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Chinese Religious Culture, 2000-2016

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During the years under review in this outline, China was under the leadership of successively Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. More importantly, in terms of the periodization of Chinese religious policy, it begins after the suppression of Falun Gong and the institution of the Anti-Cult Law, both of which took place in 1999. This marked a new period in attitudes both towards officially recognised religious groups and what the Chinese Party-State chose to call “evil cults.” This was a new coinage in Chinese English-language discourse but it translated a very old word in Chinese, namely *xiejiao* 邪教, that would be more accurately translated as “heterodox teachings.” This essay is in three parts: religion and the Chinese state, religious flashpoints, and new forms of religiosity.

Religion and the Chinese State

It is crucial to understand that the Chinese Party-State arrogates to itself the right to rule over religion. Religion is not a sphere of activity that is protected from state intervention nor has it rights that can be defended in court. One indication of the one-sided power relationship between religion and the state in contemporary China can be found in the continuing promulgation of regulations controlling religious organisations and the publication of collections of these regulations by official government presses. In addition, any large bookshop in China will have guides for cadres involved in “religious work,” and studies of the pertinent issues in society concerning religion. The underlying assumption in these publications is that it is the state’s right and duty to “manage” religion.

i. Xi Jinping’s Speech at National Conference on Religious Work

On April 23, 2016 Xi Jinping gave the first major speech on religion since he came to power in 2012. As reported by the Xinhua news agency he instructed the religions of China to “merge religious doctrines with Chinese culture, abide by Chinese laws and regulations, and devote themselves to China’s reform and opening up drive and socialist modernization in order to contribute to the realization of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation.”¹ That religions should

¹ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-04/23/c_135306131.htm

abide by the law and assist in government policy implementation is unexceptional for China; what is novel and interesting here is the statement that religions should merge their doctrines with Chinese culture. During 2016 most religious groups in China that have foreign origins – Islam and both Protestant and Catholic forms of Christianity – held meetings to discuss how this new policy should be implemented. Clearly this new policy pronouncement is focused on two targets, one old and one relatively new. The old target is the “foreign control” of the Catholic church, the new one is the perceived threat of foreign followers of Islam who allegedly inspire terrorism. Thus, he continued, “We must resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means and prevent ideological infringement by extremists.”

Religious groups, moreover, should “dig deep into doctrines and canons that are in line with social harmony and progress, and favorable for the building of a healthy and civilized society, and interpret religious doctrines in a way that is conducive to modern China's progress and in line with our excellent traditional culture.” This statement underlines previous official commentary that religions can have a positive role in society and may become involved in the provision of social support. As underlined in successive Communist Party statements, religions should never, “interfere with government administration, judiciary and education,” and members of the Party must act as “unyielding Marxist atheists, consolidate their faith, and bear in mind the Party's tenets.”

While overseas religious organisations and commentators typically took a negative view of this speech, a more optimistic view was presented by Italian scholar and journalist Francesco Sisci in *Asia Times*.² Sisci points out that Xi appears to have changed official vocabulary in the way he describes the relationship between the Party and religions, noting in particular the use of the word *yindao* 引导 rather than the more typical *zhidao* 指导. *Yindao* may be understood as “guiding by reacting to an action taken by others.” In English we might translate this as “to lead.” *Zhidao*, on the other hand implies passivity on the part of religions and an appropriate translation would be “to direct.” Sisci discusses the ramifications of the new terminology in this way: “With this formulation the party maintains the lead but ... must guide by reacting to the stimuli and impulses of religious bodies.”

ii. The Draft Revisions 修订草案 to the Regulations on Religious Affairs 宗教事务条例

On September 7, 2016 a set of draft revisions to the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs were released for comment. According to Katharina Wenzel-Teuber, these regulations are, “the basic administrative legal norms for the State’s dealings with the religions.”³ Comments on the draft revisions were due on October 7 but at the time of writing (August 2017) the final revised regulations have not been released. The draft revisions indicate changes in several areas:

² <http://atimes.com/2016/04/xi-signals-new-party-stance-on-religion-via-subtle-change-in-words-sisci/>

³ http://www.china-zentrum.de/fileadmin/downloads/rctc/2016-4/RCTC_2016-4.21-24_Wenzel-Teuber_The_State_Council_Publishes_a_Draft_Revision_of_the_Regulations_on_Religious_Affairs.pdf

- a. they accept the existence of religious “schools” and acknowledge religious charities but deny the right to spread religious ideas through them,
- b. they indicate new concerns over harm to national security, spreading extremism, inciting ethnic separatism, terrorism, importation of religious material, and use of the internet,
- c. they mandate that approval or rejection of applications for “religious activity sites” needs to be given at a municipal level and must take account of the “needs of urban planning,”
- d. they forbid the building of large-scale outdoor religious statues outside religious sites,
- e. they allow donations to religious organisations but demand that those over Y100,000 must be reported, and
- f. they insist that religious organisations must be properly regulated financially and audited.

To what extent the draft revisions are changed will only be clear when the final Regulations are released. In passing, and with regard to Sisci’s comments about Xi Jinping’s April speech, the September draft revisions use the term *zhidao* four times, and never use *yindao*.

iii. Banned Religions

One aspect of the power the Chinese Party-State has over the regulation of religions is their ability to declare them illegal. Making followers of certain religions into criminals is something that Chinese governments have done for hundreds of years. Declaring those religions to be “heterodox teachings” (or “evil cults” in the Chinese government’s current translation, see above) does not mean that they are “false” or “spurious” as, say, declaring them to be “superstitions” – *mixin* 迷信 – would. Rather, it acknowledges that they have spiritual power but they are not approved by the state. The opposite of “heterodox teachings” are “orthodox teachings” *zhengjiao* 正教, which are approved by the state.

At various times in recent years the Chinese authorities have made lists of what they call “cults.” In 2014 they issued a list of the eleven most active of them:⁴

The Church of Almighty God 全能神教会 (Eastern Lightning 东方闪电)

The Shouters 呼喊派

The Disciple Society 门徒会

The Unification Church 统一教

Chinese Mainland Administrative Deacon Station 中华大陆行政执事站

The Bloody Holy Spirit 血水圣灵

The Full Scope Church 全范围教会

The Three Grades of Servants 三班仆人派

⁴ http://jb.sznews.com/html/2014-06/04/content_2895965.htm

The Quan Yin Method 观音法门
The True Buddha School 灵仙真佛宗
Falun Gong 法轮功

While this is not a fixed or definitive list, it is worth noting that the first eight of the eleven of these groups find their origins in some form of Christianity, while the next two are based on Buddhism, and the last is derived from *qigong*.

Religious Flashpoints

i. Islam

One of the religions that has attracted most attention from the Chinese state in recent years has been Islam. The concerns have generally centred on Uyghur Muslims from Xinjiang rather than those of what the Chinese call the Hui nationality. Typically, the focus of concerns has not been the religion but various movements that have intersected in important ways with it. Thus, in some ways, the real concern of the state has been on Uyghur activism rather than Islam in itself. There are four main streams of Uyghur activism: the defence of religious rights, Uyghur nationalism, pan-Turkism, and Jihad. Across Xinjiang and in China, various Uyghur protests and demonstrations have taken place but as is the case for most activities of this sort in China, only the most violent are reported. These have included suicide bombings, random stabbings, bus bombings, etc. The state has condemned all these activities while blurring the boundaries between terrorism, separatism, and religious fundamentalism.

The government has responded in, broadly, four ways: “strike hard” campaigns of arrests, detentions, etc.; attempts to speed up economic development; increasing migration of Han people into Xinjiang; and the hardening of border controls where Xinjiang borders Central Asian states. The arrest in 2014 of Ilham Tohti, an academic economist at the Central Nationalities University in Beijing, drew serious attention overseas as this indicated that the Party were willing to suppress even moderate Uyghur voices. In the cultural field, the wearing of the veil by Muslim women has been banned, and even overseas, the Chinese government has tried to silence Uyghur voices, for example by demanding the Australian government rescind an invitation to Rebiya Kadeer, President of the World Uyghur Congress, to attend the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2009 when a documentary about her life and struggle - *The 10 Conditions of Love* - was being premiered.

ii. Tibetan Buddhism

During this period the Chinese government has not lessened its opposition to the Dalai Lama but has continued accusing him and his supporters of separatism. Their opposition has partly played

out in an underlying tension over his succession, with the Chinese insisting on their right to approve the next Dalai Lama. We have already had a preview of what may take place: there are currently two claimants to the title of Panchen Lama. The one who makes public appearances was approved by the Chinese authorities; the one nominated by the Dalai Lama disappeared from view in Beijing and is presumed to have been arrested. In a related measure, in January 2016, it was announced that a database of “living Buddhas” had been created by the religious affairs bureaucracy, listing the names, addresses and details of 870 incarnations that had been “verified.” In more direct action, in July 2016, what was claimed to be the biggest Tibetan Buddhist institute in the world - Larung Gar in Sertar, eastern Tibet – was attacked, with many buildings being demolished. The officially stated goal of these actions was to halve the population of the settlement from 10,000 to 5,000.

One of the most striking features of Tibetan Buddhism in contemporary China is its growth among Han Chinese, especially among the urban middle class. Some wealthy Han people have even become patrons of reincarnate lamas and important monks but there is some disagreement over whether this support represents genuine belief in and respect for a religious guide, or whether it is, in John Osburg’s term, “spiritual protection money” that will protect them from trouble.⁵

iii. Roman Catholicism

In recent years Roman Catholicism has experienced strong growth, although exact figures are hard to ascertain. About six million people belong to the “patriotic church,” but other estimates that include non-approved congregations put membership at between nine and twelve million. The province of Hebei is the church’s stronghold with about one million members.

The continuing issue with this church is the status of the Pope and the Holy See. For the Chinese this equates to “foreign control” – the PRC and the Vatican do not have diplomatic relations, with the Holy See still recognizing the ROC on Taiwan and maintaining an office there. In practice, the core problem this creates is the appointment of bishops. The orthodox position is that bishops can only be appointed by the pope, but the Chinese insist that bishops be appointed by the Patriotic Association. Nonetheless, in fits and starts, ties between the Vatican and the PRC are becoming closer. The appointment by China of Joseph Li Shan as Archbishop of China was “tacitly approved” by Vatican in 2007. And in 2008, the Chinese Philharmonic Orchestra gave a concert for the pope in the Vatican.

iv. Protestantism

The growth of Protestant Christianity in China over the past few decades has been immense. With the same caveats as Roman Catholicism, there are currently between 40 and 50 million Protestants in China with some sources claiming up to 90 million. In some ways, Catholicism is an easy target for the authorities with its unified structures, its set liturgy, its hierarchies, etc.

⁵ <http://international.ucla.edu/ccs/event/11572>

Protestantism, on the other hand, is much harder to control as it is, by its nature, more diverse, flexible, and local. For example, since there is no need for a priest to be present in Protestant worship, a large number of small and informal churches have appeared that meet wherever they can, and often move.

The concerns the features raise for the authorities focus on the involvement of foreign churches and religious personnel, their alleged political aims, and increasingly questions of visibility and size. This latter concern is evident in the case of the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang, sometimes called China's "New Jerusalem." Wenzhou's relative isolation and lack of party control, its wealth, and its capitalist activities all led to successful early evangelization. This city alone now has more than one million Protestants, as well as many other active religious believers from other forms of Christianity as well as non-Christian religions. The visibility of Protestantism in Wenzhou led to widespread church demolitions in 2014 and the removal of up to 1,500 crosses from the tops of church buildings – including those of the patriotic "Three-Self" association.

New Forms of Religiosity

i. New Forms of Buddhism from Taiwan

Taiwan has experienced a creative flourishing of Buddhism since the lifting of Martial Law in 1987. One of the best known new associations is Ciji 慈濟. Active in China since 1991, its work on the mainland has followed that in Taiwan working in disaster relief, but also in hospitals, old people's homes, schools, and day-care centres. As in Taiwan also, it has sponsored bone marrow donations. It was officially registered in China in 2010 in Suzhou. Its activities do not appear to have been affected much by the ups and downs of Cross-Straits political relations.

Less strong in China than Ciji but more politically active has been Foguangshan 佛光山. The leader of Foguangshan, Master Hsing Yun met Wang Yi, the head of Taiwan Affairs in China, in Beijing in May 2010. At that time, the *Peoples Daily* reported Wang as saying Hsing Yun "has played a 'special and positive role' in promoting exchanges across the Taiwan Strait."

ii. Quasi-Religions

In recent years, and especially since the suppression of Falun Gong, the activities of *qigong* groups have become much more low-key and consistently secularized. The focus now, in these groups and in society at large, is much more on health. However, in the Chinese context, practices that lead to real or alleged health benefits – sometimes verging on claims of the miraculous – can easily acquire religious overtones. The key term at present is *yangsheng* 养生 or "nourishing life." This can include practices such as diet, fasting, meditation, medical treatments, exercise, spiritual teachings, and beauty treatments. The popularity of *yangsheng* activities has led to the growth of *yangsheng* tourism with the establishment of middle and upper class retreats. In some cases,

temples, both Buddhist and Daoist, have been converted into resorts while still being staffed by monks and priests. These kinds of activities and establishments have often been endorsed by celebrities and the word *yangsheng* itself appears to have become a selling point, with at least one golf course claiming golf as a yangsheng activity!