Preface

Religion in late-Imperial and twentieth-century China has been the object of a large number of publications in the past few decades. These studies used archival and ethnographic research, but also relied upon an earlier generation of scholarship that had opened the field and created its methodological and theoretical foundations. Part of this early scholarship did not result from the work of traditional academics, but from explorers or photographers, and thus enriched the discourse of religion in modern China with different and less academic perspectives. Parallel to this publishing production, the organization of conferences, the establishment of research centers and the creation of international research networks on this theme have multiplied steadily. This flood of new research reflects the fact that the study of religions in modern China has emerged as a new and challenging field in both Asian and Western academia.

Within this emerging rich field of study, however, there is still an ongoing debate regarding what methods and theories are appropriate to be employed in this new field. The three-volume publication *Concepts and Methods for the Study of Chinese Religions* contributes to this debate. It reviews the past history of the field, highlights challenges that the scholars in this field have encountered, reconsiders the present state of analytical and methodological theories, and finally opens up a new chapter in the history of concepts and methods for the field itself.

These three volumes explore religion in the area known as greater China, which includes mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Among the authors, some have been trained and have published in the fields of anthropology and sociology; others are historians, textual scholars, area studies scholars, and political scientists. The three volumes present the results of a constructive dialogue and mutual integration of various disciplines of humanities and social sciences. This publication also aims to contribute to a discussion on analytical and theoretical concepts that could potentially be applied to the study of religion in other contexts, including in Western societies. In other words, China is seen not as an exotic outlier, but as a global player in the overall academic study of religion. Such a framework responds to the current call for interdisciplinary and cross-tradition debates on a trans-regional horizon and globalization, and thus methodologies for the study of East Asian religions should be engaged with Western voices in a more active and constructive manner.

The first volume, *Concepts and Methods for the Study of Chinese Religions I: State of the Field and Disciplinary Approaches*, starts with an assessment of the earliest works and individuals who initiated the study of religion in modern China. Those individuals include Western and Chinese religious practitioners,
academic figures, explorers and photographers. The earliest works are predominantly textual, historical and ethnographic studies: these form the foundation of the field. Questions addressed include: Who are the pioneers in the study of religion in modern China and Taiwan? What were the first disciplinary approaches, conceptual categories, and objects of research? How did those choices shape the beginning of the field as well as the academic output of today? What were their contributions and their limitations, and how can we work to overcome those shortcomings? The second part of the first volume discusses methodological and disciplinary approaches that are currently used in the study of religion in modern China and Taiwan, with constructive conclusions on potential changes in research trajectories, and thus works toward an overdue improvement of research methods. The chapters address methodological disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, political science, and history, in their own micro-contexts as well as in the ways they relate to macro-fields.

The second and third volumes shift the focus from methodological concerns to critical reflections on analytical concepts, and include the re-evaluation of concepts and practices that inform the religious sphere and scholarship in the field. These two volumes look at endogenous Chinese concepts and exogenous ideas from the West and Japan that are foundational in thinking about the Chinese religious landscape. Some chapters address the introduction of new concepts or the reshaping of traditional ones in light of the intellectual, political, and social atmosphere of the late nineteenth century and the early Republican period in China, while others assess ideas that continue to permeate the religious sphere of China and Taiwan today. These key concepts are all interconnected because they participate in the same debates on traditional dichotomies and recent paradigm shifts. Concepts and Methods for the Study of Chinese Religions II: Intellectual History of Key Concepts analyzes key concepts in their intellectual history and development: these are concepts that have become core terms in Chinese religions but have each their own history of formation and use. Concepts and Methods for the Study of Chinese Religions III: Key Concepts in Practice analyses another set of concepts that form the foundations of the Chinese religious sphere. Adopting an approach that differs from that of the second volume, these concepts are studied through their praxis in lived religions.

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