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P. van der Veer: The Modern Spirit of Asia

Peter van der Veer’s “The Modern Spirit of Asia” offers a comparative analysis of the interactions between Western modernity and its counterparts in India and China. The author seeks to uncover asymmetries in Chinese and Indian nationalist assessments of “religion” while exposing the relationship between “religion” and “nationalism” in both countries. In this way, the study unveils how disparate reactions to Western colonialism influenced the creation of novel spiritual values. Its innovative aspects lie in how van der Veer explores the emergence of “spirituality” and “secularity” in relation to nation-building dynamics. He even manages to include a careful discussion of how consumerism has impacted the definition of “spirituality” in contemporary times.

The work is organized into nine chapters, with the introduction providing definitions relevant to the concepts of “modernity” and “civilization.” Chapter 2 discusses the emergence of spirituality as a category connected with the concept of modernity. The following two sections retrace the rise of Orientalist scholarship and its impact on the emergence of “oriental religions” as well as the role of Christian missions in the formation and “re”-formation of Asian traditional teachings. The fifth chapter delves into modern debates concerning “magic” and “superstition” in the re-branding of popular beliefs. This is followed by a discussion of the emergence of “secularity” in India and China from a nationalist perspective. Chapter 7 explores the political implications of Indian and Chinese traditional practices such as *yoga, qigong* and *taijiquan*.

The penultimate section focuses on minority-majority relationships in India and China, identifying Muslims as meaningful “others” in both contexts. In the conclusion, van der Veer considers implications of his findings as opposed to conventional understandings of religion and secularism. The author employs a comparative framework, with India and China as his two case studies, both of which he analyzes with constant reference to Western imperialism. He appears to favor breadth over depth, skillfully surveying major themes that might leave specialists understandably wanting more detail while satisfying generalists keen on macro-level connections.

Van der Veer’s approach to historiography takes exchanges and interactions seriously, fleshing out the impact of emerging nationalisms on the transformation of religious traditions in China and India. At the same time, the work comprehensively surveys the existing literature on the historical development of spirituality within the areas under examination. The adoption of “interactional history” as an overarching theoretical framework is particularly fortuitous, as it allows the reconstruction of an historical puzzle in which each country is seen as more than merely reacting to inputs which are not necessarily “domestic”. This leads to an emphasis on novel cultural outputs that moves beyond the traditional resources of Area Studies and linear historiography, enabling the work to convincingly retrace the push and pull factors behind cultural dynamics. In the process, the author cogently argues how imperial interactions have had a major role in the formation of Indian and Chinese identities (p. 223).

However, the analysis could benefit from greater con-
ceptual clarity with regard to fundamental concepts such as the very notion of “spirituality,” which for the author has no straightforward equivalent in either Sanskrit or Chinese (p. 35). Yet, the study persuasively identifies interpretive shifts in the multifocal appropriation of such concepts, as exemplified by the notion of “secularity”. The author demonstrates how such concepts assumed distinct sociological nuances in different contexts, becoming intimately associated with “rationality” in the West, political “neutrality” in India, and “atheism” in China (p. 227). Such findings reinforce the value of “interactional history” as a powerful research framework for retrieving asymmetries in cultural exchanges.

Occasionally, the sacrifice of primary evidence to the extensive comparative scope leaves room for debates over specific issues such as the convergence of “power” and “politics” in the exploration of yoga, qigong and taijiquan, regarded by the author as potentially imbued with political implications via the personal power of practitioners (p. 170). This leads to a conceptual algorithm that largely ignores the collective and relational nuances embedded in the notion of “politics” and not necessarily represented by concepts such as “power” or “empowerment”, especially in connection to individual pursuits.

It is worth noting that the study’s definition of China’s Hui people as “Han Muslims” (p. 199) overlooks fundamental ambiguities inherent in the modern concept of “nationality” in the construction of China’s multinational texture (tongyi duo minzu guojia or “unified multi-ethnic state”). Thomas Mullaney, Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethic Classification in Modern China, Berkeley 2011; Jonathan Lipman, Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China, Seattle 1997. It equally downplays the historical self-engineering of the Hui people as a distinct Chinese ethnicity throughout the early modern period. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, From ‘Literati’ to ‘Ulama’: The Origins of Chinese Muslims Nationalist Historiography, in: Nationalism and Ethnic Politics 9, 4 (2004), pp. 83–109; Roberta Tontini, Tianfang Dianli: A Chinese Perspective on Islamic Law and its Legal Reasoning, in: Ming-Qing Studies (2011), pp. 487–528. Here, the book’s level of analysis with its all-encompassing ambitions leaves no room for a proper accommodation of such debates, which calls some of its conclusions into question. Among these is van der Veer’s assertion that the acknowledgement of a people as “Hui” by the state stemmed from their allegiance to Islamic doctrinal precepts. One could also challenge the author’s claim that Muslims in general are not regarded as belonging within the pale of “Chinese” civilization, a point supported primarily by limited attitudinal data collected in Shanghai (p. 221).

Finally, van der Veer’s understanding of Indian and Chinese spiritual patterns as deeply intertwined with nationalist discourses leads to a set of assumptions that would be well served by additional substantiation. For example, he argues that without strict control by the CCP, China would turn into a theater of communal struggles comparable to those triggered by modern Indian utopias (p. 188). At the same time, the book’s nexus between “spirituality” and nation-building yields a rich set of thought-provoking interpretations, including the conceptualisation of Maoism as a reinvented form of Chinese millenarism (p. 152), that ultimately associates it with “traditional” forms of popular reaction to failing structures of governance.

In summary, the study is an important contribution to the larger transcultural scholarship that examines the movement of Western ideas onto Asian soil and vice versa. Departing from the premise that religions become essentialized and made comparable by the colonial encounter, van der Veer skilfully expands the spectrum of religious investigation to the scrutiny of “spirituality” and “secularity” as possible offshoots of national encounters. Furthermore, his careful interactional approach to history raises provoking questions and original insights into the dialogic nature of cultural production.

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