Recent years have seen a steady stream of new academic publications on various aspects of religious thought or life in both traditional and modern China. While much of current scholarship increasingly eschews the rigid division of Chinese religion(s) in terms of normative categories such as the “three teachings” (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism), most publications still end up dealing with specific texts, ideas, issues, or events that are located within the confines of one of the main religious traditions. Moreover, laudable increases in the volume and sophistication of scholarly production have been accompanied with a tendency towards ever-increasing specialization, both in terms of the methodological approaches adopted by individual scholars and of the topics of intellectual enquiry they choose to pursue. An unfortunate upshot of this state of affairs is a paucity of publications that deal with the big picture and look at Chinese religion as a whole, in all its historical variety and structural complexity. John Lagerwey’s informative and clearly written book represents a refreshing attempt to partially rectify this situation and to dispel a host of misunderstandings about the basic nature and multifaceted functions of religion in China, even if for the most part the discussion revolves around Daoism and popular religion, his main areas of specialization, which converge at the level of local society.

The author succeeds in making a strong case for the importance of serious consideration of the religious aspects of Chinese society — at both the elite and the popular levels — which is indispensable for properly understanding virtually all aspects of China’s past and present, including the Chinese state and local society. In essence, he argues that Chinese society is essentially a religious society. Pointing to a dominant tradition that repeatedly brought church and state together, he also illuminates the close links between religion and politics. He conceives of China as a sacred space, infused with divine energies and populated by an array of spirits that elicit the attention and sacrifice of the human inhabitants. Consequently, the often prevalent tendency to ignore or gloss over the religious dimensions has serious ramifications for the various misunderstandings of China, including those prevalent in the West, many of which can be traced back to interpretative distortions disseminated by official versions of Chinese history, which typically reflect Confucian biases and misinterpretations.

As an alternative, Lagerwey calls for the adoption of a nuanced approach and an integral vision that takes into account Chinese religion, society,
culture, and history in relation to each other. Another noteworthy feature of
the book is its author’s skillful adoption of multidisciplinary approaches and
perspectives, especially his concurrent employment of historical analysis and
ethnographic research. He makes a strong argument for the complementarity
of history and ethnography, and makes a compelling case for training our
students in both disciplines. The end result is an engaging book that is filled
with all sort of interesting data about enduring historical patterns and multi-
layered present-day predicaments, presented alongside insightful reflections of
a more general nature.

The book consists of four chapters of varied length, each of which is based
on a lecture given in Hong Kong in 2007. The first two chapters adopt his-
torical perspectives, while the last two are based on ethnographic research,
mostly in the southern and southeastern parts of China. Accordingly, the
book is not as thematically consistent and structurally coherent as one might
wish for — it even comes across as being truncated or fractured — although
the well-written introduction and conclusion help highlight some of the cen-
tral themes and the main arguments put forward by Lagerwey. On the whole,
it tends to read as a collection of separate essays, with some thematic overlap
and pertinent cross-referencing. One could perhaps question the publisher’s
decision to bring out these disparate materials in book form. On the other
hand, the quality of Lagerwey’s research is high and the book contains a wealth
of interesting and useful information, put together in a handy format that
presumably will be appreciated by students and scholars alike.

The first chapter provides a historical survey of the Chinese pantheon, from
the late Shang era up to the end of Late Imperial China (roughly eleventh cen-
tury BCE to nineteenth century CE), with a focus on religious Daoism. Here
the author adopts a top-down view, primarily centering his discussion on the
official religion that was sanctioned by the imperial state, although there is also
some discussion of local gods. While there is lots of fascinating material, this
is arguably the weakest chapter in the book. Often the author goes off-topic
and the narrative tends to be somewhat episodic. For instance, the section that
covers the Period of Division (220–589) hardly discusses the pantheon at all,
but instead rehearses familiar themes about the dominant patterns of church-
state relationships that were formed during this remarkable era.

The second chapter provides a historical outline of the evolution of Daoist
ritual, from ancient China to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), with particular
attention on its social functions. It provides brief descriptions of the bureau-
cratic pantheon that developed before the emergence of Daoism as organized
religion; the various techniques of spiritual cultivation developed by the early
medieval tradition, including visualizations of the spirits of the body; healing
and repentance rituals; sending of memorials by the Daoist clergy; initiations and transmissions of registers; codification of the Lingbao canon; recitation of scriptures; performance of offering rituals (jiao); and rituals for the dead. The chapter also notes the development of monastic institutions, the ongoing concern with ancestors, the development of Daoism into an official state religion, the complex relationship between the Daoist church and local cults, and the infusion of Buddhist elements into Daoism, such as the doctrines of karma and rebirth, and the rituals of universal salvation.

In the third chapter, the longest in the book, Lagerwey presents a fascinating survey of the rich variety of festivals observed in Southeastern China, covering both local and pan-Chinese festivals. Much of the discussion is based on his ethnographic research, but he also draws extensively on the work of other scholars. The presentation is organized in terms of basic spatial categories. It starts with descriptions of village festivals of the jiao variety, accompanied with a discussion of the ways they were/are organized by local communities. That is followed by depiction of festivals held at market towns, such as the annual procession of the Three Ancestral Masters — Guanyin, Dingguang, and Fuhu — organized by the New Temple (Xin miao) in Hetian town, western Fujian. Then there are the festivals held at county seats, which include New Year celebrations, the Dragon Boat Festival (Duanwu), festivals held at city god temples, and festivals dedicated to a variety of deities associated with Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion, such as Guanyin, Mazu, and Guandi. Finally, there are assorted festivals held at mountain temples, and festivals that are primarily dedicated to women.

The final chapter is perhaps the most creative in the book, although it is also by far the shortest. In it Lagerwey makes an intriguing argument about the rational character of local religion. Examining the internal logic of local religion at the village level, he points out that, as a complex symbolic system, religion fostered values and acts that were eminently suited to the socioeconomic circumstances of the majority of Chinese people, thereby helping them pursue their basic aspirations and cope with the ongoing struggles that characterized their daily existence. The chapter starts on an ambitious note: the author conjures up an imaginary village, which is a composite of villages in Southeast China where he has conducted field research, and sets to describe the central aspects of its religious life. That includes a mapping of the space occupied by the village, which contains a number of religious structures such as ancestral halls, temples, and shrines. To a large degree such organization of space is a product of history that is primarily shaped by the main lineages that inhabit the village. That is followed by a survey of some of the major gods
worshiped by the villagers and the rituals that are dedicated to them, which is not as comprehensive as one might hope for. While the chapter presents some interesting data and intriguing analysis, unfortunately the execution is imperfect. The chapter ends rather abruptly and leaves the reader with a sense of incompleteness.

Personally, I liked the book and recommend it to students and scholars of Chinese religions, as well as to others working in related fields, such as history, politics, and anthropology. The book is filled with all kind of attention-grabbing information about distinctive beliefs, colorful rituals, quaint deities, and a host of other related issues. Moreover, it contains numerous insightful reflections on the general patterns of Chinese religious life, in relation to other aspects of Chinese culture, society, and history. It can also be appreciated for its timely arguments about the need to construct balanced and integrated narratives about Chinese religion. However, in the end the book fails to fully illuminate the large picture, even in relation to the main topic evoked by its title. That is perhaps to be expected, given the vastness and complexity of the subject matter.

While the author introduces a commendable amount of valuable historical and ethnographic data, most of it is based on his study of religious life in a specific geographical area, primarily Southern and Southeastern China. Can we really talk about Chinese religion in general terms, both at the level of the state and in the context of local society, without considering regional differences, not only between the North and the South, but also between the Chinese heartlands and outlying regions such as the Northwest? Furthermore, the main focus of attention throughout the book is on Daoism and popular religion, even though such a narrow focus is not indicated by the title. Only occasionally Buddhism and Confucianism come into view, while Christianity and Islam, each of which has tens of millions of adherents, are completely ignored. A fuller accounting of Chinese religion(s) — past and present — should take into account all of these, in relation to each other and everything else, which admittedly is easier said than done.

Notwithstanding such concerns and caveats, in his commendable volume Lagerwey presents a wealth of interesting information and introduces a number of innovative — even enlightening — perspectives on the study of Chinese religion(s). He sensibly identifies the inadequacies of dated narratives about China that are based on dominant but problematic ideologies, and sheds light on a host of important issues that are centered on, but not confined to, Chinese religion. In so doing, he points towards new intellectual horizons and fruitful avenues of future research into what is still a developing field of
academic study, which can take into full account both the present and the past, the center and the periphery, the elite and the popular, the sublime and the outlandish.

Mario Poceski

*University of Florida*