

# **Technology, Trust, and Religion**

Roles of Religions in Controversies on Ecology and  
the Modification of Life

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## 5 Religion, Nature, and Modernization in China

*James Miller*

One of most important concepts in the Weberian theory of modernity is summed up in the German term *Entzauberung*, usually translated into English as ‘disenchantment’ or ‘rationalization.’ A concise summary of this concept can be found in an essay published in 1987 by the British sociologist Ernest Gellner. He writes:

The modern world is organized in a rational way. This means that clearly specified goals are pursued by a calculated allocation of means; the means include not only tools but also human activity and men themselves. These things are treated instrumentally and not as ends in themselves. Effectiveness and evidence are kings. The procedures are also rational in the sense of being orderly and rule-bound: like cases are treated alike. (Gellner 1987, 153)

According to this view, therefore, modernity presupposes a rational, logical and orderly view of the world, one that is best managed by rational procedures and gives rise to the legalistic, bureaucratic institutions of the modern state. Rationalization, moreover, is not something that ‘happens’ to society. It also has consequences for the way that moderns view and engage the natural world. Gellner continues:

It is not only the procedures of organizations which are in this sense ‘bureaucratized’; the same also happens to our vision of nature, of the external world. Its comprehensibility and manipulability are purchased by means of subsuming its events under orderly, symmetrical, precisely articulated generalisations and explanatory models. *This* is Disenchant-

ment: the Faustian purchase of cognitive, technological and administrative power, by the surrender of our previous meaningful, humanly suffused, humanly responsive, if often also menacing or capricious world. *That* is abandoned in favour of a more a more predictable, more amenable, but coldly indifferent and uncanny world. (Gellner 1987, 153)

As Gellner's explanation makes clear, the Weberian concept of *Entzauberung* has at least two aspects to it, evident in the two English terms that are commonly used to translate it, rationalization and disenchantment. On the one hand, *Entzauberung* involves a belief in the possibility of the rational ordering of the world; on the other hand this belief is predicated on an instrumental view of nature, one in which nature is not valued as an end in itself, but becomes a means for the attainment of rationally calculated ends. *Entzauberung* is thus more than a process that takes place within the ordering of society. Rather it also 'happens to our vision of nature' conceived as the world that is 'external' to the self. Thus, according to this theory, the rationalization and bureaucratization of society that we are familiar with in the modern period, is also accompanied by the secularization of space and the disenchantment of nature.

Recently, however, this understanding of disenchantment has begun to be questioned by social theorists. In particular, Bronislaw Szerszynski (2005) has argued that the reordering of society and nature in modernity should not be viewed as a final stage in the process of disenchantment and secularization, but rather as a moment within the ongoing transformation of the sacred throughout history. This transformation is not so much a gradual process of the sacred's absencing itself from society and from nature, but rather a continuous reordering of the sacred within the world. The view of modern society as the highest stage in some gradual evolution towards rationality and secularism is a view from a particular evolutionary perspective, one that has been informed by centuries of Western theological history, or as Szerszynski terms it, 'the long arc of monotheism.' As Szerszynski writes:

The illusion that the sacred has disappeared is arguably a feature of all historical transitions from one form of the sacred to the next in a given society. Each transition can seem like an eclipse of the sacred in the terms in which it was organized in the closing epoch; from a larger historical perspective, however, it can be seen as the emergence of a new sacred ordering. (Szerszynski 2005, 26)

The secularization of society and the disenchantment of nature summed up in the concept of 'absolute profane' are thus not to be seen as a final stage in history but as 'an event *within* the ongoing history of the sacred in the West' (2005, 27).

This paper aims to consider the disenchantment of nature in modern China from the perspective of this debate within social science theory. First it examines the process of modernization in China as a self-conscious process of disenchantment and rationalization. In this process the state assumed rational control over religious spaces and religious organizations. It was able to do so in part through the development of the concept of 'superstition' in which the religious activities associated most overtly with nature were prohibited. All this seems to indicate the value of the Weberian view of modernization. This chapter follows Szerszynski, however, in arguing that this process should not be understood as the absolute secularization of Chinese society but rather as the creation of a new form of the sacred in Chinese society, this time the creation of a transcendent monotheism focused on the abstract concept of the state and concretely embodied in the Communist Party. In effect, therefore, the process of modernization in China has not been about secularization but rather about the establishment of a new sacred order in which the diversity of Chinese religious values became increasingly subordinated to a new transcendent monotheism.

### **The Rationalization of Sacred Space**

In an article entitled 'Knowledge and Power in the Discourse of Modernity: The Campaigns against Popular Religion in Early Twentieth-Century China' Prasenjit Duara (1991) argued that the newly emerging modern Chinese state in part based its ascendancy on its ability to destroy the local religious associations and local geographies of power so as to reorganize them within a monolithic ideology of the modern nation state. Even before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the modernization of the Chinese state was achieved through a reorganization of local power and social networks, chiefly by appropriating land owned by local temples. 'Monks and priests who had depended on religious properties were deprived of their sources of livelihood; local religious societies that fulfilled social as much as spiritual needs were dispossessed and replaced by government offices that seemed mainly interested in extracting revenues and uncovering unregistered property' (Duara 1991, 76). Duara

viewed this reordering of local religion as socio-economic activity, with the state assuming control over the economic resources and social structures previously under the control of the religious organizations. But perhaps this was not simply a reordering of the religious economy, but also a reordering of the sacred. Perhaps in crushing the social and economic power of the local temple networks, the modern Chinese state was also establishing itself as the only legitimate source of spiritual authority within the nation. In short, this transformation might not be about secularization, as Weberian theory understands it, but, in Szerszynski's terms, as one of these various moments in human history when an old sacred order gives way to a new one.

In order to understand how this forced disenchantment of China's countryside could legitimately be viewed as a transformation within the sacred in modern China, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the sacred, nature and geography in traditional China. In the history of China, power was not only constituted ideologically and theologically, but geographically too. This was evident most clearly in the sacred cosmography that held China to be the 'middle kingdom.' This term originated in the Warring States period, and was originally understood in the plural. It referred to the various 'central states' that shared the culture of writing in characters. These 'central states' were thus distinguished from outer regions who did not share the same literary and cultural traditions. After unification under the first Qin emperor, these 'central states' became the 'middle kingdom,' that is, the single China that is familiar to us today. At the centre of this middle kingdom was the capital, and at the centre of the capital was the imperial palace, and at the centre of the imperial palace was the court from which the emperor governed the distant corners of the empire. This cosmology was replicated everywhere. The magistrate had his offices in a courtyard at the centre of the city. The city was surrounded by walls. Outside the walls was the countryside that provided the food to keep the city functioning and beyond the countryside was the wilderness inhabited by bandits, beasts, and barbarians. This cosmology was replicated also in the heavens, which were viewed as a circular canopy rotating around a central ridge-pole known as the Great Ultimate (*taiji*), an *axis mundi* connecting the pole star down through the earth into the underworld. In some Daoist religious movements, the most significant deities were thus the ones associated with the stars of the Big Dipper (*Ursa Major*) who lit the way to the apex of heaven and around which the lesser constellations revolved. Power, in earth and on heaven, was manifested in the construction of space. It was about the

disposition of things, structuring human relations in a certain way within their surroundings so as to promote a cosmic vision of order and harmony (see Lewis 2006).

Central to this worldview was the network of sacred mountains that symbolized the centre and the four corners of the empire. In addition, both Buddhists and Daoists claimed their own sacred mountains and established monasteries and retreat houses there. At certain times and in certain locations these sacred geographies overlapped with each other. Mt. Tai in Shandong province, the Eastern mountain of the imperial cult was also sacred to both Buddhists and Daoists. On this mountain, the Qin emperor who reunited the country following the dissolution of the Warring States period instituted new sacrifices to the supreme cosmic rulers. Only the emperor was permitted to offer these *feng* and *shan* sacrifices. Through this exclusive ritual the emperor asserted his own personal connection to the cosmic powers that governed heaven and earth. He established himself not only as the chief mediator between the gods and the people but as an indispensable element in the theological geography that constituted the Chinese understanding of their place in the universe. The Wu emperor of the Han dynasty reinstated these sacrifices and built a temple at the base of the mountain where the entire cosmic pantheon could assemble to witness the rituals over which the emperor personally presided (see Bokenkamp 1996). The imperial cult thus served to reinforce the authority of the emperor over his people, an authority vested in the ritual construction of sacred space by means of which the nation could orient itself in relation to the heavens above and the peripheral spaces to the north, south, east and west.

This network of sacred spaces, however, should not solely be interpreted in ideological and epistemological terms about what Chinese people *believed* about the nature of the cosmos. Rather we should interpret this construction of sacred space as the way in which power and authority were actually constituted in terms of the geography of the nation. The significance of the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices did not lie solely in the symbolic nature of the liturgy and the ritual, but in the fact that they were performed at the base of a vast and imposing mountain reaching vertiginously up into the sky. Through the ritual the emperor was appropriating power vested in the physical geography of that particular space.

The technological limits of the pre-modern era, however, meant that the official state orthodoxy was not imposed uniformly throughout China. China was thus a land of religious diversity in which local religions constructed their own interpretations of sacred space and competed with

each other for the allegiance of the people. Dynasties were established on the back of religious fervour and were destroyed in the same way. As much as the Imperial court sought to impose its vision of unity and harmony on the empire, such an imposition was inevitably imperfect, fracturing at its various intersections with the authority of local cults and popular religions. In order for this vision to become a reality, it was necessary for the modern state to dismantle the networks of theological power and religious authority traditionally associated with the sacred mountains and local cults. This was made possible part by rapid developments in communications technology that, for the first time, enabled the central authorities to impose their vision of the world upon the various regions of China. Although from the perspective of traditional Chinese religious history this could be viewed as the secularization of these natural and local spaces, the campaigns against popular religion could equally be interpreted as the reordering of the sacred into a single, overarching, transcendent monotheism constructed around the abstract notion of the state.

It would come as no surprise, therefore, that religion and the state would come into conflict where the function of religion was not clearly allied with that of the state. In such cases religion had to be controlled by the state because it was, in effect, a theological competitor. Duara traced the modern history of conflict between religion and the state to an official document published in 1928, called the 'Standards for Preserving and Abandoning Gods and Shrines' (Duara 1991, 79). This document marked a milestone in the process of legitimating certain forms of religion and delegitimizing others. Some gods such as Confucius, Guandi, Laozi, and Buddha were permitted to be worshipped. Other gods, such as the city god and the god of wealth were proscribed. The main distinction to be drawn between these two lists of gods is that the former could be identified in terms of their function with the overarching goals of a nation state, whereas the latter list contains gods who chiefly serve the interests of individuals or localities. In short, some gods had a place within the temple of nationalism and other gods were seen as subversive of the overarching agenda of the state. Just as the rise of the nation state in Europe has been seen as a theological consequence of the Protestant Reformation (Loy 2002, 94), so also the invention of the modern Chinese nation state could be seen a type of theological activity that demanded the restraint of religious competitors.

## Religion, Nature, and Modernization

The debate about the place of religion in the modern Chinese state was not, however, understood simply within the framework of the overarching theology of the nation state. It was also an ideological conflict predicated on competing visions of nature. This conflict was made possible by the invention of the category of 'superstition' (*mixin*). Duara demonstrates in the same article that although popular cults and local religions had previously been regarded with disdain by elite religious leaders and categorized as 'heterodox' (*xie*) they were now increasingly placed under the new category of superstition (*mixin*). The category of 'superstition' thus functioned as an ideological tool by means of which the state was able to make normative judgments about religious institutions so as to assert power over them. It did so by framing the ideology of local and popular religious movements as 'superstition', that is to say, 'deluded beliefs'. A deviant or unorthodox institution might have the possibility of being aligned, reformed or normalized in some way. An organization founded on superstition, or deluded belief, would face a far harder task of surviving in the modern state. Just as the birth of the nation state in Western Europe and North America was accompanied by the proscription of witchcraft and magic, so also the birth of the modern Chinese state witnessed a violent struggle over the ideologically correct way to view and engage the natural world. In both cases, magic and superstition were seen as the direct enemies of technology and science.

The attempt to define superstition in China began in 1930 with the 'Procedure for the Abolition of Occupations of Divination, Astrology, Physiognomy and Palmistry, Sorcery and Geomancy,' the 'Procedures for Banning and Managing Superstitious Objects and Professions,' and the 'Prohibition of Divinatory Medicines' (Duara 1991, 80). The so-called superstitions of divination, astrology, physiognomy, palmistry, and geomancy were all key elements of popular religion in China, frequently conducted in local temples, and were not generally associated with the foreign religions of Buddhism or Christianity. In effect the proscription of these activities was designed to promote the demise of traditional Chinese popular religion. But there was also a significant ideological component at stake here that revolved around the philosophy of nature. Although astrology and physiognomy are generally dismissed in modern society as 'fortune-telling', in traditional Chinese religion they were part and parcel of the fabric of religious meaning that enabled people to make sense out of their lives, and also part of the local temple economy. What binds all



these forms of 'fortune-telling' together, however, is a shared philosophy of nature, one that is diametrically opposed to the ideology of science and rationality on which the modern Chinese state was building its authority. All the proscribed activities described as 'superstitious' held in common the view that physical nature, whether in the form of human bodies, the stars or geography, had the capacity to reveal truths that are of value for human beings. As such they were sources of religious meaning and moral capacity that originated beyond the control and authority of the state, or, indeed, any formal religious institution. The development of science, on the other hand, was accompanied by an instrumental rationality that viewed nature not as the revealer of spiritual truths but as neutral, value-free space capable of being shaped by human will through technology and so forth. In the former case, nature revealed truths to humans through religious processes; in the latter case, humans imposed their values on nature through technological and economic processes. In the modern nation state the imposition of values on nature is directed by the organs of the state through its various science and technology research institutes and the modern university system.

The attack on superstition persisted in modern China through to the Communist period. At the Eleventh Party Congress in 1979, freedom of religion was restored in China only for the five state-sanctioned religions of China. All other forms of traditional religious culture were deemed superstition. The policy on the regulation of religions adopted in 1979 states that:

By superstition we generally mean activities conducted by shamans, and sorcerers, such as magic medicine, magic water, divination, fortune telling, avoiding disasters, praying for rain, praying for pregnancy, exorcising demons, telling fortunes by physiognomy, locating house or tomb sites by geomancy and so forth. They are all absurd and ridiculous. Anyone possessing rudimentary knowledge will not believe in them. (Document 3 from *Selected Documents of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party Congress, 1979*; MacInnis 1989, 33-4)

From this excerpt we can see that the principal question about the relationship between religion and the state has been formulated around the capacity of nature to shape and direct people's religious experiences. The so-called superstitious activities mediate the relationship between humans and nature in a way that lies outside of the bureaucratic processes of the state, or the established religions with solid institutional structures

that could more easily be brought into line with the goals of the modern Chinese state.

Thus the conflict between religion, science and superstition was not just about epistemology, or the rational procedures for verifying belief. They were also about the capacity of nature to be a source of sacred power and even moral authority outside of the structures of the state and the rational procedures of science. The campaigns against superstition and local religions that were begun in the Republican period and carried through most forcefully in the Communist period were not only contesting ideological and epistemological space within the Chinese psyche; nor were they solely struggles to assert central power over local areas; rather they were also struggles over the value of nature, and the capacity of nature to function in some way as sacred space, as a source of divine revelation, or as a theological reality.

It would be a mistake to underestimate the serious nature of this conflict between science and ‘fortune-telling’. The various activities proscribed under the rubric of ‘superstition’ were by no means fringe activities restricted to a few uneducated people. Rather, they expressed a fundamental aspect of the traditional Chinese worldview, namely the view of nature as a source of sacred power. This view is neatly summed up in a third-century poem by Cao Zhi. The subject is Mt. Tai, the sacred mountain of the east, mentioned above as the location of the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices.

I roamed the mountain in the dawn  
Secluded in its misty depths  
When suddenly I met two boys  
With faces that were fair and fresh.  
They gave me herbs of the immortals  
The Numinous Supreme had made,  
Medicaments that when absorbed  
Revive the seminal essence and brain,  
So life, like a rock’s or metal ore’s,  
Passes through eons, but does not age.  
(Trans. Elvin 2004, xxii-xxiii)

Here nature, in the form of Mt. Tai, is the space in which the poet encounters two boys. They are described as having ‘fair and fresh’ faces, which is the clue that they are not ordinary mortals but immortal beings. This view is confirmed when they give the author ‘herbs of the immortals’ to ‘revive the seminal essence and brain’. Here, nature is not simply the location for

an encounter with divine beings, but is also the source of cosmic power which has the capacity of conferring immortality on the one who ingests the herbs. Finally, nature in the form of unchanging rock is a metaphor for the sacred ideal of immortality. In these three cases, nature is not valued in terms of some rational economic calculus but as the medium through which the adept can transcend the mundane world. Nature is sacred inasmuch as it is the Way to attain a transfigured and more perfect reality. When the state proscribed 'divination' and 'magic medicine' it was in effect proscribing this view of nature, which formed the bedrock of traditional religious culture.

Remarkably, however, this view of nature was never extirpated from the Chinese mentality; instead it continued, albeit in a transformed way, into the modern period. Despite the ideological rhetoric of the modern Chinese state, the view that nature is a source of sacred power and moral authority continues into the present day. Take for instance, the following song from the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s:

Let's attack here!  
Drive away the mountain gods,  
Break down the stone walls  
To bring out those 200 million tons of coal.  
(Zhang Zhimin, *Personalities in the Commune*; quoted in Shapiro 2001, vii)

At first glance it would seem that this song supports the Weberian hypothesis that modernization involves the disenchantment of sacred space. Here modernization, in the form of coal mining, demands the secularization of the mountain space where the mining takes place, described as 'driving away the mountain gods'. From the perspective of traditional Chinese religion this indeed is tantamount to the secularization of sacred space, but from a larger perspective it is more accurate to interpret this as the reordering of the sacred. Driving away the mountain gods does not reveal the mountain to be an inert place devoid of any sacred power. Rather it reveals the mountain to be harbouring a new form of sacred power, that of coal. Coal is not here simple 'stuff', but during the Great Leap Forward was the means by which China would achieve its Great Leap Forward into the future. It was, in effect, the numinous substance that was essential in the concoction of a new elixir of immortality: steel. The view of nature as harbouring secret powers, whether conceived as 200 million tons of coal, or herbs with numinous powers remains constant. The only thing that

changed from the time of Cao Zhi to the time of Mao was the understanding of the role of the traditional gods as guardians or mediators of the sacred power of nature. These were dispensed with and replaced by the gods of the human will. As Jasper Becker writes in *China's Hungry Ghosts* (1996, 308; quoted by Shapiro 2001, 68):

Mao wanted to modernize China but could not grasp the basis of modern thought, the scientific method: that the way in which the natural universe behaves can be proved or disproved by objective tests, independent of ideology or individual will.

Becker's critique of Mao, and also Shapiro's, was that Mao did not in fact secularize nature in the 'correct' way. Rather he simply replaced one form of ideology with another, asserting the supremacy of the human spirit, not the celestial gods, over nature.

Reading Chinese modernization not as 'secularization' but as an enduring theological contest over the location and power of the sacred might also help explain contemporary Chinese leaders' fascination with grand works of environmental engineering. Projects such as the Three Gorges Dam can be understood as modern equivalents of the acts of mythological heroes who brought order out of the watery chaos. Such projects continue to reveal the enduring power of sacred mythology in modern China. Thus the destruction of the natural environment continues not through the rationalization and disenchantment of nature, as conservative religious critics of modernity might suggest, but because of the enduring power of 'secular theologies' to subordinate human interests to irrational ideals (see Gray 2004).

### **Religion and Nature in Contemporary China: Three Cases**

The debate over the place of religion and nature in modernity was not, therefore, decisively settled in the twentieth century and has begun to take on new forms in an era of relative religious freedom in China. The following three brief case studies display something of the complex situation of religion, nature and modernity in contemporary China.

The first case concerns that of religious sites located in areas of outstanding natural beauty, which have been developed and reorganized chiefly as tourist attractions in China, and function under the authority of local tourism offices. Although the reopening of temples might lead one

to think that religion is somehow resurgent in China, the fact that religious spaces are often contained firmly within tourist economic development zones makes clear that the sacred is secondary to the economic. The recent flourishing of religious activities in China thus leads, paradoxically, to serious problems faced by wealthy monasteries located in tourist development zones. Referring to Buddhism, Jing Yin (2006, 90) writes:

Problems associated with the impact of the market economy on Buddhism can be divided into two categories. The first can broadly be termed external problems that arise when government officials, particularly low ranking local ones, infringe upon the rights and interests of the monasteries. The more wealthy monasteries become the more frequently this occurs, and this constitutes a rather serious problem in some areas. The second category of problems are internal disputes that arise when the state returns property to the monasteries following the implementation of the policy of religious freedom in 1979.

The recent freedoms bestowed on religious institutions in China have thus come at a price, that of keeping sacred space contained within the bureaucratic control of the state as a means to achieving rational economic ends. Jing Yin (2006, 91-92) goes on:

From a Buddhist perspective, one can say that the one-sided economic development in many monasteries has made them lose their distinctively Buddhist characteristics. I have accompanied many overseas Buddhist delegates on visits to monasteries in China. In my experience, visitors often feel that despite the proliferation of monasteries, there is a lack of character here. Monasteries commonly operate vegetarian restaurants, guest houses, souvenir shops, and food and drink booths. Some even go to the extreme of running factories and operating companies. The long-term effect is that the market economy is seriously hurting the religious nature of the monasteries. Once monasteries become large-scale enterprises, it is difficult for them to back out. And when monasteries become principally tourist attractions, the danger is that the energy of the monks becomes devoted chiefly to receiving tourists, leaving no time for the *sangha* or to engage in Buddhist practice.

In other words, even in an era of religious freedom, it seems that religious activities continue to be subordinated to rational, economic functions and are increasingly unable to stand as moral or ethical challenges to the

dominant values of the state. Such a view is borne out by the Chinese state regulations on religion issued in 2004, which paint a clear picture of the place of religion within the secular space of the Chinese state. These new regulations do not deal with the thorny theoretical questions such as the definition of religion, or the relationship between religion, superstition and scientific belief. Rather they tend to focus on more bureaucratic questions such as which government agency is the competent authority for dealing with various types of religious issues, and economic questions such as the relationship between religious pilgrimage and secular tourism. Article 18 of the new regulations, for example, governs the management of religious sites and typifies well the new direction in Communist policy towards religion:

A site for religious activities shall strengthen internal management, and, in accordance with the provisions of the relevant laws, regulations and rules, establish and improve the management systems for personnel, finance, accounting, security, fire control, cultural relics protection, sanitation and epidemic prevention, etc., and accept the guidance, supervision and inspection by the relevant departments of the local people's government. (State Council 2004)

As this regulation indicates, the overall goal now is to promote the smooth management of religious spaces in such a way that they do not disrupt social harmony or pose a threat to the authority of the government. It seems that party officials are no longer concerned with understanding the nature of religion in terms of political theory, but only with managing its social and economic functioning. In contrast to the divisive ideological debates of the May Fourth and early Communist era over secularization, tradition, and modernity, the contemporary framework for understanding the relationship between religion and society emphasizes economics, management and social harmony. The CCP no longer seems intent on attempting to control the religious beliefs of Chinese citizens, but rather on ensuring that religious organizations, whatever they believe, work to support the nation and its economy

The second case study concerns the revival of interest, at least in a theoretical sense, of the value of traditional religions in contributing to the emergence of environmentalism in contemporary China. Most notable in this regard has been the work of Pan Yue, Vice-Minister of the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA). In a notable speech in 2003, he called for the creation of an 'environmental culture and national

renaissance' that forged traditional views of nature with the demands of the modern Chinese state into a nationalistic vision of Chinese development, and one that would avoid the ecologically destructive excesses of Western modernization. He quoted chapter 16 of the Daoist classic, *The Way and Its Power (Daode jing)*, 'The myriad creatures all rise together / And I watch their return / The teeming creatures / All return to their separate roots' to argue for a 'circular economy,' his vision of an ecologically sustainable society (Pan 2007, 11). Such a society would be at once at the forefront of ecological economics and sustainable development theory, and at the same time indigenously and authentically Chinese:

The pursuit of harmonious relations between man and nature is the mainstream of traditional cultures in the past thousands of years. The Confucian school advocated 'the unity of nature and man', which emphasizes that all human behaviours must conform to the law of nature.

...

The Daoist school proposed the theory of 'Tao following nature', which elevates the concept of 'nature' to a metaphysical height. ... According to Laozi, natural laws shall not be violated, and human principles must conform to the natural laws. (Pan 2007, 6-7)

In Pan's view, therefore, China's religious traditions are sources of moral capacity and intellectual authority which could be reconfigured to fit in with China's new goals of sustainable development. China's economic development, its accompanying environmental and social pressures, and its state-sponsored nationalism are thus ushering in new transformations of the sacred.

Finally, the contemporary Chinese scene reveals a popular interest in understanding the relationships between religion, science and nature. Such an interest has most recently been evident in the 2005 debate about whether environmental protection in China was best served by an attitude of reverence (*jingwei*) towards nature. He Zuoxiu, a prominent scientist, argued that reverence for nature was the product of anti-scientific thinking and was not helpful in fighting diseases or natural disasters (He 2005). Liang Congjie, the founder of the Chinese NGO Friends of Nature, on the other hand, argued that nature cannot be viewed simply as a tool, and that having a sense of reverence for the natural world was itself natural and rational (Liang 2006). Although Liang was careful to define his use of the word 'reverence' in a humanistic way, the very use of the term 'reverence'

or 'awe' (*jingwei*) in the first place, clearly struck a negative chord with some members of the scientific establishment. The very debate reveals that issues of the environment are not simply a matter of science and technology in China, but also ethics and values.

These three examples from the contemporary Chinese scene reveal that in China's quest for modernization, religion and nature continue to be sites of ideological conflict. Religious organizations continue to be actively managed by the state's religious affairs administration. This oversight is especially strong where religious sites are located in areas of natural beauty and there is thus a large potential for making money by developing the local tourist economy. On the other hand, there seems to be a willingness among some of the elite to consider the value of traditional ideas in helping to solve China's dire environmental problems. Their views are regarded as controversial because they seem to contradict the official ideology of modernization and scientific development (*kexue fazhan*) and yet figures like Pan Yue hold senior positions within the government. At the same time the question of respect for nature remains highly contested among scientists and environmentalists. All this seems to suggest that despite the rhetoric of science and modernity, there has not been an irreversible process of disenchantment in China. Some traditional values persist, whereas others have been transmuted into nationalism and scientism. The relationship between science, nature, and religion continues to be contested both theoretically and practically.

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