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The Dynamics of Religious Growth and Change in Contemporary China

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CHINA'S REFORMS HAVE BEEN REMARKABLY effective in achieving many of its leaders' goals. Like any major policy change, however, they also brought many unintended consequences. One of the most striking among these has been a massive increase in religiosity. This has affected the entire country—east and west, urban and rural—but unevenly across the geographic and economic landscapes. The new religious world also ranges across the entire legal landscape, from strongly repressed groups viewed as dangers to national security to the five officially sanctioned national religious associations. The most lively realm, however, has been the one that falls in the intermediate zone—not sanctioned by law but recently more or less tolerated by officials at all levels.

While the rapid increase in religious activity obviously relates to the increased personal (but not political) space that opened up from the beginning of the reforms, it also has roots in earlier Chinese religious patterns and in the modern history of religious control. Much of what we now call religion in China fell into two separate categories in late imperial China. One was "worship" (拜神), which typified the loosely organized activities based around local temples. These usually had institutional structures that extended only through a village or town, and they lacked priestly leadership and canonized textual traditions (though priests would be hired to conduct rituals). This very loose and local structure is one of the keys to the rapid regrowth of these traditions during the reform period. The second category that we now call "religion" included the "teachings" (教), a category that subsumed organized forms of knowledge passed down by teachers. Most important of these was

the teaching of the scholars (儒教, Confucianism), but Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and eventually Christianity were also classified as teachings.[1]

State policy toward religion changed drastically in the early twentieth century. Both the Nationalist and Communist leaders embraced key nineteenth-century ideas about secularism, especially in the French version that saw a radical separation of Church and State and an attempt to undercut the economic power of religious organizations, often by taking their land. Separating religion from politics in part also meant defining religion as a separate category of thought. One immediate result of this was the coining of a word for "religion" (宗教) for the first time in Chinese, and its definition along roughly Protestant lines as something with a sacred canon, voluntary membership, and trained specialists. By this definition, popular temple worship was only superstition (迷信, another new usage). Confucianism also fell out of the list of religions, because its fit with the standard definition was precarious (as seen by continuing arguments about whether it is a "religion"), even though it was the most exalted example of a "teaching." This Kuomingtang (KMT) legacy continues today in the official sanctioning of just five religions in the People's Republic: Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, and Catholicism.

Marx's basic stand toward religion was that it was an escape for people made miserable by their class position—"the heart of a heartless world."[2] It would simply fade away, he thought, when communism swept away exploitation. When the Chinese Communists took power after 1949, it is perhaps not so surprising that their religious policy was roughly a continuation of the previous decades under KMT rule—distinctly unsympathetic but not determined to exterminate religion entirely. Temples certainly were closed in the 1950s, but in ways very much like what the KMT had done earlier. The most striking difference was that the Communists felt much less need to spare Christianity for diplomatic reasons, and indeed worked hard to excise its significant foreign presence. A more radical seed, however, had been planted by Mao in 1927, when he wrote of religion as one of the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people—an attitude very different from Marx's patronizing sympathy.[3] That seed matured with the Cultural Revolution, which brought a far more antireligious attitude than ever before, and succeeded in stamping out almost all public forms of religiosity and making China appear in polls as the least religious place on the planet.[4]

Although basic attitudes of high cadres toward religion did not change, the policy immediately loosened up with the reforms. Large numbers of small village temples had reopened in some areas by the middle of the 1980s. The most important signal of the new policy was the promulgation in 1982 of "Document 19," which reiterated the basic stand (first taken in the 1950s) of respect for and protection of freedom of religious belief, and the confidence

that religion would wither away on its own. This allowed the eventual reopening and restoration of many religious buildings, the training of new religious specialists, and the renewed performance of their rituals. New regulations issued in 2005 (as well as the law on heretical sects passed after the Falun gong repression in 1999) further clarified many details, but did not offer a new departure. After three decades, much of the work of rebuilding and restoration has been accomplished. That process, however, is only a small part of the changes that have occurred, as we will discuss.

To some extent, the rapid growth of many religions has led the central state to begin reconsidering policy. While no fundamental changes have occurred since Document 19 was issued, there are many signs that a new policy may be possible within a few years. Some regions, for example, experimented with the possibility of registering local temples as a sixth official religion—"Popular Religion" (民间宗教). This did not become central policy, however, and the idea now seems to have been dropped in favor of treating local temples as repositories of Chinese culture and allowing their activities as a kind of folkloric revival. At the same time we see public calls from a few intellectuals for things like registering house churches independently from the official church, which would have been impossible to say a few years ago. The main government offices in charge of religion have also been reaching out. The United Front Department of the Communist Party, for example, has established religious research areas around the country (including temple religion as well as the officially recognized ones). In another sign of change, the State Religious Affairs Bureau has recently established exchange relations with religious studies programs in foreign universities.

While we will return to these long-term possibilities of change in the conclusion, most of this chapter addresses the rapidly evolving situation on the ground right now. For reasons of space, we will concentrate just on the groups that have changed most strikingly. We will begin with local temple religion. Although this rarely shows up in polls because it is not an officially recognized religion, we have evidence of its growth in rural areas across the country. Indeed, there are probably hundreds of millions of people in China who take part in such activities, at least a few times during the year, making this one of the largest (and least recognized) religions in the world. The others that stand out for their size and rate of growth are Buddhism and Protestantism. Numbers of adherents are again extremely uncertain, especially because the boundaries of Buddhism are so porous and because so many Protestants will not register with the official Three Self movement. Nevertheless, all observers agree that we have rapid growth in both cases involving at least many tens of millions of people.

We will spend little time with the other traditions or with issues of religion among China's many ethnic minorities, simply for reasons of space. Let us

briefly note, though, that the past ten years have seen signs of Confucianism coming back in Chinese society: the restoration of ancestral halls and recompilation of genealogies in rural areas, a handful of high-profile intellectuals advocating that Confucianism reassume public roles, the movement to teach Confucian classics in urban centers, the fashion of wearing traditional Chinese robes among some college students, as well as revived state-sponsored sacrificial rites to traditional Confucian cultural icons. Nevertheless, two of the most vital social institutions of Confucianism—the lineage system and the civil service examination system based on the classics—are unlikely to reclaim their former centrality, which will limit the possibilities for a revival. In comparison with Buddhism and Protestantism, the growth of institutional Daoism during the reform era has been lethargic, if measured by the scanty numbers of young clerics and the slow increase of the population of formal lay disciples. For the minorities, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are all very important, but there is also a mosaic of other religious diversity among minorities—much more than we can begin to address here.

As we describe the developments of the three religions, we will focus on three broad issues that crosscut the religious denominations. The first of these is the relation between religion and the state. One of the crucial variables in explaining religious change in China is the kind of space the state has made available for religion, and the ways different traditions have been able to take advantage of it. Each of the five recognized religions was consolidated into a state-controlled association in the 1950s, and all five associations were revived after the Cultural Revolution. In the case of Buddhism and Daoism, which were not historically organized in congregations, these organizations have had relatively successful monopolies due to their control over monastic life and ordination. The Protestant and Catholic organizations, however, have been challenged from the beginning by "house churches" that refuse to accept state oversight and interference in theological matters. Temple religion is equally precarious, in this case because the state does not recognize it as religion at all.

The result is five conservative, careful religious associations with close ties to the State Administration for Religious Affairs. Among them, the Buddhists have probably been most successful at negotiating that position. At the other extreme, we have officially condemned "evil cults" (the term was resurrected from imperial language in the aftermath of Falun gong), which the state actively represses. These include various syncretic sects with long histories in China, and more recently a few radical and indigenous Christian groups. The vast majority of the growth, however, lies in between—a gray zone not technically legal but largely allowed to occur.[5] Repression is always a legal possibility, but in fact a wide range of such religious activity—from massive local temple rituals to large, clearly marked unofficial churches—can be seen across the

country. The intermediate space shows up again in the wide array of government offices with some say over religion, but often with conflicting interests. These include local branches of the Religious Affairs Bureau, the Communist Party's United Front Department, the Tourism Bureau, and sometimes the Civil Affairs Bureau and other departments. The various religious traditions deal with the opportunities and risks of this intermediate zone in quite different ways, which has been crucial for understanding their different rates of growth and potentials for the future.

The second broad issue is the relation between economy and religion, especially with the rapid commercialization of life since the reforms. To what extent does religion shape economic behavior and to what extent does it change as a result of a new economy? Certainly religion has not been immune from the market—its increasing involvement in charity is one kind of response to perceived failures of the market, while increasing feelings that temples and clergy are corrupt is quite another kind of market involvement. One crucial factor here is the relatively low level of institutional control over religion over the past millennium in China, which helps create a high degree of flexibility and adaptability to new economic conditions. At the same time, as we will discuss, the perception of "modernity" has been important in attracting adherents to some religions, especially Protestantism.

Third, the data remind us yet again of China's enormous geographical and social diversity. We will thus be concerned to begin to outline—as far as possible right now when there is still little research on modern religion—some of the major variations. Christianity, Buddhism, temple religion, and the rest exist everywhere in the country, but each also has areas of particular strength. Religious conversion and activity similarly extend across all levels of society, but we sometimes see quite different dynamics between men and women, rural and urban, educated and uneducated, and so on.

Temple Religion

Temple religion suffered in China throughout the twentieth century. Officials considered many associated activities like spirit mediumship to be superstition at best and a dangerous con at worst. Spirit mediums, fortune tellers, *fengshui* experts, and the like had to practice underground or not at all. Gradual closings of temples continued policies from the KMT period. The only attempt at total repression, however, was during the decade of the Cultural Revolution. This was a relatively short period compared to what happened in the Soviet Union, for example. It was not long enough to break social memory.

Indeed, the repression never succeeded completely, even in the most radical years. Many places hid god images, to be worshipped in secret or pulled out of hiding when it became safe, even during the Cultural Revolution. Chau, for example, reports that in its early, most radical years, the spirit of Norman Bethune (widely studied and admired during the period thanks to an essay of Mao's) was performing miracle cures in northern Shaanxi. There was no temple, but people invoked the spirit by uttering his name and smoking his favorite *Yan'an* brand cigarettes.[6] Also in China's northwest, Jing reports that although all local temples at his field site had been dismantled in 1958, an early makeshift shrine had already been established by a female medium in 1975.[7]

Things began to change rapidly in the early years of the reforms. Probably the first thing to return in most areas was ancestor worship, especially where it could be done without a permanent public display (like an ancestral altar). "Sweeping" the graves at the Qingming Festival by offering incense and food and cleaning up the year's plant growth was an obvious candidate, in part because people could always claim quite secular motives if they had to, and partly because it involves no permanent religious structures. One local cadre in Guangxi explained that he was a Communist and an educated man (that is, an unsuperstitious atheist), but that shortly after the Cultural Revolution he had successfully consulted a spirit medium who helped him find his parent's grave so he could sweep it. He had lost track of it during the Cultural Revolution decade.[8]

Spirit mediums also came back relatively quickly in many areas, for similar reasons. Mediums do not need permanent religious structures and can easily work out of residences. They could operate under the radar of any cadres high enough to be concerned. Thus in rural Fujian, Dean reports that local areas that had not yet reconstructed their temples were able to send spirit mediums to festivals.[9] In many areas the initial mediums were all women, even when men had traditionally played that role. This was again because of the insecurities of those first years of opening up—cadres found it easier to ignore or dismiss what women were doing.[10]

Within a few years, however, temple festivals reappeared and temples began to be rebuilt or refurbished. These included a few famous tourist sites that had government support, but also many thousands more built in the full knowledge that there was no government support and that renewed repression was always a possibility. Typically, reconstruction began with the smallest temples (village shrines to earth gods), but in many cases eventually major temples of the past were recreated or even expanded.

Fujian has been one of the centers of this revival. Dean documents the reconstruction of various temples throughout the 1980s, and suggests that there were about a hundred such cases in one county alone.[11] Only a few of these had direct government support, but many drew support from Taiwanese

devotees of the deities in these temples. Local officials often tended to stand aside because they were eager for other forms of Taiwanese investment to accompany the rebuilding of temples.

This may have encouraged a greater density of newly rebuilt temples in Fujian than most other places, but overseas connections were not necessary. One of us (Weller) saw dozens of new earth god temples (社坛) in remote parts of Guangxi in 1985, and major community temples had been rebuilt in many areas by then. In one area of northern Shaanxi, for example, the major temple festival had been revived in 1978—almost the first possible instant—and the temple was rededicated in 1982.[12] Also in the northwest, Jing documents that his field site had eight new or rebuilt temples by 1992, four of them the responsibility of female shamans.[13] Another festival, this time in northern Hebei, had been restored in 1979, as documented by Gao Bingzhong.[14] In this case there had never been a temple, but just a wooden board dedicated to a Dragon King. As the villagers got both wealthier and bolder, they created ever larger and more elaborate boards to substitute for the old one that had been hidden through the Cultural Revolution. They paid 30,000 RMB for the one carved in 1995, and they built a permanent structure for it in 1996, for the first time ever. They report that one hundred thousand people typically attend the annual festival, and this scale is not unusual by the standards of other temples for which we have studies.

We have too few studies to produce a good geography of local temple religion (historically as well as in contemporary times), but most observers would agree that the southeast coast has the greatest density of such activity and that we see at least some activity all across rural China. By the end of the 1990s the spate of rebuilding appeared to have run its course in many areas. In rural Zhejiang, for instance, consecration rituals for new village temples attracted thousands of believers from near and far earlier in the 1990s. By around 2000, however, enthusiasm began to wane and temples found themselves competing for attention.

In some areas, village solidarity has been so weakened that temples no longer have the kind of influence they once did. These temples have become simple profit-making enterprises or have simply given way to other forms of religion.[15] As Wu Keping reports from the highly developed Changzhou area (Jiangsu), for example, village resettlement as a result of rapid urban expansion has nearly wiped out local temple religion because the local communities of support have dissolved. Instead, religious life has been taken over by Buddhism and by spirit mediums.[16] Thus while temple religion thrives all across the country, it is probably most active on the southeast coast (especially Fujian) and less so in the rapidly urbanizing environment of the lower Yangtze valley.

Just as with the rebirth of spirit mediumship, women—especially older women—have often been crucial in the rebirth of temples by initiating the rebuilding, raising funds, and persuading men to help. Old age and female status provided them with a double layer of protection, making them relatively immune to suspicion and suppression from local cadres. This was especially important during the early years of the reforms when there was more repression. It offered women new visibility and power in the religious public sphere, which men had dominated in an earlier era.

In many cases women have retained these new forms of power after temples have been restored, but in others men have taken over again once the political risks diminished and the advantages for building social capital again became clear. One unforeseen consequence of this has been that women founders of temples have sometimes turned them over to Buddhist clergy rather than lose control to men as temples reenter systems of local social capital. This has been especially true in the lower Yangtze region, where Buddhism is thriving (see below). It also allows temples to avoid the difficulties of the unregistered gray zone that temples usually occupy in China today by allowing them to register with the Buddhist association. It is not yet at all clear whether this sort of Buddhist conversion is mere camouflage, or a Buddhist "superscription" on local religion, or the beginning of a fundamental change in religiosity.[17] In many wealthier parts of China, we can also find individuals becoming formal disciples of Buddhist or Daoist clergy. In some cases this is obviously a continuation of long-standing practices of lay devotees, but in others it appears to be simply a purchased document that allows activists in temple religion to make a formal claim that they are part of officially registered religions rather than victims of feudal superstition.

Entrepreneurs are a significant proportion of this last kind of devotee. Whether or not the end result will be a gradual move from temple religion to more standard forms of Buddhism or Daoism, these people remind us that temple religion has a comfortable relationship with the modern economy. Taiwan's temple religion boomed at the exact moment the island became rich. People continue to argue about how correlation and causation may be related in Taiwan's case, but at the very least it tells us that temple religion, in spite of its strong continuities with a much earlier China, is no hindrance at all to modern economic success.

Buddhism

As soon as the Cultural Revolution ended, the restoration of dilapidated Buddhist temples began. Monks were allowed to return to the temples and reassert

the power to run them. As with temple religion, donations from Chinese expatriates, both clergy and laity, greatly aided rebuilding in the 1980s.

The deepening of economic reform since the early 1990s has had a major impact on Buddhism, creating both opportunities and problems. Especially after Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in the spring of 1992, economic development became the paramount objective for government at all levels, both motivating and pressuring officials to develop the local economy. Cadre promotion criteria in many counties have focused almost entirely on how much capital investment they can bring to the county from outside. Under such circumstances, local officials have been driven to exploit every possible resource to stimulate the local economy. Cadres in many areas have seen religion's potential to facilitate the tourist industry and, for some areas, to help bring in other forms of investment from overseas Chinese.

Buddhism has proved to be the most valuable resource for this strategy because of the location of many of its temples in famous scenic spots, its cultural appeal, and its widespread networks of devotees. Indeed, as rapid economic development led to growing affluence for many Chinese, endless streams of tourists and pilgrims swarmed daily to the sacred Buddhist mountains and famous temples. They gave rise to an economic chain that consists of hotels, restaurants, shops for religious goods, tour guides, taxi drivers, and other associated industries.

Local governments are thus responding favorably to initiatives of rebuilding Buddhist temples. In some cases, they themselves have initiated the process. Local government officials, for example, sometimes have tried hard to woo old monks with national fame to preside over the temples in their locality, because these eminent old monks have widespread disciple networks and are able to channel tremendous resources to any temple they help to rebuild. Let us give just one example of this "old monk effect." Fengxin County in Jiangxi Province is a relatively poor county not blessed with many economic resources. It is, however, the site of a historically significant temple where the eminent monk Baizhang in the Tang dynasty purportedly established an early set of rules for Chan monastic discipline. The local county government, interested in tapping into the developing Buddhist tourist economy, generously allocated 192 acres of land for the purpose of rebuilding the temple. In addition, the county officials paid five visits to the renowned monk Benhuan based in Shenzhen City. The ninety-eight-year-old monk finally agreed to assume the abbotship. He and his lay disciples poured 120 million yuan into temple construction. Within two years, a magnificent temple complex emerged from the bucolic surroundings. The temple, scheduled to open in early 2010, is expected to create an influx of pilgrims and tourists and help to boost the local economy.[18] Fengxin County has also invested heavily in the infrastructure of

this promising tourist site. By the end of 2007, they had completed a 15-kilometer-long highway to replace the original zigzagging and bumpy dirt road leading to the location of the temple.

Corporate interests too covet the commercial value of Buddhism. These companies, which generally have strong government background, are participating in projects to build giant Buddha statues and Buddhist theme parks or tourist complexes. Other groups that cash in on Buddhist temples include the nearby villagers who act as incense sellers, tourist guides, photo takers, and fortune tellers. Their unrestrained moneymaking activities often interfere with the operation of the temples. In the face of market forces, some Buddhist temples have taken the initiative and tried to exploit the commercial potential themselves. The most (in)famous example is the Shaolin Temple in Dengfeng City, Henan Province. Known as the legendary birthplace of both Chan practice and martial arts, it became a cultural icon, thanks to some widely popular kungfu films and novels. Under the leadership of the monk Yongxin, who assumed the abbotship in 1987, Shaolin has taken advantage of its fame and made a series of commercial moves, including kungfu shows of Shaolin monks around the globe, film productions, hosting reality TV shows for kungfu stars, and online selling of Shaolin-related products from secret kungfu recipes to chopsticks. In 2006, the Dengfeng municipal government awarded Yongxin a German Volkswagen SUV for his "extraordinary contribution to developing local tourism."[19]

This tendency toward internal commercial secularization intensified when the new generation of monks born in the 1950s and 1960s assumed abbotships. Unlike the old generation of monks who are withering away, many of these new leaders have little experience of Chan hall training but have strong administrative skills and great political finesse.[20] They have an affinity with the bureaucrats because they share the mindset of developmentalism.

Modern technology, management skills, and business development can serve religious ends, but much of the concern now is that religion is becoming simply a façade for business ventures and the bait for generous donation and spending. Furthermore, the means many Buddhist temples employ to acquire income (even if they try to justify the means in light of religious or charitable ends) are questionable, some in direct contradiction with the Buddhist spirit. The not uncommon practices of inveigling visitors into burning exorbitantly priced incense before Buddha statues, selling bell-tolling rights at New Year's Eve, and holding auctions of purportedly consecrated (开光) cell phone numbers have downgraded temples into moneymaking enterprises, clerics into salespersons.

In certain ways, this kind of entrepreneurial approach creates an economic win-win situation for Buddhist temples, their local government, and the neighboring community. Its economic value (combined, of course, with its

recognition as one of the five official religions) has made state legitimation easier for Buddhist temples than for those in most other traditions. As a source of significant income, such temples can bargain with the state for a higher degree of autonomy. The economic value of Buddhism, however, is a double-edged sword. It makes Buddhism easy prey to various interest groups and is a source of conflict and contestation. Conflicts might rise over disagreements about profit distribution. Temples might bicker with Tourism Bureau or corporate interests on issues like the price of entry tickets, and who gets the bigger share of the income from tickets. Conflicts might also rise when Buddhist temples resist the forces encroaching on their autonomy and take radical actions to assert their religious identity. The first half of 2009 witnessed several such incidents: two important and vigorous Buddhist temples, the Bailin Temple in Hebei Province and the Famen Temple in Shaanxi Province, both announced that they would close the temples to public access as a protest against the predatory commercial forces that impinged on their autonomy. Without doubt, similar incidents will occur in the future. Some of the Buddhist temples are becoming stronger and more self-assertive about their religious identity. On the other hand, the local governments have not changed their attitude toward Buddhist temples, seeing them primarily as profit-generating machines. They still adopt a developmental mentality and authoritarian style when dealing with temples. Furthermore, capitalists looking for high-return investments covet the commercial value of Buddhist temples. They and the local government easily form allies. Often the local governments are the developers themselves. Thus, even though Buddhism has tended to be politically safe—not advancing into the gray zone where both temple religion and Christianity (see below) have thrived—it is still forced into extensive negotiation with the state.

The overt commercialization practices of some temples may bring wealth to temples in the short run, but they also risk overspending and abusing their "spiritual capital" and thus eating away the very foundation on which faith in temples and sangha is built. In effect, much of this damage has already been done. The Shaolin Temple, the pioneer of such commercialization, has found itself in the center of controversy. In several polls carried out by news websites, public opinion toward Shaolin's business moves and its abbot's accepting the German SUV was overwhelmingly negative and the netizens expressed their contempt, ridicule, and regret in chat rooms.[21] The recent Internet uproar shows that the public, Buddhist practitioners or not, holds some basic expectations of how a Buddhist monk or a temple should act. In adapting to modernity and riding the tide of market forces, many feel that Buddhism should at least uphold its religious core. The secularization has been so rampant that the former head of China's State Religious Affairs Bureau, Ye Xiaowen (not known as

a man of great religious conviction himself), called on the Buddhist sangha to take the Vinaya (precepts and monastic rules) as their master (以戒为师) at an important meeting of the Buddhist Association of China in 2006.[22]

The Buddhist world is aware of the danger of commercial secularization. Some monasteries stress the importance of upholding the Vinaya rules, and they have earned the respect of Buddhist believers. Two monasteries in particular, the Pushou Temple on Mt. Wutai in the north, and the Pingxin Temple in Fujian in the south have emerged as new pilgrimage destinations for the Buddhist practitioners because of their strict adherence to the Buddhist precepts and ascetic practices.

There is also a type of temple that diligently preserves religious traditions but remains more actively engaged with society. The Bailin Temple in Hebei Province is a forerunner and one of the most successful examples of promoting the Buddhist Dharma through cultural and educational means. It publishes a Buddhist periodical and books, and organizes meditation retreats. The most noteworthy achievements have been the sixteen summer camps they have organized for college students since 1993. Other temples emulate the practices of the Bailin Temple, and summer camps organized by Buddhist temples are now sprouting across China. Some monasteries or lay Buddhist associations have also been involved in charitable work, from disaster relief to building old-age homes. They work to patch the gaps in people's lives that neither the market nor the state is currently filling. Even those temples being criticized for going too far down the road of commercialization have made efforts to return to their religious core in recent years. The Shaolin Temple, for example, partially salvaged its image within Buddhist circles by launching a meditation retreat in 2006, and sponsoring the grand ordination ceremony in 2007.

Protestantism

The growth of Protestantism in the past thirty years has been spectacular. Other religions have tried simply to recover from the wreckage of the Cultural Revolution, but Protestantism has far surpassed its 1949 level. It has been the fastest growing religion in the reform era.[23] Protestantism in China is divided into two segments: (1) the government-sanctioned churches that are associated with the committee of the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and its ecclesiastical extension, the China Christian Council (CCC); and (2) the house churches not registered with the government. The TSPM and the CCC are commonly referred to as the "two committees." Like the Buddhist Association of China, they form the leadership structure of the official churches and are directed by the State Administration for Religious Affairs.

With a sea change in the CCP's religious policies after the Cultural Revolution, the government reinstalled the TSPM in 1979 and formed the CCC in 1980. The official church recovered much of its property, reopened sites for collective gatherings, ran seminaries, and published national Christian journals. The official 2006 membership figure of 16 million Protestants, compared with the 1949 figure of 870,000, indicated a growth of almost twenty times during the last three decades. However, this number does not take into account membership unaffiliated with the official churches. The growth of these unregistered house churches is even more vigorous than that of the state-sanctioned churches. As we now know, house churches, particularly in Henan, Anhui, Shandong, and Zhejiang, continued to meet in secret even during the most repressive time.[24] The liberalization of the state religious policy has enabled the house churches to engage in more open and active activities. Unlike the official churches, they refuse to be burdened by abiding by state policy constraints on evangelization, and recruit avidly. Also, the more intimate relationship among its members and the vigor it displays often makes a house church much more appealing to seekers.[25]

There are many strands within the category of house churches.[26] We will highlight three types, as they probably represent the three most influential or potentially influential models.[27] Each is a noticeable social phenomenon on its own terms and has distinctive leadership and organizational attributes. There is some commonality but also clear differences in each type's relationship with the state and its interaction with the market economy.

First, there are the house churches in rural Henan and Anhui, especially along the Huai River valley. Starting from the 1970s, this region has seen a remarkable spread of Protestantism. Illiterate or semi-illiterate itinerant evangelists made up a core of charismatic leaders and zealous preachers, who have been extremely successful in recruiting the rural poor. Then, by taking advantage of the converts' existing social bonds of family, friends, and neighbors, Protestantism expanded rapidly to the wider population. The tremendous increase of Protestantism in these areas actually owes a great deal to the Communist state because the state effectively wiped out or weakened the main local foes and competitors of Christianity—the lineage groups and the gentry class, and other religions and sects. Indeed, the peasants found Protestantism a good substitute for popular religion and were first attracted to it precisely because the kind of Protestantism trumpeted by the rural preachers had elements reminiscent of popular religion, for example, supernatural healing, exorcism, and petitionary prayers for health and wealth.[28]

As the rural churches further expanded, they began to be afflicted by a number of problems—lack of theological training of the preachers, personality cults, embezzlement of overseas donations, authoritarianism, conflicts

between different sects, and some Christian offshoots that drifted far from their roots and sometimes into violence. The problem of these "heresies" has been recognized by some church leaders and members. In fact, one of the chief motivations behind the drafting of *The Manifesto of Chinese House Churches* (中国家庭教会宣言) by Henan house church leaders in 1998 was to facilitate doctrinal unity among different sects and churches, and to separate themselves from Christian sects they saw as heretical.

The fervent evangelization, the large scale of the churches, the firm control of a mother church over a number of smaller churches, together with the above-mentioned problems made local officials wary and unnerved. The Henan house churches have suffered intermittently from police raids and some church leaders were imprisoned. The tension with the state has reinforced the sectarian tendency of these rural churches. Their mistrust and antagonism toward the local state and the government-sanctioned Three Self churches are too deep-rooted for them to compromise easily.

The second major Protestant type is the Wenzhou model. The Wenzhou model of economic development, characterized by privately owned businesses thriving by producing and selling small merchandise, was used to explain the marvelous rise of Wenzhou from an impoverished rural town to one of China's most affluent cities and regional hub of global capitalism during reform-era China. Perhaps less known to the world, Wenzhou also earned the nickname of "China's Jerusalem" during the same period. Located on China's east coast, Wenzhou became an important base of foreign missionary activities as early as the Qing dynasty, especially for the United Methodist Free Church and China Inland Mission. Wenzhou has also been deeply influenced by the "Local Church" movement led by Watchman Nee, one of the most influential Christian leaders in twentieth-century China. By 1949, Wenzhou already had approximately 70,000 Protestants. Geographically isolated and politically distant from the center, believers were able to keep their faith even during the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution. Even before the Cultural Revolution ended, Wenzhou has already witnessed the dawn of a Protestant revival. Now the city is home to more than 1,200 churches and an estimated 700,000–1,000,000 Protestants, which amounts to very roughly 12 percent of the local population.[29] In comparison with the rural churches in Henan and Anhui, Wenzhou churches, with more than one hundred years of Protestant influence, are less vulnerable to sectarian offshoots. In addition, the inherited church structure has made Wenzhou churches less likely breeding grounds for charismatic and authoritarian leaderships.

One of the most distinctive features of the Wenzhou model of Protestantism is that the new generation church leaders are often at the same time successful private business owners. These "boss Christians" have made generous offerings

to church coffers, aggressively acquired assets for churches, helped erect sumptuous church buildings, invited famous preachers from other areas to provide pastoral services, trumpeted prosperity theology in their congregations, orchestrated mass Christmas celebrations, and spread their faith by taking advantage of their widespread existing business networks.[30] Their enthusiasm in expansion and evangelization was boosted by their entrepreneurial pursuit for a bigger share in the market. Their audacity to think big and act bold was not only a reflection of the self-confidence based on their success in the market economy, but also an enactment of the developmentalism they fully embraced.

Unlike the Henan Christian leaders, who suffer from state repression and who are a marginalized social group, these affluent Wenzhou Christians, social elites in mainstream society, have adroitly built social connections with local cadres and used those connections to win some security from the state for house churches they built or managed. Sometimes they have also been able to secure the local state's permission or at least acquiescence to evangelize in the localities where they have business investments.

The third major form consists of urban house churches in Beijing and other cities. In recent years the house churches in metropolitan cities have risen in significance, not only because of their rapidly growing membership, but also because of their increasing social impact. These urban house churches, especially those in Beijing, have attracted well-educated professionals, college and graduate students, writers and artists.[32] Many of these believers or seekers are young people born after the 1970s. They find Christianity "liberating, democratic, modern, cosmopolitan, or universal."[33] These same traits made Christianity a favored religion among social activists and political dissidents. Although currently these urban church members constitute an insignificant percentage of the Christian population in China, they will be able to exert disproportionate influence on the Chinese Christian community in years to come. The emphasis on the importance of theological training and institution building by the urban churches has set an example for other churches to follow. They are open to dialogue with other intellectuals and government officials and would like Protestantism to become more actively engaged in the discursive arena of the public sphere instead of having to retreat to their sectarian enclave. These urban elite Christians are thus quite discontent with remaining in the gray area and in recent years are the most active Christian groups calling on the government to revise the current church registration system to allow house churches to register on a par with the TSPM churches rather than register under them.[34]

The urban house churches had little interference from the government until 2008 when a number of house churches in Beijing and Chengdu were raided by government agencies. As these churches are well connected with the

overseas Christian community, these incidents immediately evoked an international outcry. Most noticeably, the Autumn Rain Church of Chengdu, headed by a social activist and lawyer, sued the county Religious Affairs Bureau for transgressing the appropriate legal procedure and violating the religious freedom guaranteed in the Constitution.[35] Using legal weapons to defend their rights has become a commonly accepted practice among the urban Christian churches.

The state in general remains uneasy with Protestantism, especially the house church movement, compared with its relatively relaxed attitude toward Buddhism and popular religion. Although they live within the same legal and regulatory framework set by the central state, the three types of house churches have very different relationships with the local officials, as we have seen above. It is the local state more than central policy that directly shapes the sociopolitical milieu in which they operate. Even within the same prefecture, the religious governance of neighboring counties can be drastically different. In spite of internal variations, as a rule, the Henan house churches have an antagonistic relationship with the repressive local government offices, while the relationship between the Wenzhou churches and the local cadres often is more harmonious. The urban churches led by elite intellectuals, on the other hand, are actively seeking to engage the state in dialogues and pushing for a fundamental change of the existing restrictive and discriminatory legal framework toward house churches.

Current religious policy appears unable to curb the growth of Protestantism at all. Unlike Buddhism and the more compliant TSPM churches, house churches exert little self-censorship in evangelization work, which contributes to their more rapid growth. The state's outright repressive measures are bound to elicit international criticism on human rights, which Beijing has to take into consideration. Moreover, the house church movement has already become a powerful social force, and the state cannot afford to further solidify and radicalize them.

Protestantism has been able to gain converts across China, from a wide range of age groups and from very different socioeconomic groups, from marginalized peasants, the new rich, the urban middle class, and elite intellectuals. What makes Protestantism the fastest growing religion in China today? First we would point to the inner drive of evangelicalism of Protestantism. In comparison with the enthusiastic proselytization efforts of Protestantism, Buddhism as a whole appears rather inert. Protestantism not only has many skillful and persistent evangelists who dedicate their lives to spreading the faith, it also prompts all believers to evangelize in the social networks in which they are embedded. Moreover, it devises strategies to recruit nonnetworked strangers.[36]

Protestantism has also been developing a much firmer base in the local communities than Buddhism. By appropriating personal ties—family members, neighbors, friends and colleagues—to spread its messages, Protestantism is able to encapsulate an increasingly wider but connected community. Such a move has also brought about long-term demographic change in the congregation. In the beginning of the 1980s, in the rural areas, both Buddhism and Protestantism appeared to be religions of old women. Now with the lapse of some twenty years, more young people have joined the Protestant community and the sex ratio has become more balanced, while Buddhism remains predominantly for middle-aged and old women. The pastoral care that Protestant churches are performing helps to stabilize the community of the faithful and binds them together. In contrast, while monks in small Buddhist temples make a living by performing rituals for local patrons, major Buddhist monasteries are primarily transterritorial entities in the sense that they value more their relationship with those socioeconomically advantaged patrons from afar. In both cases, little effort has been made to take care of the local communities in which Buddhist temples are embedded. Even believers who have already taken formal refuge with Buddhism are basically left to their own devices for spiritual growth.

The current restrictive religious policy actually has hampered the growth of the more compliant religions like Buddhism rather than unregistered Protestant churches. Although the state prohibits religious activities outside of the designated religious sites, underground Protestantism has exercised little self-restraint in evangelization. Instead, they invented ways to circumvent the radar of state surveillance, for example, door-to-door proselytizing in the countryside, cultural performances with Christian messages in the cities, and proselytization in overcrowded public spaces.[37]

The rapid growth of Protestantism in China, however, is accompanied by fission, discord, and disputes. Conflicts will continue to thwart any promise of unity in the future—not just those between government-sponsored and house churches, but also within the house church segment, like the conflicts between the conservative Local Churches and the charismatic movement, between self-regarded orthodoxy and heterodoxy, between the more conciliatory groups and the adamantly antistate groups, between the groups promoting Protestantism to become a public religion and the sectarian groups that accuse them of succumbing to the world.

Conclusion

One of the striking features of Chinese religions over the three decades of the reform period has been the speed of change. This involves significant new

variations in every tradition, not simply recapturing earlier levels of religiosity. Along with these new adaptations we can see broad lines of regional variation that we have been able to mention only briefly. Thus, even though all the traditions we have discussed exist across the entire country (along with some others, like Islam or Catholicism), some areas have developed concentrations of particular traditions: Protestantism in the Huai River region, Buddhism in the lower Yangtze, and temple religion in the southeast coast.

One reason for this variability in time and space is the relative lack of very strong institutions of religious control in China ever since (pre-Christian) religion took roughly its current form in the Song dynasty. There is a striking historical contrast with the Orthodox Church in Russia, or the Roman Catholic Church in West Europe, or Islam in Saudi Arabia. Unlike those cases, central control over Buddhist or Daoist ritual practice, ordination, and textual interpretation was quite weak. For the temple religion that framed the lives of most people, there were no central institutions at all, with religious authority generally stopping at the temple in the nearby town or the relatively educated man down the street.

The lack of strong centralized traditions has allowed all kinds of religion to develop quickly and flexibly in China, in spite of a very new economic environment. This holds some ironies and some lessons for current government policy, which has in general pushed in just the opposite direction. Religious policy has changed greatly since the near complete repression of the Cultural Revolution, but has maintained the general attempt of the 1950s (pioneered much earlier by the KMT) to allow only religions with strong centralized control through the five official associations. The rapid growth and adaptation, however, has happened almost entirely at or beyond the boundaries of those official institutions.

We see this in every tradition we have examined. The empowerment of women in the rebuilding of village temples is one example. Temple religion itself, of course, is entirely beyond the State Administration for Religious Affairs because it does not meet their definition of religion. The experiments of a few years ago in registering temples as a sixth official religion appear now to have been abandoned. Instead, some local temples have been able to register as Buddhist or Daoist temples. The long-term consequences of this are still unclear, but it might lead to a push toward greater monastic control and, especially for the Buddhists, more widespread changes in ritual practice. Recently it has become common for temples to find some political legitimacy by claiming folkloric value as repositories of traditional culture. At the same time, Buddhist monasteries are increasingly experimenting with new social positioning, sometimes inspired by the enormous success of Taiwanese Buddhist groups in gathering support in Taiwan and around the world.

Protestants, although they have an official association, have been active above all in the gray zone, with churches that refuse to cooperate with the official Three Self Patriotic Movement and that even ordain their own ministers. These churches are no longer underground at all, in the sense that they often occupy large, clearly marked buildings that attract hundreds of worshippers, but they still completely reject the state religious project and could be legally subject (just like temple religion) to repression at any time. This sector is growing especially quickly, in part because Protestantism is so skilled at working in this gray zone. Much more than the Buddhists or Daoists, who have tended to recognize and live within the authority structures of the official associations, the Protestants have been able to capitalize on their ability to work the interstices of the system. One of the greatest unintended consequences of government policy has thus been the very rapid expansion of Christianity at the expense of older Chinese traditions that remain more clearly within the law. Protestants, for example, missionize among rural migrants to cities—a group that temple religion is not well placed to serve and that Buddhism has been too cautious to approach.

These limitations on the earlier traditions are very different from all other contemporary Chinese societies, which lack comparable policies. In Hong Kong, Chinese communities of Southeast Asia, and especially Taiwan the most rapid growth has been in temple religion and Buddhism rather than Christianity. The kinds of space left open by current state policy have thus had quite different implications for the different religious traditions. Large parts of Protestantism and temple religion have thrived in the gray zone, officially disapproved but usually permitted. Buddhism, on the whole, has maintained a congenial relationship with the government, staying within sanctioned boundaries and taking advantage of state support (as in the hosting of the 2007 and 2009 World Buddhist Forums). Buddhism's contribution to boosting local tourist industry has made local governments adopt policies favorable to the rebuilding and expansion of Buddhist temples. However, exploitation of the economic value of Buddhism has also led to consequences detrimental to the growth of the religion in the long run, especially the overcommercialization of temples.

The traditions also vary significantly in their relationship to the market economy that has increasingly characterized the last thirty years. To a great extent temple religion was already comfortable with the commodity aspect of China's earlier economy. Temples had long been run as shareholding corporations that depended on a "market" of donations, and worship was often for purely pragmatic goals (including market success). Combined with the relative lack of institutional constraints, this has allowed such practices to thrive in all modern Chinese societies, including the mainland after the reforms.

The situation has been more complex for the more institutionalized traditions like Buddhism or Daoism. They lost their earlier economic base in monastic landholding, and have had a greater adjustment to make. In addition, both have to work through the institutional inertia of the state-controlled associations. On the other hand, both can also offer a long legacy of moral thought, and this often appeals to people looking for an alternative to the perceived selfishness and greed they experience as the market economy comes to dominate. Here the Buddhists and the Christians have been far more nimble than the Daoists at taking over this position.

Most traditions evolve some combination of helping people with the new economy and offering alternatives to its failings through charity or by offering new moral worlds. Temple religion easily embraces the market, and also develops as part of the reemerging world of rural social capital. Buddhism has tended to concentrate on the other approach of offering a moral alternative, although the obvious commercialization of some monasteries tends to undercut the moral message, as we discussed above. The Protestants have managed to do both strategies at once with great success. On the one hand, the rural evangelical churches have satisfied people's needs for healing in particular, while urban churches have found champions in wealthy entrepreneurs who attribute their wealth to Christianity. At the same time, the churches preach a moral message that people find appealing as an alternative to the image of a tooth-and-claw market (just as they do in the United States). Perhaps most striking is the way that Protestants have successfully positioned themselves, especially in urban areas, as being the cultural key to modernity. This shows up both in intellectual calls for a relatively nontheistic "cultural Christianity" as well as in the Wenzhou entrepreneurs who keep their copy of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic* next to their Bible.[38] There is nothing automatic about this positioning, and it has not happened in most other Chinese societies. We have seen a rekindled Buddhism able to take advantage of this niche in Taiwan, for example. This has so far not been possible in China because of the weight of government control over Buddhism, which the Protestants do not accept.

What will the next thirty years bring? There are, of course, far too many unknowns to try to answer with any confidence, although there is little reason to expect a return to the antireligion environment that dominated just before the reforms. Given China's history of great religious diversity, it also seems unlikely that we will see any one tradition come to monopolize the field. Still, the last thirty years have brought a major reproportioning in the strength of the various traditions. Actual rates of growth are impossible to determine, both because so much religious activity is unregistered and because adherence to any of the non-Christian traditions is extremely difficult to define. The overall trends seem clear enough, though. Protestantism has increased ex-

tremely rapidly, especially in some areas; Catholics are expanding much more slowly, but are important in a few places. Buddhism is increasing statistically although some of that surely represents adherents of temple religion. Institutional Daoism is struggling by comparison. Temple religion, while clearly thriving in many parts of the country, will stagnate eventually unless it is able to move beyond strong roots in rural villages.

Our closest comparative case to China is Taiwan. In Taiwan, as in many places, great success in the market economy also accompanied a religious boom. Temple religion there, which thrived as the economy grew rapidly several decades ago, has indeed suffered as migration weakened village ties. On the other hand, this has been counterbalanced by its successful rise in modern urban areas and by the central role that several temples (especially the cult of the goddess Mazu) play on an islandwide basis—much larger than the usual field of influence for a popular temple.

Most striking of all in Taiwan has been the rapid rise of the new humanistic Buddhist (人间佛教) groups, several of which claim millions of adherents and have spread around the world. This new Buddhism is seen as both consistent with modernity and as an antidote to the malaise of modernity. Moreover, Taiwanese Buddhist organizations have developed disciplinary practices to ensure the penetration of Buddhism into believers' daily lives. In China, on the other hand, Buddhism just embarked on the modernization project, but is now in danger of being bogged down in commercialization brought about by the unbridled market forces. On the mainland it is Protestants who have been far more successful so far in positioning themselves as the religion of modernity, especially in urban areas, while they remain moribund in Taiwan.

Much of this difference is due to government policy. Both governments inherited the early KMT antipathy to religion, especially temple religion. Both also developed roughly corporatist mechanisms to control religion. Both saw rapid growth in the resulting gray areas. In Taiwan, however, all of that ended in 1987 with democratization. While the major Buddhist groups existed before that, their rapid growth occurred at exactly the moment when the relationship between state and society changed, and the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China lost its grip over the religion. Freed up to behave like genuine social organizations in the public sphere, the Buddhists were able to rework their traditions into something with enormous appeal.

This has not happened in China because the current policy of tight nominal control but loose supervision of the gray area has handcuffed the cooperative Buddhists (and Daoists) and left the field open to others. A change in this situation within the next few years, however, seems plausible. We have already mentioned signs that the central organs in charge of religious policy (the State Administration for Religious Affairs and the United Front Department of the

CCP) have become much more open to new ideas. It seems to have become clear to policymakers that current policy is failing to control or even effectively monitor religious growth, and that the patterns of growth are unexpected.

Any fundamental change, however, will mean revising the monopoly power of the five religious associations. First, the condemnation of temple religion as "feudal superstition" has clearly not had the desired result of discouraging it. Moving away from the idea of legitimizing it as a sixth religion, the policy might turn to three current directions: (1) toward temples as folkloric repositories of Chinese culture (registered with local cultural departments); (2) toward temples as NGOs that provide services (registered with civil affairs departments or related units); and (3) affiliating, at least nominally, with the Buddhist or Daoist Association. In all cases the adjustments raise questions about the long-term effects on local practice. How much of a difference does it make that a temple also has a sign declaring it a museum of "dragon culture," that it runs an arboretum or school on the side, or that it has brought in a monk as manager?

Christianity poses the most difficult problem for the government, because the registration system is already clear, but it is so widely and openly resisted that it is hard to see how the registration system can be patched. One possibility is to give up on the attempt at institutional and theological unity through the five religious associations, and simply allow groups to register directly with the government. From the government's point of view, this would have several advantages. It would end a situation where tens of millions of Christians see themselves at least partially acting against the will of the state and it would allow far more effective monitoring. At the same time, applying the same policy to Buddhists would open up new space for them to develop as more plausible competitors to the Christians (as they have done so successfully in Taiwan).

Yet such a change will not be easy or obvious either. In part, officials worry that it will encourage dangerous sectarian offshoots (although that is happening anyway). More importantly, it would mark a change in how state and society relate to each other, where we would have large numbers of groups not directly under the control of any corporatist association—the beginnings of a genuine public sphere. This would solve many problems of religious policy, but will probably require a longer time frame than just the next few years.