

Abstract

The Jade Emperor: Sovereign Power, Celestial Bureaucracy, and the Political Theology of the Masses in China

Based on fieldwork in Wenzhou on the southeastern coast of China, this paper adopts the notion of “political theology” to understand the nature of political power in contemporary China, and the religio-political imaginary of rural and small-town people whose genealogy traces back to imperial times. The paper draws the contours of a counter-political theology of the masses which deploys the Jade Emperor and his “celestial bureaucracy” of official-like gods to represent, confront, and critique sovereign power in China. What people *do* with the gods and divine realms, and say about them, shows their engagement with the realities of sovereign power in their lived experiences. This vision of an alternative divine sovereign power in popular religion departs from recent Western academic critiques of China as “neo-liberal governmentality,” which imposes Western experiences and concerns onto a very different historical and political situation. The long genealogy of gods as sacred rulers who intervene in times of crisis to save humankind may also help explain the power of the 20th century cult of Mao Zedong. Although both the Mao cult and the Jade Emperor cult share in a religious culture, the former was borne out of crisis and led to a Bataillean excessive, even suicidal destructiveness, while the latter re-emerges in more stable times, so the religious force does not overwhelm the entire social realm.