

Fenggang Yang, Jonathan Pettit, and Chris White, eds. *Shades of Gray in the Changing Religious Markets of China*, Religion and the Social Order, Volume 28. Leiden: Brill, 2021. 392 pp., e-book (PDF), EUR €179.00 / USD \$215.00, ISBN 9789004456747.

Fifteen years after Fenggang Yang’s landmark article, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China,” the titular tricolor market theory has received diverse reactions, ranging from eager endorsement to complete rejection. For Yang and his colleagues who see both the persistent vitality of this theory as well as the need for further nuance and update, *Shades of Gray* is their response to recent developments in the sociology of religion in China. And an expansive response it is, too, considering that the book is an edited volume comprised of fourteen chapters by eighteen contributing authors. By presenting a new portrait of religion in China that fills significant gaps in the original model, this edited volume testifies that an updated tricolor market theory remains one of the best models in explaining religious behavior and institutions in contemporary China.

The original tricolor market theory proposes that religion in China often functions according to a market mentality, and that the religious market can be divided into the red, gray, and black markets, each drifting further and further from state sanction. The reality of heavy regulation and suppression of religion necessarily gives rise to the tricolor market, and the size of the gray market correlates positively with the degree of suppression.¹ While this central thesis remains valid, this edited volume highlights important nuances for which the original model did not adequately account.

First, as the book’s title suggests, “red,” “gray,” and “black” are not stagnant designations, but “shades” that contain a certain degree of diversity. The fluidity of the tricolor market is highlighted throughout this volume, as multiple chapters argue that “not only is there movement between the three colors of the religious market, but there is also

¹ Yang Fenggang, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China,” *Sociological Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 93–122.

movement within each of the markets. Instead of viewing the religious market model as comprising three distinct categories, it may be more helpful to think of it as a continuum.”² Throughout the book one observes how various religious groups are constantly subject to negotiations in power relations, both external and internal, that propel them to transition from one color to another, or to a redder or blacker shade within its own color market. A second nuance, related to the first, is that while the original model understandably focuses on the effect of top-down political regulations, *Shades of Gray* argues that often the process for a religious group to retain or change its color is not top-down, but self-initiated, and the primary motivation is often not political, but religious. Contributing author Huang Ke-hsien argues that churches could choose to identify more closely with the red market for their own benefits, due to factors such as the emergence of “a new generation of church leaders...who are much more pragmatic and are equipped with ‘state-aiding’ entrepreneurial skills,” more “active” and “inclusive strategy toward religious regulation” from the government, and “the diversification of ideas, practices, and theology within churches.”³ Likewise, religions that were traditionally entrenched in the red market may also choose to enter the gray or the black market out of their own volition. Third, this volume gives greater consideration to non-state, cultural factors that nevertheless play a significant role in deciding a religious group’s movement in the tricolor market. Multiple chapters present case studies in which a religious group’s position in the tricolor market depends more on its ability to integrate with the local community across religious and ethnic divides than with its legal status in the eyes of the government. Together this volume seeks to flesh out the rough edges and correct some of the previous oversights in the tricolor market theory.

These arguments are supported with concrete examples, as each chapter typically is one in-depth case study. Perhaps surprisingly, most chapters in this work of sociology do not devote much length to renovating or critiquing theoretical models, opting instead to offer “thick descriptions” of complex religious behavior substantiated by solid fieldwork. Li Hui, for example, tells of a pair of churches making active use of state power to settle their own internal strife. Finding themselves deadlocked in a rivalry between leading pastors—largely

² Yang Fenggang, Jonathan E. E. Pettit, and Chris White, “Introduction” in *Shades of Gray*, 4.

³ Huang Ke-hsien, “Becoming ‘Patriotic’ for God,” in *Shades of Gray*, 17–18.

due to disagreements in the order of succeeding church leadership—one church welcomed the intervention of the Three-Self Committee to secure its legal status and to drive out its rival.⁴ In another case study, a charismatic and heavy-handed preacher developed such an authoritarian reputation that her congregants were known to complain: “The way I see it, the government should publicize all the wrongdoings of this church to save other Christians from all the deception.”⁵ Yet she was arrested by the government just in time to turn her tanking reputation into one of a saint and martyr. Here one sees how, in the power play between church and state, mishandlings from one can put the other in a stronger position. In his study of Mentuhui 門徒會, Yuan Hao shows how certain practices originally devised to circumvent state censorship have taken on a spiritual aura for themselves, thus adding “another shroud of mystery to the organization and reinforc[ing] a sense of collective identity.”⁶ It is an example of a religious group complying with state regulations for primarily religious purposes. In Zhao Cuicui’s account of an interreligious conflict in a seaside village, a “red” church was defeated by the “gray” folk religions, despite its clear legal advantage, because it failed to present itself as an integral part of a religiously diverse community due to some Christians’ dishonest under-the-table dealings with local villagers.⁷ These are but a few outstanding examples among many studied in this volume. Together they challenge the reader to perceive the contemporary state of religion in China as a web of intermingling power relations—indeed a market—where affiliation or disaffiliation with the state becomes a resource to be exploited for the benefit of religion.

The intricacy of the case studies results from the piercing observations of their authors. Almost all authors are mainland Chinese. Most authors conducted their field research and wrote their original manuscripts in Chinese, which were then translated into English for *Shades of Gray*. The sheer volume of contributions, coupled with the translated nature of their work, does present some minor inconsistencies and irks

⁴ Li Hui, “Between Interest and Politics: The Changing Status of Two Protestant Churches in China’s Tricolor Religious Market,” in *Shades of Gray*, 74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶ Yuan Hao, “The Transformation of Mentuhui (Society of Disciples): Constructing Legitimacy and Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy,” in *Shades of Gray*, 45.

⁷ Zhao Cuicui, “Competing Interests and Conflicting Beliefs: A Case Study of a Seaside Church in Zhejiang,” in *Shades of Gray*, 123–24.

in the writing. Readers are told that the translator chose to render Chinese terms as faithfully and as close to the original as possible, at times to the detriment to the flow of language. But the benefits of convenient access to these texts far outweigh the drawbacks. As Chinese these authors are able to penetrate the religious communities studied here to an extent rarely possible for foreign observers, and therefore are able to unveil internal dealings and clandestine complications hidden from outsiders. Such insider's knowledge enables them not only to offer a detailed portrait of Chinese religion, but also to make contributions to the theoretical side of the field, for cases here would challenge any theorist to account for their full complexities. Proximity to their subjects of study does not dull the authors' critical edge either. It is impressive that, overall, they succeed in being sympathetic but not romantic, in giving voice to their subjects while maintaining a critical distance from them, in being both an insider and an outsider. Focusing on giving complex descriptions allows the authors to walk a tight rope relatively free from ideological biases as well. While at places one can piece together some biases of individual authors based on their angle of analysis, overall one does not find overt favoritism or disdain towards either any particular religion or the state in this volume.

Solid case studies notwithstanding, readers who wish to find in this volume unprecedented or comprehensive engagement of existing sociological theories of religion may be left unsatisfied. One would not find in this book the extreme ends of reactions to the tricolor market theory. Rather, most authors are committed to work within the framework of the tricolor market theory while also providing qualified critique. Some inconsistencies in the chapters though demonstrate the challenges that still face the tricolor market theory today. While much work has been done to situate the theory in the Chinese context, it still bears the image of its theoretical ancestry, which was developed primarily with Christianity in mind. In this volume, the theory is at its best when explaining Chinese Christian churches, which almost always have a "disembedding" tendency common among axial religions. When it comes to some Chinese folk religions that are thoroughly utilitarian in their ethics, however, the theory appears to lose some explanatory power, as these folk religions often see no need to challenge the status quo, hence no need to position themselves along a gradient of state sanction. Especially in chapters that focus on the more idiosyncratic religious sects, greater attention to the sect's own teachings on political ethics, or the lack thereof, would have greatly strengthened the arguments. The lack of a focused theoretical commitment also means that authors can sometimes be imprecise when using loaded concepts such as "democratic,"

“Christology,” or “ethical society.” Lastly, a point the editors are well aware of, since most chapters draw from fieldwork done in the early 2010s, they cover the tail end of an unusually tolerant period in recent Chinese history. Reading with the hindsight of renewed repression of religion and dissent in China today, one also wonders if more chapters could benefit from greater attention to the presence of state power even as a potentiality. Small drawbacks notwithstanding, this empirically researched and content-packed book largely succeeds in what it set out to do: not to revolutionize the field, but to update the tricolor market theory that remains one of the most vital sociological models today for examining religion in contemporary China.

BAI Yucheng

Duke University

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