



The Discourse and Practice of the Anti-Superstition Movement in Guangzhou (1929-1936) – Based on the Republican Daily News (Guangzhou)

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Abstract

During the “Ten Years of Construction” (1927–1937), the Nanjing National Government prioritized the elimination of superstition as a critical component of cultural modernization. However, the penetration of state power into local society involved complex negotiations rather than simple top-down implementation. Based on a systematic analysis of The Republican Daily News (Guangzhou), this article examines the discursive construction and practical implementation of the anti-superstition movement in Guangzhou from 1929 to 1936. The study reveals that the definition of “superstition” in Guangzhou was not static but fluid, evolving through phases of radical ideological fervor by the Social Customs Reform Committee, pragmatic legalism by the Social Affairs Bureau, and political instrumentalism under the semi-independent rule of Chen Jitang. By placing this movement within the broader theoretical frameworks of secularization and moral regulation, this study illustrates how the newly emerging public sphere became a contested arena between state and society. In practice, the movement exposed the structural limitations of state capacity. While administrative authorities successfully altered physical landscapes, such as the removal of roadside idols and the conversion of the City God Temple into a market for domestic goods, they struggled to transform underlying social behaviors. The prohibition of divination and astrology largely failed due to the state’s inability to provide adequate economic relief for displaced practitioners, while the public responded to the destruction of idols with strategies of symbolic substitution and spatial relocation. The findings demonstrate that the boundaries of “superstition” were continuously contested and redefined by the interplay of central norms, local governance needs, and resilient social customs. Ultimately, this research highlights the institutional and cultural dilemmas faced by the modern China in its attempt to integrate grassroots society, arguing that cultural transformation is a dynamic process of conflict, compromise, and hybridity.

Keywords: Anti-superstition Discourse, State Power, Folk Beliefs, Social Resistance

1 Introduction

During the “Ten Years of Construction” (1927-1937) of the National Government of the Republic of China in Nanjing (Nanjing National Government), “eliminating superstition” was regarded as an important part of the state’s efforts to promote social transformation, enforce moral regulation, and drive cultural modernization through a definitive project of secularization. Since the late Qing Dynasty, under the influence of scientism, evolutionism, and the discourse of nation-building, “superstition” gradually transformed from a relatively neutral descriptive concept into a political-cultural label with strong negative connotations, and was systematically used to refer to folk polytheistic beliefs, witchcraft practices, and related social customs. In 1928, the Ministry of the Interior promulgated the “Standards for the Preservation and Abolition of Shrines,” which, through administrative regulations, divided traditional belief objects into “ancient philosophers,” “religious religions,” “ancient gods,” and “licentious shrines,” (“省府令发神祠存废之标准，于崇奉贤哲信仰自由之中，除蛊惑人心妨碍进化之患” [The provincial government issued a decree outlining the standards for the preservation and abolition of shrines, aiming to eliminate those that mislead the public and hinder progress, while upholding freedom of belief in sages and virtuous individuals], 1928; *The Second Historical Archives of China*, 1994, pp. 495-506) and explicitly included the latter in the scope of prohibition, marking the formal establishment of “anti-superstition” at the institutional level. With the promulgation of regulations such as the “Measures for Abolishing Divination, Astrology, Shamanism, and Geomancy,” “superstition” was explicitly constructed as the “other” in the process of national modernization, and a set of official anti-superstition discourse and practices centered on science, rationality, and social evolution was thus formed.

Existing research has explored the key issue of “superstition” and “anti-superstition” in the socio-cultural transformation of modern China from multiple perspectives, including conceptual history, social history, religious history, and political history. On the one hand, studies have traced the formation and evolution of the concept of “superstition” in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, revealing how it acquired negative connotations within the reconstruction of modern discourse (Luo, 2013, pp. 62-69; Shen, 2006, pp. 32-42). On the other hand, they have focused on analyzing the interaction between the state, local elites, and civil society in the anti-superstition movement, pointing out that this process was not a one-dimensional state repression, but a dynamic practice full of gamesmanship, compromise, and negotiation (Pang, 2020, pp. 42-28). However, to fully grasp the complexities of this movement, this study broadens the theoretical framework by situating Guangzhou’s anti-superstition efforts at the intersection of secularization theory, moral regulation, state capacity, and the public sphere. By examining how the state attempted to secularize public life and regulate societal morality, we can better understand the severe deficits in its infrastructural capacity when met with resistance formulated in the public arena.

Guangzhou, as an important cradle of the National Revolution and a central city in South China, has outstanding observational value in the process of modern state power penetrating into the grassroots of society. Poon (2003, pp. 108-122; 2011, p. 18) have provided insightful analyses of the activities of the Social Customs Reform Committee in Republican Guangzhou, the political gamesmanship in temple renovation and festival reform, laying an important foundation for understanding the interaction between the state and society in the realm of belief.

However, compared to a holistic macro-narrative, the relatively unique historical period of Chen Jitang’s rule in Guangdong from 1929 to 1936 presents room for further exploration of the complexities of the Guangzhou anti-superstition movement at both the discourse and practical levels. Especially under the “semi-independent” political structure, how were central policies reinterpreted, adjusted, and even partially reversed at the local level? How did different

government departments divide labor, engage in competition, and coordinate in implementing anti-superstition policies? What practical resistance and response mechanisms did administrative measures encounter at the grassroots level? These questions not only contribute to a deeper understanding of the Guangzhou case but also help to reflect on the structural tensions of modern state power in cultural integration and social transformation from a local perspective.

Methodologically, this study conducts a systematic qualitative textual analysis of all news reports, editorials, and official decrees related to anti-superstition published in *The Republican Daily News* (Guangzhou) between 1929 and 1936. The coding strategy focuses on extracting discursive themes and administrative actions rather than relying on quantitative analysis (with the exception of official registration numbers for astrological practitioners). Acknowledging the inherent political bias and representativeness of the newspaper as an official Kuomintang organ, this research employs triangulation by cross-referencing newspaper accounts with historical memoirs and official archives. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize the newspaper's dual role as both an information source and an active political actor. The publication did not merely record the movement; it actively shaped anti-superstition public opinion through dedicated sections like the "Social Customs Reform Weekly", disseminated government bans, and inadvertently documented societal resistance by publishing both practitioners' petitions and the ensuing official rebuttals. Its reporting and actions were intertwined, forming an organic component of the movement itself.

The article aims to illustrate: first, how the anti-superstition discourse originating from the central government underwent local evolution in Guangzhou and was embedded in a specific political and social context; second, the specific process, actual effects, and inherent limitations of measures implemented by administrative agencies such as the Social Bureau to remove religious statues, abolish divination, astrology, shamanism, and geomancy practices, and renovate temple spaces; and third, how civil society responded to national policies through daily strategies and discursive practices. Through this analysis, this paper attempts to further examine the institutional, cultural, and practical dilemmas faced by state power in modern China when penetrating the grassroots level of society.

2 The Evolution of Discourse: National Norms, Local Adaptation, and Political Reshaping

The evolution of anti-superstition movement in Guangzhou at the discourse level is primarily reflected in the way national normative discourse enters local society and its subsequent transformation. From an institutional perspective, the Nanjing National Government, through the "Standards for the Preservation and Abolition of Temples" (Standards) and a series of supporting regulations, attempted to rationalize the complex phenomena of folk beliefs through administrative classification. This approach itself embodies a core characteristic of modern state governance logic: defining socio-cultural practices in an identifiable and manageable way through abstract concepts, unified standards, and legal texts. This bureaucratic classification served as a powerful tool for moral regulation, allowing the state to distinguish between "legitimate" religion and "harmful" superstition, thereby justifying its monopolization of secularized public morality.

Led by Pu Liangzhu, the Social Customs Reform Committee in Republican Guangzhou (SCRC)'s radical critique of superstition was deeply influenced by intellectual currents since the 1920s. First, it represented a strong continuation of scientism following the "Science and Metaphysics Debate", treating science as an omnipotent and absolute standard to overthrow all traditional Chinese culture and complete the project of secularization. Second, it extended the

discourse of the Anti-Christian Movement, which criticized Western religious and cultural aggression, intertwining with contemporary nationalist waves against imperialism, warlords, and the reclamation of educational rights. Although the Nanjing National Government gradually suppressed this anti-Christian movement after 1927 to secure diplomatic recognition and stability, the SCRC explicitly continued this rhetoric. Statements condemning all religions as “superstition,” such as “Christianity’s influence in Guangzhou is also very large, especially in the Dongshan area. We know that Christianity is the latest form of superstition and is one of the tools of imperialist aggression against China,” (“破除迷信运动大会之热烈” [The enthusiasm of the anti-superstition movement], 1929) and “Overthrow the licentious temples, shrines, and idols! Down with Jesus Christ!” (“今日举行破除迷信运动大会” [A campaign to dispel superstition was held today.], 1929), differed significantly from the Ministry of the Interior’s stance of recognizing Buddhism, Taoism, and other legal religions in “Standards,” reflecting the intention of local government radicals to thoroughly transform society in the name of “science” and “revolution”, and demonstrating a clear rupture between central and local discourses.

However, it was precisely this highly politicized and de-institutionalized anti-superstition discourse that quickly triggered a backlash from the societal level. Opponents voiced their opinions in newspapers and media outlets such as *The Great Chung Hwa Magazine* utilizing the nascent public sphere to challenge state narratives. They argued that Sun Yat-sen might have supported using religion to unite nations, citing the Premier’s statement that “some nations in the world are formed by the power of religion,” and even questioned whether the anti-religious movement “inevitably violated the Premier’s intentions.” They emphasized that “opposition to religion was not explicitly stated in the Three Principles of the People,” thus questioning the movement’s legitimacy and appealing to the universal values of “freedom” and “justice,” portraying themselves as “the weak.” (Zeng, 1929) Some even went so far as to directly label the Fenggai Society as a “Communist Party,” claiming that its propositions “are Communist Party theories” and constituted “aimless and blind destruction.” (Zeng, 1929)

In response to these accusations, the SCRC refuted them in *The Republican Daily News* (Guangzhou)’s “Customs Reform” series, accusing them of misinterpreting Sun Yat-sen’s thought and claiming that they were eliminating religion as “reactionary propaganda” in order to “implement the psychological construction of the Premier” and “uphold the Three Principles of the People.” (Cai, 1929) They emphasized that the Three Principles of the People were “principles,” and their task was to “adhere to these principles” to remove all obstacles, advocating the replacement of religious belief with faith in the Three Principles of the People. Regarding “freedom” and “justice,” they redefined them, stating that “‘freedom’ is not unlimited, and ‘justice’ has never been on your side,” and proposed a higher source of legitimacy— “What we respect is the will of the people!” (Zeng, 1929) This process demonstrates that anti-superstition discourse is not a one-way ideological tool indoctrinated into society, but rather a debating discourse that is constantly questioned, responded to, and revised in the public sphere. From the perspective of national governance, this public opinion conflict surrounding the definition of “superstition” actually exposes the differences between the party system and the administrative system in their approaches to social reform. The former emphasizes ideological purity and the effectiveness of political mobilization, while the latter must face the practical considerations of policy feasibility and social stability.

In February 1930, the Central Committee, citing the Social Affairs Bureau’s existing functions, ordered the abolition of the SCRC (“风改会遵令结束” (The Social Customs Reform Committee in Republican Guangzhou has ceased operations as ordered), 1930). Subsequently, the leadership of anti-superstition work shifted to the Guangzhou Municipal Social Affairs

Bureau, and the discourse transitioned from intense ideological debate to pragmatic statements centered on administrative execution. The Social Affairs Bureau explicitly adhered to the “Standards” in its operations. For example, in November 1929, when the Public Security Bureau cooperated with the Social Affairs Bureau in removing roadside idols, it explicitly stated that this was because the statues “met the standards for the abolition and preservation of shrines and the category of ‘licentious shrines’ previously issued by the Ministry of the Interior.” (“公安局飭区调查各马路路旁偶像” [The Public Security Bureau ordered a district-level investigation of the idols along the roads], 1929) After the Central Committee provided a more detailed interpretation of the “Standards” in 1930, although *The Republican Daily News* (Guangzhou) did not publish the full text (especially omitting the section on abolishing sacrificial rituals), the Social Affairs Bureau’s implementation standards clearly followed this (“省党部转发神祠存废标准及监督寺庙条例” [The Provincial Party Committee forwarded the standards for the preservation and abolition of shrines and the regulations for supervising temples], 1930). This change was not merely a rhetorical adjustment, but rather an attempt by the state to re-establish its legitimacy in anti-superstition affairs through procedural language. By emphasizing law-based administration, the Social Affairs Bureau is attempting to distance itself from the previously radical image of the SCRC, while also providing institutional support for specific law enforcement actions.

However, administrative control did not end the instability at the discourse level. During Chen Jitang’s tenure as governor of Guangdong, the anti-superstition discourse underwent another significant shift. In 1933, to strengthen traditional moral education and maintain his rule, Chen Jitang formally proposed “restoring the sacrificial rites for Confucius and Guan Yu and Yue Fei.” In his proposal, he denounced modern criticisms of the worship of Confucius as “misunderstandings of freedom and equality,” characterized accusations of the worship of Confucius as “superstition” as “outrageous,” and strongly argued that Confucius and Guan Yu and Yue Fei, as spiritual symbols “entrusted with the destiny of the people,” were indispensable (“陈总司令提议复孔子关岳祀典” [Commander-in-Chief Chen proposed restoring the sacrificial rites for Confucius, Guan Yu, and Yue Fei], 1933). This move was approved by the *Southwest Government Affairs Committee*, and Guangzhou subsequently resumed the large-scale spring and autumn sacrificial rites for Confucius and Guan Yu and Yue Fei at the Confucius Temple (“政会一零九次会议决定祀孔子关岳礼节” [The 109th meeting of the Political Council decided on the rituals for worshipping Confucius, Guan Yu, and Yue Fei], 1934).

Chen Jitang’s move was not merely a response to Chiang Kai-shek’s New Life Movement; it was essentially an independent decision based on his local ruling logic (Xiao, 2002, p. 366). Its core lay in using political authority to strip the worship of Confucius, Guan Yu, and Yue Fei from the category of “superstition,” thus reconstructing an “orthodox” belief system serving local rule. This highlights how moral regulation was fiercely contested even within the state apparatus; Chen utilized state-sponsored traditionalism as an instrument of moral governance, demonstrating that the boundaries of secularization were fluid and deeply tied to political utility rather than pure scientific rationalism. On the one hand, it continued to crack down on folk superstitions such as divination and astrology; on the other hand, it restored official sacrificial rites with traditional rituals. This contradiction was immediately noticed by contemporaries. Some in the Political Research Society pointed out that “lacking widespread publicity on this true meaning, many people have misunderstood the government’s move as a restoration of traditional religion.” (“切实取缔卜筮星相营业，政究会提出讨论” [The Political Research Council has proposed a thorough abolition on divination and astrology], 1934) This reveals that the boundaries of “superstition” discourse are not determined by abstract doctrines, but are to a large extent directly shaped by political power.

In 1936, Chen Jitang stepped down, and Guangdong's political situation returned to unified central leadership. The central government regained control over local areas, leading to a reversal in the anti-superstition discourse. The newly appointed Guangdong Provincial Public Security Bureau Chief, Li Jiezhi, reiterated the need to abolish temples, abolish divination and astrology, and prohibit the burning of clothes on Qixi Festival, in accordance with the established "Standards" ("警察局废除迷信庙宇标准" [Police department's standards for abolishing superstitious temples], 1936; "省会公安局为破除迷信告市民" [The provincial capital's public security bureau issued a notice to citizens to dispel superstitions], 1936). In a public proclamation, he directly criticized the social atmosphere during Chen Jitang's era: "In the past, this city was filled with divination, astrology, and sorcery, which numbed the people, leading to widespread belief among the upper classes and creating a chaotic intellectual atmosphere." ("李洁之谈今后整顿警政施行办法" [Li Jiezhi discusses future measures for reforming police administration], 1936) Indeed, this observation was highly accurate.

As recounted in Li Jiezhi's own memoirs, a profound superstitious atmosphere permeated even the internal echelons of the local government, with traditional protective stones like Taishan Shi Gandang openly displayed in government offices (Research, 1987). This statement suggests that the local authorities may have tacitly approved or even participated in this trend, providing clues to understanding the implicit resistance encountered by the anti-superstition policy at the local level. Simultaneously, the Guangdong Provincial Government, following central regulations, abolished the spring and autumn ceremonies for worshipping Confucius established during Chen Jitang's era, replacing them with commemorative activities only held on Confucius's birthday. ("简讯" [Brief News], 1936) This reversal did not signify a simple return to 1929, but rather demonstrated the state's ability to strategically adjust its anti-superstition discourse at different political stages. Overall, the evolution of anti-superstition discourse in Guangzhou clearly demonstrates that national normative discourse is not static at the local level, but is constantly being reshaped through the interaction of political power structures, governance needs, and social feedback.

3 The Dilemmas in Practice: Administrative Promotion, Social Feedback, and the Problem of Containment

Corresponding to the repeated adjustments at the discourse level, the anti-superstition policy was equally complex in practice. After taking over the anti-superstition affairs, the Social Affairs Bureau quickly focused its efforts on several concrete and easily implementable measures, among which the removal of idols became the most symbolic and readily demonstrably effective measure. With the cooperation of the public security forces, idols and land shrines in urban public spaces were cleared away in a short period of time. This action significantly altered the urban landscape visually and symbolically, strengthening the state's control over public spaces.

On November 4, 1929, the Social Affairs Bureau, together with the Public Security Bureau and the Public Works Bureau, held a meeting to discuss methods and resolved that each police district should complete a survey of roadside idols throughout the city within ten days ("公安局飭区调查各马路路旁偶像" [The Public Security Bureau ordered a district-level investigation of the idols along the roads], 1929). The resolution was quickly implemented, and by November 18, reports indicated that land shrines in the Xiguan and Henan areas had been "all demolished, leaving nothing behind." ("快事：本市土地一扫而空" [Breaking

News: Land in the city has been cleared], 1929) On the 19th and 22nd, the Social Affairs Bureau launched a series of large-scale operations, dispatching impoverished residents from the Poor Teachers' College to unload trucks and transport the collected idols back to the bureau. The quantity was counted as "over a hundred pieces," "six large baskets," or even "several truckloads." ("全市偶像搜罗一空" [All the city's idols have been gathered], 1929; "扫除路旁偶像共有六大箩" [There are six large baskets used for cleaning up roadside idols], 1929) In terms of disposal, idols were mostly burned, while stone idols and those with unique characteristics were sent to the Guangzhou Museum or the Folklore Research Institute of Sun Yat-sen University for display and research ("搬运偶像陈列" [Moving idol display], 1930; "中山大学语言历史学研究所搜罗木偶神像" [The Institute of Linguistics and History at Sun Yat-sen University collected wooden deity statues], 1930).

As the cleanup of idols in the city center intensified, the movement began to extend to the city's outskirts and more secluded areas. The Social Affairs Bureau realized that "many earthen and wooden idols in the Henan area have not been removed," and believers in the city were turning to Henan for worship ("社会局连日派员，赴河南扫除像" [The Social Affairs Bureau has been sending staff to Henan for several days to clean up], 1930). Therefore, starting in January 1930, they mobilized daily to "search for these idols throughout Henan," returning with several truckloads ("河南淫祠偶像，昨已一律拆毁" [All illicit shrines and idols in Henan were demolished yesterday], 1930). Later, the search expanded to temples in the Huatai and Fangcun areas ("没收花埭偶像" [Confiscated idols of Huatai], 1930). The targets of the cleanup also became more generalized, no longer limited to idols; even the stone lions in the city "are considered superstitious and urgently need to be removed," and many were removed ("社会局扫除石狮子，澈底破除迷信" [Social Affairs Bureau removes stone lions, thoroughly dispelling superstition], 1929).

However, the subsequent emergence of alternative practices shows that the disappearance of the idols did not simultaneously bring about the end of religious practices. Through symbolic substitution, spatial relocation, and reinterpretation of meaning, the people continued their religious activities in a more covert way. The Social Affairs Bureau found that although the idols were gone, the religious behavior continued in a substitute form. "The people's superstitious thinking has taken deep root in their minds... they are eager to obtain a symbol, or erect a new stone to replace the idol, or whitewash the walls and write 'Taishan Stone Guardian'." ("社会局销毁神像土偶" [Social Affairs Bureau destroys statues and clay figurines], 1929) Whenever administrative efforts were slightly relaxed, such as at the end of 1929 when the Social Affairs Bureau was preoccupied with the "suppression of the rebels," the residents of various neighborhoods "took this opportunity to revert to their old ways, either posting red paper or wooden signs reverting to the names of their former clay idols and deities...attracting ignorant women to gather and worship, with incense smoke swirling, instantly restoring the old appearance." People even created new interpretations to maintain their faith, spreading the rumor that "the Bodhisattva is facing a calamity, therefore the idol is difficult to protect," but sincere prayers could still bring blessings and avert disaster ("社会局澈底肃清偶像" [Social Affairs Bureau thoroughly eliminates idols], 1929).

In 1934, a Ming Dynasty stone coffin near Shipai Township attracted women to worship, with some "charlatans profiting from it." ("社会局禁拜石碑石棺，与番禺县会衔布告" [The Social Affairs Bureau prohibits worshipping stone tablets and coffins, and issued a joint notice with Panyu County], 1934) This phenomenon reveals the inherent limitations of administrative measures in cultural transformation. When policies primarily target visible material carriers,

their effects are often more pronounced, but when it comes to the level of ideas, state power struggles to achieve fundamental change through short-term actions.

The crackdown on divination and astrology directly exposed the contradiction between administrative directives and social reality. From the end of October 1929, the Social Bureau frequently issued bans, requiring practitioners to change professions before New Year's Day 1930, with violators facing closure ("禁绝星相, 社会局严厉执行" [Astrology is prohibited; the Social Affairs Bureau strictly enforces the ban], 1929; "社会局, 取缔星相巫觋" [Social Affairs Bureau, abolishing divination and sorcery], 1929; "社会局劝谕, 卜筮星相速改别业, 限本年度底下前禁绝" [The Social Affairs Bureau advises fortune tellers and astrologists to change their professions immediately and prohibits them from engaging in such practices until the end of this year], 1929; "社会局再限, 卜筮星相依期改业" [With further restrictions imposed by the social welfare bureau, fortune tellers and astrologists are expected to change their professions], 1929). According to a survey conducted by the Social Bureau in November 1929, there were approximately 800 divination practitioners in Guangzhou ("本市卜筮星相共约八百余人" [There are approximately 800 practitioners of divination and astrology in this city], 1929).

This triggered panic and confusion among the practitioners, who held numerous rallies at the City God Temple ("妄延残喘, 筮觋相巫连日会议, 意见纷歧, 毫无秩序" [Desperately prolonging their lives, the divination, sorcery, and astrology meetings have been held for days, resulting in differing opinions and utter chaos], 1929). In subsequent petitions, the joint petitions of ordinary practitioners were criticized by the municipal government as "an attempt to amass wealth." ("卜筮星相巧言如簧 向市府呈请维持现业" [Practitioners of divination and astrology, with their silver tongues, petitioned the city government to allow them to maintain their current operations], 1929; "市府批斥卜筮星相依限改业" [The city government criticized fortune tellers and astrologists for having to change their profession within the stipulated time], 1929). However, the pleading petitions of the blind community, expressing their desperation and lack of other skills, moved the authorities, resulting in a more lenient directive to "understand the situation and consider the legal principles." ("瞽者出巫学后, 向市府请愿照旧执业" [The blind man succeeded the fortune teller and petitioned the city government to allow him to continue practicing medicine as before], 1929). The originally planned strict crackdown on New Year's Day was not fully implemented as scheduled.

To push for a complete ban, the municipal government passed the "Implementation Measures for Abolishing Divination, Astrology, Shamanism, and Geomancy" in January 1930, strictly ordering the complete abolition of the profession without exception, and explicitly proposing post-ban relief measures—the blind, disabled, elderly, and poor could be sent to slums for rehabilitation ("残废卜筮星相仍不准执业" [Disabled practitioners of divination and astrology are still not allowed to practice], 1930; "废除卜筮星相之善后" [The aftermath of abolishing divination and astrology], 1930). The government attempted to solve the social problems caused by the ban through relief institutions. However, in previous petitions, they had already stated that the rehabilitation was "only a means of survival for one person" and could not solve the family support problems of "those without parents, wives, children, or many mouths to feed." ("瞽者出巫学后, 向市府请愿照旧执业" [The blind man succeeded the fortune teller and petitioned the city government to allow him to continue practicing medicine as before], 1929). In addition, the slums for rehabilitation often served as a source of labor for carrying out anti-superstition work, which was far removed from their daily lives and social networks. Although there were reports of enforcement of the ban in the early stages, such as the dispatch of police to the City God Temple to forcibly drive people away in March 1930 ("

卜筮星相业已届末日" [The divination and astrology industry is nearing its end], 1930), it inevitably stalled thereafter ("实行取缔卜筮星相业" [Implement the banning of divination and astrology industry], 1931). As a profession defined as "superstition," divination in urban society simultaneously served the dual functions of livelihood and psychological services. The Social Affairs Bureau attempted to address the issue through a "discontinuation of employment – detention – re-employment" approach in its policy design. However, in practice, this approach consistently lacked sufficient institutional support. This failure vividly illustrates the stark gap between the state's despotic power and its infrastructural state capacity. While authorities possessed the despotic power to issue bans and temporarily clear public spaces, they severely lacked the infrastructural state capacity, the institutional, financial, and logistical resources, required to provide alternative livelihoods or enforce long-term compliance. Limited capacity in relief institutions and a significant gap between the conditions of detention and the workers' original lifestyles made it difficult for the policy to gain social acceptance.

Until 1933, under the framework of the "Guangzhou Three-Year Governance Plan," Zhang Yuanfeng, the director of the Social Affairs Bureau, implemented a gradual approach: registration in the first year, restrictions in the second year, and complete abolition in the third year ("取缔卜筮星相拟定办法：不日施行" [Measures to abolish divination and astrology will be drafted and implemented soon], 1933). This reflects the authorities' reflection on the previous setbacks in their radical implementation, attempting to understand the situation through registration and provide a transition period. By the registration deadline that year, over 1200 people had registered, an increase from 1929 ("取缔相巫系业" [Abolish the industry of divination and astrology], 1934). By 1935, a notice showed that 1754 people had completed registration (1636 men and 118 women) ("卜筮星相男女执业人数" [Number of male and female practitioners of divination and astrology], 1935).

Considering the subsequent overall situation, although the Social Affairs Bureau was able to promote registration, it still failed to successfully implement it gradually. Meanwhile, the relief homes (reorganized from poor people's reformatories) were already at full capacity, and despite efforts to relocate poor people from outside Guangzhou, they were unable to handle the new and enormous demand for accommodation ("市社会局最近施政概况" [Recent Policy Overview of the Municipal Social Affairs Bureau], 1936). This severe lack of resettlement capacity meant that the strict abolition order lacked operational follow-up support and was difficult to truly implement.

In 1936, Chen Jitang stepped down, and the political upheaval provided new impetus for the "anti-superstition" movement. In August, Li Jiezhi, the newly appointed head of the Guangdong Provincial Public Security Bureau, and the Social Affairs Bureau jointly issued a proclamation ordering all practitioners to cease operations by September 1st, reiterating that "the elderly will be housed in reformatories for the poor." ("社会公安两局布告废除，卜筮星相巫覡堪輿" [The Social Affairs Bureau and the Public Security Bureau issued notices abolishing divination, astrology, shamanism, and geomancy], 1936; "限九一停业" [Businesses to cease operations on September 1st], 1936) Reports at the time stated that "the Wu's plan was halted due to unresolved issues with housing, while the Zhang's plan was underway, but was obstructed by Weng Banxuan and Lin Guopei." ("广州市破除迷信星相勘輿办限期肃清" [Guangzhou City has set a deadline for eradicating superstitions related to astrology and geomancy], 1936) Upon hearing this, practitioners gathered again at the City God Temple to plan a petition. Li Jiezhi was resolute, stating that "breaking the astrological practices of a few dozen people is a small matter; poisoning the national spirit is a great matter," and claimed that a relief plan had been agreed upon (The Republican Daily News (Guangzhou),

1936). However, this scene seemed to mirror the historical situation at the end of 1929; the new political authority did not bring new resources for a solution.

Table 1. Overview of the reform process

Year	Key Policy Event & Administrative Action	Policy Impact
1928	Promulgation of “Standards” by Ministry of Interior	Establishes national framework for abolition.
1929	SCRC established; Social Bureau begins strict idol clearance	~800 divination practitioners surveyed.
1930	SCRC abolished; Strict ban on astrology attempted	Widespread resistance; enforcement stalls due to relief limitations.
1931	Jian Youwen steps in as Social Bureau Director	Temple clearance & City God Temple renovations promoted.
1933	Chen Jitang restores Confucian rites; Gradual abolition policy introduced	Over 1,200 practitioners successfully registered.
1935	Gradual transition ongoing	1,754 practitioners formally registered (1,636 men, 118 women).
1936	Chen Jitang steps down; Li Jiezhi orders strict abolition anew	All operations ordered to cease by September 1st; resistance repeats.

The process of transforming the City God Temple into a market for domestic goods further reveals the complex consequences of the anti-superstition policy from the perspective of spatial governance. The proposal to transform the City God Temple first appeared in November 1929. The 13th meeting of the Social Affairs Bureau resolved to convert the City God Temple into a market for domestic goods, deciding to abolish the name “City God Temple” to “eliminate superstition and improve aesthetics,” and to promote domestic goods (“社会局十三次局务会议” [The 13th meeting of the Social Affairs Bureau], 1929). This resolution echoed the policy of abolishing astrology and divination at the time, eliminating carriers of superstition from physical space. For several years afterward, the Social Affairs Bureau continued to promote this plan. Director Wu Boliang completed the initial investigation and planning during his tenure (“国货市场积极筹划进行” [The domestic goods market is actively planning to carry out], 1930; “社会局积极筹法国货市场” [The Social Affairs Bureau is actively preparing for the establishment of a domestic goods market], 1929).

During the 1931 “Extraordinary Conference” period, amidst opposition between the central government and Guangdong’s local authorities, Jian Youwen arrived in Guangzhou with the Crown Prince Faction (Taizi Dang) and concurrently assumed the directorship. As noted by researchers, Jian, being a devout Christian, was extraordinarily enthusiastic and active in eradicating these feudal remnants which he believed harmed the people’s minds. According to him, the Social Affairs Bureau was notorious at the time for its radical implementation of public health policies and the abolishing of traditional Chinese medicine. After taking office, Jian Youwen worked to ease tensions with the traditional Chinese medicine community while focusing on the transformation of the City God Temple, attempting to reshape the image of the Social Affairs Bureau (Jian, 1982, p. 172). The next Director of the Social Affairs Bureau, Zhan Jusi, cleared out the statues, bronze bells, and bronze seals from the City God Temple

during his tenure ("城隍庙神像" [The statues of the City God Temple], 1932; "城隍庙铜印" [The bronze seal of the City God Temple], 1932; "动物园陈列两古物" [The zoo park displays two antiquities], 1932; "两大学领域城隍庙偶像" [The two universities received idols from the City God Temple], 1932), and once again drove away the surrounding astrology and divination stalls ("城隍庙星相摊位限期搬迁" [The astrology stalls at the City God Temple have been ordered to relocate within a specified period], 1931). He oversaw the construction of the national goods exhibition hall and organized a national goods exhibition in national day, promoting the transformation of the exhibition space into a national goods marketplace ("国货陈列所，定九月一日开幕" [The National Products Exhibition Hall is scheduled to open on September 1st], 1932; "国货展览会" [National goods exhibition], 1932). After Zhang Yuanfeng took over, he ordered the relocation of the stalls in the temple to be completed by June 1933, continuing to promote the establishment of market for national goods procurement and sales ("国货征销场限月内成立" [Market for national goods procurement and sales will be established within a few months], 1933). During this period, the Social Affairs Bureau, together with the Public Works Bureau and the Finance Bureau, formulated detailed rules on several occasions. The Municipal Chamber of Commerce, various trade associations, and the Committee for Promoting National Goods were also mobilized to participate. This demonstrated strong administrative execution and policy continuity.

This renovation, while redefining the function of the interior space, did not completely eliminate the local traditional livelihoods and social customs. The renovated City God Temple created a peculiar hybrid situation. Inside the temple was a market displaying domestic goods, while outside and in the surrounding streets and alleys, it remained a folk market teeming with astrologers, fortune tellers, and vendors. Its prosperity seemed fundamentally unaffected. Although the market inside the temple was "brightly lit," about sixty fortune tellers gathered in front of the temple, their signs lining the streets, and their businesses thriving. "Since a certain prominent figure began to believe in Guiguzi... this business has flourished," suggesting that even under the high-pressure policy of "anti-superstition" and spatial renovation, the personal beliefs of local powerful figures, huge market demand, and the tenacity of practitioners jointly maintained the survival of this traditional industry ("广州市城隍庙之夜" [Night at the City God Temple in Guangzhou], 1935). Even after Li Jiezhi issued a strict prohibition order, and despite numerous reports that it severely impacted the astrologer stalls, records of daily life in late 1936 still mention "going to the City God Temple to have one's fortune told." (Tuo, 1936)

The case of the City God Temple demonstrates how, through administrative orders and engineering renovations, traditional religious spaces were imbued with symbolic significance for the revitalization of the modern economy and national industry. However, the continued presence of astrological stalls outside the temple resulted in a juxtaposition of old and new business models. While the state altered the official narrative of the space through planning, it failed to sever existing social networks and market demands. This area did not become a purely planned symbol of promoting domestic products. On the surface, it was a state-designed venue for displaying domestic goods; at its core, it was a spontaneous space for everyday life, with the two overlapping and permeating each other. This reflects the ongoing tension and delicate balance between state intentions, administrative capacity, and social realities in modern Guangzhou's urban governance and social transformation. The state's attempt to re-engineer the City God Temple underscores the limits of top-down secularization. Transforming physical space was achievable, but altering the embedded economic and moral ecosystems of the populace required a level of state capacity that the republican government simply did not possess.

Overall, the repeated setbacks of the Guangzhou anti-superstition movement in practice were not due to a single factor, but rather the result of the combined effects of administrative capacity, social structure, and political choices. The state demonstrated a strong will in cultural transformation, but lacked the corresponding resources and institutional tools; society, under policy pressure, continuously adjusted its practices, allowing traditional beliefs to persist in new forms. It is precisely in this process of balancing that the relationship between modern state power and society is concretely revealed.

4 Conclusion

Luo Jianqiu points out that the discourse on religious superstition in modern China “mainly took shape after the infiltration of state power.” (Luo, 2013, p. 63) This assertion accurately reveals the dominant role of state power in constructing cultural order and attempting systemic moral regulation. This paper’s exploration of the anti-superstition movement in Guangzhou, while agreeing with this judgment, also attempts to supplement and deepen it from the perspective of local micro-practice. The practice in Guangzhou shows that even after the strong intervention of state power and its attempt to define the category of “superstition,” the boundaries of this discourse are not fixed, but rather continuously flow and adjust in the multi-dimensional interaction between the central and local governments, and between the state and society.

The discourse on “anti-superstition” in Guangzhou has undergone several phases: radical criticism from the SCRC (Social Research Commission), administrative implementation by the Social Affairs Bureau, political restructuring by Chen Jitang based on his ruling needs, and a subsequent reversal after the change of government. This series of local developments reveals that while the state holds the power to define “superstition,” its content and boundaries are influenced by local political logic and the will of those in power. In practice, from the efficient yet repetitive removal of religious statues to the protracted struggle and containment difficulties in abolishing astrology businesses, and the mixed old and new spaces after the renovation of the City God Temple, all demonstrate that the penetration of state power has encountered resilient resistance from society based on livelihoods, habits, and beliefs. During implementation, policies are constantly distorted, compromised, and even cyclical due to limited administrative resources, insufficient execution capacity, and the complexity of social realities.

Similar to Poon (2011, p. 18) overall observation of religious changes in Guangzhou from 1900 to 1937, this study argues that the expansion of state power is an interactive process full of negotiation, involving both competition with the people and internal disagreements within the state. The anti-superstition movement in Guangzhou reflects both the state’s strong will to integrate society during modernization and exposes the deep-seated dilemmas it faces in cultural transformation. Ultimately, framing this historical episode through the lenses of secularization, moral regulation, state capacity, and the public sphere reveals that the campaign was far more than an administrative cleanup. It was a profound clash between an ambitious modernizing state attempting to monopolize moral authority and secularize society, and a resilient populace that exposed the fragile, limited infrastructural capacity of that very state. The penetration of state power is always accompanied by social resilience.

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