

Unofficial Religions in China: Beyond the Party's Rules

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Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2255

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The great majority of Chinese religious activity has never been part of any broader organized church, and has never had much institutional existence above the local community. This continues to be true today, where people across China burn incense to gods and ancestors but have no affiliation with any of China's religious organizations. This kind of popular worship is by far the largest part of China's current religious resurgence, and also the most neglected. Officially, the government considers this the practice of "feudal superstition," and such worship does not even receive the nominal guarantees of freedom to practice "normal" religion in the Chinese Constitution.

In this statement I will very briefly consider the history of this and other important forms of informal religion in China today. I will compare it to the situation in Taiwan, especially in the 1970s, when an authoritarian government made a similar attempt to create corporatist control of all organized religion, and to discourage practice of popular worship. Finally, I will consider the role of informal religion in Taiwan's democratization and construction of a civil society, and suggest possible implications for the People's Republic of China.

A Brief History

Most popular religious practice in China focused around worship of ancestors and spirits of various sorts at community altars. The basic organization of this worship is well known by now, especially from numerous studies in Taiwan.¹ Important features included community ownership of temples, widely variant deities sometimes known only locally, worship generally by individuals rather than congregations, a strong emphasis on votive requests, widespread use of spirit mediums, and involvement of Daoist or Buddhist priests usually only for major events. There were no sacred texts comparable to the Bible or the Buddhist and Daoist canons.

At the same time, China developed other traditions that were widely available. Buddhism and Daoism are the best known, and their priests were hired for nearly all large-scale popular ceremonies. By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), China had also developed a strong tradition of what Overmyer calls "pietistic sects," which did not require the priestly virtuosity of the Buddhist or Daoist clergy, but did have a much stronger voluntaristic and congregational structure and a stronger textual emphasis than popular worship.² The Chinese government from imperial times to the present has been highly suspicious of these groups, because a few fomented rebellions, most notably the White Lotus. The vast majority, however, remained peaceful.

The most important twentieth-century developments in China were political. Most religion of all kinds has struggled there throughout the century. The Republican government that took over from the final imperial dynasty in 1911 was dedicated to modernity. Some of the leaders were Christian, but the general attitude to religion was unfavorable. They saw it as a remnant from premodern times, embarrassing to their aspirations and draining valuable resources from the people. They looked with particular disfavor on popular worship, and instituted massive campaigns to convert temples to secular use.³ As is well known, attitudes in the People's Republic after 1949 were even harsher, and included periods of powerful religious repression.

The Current Situation

There has been a significant relaxation of attitudes toward religion in China since the 1980s, but even that is marked by periodic crackdowns (as after the Falungong demonstrations), a general feeling of distrust from many cadres, and a continuing lack of legal status for popular worship. In spite of the problems, the last two decades have seen a huge increase in religious activities of every type in China.⁴

Christians have received the most attention; recent growth has been rapid by all accounts, although estimates of numbers vary widely. Even with the rapid growth, Christians remain a small minority of perhaps 5-7 percent of the population. Organized Buddhism and Daoism were never large, but their clergy provided crucial services to the rest of the population. Both have been revived since the Cultural Revolution, and are again training a new generation. Pietistic sects also appear to be widespread, but they are thoroughly underground (especially since the repression of Falungong) and we have no reliable research on their current state. Popular worship is coming back more in rural than urban areas, and not equally across the country. In some areas, like Fujian, every village has rebuilt one or more temples. This is rarer in north China. Still, we have reports of active local worship across the entire country, and can guess that perhaps half the rural population is involved—that would be something like 300-400 million people, and far larger than any other religion.

Legally, China has created space for religions that are officially recognized and institutionalized within a state-dominated corporatist framework. Two kinds of religious activity clearly fall outside of even that limited framework, however. First, some religions are condemned as "evil cults" (xiejiao), a piece of imperial language that was brought back with the repression of Falungong. This includes essentially all of the pietistic sects, Falungong, and any institutionalized religious activity that falls outside of state control. The second is activity that has very low levels of institutionalization, and thus does not count as "religion" at all—this is primarily all popular worship of gods. In many cases such activities are in practice permitted as local officials choose to turn a blind eye. Nevertheless, they are legally precarious, and subject to repression at any time.

Religion has long been one of the most important reservoirs of social capital in Chinese villages. Outside of purely economic ties like land tenancy or trade, religion and lineage were the two kinds of ties that most linked together villagers. Most temples were controlled directly by community members, often through a committee whose leaders were chosen by lot. In many areas, temples had the ability to tax local households to support their rituals, and they frequently provided rallying points in times of need. In some ways, their difficult legal position has actually reinforced this role over the last decade or two. A recent dissertation on the delivery of public goods in China, for example, concludes that villages with strong temple committees tend to have better roads, newer schools, and other social goods.⁵ I will return to this point below.

Lessons from Taiwan

Frontier conditions in Taiwan through the nineteenth century may have encouraged some uniquely local developments in the broad patterns of Chinese religion, but probably no greater than what characterized any part of China. The Japanese occupation of 1895-1945, however, repressed many forms of popular religion, pushed Buddhism to affiliate with Japanese sects, and began to promote Shinto toward the end of the period. The motivations were a combination--in part yet another version of the modernist attack on popular religion, and in part an attempt to draw Taiwan into Japanese religious culture.

The Nationalists who came in 1945 undid much of what the Japanese attempted.⁶ Shinto disappeared, and a new Buddhist power structure that came over from the mainland ended any move in the direction of Japanese Buddhism. They tolerated popular religion, never repressing it in ways comparable to the mainland, but campaigning against it for decades as wasteful, superstitious, and unsanitary. As the island grew wealthier, however, people began to rebuild popular temples on ever more lavish scales, and ritual events at a few temples, especially the important temples to Mazu in the south, became important across the entire island. With democratization in the late 1980s, campaigns against popular religion ended, and politicians have often

visited local temples in attempts to appeal to the electorate. The religious boom of the last three decades continues, and temples remain closely entwined with daily life.

At roughly the same time as popular religion began to boom in the 1970s, various forms of more organized religion also drew significant attention. The most striking initial growth occurred among the pietistic sects, including the Yiguan Dao and similar organizations. These groups had long been illegal under the KMT government, although their politics in Taiwan were in fact very conservative. Unlike temple religion, these sects were built of voluntary members who got together secretly for regular meetings, often featuring texts revealed by spirit possession. By the 1980s, when they were finally legalized, they claimed millions of members, including some of Taiwan's wealthiest entrepreneurs.

Taiwan's new Buddhist groups--dedicated to the humanitarian aims of building a "Pure Land on Earth"--also began around this time, and achieved huge followings by the 1980s and 1990s.⁷ Three of these groups now have massive global followings, accounting for millions of people. Much more than either temple worship or the pietistic sects, these groups have an explicit social mission, building hospitals, founding universities, bringing aid to the poor, and providing emergency relief around the world. They have not yet established independent branches in China, due to the political sensitivities, but they are active in delivering aid there.

Taiwan's democratization in 1987 ended political campaigns against temple worship, opened up space for a new Buddhist-based social philanthropy, and legitimized pietistic groups. Just as importantly, it let us see how local religion could help consolidate the civil society that quickly developed there. As one of the few areas where local social ties could develop away from the powerful authoritarian control of the KMT before democratization in 1987, temple religion provided an important resource to put democracy on a strong social base. In contrast, authoritarian rule that more thoroughly destroyed all social ties has tended to be replaced by gangsterism, as in Albania, for instance. While temple religion did not directly cause Taiwan to democratize, it has been crucial in consolidating an effective democracy.⁸ We can see its role especially where temples help organize local people to protect their welfare, for example by protesting against polluting factories.

Possibilities in China

The growth of informal religion in China beginning in the 1980s is reminiscent of Taiwan a decade or two earlier. It is worth noting that while China continues to repress signs of religion that it feels might challenge its political monopoly, it has also allowed its people far more personal space than they had earlier. This has directly encouraged the current religious resurgence. Temple religion has no legal legitimacy in China, but local officials nevertheless often either turn a blind eye or cooperate in finding ways to legitimize newly rebuilt temples and revived festivals.

In some ways this encourages local temples to mobilize social capital to negotiate with the state. One successful temple in Shaanxi, for example, achieved legitimacy with the local government by building an arboretum attached to the temple grounds, eventually attracting the attention of national and international NGOs.⁹ Others build schools, or call themselves museums to enhance local culture. Such activities may be undertaken cynically, just to keep the state from forbidding them. Once undertaken, though, the activities are real and have an effect on Chinese society. In the current political climate where China is trying to encourage local society to take over many welfare functions that it cannot provide, we can expect to see religion of all kinds, both formal and informal, to increase its social role.

Temples also sometimes help organize popular protest, mobilizing social capital on behalf of the rights of a village. In one case in Gansu, for instance, local fertility goddess cults organized an environmental protest movement.¹⁰ The argument that pollution threatened the health of their children provided the connection to the fertility goddesses. Such arguments are particularly powerful in rural China now because of the one child policy. While this hardly qualifies as civil society, it does show the potential of religion to develop means for the direct expression of popular needs.

None of this means that informal religion is likely to push China toward democracy. While such religion has some democratic features in its internal organization and is a core reservoir of social capital, it is also limited by a fundamental localism and difficulties in scaling up. It has also survived for centuries under undemocratic regimes of every kind. Nevertheless, the Taiwan experience shows that informal religion can be very helpful in consolidating democratic openings. In addition, its current direction in China shows the way it can improve the quality of life—material life as much as spiritual—even under the current regime.

Hundreds of millions of people are involved in temple-based local religion in China. While current Chinese policy has made room for this remarkable resurgence, it has also left local religion in a precarious legal position where it can be repressed at any moment and at the whim of any local official. China's government has a century-long modernist prejudice against local religion. Comparative evidence from Taiwan and Hong Kong, though, shows the important social and personal functions of these practices. They show clearly how these practices that the government dismisses as "feudal superstition" are perfectly compatible with modernity, and indeed how they can contribute to the successful construction of a modern and successful people. Simply broadening the political and legal understanding of religion in China to include these practices would be an important first step in improving the lives of many millions of people.

Notes:

1. For a general overview of the development of this field, see Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, "Introduction: Gods and Society in China," in *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, ed. Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 1-36. For a very useful review of the literature on Taiwan, see Hsun Chang, "Guangfu Hou Taiwan Renleixue Hanren Zongjiao Yanjiu Zhi Huigu [A Review of Anthropological Studies of Han Chinese Religion in Taiwan, 1945-1995]," *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica* 81 (Spring 1996): 163-215.
2. Daniel L. Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
3. Prasenjit Duara, "Knowledge and Power in the Discourse of Modernity: The Campaigns Against Popular Religion in Early Twentieth-Century China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 1 (1991): 67-83.
4. Popular worship in China remains badly understudied, but important recent works include Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Lizhu Fan, "Popular Religion in Contemporary China," *Social Compass* 50, no. 4 (2003): 449-57; Chau, Adam Yuet. *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, i.p.
5. Lily Lee Tsai, "The Informal State: Governance and Public Goods Provision in Rural China" (Ph. D. diss., Harvard University, 2004). On the recent growth of Christianity, see David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Lanham, MD: Regnery, 2003).
6. On the history of Buddhism through this period, see Charles Brewer Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).
7. Hwei-syin Lu, "Taiwan Fojiao 'Ciji Gongdehui' de Daode Yiyi [The Moral Significance of Taiwan Buddhist 'Ciji Merit Association']," paper presented at the International Conference on Chinese Buddhist Thought and Culture (Shanxi University, July 12-18, 1992); Lin, "Zongjiao Yundong de Shehui Jichu -- Yi Ciji Gongdehui Wei Lie [The Social Base of a Religious Movement -- the Example of the Compassion Merit Society].";

Chien-yu Julia Huang, "Recapturing Charisma: Emotion and Rationalization in a Globalizing Buddhist Movement from Taiwan" (Ph. D. diss., Boston University, 2001).

8. Weller, Robert P. *Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999.
9. Chau, Adam Yuet . *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, i.p.
10. Jing, Jun . "Environmental Protests in Rural China." In *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, edited by Mark Selden and Elizabeth J. Perry. New York: Routledge, 2000.