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Religious Renaissance in China Today

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the Reform Era in 1979, there has been a rapid growth and development of religious belief and practice in China. A substantial new scholarly literature has been generated in the attempt to document and understand this. This essay identifies the most important contributions to that literature and discusses areas of agreement and controversy across the literature. Along with new data, new paradigms have developed to frame research on Chinese religions. The paradigm derived from C. K. Yang's classic work in the 1960s came from structural functionalism, which served to unite research in the humanities and social sciences. However, structural functionalism has been abandoned by the new generation of scholars. In the humanities, the most popular paradigm derives from Michel Foucault, but there are also scholars who use neo-Durkheimian and neo-Weberian paradigms. In the social sciences, the dominant paradigms tend to focus on state-society relations. None of these paradigms fully captures the complexity of the transformations happening in China. We recommend greater dialogue between the humanities and social sciences in search of more adequate theoretical frameworks for understanding Chinese religions today.

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Introduction

China is undergoing a remarkable religious renaissance, which includes not only revival and re-invention of many traditional forms of Chinese religion, but also the creation and creative adaptation of new forms. Literally millions of local deity temples have been built or re-built in the past 30 years, pilgrims flock to refurbished Buddhist temples and Daoist shrines, multiple forms of Christianity have been undergoing explosive growth. This is all the more surprising because during the era of Mao Zedong Chinese leaders tried to suppress all forms of religious practice, and during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), they actively tried to obliterate religion in the entire country. But since 1979, when Deng Xiaoping ushered in the era of Reform and Opening that opened up a limited space for religious practice, religion of all sorts has been growing and rapidly evolving throughout China, far outstripping the limited boundaries set for it. These surprising events have begun to attract the attention of many scholars. Moreover, the transformations of religious belief and practice in China and the development of new forms of relationship between religion and society are part of global trends, and there are good opportunities to derive new theoretical insights by comparing Chinese religious developments with those elsewhere (see Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011). Here we will sample the most important works published in English.[1]

Although it is obvious enough that there is a religious resurgence in China, it is hard to come by accurate survey data on it because religion remains a "sensitive" topic for the Chinese government. The official number given by the Chinese State Statistical Bureau is that there are some 100 million religious believers in China, about 10 per cent of the population, a figure that is certainly inaccurate on the low side (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China 2004). A survey published in an officially approved journal in 2007 by scholars from East China Normal University estimates that there are at least 300 million religious believers (Wu 2007). Even that number may well be too

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[1]   There is a growing Chinese literature, produced by scholars at the Institute for World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social sciences, Peking University, People's University, Fudan University, and Hangzhou University among others. A sample of such scholarship can be seen in the proceedings of the Beijing Summit on Chinese Spirituality and Society organized by Fenggang Yang at Peking University in October 2008. English translations of some of the articles are in Yang and Lang 2011.

low, because it only counts people who have a fairly explicit, public style of religious practice and who are affiliated with some kind of recognized religious association. This does not count the "diffused" religion that, according to C. K. Yang's classic study, was traditionally the main form of Chinese religion (Yang 1961). This religious form

> is conceived of as a religion having its theology, cultus, and personnel so intimately diffused into one or more secular social institutions that they become part of the concept, rituals, and structure of the latter, thus having no significant independent existence (Yang 1961: 294-295).

Examples would be the religious dimension of family life and the rituals carried out at weddings and funerals and during festivals like the Chinese New Year that give meaning to family members' connections with one another and with their ancestors. These practices are not carried out in any particular "church" but are woven into the fabric of family life itself. These rituals posit the living presence of the ancestors, as well as the presence of a wide array of gods and ghosts who protect and threaten the family. After having been banned during the Cultural Revolution, such religious practices embedded in the family and local community are now once again pervasive. If we count all such religious practices, we would certainly find that a high percentage of the Chinese population has some kind of religious belief.

But exact numbers are still hard to find. It is reported that the Chinese State Council has recently funded some large surveys carried out by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to get a more accurate picture of religious beliefs. But these data are not yet publicly available. Also other agencies like the Public Security Bureau have been conducting surveys that have even less of a chance of being publicly accessible. (I was told that one such survey reported that 15 per cent of communist party members, who are supposed to be actively committed to atheism, were in fact religious believers. If so, this would be far too embarrassing to be publicly acknowledged.)

One recent survey designed by Yang Fenggang in cooperation with research teams at Purdue and Baylor Universities and carried out by the Horizon Research agency in Beijing in 2007 has these numbers:

> 58 percent of the respondents claimed to believe in no religion or in any spiritual beings, gods, ghosts, buddhas, or the like. Upon further probe, however, 44 percent of them have engaged in some type of religious or spiritual practices in the last 12 months, practices such as attending church, praying, burning incense, having a portrait of some

god at home, wearing a charm, consulting a Fengsui master, or seeking divination. Moreover, 49 percent of these self-claimed atheists hold some religious beliefs, such as believing in supernatural forces, heaven, hell, or soul reincarnation. After we exclude those who either have some religious beliefs or who engage in some religious practices, or both, the 'pure atheists' make up only about 15 percent of the Chinese population according to the survey (Yang 2010: 1).

This survey also found that

Buddhism is the largest religion in China today with 18 percent of people self-identifying with Buddhism, and only 3.2 percent of people self-identify with Christianity (Yang 2010: 1).

Such surveys raise more questions than they answer. Given the difficulties of doing research on a politically sensitive topic in such a large and diverse country, it is difficult to assess the accuracy of the numbers – hence the great disparities seen in different surveys. Beyond that, however, are important substantive issues that remain unexplored. How are religious beliefs and practices distributed geographically and socially? How is religion different in rural and urban areas, and what is the effect of China's massive internal migration on changes in religious practice? What kinds of religion are growing and declining? In what contexts is religious growth and decline taking place? Religion in China is not just reviving but dynamically evolving, but we need much more research to see the patterns of change.

The Meanings of Chinese Religion

Even if we had excellent demographic data, they would be insufficient in themselves to answer the most basic of questions: What is the meaning for practitioners of this religious revival? Why is it taking place now? A short answer, favoured by journalists, is that the religious revival is the result of a "moral vacuum" left by the collapse of Maoist ideology and the ascendency of amoral market forces. This may well be true, as far as it goes, but the assertion is much too vague and general to account for any concrete patterns of religious development.

The search for the meanings of Chinese religious practice best proceeds through detailed ethnographies of religious communities and in-depth interviews with practitioners. But even with this kind of information, we require interpretative frameworks to make sense of what people say and do. In Western academic studies of Chinese religion, there have

been several competing interpretative frameworks. As has been mentioned, the classic sociological study of Chinese religion is C. K. Yang's *Religion in Chinese Society*. Published in 1961, but based on fieldwork carried out before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, this serves an as yet unmatched synthesis of Chinese religious belief and practice. The interpretive framework is a product of its time, the structural-functional social systems theory of Talcott Parsons. In this perspective, religious practices have persisted throughout Chinese history because they have "active ethico-political functions". Religion serves well as a "group integrating factor" because of

> its ability to furnish a spiritual orientation as the symbol of a social or political cause, thereby lifting the attention of the group above the conflict of varying utilitarian interests and focusing their views on a higher plane (Yang 1961: 242).

To be sure, C. K. Yang's knowledge of Chinese history is too rich and his understanding of Chinese society too thorough to be confined to a simplistic functionalist framework, and the information in his book can be re-interpreted through other frameworks. In any case, the book is indispensible for any serious study of Chinese religion.

For over two decades after the publication of C. K. Yang's book, there were very few scholarly publications on religion in China, perhaps because religion seemed to have been wiped out by the Cultural Revolution. The 1980s saw a revival of academic interest, which, like the societal revival of religion, took a while to gain its full momentum. Major books began to appear in the 1990s, and an even broader stream of publications has come forth in the 2000s. But by now, most scholars in the West regarded the Parsonian framework as passé.

Much of the new scholarship is based on ethnography, for which there are new opportunities (but always challenges because of the sensitivity of the subject matter) since the opening of China. More recently, there has been new scholarship based on survey research, such as that by Yang Fenggang cited above. These research projects have been guided by a number of theoretical frameworks, none of which are Parsonian. Nonetheless, they tend to reinforce rather than negate the broad outlines of C. K. Yang's portrait of Chinese religion. One common theme is that Chinese popular religion is more a matter of ritual practice than beliefs. As a recent ethnography by Ellen Oxfeld points out, in the Hakka village she studied, the individuals carrying out traditional funeral rituals attached many different meanings to them: For example, many believed

that the rituals were really ushering the spirits of the deceased into another world, while others denied the existence of any such spirits (Oxfeld 2010: 114-151).

Given such widely divergent relationships between beliefs and rituals, how can we arrive at a coherent understanding of the meanings of Chinese religious practices? Today, the interpretation of much of the new ethnography is based either on frameworks derived from Max Weber or Michel Foucault. These highlight both the power relationships implicit in religious practices and the creativity of the religious agents.

For example, the anthropologist Stephan Feuchtwang (on the basis of fieldwork both in Taiwan and mainland China, as well as extensive historical research) shows how the imagery and ritual of popular temple festivals are metaphors for the bureaucratically exercised power of imperial regimes. But they are metaphors, not reflections. Popular rituals are different from imperial rituals. They represent relations of power, as well as ways of resisting that power. But they represent imperfectly, and it is their imperfections, their difference from that which they represent, that enables them to be sources of great cultural creativity. They not only link communities into nested hierarchies that culminate in the imperial centre, but they also enter into wide alliances with other communities, while also helping these allied communities draw boundaries against intrusion by outsiders (Feuchtwang 1992). Although Feuchtwang does not say so explicitly, this analysis seems to resonate with Weber's treatment of the ways that powerful rulers use religious beliefs to justify their rule, while lower-level status groups use these beliefs to strengthen their solidarity and capacities for resistance.

Using a framework derived from Foucault, Kenneth Dean argues that popular religious ritual is even more fluid and is the matrix of even greater cultural creativity than envisioned by Feuchtwang.

> Rather than seeing all local cultures at all times rising to a common level of unity in a vision of inevitable centrality of the cosmic role of the Chinese emperor, perhaps we can imagine a vast variety of locally rooted and constantly changing conceptions of cosmos and individuality, rising out of local and immediate contests of power and metamorphoses of bodies. This does not mean that the cosmos looks different according to where you are situated in it, as in functionalist readings of Chinese religion, but rather that the cosmos itself is constructed and subject to change, along with the individual, and that the changing set of perspectives on a changing cosmos can never be encompassed in a single system (Dean 1998: 60-61).

This emphasis on the fluidity and creativity of popular Chinese religion is echoed in overviews of the field such as Mayfair Mei-hui Yang's introduction to the edited volume *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation* (Yang 2008: 1-40). However, despite the interpretive disagreements of scholars from different theoretical traditions, there is actually considerable agreement, although different emphases on the main points: Village temple religion oriented its practitioners both to the centres of political power and to the life of the local community; it could serve both to strengthen imperial ideology and to engender resistance; it comprised a huge repertoire of rituals, symbols and myths handed down through many centuries of tradition; but it also enabled a tremendous amount of local creativity for transforming those traditions in the light of current realities.

Chinese popular religion in short is multivalent and multipolar. As Kenneth Dean puts it, popular religion is suspended between "the polar attractors of *sheng* (Confucian sagehood) and *ling* (spiritual power) by the attraction and mutual repulsion of these centers" (Dean 1998: 58). The pull toward *sheng* is toward all those virtues that lead the individual to be a loyal citizen in a harmonious society. The pull toward *ling* is toward ecstatic practices, shamanism, spirit possession, charismatic leadership and the disruptive reconfiguration of the terms of social order.

Popular Chinese religion forms a background of common meanings that give significance to other religious forms.[2] Christianity, institutionalized Buddhism and Daoism, or new religious movements like the Falungong, derive their identities either in contrast with this background or in resonance with it. The multiple meanings of popular Chinese religious practices and their ambivalent relationships with state power invite endless, fascinating scholarly exploration. The problem for scholars is that this background of meaning is so rich and multivalent that there can never be a definitive interpretation of it, and particular interpretations depend on one's standpoint within one of several somewhat incompatible interpretive traditions.

Many humanists may revel in the challenge of delving into the bottomless pit of ambivalent meanings, but many social scientists shy away from such challenges in order to ground their discipline on clear definitions and analytic rigour. One way to avoid the frustrations of interpret-

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2   As used in the writings of Charles Taylor, "common meaning" does not imply consensus; it implies a common frame of reference for carrying on debates (Taylor 1979).

ing the meanings of Chinese religious practice is simply to bracket the question of meaning. Following in the footsteps of Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, one can declare all religious expressions to be manifestations of some widespread need for "religiosity" shared by most humans regardless of culture (Stark and Finke 2000). Then one can focus on the opportunity structures available for individuals to express that religiosity. The choice of religious expression thus becomes like any choice in a marketplace, dependent on how open or closed the market is and how much information is available to individuals about the range of choices. This method of analysis can provide powerful tools for explaining the changing distribution of religious practices. It also has the advantage of linking up with two important branches of modern social scientific theory: rational choice theory and neo-institutionalism.

Much of the writing of Yang Fenggang on religious market theory in China represents this genre, although he has been modifying the "supply-side" theory to include a "demand side", which posits that religious demand is not constant but actually increasing (Yang 2006). Yang Fenggang's theory has been especially useful for explaining patterns in the spread of Christianity. Graeme Lang has also applied this perspective to explain shifting patterns of affiliation with temples to popular deities, like Huang Daxian in Southern China (Lang 2005).

The contributors to this special issue are not partisans of religious market theories, but all of them are social scientists, and, following the proclivity of social scientists, most of them stray from exploring the deep meaning of religious practices in favour of the social contexts within which religions grow and develop. This includes not only the religious market, but also the organizational and institutional frameworks for religious practice, the political uses to which religion might be put, and tensions between religious institutions and the state.

Organizations, Institutions and the State

Even if one wants to focus solely on the organizational, institutional or political dimensions of religious practice, however, I would argue that one cannot avoid the issue of meaning. The social sciences and humanities cannot afford to drift too far apart. For example, in a recent essay I argued that the Chinese government's policies toward religion today are rooted in common understandings of the meanings of religious practice that have been handed down from imperial times. During the time of the

Ming/ Qing emperors, religious practices elicited constant imperial scrutiny and concern, including attempts to co-opt and control local cults and efforts to eradicate them if they seemed to threaten state power (Madsen 2010). The same scrutiny and concern can be seen today in the attitude of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) toward popular religion. The CCP has abandoned in deed – though not in word – its Marxist ideology, which assumes that popular religion is a relic of the past that will eventually be wiped out by modernization. In practice, the CCP is following the policy of the Ming/ Qing emperors. Popular religion was once called "feudal superstition", but now those parts of it that are conducive to a state-sponsored social harmony are often called "non-material cultural heritage" and are to be channelled into proper political and economic purposes. One can confine oneself to analysing how this channelling is done (or fails to be done), but the question of "how" cannot be completely answered until one understands the "why" – the background common understandings that make this type of state response seem natural.

An exemplary attempt to combine an understanding of meanings with analysis of institutional structures would be the work of David Palmer on *Qigong Fever* (which includes Falungong) and his essay "Religion and Social Movements in China" (2007). Daniel Overmeyer (2003), Robert Weller and Meir Shahar (1996), Kenneth Dean (1993), Adam Yuet Chau (2006), Prasenjit Duara (1995), and Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (2008) are among the most prominent scholars who have also attempted to do this for the various forms of Buddhism, Daoism, and popular deity temple worship. I myself have tried to do this for Chinese Catholicism (Madsen 1998), and Daniel Bays (forthcoming) and Lian Xi (2010) for Chinese Protestantism. The best new overview of all forms of contemporary Chinese religion is *The Religious Question in Modern China* by Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer (2011). It is no accident that most of those mentioned here are from the disciplines of Religious Studies, Anthropology and History, rather than from those branches of the social sciences that are more oriented toward positive science.

Nonetheless, it is no insignificant contribution to analyse the "how" of religion's relations with society – for example, the government regulations affecting religion, the political maneuverings between religious groups and the state, the sources of economic support for religious practices, and the preponderance of recent scholarship, including the essays in this special issue, have been on this topic. One of the finest works on

the state regulation of religion is the legal scholar Pitman B. Potter's essay "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China" (2003). There has been a great deal of excellent analysis of how and with what consequences this regulation has been applied to Tibetan Buddhism (exemplary works are by Melvyn Goldstein and Matthew Kapstein (1998), Robert Barnett (1994), and Jose Ignacio Cabezon (2008). And there are similarly penetrating studies of state regulation of Islam, with major work by Dru Gladney (1991, 2004) and Elisabeth Alles, Leila Cherif-Chebbi, and Constance-Helene Halfon (2003).

Several important edited volumes explore the politics of religion in China. The best so far is *Making Religion, Making the State*, a volume edited by Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank (2009). A good overview of the regulatory environment is Kim-kwong Chan and Eric R. Carlson, *Religious Freedom in China: Policy, Administration, and Regulation; a Research Handbook* (2005). Another excellent work is *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, edited by Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin (2004). Most of the articles in the latter book concern the state's relations with Christian churches.

The complexities of the relationship between organized Mahayana Buddhist and Daoist institutions and the state are deserving of much more research than has been done to date. An essential starting point for anyone wanting to study Chinese Daoism is Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body* (1993), but this does not discuss relationships between organized Daoist institutions and the Chinese state at the present time. For discussion of these issues, one should consult *Daoism in the Twentieth Century: Between Eternity and Modernity* (2011), edited by David Palmer and Liu Xun. Much of the practice of religious Daoism is carried out through the socially embedded, communal rituals discussed in the first part of this essay and studied extensively by scholars such as Kenneth Dean and John Lagerwey. As for government control, according to Goossaert and Palmer, the China Daoist Association, the official government-organized association for supervising the Daoist religion, now carries out its own ordination ceremonies for Daoist priests – ceremonies that traditionally would have been carried out by the Daoist Heavenly Master, who now lives in Taiwan. The problem with controlling Daoist clergy, however, is that non-monastic Daoist priests traditionally operated as independent ritual specialists with little clerical organization. The Chinese government now gives such priests official licenses to practise and tries to provide standardized training in Daoist orthodoxy. But effective control of Dao-

ist clergy seems to be minimal. Meanwhile, popular syncretistic commu-
nal religious temples vie for registration with the Daoist Association
because this can give them a measure of legitimacy and political protec-
tion. In return, the Daoist Association collects a fee from the revenues
of the temple (Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 331-335; Chau 2006).

An exemplary overview of Buddhism in mainland China is Raoul
Birnbaum's "Buddhist China at the Century's Turn" (Birnbaum 2003).
An overview with a deep historical perspective would be "Secularization:
Confucianism and Buddhism" by Rudolf G. Wagner (2009). Ji Zhe, a
Chinese scholar based in France, has produced an important series of
sociological studies on Buddhism today, notably his "Secularization as
Religious Restructuring: Statist Institutionalization of Chinese Buddhism
and its Paradoxes". Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank have produced
analytic case studies of the influential Nanputuo Temple in Xiamen
(Ashiwa 2009; Wank 2009). Gareth Fischer has studied "The Spiritual
Land Rush: Merit and Morality in New Chinese Buddhist Temple Con-
struction" (2008). Finally, in this issue, André Laliberté's article explores
political implications of the interactions between mainland Chinese and
Taiwanese Buddhists across the Taiwan Strait.

The study of Buddhism in Taiwan is a rapidly growing subfield in it-
self, and it has yielded works that are more empirically rich than those
yet produced on mainland China. Taiwan today gives scholars much
more freedom than does China to conduct research on religion. Thus
studies of religion on Taiwan can be more comprehensive and on more
solid ground than those done in and on the Chinese mainland. At the
same time, the greater freedom of religious expression possible in Tai-
wan has produced many creative new attempts to adapt religion to mod-
ern life. Some of the most important work on this subject is by André
Laliberté. His *Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan, 1989-2003* (2004)
is an indispensible foundation for understanding the ambiguous influ-
ence that Taiwan's large middle-class Buddhist associations have had on
Taiwan's politics. He has also written important essays, including the one
in this special issue, on the influence of Buddhist charities in relations
between Taiwan and mainland China (Laliberté 2008, 2003). Major
works on specific developments within Taiwanese Buddhism are Julia
Huang's *Charisma and Compassion: Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi
Movement* (2009) and Stefania Travagin's articles on Buddhist nuns (2004,
2005, 2007).

In Taiwan, the relations of these Buddhist institutions with the state has been relatively constructive and harmonious; in mainland China, relations between Buddhist institutions (with the important exception of Tibetan Buddhism) and the state have in general been less conflicted and less problematic than those between Christianity and the state. Problems created by the latter conflicts have generated more research in the West, partly because of their dramatic nature and partly because of their relevance to predominant Western religious concerns. Indeed most of the articles in this special issue are about the relationship between Chinese Christianities and the Chinese state. For the remainder of this section, therefore, we will focus on this issue.

Since the dynamics of religion-state relationships are different for Catholicism and Protestantism, specialized literatures have grown up around these topics. A groundbreaking work on the Chinese Catholic Church was Beatrice Leung's *Sino-Vatican Relations: Problems in Conflicting Authority 1976-1986* (1992). An excellent overview of the many dimensions of conflict between the Catholic Church and the Chinese state is Edmond Tang and Jean-Paul Wiest's (eds.), *The Catholic Church in Modern China* (1993). In this special issue, Lawrence Reardon carries these earlier analyses a step further.

Since the organization of Protestant Christianity is much more diverse than the organization of Catholicism, there is a need for an even wider array of studies of state-society relations for Protestantism than for Catholicism. A scholarly overview is by Alan Hunter and Kim-kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (1993). Recent surveys done by Yang Fenggang and his colleagues are important for documenting the spread of Protestant Christianity. Protestant church-state relations are discussed authoritatively in the many writings of Daniel Bays. Ongoing research by David Schak, represented by his article in this issue, details tensions between the state and unregistered urban churches, some of which have provided major moral support for activist "rights lawyers". Gerda Wielander has written an important article about the support given by such churches to reformist intellectuals (2009). Cao Nanlai has published a book on another model of Protestant communities and the state – that of the "Boss Christians of Wenzhou" (2011).

A central theme in most of the studies of Christianity is the tension between the state-controlled organizations for controlling religion and the ideals and interests of Christian communities. The State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA, aka the Religious Affairs Bureau) is

supervised by the CCP's United Front Department, and together these organizations sponsor "patriotic associations" – the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), and the Three-Self Protestant Movement (TSPM) – which select the leaders of Catholic and Protestant churches, register religious venues, and try to ensure that the churches are following government policies.

For a variety of reasons, many Christians find these patriotic associations too restrictive and even illegitimate. Thus alongside the Catholic and Protestant churches officially recognized by the Chinese government, large "unofficial" (sometimes called "underground") churches have sprung up. In fact, membership in these unofficial churches far outnumbers those in the official churches. The actual relationships between official and unofficial churches and between the unofficial churches and the government differ widely by denomination and locality.

The patriotic associations install religious leaders who have proven themselves to be reliable servants of the government, not necessarily servants of the church. For Catholics, the government, working through the CPA, claims the decisive role in choosing Catholic bishops, a claim that goes against a Catholic belief (more firmly held by grass-roots Catholics in China than in Europe and North America) in the ultimate authority of the pope (Madsen 1998: 25-49). For Protestants, the government has favoured leaders who emphasize good works, especially those in harmony with government interests, rather than faith. This has led the government-approved Protestant leadership to emphasize a "reconstructionist" theology that tries to reconcile Christianity with socialism and in the process de-emphasizes the role of faith in Jesus as the sole path to salvation, a theology that many of the most enthusiastic Christians think to be false (Dunch 2008). Although the government's patriotic associations try to co-opt Christian communities, they do not want these communities to grow. This sets up a clash with Christians who believe it imperative to spread the gospel.

The government's efforts to contain the growth of Christianity have not succeeded, and the kind of Christianity controlled by the patriotic associations has been overwhelmed by rapidly growing Christian movements outside of government control. Thus, the non-registered part of the Catholic Church – what some Catholics call the "underground Church" – is probably about three times the size of the officially regis-

tered Church that accepts the suzerainty of the CPA.[3] Sometimes there are bitter conflicts between the unregistered and official Catholics, in which theological and ecclesiological issues are intertwined with social grievances, as when a lineage that is mostly Catholic and officially registered with the CPA comes into conflict with a traditional rival Catholic lineage that is affiliated with the "underground" (Madsen 1998: 50-75). As the paper by Lawrence Reardon in this issue shows, these local conflicts are further complicated by the ebb and flow of diplomatic negotiations with the Vatican. When negotiations have gone well, informal arrangements have been made that have enabled the Vatican and the Chinese government to reach agreement on the appointment of bishops – over 90 per cent of bishops in the officially registered Church are in fact approved by the Vatican. This helps mitigate tensions between the official and underground parts of the Church, but it does not completely end them. In recent years, however, the government has insisted on choosing some bishops that the Vatican disapproves of, and this has led to a breakdown in negotiations between the Vatican and the PRC government and to intensified conflicts within parts of the Catholic community. There are enough angles in this ongoing saga to have been the subject of many books and articles (see Ladany 1987; Tang and Wiest 1993; Leung 1992).

The Protestant churches are much more decentralized, and patterns of conflict and cooperation with the state are more diverse than for the Catholics. Those communities that flourish outside of the TSPM are often called "house churches" because they meet for worship in private houses. But some are large enough and have achieved enough de facto tolerance that they have built large edifices. There are great variations across different localities.

The conflict between rapidly growing house churches and the officially registered churches is not necessarily theological. Despite the advocacy of a "reconstructionist theology" by the top leadership of the TSPM, many, perhaps most, of the members of their congregations have a very conservative, evangelical theology, similar to many of those outside of the TSPM. One reason for joining an unregistered congregation may simply be that the government has not provided enough venues through the TSPM to meet the demand for Christian worshippers.

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3   I believe that the best estimates are those developed by Anthony Lam and published regularly in *Tripod*, the journal of the Holy Spirit Study Centre, Hong Kong.

But other rapidly growing movements of Christian converts go in directions that would make government guarantors of "stability" uneasy. Among the most rapidly growing forms of Protestant Christianity are Pentecostal-style churches that preach an imminent end of the world. The government does not like such eschatological talk. But a greater problem for the government, perhaps, is the independence of such Pentecostal-style communities. Almost anyone can become a charismatic preacher, there is no need to get certified in a government-controlled institution. Such Christians are loyal to the Holy Spirit, not to any worldly authority. Just for these reasons, such Christian communities can grow very rapidly and in unpredictable ways. Given the Chinese government's perceived need for "stability" and predictability, this can be very threatening (Kupfer 2004; for a journalistic account of the development of Pentacostal-style Christian networks, see Aikman 2003).

The lack of a clearly defined theology or authority structure facilitates both absorption of parts of traditional Chinese culture and the proliferation of many different sects. Most of these sects seek a purely spiritual salvation, but there are some with extreme views that lead to direct political challenges. The government has tried to stamp these out, but without complete success.

Since the beginning of the Reform era, the most rapid growth of these unregistered, indigenous Christian communities has been in the countryside. But in the past decade, unregistered Christian movements have also been spreading in cities, not only among workers and small-scale entrepreneurs, but also among students and intellectuals (Fiedler 2010). These communities represent a wide range of styles of theology and worship. Some are akin to the rural Pentecostal churches, but others are very attuned to the issues of modernizing middle classes. The Shouwang and Fangzhou communities in Beijing have in fact nurtured many of the "rights lawyers" who have pressed for political reform at great personal risk. This has brought government scrutiny and harassment on the congregations. David Schak's article in this issue explores some of this.

Both the central government and local governments are trying to develop better policies for controlling and channelling the energies of rapidly growing Christian movements. There are simply too many unregistered Christians, of all kinds, to be suppressed through force. So government agencies at all levels try to distinguish those that are truly threatening from those that can be co-opted. The co-optation does not neces-

sarily take place through the TSPM. One new model is that of the "boss Christians" in Wenzhou. There, many Christian entrepreneurs negotiate the local political and economic development agencies to accept Christian chapels in their overall investment package (Cao 2011).

As with China's Catholics, there are enough facets to this evolving story of relations between Christianity and the Chinese State to sustain a whole library of publications.

Beyond State-Society Relations: Avenues for Further Research

A comprehensive understanding of the Chinese religious renaissance would require integrating the work done by historians, anthropologists and sociologists on the cultural meanings of Chinese religions with the work done by political scientists on institutional tensions between religion and state. As the first part of this essay suggests, over the course of Chinese history widespread common understandings have developed about the roles of different forms of religious practice and belief in the social world. This common understanding is not the same as a consensus. There have always been deep disagreements within the Chinese tradition about the goodness and reasonableness of devotion to different gods and the value of different religious practices. But there has been a common language for agreement and disagreement, common categories for relating one kind of religion to another, and commonly understood patterns for taking sides in disputes about the meaning of it all.

As we have seen, the deities worshipped by different families, different communities, different occupations all serve simultaneously to distinguish such groups from one another and to relate them to each other as familiar or strange, friend or foe, subordinate or superordinate. Even "foreign religions" like Christianity fit into this pattern. Those who still adhere to the pantheon of traditional popular deities may see the Christian god as just another addition to the pantheon, to be judged on how well he performs relative to other traditional gods. There is in fact evidence that during the Cultural Revolution conversions to Christianity began to spread rapidly where the traditional deities lost credibility because of being unable to protect their communities from violence (Kao (without year)). And even though Christians reject traditional deities, they often accept the enchanted worldview of popular religious consciousness, a world full of demons that God must vanquish, of direct

channels to God through dreams and visions and spirit-filled ecstasy, and of miracles that suspend the normal laws of nature. And for Christians as for all forms of popular religion, religious practice is pulled between the poles of *sheng* and *ling*, with *sheng* being the pole favoured by the state, which interprets religious symbols as the source of virtues that uphold social order, and *ling*, favoured by the common people, being the charismatic power that overturns convention and pushes beyond the visible world.

Present-day institutional tensions between religion and state can take on a new depth of meaning in the light of these common cultural understandings. The tensions can now be seen as reiterations of patterns that have developed over many centuries, albeit with modern characteristics. The rise and decline of different forms of religion can be seen not simply as the conflict between some supposedly universal need for religiosity and the need of the communist party-state to maintain its power. It can be understood in terms specific to Chinese culture. If we understand it in this way, I would suggest, we will discern many nuances in the current Chinese religious ferment that we would not have noticed if we applied the standard tools of Western social science.

Larger Issues

China's religious renaissance is fascinating in itself, but it is also connected to larger issues that have profound implications not only for the fate of China, but that of the modern world. Religious Studies specialists should widen their gaze to encompass these broader issues and they should move beyond their narrow communities of the competent to enter into dialogue with larger public communities concerned with these issues.

The issue that most directly concerns the fate of China in the 21st century is the prospect for the development of a Chinese civil society. What do recent developments in Chinese religion tell us about this? In Western political theory, civil society is conceived of as the independent voluntary associations that enable citizens to govern their own affairs from the bottom up without following the dictates of the state. A healthy civil society is seen as the basis of a viable democracy (Chambers and Kymlicka 2002). In some contexts, religion can inhibit the growth of such a civil society, because religion can sanctify ethnic relations, fragmenting a civic community into incompatible parts. Religious zeal can

demonize enemies, leading to widespread violence that can only be suppressed by an authoritarian state. Religious myths can occlude the rational discourse necessary to create effective policies in a modern interdependent society. But religion can also inspire a spirit of compassion and charity that might mitigate clashing interests and create the basis for a peaceful resolution of differences. Religious beliefs and practices can bring diverse people together in new communities that transcend old attachments (Madsen 2008). In their book *American Grace*, Robert Putnam and Donald Campbell argued that religion in America largely plays a positive role in sustaining a healthy civil society (Putnam and Campbell 2010). But in his *Terror in the Mind of God*, Mark Juergensmeyer points to the global dangers posed by radical religious movements (Juergensmeyer 2003). Where do Chinese religions fit on this spectrum?

They contain contradictions and ambiguities that demonstrate how they do not fit into standard Western models of civil society. Traditionally, local temples were true community centres. They brought together rich and poor, not just for worshipping the gods, but for engaging in all sorts of commercial, educational and leisure activities. Temple affairs were managed by committees of local leaders, and sometimes the leadership included not just the wealthy and powerful but ordinary people chosen according to principles of rotation. Often local temples connected themselves into large regional alliances symbolized by sharing the ashes from their incense burners. Temple worship was thus a major contributor to local and regional association and self-governance.

All of this fits at least part of Western prescriptions for civil society. As we have seen, such traditional temple activities are being revived, or at least reinvented. According to a provocative book by Lily Tsai, the growth of such temples in rural areas is positively correlated with community capacities to provide public goods (Tsai 2007).

In urban areas, large Buddhist temples, like the Nanputuo temple in Xiamen, are centres for local philanthropy. They collect considerable sums of money during festivals like the Chinese New Year and redistribute this to projects to care for the elderly and sick. Such temples also mobilized resources to help far away victims of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan.

By the same token, Christian churches form voluntary associations out of believers from many different social classes and social localities. Through Christian NGOs, like the Protestant-established Amity Foundation and the Catholic Jinde Charities, Christians have the time and

money to carry out social development and to contribute to disaster relief, as in the Sichuan earthquake. Besides contributing through their philanthropy, Christian Churches may provide an informal training ground for community leadership. Many Protestant communities are governed by leaders chosen from within their congregations and they are linked in widely ramifying networks to congregations across China. As a consequence of these exercises in self-governance, the journalist David Aikman, for one, thinks that the rapid growth of house-church Christianity could help transform China into a political democracy (Aikman 2003: 285-292).

However, there are other aspects of the Chinese religious renaissance that point away from civil society. Local deity temples may foster community solidarity, but such solidarity becomes increasingly irrelevant as village youth migrate to the cities. In any case, temples have to secure formal or informal permission from all sorts of government agencies to function, and their local leadership may be less an instance of bottom-up self-governance and more an instance of co-optation by the state.

Large Buddhist temples have been quite compliant with the National Buddhist Association, which is under the sway of SARA and the United Front Department. Does this represent a proto-democratic civil society or simply another manifestation of corporatist state control? (Ji 2008).

Precisely because they had been victims of decades of heavy government repression, some Catholic communities, especially in the countryside, may have withdrawn into themselves and adopted a belligerent attitude toward outsiders and to the state – attitudes that do not bode well for the peaceful development of a civil society (Madsen 1998: 126-148). Some Protestant Christian communities have developed apocalyptic theologies and militant programmes that bear more than a passing resemblance to sectarian revolutionaries like the Taiping movement in the nineteenth century (Lian 2010; Kupfer 2004). Ever cautious, the Chinese government sees in these movements a reason to increase suppression of religion as a whole.

Added to this is what might appear to be the anti-rational, anti-modern tone of much of China's religious renaissance – not only local deity worship, but Buddhist, Daoist, and Christian worship as well. There is widespread belief in mystical forces that contradict modern science, rumours of miracles that are easily exploited by charlatans, apparitions and visions that give rise to false hopes. Not only the structural

aspects but also many of the cultural aspects prevalent in Chinese relig-
ions point away from the sober, civil, interlocking voluntary social asso-
ciation that Western theories presume to be the basis of a democratically
oriented civil society.

To resolve some of the ambiguities about where religious renais-
sance may be taking China, we might look outside of the mainland to
Taiwan and Singapore. Taiwan, too, has undergone a religious renais-
sance. There have always been many flourishing deity temples in Taiwan,
although their more extravagant activities were restricted by the Nation-
alist Party during much of the martial law period, which ended in 1987.
The ending of authoritarian rule has opened up social space that allows
local temples to mount ever more elaborate festivals. But it has also
helped give rise to new urban middle class religious movements, particu-
larly "humanistic" Buddhist movements like Buddha's Light Mountain,
Dharma Drum Mountain, and the Buddhist Compassionate Relief Soci-
ety. These movements have sought to bring Buddhism out of the mon-
astery and into the world. They have large followings of laypeople, in-
spired and organized to exercise Buddhist compassion in alleviating the
problems of modern society. The lay associations are voluntary associa-
tions drawing together a wide variety of middle-class people. They em-
phasize openness and tolerance as well as care and compassion. I have
argued elsewhere that such associations have provided a moderating
force in Taiwan's contentious civil society and have thus made possible
the consolidation of a Taiwanese democracy (Madsen 2007). The rela-
tionship of these groups with the Taiwanese state, however, is on the
whole much more cooperative (and the cooperation more widely ac-
cepted) than it is for Christian organizations in Western civil societies.
Such developments point to an Asian mode of civil society, different
from the West. Does Taiwan's religious renaissance and the concomitant
development of a democratic civil society point the way to a path that
mainland China might follow?

Chinese religious revivals thus pose a unique mix of dangers and
opportunities for the development of peaceful and productive civil socie-
ties. Different governments in the Asia-Pacific take different approaches
toward regulating or liberating emergent religious forces (Madsen 2011).

Beyond challenging us to think more deeply about the development
of Asian versions of civil society, the Chinese religious renaissance pro-
vokes deeper reflections about the very meaning of modernity. Classic
modernization theories assumed that secularization was a fundamental

pillar of modernization. The Chinese religious renaissance contradicts that assumption. It is an example of religion not only surviving the sometimes brutally promoted projects of secular modernizers in the twentieth century, but dynamically evolving and interacting with modernity in unexpected new ways. Chinese societies, rapidly developing to the point where they can challenge the West in economic growth, technological sophistication and political prowess, are examples of a hybrid modernity, a mix of religious and secular elements different from the modernity in the West.

This is a challenge not only to theory, but also for politics. Despite the homogenizing forces of globalization, there are still many ways for civilizations to be modern. Differences are here to stay, and they can either enrich us all through the sharing that comes from genuine dialogue or endanger us all through a clash of civilizations. We scholars can only hope that sympathetic but objective study of the Chinese religious renaissance can help guide politics toward the more positive outcome.

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Contents

Introduction

Research Articles