

Prof. Bony Schachter – Exploring Hong Kong Religions and Temples

Welcome to this episode of Exploring the Humanities voices from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Our podcasts allow us to showcase the exciting and innovative work being done by our colleagues in the humanities, intersecting with fields as varied as aviation, mental and physical health, virtual reality, religion, gender, AI, design, neuroscience.

I am Renia Lopez from the Faculty of Humanities.

Today we have with us Prof. Bony Schachter, a religious studies scholar who focuses on Daoism. Working at the Department of Chinese History and Culture at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Thank you very much for joining us. So, Bonnie, tell us quickly, how did you get into religious studies?

- Thank you for having me. That's really a very long story. I try to make it short. When I was a teenager, around 12 years old, I started doing Taiji. You know, Chinese martial arts, and was very fascinated by the world of Chinese thinking. I started reading things like The Book of the way and its power. Ancient Chinese classics. It just got me, like, very interested in this topic. Yes.

Tell us a bit more about your background. Because this wasn't happening in Hong Kong, was it?

- No, no, no, it was happening in Rio de Janeiro. I was born in Brazil. And actually, it's a very interesting place because it has a lot of religious diversity. So I was exposed to many types of religion, and I think this is one reason I ended up doing religious studies.

So why Daoism specifically?

- I think it's because of the connection with Chinese thinking, what was doing, like Taiji and this kind of stuff. So people say that Taiji is a Daoist art. I have my doubts about that. But at that time it would be like, very. I was comfortable with this idea.

So tell us a little bit more about what is religion in the Hong Kong context. What does it mean?

- Well, I think, we can think this way. Hong Kong is a very modernized place. So what's religion? Hong Kong is very similar to what is religion in Europe or the United States or other Western countries, in the sense that even students, they have this perception that religion is belief, is faith in something that is supernatural. At the same time, the Hong Kong law guarantees freedom of religion. So I think that for people living in Hong Kong because a very diverse place, religion means also community like, people from different ethnic backgrounds, they will meet at the church or synagogue or the Chinese temple, and they will share their lives, their experiences.

Do you think that's the same in places like Rio de Janeiro?

- I think it's the same like in Rio de Janeiro. But, Rio de Janeiro is a very particular place in the sense that not only we do have freedom of religion, we also have a kind of a religious market, and people are willing to experiment with different religions. So, yeah, I think that's the main difference.

Here in Hong Kong, people are not willing to experiment with different religion?

- I think that's the case. I think people have their own backgrounds. They have a more, stable sense of identity. So I think they will not mingle with other ethnic groups as much as they would do in Brazil or other places like that.

You're saying that religion is not only part of the community, but it is part of the family and a part of the individual?

- Yeah. Yeah. As I think ethnic background and has a very important role in deciding what kind of religious group you are going to mingle with, you're going to merge with, I don't see many foreigners in Chinese temples, for example. And it's not that easy, for example, to have access to some Hindu

temples. Maybe some of them are not close to foreigners. I had this experience before. I was listening to some Hindu ritual. So I went to the temple I wanted to see, but they didn't allow me to enter the temple. It's not because they are against, people who are not from their ethnicities, just because maybe there are too much things to explain. They don't feel very comfortable with outsiders.

But outsiders are always welcome in Chinese temples.

- They are very welcome in Chinese temples. But, they are not really part of the ritual community, let's say this way. The ritual community itself might be a very expert community in the sense that even the Chinese the ethnically Chinese people are not part of the ritual community.

Are we talking about popular religion here?

- We are talking about Chinese religion in general. Popular religion, Daoism, Buddhism.

You've just mentioned two in particular. How many other Chinese religions?

- Yes. Well, this is a very interesting question because, to put this way, there was no such thing as religion in traditional China. There was no concept of religion. You had a similar concept, like the concept of teaching, and you had the three teachings like Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoist. But sinologists, they think that actually the fundamental layer of Chinese religious life is what some people, the shamanism --I don't like this term. I think maybe spirit medium is better, but it's a very basic phenomenon, like comprising spirit mediums sometimes what we call shamanism and also sacrifice, and stuff. So worship, this kind of stuff.

Then, what is the role of the Chinese temple in this 'non religion', which is a religion?

- In traditional society there is a very interesting concept, the temple centric society John Lagerwey is a Sinologist, he invented this concept to try to describe Chinese society, Chinese society in the imperial period, specially from the Song dynasty. The 10th century onwards is like a temple centric society in the sense that there were temples everywhere. As you see today many seven elevens and many banks, [before] you had temples everywhere. Structuring society. Here in Hong Kong, it's very clear that you used to have something similar, especially with altars like you see everywhere. I don't know if you have noticed, many stores or restaurants, you see altars to the Earth God everywhere. So it kind of the structure of society and relations between the people and their gods.

What are the roles to the temple play in the life of Hongkongers?

- Well, I think today, because we have a very modernized place, maybe the most important role of temples is taking care of the deceased. Because any way ancestors and ancestor worship like, sacrificing to your deceased parents, to your family, is still very important. So the temples they play this role, they also offer other services like divination or maybe in some cases, healing. But, yeah, I think the most important is connecting people to their ancestors, providing this sort of religious service.

When one walks into a temple and you have mentioned that there are many around Hong Kong, apparently there are over 600 temples, okay, different religions, but there are many in Hong Kong. When one walks into a temple, are there any specific features that you see over and over in all of the temples?

- Yes, there are specific features. First we have to understand Chinese ontology, which is very different from Western view of the sacred, because the Chinese ontology is like is about imagining the sacred as a divine bureaucracy. So we are all ruled by a divine bureaucracy. Each god has its own post, its own place in this hierarchy. So we have a microcosmos. We've ghosts even. I mean, we are a microcosm of this bigger microcosm. So let's put it this way: You can imagine that this divine

bureaucracy has a lot of components. So you have gods, you have ghosts, you have ancestors, and we have humans.

- But there is no ontological difference between them. Like being a god is not like the Judeo-Christian god, who is a superior, a morally superior being, ontologically different from us. The Chinese gods are people who passed away, usually in tragic circumstances and became local gods. So these are the gods that people worship in local temples. And this is very this kind of divine bureaucracy framework also pervades Daoist Confucianism and Buddhism.

We talk specifically about one popular temple in Hong Kong.

- Yes.

Which one would you pick?

- Well, there are so many. It may be that one in Temple Street would be a good one.

Tell us about Temple Street.

- When you get to the temple, you'll see what's specific about all the temples. Like you have the sensation that you are entering another space separate from this world, because everything is a little bit eerie. Basically, the basic architectural components are very similar in all temples. You will have a altar for the Earth God when you enter at the temple. Inside the temple you have the main deity. Usually it looks like a court. It looks like a royal court because it's actually a divine bureaucracy. So it's like you're and you're having direct access to this divine bureaucracy.

- You will have other statues to the left and to the right, the main god, and you have many ritual implements, like you can burn incense, you can practice divination, you can, divine with the so-called fortune sticks. So, yeah, you have a lot of ritual implements.

Let's go into more detail, into the various parts of the Temple Street temple. You mentioned that there are many statues as you walk in. Those statues, who do they represent?

- Well, it depends on who you ask. If you ask someone who worships from a lay perspective, they really they might believe that the statue represents the god. If you were someone who is a spirit medium, maybe he would say that the statue doesn't represent the God. It is the God. The God is living there because all statues, they go through a ritual process. It's a ritual for consecrating the statue and inviting the god to live inside the statue.

The statues in Temple Street, if I remember rightly, and it's been a long time since I was last there, they seem to be dressed like civil servants.

-Yes.

Why is that?

- They look like civil servants. Because they are civil servants in the divine bureaucracy. So you have, for example, in the Mazu temple of the Temple street, the main deity looks like a queen, actually. And you have other like civil servants, like to the left and to the right. They will take notes. They will record people's falls and people's actions, the people's behavior, so they know who deserves punishment and who deserves blessings.

And this is a case in all temples? There's usually civil servants making notes?

- This is the case actually with the divine bureaucracy as a whole. Because the divine bureaucracy is always in constant interaction with the human realm. So in traditional China, there were festivals like every month for the divine bureaucracy from these gods, because they are coming and they are inspecting people's behavior all the time. They are taking notes and they are going to report to the royal court.

In the Temple Street Temple, you're saying that they're reporting to Mazu?

- Well, you can imagine it like that. Yes.

So tell us more. Who is she?

- Well, actually we don't know if she was a historical person. Maybe she was a legend. There are many different versions of the legends, but one of them says that she lived in Fujian in the 10th century, and she was a spirit medium. We have many records about spirit mediums in Chinese history, starting from very early on. And she was a spirit medium who was able to predict people's fortune and your fortune.

- And she died tragically. But she died as a virgin. So there is this component of, in some stories. She died in order to try to save her father. So there is this component of self-sacrifice and chastity, virginity and all those traditional values that are associated with this deity.

Yes. And not only with her, but it seems that this idea of the Virgin runs through all religions.

- Yes, yes. But, I think in the Chinese case, she became a goddess or deity because she has a sort of power associated with her. Like, this is the case for all local gods. They are just humans, but they have something very strong about their character. Make the people want to worship them. It's not like they're just common people like us, but at the same time, they have some very strong virtue, like for example, loyalty or, I don't know, devotion or some kind of very strong virtue that people just feel like very moved by the local God and for by the local gods started to start worshipping it. Or they have these so-called miracles and blessings, they built temples and start to sacrifice in those.

In the case of Mazu's Temple, a lot of people also go there to have their future foretold?

- Well, if you go to the temple, actually outside the temple you have many fortune tellers, especially during night time, so you don't even have to enter the temple. Yes, because it is huge, there are many, many fortune tellers waiting for you, but also you can go to the temple and you can ask questions to the gods is or you cannot use fortune sticks, which are more difficult for foreigners because the fortune sticks will answer you through poems, very beautiful poems which are written in classical Chinese. So you will probably need help. And there is someone there who will help you to interpret the poems.

Have you..?

- Maybe you have to pay a fee for that. I never try to, Because I can read the classical Chinese, although I never use the service.

But have you tried both the people outside and the services?

- Not the people outside.

Really?

- Yes. I only try in the temple. The fortunate sticks.

And?

It was a very good prediction. So I was very happy.

Well, glad to hear that. Did it come true?

I don't remember. It wasn't something important.

So tell us a little bit about the story of, of the temple. Why there and why here on Hong Kong?

- Yes. So actually, if you judge from the story as we saw the legend, maybe her cult started eating food, but it became a nationwide phenomenon. And it's very common for local gods to become national gods in the sense that their cult will not be like, restricted to one area. So here in Hong

Kong, it were fishermen who established this temple in the 19th century, after, you know, in 1860, the British, they signed the Beijing convention and they took control of Hong Kong, like, officially. And they also wanted to develop the Tsim Sha Tsui, the area. So they moved the local population to the Yamatei, the area where the temple is located.

- So in 1865, they established the temple. And the temple has been there for a long time.

So it was established..

- by the local fishermen

by the government or by the fishermen themselves?

- by the fishermen.

The temple has been in use since then, continuously, since then, continuously?

- Maybe during the Second World War there was some interruption or some disturbance to the temple, or because life was not normal that period, but basically without interruption.

And has it been renovated at any point or what we see is what was built originally?

- It was renovated many times, maybe three times. But what's really interesting about those renovations is how the local community, people will come together to protect the temple, because they really feel like this is part of their identity. And it's a very crucial part of their lives, like the relationship between the local people and the divine bureaucracy, and also the fact that the temple is not only a place of worship, but also a place where local people can decide things together, is also very interesting, so that the population will protect this places.

So that means that the temple also has a role in the administration of the area.

- Not only this temple, but especially during the Imperial period. Many local temples also were administrative buildings, and they also had other functions, like they could be a guild, they could be a merchant association, they could work as an educational place. They could work because, you know, during the late imperial, during the Imperial period, we had the civil service examination, so many young men would like to study the classics to, to take part in the examinations.

- So temples would also offer this type of, it isn't really a service. People would just gather there and study. Also they would study religious scriptures. They would promote ideas like vegetarianism and, salvation. They would do spiritual writing rituals, which are still practiced today in Hong Kong.

So in Temple Street Temple, do they do spiritual writing rituals?

- I never saw spirit writing rituals. I think that there is no special writing rituals in that specific temple. But in other temples in Hong Kong they practice this spiritual writing, yes.

Because I think for many of us is more of a tourist attraction than a real religious place. Is that the case?

- I think that for foreigners is a tourist attraction. Maybe for many, Chinese who are coming to Hong Kong to travel also is a tourist attraction. But at the same time, even people who are traveling, they also have the opportunity to express their faith or to worship or to ask for blessings. Yes.

So do you think the casual tourist that walks in, do you think they get enough information about the temple itself, about what the temple means? What it represents?

- The temples do offer information about the temple history. They do offer information about the statues, about what's happening there. But obviously there's a lot of information being in a temple like that maybe for some people is overwhelming because it's a lot of information. Even if you have some kind of pamphlet telling you what's happening. Still, it's a lot of things to digest. So I, I encourage people to go there many times to you always see something that you didn't realize before.

You mentioned before that the temple was built in 1865 by the local fishermen. Was there anything else there before the temple was built? Was it already sacred place? As far as you know?

- As far as I know, it wasn't a sacred place before. And what makes the temple sacred actually, is the altar. So as long as you have an altar, you can have a temple. And it's very interesting. You can we can explore this question from the Daoist perspective. With the Daoist perspective, you don't even need an altar because the Daoist can, through their rituals, create a virtual altar in any place for esoteric rituals. But this is very specific and we don't have time to go through this.

And this temple is a temple. Then?

- I think, it's very difficult to say that the Daoist temple, because it's not managed by Daoist. Many Daoist do perform rituals there. And I think maybe Buddhist also are allowed to perform rituals there. But the temple itself is not Daoist. It is a local temple. Is the temple that represents the religion of the people, not Daoist, which is another religion or another thing.

The religion of the people in 1865. Is that the same religion of the people being followed today?

- I think we can say that, yes. Because, the people, they have their local gods, they worship their local gods, and they are not necessarily interested in Daoist transcendence or Buddhahood or becoming saints. So, they have a more practical relationship with their gods. Yes. I do believe that we can say that it's the same local religion of the people.

And because this was built under a British administration, how did the British react to this religion?

- Well, I don't I don't have many materials to answer that, but I think that, looking for the perspective that we have so many temples in Hong Kong, the British were probably very chilled about this. I think there was no repression of Chinese religion, perse. I think, I don't have evidence to say that there was persecution or this kind of stuff.

It wasn't considered a threat to the British, they didn't feel that the people might be getting together in these temples and revolt against them in any way?

- I think it wasn't perceived as a threat because the British had a lot of military power with them. So they some fishermen worshipping a local god wouldn't represent, like, a problem, a concern, a real concern, yes.

Overall, who manages these temples?

- So, for example, we have historically some charity associations, like, for example, the Tung Wah group of hospitals, and they are responsible for managing the temples in a very transparent manner. So they take care of accounting, they take care of finances, financial stuff, etc. and also promoting like cultural activities. So, you can say that those charity associations, they are responsible for taking care of the temples, guaranteeing that the temples are well preserved and that they serve the social role for the people. Yeah.

Again, the religion element there is almost secondary?

- That's the very interesting aspect of Chinese religion, that religion is always entangled with all aspects of life. So from a Western perspective it seems that secondary. It seems that's not the most important thing. But, maybe that's also a reflection of the divine bureaucracy stuff, because the whole ontology, this Chinese ontology of the divine bureaucracy, it connects everything together society, government, politics. So, yeah, the sacred is not only about the sacred, it's about all aspects of life.

And do you think young people today still feel the same about this "immense" religion that used to be central to everybody's lives? From what you're saying?

- I sure like from my students, I feel that, we have very different types of students here. Some come from mainland China, some are local, and I think the majority of them, they are not really very connected with this religious aspect of Chinese society, but they are very curious about that. And they really want to learn more about this. But at the same time, you cannot say that, I mean, young people in universities, they don't represent the population as it. Well. Right? They are just elite part of the population. We can say that if you go to local temples you will also see young people engaged with the temples, because maybe historically, their families have been tied to the local temple. So, you also have young people outside university circles are engaged in those temples, are working there.

We have seen recently serious renovation to the whole of Temple Street, focusing on tourism again. So I'm assuming that this is also benefiting the temple. Is it a good thing or a bad thing in your opinion?

- I think it's an excellent thing. I think. I don't know if it's benefiting the temple, but I think there is no harm to the temple. I think if people go to Temple Street to have food to, I don't know, Temple Street has a lot of services. They have massage, they have food, they have you can buy stuff. So people will eventually go to the temple and take a look and be exposed to Chinese culture to the deepest level of Chinese culture. So I think it's a very good thing for the temple.

Any last thoughts for our listeners in terms of temples in Hong Kong and religion in general?

- I think, our listeners should try to go to the temples and sometimes you don't even realize there is a temple there. And then you would just enter the temple and suddenly you went back to Imperial China. So it's like traveling in time. So I really recommend people to go to the temples and take a look and feel experience a little bit. Yeah.

Thank you very much. And to our listeners, there you have it. Go out of visit the temples!