



Stephan Feuchtwang, *The Anthropology of Religion, Charisma and Ghosts: Chinese Lessons for Adequate Theory*

Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010. vii + 213 pages. Hardcover, €89,95/ US\$126.00. ISBN 978-11-022356-9.

THIS BOOK is a collection of essays by Stephan Feuchtwang, a British anthropologist who began working in Taiwan in the 1960s. With China being closed to Western researchers at the time, anthropological research on the Chinese world had to take place in areas not under control of the People's Republic of China. Unlike other British social anthropologists interested in China who mostly went to (former) British colonies like Hong Kong, Feuchtwang chose to work in Taiwan. Like the cultural anthropologists from the United States who had also begun working in Taiwan around that time, Feuchtwang had a strong interest in popular religion. He carried out his dissertation research on religion and religious change in Shiding, a small town in the mountains in what at the time was still called Taipei county. In the decades that followed this first fieldwork project, Feuchtwang continued to work on religion, not only in Taiwan but also in mainland China. This resulted in numerous well-known articles and monographs, including *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor* (Routledge 2001 [second ed.]) and *Grassroots Charisma* (Routledge 2001, coauthored with Wang Mingming). Of the eleven essays in this volume, seven were previously published in journals or edited volumes, and all except one appeared between 2003 and 2009.

Feuchtwang begins with expressing the hope that, at a time when China supposedly has become “the future of the world,” insights gained from the study of rituals in a small mountain town in northern Taiwan can attract a wider audience than just China specialists. He argues that the phenomena he observed in China and Taiwan forces us to reconsider core anthropological concepts like religion. Feuchtwang's ambition to contribute to anthropological theory can be seen most clearly in the first part of the book, in which he deals with the category of religion. He traces its roots in the West, and discusses Chinese equivalents and the way in which the Western concept was finally adapted in China. This is followed by a discussion of an old debate between Maurice Freedman and Arthur Wolf on the Western anthropology of China—on whether a Chinese religion exists or not—using Freedman's notes to explore what he meant when he argued for the existence of a Chinese religion. The second part of the book focuses on the concept of charisma and how it relates to Taiwanese and Chinese forms of authority, and consists of two different case studies and one review article that was originally written for a special issue of the journal *Nova Religio* on charisma in China. The third part deals with the concept of “ghosts,” which Feuchtwang in some way sees as standing for a repressed past. The last chapter of the book is a more general overview of the present situation of religion in mainland China.

As in his earlier works such as *Popular Religion in China* (Routledge, 2001) Feuchtwang always starts his observations from a political perspective, and at times

it almost appears as if religion is only interesting because of how it relates to the state and forms of power. This can be seen in his discussion of the concept of religion, in which the focus seems to be more on political theories of religion; it comes back in his discussion of charisma, which as a form of authority is “necessarily political.” Even ghosts are political entities, as they can be contrasted with the “officially commemorated martyrs and heroes.” Although the focus of the book is clearly theoretical, Feuchtwang does occasionally come up with interesting ethnographic observations. His discussion of the Luku incident offers an interesting case study of how tragic events are remembered or dealt with by different groups of people, including descendants of the victims, the state, and the general populace. At times, however, his interpretations are more open to debate. One could for instance wonder how far the notion of charisma has to be stretched to include, as Feuchtwang does in chapter 5, the so-called “masters of the incense burner.” Feuchtwang presents them as leaders of what is usually translated as “ritual spheres,” but I am not convinced that they should be seen as leaders at all or if they have authority, although this would probably depend on the kind of ritual sphere of which they are the “master of the incense burner.” In some cases it can be helpful to go back to Feuchtwang’s earlier publications. For instance, the case of a cult leader in Shiding during the Japanese period discussed in chapter 6 is discussed in a much more detailed way in *Grassroots Charisma* (Routledge, 2001).

Even if the different chapters of the book are interesting in their own right, it is clear that they were written on different occasions and for different purposes. In some cases, the fragmented nature of the book makes it somewhat of a challenge to find out how a chapter or argument fits into the bigger picture. Although this has much to do with the nature of the book as a collection of essays it is somewhat unfortunate as the questions Feuchtwang raises are interesting and he surely is in the position to answer them. It is good to see these various essays collected, and *The Anthropology of Religion* certainly deserves a wider readership than China specialists alone.

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