Religion in China Today: Introduction

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In the last 20 years religious traditions in many parts of China have revived their activities and organizations and rebuilt their temples, mosques and churches, despite decades of strict regulation and repression by the government. This revival is an aspect of the greater social freedom that has accompanied the economic development and diversification of that period. The government is trying to maintain political control, and legal restrictions remain, but wherever local conditions permit, religious activities come bubbling to the surface, festivals for the gods are held, traditional funerals and burial rituals are restored, destroyed images and shrines are replaced, priests reappear to perform rituals, and congregations meet to worship. There is some outside help for these revived activities, from such sources as overseas Chinese lineages, temples for the same gods in Taiwan, Muslim and Buddhist organizations in the Near East and South-East Asia, and Christian missions, but the fundamental impetus is the faith and devotion of the Chinese people themselves. All of this involves both the partial restoration of older traditions and adaptation to the present economic and social situation. Religious beliefs and rituals are an important and growing reality in modern Chinese society, which cannot be fully understood without taking them into account. They are also an important political issue for the government, because according to orthodox Marxist theory religion is supposed to wither away as socialism is established, but this has not happened. On the contrary, religious traditions with completely non-Marxist ideologies are flourishing, which amounts to a challenge to the authority of the Party and state. A closely related issue is religious freedom, which is important in China's relations with many other countries, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist. It is our hope here to provide much-needed information about this vital aspect of contemporary Chinese life, culture and politics.

This special issue is co-sponsored by *The China Quarterly*, the Institute of Asian Research of the University of British Columbia, and the Fundação Oriente, an academic foundation in Portugal. Its eleven articles are all by scholars who are among the best in the world on their topics, from universities in Canada, the United States, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, while one of the discussants/reviewers is Timothy Barrett of the University of London. The other reviewer is Diana Lary of the University of British Columbia. All of these authors have done fieldwork in China. The project began with discussion in 2001 among Pitman Potter, Diana Lary and Dan Overmyer of UBC, and Richard Louis Edmonds of the University of London, then the editor of *The China Quarterly*. We identified topics and scholars, and then solicited articles, the drafts of which were discussed at a conference in Arrábida, Portugal in the autumn of 2002, supported by the Fundação Oriente and its director, Mr João Amorim. We are grateful to the Fundação for this support, which was an

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important contribution to our project. There are many studies of contemporary Chinese politics and economics, but few of the current situation of Chinese religions, so the goal of this project is to provide the best available information about this topic for non-specialist readers.

The first of the following contributions, on Chinese government policies towards religion, is by Pitman Potter, a scholar of Chinese law and politics. For many hundreds of years the Chinese state in all its forms has assumed that it has the right and obligation to control every aspect of life, including religious beliefs and practices. The state has always been particularly concerned to control organized groups with their own allegiances, from family lineages and private academies to Buddhist monasteries and popular religious sects. Until the mid 20th century poor communications and weak local government administration hindered the application of this ideology of control, but in the People's Republic such administration has been much more effective, and policies toward religion more strict. According to the Chinese constitution, people have the freedom to believe or not believe in religion, but this refers to government-approved forms of five major traditions, Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, and Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity. Independent groups associated with these traditions are proscribed, as are traditional Chinese popular religious sects, which were once widespread. But the most serious problem with this limited definition of approved religions is that it leaves out the beliefs and rituals of the great majority of the Chinese people as practised in families and local communities. This ancient and varied local tradition, institutionalized in the midst of ordinary social life, is based on the worship of ancestors and protective deities in domestic shrines and community temples. It has long provided community identity and cohesion, and support for traditional social values. However, in the People's Republic all of this has been labelled "feudal superstition" unworthy of recognition as religion, and hence subject to repression and destruction.

Pitman Potter discusses the recent history of government policies towards religion, and the changes that have taken place since the end of what is called the "Cultural Revolution," 1966–76, a period of particularly intense destruction of old social and cultural traditions. Though the state has continued its emphasis on social control, there has been a gradual liberalization of policies towards religion since about 1982, while in 1990 Jiang Zemin urged a "more tolerant management of religious organizations." Nevertheless, leaders of unauthorized Muslim, Roman Catholic and Protestant groups continue to be subject to arrest, as are Tibetan Buddhists who support the Dalai Lama and members of the outlawed *falun gong* movement discussed by Nancy Chen below. In some areas local ritual traditions and temples have been allowed to revive, but they still have no legal status or protection.

The term "religion" in this article means worship of symbols that are believed to represent extra-human power, either natural objects such as large rocks and trees, or personified deities. The goals of such worship range from seeking immediate practical aid like healing and safe child-

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birth to harmonizing oneself with cosmic forces. By this definition, the rituals and beliefs of Chinese local communities are as much religion as any other.[1] Since community traditions are the foundation and quantitative mainstream of Chinese religions, four of the contributions to this special issue are devoted to them as they appear in different areas of the country. The first of these is by Kenneth Dean, an anthropologist and historian of religions at McGill University in Montreal. His topic is local communal religion in contemporary South-east China, the area where such practices have most strongly revived in the last 20 years, in part because of the influence of Taiwan, just 90 miles from the coast of Fujian province. The opening pages of Dean's article provide a good definition of his topic, emphasizing communal rituals centred in temples dedicated to a variety of gods, annual festivals, individual offerings of incense, food and drink, and divination, all of which require complex local organization. He notes the destructive results of official policies and the "extraordinary acts of courage and devotion that enabled the survival and growth of local community religion in China today." Dean emphasizes that annual rituals mobilize the entire populations of rural villages, and can also connect the villages in a whole area through annual processions in honour of their gods. These temple networks can be the most immediate and effective form of local organization, "an unofficial level of local governance." Together with his Chinese colleagues Dean has surveyed the lineages, cults and ritual activities of over 600 villages in one area of Fujian. Though much has been revived, the effects of repression by both Republican and communist governments can still be seen in ruined temples and depleted rituals, with much variation among local areas. In the cities temples have been completely destroyed in most areas so that young people have no way of learning about traditional religious practices; hence, there can be sharp differences between urban and rural areas. However, even in rural areas symbols of modernity can be incorporated in tradition, so temple committees can provide for audio-visual records of festivals, and images of Mao Zedong and banners with official slogans can be carried in religious processions.

Fan Lizhu, a sociologist from Fudan University in Shanghai, deals with an example of local community religion in north China, the activities of a woman spirit-medium in a small village in Hebei province. This woman is believed to represent an ancient goddess, the Silkworm Mother, to whom people turn for healing illnesses not cured by Western or Chinese medicine, the cost of which they may not be able to afford. Several specific cases of such healing are discussed. This delightful little study takes us to the heart of Chinese village religion, with its emphasis on practical aid.

The survey of local community traditions is continued by Liu Tik-sang, an anthropologist from the Hong Kong University of Science and Tech-

1. The meaning of the term "cult" in this special issue is that of the Oxford English Dictionary, "Worship; reverential homage rendered to a divine being," that is, it is here intended as a neutral descriptive term without the pejorative meanings sometimes associated with it.

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nology who is a specialist in the activities of ordinary people in Hong Kong and its surrounding Zhu (Pearl) River delta. His report emphasizes the mutually supportive relationship between rituals and the organization of local households, communities and lineages, all of them based on a traditional view of the close connections between humans, deities and extrahuman forces in the environment. He also discusses the ways in which people continue their worship in a new urban setting, and the importance of *fengshui*, the art of aligning buildings and graves in accord with cosmic forces believed to be present in the landscape. These and other popular practices are carried out in a completely matter-of-fact way by many thousands of people in the modern societies and economies of Hong Kong and Macau as expressions of their own identity and culture. As is the case with Taiwan, religious practices in these two areas have not been subject to severe repression, so are important manifestations of contemporary Chinese religious faith and practice.

The most vibrant religious scene in the Chinese-speaking world is in Taiwan, which now has a democratically elected government and complete religious freedom. Taiwan's modern society and economy are a standing refutation of the old idea that religion will fade away as modernity advances. On the contrary, new freedom and economic resources have led to an increase of religious activities of all kinds, including those of local temples, Buddhist monasteries and charitable organizations, and a variety of new religious groups. Long-suppressed religious sects now have magnificent new temples and publicly distribute their scriptures and tracts. Local religious traditions are understood as an integral part of Taiwanese identity, while politicians seek the support of gods and temples for their campaigns. All of this is discussed here by Paul R. Katz, a historian who has long taught and done research in Taiwan and is now at the Academia Sinica in Taipei. His focus is on the relationship of religion and the state, and on the role of religion in providing a Taiwan form of civil society, a social space between private life and the state. He also discusses the efforts by devotees of the goddess Mazu to visit older temples to her on the mainland, and to invite mainland worshippers to bring a famous image of the goddess to Taiwan. Many Taiwan scholars now study their own religious traditions, a Taiwan Association of Religious Studies has been established, and there are now eleven university departments of religious studies and a new graduate institute devoted to that topic. Though the repression of religious activities on Taiwan was never so severe as in the People's Republic, freedom of religion did not fully develop there until after the lifting of martial law in 1987, so here as in other areas Taiwan provides a good example for the People's Republic to follow.

The oldest religious traditions in China are those of local communities, the emperor and state, and Daoism, though Buddhism began to arrive from India and Central Asia in the first century CE at about the same time that the Daoist religious tradition started to develop. Rituals performed by the emperor and his officials died out in the early 20th century with the end of the Qing dynasty, though many of their forms, symbols

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and deities still influence local community traditions, where there is still an emperor of the gods. From its beginnings in the Han dynasty Daoism was distinguished by its own forms of organization, priests, rituals, beliefs and scripture texts, which the Daoists maintained were superior to the common traditions around them. Daoist gods are immortals or symbols of astral forces, not the deified human beings of community cults. Daoist priests, trained by masters or in monasteries, developed elaborate theologies and rituals devoted to these gods, so Daoism became a complete religious system in its own right. Nevertheless, since these priests were invited to participate in community rituals, they influenced local religion and in turn were influenced by it. Lai Chi Tim, a historian of religions at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, has contributed an article on the situation of Daoism from 1980 to the present, as it has emerged from the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. His emphasis is on the restoration of Daoist temples, liturgies and training for priests, as well as on the activities of priests outside the monasteries to perform rituals for local communities. Most of these activities are authorized by the government-established National Daoist Association, which has produced several sets of rules for them. Lai notes that some of the funds for this revival of Daoism have come from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, as well as from mainland devotees and from tourism at Daoist pilgrimage sites on sacred mountains. In 1989 the first ordinations of Daoist priests were held since 1947, with other ordination rituals held in the 1990s. With these ordinations Chinese Daoism is on the path to recovery.

Buddhism has been an integral part of Chinese religion and culture since the first century CE, and has long since developed such Chinese characteristics as a more world-affirming philosophy and a simple and direct method for attaining salvation by mindful recitation of the name of the Buddha Amitābha. Its ideas of karma and rebirth have influenced Chinese literature and popular mentality, and some of its Buddhas and bodhisattvas have been adopted as deities by local and popular sectarian traditions. Nevertheless, Chinese Buddhist intellectuals over the centuries have maintained the old classical philosophical teachings. The author of the contribution here on contemporary Chinese Buddhism is Raoul Birnbaum, a scholar of Buddhism at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who has more fieldwork experience with Chinese Buddhists than any other Western scholar now active. He begins his report with a discussion of important Buddhist leaders and reformers from the 19th century through the first half of the 20th, to clarify the integrity and self awareness of this tradition as it entered the time of the People's Republic. His focus is on monks and nuns, and lay devotees who have taken formal vows of allegiance.

For centuries many monasteries were supported by income from land donated to them by lay devotees, but after 1949 such land was confiscated, monasteries were destroyed or converted into schools, factories or residences, many monks and nuns were forced to return to lay life, and public assemblies of lay Buddhists ceased. A China Buddhist Associ-

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ation was formed at government direction to control the monastic activities that remained. However, beginning in the mid-1980s the situation began to improve, with financial support coming from lay donors and remuneration for rituals performed by monks, particularly for funerals. A key problem has been the lack of middle-aged leaders to instruct novices, but new academies are helping to fill this gap. Birnbaum concludes his essay with a discussion of the influence of Buddhist teachers outside the mainland and from Tibet. Though Tibetan Buddhism is different from that of Han Chinese, some Chinese Buddhists have gone to Tibet on pilgrimages and to study.

The Chinese government recognizes 56 different ethnic groups in the country, with the great majority being the Han people and the rest called "minority peoples." Though Han Chinese influence is everywhere, most of these groups have maintained at least some of their own cultural, language and religious traditions, but this topic is far too complex for a one-volume survey. Among the minorities are several who are Muslim, that is, whose religion is a form of Islam. There have been Muslims in China for about 1,400 years, living all over the country, but with a large concentration in Xinjiang province in the far west. There are over 20 million Muslims in China, more than in most Middle Eastern countries. The best informed Western scholar of contemporary Chinese Islam is Dru C. Gladney of the University of Hawaii, the author of our chapter on this topic. He is an anthropologist with extensive fieldwork experience in China and Central Asia. Gladney notes at the beginning of his report that "Muslims in China live in minority communities amid a sea of people, in their view, who are largely pork-eating, polytheist, secularist and kafir ('heathen')." His focus is on Muslim identity in China, and the wide variety of Muslim practices and ethnic groups. One of the largest of these groups is the Uyghur, with over seven million members, mostly living in the Uyghur Autonomous Region in Xinjiang. Gladney discusses in detail their history and divisions, including sometimes violent conflicts. Some Uyghur factions advocate independence from China, which is a matter of great concern to the government not only for political reasons but also because Xinjiang is an oil-producing area. Chinese Muslims are also important because of their contacts with Muslim nations in Central Asia and the Middle East. In the late 1990s over 6,000 Chinese pilgrims went on pilgrimages to Mecca, and some Chinese students are being educated in Islamic universities in Egypt and elsewhere. Gladney concludes by noting that the activities of some Chinese Muslims are part of the larger globalization that is affecting much of the country.

There have been Roman Catholic Christians in China since the 16th century, and they now total ten to 12 million, "more Catholics than in Ireland"! Most are active and devout, and many have risked "severe political harassment, even imprisonment, in order to practise their faith." These quotations are from the article here on Chinese Catholicism by Richard Madsen of the University of California at San Diego, a foremost scholar of this topic. Since the beginning of the People's Republic there has been a struggle between the Chinese government and the Vatican,

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because in 1949 Pope Pius XII "forbade Catholics, under pain of excommunication, to co-operate in any way with the new Chinese regime. For its part, the new regime was determined to bring the Catholic Church, as all other religions, under tight state control." To do this the government set up the Catholic Patriotic Association, and sought Catholic leaders who would consecrate bishops without Vatican approval. Most Catholics refused to co-operate with this, and "carried out their faith in secret, sometimes under threat of severe punishment." Some bishops and priests were imprisoned for long terms. The result was an underground church with six to eight million adherents. Madsen's focus is on the division of the Chinese church, which is still unresolved because of the issue of whom is to select and appoint bishops. All of this is exacerbated because the Vatican is now the only state in Western Europe that recognizes Taiwan. The author notes that since Chinese Catholics were cut off from the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1962–65 most of them remain quite conservative, especially in rural areas where the church is firmly embedded in the patterns of traditional village life. Persecution by the government continued in the 1990s, but this has not reduced the number of practising Catholics. In actual practice there is now some reconciliation between members of the official and unofficial church, but the great majority give their allegiance to the Vatican. The government cannot stop this, but neither can it bring itself to grant any autonomy to the church, so the stand-off remains.

There have been Protestant Christians in China since the early 19th century. In the People's Republic they have gone through the same cycle of repression and recovery as other religious traditions, but in this case the result has been rapid growth to a total estimated membership of 25 to 30 million, at least 20 times more than in 1949. Our authority on this topic is Daniel H. Bays, a historian at Calvin College, whose contribution here begins, "Protestant Christianity has been a prominent part of the general religious resurgence in China in the past two decades. Today, on any given Sunday, there are almost certainly more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe." There are an officially recognized Three Self Patriotic Movement (self-government, self-support and self-propagation) and a China Christian Council, but the majority of Protestants are in unofficial "house churches." Though there is still Western missionary influence on the liturgy and theology of many congregations, some of the house churches are part of independent Chinese traditions founded in reaction to missionary control. While there are some large urban congregations, most Protestants live in rural areas where they are influenced by local social and religious traditions. Bays also notes "Cultural Christians," Chinese intellectuals attracted to some Christian teachings who are not themselves members of churches. They are particularly interested in the reputed role of such teachings in the development of modern capitalism. In my own view, Protestant Christianity is doing well in China in part because of its association with the West and because for a long time so much of the local religious competition was destroyed or discredited. Though Chinese Protestants are now in contact with churches and

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organizations outside China, they are fundamentally independent and self-sufficient, and have become part of Chinese religion and culture. From this foundation they are now prepared to make their own contribution to world Christianity.

The final contribution to this special issue of *The China Quarterly* is by Nancy N. Chen of the University of California, Santa Cruz, an anthropologist of modern Chinese popular culture. Her focus here is on contemporary movements to promote healing by refining and strengthening *qi*, the vital force of the body and spirit, which in traditional Chinese thought are not clearly distinguished. This activity is now called *qigong*, "*qi* practice." The ultimate source of such practice is Daoist meditative exercises going back to the fourth century BCE, but Chen's focus is on modern forms in the People's Republic which were widely practised until the 1990s, typically by groups of people in public parks. Many *qigong* masters appeared whose followers believed had special healing powers, which was an attraction in part because the cost of medical treatment had risen sharply. As the numbers of participants grew, the government became concerned to regulate *qigong* and to specify that it could be practised only according to scientific principles without mystical overtones. Following the wide interest in *qigong* healing, a man named Li Hongzhi began to lecture and to organize a movement called the *falun gong*, which combined forms of meditation and self-cultivation with Li's own views. Based on the testimony of its practitioners this movement spread rapidly. As early as 1994 the *falun gong* organized demonstrations to protest against denouncements of its claims to heal, and on 26 April 1999 over 10,000 of its members staged a silent vigil outside Zhongnanhai in Beijing, the official state compound where China's top leaders live. This demonstration took the government completely by surprise, and caused it great consternation because it represented an independent ability to mobilize thousands of people outside government control. Before long the *falun gong* was banned, and millions of its books and tracts were burned, accompanied by intense propaganda attacking the movement as an "evil cult." Li Hongzhi had fled to the United States in 1996, which led to an internationalizing of the *falun gong* and widespread communication via the internet. Though this movement has been largely suppressed in China, it continues to recruit and protest in many other parts of the world. The response of the Chinese government has been very severe, and there is concern that this will encourage a return to old repressive policies towards other traditions.

Concluding Comments

In such a brief survey there is of course much that is left out, such as the religious traditions of minority peoples, as noted above, local community religion in the central, south-western and other areas of China, and Christianity in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau. Fan Lizhu has also done research on religion in the modern city of Shenzhen that has revealed a variety of private practices by its largely new immigrant

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population. Her work provides a fresh start for a study of urban religion in contemporary China. For recent Chinese studies of local community traditions see the section on "New sources for the study of Chinese local religion" in Kenneth Dean's article, and two of my recent publications, "From 'feudal superstition' to 'popular beliefs': new directions in mainland Chinese studies of Chinese popular religion,"[2] and *Ethnography in China Today: A Critical Assessment of Methods and Results*.[3] For a survey of recent Western studies of Chinese religions in general, see my "Chinese religions: the state of the field."[4]

The religious situation of Tibet is not discussed here because as the organizer and editor of this special issue I am reluctant to contribute to the idea that Tibet is an integral part of China, a view not necessarily shared by other contributors to this volume. Confucianism is not addressed because its modern manifestation is more as an ethical philosophy than a religion. Confucian ethical principles permeated late traditional Chinese culture, and had much influence on the beliefs and values of religious traditions, particularly the veneration of ancestors that is a fundamental aspect of family, lineage and community religion. Wherever such values as filial reverence, respect for social superiors, justice, honesty and courtesy are promoted, there Confucian values are present. There are Confucian temples in Taiwan and elsewhere in the Chinese diaspora that are still active, with ancestral tablets of the master and his followers arranged in rows above the altars. I have visited some great old temples on the mainland which have images of these figures, though none that I have seen was still being used. In the past Confucius was also worshipped and meditated on in Confucian academies. In Daoism and community temples Confucius has long been treated as a god represented by images, and in Taiwan there are religious sects devoted to him. In the past students prayed to him for help in civil service examinations, and in Taiwan they still pray to deities who are believed to have special powers for this. On the whole, however, proper intellectuals have been supposed to venerate Confucius as a very special human being, but not as a god. In the 20th century there have been decades of fierce attacks on Confucius as a symbol of all that is decayed and backward, attacks that intensified in the People's Republic, but there is now an attempt in China to rediscover his ethical teachings, if only to fill the void left by the destruction of traditional social values. His hometown and burial place in Shandong province have been restored.[5] In Taiwan Confucius and his teachings have been promoted as a foundation of Chinese culture, in part as a response to the Cultural Revolution on the mainland.

2. *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, No. 12 (2001), pp. 105–128.
3. Taipei: Yuan-liou Publishing Co., 2002.
4. Parts I and II, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (February 1995), pp. 124–160, and Vol. 54, No. 2 (May 1995), pp. 314–395. These articles are by ten co-authors.
5. For a summary of the revival after 1980 of discussions by Chinese scholars of Confucian thought and ethics, see ch. 15, "The new Confucian movement in mainland China," in Umberto Bresciani, *Reinventing Confucianism: The New Confucian Movement* (Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, 2001, Variétés Sinologiques New Series 90).

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The impression one gets from reading this material is that despite government repression and restrictions, religions in China are doing better than might have been expected. All of them had difficulties in the decades before 1949 from social disorder, weak and corrupt government, civil wars and the Japanese invasion, so their situation was far from ideal when the People's Republic began, which makes their persistence today all the more remarkable. They are a tribute to the tenacity of the human spirit and religious faith. Nevertheless, the freedom of religion still has a long way to go in China, where the government still feels threatened by any significant social activity outside its control. In this area, old imperial Chinese and Leninist assumptions still rule, yet China will never become a fully modern and democratic country until these assumptions are abandoned. The example of Taiwan demonstrates that lively religious activities are not a danger to a fully modern society; indeed, they can strengthen social modernity by providing the people with a cultural arena of their own.

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