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# Religious Landscapes of China: Provincial Histories of Faith

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## Introduction

This book maps the religious landscapes of China as they have taken shape across provinces and over centuries. We trace how Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Christianity, and diverse folk traditions have traveled, settled, and transformed in dialogue with local ecologies, economies, and regimes of governance. Rather than narrating a single national story, we assemble twenty-five provincial histories that foreground mountains and markets, caravans and coastlines, monasteries and mosques, ancestral halls and urban house churches. The result is a comparative portrait of faith and statecraft—how temples became fiscal actors, how sects organized moral economies, how pilgrimage powered regional exchange, and how secularization reconfigured, but rarely erased, religious life.

Our approach blends archival and ethnographic methods. We read county gazetteers, temple steles, missionary periodicals, court records, and policy directives alongside field observation, interviews, and site-based microhistories. Spatial analysis—pilgrimage circuits, maritime routes, and Silk Road oases—anchors many chapters, while demographic shifts, lineage structures, and urbanization patterns help explain why similar traditions diverged across places. By situating local episodes within broader imperial, republican, socialist, and reform-era contexts, we show how national institutions repeatedly met provincial particularities, producing distinctive religious ecologies.

Each chapter follows a common scaffold to facilitate comparison. It opens with topography and settlement history, turns to institutional infrastructures (monasteries, mosques, churches, and temples), examines sectarian networks and reform movements, and then tracks regulation—from magistrate edicts and imperial patronage to registration campaigns, patriotic associations, zoning laws, and heritage designations. We pay close attention to economies of devotion: donation regimes, temple fairs, incense markets, diaspora remittances, and the new philanthropy. Pilgrimage appears as both a devotional practice and a transportation system, connecting mountain peaks, river ports, treaty ports, border crossings, and, increasingly, digital platforms.

The temporal arc is necessarily broad. We follow early transmissions of Buddhism along oasis towns, the consolidation of monastic estates in the Tang-Song era, the embedding of Islam through garrisons, trade, and Sufi brotherhoods in the Yuan-Ming-Qing, the efflorescence of redemptive societies and charitable associations in the late empire, and the expansion of Christian missions in treaty ports and interior stations. Republican experiments in religious administration and education, Mao-era suppression and reconfiguration, and the post-1978 revival and heritage economy

reframe practice, authority, and space. Contemporary chapters probe how urbanization, migration, tourism, and platform media reshape the conditions of belief and belonging.

Analytically, we distinguish secularization as a transformation of social organization from secularism as a project of governance. Provinces exhibit varying modes of “regulated pluralism,” where law, policy, and market logics structure the field of religion without dissolving it. Concepts such as ritual economy, moral capital, and networked authority guide our reading of sources; so do insights from sociology of religion and political anthropology on how institutions, elites, and publics negotiate legitimacy. We invite readers to consider not only what people believe, but how infrastructures—roads, schools, associations, and heritage bureaus—make certain forms of religion possible and others precarious.

Terminology and ethics matter. We use standard pinyin, retain local ethnonyms where salient, and signal historical names when necessary. Categories such as “folk religion” index heterogeneous practices—lineage rites, spirit-mediumship, deity cults, and local festivals—that overlap with Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian repertoires. Where sources are silent or biased—missionary triumphalism, statist securitization, or romantic ethnography—we read against the grain and triangulate. Throughout, we foreground practitioners’ voices and the textures of place, attentive to conflict and accommodation without reducing either to a single narrative.

Finally, a word on how to read this book. The chapters can stand alone as provincial case studies, but they also speak to each other. Readers interested in maritime networks might read Fujian alongside Guangdong and Zhejiang; those tracing Islamic lineages may follow threads from Gansu to Xinjiang and down trade corridors into Yunnan; studies of Daoism link Jiangxi, Sichuan, and Beijing’s ritual and institutional worlds; inquiries into Christian growth pair Shanghai’s treaty-port modernity with interior revivals in Henan and Hubei. By moving between chapters, you can watch ideas, institutions, and people traverse China’s varied terrains—revealing a religious landscape that is at once provincial and profoundly interconnected.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Beijing — Imperial Altars to Post-socialist Pluralism**

Beijing, the illustrious capital of China, has long been a crucible where the sacred and the secular have intertwined, often dramatically. From its early iterations as a frontier garrison town to its present-day status as a global metropolis, Beijing's religious landscape mirrors its political journey: a story of imperial grandeur, periods of profound upheaval, and a nuanced, often negotiated, pluralism. The city's topography, dominated by a flat plain ringed by mountains to the north and west, historically facilitated both its defensibility and its role as a nexus for cultural and spiritual exchange. The Yongding River, though now largely controlled, once provided a vital artery, connecting the nascent city to wider networks. Its strategic location at the northern edge of the North China Plain positioned it perfectly to absorb influences from the steppes while simultaneously projecting the authority of successive dynasties.

The city's earliest religious imprint can be traced to animistic beliefs and local cults predating imperial unification. As early as the Warring States period, the area that would become Beijing was recognized for its strategic importance and spiritual resonance. However, it was with the establishment of dynasties like the Liao (907-1125), Jin (1115-1234), and especially the Yuan (1271-1368) that Beijing began to take on a more defined religious character. Each ruling power, whether Khitan, Jurchen, or Mongol, brought its own spiritual traditions, leaving behind a complex palimpsest of temples, shrines, and practices. Buddhism, in particular, flourished under these northern dynasties, with numerous monasteries established within and around the burgeoning city. The Dajue Temple, for instance, with its ancient ginkgo trees, dates back to the Liao Dynasty, embodying centuries of Buddhist devotion and architectural evolution.

The Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties, however, were instrumental in shaping the religious topography of Beijing as we largely understand it today. With the Ming relocation of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing in the early 15th century, the city underwent a massive urban redesign, one that deeply embedded imperial cosmology into its very fabric. The Forbidden City, the imperial palace, stood at the heart, flanked by a meticulously arranged network of altars dedicated to heaven, earth, the sun, the moon, and imperial ancestors. The Temple of Heaven, a masterpiece of Ming architecture, served as the primary site for the emperor's annual solemn prayers for good harvests and national prosperity. These rituals were not merely symbolic; they were seen as vital acts of governance, ensuring the cosmic harmony that legitimized imperial rule.

Beyond the grand imperial altars, Beijing during the Ming and Qing eras was a vibrant tapestry of religious institutions serving its diverse populace. Buddhist temples, ranging from grand monastic complexes like the Fayuan Temple (originally Tang Dynasty but extensively rebuilt) to smaller neighborhood shrines, dotted the urban landscape. These served not only as places of worship but also as centers for education, charity, and social gathering. Daoist temples, though perhaps less numerous than Buddhist ones, held significant sway, often patronized by the imperial court and aristocratic families for their esoteric practices and promises of longevity. The White Cloud Temple, a prominent center for the Quanzhen school of Daoism, gained considerable prestige during the Yuan and continued to thrive, drawing pilgrims and practitioners from across the empire.

Islam, introduced centuries earlier via the Silk Road, also established a firm presence in Beijing. The Niujie Mosque, one of China's oldest and most significant mosques, stands as a testament to the long history of Muslim communities in the capital. Established in 996 CE, it served as a spiritual and communal hub for the Hui people, a distinct ethno-religious group with deep roots in China. Over the centuries, the mosque was rebuilt and expanded, incorporating traditional Chinese architectural elements alongside Islamic design, a visual representation of cultural synthesis. These Muslim communities, often involved in trade and commerce, formed cohesive enclaves within the city, maintaining their religious practices and cultural distinctiveness.

The arrival of Christianity, initially through Jesuit missionaries like Matteo Ricci in the late Ming Dynasty, marked another significant chapter in Beijing's religious history. Ricci, arriving in Beijing in 1601, famously adopted Confucian scholar attire and utilized his scientific knowledge to gain access to the imperial court. While the early Christian presence was relatively small and often faced periods of persecution, the Jesuits established a foothold, constructing churches and actively engaging with the Chinese intelligentsia. These early missions were not just about proselytization; they were also conduits for the exchange of scientific knowledge, astronomy, and cartography between China and Europe. The South Church (Nantang), originally built by Ricci, stands as a historical landmark, rebuilt multiple times, symbolizing the enduring, if sometimes tumultuous, presence of Catholicism in Beijing.

Folk religions, a broad category encompassing local deity cults, ancestral veneration, and spirit mediumship, permeated daily life for the vast majority of Beijing's residents. These practices, often intertwined with Buddhist and Daoist beliefs, provided a framework for understanding the world, ensuring good fortune, and warding off ill-luck. Temple fairs, vibrant and boisterous events held at various times throughout the year, were crucial expressions of folk religiosity, blending spiritual devotion with commerce, entertainment, and community gathering. They were occasions for both serious pilgrimage and lively celebration, demonstrating the embeddedness of

religious life in the social fabric.

The Republican era (1912-1949) brought significant shifts to Beijing's religious landscape. The collapse of the imperial system meant the dismantling of the state-sponsored religious cosmology that had centered around the emperor. The grand imperial altars, once vital for national rituals, lost their primary function. Some, like the Temple of Heaven, were eventually repurposed as public parks or historical sites, their spiritual significance evolving into cultural and historical value. This period also witnessed a surge in intellectual critique of religion, often viewed by modernizing elites as superstitious and an impediment to national progress. Campaigns to "supervise" or even "abolish" temples were not uncommon, leading to the secularization of some religious properties and the appropriation of their assets for public use, such as schools or hospitals.

Despite these challenges, various religious communities adapted. Buddhist and Daoist organizations attempted to modernize, establishing national associations and engaging in social welfare initiatives to demonstrate their relevance in the new era. Protestant Christianity, backed by foreign missionary societies, expanded significantly, establishing schools, hospitals, and universities (such as Yenching University) that played a crucial role in modern Chinese education and healthcare. Catholic communities also grew, though often facing greater scrutiny due to their perceived foreign loyalties. New religious societies, often syncretic in nature, also emerged, attracting followers seeking spiritual solace and moral guidance amidst the tumultuous changes.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 ushered in a new chapter, one characterized by state-led secularization and, at times, severe suppression of religious practice. During the initial decades, religious institutions were brought under state control, with the formation of "patriotic associations" for each recognized religion (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism). These associations were tasked with ensuring that religious activities aligned with the socialist state's objectives. Many temples, mosques, and churches were closed, converted to secular uses, or fell into disrepair. Religious personnel were subject to re-education, and foreign missionaries were expelled. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) represented the apex of this suppression, with systematic destruction of religious sites and persecution of believers, nearly eradicating public religious expression in Beijing.

The post-Mao reform era, beginning in the late 1970s, brought a gradual and, at times, uneven religious revival. Beijing, as the capital, became a focal point for this re-emergence of faith. The government adopted a policy of "religious freedom within limits," allowing the reopening of many key religious sites and the training of new clergy. Iconic temples like the Lama Temple (Yonghegong), originally an imperial residence turned Tibetan Buddhist monastery, were painstakingly restored and reopened to both worshippers and tourists. Similarly, the Fayuan Temple once again

became a vibrant center for Buddhist practice and scholarship, housing the Chinese Buddhist Academy.

This period also saw the rebuilding and expansion of mosques, such as the Niujie Mosque, which continued to serve as a vital community hub for Beijing's Muslim population. Christian churches, both Catholic and Protestant, also experienced a resurgence, with many previously closed churches reopening and new ones being built or designated. The official "patriotic" churches experienced significant growth, while "house churches"—unregistered Protestant gatherings—also proliferated, particularly in urban areas, reflecting a diverse landscape of Christian practice that often navigated the boundaries of state regulation.

Contemporary Beijing's religious landscape is a complex mosaic of officially sanctioned institutions, vibrant folk practices, and more subterranean expressions of faith. Pilgrimage, though perhaps less dramatic than in mountainous provinces, still occurs, with many urbanites visiting nearby temples for blessings or spiritual reflection. The state actively promotes certain religious sites, like the Lama Temple or the Temple of Heaven, as cultural heritage, leveraging their historical and architectural significance for tourism and national identity. This "heritage designation" often comes with significant state investment in restoration and maintenance, but it also means that these sites are managed as cultural assets as much as places of worship.

The economies of devotion in Beijing have also evolved. While traditional donation boxes remain, many temples and churches now engage in broader economic activities, from souvenir shops to cultural performance spaces, contributing to their upkeep and expansion. Philanthropy, often driven by newly affluent entrepreneurs, also plays a role, with individuals and businesses sponsoring temple renovations or charitable initiatives. Digital platforms have begun to impact religious life, with some temples and organizations using social media to disseminate teachings, announce events, or even offer virtual blessings, connecting with a younger, tech-savvy demographic.

Secularization in Beijing can be understood not as the disappearance of religion, but as its transformation within a modern, urban, and increasingly globalized context. The grand imperial cosmology is long gone, replaced by a state that largely operates on secular principles, yet acknowledges and manages religious expression. The city exemplifies a "regulated pluralism," where various faiths coexist and often thrive under the watchful eye of the state. This means a constant negotiation between religious communities and government bureaus over space, resources, and the public expression of faith. Zoning laws, for instance, can dictate where new religious buildings can be constructed, and public gatherings are often subject to specific regulations.

Despite the overarching state control, Beijing's spiritual life remains dynamic and diverse. From the quiet morning prayers at a neighborhood temple to the bustling crowds at a major festival, from the weekly services at official churches to the more discreet gatherings of house churches, faith continues to shape the lives of many Beijing residents. It is a city where ancient imperial altars stand as monuments to a bygone era, yet new forms of religious expression continue to emerge, adapting to the rhythms of a rapidly changing metropolis, showcasing how religious landscapes are continuously reshaped by both historical legacy and contemporary forces.

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