Knowledge and Power in the Discourse of Modernity: The Campaigns against Popular Religion in Early Twentieth-Century China

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EVER SINCE THE ENLIGHTENMENT—the dawn of the modern era—historical understanding has been much concerned with the passage to modernity. In our present century, questions and dilemmas of the transition to modernity and the evaluation of "tradition" in the non-Western world have been central to the historical problematique the world over. I have chosen to analyze the modernist understanding of this historical transition in China not only among professional historians in the West, but among Chinese advocates of modernity. Specifically, I will examine the campaigns attacking popular religion during the first three decades of this century. As a movement advocating the establishment of a rational society, these campaigns offer a view of the understanding of this transition, not just in theory and historiography, but in practice.

By "modernity" I refer to a discourse which structures the perception of the world not only cognitively through the categories of rationality and science, but also by means of such values as progress and secularism, which are often inseparably entwined with the former.¹ Modern theories have tended to evaluate different forms of knowledge by exclusivist and dualistic criteria. Central among these has been the dichotomy between objectivism and relativism. A basic argument of this article is that this dichotomy is neither adequate nor very useful for understanding traditional and even modern society. By expanding our horizons of rationality, we may come to an adequate understanding of modern society and its alternatives and perhaps even be able to justify our choices. But we may be able to do this only when we

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¹My usage of modernity and modernist is to be distinguished from modernism as a movement in the arts in the twentieth century. Ironically, this movement bears some resemblance to what is called "post-modernism" today.

acknowledge that all forms of knowledge are born in historical society and become implicated with the dynamics of power in this society.

Part I: Modern Views of Tradition and Modernity

In China, as in much of the non-Western world, the ascendancy of modernist discourse is tied to the emergence of the modern nation. The aspirations for independence from Western imperial powers on the part of non-Western intellectuals took the shape not just of an independent nation, but of the modern nation. To be sure, the modern nation does not contain only modern elements. Its appeal, according to existing scholarship, derives from the play of two elements: the modernist values of the Enlightenment, whose emancipatory ideals were founded upon a scientific and rational understanding of the world, and the exclusivist values that we call nativist and traditional. These intellectuals were thus able to be modern and, at the same time, to assert their unique identity.

What remains problematic is the characterization of the relationship between these two elements. For the objectivist Ernest Gellner (1982), the conceptual unification of the world through science provides us with "the account of how things actually are"; our world is not just "a world, it is the world." It is thus easy to understand why, in Gellner's influential study of nationalism (1983), he reduced attempts by nationalist thinkers to define the national community in a vocabulary other than that of the modernist discourse to being not just romantic, but spurious, and in some way to be inescapably locked into the modernist form (Chatterjee 1986).

This view, which is dominant among writers on nationalism, was most articulately presented in Chinese historiography by Joseph Levenson (1964). Levenson saw the nation state as an indubitably modern form for which "tradition" is a second order of knowledge, a psychological comfort at best, a cynical manipulation at worst. While "tradition" in a nationalist discourse is useful to reach through to the masses or respond to the cultural dilemmas of Westernized intellectuals, this tradition is a reconstructed image, epistemologically derivative, and one that is reorganized under the new categories and assumptions of the modernist discourse to be used for certain ends. This mode of reducing alternative characterizations of nationalism to "tradition-within-modernity" is not restricted to Western scholars but represents the ultimate shield of a Westernizing and modernizing intelligentsia in non-Western societies in their battle against their enemies.

To be sure, Levenson's ideas have much depth and power. It is undoubtedly true that traditional ideas and values are used for purposes other than that which they themselves proclaim. A few examples will make the point. Yuan Shikai, the president of the Chinese Republic (1911–49), sought to revive the official pantheon of state-sponsored gods. However, it was not the old pantheon of the imperial state that was restored; rather the new pantheon represented a careful selection of apotheosized heroes who could embody loyalty to the national cause. Chiang Kai-shek's New Life movement sought to restore Confucian moral values in everyday life; these values were intended not only to shore up the social and moral order as they might in the empire, but also, or perhaps, principally, to define what was Chinese. Levenson has said of this effort, "nationalistic eulogies of the Chinese essence were only a counterfeit of culturalistic confidence in it. The nationalist-traditionalist impulse was for China to be Confucian because Confucius was Chinese, not because he told
the simple truth" (1964:153–54). Modern nationalists did not have “a primary belief in Confucianism, but a belief in the need to profess belief” (1964:142).

But we must take exception to the epistemology that characterizes one set of historical ideas as “believed” and another set as “needed to be believed” as fulfilling something other than what they claim. Underlying this dichotomy, of course, is an important modernist premise of a distanced self formally defined in terms of its power to choose, a premise that is exemplified most clearly in Max Weber’s notion of “methodological individualism.” According to Weber, one of the distinguishing hallmarks of modernity is the recognition that the beliefs and attitudes in society are based upon choice—a constrained choice doubtless, but choice nonetheless—on the part of the individual. Thus, modern thought recognizes what traditional societies had failed to recognize, namely that values are self-chosen and not grounded in a larger cosmic scheme. For Weber, traditional societies may reveal highly sophisticated, rational systems, such as the Chinese bureaucracy or the Indian caste system, but they are ultimately constrained by the unquestioned beliefs of the culture. In contrast to this “substantive rationality,” the modern self, empty and formal, making efficient decisions to maximize self-chosen values, engages in “formal rationality.” Modern subjectivity has grasped the fundamental truth of its own emptiness and is thus unconstrained in its power to know (Weber 1958; Kolb 1986: 9–12).

It is this conviction in the power to know—the ability of the subject to unify the world by rational method—that is the given, the belief of naïve modernity and “scientism”—the view that places all reality within the natural order and deems it knowable by the methods of science. And in the modernist discourse at large, positivist science and its corollaries, secularism and progress, become values that are held to be unquestionably superior to their alternatives. We rarely explore the possibility that the notions of the empty, formal self in possession of rational method may itself blind us to the existence of other beliefs and interests lurking within us, a glimpse of which we may occasionally catch in our contradictions, inconsistencies and in our actions. Like traditional beliefs, modern ideas and values can hardly be taken only at face value—in terms of their own self-definition. As I will try to show, they too are implicated in power struggles, in the masking of other objectives, and in the pursuit of sectional ends, even as they may serve as the cognitively most reasonable or morally most defensible means to guide us in the world.

All forms of knowledge in society become tied to networks of interests and goals that are other than what they profess. Traditional goals, beliefs, ideas, and values lead a life in the social world that fulfills or negotiates their status with other objectives and interests in the old empire as much as in modern society. The notion of substantive traditional life, in our reconstructions of it, does little justice to the gaps, the differences, the play, and the concealments that are at the heart of a tradition. Take the example of Chinese universalism:

2To be sure, Weber himself was well aware of the danger of interpreting science monistically: the conviction that scientific rationality in the disenchanted world is the only possible form of rationally interpreting the world. But the degree of Weber’s ties to the classical model of rationality—both in his methodology and his ethic—is a subject of some disagreement among Weber scholars. See Roth and Schluchter (1979:51).

3It goes without saying that we can extend this critique—as we have above—to those who would depict the world solely in terms of a traditionalist worldview, as for instance by fundamentalists the world over. They seek to obscure many modernist assumptions even as they utilize them to depict the world in the traditionalist image.
The standard characterization of traditional Chinese worldview is of the universal empire (tianxia) in which civilizing values radiated out from the son of heaven at the center and the status of a people was shaped by the extent to which they embodied these values. The chief spokesman of this worldview was the mandarin, who was fully identified with its moral goals and values. Yet perhaps from the earliest times, and certainly, as Rolf Trauzettel (1975) has shown, since the Song, the Chin attack and invasion of north China (1125–26) led to the abandonment of this radiant, concentric conception of the universal empire and its de facto replacement by a circumscribed notion of the Han fatherland (guo) in which non-Han barbarians had no place. Not only did this alternative conception of community develop among irredentists, but Trauzettel argues that it also forced neo-Confucian philosophers of the era to change their argument for universalism. They did so by performing two sleights-of-hand: namely, connecting individuals to the infinite (severing the theory from its factual basis in the Chinese ecumene) and internalizing (rather than externalizing) the determination of personal values.

The alternative conception of community, which was never far from the surface of the official doctrine of universalism, was reinforced during the complete military defeat by the Mongols, a foreign people with scant respect for Chinese culture, and during the trauma of resistance to the Manchus. Cultural universalism must have appeared as a thin veneer to emperor and officials when this universalism was compromised and subsequently concealed during various occasions—whether in dealing with the Russians or with the tiny northwestern state of Kokand, which successfully challenged the Qing tribute system. Indeed, might it not be possible to construct an argument that, during the early Qing, the doctrine of universalism concealed (rather than constrained) a rational strategy on the part of Han officials who served the barbarian dynasty and on the part of the barbarian dynasty itself?

To be sure, people often act according to their beliefs and sometimes also realize their beliefs and professed goals. But at the same time, we must pay attention to the wider context of alternative ideas, instrumental goals, and power structures in which these beliefs have to negotiate their role. Substantive values and formal means exist in elusive combinations on both sides of the tradition/modern divide. Not only have we set up a far too easy distinction between the substantive and the instrumental, but we have tended to see cultures far too cohesively and holistically. This, then, is a corollary of the substantive/formal distinction: the characterization of phenomena as parts of relatively closed, exclusive systems.

From his own remarkable perspective, Louis Dumont has much to say about the tendency of modern thought to think exclusively. He believes that traditional thought did somewhat better at encompassing differences and inconsistencies in a culture through the notion of hierarchy—the ordering of different levels, as, for instance, the official order’s hierarchical encompassing of its contrary, the renouncer or autonomous individual. Modern thought tends to flatten out these levels and separate them into incompatible orders of reality. Thus, rather than recognize that society is composed of the principles of both Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, one is denied in favor of the other. According to Dumont, the collision between totalitarianism and radical individualism in the modern age cannot be understood apart from this kind of exclusivist thinking that is characteristic of scientific rationality. He concludes: “The success of science is incontestable, and there can be no question of rejecting it, but all the same it is unilateral and insufficient on its own, like . . . the society of which it is born, and the two taken together are pregnant with conflict and danger, for at the one and same time they require a complement and
reject it” (1986:221–22). Thus, science must be complemented by the interpretive disciplines for us to understand that which it cannot explain and seeks to reject.

Paul Cohen has marshaled a host of arguments designed to challenge the distinctions between traditional and modern as antithetical wholes. His analysis also reveals how persistent are these assumptions when he shows us that even more recent and sophisticated studies of China in the West continue to retain the traditional-modern contrast and the accompanying exclusivism (1984:91–96). For our purposes, the importance of thinking outside holistic and exclusivist categories arises from the necessary task of discerning not only what may be valuable in traditional society, but just as importantly, of discerning what is reasonable in modern thought. \(^4\) I want to show that justifiable positions are not disengaged positions: cognition and interest, constitutive identity and instrumental motive in the social world are inseparable. It is the job of the historian to expose partialities and strategies of dominance that are embedded in modes of knowing, but not always in order to invalidate the argument. Rather, we need to make our prejudices “enabling” and join the dialogue at a fuller level of awareness.

**Part II: Beyond Relativism and Objectivism**

The tendency of modern thought to polarize into closed, exclusive categories finds expression in the criteria for evaluating knowledge by means of the either/or opposition of objectivism and relativism. It is necessary to reject this simplistic opposition. Richard Bernstein has made the most eloquent statement of this position. Whether one looks at the debates in the philosophy of science or in epistemology, Bernstein has demonstrated that many important contemporary thinkers have in their own ways transcended what he calls the “Cartesian anxiety,” according to which there must either be a fixed foundation for knowledge or else only the cosmic night of intellectual and moral chaos (1983:18). The choice before us is not between a simple, a priori theory of rationality and a self-invalidating doctrine of naïve relativism. He points to various alternative positions, and while each has its weaknesses and strengths, they provide us with room to develop a differentiated perspective to evaluate the cognitive and moral claims of the modernist discourse.

One should, by no means, be expected to relinquish cognitive objectivity just because a view may be contested or derive from a particular perspective. There is no pure a priori theory of rationality conceived in isolation from what it is for us, since we are to have a reason for our view (Wiggins 1988:154). The critique of objectivism has, just in the last ten years, become a veritable growth industry of itself. \(^5\) But objectivism, which is the belief in a meta-historical criterion of truth,

\(^4\)The most influential critique of modern rationality from the perspective of power in recent years is the work of Michel Foucault, who sees the modern disciplines of power/knowledge as constitutive of our reality: as constructing the subject, who is thus inevitably also the object of these disciplines. But Foucault, too, runs the risk of reifying social wholes when he characterizes the discourse or episteme as “constitutive.” Foucault’s subjects remain trapped in a modern ideology where there is little room for difference, play, appropriation, and resistance.

in the Archimedean point upon which we can ground our knowledge, is not the same as objectivity, and there is hardly reason to think that on a given question there is necessarily no way to sort out good from bad arguments.

To be sure, there are undecidable questions (and whether or not this is an undecidable question may itself be undecidable), but that is something that all fields of knowledge have had to live with without debilitating effects. And although these questions remain undecidable, we may still be able to stretch our imagination to try to understand different modes of classifying knowledge (as we shall have occasion to do below) and thus understand what is not immediately comparable or commensurable. Indeed, philosophers such as Gadamer have viewed these areas not as a barrier—the descent to utter relativism—but creatively, as means to test our "prejudices," to sort out the enabling prejudices from those that blind us (Gadamer 1975:230–49). These undecidable areas are areas of negotiated truth which force us to recognize the partially contingent or situated nature of our modes of knowledge.

Modernist discourse, as mentioned above, combines cognitive and moral claims. I have already considered the cognitive claims of modern historiography in part 1, and in part 3 we will encounter the implicit cognitive, but even more, the moral claims of Chinese modernizers. Few people make the absolute distinction between fact and value anymore, but that is hardly an argument for moral relativism as it is commonly understood. The strict dualism of objectivism or relativism is untenable for moral as much as for cognitive claims. David Wiggins has made a persuasive argument for the complementarity of subject and object in arriving at moral values. He cites the simple example of the process by which a man might determine to help his neighbor dig a ditch. Involved are not only the subjective value of doing something good for the neighbor, but also a rough calculation on his part of the viability of the project—an appraisal of the objective situation. "In truth the embracing of the end depends on the man’s feeling for the task of helping someone he likes. But his feeling for the project of helping equally depends on the existence and the attainability of the end of digging the ditch" (1988:162).

Through his conception of "cognitive under-determination," Wiggins is able to break down the supposed distinction between the inner or participative and the outer, objective viewpoint. He combines objectivity and discovery (the shifting of our focus to things and values that were always there but outside our view) with invention. To be sure, invention, too, does not derive from some arbitrary, blindfold commitment to anything—some pure inner point of view—but rather emerges from our life experiences. It is to be seen most distinctly in the significance we bring to our apprehension of objective processes and values. The particular virtue of Wiggins’s argument lies in its ability to answer the charges made against naïve relativism: that in making a truth-claim, namely, that all moral positions are valid, it is self-refuting. It does so by holding on to objectivity even as it demonstrates that all objective accounts are under-determined and require supplementation by both discovery and invention.  


The fact that moral positions are not based on purely subjective preferences allows us to understand how today we can see an extensive consensus on certain moral values, such as human rights. Most cultures are anthropocentric and even where they are not fully so, there is a significant tension between transcendent and humanist claims within the culture. Based upon the shared anthropocentrism, it is possible to justify a moral claim across cultures
Views such as those of Wiggins and Bernstein suggest a reformulation of the problem of knowledge and morality so that we are able to communicate and evaluate even as we recognize that knowledge is situated. They allow me to argue that, although an understanding of society derives from a particular perspective and may even empower certain groups and their modes of knowledge over others, it does not follow that these understandings are purely subjective or necessarily unjustifiable. People can have comparatively good arguments, but often enough these arguments are universalized and moralized in order to invalidate competing or alternate viewpoints. The problem of cultural imperialism arises, it seems to me, when the standards of justice are embedded in a discourse that is unable or unwilling to recognize the particular location from which it views reality.

Part III: The Power of Modernity in Republican China

Much of the historical scholarship of early twentieth-century China has focused, in one way or the other, on the anguished transition to modernity: on the dilemmas, and on the survival and uses, of tradition. But we have tended to marginalize those who have questioned the ultimate value of the Enlightenment project, and in this respect our views are consonant with those of modernizing Chinese intellectuals and the modern nation state. It is surely this shared perspective that causes us to be so quick to see the play of power in the use of traditional symbols and practices but rarely in the advocacy of modern values in China. When articulate people within the culture we study echo our assumptions, we run the risk of losing the check of otherness and become unable to tell truth from Truth, to separate power from knowledge.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable transformations in early twentieth-century China was the rapid and widespread absorption of modern ideas and ideology by the intelligentsia in the first few decades of the century. Daniel Kwok has documented the ascendancy of scientism among the intelligentsia through various phases beyond the well-known May Fourth Movement or the Chinese Enlightenment. By the end of the 1920s, not only was the victory of positive scientism over metaphysics and other more cautious versions of empiricism complete in the realm of what may be called "philosophy of life," but the polemic extended to the realm of society and history whose laws of motion were now deemed fully knowable (Kwok 1965: 142-63; Chan 1955:232).

Such was the power of the new ideology that even Nationalist or Kuomintang (KMT) thought at its most conservative felt compelled to justify its ideas in terms of their scienticity. Chiang Kai-shek wrote: "I believe that the book, Great Learning, is not only China's orthodox philosophy but also the forebear of scientific thought, undoubtedly the source of Chinese science. If we bind together the Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean, we shall have the most complete text on the harmony

provided the claim is couched in negative terms: that is, while we may not prescribe an ethical code for another society, we have a right to speak out on behalf of those who suffer crimes against humanity in that society. For instance, one can identify at least some voices that condemn the violation of human rights in a society even where those who perpetrate the crimes may be in a majority. Often these are minority voices—of the poor and of victims. The strong version of cultural relativism adopts the fallacious assumption that cultures are cohesive unities and mistakes official or orthodox justifications as representative. It thereby identifies with the politically dominant and articulate sectors of society.
of philosophy and science and the unity of spirit and matter. Thus I call it the 'Scientific Nature of the Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean' (cited in Kwok 1965:185).

Less well documented and analyzed is the commitment of the twentieth-century state to modernity. Ever since the failure of the Boxer Uprising and the call for modernizing reform in the early 1900s, but especially since the establishment of the Republic in 1911, the Chinese state has been caught up in a logic of "modernizing legitimation"—where its raison d'être has increasingly become the fulfillment of modern ideals (Duara 1988). While the modern nation state owes allegiance to the rhetoric of its origins, especially if the Westernized constituency within its territory is a rapidly expanding one, its commitment to modern ideals, as we shall see, is different from that of the intelligentsia. Moreover, the sources of its commitment do not lie solely within the domestic sphere. The awareness of the nation state's location in the world system necessitates its military and fiscal modernization which, in turn, requires an unprecedented intervention in society to extract the needed resources.

The expansion and penetration of the state into all aspects of society in the twentieth century is a truly global phenomenon (Meyer 1980). This expansion and penetration of the nation state is justified in the emancipatory language of modernity: in the claim that it is a political form that is radically different from previous states in its ability to represent all of the people and, through the mastery of the true nature of reality, bring progressive material growth. The following quotation from Sun Yat-sen contains something chilling, in the aftermath of the tragic events of June 4, 1989, in its naïve optimism in the emancipatory power of modern political technology:

Once China has acquired a powerful government, we need not fear, as did the European and American people, that this government will be too strong or out of control. . . . Once the people are fully sovereign, and their methods of controlling government are complete, then there is no need to fear that the government will become too powerful or out of control. Europe and America previously did not dare construct machines of over a hundred thousand horse-power because the construction of these machines was not perfect and the means of controlling them not fine enough, and so they were afraid of their runaway power. But now there has been great progress in the development of machinery, their construction and means of control are so fine that very powerful machines are being built. If we want to build a political machine and desire the development of this machine, we too need to follow this path . . . ."

(Sun 1986:203–4)

The growth of state power in modern times has involved a twofold process of expansion and penetration, and justification of that expansion. We have, in the past, been rightfully concerned with organic metaphors of the body politic used to justify state penetration, but mechanical metaphors also have been used to similar ends. The promises of scientific control and material progress have been central to the growth of state power in China. As moderns, we perceive this twofold process through a means-ends gestalt where expansion represents the means, and modernity

Of course, it is not just the modern characteristics of the concept of the nation that mandate an unprecedented expansion and penetration of state power. The construction and representation of a distinctive national history (the atavism of nation states) has also involved large-scale ideological mobilization on the part of the state.
the ends. In the remainder of this article, I will probe this duality further by examining the policies of the Chinese state towards popular religion in the early twentieth century.

**Modernity as Power: The Campaigns against Religion**

The modernization agenda of the Chinese government began with the reforms of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) in 1902–08 and continued through the Republican period (1911–49) and beyond. New schools, new police, new government institutions were the most visible signs of this agenda in rural China. Modernizing reformers in the state and among the elite saw the realm of popular religion and culture as a principal obstacle to the establishment of a “disenchanted” world of reason and plenty. But their campaign to rationalize rural culture was also accompanied by other instrumental motives, which were sometimes acknowledged and sometimes not, but which ultimately came to dominate the campaign.

Since the reforms required financing, new strategies and institutions of revenue extraction quickly became a salient feature of the modernizing program. Modernizing reformers thus also began to see the realm of popular religion as an important potential source of revenue that could be tapped without much effort. The villages and market towns of China were crowded with many different types of religious associations, voluntary and ascriptive, isolated and extended, that performed a variety of spiritual and secular functions for rural folk. Most of them were also propertyendowed with other financial resources. These ranged from small religious societies that doubled as credit societies to large village-wide or market-wide associations with extensive landholdings that financed the maintenance of several temples and the festivities of the temple fair (Gamble 1963).

The period from 1900 until 1930 saw several different movements and campaigns attacking rural religion. Images of popular gods were desecrated or forcibly removed from rural temples, and the temples themselves were refashioned into elementary schools and offices for local governments. The income from the properties of temples and associations now became the revenues of the village government, and ultimately much of this income found its way to higher levels of the government as the tax burden of the village began to accelerate at a rapid rate (Duara 1988:148–52). We can discern two phases in this movement: a first, from 1900 until just after the establishment of the Republic around 1915; and a second that began after the ascendancy to power of the Nationalist party (KMT) in 1927 and lasted until circa 1930. The regional focus of the first period was the north China plain, where the modernizing regime was strongest; the focus of the second period was the lower and central Yangtze valley, where the Nationalist party was strongest. In the first phase, the campaigns were led by enthusiastic administrators in cooperation with rural leaders; in the second phase, the leadership was principally in the hands of the Nationalist party activists.

The first phase is ironically associated with Yuan Shikai, a figure depicted by generations of historians as the reactionary and dictatorial President of the Republic who would be emperor. In fact, Yuan was the most active promoter of modernizing reform—by way of the Japanese model—in late imperial China. Ernest Young, the leading authority on the Yuan presidency, says that even in his most conservative phase, Yuan “was still part of the modernizing movement that sought to fulfill
nationalist aspirations” (Young 1983:236). An entire generation of students trained in Japan served as his closest advisors and were placed by him in key positions, first in the provincial governments that he headed, and later, in the national administration of the Republic (Thompson 1988:206–7).

Beginning with his governor-generalship of Zhili and Shandong at the turn of the century, Yuan advocated a series of radical reforms at the local level that established the institutions of local self-government, modern police and Western-style education (MacKinnon 1980:136–79). In its zeal to eradicate superstition and establish a modern society, the Yuan administration sought to systematically dismantle the institutional foundations of popular religion. Its success in appropriating temples and temple property in the first phase was considerable. For instance, in Ding county, Zhili, the number of temples declined by 316, from 432 in 1900 to 116 in 1915 (Li 1933:422–23). This initial success was due largely to cooperation by the rural elite. The local elite saw new avenues of social mobility in the new schools and the formal positions of village government. Education had, of course, always been a route to advancement in imperial China and now it seemed to be more readily accessible to the village elite (Duara 1988:156).

The commitment of the Yuan administration to secular and modern goals worked to justify the intrusive agenda that the state launched to acquire local resources. To be sure, the Confucian disdain toward some of the gods of popular culture reinforced the commitment to destroy this realm. However, it is to be noted that where the Confucian worldview spoke of elements of this realm as xie, commonly translated as heterodoxy, and implying an undesirable but alternative set of beliefs, the pejorative and trivializing neologism mixin (superstition), by which the entire realm of popular religion was now characterized, brought with it a much more absolutizing distinction between the scientific and the primitive. While targeting some elements for eradication, the Confucian imperial state had sought to control and order this realm principally by superscribing—or trying to appropriate the symbolism of—the great gods of this popular tradition (Duara 1988a). In other words, it had utilized the very framework of religious symbolic expression to communicate and negotiate with rural society. The new administration sought to destroy the very institutional underpinnings of this framework.

Despite a critical measure of success, the campaign was not without resistance from ordinary people. In this conflict, members of the reforming rural elite such as Mi Digang of Ding county and administrators like Sun Faxu, also from Ding county, depicted their movement as a heroic and progressive one against the superstitions of the unwashed masses, who would ultimately come to see what was good for them (Li 1933:420; Zhaicheng fukan:18–19). But if they were the zealots for a modern awakening, they were also the agents of a total reorganization of the power structure of rural society.

Monks and priests who had depended on religious properties were cut off from their sources of livelihood; local religious societies that fulfilled social as much as spiritual needs were dispossessed and replaced by government offices that seemed mainly interested in extracting revenues and uncovering unregistered property. The new schools that were set up were of little use to ordinary villagers who could not afford to spare their children for such luxuries; they were attended principally by the children of the elite. And finally, in the process of eradicating superstition in the village, the state had developed direct access to the collective property and resources of the village that it had never had before (Duara 1988:148–57).

Yuan’s was not the only effort at modernizing reform during this period in north China. Roger Thompson has studied the parallel phenomenon in Shanxi, first
under the leadership of Zhao Erxun and later through the legislative efforts of the Shanxi Provincial Assembly. Unlike Yuan, however, Zhao sought reform within the Chinese tradition. For instance, he devised means to extract resources from local society without destroying rural religious associations. However, it is perhaps testimony, in part at least, to the growing ascendancy of radically modernizing ideas, that it was Yuan's and not Zhao's methods that were to win the day in the imperial court (Thompson 1988:201). Even in Shanxi only a few years later, one could see the dominance of this less tolerant modern position in the legislative activity of the Shanxi Provincial Assembly in 1909 (Thompson 1988a). By simple fiat, the assemblymen sought to reclassify the property of religious associations as being subject, not to the decision-making power of temple councils, but to that of independent, elected local councils. In restructuring local politics, they sought larger transformations: to disempower the religious domain and redefine the relationship between the secular and sacred.

One could plausibly make a case for the superiority of modern institutions and values in terms of the peasants' own interests, as was done by reformers like Mi Digang, and as the elite seemed to recognize. One could also make the argument that the peasants resisted largely because they did not see benefits coming to them; in other words, they perceived a gap between the ideals and the reality of the modernizing program. But my concern here is not with this gap. Even had the modernization program been successful and welcomed by the peasants, the modernization process would still have spelled an enormous increase in the administrative presence of the state and a reorganization of the power structure of local society. It is this reorganization of power that both indigenous modernizers and many modernization theorists ignore in their overt or tacit advocacy of modernity.

As it turned out, the attack against religion in the early twentieth century did amount to a conspicuous displacement of power among some groups, and this displacement was resisted. Although resistance within the village was mostly suppressed, it could and did, as we shall see, reorganize at a transvillage level. Supravillage religious societies in the countryside, such as the White Lotus, the Red Spears, and the Big and Small Sword Societies in the lower Yangtze valley, were too extensive and militant for local organizations to dispossess and control. They represented the one part of popular religion that escaped both the symbolic and institutional controls of the modern state (Duara 1988). Their delegitimation would have to be conducted at a deeper discursive level, at a level beyond debate.

In the second phase, the campaign was spearheaded by the Nationalist party, which during the 1920s saw itself as the inheritor of the iconoclastic May Fourth Movement. In his study of the Nationalist response to the May Fourth Movement, Lu Fangshang reveals how most important Nationalist leaders were fundamentally antireligious. Although Sun Yat-sen was himself a Christian, as Dai Jitao and other KMT leaders pointed out, Sun was sufficiently modern to keep religion outside of politics and maintain the separation of church and state (Lu 1989:337–39). Most political leaders besides Sun, such as Li Shizeng, Wang Jingwei, Zou Lu, and Cai Yuanpei were more active in extending their support to the burgeoning antireligious movement developing among the youth both within and outside the party during the 1920s (Lu 1989:336–45; Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1953:134, 138, 142). The party actively backed the anti-Christian movement—which had distinctively nationalist as well as modernist overtones—and it continued this support for the broader

8It will be noted that the point holds regardless of whether or not power, in any particular situation, turns out to be a zero-sum game.
antireligious movement conducted by the Anti-Religious Federation and the Great Federation of Non-Religionists (Zhang 1927:187–207).

In 1928 and 1929, the party organization launched a vigorous "anti-superstition" drive in the lower Yangtze provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui. State control over the revenues from religious properties was an important issue, as it had been in the earlier phase, but the advent of party politics and the politics of mass mobilization had made the situation considerably more complex. After 1927, the left wing of the Nationalist party, which had been active in mass mobilization for the Nationalist victory at the local level, was beginning to lose control to groups and organizations that were personally loyal to Chiang Kai-shek. For instance, the Fourth Plenum of the Second National Party Congress in January 1928 drastically reduced the importance of mass movements in the party's political program, and the relevant departments in the party's headquarters were abolished (Yamada 1979:234–35; Wang 1986–87:10–17). Among other things this meant that the higher levels of the party and local administration had started to seize the initiative away from the local party in local affairs. The non-Communist left KMT now began to fight a desperate rear-guard battle to reestablish its control over political power in the party and in local affairs that lasted until 1930 (Yamada 1979:264–83). The antisuperstition campaign launched during these years, while representing the modernizing ideals of the radical KMT, thus also became inextricably involved with these political issues of the day.

Harking to the founding ideals of the Nationalist party, Sun Yat-sen's Three People's Principles, the modernizers declared that in the period of political tutelage, the masses have to be "shown the path to rational progress . . . that religious authority is an obstacle to the development of a people and social progress . . . and that a religious society is opposed to a new society based on the Three People's Principles" (Mitani 1978:9). In 1927 and 1928, local party members in several Jiangsu counties arrested temple priests and appropriated thousands of mu of land (Mitani 1978:9). However, this time around the modernizers had to contend with more complex forms of resistance. Reflecting the rapidly changing political culture of the era and the area, where associational politics had become well-established, organized Buddhism had emerged in the 1920s as a political player able to intervene at the national level (NZNJ 1936:F–134; Yang 1967:359; Chan 1953:56–57). The National Buddhist Association lobbied the Jiangsu provincial government and, unable to resist this pressure, the provincial administration sought to put a brake on the movement by sending down cautionary directives to local party units. However, it stopped short of reversing the party leadership's much-touted program of cultural reform (Mitani 1978:9).

Local party groups ignored these directives and pushed on with the campaign. But by October 1928, the campaign began to encounter popular resistance led by priests, monks, and the ubiquitous lüben or "evil gentry"—a catch-all phrase that covered all who opposed the campaign. In particular, the modernizers faced a series of uprisings led by the Small Sword Society in the counties of northern Jiangsu, which not only resisted the intrusion in the religious realm but also attacked tax offices, local KMT headquarters, and new schools. Party modernizers accused the resistance of being the work of a handful of ignorant and reactionary traditionalists, but it appears to have been just as much a resistance against the enhanced power and role of the party in local education and politics (Mitani 1979:138–39; Geisert 1979:152–66).

At any rate, faced by what many activists felt to be inexplicable hostility from the very people whom they had sought to "liberate," the local party backed off,
and, bit by bit, the administrations at the county and provincial levels were able to reassert their authority over local affairs. By 1930, the left wing of the party had been either destroyed or discredited (Wang 1986: 87:32). In some ways, the modernizers had only themselves to blame for their situation: driven, doubtless, by their zeal for reform, they had never stopped to think of how popular religion may have been meaningful in the lives of the people. Indeed, pushing the campaign forward regardless of the popular response had come to be of paramount importance because the antisuperstition movement had become the vehicle through which the enthusiasts could try to continue to assert local control in the face of the bureaucratization of power. The purposeful rationalizing strategy of the party activists had been overtaken by a different and unacknowledged political battle, but one that was still being fought under the flag of modernization.

For its part, the Nationalist state at the provincial and national level faced a set of imperatives that were quite different from those of the party radicals. To be sure, it did not abandon its commitment to modernity. The all-important official "Standards for Preserving and Abandoning Gods and Shrines," promulgated in November 1928, spoke of religious authority as being obsolete in the age of popular sovereignty, of "superstition as an obstacle to progress," and of the superstitious nation becoming "the laughing stock of the scientific world" (ZMFH 1933:807). But the Nationalist state was also forced to develop a strategy to reconcile its modernist ideals with the various pressures it faced from a restive populace, an organized clergy, and an assertive local party that was carrying on a runaway campaign. Its strategy reflects the ability of the state, by virtue of its position, to devise systems of classification which define and bound the arena of legitimate contestation. The Nationalist state distinguished the objects of true religious worship from superstition, classifying them at a level of discourse where these distinctions would come to appear as natural and normal.

The Standards sought to condemn superstition while preserving religious freedom. Accordingly, it sought to distinguish the practices, institutions, and objects of superstition that were to be abolished from the more properly religious items which were to be preserved. The Standards declared that historical figures who had become apotheosized but could be seen as beneficial to the community, such as Confucius and Guandi, were to be revered. Moreover, those who inspired belief with "pure faith," such as the Buddha and Laozi, were also to be respected. The worship of certain nature gods, the Daoist line of gods who encouraged the use of charms and magical texts, as well as the practices of popular religion were prohibited (ZMFH 1933:810–14).

The Standards did not pause to consider the argument that one person's superstition may be another's religion. Moreover, as Sakai Tadao has noted, it was being wildly inconsistent in permitting the preservation of the worship of certain nature gods, the earth god, and the stove god, while banning the worship of the city god, the dragon or rain god, and the god of wealth, among others (Sakai 1951:324; ZMFH 1933:813). The classification strategy that demarcated religion from superstition revealed the play of political considerations in its effort to disenchant the world and give it to us as it is. The strategy had the ultimate effect of protecting organized religions with authoritative texts, especially organized Buddhism (NZNJ 1936: F–134). Both organizationally and doctrinally, these religions had the virtue of being historically susceptible to state control.

It was none other than the realm of popular religion and its authority structures that came under the general ban of the Standards and a host of other laws created between 1928 and 1930, such as the "Procedure for the Abolition of Occupations
of Divination, Astrology, Physiognomy and Palmistry, Sorcery and Geomancy" (1928), "Procedures for Banning and Managing Superstitious Objects and Professions" (1930), and "Prohibition of Divinatory Medicines" (1929) (ZMFH 1933:794–96; NZNJ 1936:F–110–12). Sectarians, shamans, sorcerers, geomancers, physiognomists, and traditional healers all fell under the scope of this ban. Secret and sectarian societies—such as the Boxers, the White Lotus, the Red Spears, the Small and Big Sword societies—had historically been antiestablishment or antistate, and authority within them was founded on the command of magical rituals and charms. Sorcerers, ritual specialists, and especially healers were often the leaders of these societies. By means of these laws, the Nationalist state was able to proclaim its modern ideals, which included the freedom of religion, and simultaneously consolidate its political power in local society by defining legitimate believers in such a way as to exclude those whom it found difficult to bring under its political control.

Conclusions

The slogans against superstition raised by all the modernizers, including elites, Nationalist party enthusiasts, and the state, simplified a complex social reality where religious organizations and beliefs fulfilled spiritual, social, and political needs. This is what Dumont has called the "flattening" perspective of modern ideology. From this perspective, popular religious ideas and practices are either absurd (and hence wasteful) or else their explanations are truly incommensurable with the explanations of science. The first represents the objectivist point of view, which condemns that which is not explicable by the standards of scientific rationality. The second represents the relativist point of view, which precludes any judgment of a matter of human significance.

The standards of scientific rationality may not be relevant to understanding popular beliefs, but the alternative need not lead to relativism. Rationality is not exhausted by commensurability, and here we must stretch our imagination to understand that perhaps these beliefs participate in a different system of ideas and functions—in a different "genre" of classifying reality (MacIntyre 1971:251–53)—than do scientific ideas. Beliefs are rational or irrational (though not true or false) only in relation to other beliefs. If we understand rationality as a set of procedures for establishing coherence, then it is necessary to first establish the relevant genres in which a belief might be classified.

Thus, to understand the purpose of a rain ceremony in the same way that we understand the purpose of irrigation technology or meteorology may constitute a partial understanding or even a misunderstanding, for it may also be understood as part of a wider cosmological scheme, as fulfilling the role of a church service during a community disaster, and in many other ways. Most of all, the rain ceremony may represent a particular constellation of meanings that has no direct analogue in modern systems of classification. This may make a direct comparison impossible, but we are not ipso facto prevented from carefully unraveling the different layers of meaning. Thus, by looking for the coherence of these religious beliefs with other beliefs and criteria, we can comprehend the wider meanings of peasant religion and peasant resistance to the attack on them that a simple dichotomy between objectivism and relativism could never provide.

I have also tried to show that there was more to the slogans against superstition than met the eye. The flattening perspective was not merely constitutive of the
reality of the modernizers. It came to be used in a power struggle where the state and advocates of modernity sought to expand their power in relation to each other and in the society where their ideas would rule. Each episode of intervention in the name of modernization also involved a restructuring of power in local society, ending up, more often than not, with a significant expansion in the power of the state. Theories of modernization—both Chinese and Western—appeal to a means-ends gestalt to justify such intervention, but might there not be some validity in the view of those who, in their historical experience, have seen the reverse profile of this gestalt: where the narratives of modernization seem to justify the ends of state expansion?

To be sure, the relative superiority of many (though by no means all) modern programs can be defended intellectually and morally from various perspectives, including the perspectives and needs of a diverse peasantry. But that which is defensible does not have to be true a priori, nor need it be absolutely objective—to be what Donna Haraway has called the “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway 1988:581). I have attempted to demonstrate the inevitable politicization of knowledge that is born of and engaged in society. In order to defend that which is cognitively and morally most valuable in our positions, we must insist on justice and be alert to the ways in which these positions may become tied to the interests of particular groups.

In my work I have found that more serious than cognitive limitations are the often unacknowledged forms of power that work to inhibit our commonsensical notions of justice. One such appears in the form of an absolutist belief that justifies domination in the name of the ends. Commonly, it is religious faith that is accused of following such a procedure, but I have tried to show how the advocacy of a rational society may also involve an imperialism of ends. Less visible and thus more insidious are the deeper discursive mechanisms of power that present the contingent and partial as commonsensical and normal, as in the distinctions underlying the laws of the Nationalist state regarding legitimate religious belief. These mechanisms yield positions which do not merely refuse to recognize their own origins and limits; they are unable to do so. They may thus remove from the realm of public discussion a whole range of issues and concerns that may be vital to a group such as the peasantry.

The blinding effect is particularly strong when, as in the case of many modern historians, our own modernist assumptions and sympathies reinforce the belief that these laws are universal and neutral. This blinding reflection reinforces our inability to recognize the inevitable role of power, which may be controlled and made legitimate only when it is visible. Under these circumstances, the ethical responsibility of the analyst entails digging deeper than we have been accustomed to, examining the assumptions of our own knowledge as much as those of the people we study, and thus approaching the ideal conditions of inquiry: a fair hearing.

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CAMPAIGNS AGAINST POPULAR RELIGION


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