

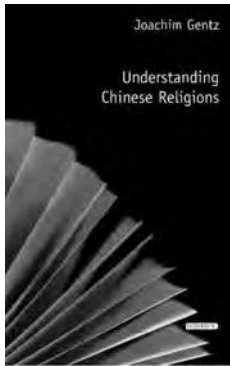
Understanding Chinese Religions

BY JOACHIM GENTZ

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Reviewed by Robert Steed



Understanding Chinese Religions by Joachim Gentz, Reader of Chinese at the University of Edinburgh, is a concise and well-structured introduction to the topic of the conceptual frameworks of Chinese religions and is part of the larger *Understanding Faith* series. Gentz indicates quite clearly in the preface to this volume that his primary focus in writing it is upon a systematical approach rather than a historical one, a methodology that of course shapes the final product in significant ways.

This text is not a typical “survey” of Chinese religion. Although it includes solid information about major dimensions of Chinese religious history and practice, Gentz’s purpose lies more in trying to provide a conceptual framework for understanding aspects of a Chinese religious worldview that underlie those practices. In chapter 1, “What is Chinese Religion?,” Gentz points out the difficulties that attend this project, since many previous attempts to accomplish this task result in definitions or descriptions of Chinese religion that ignore or pass by significant aspects of that cultural practice. Gentz demonstrates that he is aware of the difficulties attendant to the project he is undertaking. Additionally, and quite rightly in this reviewer’s opinion, Gentz goes to some length to address the problems with the Western-derived (and largely Protestant Christian) term “religion,” demonstrating the kinds of distortions and gaps in analysis that tend to be created when trying to map this term onto non-Western traditions and cultures.

Gentz is careful, whenever possible, to employ indigenous Chinese terminology and categories when analyzing Chinese religious traditions. He offers succinct and well-defined descriptions of such relevant terms as he goes along from chapter to chapter. Once he has established his theoretical framework in the first couple of chapters, he moves on to a more historically oriented discussion of categories of Chinese religious practice. Dedicating a chapter to each, they are in the sequence of Ancient Religion, Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Popular Religion. The last chapter, “Understanding Religion and Secularization in Modern China,” returns to a more theoretical framework.

This volume has many strengths. It offers much-needed attention at the “introductory” level to issues of method and theory, showing how the decisions the reader makes on these planes affect the interpretation of data and the answers drawn from those observations. The writing style is clear and fluid. Gentz devotes attention to a relatively wide range of topics for such a brief text (138 pages of narrative plus various charts, bibliography, and index). Even with his emphasis on theory, Gentz provides plenty of solid historical material and analysis.

There are a few problems with this book, as well. While there are a couple of charts showing such concepts as the sexagenary *ganzhi* cycle (used to record days or years) and the hexagrams of the *Yijing*, there are no photographs, illustrations, or pictorial content of any kind. Aside from the chart showing the hexagrams, everything is text-based. The bibliography

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is impressive, but there is no glossary of terms and no Chinese character glossary. Characters are not provided on first use of a Chinese term, either. None of these are fatal flaws, but they do place the finished product in a kind of “gray area”: the lack of illustrations and some of the theoretical complexity make it somewhat unfriendly for introductory-level students, but the lack of standard sinological scholarly apparatus prevents the text from being as useful for advanced students and scholars. I do find the lack of Chinese characters a puzzling choice, given the author’s insistence upon the importance of knowing and using indigenous conceptual categories; the use of characters would enable those who could read them to follow his arguments more closely and would demonstrate to the introductory student that really beginning to understand any religious or cultural tradition demands engaging with the languages of that culture on a sustained basis.

Overall, I would recommend this book for use in classes that incorporate study of Chinese religions. However, I would not recommend it as the primary introductory text. It would serve better as a supplementary text that could be used to complexify and provide theoretical nuance for material covered more straightforwardly and simply in other sources. It might also prove more useful for intermediate-level classes rather than introductory classes, especially if it is to be used as the main text for that class. ■

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