Orientis Aura:
Perspectives in Religious Studies

[Book Review]

Author: Gerard Lemos

Title: The End of the Chinese Dream: Why Chinese People Fear the Future

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Gerard Lemos has written widely on social policy, and was Chair of the British Council from 2008-10, and a Visiting Professor at Chongquing Technology and Business University. In this prescient and perceptive essay, Lemos takes issue with many of the prevalent western assumptions in relation to China. That is will become more westernised, democratised, and industrialised. That it will become more liberal and free as a consequence of capitalism and consumerism. And that since the death of Mao, China is slowly inculcating western values. Lemos questions these assumptions, and in this landmark book sets out an alternative thesis that should cause us to pause and re-evaluate how we might the development of China in the twenty-first century.

Lemos is an astute academic and something of a polymath. The genesis of the book lies in his recognition that few foreigners see the real China. Few venture beyond Beijing and Shanghai, and therefore, for this project, access to the 'ordinary' Chinese people – their thoughts, hopes, aspirations and fears – is crucial to the insights developed by Lemos. The heart of the book rests in one of the broadest independent surveys of Chinese people to have been undertaken. Lemos gained access to three thousand ordinary Chinese citizens and was able to obtain information about their hopes, fears, aspirations, ambitions and concerns. This was done in a most unusual and innovative manner. Instead of straightforward interviews and questionnaires, Lemos used a 'Wishing Tree' in a number of locations. At each 'Wishing Tree', nearby residents could write on 'leaves', and attach them to the tree. Those writing on leaves were encouraged to articulate their biggest worry, what they wished for, and the key event that had shaped their life. What emerged from the Wish Trees were a host of concerns about education, welfare, community life, unemployment, pensions, old age, along with a range of views about politics, freedom and ambition.

Religion – and with which this journal is primarily concerned – receives careful treatment from Lemos. Western observers of China – who may only filter their understanding of the country through their own media – may be surprised to learn just how many Muslims live in China (at least 20 million). Christianity, although predominated by the two primary and state-sanctioned expressions of Protestantism and Catholicism, also has a lively though nascent house church movement. But Lemos is careful to point out that China, despite its Communist legacy, remains stubbornly religious.

Clearly, Buddhism remains a significant and major religion in China, as does Daoism – although the extent to which either of these belief systems should be classed as 'religion' (in western terms) remains an open question. What Lemos does do in this essay – again carefully, and with poise – is draw our attention to Falun Gong (with millions of followers?) and the emerging millenarian groups that have sprung up in recent years, which are proving to be attractive to the young and offering beliefs providing value systems which appear to offer compensators for individuals in the midst of current cultural and social struggles. In all of this, folk religion remains strong, with beliefs in fortune, luck, spirits, the

veneration of ancestors, harmony and balance, and attachments to the sacredness of the natural world, all of which point to China remaining a deeply religious society.

But just how 'religious' is China? In some respects, Lemos' findings have an uncanny resonance with Keith Thomas' classic *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, published some forty years ago. In that volume, Thomas argued that no amount of organised or state-sanctioned faith could erode the common, innate and vernacular spirituality of the ordinary people of England, before, during and even after the Reformation. Indeed, nor could state-sanctioned faith and organised religion address the apathy and indifference that many expressed towards official belief. Lemos' books does draw some interesting parallels between pre-industrial Britain and the emerging modern state of China.

So, do Chinese people fear the future? No more, I suspect, than the ordinary citizens of England did from the medieval period up to and beyond the Reformation. As Keith Thomas' work showed, religion only offered some marginal and limited comfort for the great mass of society, and religious beliefs, such as they were, had to compete with 'magic' – the vernacular spiritualities of society that

flourished up until the eighteenth century. It was mainly the wealthy and educated elite who took religion more seriously, whilst the majority of the population, for the most part, focused on surviving, and, where possible, flourishing. There was piety and praxis there, to be sure; but not the systematic and orthodox faith of the church. There appear to be similarities with modern-day China here. The shrines and temples still flourish, despite the apparent ravages of communism and consumerism. Indeed, perhaps because of them?

The great achievement of Lemos' book is that he has pioneered an innovative and incisive fieldwork methodology, using the Wishing Tree. Religious observance – vernacular expressions rather than official, recognised ones – seems set to continue shaping the lives of millions of ordinary people. Lemos' achievement in this book is to give us an insight into the hopes, fears and dreams of 3,000 ordinary Chinese people, which alone makes it a rare, valuable and brilliant piece of work. One senses that more theses may well be extrapolated from this raw data in due course. In the meantime, Lemos deserves our appreciation and thanks for a thoughtful and provocative book, full of insights and ideas. It should be widely read, discussed and discerned.