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Book Review

“The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao” by Ian Johnson,
Pantheon, \$30, 455 pp.

Chinese spirituality on its own terms



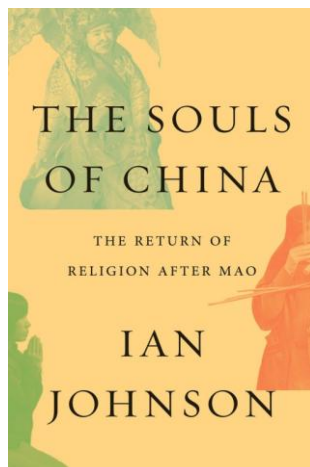
A man takes in the view from a temple on Miaofengshan, or the Mountain of the Wondrous Peak, Beijing's most important religious site. (Ng Han Guan/Associated Press)

by Richard Madsen

Chinese society is not religious. At least that's the conventional wisdom, which argues that there is no place for religion in a China consumed by materialist capitalism under the control of a dictatorial government. But in "The Souls of China," journalist Ian Johnson brilliantly demonstrates that the conventional wisdom is wrong. Under the surface lies a world of vividly imagined hopes and dreams. Johnson, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the suppression of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, ventures far off the beaten path and listens to ordinary Chinese who introduce him to their world of the spirit.

In today's China, the traditional Chinese lunar calendar, which was replaced in 1929 with the modern Western Gregorian calendar, "still underpins how many Chinese dress, eat, worship, and pray." In a nod to the calendar's influence, Johnson organizes his book around its seasons. In many respects, the Chinese approach to spirituality does not follow the lines of the religious dogmas that inspire Western Christians. The Chinese immerse themselves in a different world of time and space where sacred mountain peaks (some actually no more than hills) represent the meeting of heaven and earth. The Chinese draw on rituals and poetic stories, some ancient, others recently invented, that in their own way constitute a rich religious life.

In the most vivid and moving chapters of the book, Johnson follows the Ni family, which leads one of the 80 pilgrim associations in Beijing. The family organizes the annual two-week pilgrimage to the city's most important religious site, Miaofengshan, or the Mountain of the Wondrous Peak, to worship a goddess called Our Lady of the Azure Clouds. These associations are independent of the government, with an authority that derives from tradition and faith. The work is unpaid and passed down from father to son. Johnson spends the entire two weeks with the Ni family's association, ascending the mountain with tens of thousands of pilgrims. The mountain is transfigured with statues and flowers and gold-colored sheets and banners; the air is redolent of incense; and time is filled with performances of singing and dancing, stilt-walking and martial arts. What was the meaning of all this? "The key," Johnson writes, "was that something was here, now: a bridge to the future. After everything that China had been through over the past century, the fact that temples were still standing was the miracle. . . . Instead of appraising the statues, I looked at the people, to see what was in their eyes."



What was in their eyes was a kind of faith and hope, a belief that they were connected to their ancestors and a wish that they could bequeath that connection to their children. These aspirations are expressed in different ways by the religious practitioners throughout the book. Li Bin from rural Shanxi province is a ninth-generation Daoist, a “yin-yang man,” who organizes funerals and tells fortunes, helping the living both to understand their fate and to carry on the legacy of the dead. Qin Ling is a master of Daoist “inner alchemy” meditation techniques, who teaches in Beijing, with a clientele that includes the children of high-ranking officials. Johnson studies with her and then goes on a 10-day retreat in southern China with her mentor Wang Liping and 500 others, including lawyers, business people and artists.

He attends another retreat with a 94-year-old master of Chinese classics named Nan Huai-chin, whose books on Chinese traditions have sold more than 60 million copies and whose students include “airline executives, bank managers, young scholars, architects, and the well-connected children of senior leaders.” He also travels to Chengdu in Sichuan province, where he worships with Wang Yi, a former human rights lawyer and now pastor of a dynamic non-registered (and therefore officially illegal) “house church.” Some of Wang Yi’s friends regret that he is no longer a political activist, but Johnson reflects: “As a public intellectual in a repressive state like China, what could Wang Yi really achieve through activism? House arrest and a blocked Internet connection? . . . As a pastor and seminary teacher, Wang Yi could influence hundreds of people and help plant congregations across the country. At the very least, here he was creating his own society — a tiny cosmos of order and justice in the middle of one of China’s largest cities.”

The religious space-time that Johnson explores is real, robust and resilient, and inevitably, it impinges on the everyday world of commerce and politics. The government once tried to stifle the religious world, but under Xi Jinping, it is now trying to co-opt various forms of traditional religion in the hopes that they will crowd out a resurgent Christianity. But the efforts are clumsy and are not stopping the many religious practices from continuing on their own paths of development. In Johnson’s telling, there is not one but many souls of modern China, all engaged in a sometimes cacophonous quest for meaning, community and justice.

“Perhaps,” he concludes, “because Chinese traditions were so savagely attacked over the past decades, and then replaced with such a naked form of capitalism, China might actually be at the forefront of this worldwide search for values.”

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