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Church, State, and Community in East Asia: An Introduction
by Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, Ph.D.

Abstract
In East Asia, the complexity of church-state relations can be better understood if one takes into account the involvement of local community in negotiating with the state over sacred and secular matters. This article argues that the church, state, and community were not independent variables, but constantly negotiated with each other over the control of religions, religious institutions and rituals. When the state was strong, the church and community participated in the formation of the state power. As the state power declined, the church and community reverted to their original independence and crossed the boundaries between sacred and profane in order to claim political, social and economic influences.

This collection of essays, which grew out of a panel entitled “Church, State, and Community in Imperial East Asia” at the New England Conference of Asian Studies in 2002, presents several in-depth case studies of the interaction between church, state, and community in China, Korea and Japan. These case studies share the same premise that the church-state relationship is an integral part of politics in traditional and modern East Asian societies. At the centre of the discussion is the relationship between state power and religion. In recent years, Anthony C. Yu has addressed this complicated relationship between state and religion in China and called for more attention to the state control of religion during the imperial and contemporary eras. Commenting on this subject in the 2002 Venerable Master Hsüan Hua Memorial Lecture, Yu states, “there has never been a period in China’s historical past in which the government of the state, in imperial and post-imperial form, has pursued a neutral policy toward religion, let alone encouraged, in terms dear to American idealism, its ‘free exercise.’ The impetus to engage religion, on the part of the central government, is for the purpose of regulation, control and exploitation whenever it is deemed feasible and beneficial to the state (Yu, 2003).” As in other parts of East Asia, the imperial states of the past and modern states have continuously pursued a policy of engaging religions as long as these religions supported the state. This special issue expands on Yu’s argument by saying that the complexity of church-state relations can be better understood if one takes into account the state-society relations and the involvement of local community in negotiating with the state over sacred and secular matters. It argues that at least in East Asia, the church, state, and community were not independent variables, but constantly negotiated with each other over the control of religions, religious institutions and rituals.

In general, how did the state in East Asia use religion to legitimize its rule and regulate religious activities at the grassroots level? What role did religion play in reinforcing state ideology and in contributing to the state’s interpretation of legitimate power? How did religious communities respond to the state’s policy of using religion for political control? This collection of papers addresses these questions in the historical context of traditional and modern East Asia. The cases under study range from Song China, Goryeo Korea and medieval Japan to late imperial China and Korea as well as contemporary Hong Kong. All the articles are primarily concerned with the ways in which the state employed religion to claim legitimacy, established political leadership and expanded into society, and in which some marginal communities, in turn, employed religious discourse and resources to strengthen their negotiating position in the competitive arena of politics. The findings and insights of the following articles provide the readers with a wealth of information on this topic of great importance in the field of East Asian studies.

Two themes concerning church, state, and community relations can be discerned in the articles. The first theme concerns the state takeover of the church and community. In Song China, Goryeo Korea and medieval Japan, the powerful state appropriated Buddhism for the purpose of “regulation, control and exploitation.” Faced with a mighty state, the Buddhist communities and institutions had no choice but to cooperate with it. As the state used Buddhism as an instrument of political and ideological control, it had transformed Buddhism into a native religion and integrated it into the existing political and social structures. As a result of this development, Buddhism played a major role in the state-building process, especially when the dynastic founders sought to use Buddhist ideas to define the legitimacy of the state, and to regulate, control and exploit the local communities. Therefore, the Buddhist takeover of China, Korea and Japan should not be seen only as an example of religious transmission, but as a major component of the expansion of the state in East Asia.

The second theme concerns the ongoing negotiation between church, state, and community over sacred and secular matters. In East Asia, the church, state, and community were interdependent. When the state was strong, the church and community participated in the formation of the state power. But as the state power declined, the church and community reverted to their original independence and crossed the boundaries between sacred and profane in order to claim political, social and economic influences. In other words, the church and community were not passive recipients of the ideological conformity that state authorities decreed and imposed on them. On the contrary, they were active agents who negotiated with state authorities and thereby contributed to the ideas justifying the state’s claim to legitimacy.

At the grassroots level, religious beliefs and rituals that people shared with their neighbors gave them a personified image of what their political rulers should be like. What further complicated the situation was the impact of pre-existing internal conflicts that had shaped the interaction between church, state, and community. In this framework, the role of local agencies lies at the heart of the matter. To illustrate this point, one should look at the conflicts involving

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Christian missionarities and indigenous converts in late imperial China and Korea. In China, armed with the Bible and the gun, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries not only undermined the power of the imperial government but also provided Christian converts with additional political resources with which to struggle against the established elite at the local level. The Taiping Uprising (1845–1864) is a good example of a disillusioned Chinese scholar employing Christian resources to challenge the imperial state and create a Taiping Christian kingdom on Chinese soil (Spence 1996; 1998). There are many such examples of politically marginal communities using conversion for protection and self-empowerment, as shown in several recent studies of Christianity in rural China (Lee, 2002; 2003; Sweeten, 2001; Lutz and Lutz, 1998; Tiedemann, 1991; Laamann, forthcoming in 2005). This struggle for power is a key to understanding the dynamics of church, state, and community relations in East Asia.

By addressing these thematic issues, the first two articles apply a top-down approach to investigate the nature of state power and religion in imperial East Asia. Sem Vermeersch presents a very insightful comparative study of the state’s control of Buddhism in Song China and Goryeo Korea. Vermeersch argues that Buddhism was an integral part of the state-building project because it enabled the Chinese and Korean rulers to justify their rise to power and claim to legitimacy. After emerging from a long period of civil war, the Chinese and Korean dynastic founders were desperate to claim legitimacy and gain popular support. As Buddhism was a dominant religion in China and Korea at that time, the imperial rulers not only subscribed to Buddhist teachings and rituals but also used Buddhism to define their political images and portray themselves as virtuous Buddhist rulers. To further institutionalize Buddhism as the official religion of the state, the rulers began to control Buddhist institutions. They oversaw the translation and interpretation of Buddhist scriptures and the training of the monks. Even as the Chinese and Korean rulers acted pragmatically to use Buddhism as a political instrument, their policies advanced the Buddhist interests and contributed to the rapid expansion of Buddhism at the grassroots level. Ronald K. Frank studies the interaction between different Buddhist groups and independent daimyō domains in late medieval Japan. By examining a wide range of anti-religious policies, Frank argues that repressive measures employed by Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu to control religious communities had been presaged by similar policies in the domains of daimyō throughout the sixteenth century.

Ma Zhao and Lydia Gerber focus on Qing China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They employ a socio-historical approach in examining relationships between church, state, and community. When the power of the Chinese imperial state was declining, the government was extremely concerned with the erosion of its imperial authority in the face of the Catholic and Protestant expansion into the interior. Ma Zhao explores the anti-Christian campaign in 1784–1785 within the wider contexts of political culture and bureaucratic reform in China during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor. Ma argues that Qianlong exploited the anti-Christian campaign to reinvigorate the imperial bureaucracy at the provincial and county levels. Through a study of several anti-Christian disputes in the post-Boxer era, Lydia Gerber shows that in those peripheral areas where there was little government control and Confucian influence, the Chinese elite and local communities did not hesitate to exploit Christian missionary resources for political survival.

When the state was weak, incompetent, and could not deal with internal and external crises, the church took advantage of the situation to advance its religious, social and political agendas. In that context, John R. Stanley and James Jin-Hong Kim look at the dynamics of the Protestant missionary movements in China and Korea at the turn of the twentieth century. Focusing on the American Presbyterian mission education in Shandong province, John R. Stanley investigates a number of attempts by Chinese Christian educators to claim more power and play a more active role in the development of the Christian mission education. James Jin-Hong Kim discusses the career of Horace G. Underwood and his approach to evangelization and church-state relations in late nineteenth-century Korea. While Korea was facing the Japanese imperialistic intrusion, Underwood hoped to use Protestant Christianity to reform and modernize Korea, to make the church more important to the Korean state, and to support Korea against the Japanese aggression. His contributions made him a legendary figure in the modern history of Korea.

Chan Sze-Chi looks at a totally different world at a different time, that of Hong Kong after its return to China on July 1, 1997. Chan captures the dynamics of church-state relations in Hong Kong by comparing the role of Catholic and Evangelical Christian churches in the popular struggle against the implementation of Article 23 of the Basic Law in the summer of 2003 (Article 23 of the Basic Law was proposed to prohibit individuals and political organizations in Hong Kong from conducting subversive activities against the Chinese central government in Beijing.). Although the Beijing leaders and the Chee-hwa Tung administration successfully co-opted a significant number of Evangelical church leaders, they failed to have the Catholic Church under control, which has constantly challenged the political Establishment in post-1997 Hong Kong. The challenges that the Catholic Church currently poses to the Beijing leaders and the Tung administration have to do with its alternative interpretations of political authority and state-society relations, its campaign for the poor in society, and its mobilization of ordinary Catholics in political struggles.

The concluding essay by Thomas O’Sullivan presents a critique of the history of church-state relations in the West and throws light on the differences between Western ways in which such relations are conceptualized and the ways they are seen in East Asia. By studying the Christian Church’s explanation of its relationship to the secular power, O’Sullivan stresses that a key to understanding the dynamics of church-state relations in Europe and America is the distinction between religious and secular authorities. This distinction has become one of the most enduring features of
Western civilization and continued to shape the interaction between religion and politics in the contemporary world.

This vast array of topics resists easy categorization. Considered together, however, they clearly illustrate the highly complex nature of state power and religion in East Asia, and vividly portray a world of pragmatism and opportunism in the interaction between church, state, and community. One refreshing aspect of this special issue is the efforts of several contributors to view the subject matter not solely from the perspectives of the state and religious communities but also from the aspect of power struggles within particular societies. The appropriation of Buddhism by political leaders in the newly established Song dynasty in China and Goryeo dynasty in Korea is a good example. Another strength of this collection is the balance of national and local concerns. The articles, instead of elaborating on the religious policies of the central governments in China, Korea and Japan, clearly elucidate the multiplicity of local experiences and interests and their role in determining the course of interaction with the state over religious matters.

What emerges from this special issue is an East Asian world deeply affected by the ambiguous nature of state power and religion. The church, state and community have continuously crossed the socially-constructed boundaries between sacred and profane to claim power and influence in the competitive arena of national and local politics. As Ivan Iveković correctly points out in his study of the dynamics of church-state relations in the Mediterranean world, religion is the most enduring instrument for claiming legitimacy and popular support and has always been used and abused by ambitious rulers for political ends (Ivekovic, 2002). This, he claims, is true even in the most liberal democratic countries promoting religious tolerance and total separation of church and state. In the United States of America, since the September 11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush has assured his constituents that the War on Terror is firmly rooted in his Christian faith. This use of September 11 as a pretext to pursue an aggressive foreign policy and to defend the US military interests around the world is a classic example of linking the legitimacy of a state to divine will, as supposedly expressed in a single moment in human history – in this case, “the moment history has given us [the Bush administration] to extend liberty to others around the world (Didion, 2003: 81–86; Lincoln, 2002).” Given the importance of religion in global politics at the beginning of the twentieth-first century, this collection of essays should provide the basis for re-conceptualizing the dynamics of church, state, and community relations in East Asia from the past to the present.

ENDNOTES

1. The research for this project was supported by Pace University through a Summer Research Grant in 2004. Special thanks are due to Miss Seow Yien Lein (Department of History, University of Michigan) for painstaking editorial work, and to Harry A. Cliadakis and Ronald K. Frank (Department of History, Pace University) for their helpful comments and suggestions. The panel presenters at the New England Conference of Asian Studies in 2002 were Ronald K. Frank, “A Battle for Minds: Regulating Religion in Sixteenth-Century Japan,” Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, “Conversion for Protection: Feuding Christians in Late Nineteenth-century South China,” and Sem Vermeersch, “Buddhism in the foundation of Dynasties: Some Comparative Notes for the Cases of Song China and Koryô Korea.”

2. By definition, the term “state” refers to all forms of actual and aspiring public authority in Song China, Koryô Korea and late medieval Japan.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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