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1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?

VINCENT GOOSSAERT

On July 10, 1898, the reformist leader Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) memorialized the throne proposing that all academies and temples in China, with the exception of those included in registers of state sacrifices (*sidian* 祀典), be turned into schools. The Guangxu emperor was so pleased with the proposal that he promulgated an edict (*shangyu* 上諭) the same day, taking over Kang's phrasing. On three occasions in the following weeks, the editorial in the famous Shanghai daily *Shenbao* 申報 discussed the edict not as a piece of legislation aiming at facilitating the creation ex nihilo of a nationwide network of public schools but as the declaration of a religious reform, that is, a change in religious policy that would rid China of temple cults and their specialists: Buddhists, Taoists, and spirit mediums. This it was, indeed, although both Chinese and Western historiography have so far usually neglected to appreciate the importance of the religious element in the so-called Wuxu reforms (June 11–September 21, 1898) and later modernist policies. This importance, as we will see, can be gauged both in the writings of some of the reformist leaders and among the populations concerned by the practical consequences.

The Wuxu reforms themselves, including the edict on temple confiscation, were short lived, and by October 1898, temple clerics and managers could sigh with relief as the confiscation was recalled.¹ It is not clear how many temples were effectively transformed into schools at that time, apparently few. The relief itself, however, was temporary because as early as 1901, with the advent of the New Policies, Xinzheng 新政, and on a larger scale after 1904, a few local officials and a much larger number of reform activists began to act upon the idea and to seize temple lands and infrastructures to build the new, mandated institutions: mostly schools in the beginning and, later, self-administration bureaus (*zizhi ju* 自治局), barracks and police stations,

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¹The September 26, 1898, edict states: "The temples (*cimiao* 祠廟) which are not in the *sidian* are to be maintained as before, and not be changed into schools, unless they are improper cults (*yinsi* 淫祀)" (*Guangxu chao donghua lu*, 4203–4).

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post offices, and so forth. In this decade, and during the ensuing three decades of the Republic, probably more than half of the million Chinese temples that existed in 1898 were emptied of all religious equipment and activity.² During the whole course of the twentieth century, the confiscation and destruction³ of temples was more than a side effect of social and political modernization; it was the effect of a religious policy, that is, a conscious, purposeful new relationship between the state and religious institutions, and this policy was initiated by the religious reform heralded in 1898. The slogan “Destroy temples to build schools,” *huimiao banxue* 毀廟辦學, and the many texts that advocated it, placed equal stress on both elements: religious and educational reform.

The process of temple destruction and the larger framework of antisuperstition policies from 1898 to the present have been relatively little studied and lie outside the scope of this article (the literature on this topic, focusing on the 1911–37 period, include: Nedostup 2001; Duara 1988, 148–57; Duara 1991; Duara 1995, chap. 3; Makita 1984; Shi Dongchu 1974, 72–77; Welch 1968, 146–52 *passim*; Mitani 1978; Shi Zhouren 2002; and Goossaert 2003). My aim here is to identify the social and intellectual events that made it possible in its early phases, before the 1911 Republican revolution. I will focus on facts, texts, and ideas that predate the fierce antisuperstition campaigns led by the Kuomintang between 1926 and 1937, and I will attempt to show that much of the contents of these campaigns already existed during the period between 1898 and 1911. In doing so, I will try to label changes in the discourse on religion around 1898 by using terms such as *Confucian fundamentalism*, *anticlericalism*, and *antisuperstition*. These I use in order to account for differences in religious attitudes and convictions that positivist historians tend to lump together as *rational*, *secular*, or *anti-Buddhist*, terms that seem neither appropriate nor useful to understand the events under consideration. I define Confucian fundamentalism as the rejection of all ideas and practices absent from the Confucian canonical scriptures⁴ and anticlericalism as the rejection of the institutionalization of religion, especially monasteries and professional clerics living off liturgical services. Anticlericalism will refer here mainly to the rejection of the Buddhist and Taoist clergies (but not Buddhism and Taoism as doctrinal systems or spiritual traditions), although this notion can find broader uses in the late imperial Chinese context (Goossaert 2002b). As I will show, Confucian fundamentalism and anticlericalism, which were distinct but partly overlapping ideologies, were important elements of late imperial thinking on religion, whereas antisuperstition, that is, the rejection of so-called irrational, backward ideas and practices

²This preliminary estimation is based on ongoing research on the history of temple destruction during the twentieth century, which will be the topic of a separate publication. It is based on various archival resources and Chinese and Western publications.

³I use *destruction* here, although, in most cases, temples were not razed to the ground and the buildings were put to other uses. I find the term useful, though, because many religious objects were destroyed in the process, and the eradication of religious life was often intended. Furthermore, many of the sources mentioned here use the word *hui* 毀, “destroy,” to describe the taking over of temples for other purposes.

⁴This fundamentalism overlaps very much with what historians of ideas have identified as late imperial Confucian purism (see, e.g., Chow Kai-wing 1994). As Chinese religion has three institutional components, with clerics and scriptures (the three religions: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism), there are, in theory, three possible distinct fundamentalisms at work. Taoist fundamentalism has been dead since at least the Sung, however, and Buddhist fundamentalism did not recover until the Republican period. The only fundamentalism at work in late imperial China is Confucian, and, indeed, it is arguable that Confucianism is the fundamentalist component of modern Chinese religion.

as opposed to acceptable religion, was a new phenomenon that appeared around the turn of the twentieth century. The opposition between Confucian fundamentalism and anticlericalism on the one hand and antisuperstition on the other is the major thrust of my argument and, in my opinion, explains the unprecedented assault on Chinese temples launched in 1898. Although openly confrontational in nature, Confucian fundamentalism and anticlericalism did not warrant wholesale temple destruction, whereas antisuperstition had such a destruction as one of its core projects.

My working hypothesis is that although the 1898 temple-confiscation edict had a limited immediate effect, it took place at a time of change in the political and social discourse on Chinese religion and that such a change did put into motion the “Build schools with temple property,” *miaochan xingxue* 廟產興學, also called the “Destroy temples to build schools” movement. I will, therefore, first look at the various discourses surrounding the 1898 edict and isolate two typical trends: one traditional that drew on anticlerical and Confucian fundamentalist ideas and the other that announced the new antisuperstition approach to Chinese religion. These two trends are in a way a theoretical construct, and are often confused in the texts themselves, but each has its own distinct coherence. I will then further document them by summarizing the pre-1898 discourse on Chinese religion and by introducing the new discourse that appeared around that date in order to highlight the change. Finally, I will outline the elements of continuity and change and their impact on the religious situation in twentieth-century China, including the process of temple destruction. My sources for such an inquiry consist of samplings of the vast relevant literature, taken from different genres: the press, notably the widely read daily *Shenbao*, as well as writings by political thinkers, official texts, and novels.

Religion, Politics, and Modernization

Neither the historical facts nor the discourses observed around 1898 may be understood if we use today’s definition of religion in general and religion in China in particular. The current meaning of *religion*, *zongjiao* 宗教, among Chinese intellectuals is a coherent, exclusive system of thought and practice with a churchlike organization distinct from society, that is, a definition imported from post-Renaissance Europe; although it applies easily to Christianity (in fact, the word *zongjiao* referred essentially to Christianity in the early phases of its use in Chinese), it does not adequately describe religious life in the Chinese context. The appearance of this notion in Chinese language around 1900 is, in fact, part of the process under consideration and has served anti-superstition policies well (Nedostup 2001, 18–27; Chen Hsi-yuan 1999, 2002).

Yet the fact that no institution in late Qing China matched the definition of a religion/*zongjiao* cannot prevent us from speaking about Chinese religious life, which, even though it was totally embedded in its socioeconomic context, was still a distinct field of thought and practice dealing with rituals, devotion, and salvation. My own departure point, then, is not a philosophical construct of religion or a Western definition of what a religion is but the empirical fact of religious life in China in 1898—and still today for that matter: traditions of individual salvation (meditation and body techniques, morality, and access to revelation, notably through spirit writing), communal celebrations (cults of local saints and ancestors, death rituals), and the three

institutionalized religions, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.⁵ These three institutionalized religions each are precisely defined by a distinctive clergy, a canon (scriptures that define orthodoxy), a liturgy, and training centers (monasteries, academies), yet they do not exist in strict isolation because they cooperate for liturgical and devotional purposes and openly share texts, values, and ideas. The coexistence and cooperation of the three institutionalized religions together with local cults and ritual traditions and their specialists (spirit mediums, diviners, sectarian leaders, and so forth) are not syncretism as it is too often described; they are expected to coexist but not mingle and lose their identity. Rather, it is best analyzed as a pluralistic religious system, characterized by many ritual and theological continuities as well as many distinctions, and sometimes tensions, between groups and practices based on locality, social class, economic status, ethnicity, or other particularistic identities. After other scholars (e.g., Feuchtwang 1991), I call this pluralistic and internally contested religious system *Chinese religion*, a merely heuristic, but nonetheless useful, concept.

The political management of this system by the late imperial state consisted in recognizing as well as attempting to control clerical communities (Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist) as well as a large number of cultic groups (lineages, corporations, temple cults to local saints) and banning others (sectarian groups; improper cults, *yinci* 淫祠). The entanglement of religion and politics was due to the fact that many socioeconomic groups such as lineages, guilds, or village communities and alliances were officially sanctioned as cult communities. Although considerations of maintaining social order often loomed large in the practice of official religious policy (especially in the case of sectarian movements), it would be very misleading to reduce the whole of the imperial state's policies to security concerns, as quite often decisions on recognizing or banning (more accurately, attempting to ban) certain cults, specialists, or rituals hinged on purely moral-theological reasons. For instance, spirit mediums, lay female congregations, and all sorts of operatic rituals were banned not because they threatened the state but because they contravened the moral and symbolical order of the universe as imagined by fundamentalist Confucians.

By contrast, the Republican-period management of the religious scene was based on a very different paradigm, of Western origin, that recognized a number of China-wide religions (*zongjiao*, that is, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism, the latter two defined in a narrow, purist sense), with their autonomous organizations, and banned any public ritual, devotional, or spiritual activity not integrated into these religions. Within the field of Chinese religion, this amounted to dramatically redefining and reducing the extent of legally and intellectually legitimate religious practices, notably by excluding local temple cults. This article attempts to examine the process that led from the former to the latter paradigm and hints at their many overlaps in actual practice. Such a process is not without parallels in other countries where political modernization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also led to a complete overhaul of the state-religion relationships. Although the Chinese case is unique because of the particular organization of Chinese religion, similar causes and effects can be observed elsewhere and, indeed, may help understand what happened in China.

⁵In this article, I systematically refer to Confucianism as a religion, and I translate *jiao* 教 as "religion" in the contemporary, anthropological sense, even though I am acutely aware and, indeed, attentive to the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century actors' different interpretations of the relationships between Confucianism, other *jiao*, and the Western idea of religion (*zongjiao*) as it was then understood (see Chen Hsi-yuan 1999).

One of the most illuminating lessons from my comparative readings is that, in late Qing China as in many other countries during the modern period, the debates and assaults on religion, more often than not, did not pitch rational atheists against believers; rather, they opposed different religious visions. For instance, the conflicts that opposed anticlericals to the catholic Church in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century France and that led to the contentious exclusion of religious orders from the schools (1901) and the more consensual law of separation of church and state (1905) counted firm and avowed believers (Catholic and Protestant) on both sides (Baubérot 2004). Those believers who advocated that the state repressed groups playing both religious and sociopolitical roles adhered to a secularist paradigm whereby individuals should be free to believe and practice, but social institutions created around religious beliefs and practices could only exist in a separate realm of religion and not have social, political, or educational roles.

Similarly, in China, many of the leaders of the reform movements were active practitioners of spiritual traditions, some, like Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (Binglin 炳麟, 1869–1936) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), being part of a strong and influential movement of Buddhist intellectual revival (Goldfuss 2001), others, like Sun Yat-sen and other future leaders of the Kuomintang, being converted to Christianity, others yet, like Kang Youwei, envisioning to invent a state religion out of Confucian elements.⁶ It was actually such spiritual traditions, rather than rationalism or atheism, that drove political leaders to reform the religious scene. For this reason, although the reformers' discourse on superstition, religious reform, and temple seizures was self-serving and partly motivated by social and political projects, it would be a major mistake not to consider that it was at the same time also a religious project aiming at improving China's spiritual conditions. In other words, in late Qing as well as in Republican China and in other modern countries, the political and the religious were in close relationship, but the religious could not be subsumed into the political; religious ideas and projects shaped political history as well as were shaped by it.

Another trend, and one to which theoreticians of secularization have paid much less attention, is that several modernizing states redrew the religious field not only through selective repression but also by favoring or even creating religious institutions that adopted a modernist discourse on civilization and culture (Duara 2003, 103–22) and other features of a nation-state, such as a national hierarchy, that enabled them to dialogue with the nation-state. If in countries where an established church was in place, such as Mexico or Russia (Butler 2002; Husband 2000), a revolutionary state had to take on this church to establish its monopoly on social control, by contrast, countries characterized by a pluralist, unintegrated religious system tended to elicit the creation of a churchlike institution. From the Chinese perspective, the readiest comparison point is Japan; the Meiji reforms, which the late Qing reformers knew well and took much inspiration from, also included an important religious aspect. The Meiji reformers launched a large-scale attack on Buddhism and its social network of temple parishes (Ketelaar 1990), while at the same time creating a new religious institution, the state Shintô, in order to replace the people's religious allegiance to local Buddhist communities with integration into a hierarchical state cult (Hardacre 1989). In Japan as in China and other Asian countries,⁷ modern political entities were

⁶The religious world of Kang Youwei was a rich and complex one; he was also influenced by the Buddhist intellectual revival movement and later became, from 1920 to 1927, the president of a sectarian redemptive society, the Wanguo daode hui 萬國道德會.

⁷For a similar argument in a colonial and postcolonial context (Bali), see Picard (2003).

ready to negotiate with churchlike religions organized hierarchically and distinct from social organization but not with a host of religious communities organized as the structure of local society. With this in mind, we can now look at the particulars of the 1898 events.

The 1898 Confiscation of Temples

What I see as the turning point of the modern Chinese state's management of religion, the July 10, 1898, temple confiscation edict, was part of a larger movement, the Wuxu reforms, that encompassed attempts at creating a modern, Western-inspired educational system, military, and economic institutions, all designed to enhance China's strength and chances at survival in an imperialist context. Although issues of institutional reforms (schools and examinations, army, political institutions, economic and industrial development) were primary in the reform literature, recent research has shown that social and moral reform, including gender issues, were also part of the reformers' projects (Karl and Zarrow 2002). The issues of temple seizure and religious reform pertained to both institutional change and social reform. The essays gathered by Karl and Zarrow (2002) attempt to show how the 1898 and subsequent late Qing reforms constituted a first attempt to systematically formulate a Chinese vision of modernity, which fits well with my particular argument about the change in the discourse and state policy on religion around that date.

One of the most interesting features of the 1898 events is that there were actually several distinct forces at work behind the confiscation of temples to build schools. Three figures stand out: Kang Youwei, mastermind of the Wuxu reforms; Zhang Taiyan, an influential reformist scholar; and Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909), then the Huguang governor-general. Zhang Zhidong has been seen by many as the father of the *miaochan xingxue* movement (Makita 1984, 292–97), mostly because of his very influential essay, “Exhortation to Build Schools,” *Quanxue pian* 勸學篇, written during the third month of 1898 and already very largely diffused by the fifth month (Ayers 1971, 149–51).⁸ Zhang's essay is, by and large, devoted to the technical question of educational reform. While discussing the funding of the new schools, however, he writes that it would suffice to seize 70 percent of Buddhist and Taoist monasteries and their landed property. Zhang maintains that the remaining monasteries would be sufficient for the upkeep of the clergy and that a bit of Confucianization would, in any case, invigorate these two declining religions. Zhang also envisions some sort of compensation (*Zhang Zhidong quanji* 1998, *Quanxue pian*, chap. 3, “Shexue,” 9739–40). What Zhang was after, then, was clearly more the optimal allocation of resources than an all-out assault on religious institutions.

Another text written in spring 1898, just before the Wuxu reforms, was Zhang Taiyan's “[We Should] Sell the Temples” (Zhang Taiyan 1984, “Yumiao” 鬻廟, 98–99).⁹ This text advocates selling (so as to both destroy and reuse) improper temples (*yinci*) but also, and most importantly, Buddhist and Taoist monasteries, seen as the

⁸Franke (1960, 43) and Welch (1968, 11) are mistaken in believing that the *Quanxue pian* postdates the edicts.

⁹The “Yumiao” entry was later deleted from Zhang's revised edition of *Qiusbu*. It is introduced by the following line: “This text was written during the spring of 1898. During the summer, there was an edict calling for the destruction of monasteries for the building of schools, but it was not actually enforced.”

repository of all debaucheries. At the end of his text, Zhang notes that the selling of improper temples and monasteries would have the added advantage of financing the building of new schools, thus inverting the priorities as expressed in Zhang Zhidong's writing. In 1898, Zhang Taiyan was an ardent reformist and later revolutionary, but he eventually fell out with Kang Youwei as the latter's definition of Chinese culture in purely Confucian terms did not satisfy his more comprehensive vision; indeed, Zhang would, during the following years, develop a strong interest in Buddhist philosophy.

It is difficult to ascertain how Zhang Zhidong's and Zhang Taiyan's propositions influenced Kang Youwei's July 10 memorial, but what is quite clear when reading the texts is the difference between the three projects. Kang's memorial, *Qing chi gesheng gai shuyuan yinci wei xuetaang zhe* 請飭各省改書院淫祠爲學堂摺 (Memorial Requesting [the Emperor] to Order that Academies and Improper Temples Be Changed into Schools throughout the Country) (Qinghua daxue lishixi 1998, 770–73), ends with an attack on improper cults, *yinsi* 淫祀. In each village, he writes, there are several temples that all have landed property; these could all be seized and made into schools where education would be compulsory for all village children. No mention of Buddhism and Taoism here;¹⁰ it is not a certain category of religious institutions (monasteries) that is targeted, but all temples (*miao*). Furthermore, Kang does not mention a quota to be seized or compensation; all temples must go. This idea clearly fits into his larger scheme to set up Confucianism (called by him Kongjiao 孔教) as the state religion (*guojiao* 國教) and to ban any other religious institution, although Kang did not elaborate much on this scheme during the 1898 reform.¹¹ He had, however, already proposed in famous letters to the emperor in 1895 to transform into Confucian temples all improper temples (*yinci*) and even proper temples to Confucian saints other than Confucius (Kang Youwei 1990, 2:97; *Shang Qingdi di'er shu* 上清帝第二書 [Second Letter to the Qing Emperor], May 2, 1895; *Shang Qingdi disan shu* 上清帝第三書 [Third Letter to the Qing Emperor], May 29, 1895, 2:148). Kang's project is a wild hybridization of Confucian fundamentalism and Christianity under the influence of, notably, the Scottish Baptist missionary Timothy Richard (1845–1919). Indeed, a rumor that circulated after the publication of the July 10 edict suggested that Kang had drugged the emperor and converted him to Christianity

¹⁰Indeed, in a later private writing, Kang claims that, in his mind, the Buddhist monasteries were not among the *yinci* to be destroyed and that he had not imagined that some ruffians would seize the occasion to attack these monasteries (Qinghua daxue lishixi 1998, 772).

¹¹The famous memorial *Qing zun Kongsheng wei guojiao li jiaobu jiaobui yi Kongzi jinian er fei yinci zhe* 請尊孔聖爲國教立教部教會以孔子紀年而廢淫祠摺 (Memorial Requesting that Confucius Be Worshipped as [the Founder] of the National Religion, that a Ministry of Religion and a Church Be Established, that Years Be Counted from the Birth of Confucius, and that Improper Temples Be Suppressed), which lays out a precise plan to eradicate Chinese religion and set up Confucianism as the exclusive national religion, is actually a fake; that is, it was written later and not submitted to the throne (see Huang Zhangjian 1974, 464–70). The text proposes creating a ministry for religion and compelling all Chinese to attend weekly Confucian masses in their local Confucian church, where Confucian classics are read by a Confucian pastor. It also includes fierce attacks on Chinese religion. A lax state, says Kang, has during two millennia let people build temples to all sorts of immoral deities. Now, foreigners “photograph the statues in our temples, show these pictures to each other and laugh” (Kang 1990, 65). Paganism, he goes on to argue, goes as far as the worship of animals and is a shame that debases China and causes it to be ranked among barbarian countries.

(Qinghua daxue lishixi 1998, 773).¹² More generally, Kang exhibits a strong sensitivity to the Western perspective on Chinese religion and evinces what will be a major characteristic of Republican-period writings on religion, that is, a desire to remodel Chinese religion on a Christian-based model of what a religion should be. This desire would notably find a mature expression in the 1910s attempts by Kang's disciples to create an official Confucian religion, attempts that have been very insightfully studied by Chen Hsi-yuan (1999).¹³

It is, of course, a bit artificial to remove the 1898 texts on the temple/school issue from the larger political context, but I contend that they clearly reveal different positions regarding religion. Zhang Zhidong represented a traditional attitude; he spoke from within Chinese religion, which he may have wanted to reform along Confucian fundamentalist lines but in no way revolutionize. He did not even want to destroy the Buddhist and Taoist institutions but merely cut them down to size. Furthermore, his program was purely educational; he only spoke of religion insofar as he saw monasteries as overendowed. For Zhang Zhidong, religion was not at all a primary issue. Zhang Taiyan and Kang Youwei, on the other hand, envisioned a religious reform as an important part of their overall project. Zhang Taiyan wrote that “now is not the time for performing rituals and following the way of the gods anymore” (Zhang Taiyan 1984, 99). Kang's project was more articulated and comprehensive: He wanted to destroy the temple cults and build something entirely new on their ruins. This point needs some elaborating: Apparently, the terms of the July 10 edict (suppress improper cults and maintain the register of state sacrifices, *sidian*) seem to be in accordance with traditional Confucian fundamentalism and, indeed, with the Qing code. The larger project was clearly not traditional Confucian fundamentalism, however, nor was the July 10 edict received as such.

Semantically, the difference hinged on the use of the word *yinsi*. As a marker of illegitimate practice, *yinsi* has always meant different things to different people, some interpreting it in a narrow sense (focusing on a few downright “immoral” cults, such as the lascivious Wutong 五通, which were the traditional targets of Confucian fundamentalists; Kojima 1991; Jiang 1995), others being more inclusive; in all cases, however, it refers only to a part of all the existing cults, a part judged perverse and heterodox and opposed to acceptable cults to orthodox deities, *zhengshen* 正神. This indeed is the sense of the term in the September 26 revocation edict, which condemns improper temples but maintains all other temples, whether in the register of state sacrifices (*sidian*) or not. By contrast, Kang Youwei, who wanted to promote exclu-

¹²The fact that an edict protecting the missionaries was proclaimed the following day could only reinforce people's feelings that Christianity was out to eradicate Chinese religion (Qinghua daxue lishixi 1998, 773; Shi Zhouren 2002, 150–53).

¹³Chen (1999, chap. 2) insists that Kang Youwei still thought within a traditional Chinese framework of teachings (*jiao*) and not in terms of religions (*zongjiao*), which distinguishes him from Republican-period attempts to establish Confucianism as a state religion. At the same time, Christian competition and influence during the late nineteenth century caused Confucians to change the ways they thought of Confucianism; during the 1890s, intellectuals other than Kang, including some unrelated to him, also called for the establishment of a Confucian church on a Christian model; see, for instance, the pious and anticlerical Confucian and Buddhist Song Shu 宋恕 (1862–1910; *Song Shu ji*, 36; text dated 1892) and Chen Hsi-yuan (1999, 87–92). Such change also caused a major departure from the Confucians' traditional vision of Chinese religion as a whole, including temple cults. For this reason, I contend that, even though the notions of religion and superstition would only be used a few years later (after 1901) to describe their new approach of Chinese religion, radicals like Kang Youwei in 1898 were already part of the new discourse.

sively the cult of Confucius, proposed to maintain temples in the *sidian* but to reclassify *all* others as *yinsi* targeted for confiscation. He made his point clearly enough, for all available sources show that both reformers and the general public understood the July 10 edict as calling for the destruction not of a few select temples but of all temples, bar the handful of those where state sacrifices were performed.¹⁴ In other words, Kang did not use *yinsi* in the standard sense but made it a label that applied to all local cults, which amounted to completely reinventing Confucian theology. This might seem a theological trifle, but it is not, and in any case, in China as elsewhere, theology is never considered a trifle.

Thus, although they seemed to stand on similar grounds (the use of temple property to finance a modern educational system), Zhang Zhidong and Kang Youwei, in fact, adopted very different positions: extracting money from the existing religious system versus destroying it. Historians may not be surprised by such an analysis; they traditionally see Zhang Zhidong as a conservative who tried to adapt China to its modern predicament without upsetting its social fabric, whereas Kang Youwei was a real modernizer ready for fundamental changes. Yet their divergence on the religious question may be more than a mere consequence of a larger political opposition. It expresses a rift in the elite's opinion on the topic of Chinese religion. This rift, and the importance of the religious question, was reflected in the press.

The *Shenbao's* Endorsement of Religious Reform

The reaction of the *Shenbao* may not be representative of the whole of Chinese society's answer to the temple predicament, but at least it was rich, varied, and fascinating. The recent outflow of research on early Chinese newspapers, notably the *Shenbao*, has shown that, although written by a small group of journalists, the newspaper echoed prevailing debates among intellectuals and endeavored to reflect dissenting views, thus constituting a unique arena for public discussion of current issues (Vittinghoff 2002; Wagner 2001; Mittler 2004; Janku 2003, 147–321 discusses the role of the *Shenbao* during the 1898 reform movement). It is, therefore, significant that the question of religious reform and temple seizures featured prominently in the *Shenbao*, even if it is difficult to quantify how widespread the *Shenbao* editorialists' views were. Although established and run by an Englishman, Ernest Major (1841–1908), the *Shenbao* did not reflect a Christian perspective; the journalists, including Huang Xiexun 黃協塏 (1852–1924), the editor between 1894 and 1905, were classically educated Chinese scholars.¹⁵ As an influential media, the *Shenbao* both reflected and contributed to shape elite opinions on many issues, including religion, and it is, therefore, not surprising that many of the themes developed in its 1898 editorials are found later, as we will see, in other media such as pamphlets or novels.

First, the newspaper published an editorial that ran for two days, July 21 and 22, commenting on the July 10 edict. The confiscation of temples amounted to only a

¹⁴It should be noted that “temples included in the *sidian*” is an equally ambiguous formulation. It can be interpreted in a larger sense (temples to gods mentioned in the *sidian*) and in a narrow sense (temples in which official sacrifices were mandated). For instance, Guandi has one temple per county recognized by the *sidian*, but it is unlikely that any fundamentalist Confucian would propose destroying the dozens of other Guandi miao in any given county.

¹⁵The *Shenbao* editorials are either not signed (if written by a journalist of the journal; by 1898, all Chinese) or appear under a pseudonym if sent by an outside contributor. On *Shenbao* journalists, see Vittinghoff (2002, esp. chap. 3).

short passage of the edict, but the editorial saw it as the most important part because it devoted most of its space to discussing it. The editorialist approved it enthusiastically: The decision to turn temples into schools was good for education but also the best way to destroy the source of “two thousand years of evil customs.” From the outset, like in Zhang Taiyan’s essay, a fundamental point of the *miaochan xingxue* movement was expressed: Destroying temples in itself was as important as creating schools. This was followed by two additional editorials, equally supportive of temple destruction, on August 4 and September 9.¹⁶ A short extract from the July 22 editorial will give an idea of the style of these texts:

If you ask what gods [these Buddhists and Taoists] sacrifice to, you find out that they are all uncanonical absurd deities which no gentleman would want to mention. [These clerics] ruin the moral education of the people (*jiaohua* 教化) and squander their wealth, engage in debauchery and theft, and live as parasites of the honest people. Today’s Buddhists and Taoists are really the most heinous criminals on earth. This author feels a deep hatred towards the two religions, which has made him long suffering. But today their buildings, lands, and property are about to be turned over to the good cause; the circumstances are favorable and it seems easy. This is a most happy day for the world!

Three points can be made on the basis of these editorials. First, the violence of the discourse (in both insulting vocabulary and shocking propositions, such as selling out nuns as slaves) betrays the sense of a religious reform coming to a head. All three texts insist that previous attempts at religious reform in China had failed but that now was a unique occasion in a context in which international competition put China’s survival into question. Second, the position taken by the anonymous editorialists is somewhat between Zhang Zhidong and Kang Youwei and quite close to Zhang Taiyan. They did not share Kang’s rejection of the whole of Chinese religion and actually quoted Zhang Zhidong’s *Quansue pian* as if it were the inspiration behind the edict. Therefore, the three editorials touch little on the question of local cults and aim at the same target as Zhang Zhidong: the Buddhist and Taoist clergy, specifically. They do not mention the most revolutionary themes of Kang’s religious project: to put an end to the autonomy of local cults and to ban local gods and idols (statues). On the other hand, they wax eloquent over traditional anticlerical themes illustrated by dozens of earlier *Shenbao* editorials (Goossaert 2002a) since the newspaper’s creation in 1872: Buddhists and Taoists are parasites of Chinese society and both corrupt its customs (sexual propriety, in particular) and waste its resources. They must be returned to lay life by any means, beginning with the expropriation of their monasteries. Not much is said of the vast majority of Chinese temples that did not have clerics. Yet, if the *Shenbao* maintains its usual anticlerical stance, it is more uncompromising than ever. The September 9 editorial criticizes Zhang Zhidong’s project for maintaining some of the monasteries, whereas the editorialist wants them all destroyed with no delay. In other words, the *Shenbao* editorialists enthusiastically welcomed the religious reform declared by Kang Youwei but interpreted it in terms of traditional anticlericalism: to rid Chinese religion of its priests (Buddhists and Taoists) who prevented the “real clerics” of Chinese religion, Confucians, from exercising their due guidance on society.

¹⁶“Lun Zhongguo Shidao erjiao you shuaifei zhi ji” 論中國釋道二教有衰廢之機 (Chinese Buddhism and Taoism Could Now Be Annihilated) and “Siguan gai xuetang ce” 寺觀改學堂策 (The Turning Monasteries into Schools Policy).

In 1898, China's political elite were divided between those who followed the radical line of Kang Youwei, such as the *Shenbao* editorialists, and those who preferred the more cautious approach of Zhang Zhidong. Even some reformers took exception to the blanket confiscation of temples.¹⁷ The radicalism of Kang's project for a new religion caused him to be rather isolated. If he had few direct heirs, however, some of his ideas did gain wider currency.¹⁸ Although most intellectuals did not adhere to his vision of a messianic Confucian religion, Kang was influential because he was one of the first and most vocal proponents of a new way of thinking the religious question in China, a way that would, after 1901, become the foundation of the antisuperstition movement. Although they rejected Kang's person and his wildest projects, the anti-superstition campaigners reverently quoted the July 10, 1898, memorial as the forerunner of their action.

I will now extend my source base to define more largely the two discourses, the Zhang Zhidong-type, pre-1898, anticlerical and fundamentalist discourse and the post-1898, antisuperstition discourse, while keeping in mind that the two are, in fact, often confused and distinguished here only for the purpose of analysis.

The Pre-1898 Discourse

The Zhang Zhidong discourse may be considered as typical of most of the late imperial literati writing on Chinese religion. A rather extensive analysis shows that, in spite of the large array of religious convictions found among elite writers, a few common assumptions were shared. First, and most importantly, all writers belonged to Chinese religion. That is, they thought according to the cosmological system proper to Chinese tradition, believed in a postmortem destiny, practiced death rituals and sacrifices to ancestors, and believed in the moral retribution of one's actions. Officials and members of the gentry may have had a different explanation for these beliefs from that of other actors in Chinese society, but this did not necessarily preclude a sense of sharing the same religious world.

At the same time, there was a great deal of polemical and aggressive discourse on religious practice authored by members of the gentry. This discourse can be found in a variety of sources, including essays, official decisions and manuals, as well as editorials in the *Shenbao*, from 1872 to 1898, a journal that discussed religious issues extensively. I have drawn up four categories of criticism. First, criticism aimed at sectarian groups. This has been rather well studied and need not be recalled here. Although Buddhists and Taoists are often accused of paving the way for sectarian teachings, sectarian groups have always been treated as a separate issue, and they play little part in the 1898 discussions (and even less thereafter). Second, criticism of improper cults (*yinsi*) and mediums. The question of improper cults has been discussed quite a lot in modern scholarship, mostly in relation to earlier periods, and hostility to mediums has been well studied by Donald Sutton (2000). Such discourses are based on the defense of traditional Confucian religious values and norms regarding who may

¹⁷For instance, in a letter dated September 11, 1898, from Qiu Xian 丘憲, writing to Wang Kangnian 汪康年 (1860–1911) (Qinghua daxue lishixi 1998, 965).

¹⁸One good example is how the extraordinary sentence (in the fake memorial on Confucianism as state religion) on foreigners photographing idols in Chinese temples did find itself used verbatim, thirty years later, in one of the fiercest antisuperstition laws of the Nanking regime, the November 1928 *Shenci cunfei biao zhun* 神祠存廢標準 (Standards to Determine the Temples to Be Destroyed and Those to Be Maintained).

offer sacrifices to whom and according to which ritual. As already mentioned, in the pre-1898 discourse, *yinsi* was always supposed to be a deviant minority of cults and did not concern nationwide cults such as Guandi 關帝, Mazu 媽祖, Zhenwu 真武, Wenchang 文昌, the Chenghuang 城隍, and so forth (which were included in the official register of sacrifices, *sidian*, anyway).

Third, criticism concerning communal celebrations: opera, large processions, nightly activities, voluntary devotional associations (pilgrimage associations, Buddhist pious societies), and, in particular, those in which women participated. Elite opposition to such forms of celebration was grounded in both concerns for social order (fear of trouble arising in mass celebrations, sometimes real, often phantasmic) and considerations of orthopraxy, or “style,” and theology (communal celebrations were condemned as sacrilegious). Fourth, criticism aimed at the participation of Buddhist and Taoist clerics in social activities, notably the performance of rituals outside monasteries (funerals, rituals during temple festivals), the organization of lay pious societies, and fund-raising (Goossaert 2002c). The elite’s attitude toward Buddhism and Taoism was complex. They sometimes treated both as *yiduan* 異端, heterodoxies to be banned altogether. Most of the time, however, members of the gentry considered, as did imperial orthodoxy, that these two religions were legitimate as long as they were limited to the individual quest for sanctity within the confines of proper places: monasteries.

What has been left out of this roster of criticisms? Ancestor worship, of course, because this is what Confucianism is about, but also, just as importantly, territorial temple cults. The orthodox nature of territorial cults was already spelled out in the basic law on religious heterodoxy in the Qing code, namely the *Jinzhǐ shìwū xiéshù* 禁止師巫邪術 (Ban on Spirit Mediums and Heterodox Practices) article. The same position was elaborated by many authors in official or private writings. For instance, in his brief on local religious culture, Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀 (1696–1771), an iconic model official, distinguished the legally sanctioned spring and autumn prayers from the forbidden voluntary associations and their assorted celebrations.¹⁹ In practice, it is, of course, absolutely impossible to separate territorial cults from devotional associations, but what deserves attention is that there was, in Chen’s world, a place for village temple festivals for the territorial god (spring and autumn prayers). Why? Not only because cults to territorial gods (*she* 社) were as canonical as you could get by Confucian standards but also, I presume, because these cults’ organization reflected the social structure of the village, in contrast to the congregationalism of voluntary devotional groups. Nothing in them contravened the natural, patriarchal social order dreamed by Chen and his colleagues.

Most of these four strands of criticism run throughout late imperial history, and some do have a much older pedigree. William Rowe, in his study of Chen Hongmou, concluded that Chen, along with the whole late imperial officialdom, was taking part in the “great religious war waged by devout *lixue* adherents against Buddhist and Taoist beliefs and practice” and “the more persistent assault on popular culture” (Rowe 2001, 436). The term *religious war*, although controversial, is certainly thought provoking. The antagonists in this so-called war are easy to identify: Confucian fundamentalists against local society and its religious structures (local cults). Although the

¹⁹Chen Hongmou, “Fengsu tiaoyue” 風俗條約 (A Compact on Customs), in He (1889, 68.1b–2a). This is an eighteenth-century text, but its inclusion in the *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* and its wide distribution thereby make it a relevant source for a discussion on late Qing discourse.

tone of exchanges between them was often vitriolic, this was a conflict that made few physical victims; it was mostly a war of words and political decisions.

Thus, there was already a low-intensity religious conflict taking place in pre-1898 China. Yet two mitigating observations should be made. First, innumerable prohibitions, both national and local, against practices such as those described previously under my four categories, seem to have been ineffective, often ignored altogether, sometimes applied only for a very short period of time. This is probably because, as mentioned earlier, the legal (monasticism, lineage and territorial cults) could not be separated from the illegal (devotional associations, outdoor Taoist and Buddhist ritual, large-scale festivals). The social structures of Chinese religion in 1898 were, by all accounts, alive and well, even though many temples had been destroyed during the Taiping war and other war episodes. Second, even the most aggressive discourses were pronounced from within Chinese religion. In other words, the elite discourse proposed to reform Chinese religion by returning it to the purity of its origins as described in canonical scriptures and stripping it of all noncanonical later accretions; this was, strictly speaking, Confucian fundamentalism, and not rejection of Chinese religion as such.

In addition to Confucian fundamentalism, there is a second notion, anticlericalism, that may help us understand the pre-1898 discourse on the gentry side of the religious conflict. The anticlerical discourse described the moral and intellectual inferiority of religious professionals and their bad influence on society at large. There was a popular anti-Confucian anticlericalism that is of no concern here. What we are talking about is outright hostility, mostly on the part of certain members of the gentry (by no means all of them) toward Buddhist and Taoist clerics as people with (in their view) questionable lifestyles and activities. It was sometimes part of an antireligious discourse (from the 1920s to the present), or a fundamentalist discourse, because much of the outright rejection of Buddhism and Taoism by the most fundamentalist Confucians was based on anticlerical arguments rather than the idea that Laozi's or the Buddha's teachings are worthless. At least until 1898, however, the majority of anticlerical discourses can be considered as *faith-based anticlericalism*, grounded in a rhetorical dichotomy between the noble Buddhist and Taoist ideals and their actual practice. Not all violent discourses against monks and priests, and there were a great many of them, were anti-Buddhist or anti-Taoist; quite often, they stemmed from faith-based anticlericalism, that is, they advocated getting rid of the clergy in order to save Buddhism or Taoism. Furthermore, this view was not restricted to the elite, because sectarian movements (*lay Buddhism* as they are sometimes called) also fundamentally shared this attitude of respect for the Buddha and his teachings while despising the monks and nuns (Goossaert 2002b).

One example nicely summarizes what I consider a typical pre-1898 anticlerical discourse on religion by Chinese intellectuals: the writings of Zheng Guanying 鄭觀應 (1842–1921). Zheng was a Cantonese comprador who worked for various business schemes initiated by late imperial officials; he was closer to Western ideas than most Chinese intellectuals of the time. In 1892, he published a political, social, and economical agenda for reforming China entitled *Shengshi weiyán* 盛世危言 (Daring Words in an Age of Abundance). In this book, religion is discussed in a chapter entitled “Clerics,” “Sengdao” 僧道. Like so many intellectuals of his time, Zheng believed there was a religious problem in China and proposed to solve it by forcibly secularizing the clergy. Zheng professed respect for Buddhism and Taoism (indeed, he was a Taoist self-cultivation practitioner) but thought that the debased clergy was the cause of a general lack of religious ideals among the population. According to him, people

attracted to Buddhism or Taoism should be free to practice individually at home but not to create institutions. He even praised Islam for upholding religious ideals and morality without a parasitic clergy.

In short, the discourse on religion in pre-1898 China was characterized by aggressive plans and ferocious verbal (much less frequently physical) attacks on temples, cults, rituals, and specialists, but these, I believe, boil down to three overlapping concerns: a struggle between intellectuals and clerics for the status of moral/religious authority, a cultural conflict between social classes (the gentry and the rest) about religious and artistic styles, and an undercurrent of more abstract, theological anticlericalism (religion should not be a profession). Debates raged about who should run temples and how, but none of these three concerns implied a radical questioning of the temple-based religious organization of Chinese local society, such as the one put forward on July 10, 1898, and later with the *miaochan xingxue* movement. To be sure, the question of financial resources was central to the pre-1898 discourse, and the theme of money spent in useless (*wuyi* 無益) temple celebrations, instead of socially beneficial undertakings, often comes up for discussion.²⁰ Yet the proposed solution before 1898 was not to destroy temples but to convince people to better spend their money.²¹

The Post-1898 Discourse: The Birth of Antisuperstition

Many of the themes and rhetoric found in pre-1898 texts, which I have labeled *Confucian fundamentalist* and/or *anticlerical*, continue to appear after that date, and, indeed, some are still current today. From 1898 onward, they are mixed in various degrees with new elements, namely a new vocabulary to discuss the religious question, new genres to deal with it, and new targets for the polemical discourse.

Shortly after 1898, new words began to appear in the discourse on religion, usually first introduced in newspaper articles. Most important among these are *zongjiao* for “religion,” *mixin* 迷信 for “superstition,” and *shenquan* 神權 for “divine right or power.” All were adopted from Japanese and were used to express Western notions that did not exist in the Chinese discourse until then (Chen Hsi-yuan 2002; Nedostup 2001, 18–27). *Zongjiao* and *mixin* seem to have been made popular by Liang Qichao in 1901 (Bastid-Bruguière 1998). The question of vocabulary is far from innocent: The use of Western notions to describe religious practices or ideas that were heretofore discussed with native terms expressed the authors’ determination to distance themselves from Chinese religion. These notions brought with them distinctions, fissures that did not exist before: The great divide was now between *zongjiao*, “the acceptable,”

²⁰Before 1898, the issue is less funding schools than diverting temple money into famine relief; this, at least, is the central theme in the *Shenbao* during the period between 1872 and 1898.

²¹In 1898, there were even proposals to finance schools with money coming from religious institutions without destroying them: for instance, a proposal by Zhang Jian to tax the clergy (Zhang Jian 1931, “Zhengwen lu” 政聞錄, 2.11b–12a). Such a less-confrontational approach continued to be favored by many after 1901; a local reform in 1902 Shanxi province similarly sought to encourage village leaders to divert part of the temple and festival funds toward schools without upsetting the religious system, but by 1908, a more coercive policy of taxation of temples and festivals imposed by magistrates was enforced (Thompson 1988, 199–202). Taxing superstition was a widespread policy throughout the Republican period.

and *mixin*, “the unacceptable.” This distinction is quite different from the traditional orthodox (*zheng* 正)/heterodox (*xie* 邪) divide (Duara 1991, 76) because many local cults and practices independent from national organizations and textual traditions, that were once regarded as orthodox, were now branded as superstitious. From 1901 onward, each actor on the religious scene had to position himself in regard to the *zongjiao/mixin* dichotomy. Buddhism partially succeeded, during the 1910s and 1920s, to reinvent itself as a modern religion opposed to *mixin* and, thus, came out of the antisuperstition campaigns rather well.²² This much cannot be said of most of the rest of Chinese religion.

It would be anachronistic to speak of antisuperstition before 1900, when the notions of religion and superstition first appear in the Chinese discourse. But the term seems appropriate to label the new trends after 1901. Antisuperstition can be defined as the corpus of all discourses against religious practices using the word *mixin* and the distinction *mixin/zongjiao*: whatever is not grounded in and strictly limited to the spiritual and moral self-perfection quest delineated by the philosophical scriptures of a world religion (Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism). Antisuperstition may overlap with some extreme forms of Confucian fundamentalism but is much broader than anticlericalism because it aims at the very principle of the organization of local Chinese society as cult groups.

I will not discuss here antireligion, meaning the rejection of all kinds of self-conscious religious ideas and practices, because this is yet another matter altogether. The first instances of religious reform, like the Kang Youwei project, were anything but antireligious. In fact, even though most Chinese intellectuals disliked Kang’s messianism, they generally shared some of his postulates: China needed a state religion, and this could only be Confucianism, the natural religion of China.²³ It is only later, during the Republican period, that Confucianism was hailed as *not* being a religion. Concurrently, the issue of rejecting religion as such did not appear until the 1920s; the antireligious, or atheist (*fei zongjiao* 非宗教), movement at that time was formulated under the direct influence of European Marxists and freethinkers (Bastid-Bruguière 2002).

The new cause of separating religion from superstition, beginning in the 1900s, was part of a larger campaign to “reform the customs,” *fengsu gaige* 風俗改革, which overtook the traditional “civilizing [of the lower classes],” *jiaobua* and gave rise to new styles of ideological literature, or propaganda, notably public lectures, periodicals in vernacular language, pamphlets, and novels (on this literature, see Li 1992, 36–37, 144, which touches on antisuperstition). The use of novels to further the cause of social reform, advocated by Liang Qichao, resulted in 1905 and 1906 in a series of novels devoted entirely to the denunciation of superstitions, most of them first serialized in the literary periodical *Xiuxiang xiaoshuo* 繡像小說 (Illustrated Novels) (A Ying 1973, 116–27). Two of the best-known novelists of the social criticism persuasion,²⁴ Li Boyuan 李伯元 (Li Baojia 寶嘉, 1867–1906) and Wu Jianren

²²This, at least, was the mission of Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947). Contrary to what some Buddhophile authors claim, in the long term, the large Buddhist monasteries were relatively spared.

²³Liang Qichao, though, rejected this idea as early as 1902 (Nedostup 2001, 24–25).

²⁴Wang (1997, chap. 4) explores the genre of exposés without discussing those dealing with superstition. He astutely warns against reading these commercial, self-ironic novels in a May Fourth perspective of upright social reform. Indeed, the antisuperstition novels are, first and foremost, commercial (published for profit) and enjoyable literature, but they show, at the very least, that there is a public who understands and enjoys the language of antisuperstition.

吳趸人, (Wu Woyao 沃堯, 1866–1910) both wrote pieces devoted to antisuperstition: Li's *Xingshi yuan tanci* 醒世緣彈詞 (A Drum-Song Story to Awaken the World) and Wu's *Xiapian qiwen* 瞎騙奇聞 (Strange Stories of Stupidity and Fraud), although these are not among their masterpieces. The best representative of the genre is perhaps *Saomi zhou* 掃迷帚 (The Broom to Sweep Away Superstitions). This novel, first serialized in 1905, appears to be the first comprehensive catalog and attack of Chinese superstitions in the modern sense.

In all these novels, a family conflict, usually opposing brothers or cousins (rather than the more likely but very unfilial generational conflict), reflects a frontal opposition between progressive antisuperstition ideas and backward beliefs and practices. There are differences however: Whereas *Xingshi yuan tanci* and *Yufu yuan* 玉佛緣 (The Cause of the Jade Buddha, a novel on Buddhist swindlers that appeared at about the same time as *Saomi zhou* and in the same periodical) do not use terms such as *mixin* and limit their attacks to anticlerical themes, *Xiapian qiwen* and most of all *Saomi zhou* do talk about superstition. *Xingshi yuan tanci* condemns prayers but claims that gods do exist; *Saomi zhou* goes much farther and devotes much space to proving that there are no such things as gods, immortals, or Buddhas, while leaving Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam out of the discussion altogether.

In addition to novels, public preaching and short tracts were also used. One 1905 article discusses an activist who harangued the Chinese merchants living in an overseas port to stop celebrating temple festivals and sent tracts to this effect to all Chinese communities abroad (“Lun gechu mixin guishen zhi fa” 論革除迷信鬼神之法 [On the Methods to Extirpate Superstitious Beliefs in Gods and Demons], reprinted from *Zhongwai ribao* 中外日報 in *Dongfang zazhi*, 1905, 87–90). Another interesting case is the *Zhejiang fengsu gailiang qianshuo* 浙江風俗改良淺說 (Straightforward Speeches for Reforming the Customs in Zhejiang), published in 1910 by the provincial government of Zhejiang.²⁵ This is a collection of essays written in oral colloquial language that was clearly meant to be used by orators. The essays cover a large range of topics, but attacks on superstition are prominent.²⁶ Although this is not the first instance of preaching in colloquial language by members of the elite, because Qing-times *jiaohua* activists also used *baibhua* (Mair 1985), it nevertheless shows the antisuperstition campaign at a grassroots level.

Moreover, the social-reform activists did not content themselves with preaching; the first years of the twentieth century were marked in several Chinese cities by the forceful actions, often based on newly established police forces, of activists bent on reforming the use of the streets, notably religious festivals and related folk-art performances (for instance, in Chengdu, see Wang 2003). Although some of these reformists' aims were not new, their strong impact certainly was.

The appearance of a new way of thinking and regulating Chinese religion (in terms of religions vs. superstitions) in the press, pamphlets, and novels, and on the field also implied the broadening and merging of the targets of traditional criticism.

²⁵I am very grateful to Fang Ling for providing me with a copy of this fascinating document.

²⁶“Jie yinsi” 戒淫祀 (Prohibition of Improper Cults) (*Zhejiang fengsu gailiang qianshuo* 1910, 48b–49b), “Jie ningfo” 戒佞佛 (Prohibition of Venal Prayers) (pp. 49b–50b), “Jie shaoxiang sushan” 戒燒香宿山 (Prohibition of Burning Incense and Passing the Night in Temples) (pp. 50b–52a), “Jie mixin sengdao nüwu” 戒迷信僧道女巫 (Prohibition of Superstitious Belief in Buddhists, Taoists, and Spirit Mediums) (pp. 52a–53a), “Jie mixin sengdao ji fengshui” 戒迷信僧道及風水 (Prohibition of Superstitious Belief in Buddhists, Taoists, and Geomancers) (pp. 53a–54a).

What were until then distinct targets (the four broad categories discussed previously: sectarian movements, mediums and *yinsi*, cult associations, and clerics) were now lumped together under the single category of superstition. As comprehensive catalogs of superstitions, such as the *Saomi zhou*, show, however, superstition included more than these traditional targets; it also encompassed Confucian practices such as geomancy, divination, and spirit writing, which before 1898 were sometimes criticized for their excesses, but usually not on principle, and were, in fact, still largely practiced by gentry members in the 1900s. Cults dear to pre-1898 Confucian fundamentalists, such as Wenchang or Guandi, were suddenly rejected outright. What is more, among the elements now labeled *superstition*, which were not targets before, we find more general abstract ideas, such as the irrationality of praying to icons, or statues that are mere blocks of wood or mud. This, of course, eventually led to the questioning of all Confucian cults, including state religion and ancestor worship. Texts from the period between 1901 and 1911 usually stopped short of this, but in the following decade, the step was taken.

The nature of such an evolution can only be understood when one considers the actual workings of late imperial Confucian religion, that is, the world of the Confucian clergy, *lisheng* 禮生, which combined fundamentalism with an intense devotional and liturgical life.²⁷ That some antisuperstition campaigners and Republican politicians (beginning with Yuan Shikai) honored Confucius does not mean that they were Confucians in the same sense as late imperial Confucians were; Confucius was honored in schools, but the biennial sacrifice had gone, and so were other Confucian cults (Wenchang, Guandi, etc.). Such a rejection, most tellingly, was also espoused by those disciples of Kang Youwei who campaigned for a National Confucian Church during the 1910s (Chen Hsi-yuan 1999, 226–8). Late imperial Confucianism was part of Chinese religion; the antisuperstition campaigners' respect for Confucius was another matter altogether. Late imperial Confucianism did not disappear; it survived in other forms and is still alive,²⁸ but it ceased to be the religion of most of the governing elite. In other words, the most striking novelty in the elite's antisuperstition discourse is not its antipathy toward Buddhism and Taoism or even local cults—this was already present before and merely intensified—but its rejection of its own Confucian religious practices. Which is why, in my opinion, the elite's growing estrangement from Confucian religious life lay at the core of the antisuperstition movement.

This seems to be confirmed by an evolution in the press's, and especially the illustrated press's, reporting on religion. Whereas late nineteenth-century journals such as the *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 (Illustrated News of the Lithographic Press, published in Shanghai by the Shenbao Press between 1884 and 1898) reported critically mostly on lower-class religious practices, the otherwise very similar, in both style and contents, *Shishi baoguan wushen quannian huabao* 時事報館戊申全年畫報 (Illustrated News of the Year 1908 Published by the Shishi baoguan) featured many articles fiercely criticizing officials going to temples or praying to deities, arguing that it could be expected the people were still ensnared in "superstitious belief in

²⁷Even though the notion of a Confucian clergy is not usual in the Sinological literature, it is warranted by both the specialized education in Confucian liturgy of the gentry, and the *lisheng* in particular (Lee 2001; Clart 2003), and by the monopoly on legitimate interpretation of the Confucian scriptures wielded by the gentry and, notably, officials (Jochim 2003).

²⁸It notably survived in various sectarian movements such as Yiguandao and others and in spirit-writing groups that began at the same time to claim Confucianism as their identity (see, notably, Clart 2003).

divine powers” (*mixin shenquan*) but that such behavior among educated officials was shocking (for instance 15:6586, 15:6639).

From Fundamentalism to Antisuperstition: Continuity and Rupture

I have so far insisted on the elements of discontinuity around 1898, first by showing the ambiguous mixture of traditional and revolutionary thinking in the formulation and reception of the temple-confiscation edict in 1898 and then by opposing the typical fundamentalist and anticlerical, pre-1898 discourse and the new antisuperstition trend. I would now like to assess the importance and the causes of this perceived shift in discourses and attitudes toward Chinese religion.

First, the elements of continuity were not negligible and doubtless allowed what were around 1898–1900 probably marginal ideas (China must get rid of temple cults) to make their way into traditionally Confucian fundamentalist circles. One element of continuity was that the anticlerical discourse already had a modern secularist orientation in opposing a legitimate individual religious practice (meditation, studying scriptures) to illegitimate social forms (cults, rituals); this was carried over in the discourse on *zongjiao* versus *mixin*.²⁹ A second element of continuity was simply that the anticlericals’ and antisuperstition campaigners’ targets were often the same, such as large-scale pilgrimages and temple festivals. Already, before 1898, we find attacks on *shaoxiang* 燒香, burning incense,³⁰ but these attacks did not question the very principle of burning incense—that is, the mutually beneficial contact between humans and deities—but rather the excessive practices, notably public female devotion.³¹ Here, *shaoxiang* is qualified by other words, such as *baifo* 拜佛 *shaoxiang*, and used in conjunction with traditional expressions such as *ningfo meisben* 佞佛媚神, which refer to criticism of worshipping on any occasion and asking Buddhas’ or gods’ help in any mundane matter. By contrast, rejection on principle of any sort of human-supernatural-being transaction, including ancestor worship, was still rare before 1911. A local magistrate’s proclamation, unfortunately undated but issued shortly before 1911, illustrates such overlaps between old and new categories. It officially bans superstition but, in fact, aims at the same practices as classical pre-1898 orders against “wasteful celebrations” and extramonastic Buddhist and Taoist rituals (“Pochu *mixin shi*” 破除迷信示; Liu Ruji 1911/1997, “Shiyu,” 4b–5b).

A third element of continuity was the mention by antisuperstition authors of pre-1898 precedents. There are cases in earlier history in which Confucian fundamentalist

²⁹Compare the arguments in Goossaert (2002a) taken from 1870s and 1880s *Shenbao* with the *Zhejiang fengsu gailiang qianshuo* (1910, 52b), which opposes so-called popular ritualistic Buddhism, *suchuan fojiao* 俗傳佛教 and orthodox scriptural Buddhism, *zhenzong fojiao* 正宗佛教.

³⁰For instance, “Jie shaoxiang baifo lun” 戒燒香拜佛論 (A Proposition to Prohibit the Burning of Incense to Worship the Buddhas) (*Shenbao*, February 27, 1875; republished October 24, 1876), “Lun weijin shaoxiang” 論違禁燒香 (A Case of Defying the Ban on [Women] Burning Incense [in Temples]) (*Shenbao*, February 25, 1880); compare with “Quan ren wu shaoxiang shuo” 勸人勿燒香說 (An Exhortation Not to Burn Incense) (*Shenbao*, April 3, 1901) and the texts in *Zhejiang fengsu gailiang qianshuo*, which are very similar.

³¹As one journalist said as early as 1880, *shaoxiang* is in principle irrational, yet the emperor does it everyday, so one can only criticize the excessive use of human-god relationships (“Lun weijin shaoxiang,” *Shenbao*, February 25, 1880).

officials closed large numbers of temples and turned them into schools or other community institutions, particularly during the Ming.³² In my opinion, however, there is a difference between these earlier projects that were aimed at replacing certain improper cults (*yinsi*) with other (Confucian) institutions with both educational and religious significance and the *miaochan xingxue* idea of replacing religion with secular education. Yet, although all these earlier endeavors were local and short lived, the fact is that, when carried out thoroughly, a fundamentalist agenda of maintaining only purely Confucian cults was quite similar in its destructive effect to what anti-superstition activists achieved.

The fourth and last element of continuity appears to have been the split in Chinese society between local social organization and national elite and the continuous opposition between state and gentry on one side and local society organized around temple cults on the other side. Both traditional Confucian fundamentalists and newly appeared antisuperstition campaigners saw local society as ignorant, deluded, and wasteful. This allowed William Rowe, whom I quoted previously, to posit that the eighteenth-century cultural war against popular culture was continued in the twentieth-century campaigns against superstition. This continuity, however, is partly mere resemblance, for three reasons. First, the inefficiency of the pre-1900 anticlerical and Confucian fundamentalist policies stands in contrast to the swift destruction of temples from 1904 onward. Second, the pre-1900 situation was characterized by a great deal of rhetorical violence but also by a rather large amount of tolerance and accommodation in the field, if only because some people (gentry members of temple committees) actually played on both sides (Goossaert 2001; Szonyi 1997 also discusses the role of local elites in mitigating national religious policies in the local context). Third, I insist that, however Confucian fundamentalist they may be, intellectuals belonging to Chinese religion, as were all pre-1898 authors, who believed in ancestors, traditional cosmology, and the moral retribution of actions cannot be simply assimilated with post-1898 revolutionary antisuperstition campaigners.

In other words, the birth of the antisuperstition movement and the beginning of the destruction of temples may be best understood as a transition between two approaches: one that implied being part of Chinese religion and trying to improve it from the inside, as the anticlericals and fundamentalists did, and the other in which one viewed Chinese religion critically from the outside, without (or at least attempting not to use) its vocabulary or categories. Those, such as antisuperstition campaigners, who tried to apprehend Chinese religion from the outside were able to envision a radical destruction in a way no insider could. In the first case, that of insiders, the model was antiquity and its scriptures (which describe a fully religious world); in the second, the paradigm was the continual progress of humanity from an ignorant stage characterized by fear of supernatural forces (*shenquan*) toward science and self-reliance, a vision often combined with a spiritual adhesion to Buddhism, Christianity, or Confucianism. In post-1898 texts, Chinese religion is constantly described as what prevents China from developing and enriching itself.

I would like to mention here two particularly significant signs of rupture during the last decade of the Qing: the advent of iconoclasm and the undoing of the state's religious foundations. The typical pre-1898 violence was inflicted by magistrates who closed down improper temples (*yinci*). In doing so, they were not denying that something was happening between worshipper and deity during the cult, they simply

³²Schneewind (1999) and Faure (1999, 283–87) also discuss the case of Wei Xiao 魏校 (1483–1543) and other fellow officials in Guangdong between 1521 and the 1540s.

deemed it improper. This is quite different from young activists going into temples and smashing all the statues (although even in this case the magical element was not absent altogether), which they wanted to show as useless bits of mud or wood. The term *iconoclasm* has been used to describe earlier phenomena, such as anti-Buddhist proscriptions or Confucian replacement of icons by tablets, but I consider these phenomena, in which those destroying statues did not deny the fact that the icons were possibly endowed with numinous power, as different from early twentieth-century vandalism. The best-known bouts of iconoclast fury occurred later, during the revolutionary fervor of 1911 and 1927–28; it is, however, relevant to our argument that iconoclasm was already present during the early phases of the antisuperstition movement. In 1908, Hu Shi (he was eighteen and not yet a renowned scholar) in a fiery editorial exhorted his readers to go into temples smash statues, expel or kill the clerics (“Lun huichu shenfo” 論毀除神佛, Hu Shi 1995, 164–67).

The second obvious sign of rupture was the reinterpretation of state religion, notably the process of canonization, whereby local cults were integrated into state sacrifices. Many local cults had been granted canonizations (inscription in the *sidian*) in the wake of the Qing victory against the Taiping in 1864, but the flow of grants had been reduced as early as 1875. In 1904, a string of requests by provincial governors met with a blanket rebuttal by the Ministry of Rites, which made it clear that it would definitely stop dealing with local cults. An important symbolic link between the state and the religious organization of local society was thus severed. Sawada Mizuho, an excellent specialist of Chinese religion, saw this event as a landmark in the evolving relations between state, religion, and society (Sawada 1982). Furthermore, the decision was met with articles in the press attacking officials who took any interest in sacrifices.³³ The Ministry of Rites memorial lay down its argument in canonical language, but articles in the press went much farther and actually questioned the purpose of state ritual.³⁴ The ministry’s decision should be understood in a larger context in which preparations for a constitutional state marginalized the state rituals and in which a progressive desacralization in the conceptions of the state since the nineteenth century and a sharp decline of ritualistic studies among Confucians—furthered by thinkers such as Kang Youwei—made issues such as the canonization of local cults irrelevant to most central government officials (Bastid-Bruguière 1997).

This represents an important turn because pre-1898 texts maintained that the imperial state was a religious institution, governing through cults, “yi shendao shejiao” 以神道設教.³⁵ The “yi shendao shejiao” doctrine was implicitly challenged by the blanket proposal to destroy temples. Kang Youwei’s July 10, 1898, memorial spared temples in the *sidian*, and one *Shenbao* editorial discussing the edict paid reluctant lip service to *sidian* and “yi shendao shejiao” ideas (*Shenbao*, August 4, 1898). Post-1898 authors seem to have been divided on the issue. Some, like the editorialist mentioned previously, seemed ready to dispense with state cults altogether, whereas others seemed to maintain faith in the *sidian* system. Among the latter, we find, for instance, the celebrated industrialist and educational activist Zhang Jian 張謇 (1853–

³³See *Dongfang zazhi* (1904), “Lun jiangchen zhi mixin shenquan” 論疆臣之迷信神權 (On Provincial Governors’ Superstitious Belief in the Power of Gods), 63–65. The Ministry of Rites memorial is on 70–73.

³⁴Li Boyuan (1997, 2:7–8) also has a criticism of canonizations.

³⁵This phrase from the *Zhouyi* 周易, hexagram *guan* 觀, is the epitome of the religious doctrine of the imperial state. Yet the principle of canonization has been criticized before: “Shendao bian” 神道辨 (A Discussion of the Politics of Cults) (*Shenbao*, June 19, 1878) criticizes a further canonization of Guandi on the grounds that gods exist but do not answer prayers.

1926), who, in 1905 (shortly after the chaotic start of widespread confiscations), claimed that the movement to seize temples for building schools should not include temples in the *sidian*, territorial temples, and monasteries (Zhang Jian 1931, “Zheng gaotong wushu banxue zhujun wen” 正告通五屬辦學諸君文 [A Warning to the Gentlemen in Charge of School-building in All Five Districts of [Nan]tong County], “Jiaoyu lu” 教育錄, 2.11a–12a; see also Wang Shuhuai 1977, 325). Zhang Jian had himself been involved in the building of a school using a ruined temple’s grounds and had faced strong protest from within the local community, including gentry members.

In short, between 1898 and 1904, a sizable (how sizable is not clear to me) segment of China’s political elite had swung from traditional Confucian fundamentalism (in which it had been educated) to antisuperstition. Because of the strong factors of continuity, most of them probably saw such a swing not as a revolution in thought but as a natural evolution, if they ever thought discursively of it. With hindsight, however, we are justified in seeing this as a momentous change because it stands as the background for the wholesale rejection of Chinese religion and, hence, the launching of the destruction of China’s temples.

How may one account for such a transition? Several factors were at work. The immediate influence of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao was probably rather limited. The general mood encouraged it with the sense of crisis shared by most intellectuals, which induced in many of them a deep-felt hatred of traditional Chinese society. The introduction of Western science and, as a result, the questioning of traditional cosmology also played a role. But even more instrumental was the widespread influence of Christianity, even among nonconverts. This influence had many different effects. First, Christians, both foreigners and Chinese converts, set the example of temple destruction and iconoclasm, such as the young Sun Yat-sen, who begun his career by smashing a statue of Guandi (also, incidentally, the protector of the Qing dynasty; Shi Zhounen 2002, 153–54).³⁶ Others, while resisting Christian influence, agreed with the Christian missionaries that Chinese religion was mere idolatry. Seeing Christianity as the main spiritual threat to China, they tried to engage the missionaries in a debate on the religious situation in China and, thereby, adopted many of the Christian notions and categories, most importantly, the religion-superstition dichotomy. We have seen how people like Kang Youwei and later reformers felt shame when Western observers ridiculed Chinese temples, icons, beliefs, and rituals. Moreover, both Christian and Chinese anti-Christian propaganda, as well as Christian-inspired Taiping propaganda, raised the tone of the religious debate to new heights. Although this is difficult to quantify, it is likely that the general atmosphere of hateful religious discourse and polarization during the period between 1860 and 1900 was conducive to the events between 1898 and 1904.

A very explicit cause for the adoption of the antisuperstition discourse in many post-1900 texts was the Boxer Rebellion. The shock of the Boxer insurrection, and its dreadful consequences for China, pushed many observers into the camp of those willing to do away with village religion. Another, less explicit, motive was the religious organization of local society around temple cults, the “nexus of power” as Prasenjit Duara describes it: Temples were (and still are) places where symbolic power was vested on local leaders, where intra- and intervillage disputes were settled, and where local projects and resource management were negotiated. This organization was

³⁶One may also mention the case of gangs of Christian students who toured and vandalized Canton temples in 1911 (Rhoads 1975, 254–55).

seen, not without reason, as the main obstacle to the building of a new vertically integrated society, in which the state is physically present in the villages and in which all villagers obey the state alone.

Thus, the transition from pre-1898 Confucian fundamentalism and anticlericalism to early twentieth-century antisuperstition is a complex phenomenon with many causes, some specific to the short-term context (the Wuxu reforms, the Boxers) and some related to long-term trends (Christian and Western influence), some intellectual (the notions of religion and superstition) and some sociopolitical (a widely felt need to overhaul the structures of local society). All of these various causes quite suddenly coalesced during the 1898–1905 period to form the antisuperstition movement and its most important effect: the destruction of temples to build schools. Let us then finally return to the question of temple confiscation and destruction.

The Beginning of the End for Chinese Temples

The previous description of the elite's changing attitudes toward religion will help us better understand how the transformation of temples into schools, first attempted in 1898, became reality soon after. On September 14, 1901, an edict called for the building of modern schools in every county and mandated the transformation of academies to this end. The edict did not precisely spell out how these schools were to be financed and did not mention temples (*Guangxu chao donghua lu* 1958, 4719–20). Some activists, however, took it upon themselves to convert temples into schools, although there are rather few examples before 1904.³⁷ Some radical antisuperstition campaigners, however, had not given up hope of seeing the July 10, 1898, edict applied and published in the press calls for its application. Four days after the September 14, 1901, edict mandating the construction of schools, a *Shenbao* editorial pointed out that the only way to finance the new schools was to use temples. This would have the most desirable effect of expelling all the “rascal Buddhists and Taoists” (“Hui siguan yi chong xuetang jingfei yi” 毀寺觀以充學堂經費議 [A Proposal to Destroy Buddhist and Taoist Monasteries so as to Finance Schools], *Shenbao*, September 18, 1901). Two months later, another editorial again called for the definitive destruction of Buddhism and Taoism, explaining that their elimination and the building of schools were the two urgent tasks of the nation (“Hui simiao yi wei xuetang shuo” 毀寺廟以爲學堂說 [A Discussion on Destroying Monasteries and Temples to Turn Them into Schools], *Shenbao*, November 28, 1901). Yet another editorial—“Bo siguan changye yi kai xuetang shuo” 撥寺觀產業以開學堂說 (A Discussion on Allocating the Property of Monasteries to the Building of Schools), *Shenbao*, May 14, 1902—went even farther: It reported how the gentry in two districts (in Baoding prefecture, Hebei) had seized 70 percent of temple lands for schools, leaving 30 percent for the upkeep of the clergy (in so doing, they followed Zhang Zhidong's 1898 proposal). The journalist criticized this procedure: Why leave the temples and the clerics in place? All temples, without exception, should be razed to the ground and all statues destroyed, as this is the only way to root out the poison of Buddhism and Taoism.

Shenbao journalists were far from being alone in this line of thinking. Novelists also lamented that the 1898 confiscation edict was rescinded and not enforced (*Saomi*

³⁷An early 1904 memorial reporting on school construction in Hubei since 1902 mentions the use of temples (*Guangxu chao donghua lu* 1958, 5164); local gazetteers also provide some cases.

zhou 1960, 12:418; Li Boyuan 1997, 1:4). A *Shenbao* editorial on January 3, 1904, also claimed that the obvious idea of transforming the most useless thing (temples) into the most useful one (schools) had been floated in the government but never applied. A county magistrate in Hubei, however, had taken it upon himself to transform a Caishen miao 財神廟 into a school; the journalist praised this act as something that should be carried out nationwide.³⁸ There was thus a general pressure to act upon the July 10, 1898 initiative.

Finally, government approval came exactly a week after the January 1904 editorial. On January 10, the government published a comprehensive set of school regulations, the *Zouding xuetaang zhangcheng* 奏定學堂章程, meant to overcome the confusion of previous ad hoc decisions (Zhang Zhidong, Rongqing, and Zhang Baixi 1904). These regulations endorsed the idea of using temple property to build schools.³⁹ In contrast to 1898, however, the government approval for temple confiscation was rather shy and inconspicuous. That the main artisan behind the new regulation was Zhang Zhidong may explain this. The 1904 school regulations were not meant to fuel a religious conflict, no more than Zhang's earlier writings, but it was used to this end by several local activists who began large-scale temple confiscation in 1904. It is important to stress that those responsible for temple seizures and bans on festivals (notably in cities) were much more often activists rather than local officials, who were careful not to create troubles and used to the pre-1898 dominant pattern of accommodation with temples. For these activists, seizing temple property was a way of harnessing power for themselves, but the evidence I have gathered here suggests that they were also sensitive to the project of religious reform in itself.

The wave of confiscations encouraged by the government in January 1904 prompted some Buddhist monasteries to seek affiliation with Japanese orders and claim Japanese consular protection, as early as fall 1904, which in turn provoked outraged reactions against the monasteries (Welch 1968, 11–12, 165). More importantly, a large part of the rural violence in the period between 1901 and 1911 was linked to new administrative offices seizing village temples and to village communities fighting for their temple and their autonomy—the two being indissociable (Prazniak 1999 and Wang Shuhuai 1977 provide many examples). Temples were not the only local institutions to be taxed or seized, but they constituted a particularly sensitive target. The localized but violent armed conflicts caused by the seizure of local temples, pitting the local elites in charge of political modernization against village communities and religious leaders, would probably warrant the use of the term *religious war*⁴⁰

³⁸“Xingxue buhuan wu jingfei shuo” 興學不患無經費說 (School-Building Needs Not Suffer from Lack of Funds).

³⁹See Zhang Zhidong, Rongqing, and Zhang Baixi, 1904, *Zouding xuetaang zhangcheng*, “Gaodeng xiaoxuetang zhangcheng” 高等小學堂章程 (Primary Schools Regulations) (1b; 1: general rules, fourth item) “if there are funds collected among the public for useless endeavors such as temple festivals or opera, they may be used [for building schools]”; (p. 19b; 5: rules regarding school buildings, books and other material resources, 10th item) “For the building of schools, one may borrow facilities such as guild halls (*gongsuo*) or monasteries (*siguan*).” Same rules in “Chudeng xiaoxuetang zhangcheng” [Elementary Schools Regulations] 初等小學堂章程 (2b; 1: general rules, 5th item; and 24b; 5: rules regarding school buildings, books and other material resources, 11th item). See also Bailey (1990, 107–8).

⁴⁰In a different context, Butler (2002, 11) discusses how the historiography of peasant resistance to the revolutionary Mexican state's anti-Catholic policies has been often understood as primarily socioeconomic in nature (a traditional agrarian society fighting against an expanding modern state), with religion providing only an infrastructure articulating the resistance; the author criticizes such views as neglecting the purely religious motivations of both attack and resistance. I am inclined to have similar views regarding the anti-New Policies resistance in 1901–11 China.

more than the low-intensity conflicts of the period between 1600 and 1900. Zhang Jian, whom I have already quoted, argued for a careful selection of temples to be singled out for transformation into schools. Zhang was worried that the all-out seizure of temples would serve only to provoke violent reactions from temple communities against modern institutions and would thus, in fact, be detrimental to the cause of school building; he also complained that some activists were motivated less by educational zeal than by an urge to destroy “that religion,” *bijiao* 彼教 (Zhang Jian 1931, “Zheng gaotong wushu banxue zhujun wen”). Not all temple seizures were conflictual; in some cases, maybe most during the 1900s and 1910s, a negotiation allowed temple resources to be shared between school and cult, and some temple managers were voluntary participants in this process, thinking that village resources should be used for both cult and education. It is probably the antisuperstition zeal and iconoclasm of some activists, as well as the intolerant reaction of some religious leaders (e.g. *Shishi baoguan wushen quannian huabao* 1909, 16:6872), that ignited the worst outbreaks of violence; such attitudes were not the norm, but they were, nonetheless, very influential in shaping discourse and opinion, and they gained ground through the Republican and, finally, Communist periods.

This turn of events, the government’s meek approval for local initiatives, would remain for a long time characteristic of the *miaochan xingxue* movement, essentially spontaneous and fueled by grassroots initiatives and local activism. This explains why it was carried out so differently from one place to another, a trend that would only be reinforced during the Republican period. Indeed, as I hope to show in a subsequent publication, collective religious life had been almost eradicated in some places as early as the 1910s, whereas in others it remained strong throughout the 1930s. The localized nature of the antisuperstition and *miaochan xingxue* movements also explains the fact that the targets were not always the same. In the early phases, in the years following 1904, some activists were still driven by traditional anticlerical ideas and targeted only Buddhist and Taoist establishments. Soon after, however, as Buddhism reinvented itself as a so-called religion and organized itself politically, the local temple cults became the main and least protected target.

Conclusion

This article is only a contribution to the history of religious ideas and discourses in modern China, but the documents quoted here should help us to understand why the seizure and destruction of temples was set in motion in 1904 and would continue for the next eighty years. The idea, first formulated in 1898, received some enthusiastic support but soon foundered because it was associated with a minority reform movement. With the shock of the Boxer Rebellion and the rise of the antisuperstition movement between 1901 and 1903, however, it began to appear as a reasonable idea to many. It is difficult to ascertain how many people adhered to the antisuperstition movement and what their social origins were. It is equally difficult to estimate the respective impact of events (the Boxer Rebellion), ideas (Western and Christian influence), and context (the need for social refoundation) in the rise of antisuperstition and temple destruction. It is clear, however, that the destruction of temples was so effective because certain members of the local rural elite were active, willing participants,

whereas others resisted, either pacifically (suing against confiscation, writing texts to defend local cults) or violently. Many local elite took part because antisuperstition was also a religious project.

I hope the sources quoted here will also convince readers of the importance of religion as a contested field in modern Chinese politics and society. The policies and practices toward religion during the twentieth century should not be merely understood as the consequence of a “purely political” evolution but as a field in which politics was argued and conducted. The seizure of temples for school construction, from 1898 up to the 1930s, was never solely an educational endeavor; it was also (in various degrees according to each actor) a manifestation of a religious conflict. Religious conflict has long been part of Chinese society, and we may see the 1898–1904 period discussed here as one epiphenomenon in a long-term evolution. I believe, however, that what happened then has had a long-term impact because local temple cults, the very backbone of Chinese religion, were suddenly on the wrong side of a fissure and began to undergo a process of massive destruction, the effects of which are still visible in China today.

This, as antisuperstition campaigners hoped, was supposed to be the beginning of the end for Chinese religion. As the revival since the 1980s has shown, it turns out that it was not. Chinese religion has proved much more resilient than anyone might have imagined, but it has also undergone many changes in the process. The year 1898 was, after all, the end of an era.

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