Is Chinese religion so unique that the terms and theories used in the study of religion in the West are not applicable? How appropriate is it to construct new terms to describe Chinese religious phenomena in modern times? How useful are the terms adopted from Western scholarship? How useful are terms that are not used by the religious believers and practitioners themselves?

Terms are conceptual tools. To deal with complex and changing religious phenomena, it is always necessary to sharpen our tools, invent new tools, or revamp old tools. In this issue, Nikolas Broy examines the conceptual tools of “sect,” “sectarian religion,” and “redemptive society.” He argues that the concept of redemptive societies that has been recently constructed to describe the religious effervescence in early twentieth-century China has significant shortcomings. Instead, he suggests adopting a revised concept of sectarian religion grounded in a sociological framework.

How new are the new sectarian religions in terms of their theology, rituals, organization, and so on? Continuity and discontinuity are perennial issues in examining new religious movements. Junliang Pan studies one of the new sects active in China today—the Church of Almighty God. He argues that even though this sectarian religion is inspired by Christianity, in it there is much continuity with both traditional Chinese messianism and Chinese Communism. More specifically, the sect’s hierarchical structure finds its roots in Maoist political culture and the messianic sects in traditional China. Pan’s analysis reminds us of Stephan Feuchtwang’s (2001) study of popular religion in traditional China.

The relationship between religion and ethnicity is complex and varies among different social groups. Sometimes religion reinforces ethnicity, sometimes ethnicity maintains religion, sometimes they are intertwined and inseparable, and sometimes they are accidentally coincident. Oded Abt examines the case of descendants of Song-Yuan Muslim sojourners in Fujian Province in southeastern China. In the Chinese political context, these people have been granted Hui ethnic status, which often implies a Muslim identity. By focusing on the ancestor worship system of these people as well as the surrounding society, Abt demonstrates that Muslim faith has only marginal significance to them and that their practice is very much part of Chinese folk religion with some distinct lineage traits.

Moving from conceptual tools and rituals to the concrete operation of religions, Liubov Afonina examines the laws and regulations that govern real estate held by religious organizations in Communist China. Following the collectivization of land and property in the 1950s and marketization since the 1980s, the ownership of real estate in the People’s Republic of China today has become very complicated. In the religious sphere, the status of real estate is even more chaotic due to Communist ideology and political control over religious affairs. In fact, religious property is a politically sensitive issue. Afonina’s study
sheds some light on this chaotic field by tracing the major changes in Chinese Communist religious policy and their consequences for the status of religious property.

In the study of Chinese religion, there has been a steady stream of scholarly books. Beginning with this issue, Review of Religion and Chinese Society publishes a number of book reviews. We are particularly interested in reviewing books that deal with the interaction between religion and society, either social influence on religion or religious impact on society.

References: