

Unofficial Religions in China: Beyond the Party's Rules

Monday, May 23, from 2:00 – 3:30 PM

Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2255

Statement of Professor David Ownby

If it were possible to measure such things, I would wager that the growth rate in popular participation in both official and unofficial religions in China has been equal to if not greater than the growth rate of the Chinese economy over the past twenty-five years. Both a flourishing economy and a lively religious scene have resulted first and foremost from an important redefinition of the state in the period which followed the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. While the Chinese state remains decidedly authoritarian, it has largely withdrawn from daily micromanagement of many economic and social affairs, thus allowing a greater latitude in almost any sphere except the strictly political than at any time since 1949. This latitude, which has translated into the virtual absence of Party control in many parts of village China, has done much more to foster the expansion of religious activity—and in particular unofficial religious activity—than any formal policy statement, although the latitude can of course be reduced or revoked at will by authorities.

The religiosity of contemporary China is often explained by reference to the failure of the Maoist revolutionary impulse: according to this view, religion has filled the “spiritual vacuum” created by the failure of communist ideology. This explanation is dangerously misleading. Not only does it perpetuate the positivist error of imagining that a “normal” society will have no need for religion, it also seriously underestimates the profoundly religious character of traditional Chinese society (not to mention the religious overtones of the cult of Mao Zedong and other aspects of the Chinese revolutionary experience). In other words, while the level of religious activity observed in China since 1980 may be new to the People’s Republic of China, it is by now means new in the broader context of Chinese history. The Chinese are not “newly religious.” Rather the Chinese have been permitted once again to practice religions which have been suppressed since 1949, and even to create new religions, such as the Falun Gong, although this latter story is somewhat more complicated.

One of the reasons that it is hard to come to terms with religion in China is that the Chinese themselves have a hard time understanding and explaining their own religious heritage and contemporary landscape. There was no Chinese word for “religion” until the late nineteenth century when it was imported from the West (via Japanese translations) together with a host of other modernist concepts through which the Chinese attempted to understand their past, present, and future. As part of an effort to build a modern state, Chinese reformers sought to define what a “modern” religion might be, and chose to limit the designation “religion” to world-historical faiths having well-developed institutions, clergy, and textual traditions. Every Chinese constitution since that of 1912 has adopted this definition, and has even listed the five creeds worthy of the label “religion” in China: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. With one stroke of the pen, the modern Chinese state thus relegated ancestor worship, local cults, pietistic sects—in short, the religious activities of the vast majority of the Chinese people—to the status of “feudal superstitions” to be at best tolerated and at worst violently suppressed. It would never have occurred to a victim of this discrimination to demand that his “freedom of religion” be respected, because “religion” had been defined in such a way as to exclude his

spiritual practice. Even now, if you approach worshipers at a popular shrine in China and ask them if they are happy to be able to practice their “religion,” they will stare at you blankly, because the word itself continues to have no meaning other than that imposed by the state.

The history of Falun Gong, and of the larger *qigong* movement from which Falun Gong emerged, illustrates that the importance of this point is more than simply academic. The *qigong* boom was a mass movement involving tens if not hundreds of millions of Chinese from the early 1980s through the early 2000s. Led by charismatic masters, the movement promised miracle cures and supernormal powers, to be obtained through physical exercises, meditation, visualisation, trance, and/or speaking in tongues. Parallel phenomena in the West would be called new religious movements or new age movements. The Falun Gong emerged in 1992, toward the end of the boom, and was in fact one of the least flamboyant of the schools of *qigong*. The *qigong* boom and the Falun Gong were not only tolerated but actively supported by the Chinese state and the Chinese Communist Party, many members of which were enthusiastic practitioners of *qigong* and Falun Gong. Why, it is worth asking, would Chinese authorities endorse a mass movement with spiritual and supernatural overtones?

The answer is that the Chinese authorities were blinded by their own definition of “religion”. *Qigong* was first created in the 1950s by part of the Chinese medical establishment concerned with the Westernization of medical practice in China. Chinese medicine has a long and rich tradition, and is closely linked to religious and spiritual disciplines in the way that “holistic” medicine is in the modern West. Champions of traditional Chinese medicine in the 1950s borrowed healing techniques from what we might call “medicine men,” modernized and “sterilized” these techniques by removing the superstitions which surrounded them, and created a new therapeutic tradition which became part of the traditional Chinese medical curriculum. These efforts were encouraged by Chinese authorities; indeed, *qigong* in the 1950s and 1960s was chiefly practiced in sanatoria where China’s leaders took refuge to have their aches and pains treated by trained personnel well-versed in these neo-traditional techniques.

After the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), however, *qigong* left the sanitarium and reemerged in public parks in Beijing and other Chinese cities, where charismatic masters taught traditional, “magical” healing techniques to anyone desiring such treatment. Such activities were frowned upon by authorities until scientists working in respected universities and research centers purportedly discovered, in the late 1970s, that *qi* possessed a material existence which could be measured by scientific instruments. If *qi* had scientific status, then *qigong* did as well; it could not be considered superstitious (science having “proved” its existence) and no one thought to characterize *qigong* as “religious”, since religion by definition meant churches, priests, and scriptures. As a result, the Chinese state gave its blessing to *qigong*, believing that it was witnessing the birth of a uniquely Chinese science, and the massive *qigong* boom followed as a matter of course.

Few of the millions of those participating in the *qigong* boom were aware of the “religious” dimensions of what they were doing, although many *qigong* masters explained the workings of *qigong* by reference to traditional spiritual and religious discourses, and a very common element of *qigong* practice was an emphasis on traditional moral behavior as a necessary complement to the more esoteric techniques. Many people were drawn to *qigong* by its promise to heal their illness or assuage their pain. Others were drawn by a fascination with supernormal powers. I would also argue that many practitioners drew comfort from being able to reconnect with traditional popular cultural and spiritual practices which had been banned for many years. The *qigong* movement as a whole demonstrates the readiness of an important part of the Chinese population

to embrace ideas and practices which we would label as spiritual or religious, particularly when such ideas and practices are related to concerns of the human body. I would emphasize as well that *qigong* practitioners included many members of the educated urban elite; this was not primarily a movement of the rural illiterate. I would also note that *qigong*—and Falun Gong—readily found an audience on Taiwan, which should illustrate that we should not see them solely as a reaction to Communism, the failure of Mao’s revolution, or the particular challenges of life in today’s fast-paced and increasingly unequal Chinese economy.

Falun Gong emerged at a moment when the *qigong* boom had begun to attract criticism for its overemphasis on supernatural powers and other “parlor tricks.” This is one reason that Falun Gong founder Li Hongzhi emphasized that he was teaching *qigong* at a higher level than that of miracle cures and magic tricks. Another difference between Falun Gong and other schools of *qigong* evolved as a result of Li’s decision to leave China in early 1995: instead of emphasizing master-disciple contact through lectures delivered by the master (Li gave many such lectures in China between 1992 and 1994) or stressing the relationship of a practitioner to the Falun Gong organization, Li came to underscore the importance of his writings. Even if the master was not there, practitioners were to establish a personal relationship with him via the study of his scriptures, and to achieve corporal and moral transformation through the lessons learned therein and through the personal interventions of the master (which occurred on a spiritual plane unobservable by the individual practitioner). In hindsight Falun Gong may appear more “religious” than some other schools of *qigong*, but in my view this explains neither the popularity of Falun Gong (it was not the largest of *qigong* schools) nor its eventual conflict with the Chinese state. Practitioners were drawn to Falun Gong for the same reason that they had been drawn to other *qigong* schools; in fact many Falun Gong practitioners had tried other forms of *qigong* before discovering Falun Gong. As for the conflict with the Chinese state, this was the result of the erosion of support for *qigong* among Chinese authorities and the spectacular miscalculation of Li Hongzhi in authorizing the demonstration at Zhongnanhai on 25 April 1999. The consequences of this misjudgment have been disastrous not only for Falun Gong but for all forms of official and particularly unofficial religions in China.

It is difficult to generalize about these unofficial religions. *Qigong* and Falun Gong were the only forms of unofficial religion to establish nationwide organizations and to enjoy the support of Chinese authorities. All other forms of unofficial religion achieve at best a localized presence (although some larger networks may exist) and a marginalized, liminal status. In rural areas, particularly, the diminution of state presence in the face of persistent poverty and underdevelopment (more pronounced in some regions than in others) has encouraged the revival of local cults, pietistic sects, and secret societies. The revival of local cults and ancestral temples in South and Southeast China has been investigated and documented to some degree by Western (and some Chinese) scholars. We know much less about conditions in other parts of China, as information is largely anecdotal. These organizations appear to have resumed the roles they played in traditional China, providing a framework for social cooperation, offering miracle cures in the absence of adequate medical care, spiritual solace in the absence of hope for a better tomorrow.

We know somewhat more about the unofficial Christian movement than about local cults, pietistic sects, and secret societies, because Western missionaries attempt—with some success—to follow the fortunes of this movement. Often referred to as the “home church movement”, because services are held in believers’ homes rather than in a church, unofficial Christianity has become important particularly in certain regions (Fujian, Zhejiang, Henan), and exists in an uneasy relationship both with the state-approved Christian churches and with the state. I did a limited amount of fieldwork among such groups in rural Henan in the mid-1990s. My

impressions were that many such groups traced their origins to pre-1949 communities; often the revival of the Christian community was the work of a charismatic elderly man or woman whose faith had survived the intervening years. In addition, the movement is nourished by external and internal missionaries. Overseas Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and North America take advantage of the greater openness of today's China to smuggle in bibles and to spread the gospel. Itinerant native evangelists travel from congregation to congregation within China, creating "revival-like" conditions in some areas.

During the worship services that I attended, I noted the same emphasis on the healing power of faith which also motivated many *qigong* practitioners. Christianity, like other Chinese religions, must demonstrate its practical power and efficacy if it is to win followers, and many worship services in rural Henan included "witness statements" from members of the congregation whose aches and pains had been assuaged through the power of prayer or through other divine interventions. The church also clearly provided a sense of community, particularly in villages not otherwise bound together through family or other ties. Much of rural China is dangerously poor, under-organized and under-serviced. Christians were clearly grateful to their local church for the limited protection it afforded them in an otherwise bleak world.

The mid-1990s, when I did my fieldwork in Christian villages in Henan, coincided with a period of general latitude in state attitudes toward religion; indeed, I would not have been able to do such fieldwork during a less open period. Although most local cadres with whom I spoke were scornful of religion, some openly admitted that Christian villages were much easier to "manage" than non-Christian villages: such villages possessed a clear leadership structure which was respected by most villagers, and this village leadership was predisposed to cooperate with state authorities, if only because their marginal status meant that they had little choice. As a result, many Christian villages were more cooperative in the implementation of state policies on birth control, for example, than were non-Christian villages. I recall being impressed by this odd marriage of convenience, and believing at the time that I was perhaps witnessing the birth of a new "civil society" in rural China.

The anti-Falun Gong campaign has surely aborted such possibilities, at least for the foreseeable future. The latitude which had marked state practice on matters of religion disappeared immediately with the onset of the campaign, and the state reiterated with a vengeance its discourse on the proper definition and role of religion in modern China—the same discourse defended by the Chinese state since the beginning of the twentieth century. On paper, this discourse ironically defends "real religions" as conservative bastions of social stability, but in practice, all religions have been on the defensive since the summer of 1999, when the campaign against the Falun Gong began. In the fall of 2000, I attended, as a "foreign expert" on Chinese secret societies and popular religion, an international anti-Falun Gong conference hosted by the Chinese state in Beijing. Among the many sad aspects of this occasion, perhaps the saddest for me was the intervention by a leading member of the Nanjing Theological Seminary, an elderly, well-educated, dignified, decent Chinese Christian who had devoted his life to defending his faith and his flock, but who felt compelled not only to denounce Falun Gong, but also to denounce the Christian home-church movement. His motivation was to attempt to draw a clear line between the state's definition of religion—to which his seminary obviously belonged—for fear of being tarred with the same brush that had blackened the image of Falun Gong, then other schools of *qigong*, and finally anything that smacked of "feudal superstition."

Long term trends concerning the fate of unofficial religion in China are contradictory. On the one hand, the Chinese state seems unlikely to modify its stance on religion in favor of a greater openness to popular or

unofficial religion, and can easily identify other modern states with similar postures—France comes to mind, for example—as an additional justification for this rigidity. On the other hand, the Chinese state has neither the resources nor the political will to turn back the clock and to reimpose Maoist-like controls on daily activities and popular consciousness. From this perspective we can expect cycles of greater and lesser latitude, perhaps a slow, secular movement toward openness, but perhaps not—much will depend on particular unofficial religious movements, on particular Chinese leaders, and on China’s relationship with the outside world. Indeed, among of the most important changes on this front since the end of the Maoist era are China’s engagement with the world economy, China’s emergence as a geopolitical power in East Asia, and the growth of a vocal, educated, and materially well-off Chinese Diaspora in North America, Australia and Europe. All of these factors influence China’s policy toward religion—both official and unofficial.

The impact of the new Chinese Diaspora is clearly illustrated by the response of Falun Gong practitioners outside of China to the Chinese campaign of suppression. To the chagrin of the Chinese state, these practitioners—particularly but not exclusively in North America—have proven extremely adept at using the cybertools provided by advances in communication technology to challenge the campaign of suppression within China and to supplant the negative image of Falun Gong as depicted by the media in China. These initiatives include websites, web-based newspapers, and hacking into cable and even satellite television transmission within China. On the Chinese-language version of Clear Understanding/Minghui, the main Falun Gong website for veteran practitioners, one finds an abundance of technical information on the use of proxies and on other ways to circumvent the attempts by the Chinese state to control the internet within China, as well as videoclips that can be downloaded onto VCDs for “guerilla distribution” within China. Falun Gong practitioners outside of China have also been adept at adopting the Western discourse on freedom of thought and freedom of religious belief (although neither is a basic Falun Gong “value” per se) and using these discourses to influence public opinion and political decisions in the West. Although such efforts may not suffice to resurrect Falun Gong in China, they remain nonetheless immensely impressive (when compared, for instance, with the efforts of expatriot Chinese democracy activists), and illustrate that the Chinese community outside of China will almost certainly play an important role in the evolution of such issues in China proper. This is doubly important because a significant number of Chinese immigrants to the West have joined Christian churches, which has undoubtedly sensitized them to the fate of their Christian brethren in China.