

REVIEW: *RELIGIOUS REVIVAL IN THE TIBETAN BORDERLAND*

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Wellens, Koen. 2010. *Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderland: The Premi of Southwest China*. Seattle, WA and London, UK: University of Washington Press. xvii+278. Foreword (Stevan Harrell), preface, conclusion, epilogue, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-0-295-99068-2 (hardcover, 65.04USD), ISBN: 978-0-295-99069-9 (paperback, 27.81USD).

Identity and legitimation are arguably the two most significant analytical tools required to understand religion in contemporary China. Particularly in Southwest China, the uncertainty and ambiguity in the ongoing processes of legitimizing and making ethnic identities attracts scholarship. In studying Chinese folk religion in general, Dean (2003) asserts that "local Chinese religion resists definition" (338). Pondering how to define 'religion' in the Chinese context often proves fruitless, especially in Southwest China where religious revival may involve villagers, ritual experts, monks, and government elites ranging from village heads in the margin to representatives of the Chinese state at the center. Each group holds a distinct perspective on how to legitimize ethnic and religious identities. *Religious Revival* is one attempt to do difficult research through an ethnographic lens.

Drawing on fieldwork in Sichuan and Yunnan, the two southwestern Chinese provinces where most Premi¹ live, Wellens explores the processes of the Premi recovering traditional rituals in the context of the larger post-Mao Chinese political context. Through reviewing histories of political integration and interviewing living

¹ Also Pumi or Prmi.

Premi ritual experts, Wellens argues that the making of Premi ethnic and religious identity is *relevant* for the local elites who aim to legitimize their control within the larger modernizing Chinese society, while simultaneously *irrelevant* for villagers who seek deities' blessings and protection against evil spirits regardless of who legitimizes the identities. Wellens uses 'irrelevant' to mean that Premi villagers, unlike local monks and governmental elites, are unable to determine if Tibetan Buddhism or the Chinese state legitimizes the ritual. Rather, it does not matter much to them as long as the ritual continues. In his own words: "[despite the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, Maoism, and the post-Mao reform], Premi souls still travel to ancestral lands and are not reincarnated, and deities and evil spirits are still propitiated with blood offerings" (210).

The book features five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. The introduction reviews major works on ethnic and religious identity in the post-Mao era. Wellens realizes that not only is religious revival different from the process of retrieving the past, but that it also responds to the paradoxical effect of China's Reform (1978-present), that is, the disparity between the rich and poor, and "ideological relaxation," referring to the indirect state censorship of religion (9-11). In Chapter One, Wellens describes how Muli, Sichuan's Premi territory, was integrated into the Tibetan Buddhist realm. This was a process in which Sonam Gyatso (Bsod rnam rgya mtsho, the third Dalai Lama) played a key role in introducing the monastic system and appointing local head lamas (18-33). Second, the Qing recognized these head lamas as hereditary native chieftains and placed military/ political representatives in local villages. Third, the structure of co-existing head lamas and government representatives was sustained, though with major modifications, through the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China governments.

In Chapter Two, Wellens reveals that school curriculum, together with marriage certificates, highlight the presence of the current Chinese state at the village and township administrative levels. In Chapter Three, Wellens introduces the Premi house as a social unit that organizes marriages, and as a ritual space for mediating with deities and evil spirits. Polyandrous marriage,

virilocal residence, and ancestor worship, for example, are centered on the house in Premi society.

In Chapter Four, Wellens examines Premi cosmology, beliefs, and rituals around the house, emphasizing their effect on everyday Premi life. For instance, Premi believe that two brothers living in the same house would result in the house being possessed by *brö* 'demons', and the family living in it would face social and ritual exclusion, such as a lack of marriage partners and visits from other villagers, and would be barred from participating in common village ceremonies and celebrations (146-7). The *anji* 'ritual expert' takes responsibility for helping villagers minimize this risk of ostracization. Moreover, with the strong influence of Tibetan Buddhism, the *yèma* (local pronunciation of lama, referring to the local lay version of Tibetan monks) also practices similar rituals with the same purpose. Yet again, the state inserts its power over religion by, for instance, endorsing *anji* and *yèma* to study in Beijing and learn Chinese language in the hope that they will "identify more closely with the Chinese state" (170).

After a holistic, Malinowskian description of the Premi in Muli (Sichuan), Wellens offers a comparative perspective with the Premi in Ninglang (Yunnan) in Chapter Five. Unlike the Muli Premi mistakenly, yet officially, identified as ethnic Tibetans by both the local and state government elites, the Ninglang Premi villagers identify themselves as Premi. Paradoxically, to perform rituals, the Ninglang *hangui* (another name of *anji*, used in Ninglang), due to a lack of Premi ritual knowledge, must learn from the Muli 'Tibetan' *anji* (207). Wellens concludes by pointing out that as long as the form of the ritual exists, by which he refers to scripture, language, and clothing, the Premi can fill it with various community "cultural fabric," infusing ethnic identity with meaningful cultural contexts (209-10).

Religious Revival informs the reader about Premi culture both historically and at present, and is a reliable source for researchers interested in the Premi, as well as Tibetans, Na, and other ethnic groups in the region. However, the theoretical framework he uses for relevancy and irrelevancy of religious revival between

villagers and local elites, though imbued with much potential, is not always present throughout his analysis. The two categories of people occasionally overlap, as local elites are, or were, villagers and thus the relation between the two categories is intertwined. For instance, in discussing Premi ritual and cosmology in chapters Four and Five, Wellens presents ethnographic evidence that suggests more agreement than disagreement between the two categories.

In sum, this book contributes to the literature on contemporary Chinese religion, cultural preservation, political autonomy, and ritual studies and is valuable for comparative studies. In terms of religious revival, it coincides with findings in rural areas where most Han Chinese reside. For instance, in studying religious revival in northern Shaanxi Province, Chau (2005) makes a similar observation: "instead of responding to state-imposed political ideals and campaign goals, villagers today are engaged in social interactions based on kinship or community obligations and responsibilities" (237).

By contrasting the legitimation of ethnic and religious identity between villagers and local elites, Wellens also offers an activist insight on how to gain political autonomy. He suggests that villagers should bring forth their views and distinguish those from the views held by the local elites, as the state continues to be "successful in convincing educated elites to construct their identities in line with its official discourse" (214-6). This observation opens the possibility of exploring community-based activism in the context of Southwestern China.

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