CHAPTER 5

Religious Vitality in Contemporary China

Types of Atheism in Party Politics

In this chapter we start by discussing the various ways of interpreting Marx’ statement about the opium of the people in order to show how they relate to certain theoretical positions voiced in the context of official PPC documents. Moving from theoretical reflection to empirical observations Yang presents “a definition of religion with classification” dividing the phenomena under study between Full religion, Semi-religion, Quasi-religion and Pseudo-religion (Yang 2012: 37). Cults worshipping political leaders like Mao as if they were deities are pseudo-religions to Yang. His typology of four forms of religious devotion is confronted by him with three types of anti-religious attitudes in the theoretical argumentation of the Communist Party of China: Militant atheism, enlightened atheism, and mild atheism.

The party discussions frequently rely on alternative interpretations of Marx’s dictum that religion is the opium of the people, and some argue that opium was used for benign purposes as a pain killer. Of the three atheisms, mild atheism is the most recent development (ibid: 45). Mild atheism finds its foundation in the Marxian view that religion is a symptom of the sickness of capitalist society, and once its defects will have been corrected by socialism the people's desire for religious orientation will disappear by itself. Accordingly, there is no historical need for the persecution of religions.

Mou Zhongjian is a representative of such mild atheism. According to him “theists and atheists... should respect each other” (ibid: 62). Mou opposes the scientific atheism that is propagated in China today because he considers it “destructive to social development” (Yang 2012: 63). While these ideas voiced by Mou may be the source of a hopeful view toward the future, it would be unrealistic to ignore the fact that at least until 2010 they were “peripheral in the official discourse of the Chinese authorities” (ibid: 63).

What makes Chinese party ideology difficult to reconstruct for Western students of Marxism is – as was mentioned here before – its indebtedness not merely to Marx and Engels, but in addition to the Russians Lenin and Stalin, to Mao of China (ibid: 47) and to Mao’s successors as party leaders. The three atheisms Yang distinguishes agree of course that religion must and will disappear; they differ, however, in the measures to be taken and in the patience they display in achieving their unquestioned goal. The policies toward that goal can be compared with reference to four periods in recent history:
Period 1: 1949–1957: The five officially recognized religions were forced to become “patriotic” in exchange for not being annihilated like other religions. Those five are Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and, strangely as two separate religions Old Christianity (Catholic and Orthodox) and New Christianity (Protestant). The separation of Christianity into two distinct religions is the result of the erroneous notion that they worship different deities: Catholics (and Orthodox Christians) the God of Heaven, Shang Di (上帝), while Protestants are perceived as worshipping Jesus. The unifying idea of the Trinity cannot be entered into the political debate about religions.

Period 2: 1957–1966: Forceful reduction of the number of temples and churches of the five “patriotic” religions.


Period 4: 1979–2009: Limited tolerance, economic development (tourism, foreign investment) as motivation for the construction of temples and churches, reversal of these political decisions due to disagreements within the party, and crackdown on certain sectarian groups (Qigong, Falun Gong).

At the beginning of period 4 it gradually became possible again, to select religious studies as a major at Chinese universities, although in some schools only at the graduate level. The example of the university study of Daoism may serve as an illustration of the changes. Daoism started as an academic field in Mainland China in the 30ies and 40ies of the last century. Scholars like Meng Wentong, Wang Ming, Chen Guofu and others wrote articles and books on Daoism, which are still important for scholars of religion today. But compared to research in other areas such as philosophy, history, Buddhism and Christianity, the achievements on Daoism were limited. That also applied to the number of scholars who studied Daoism at that time.

Between 1949 and 1979, during what Yang called phases 1, 2, and 3, the study on Daoism was forbidden. As a result, there were almost no contributions on Daoism except the studies on Tai pingjing and Bao puzi by Wang Ming. Since December of 1978, the Chinese government began to support research on Daoism which made it enter a new era in its history: Special institutions for Daoism were established.

With the permission of the Chinese government in 1979 the first Research Institute on Daoism was founded in the context of the Institute of Religious Studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. In 1980 an
Institute of Religious Studies focusing on Daoism was established in Sichuang University. At the end of the 1980s, the Research Institute on Daoist Culture was founded in Huadong Normal University. The establishment of these institutes has since provided some new opportunities for the developments of Daoism.

In addition, the research subjects relating to Daoism were listed among the humanities as subjects of Philosophy and Social Sciences. The government supported the development of Daoism in an unprecedented way. Some institutions of higher learning, like Sichuang University, started to recruit graduates who specialize in Daoism. As a consequence, some young scholars interested in Daoism increasingly play a significant role in studying that religion. In some other Universities and Institutes, more and more scholars are engaged in studying Daoism from various perspectives. In addition to government initiatives, organizations on Daoism were founded by private supporters in Hubei province, Shanxi province, in Shanghai and elsewhere.

Vocational conferences about Daoism were held in China, providing scholars opportunities to learn from each other, which means, as was mentioned above, that the study of Daoism has entered a new phase. Also some journals about Daoism were established and papers on Daoism are getting published more and more. Increasingly, academic and popular books on Daoism are distributed. All of this is a development which evolved in only a little more than three decades.

Since the beginning of what Yang Fenggang called period 4 the opening or re-opening of sites for religious services has led to a striking shortage of temples and churches as well as of personnel who were willing and qualified to serve congregations (ibid: 149). Yang mentions that in 1997 the number of religious sites per every 100,000 Chinese averaged 6.5. The equivalent number for the U.S.A. at that time was about 117 (ibid: 150f.). In Taiwan there is one church or temple for every 1,350 persons; in mainland China the equivalent number was one for about 10,000 persons in 2009 (ibid: 151).

All statements referring here to data depend on the statistics released by the Chinese government itself. According to that source, in the period between 1982 and 2009 the number of Catholic priests and nuns increased from 3,400 to 5,260 and the number Protestant ministers from 5,900 to 37,000 (ibid: 152). There has been an increase during that period also among the Muslim imams from about 20,000 to about 40,000, among the Buddhist monks and nuns from 27,000 to 200,000 and among the Daoist monks and nuns from 2,600 to 50,000 (ibid: 153). These figures point toward religious resilience; they must however be seen in the context “that the numbers of lay believers have increased even faster” (ibid.). However, no matter how reliable these statistics are in
detail, they document an impressive trend toward more religious activities in contemporary China.

Yang explains that “the outdated religious policy has rendered itself ineffective in controlling religions, all the while antagonizing the Chinese populace and the world community. The religious policy has become one of the liabilities in China’s stride for modernization and for entering the global stage” (ibid: 84). This is so because “the heavy regulation of religion will lead not to religious demise” (ibid: 85) but to a dynamic interplay between the four types of religion described before (Full religion, Semi-religion, Quasi-religion and Pseudo-religion) and the following three types of religious “markets.”

Those “markets” are defined by Yang as (1) red: Religions are made “patriotic” and thereby placed under constant party supervision. (2) Black: Religions are made illegal and worshippers are forced to meet secretly and under threat of severe punishment. (3) Gray: The black market is dangerous, the red market is unattractive, so a gray market will thrive in which assemble “all religious and spiritual organizations, practitioners, and activities with ambiguous legal status” (ibid: 87).

Comparing the situation of supply and demand for religions with a commodity market, Yang describes what he calls a Shortage Economy of Religion under Communism. The ideological orthodoxy of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (ibid: 126) failed in predicting and explaining the continued “demand” for religion (as it also failed to predict the amount of food needed, see: Yang Mosher, Guo 2012), partly because of the willingness of some pious persons to prefer martyrdom to giving in to atheist imprisonment and torture (Yang 2012: 127). This observation, also in light of the history of persecution of Christians at other times and in other parts of the world, gives rise rather to the hypothesis, that in the long run, the religious policies of the Communist regime have not weakened, but in fact strengthened religions.

Ancestor Worship: The Religion of China

The tendency in the history of China for their religions to confront each other temporarily but eventually to return to peaceful coexistence may still be valid in contemporary China. Every member of the Communist Party will of course visit the graves of their ancestors on Qingming day (清明) to pay respects to them. In an interview a local party leader was asked by a Western visitor who had witnessed the Qingming graveside ritual: Mr. Secretary, as we both know, Karl Marx has described religion as the opium of the people. Now I have observed the moving rituals at grave sites here on Qingming day which struck me
as a very religious type of behaviour. The reply was: “What you saw there was not religion, it was Chinese tradition!” The members of the party are not allowed to practice what is defined in Western languages as a religion. However, as Chinese daughters and sons they cannot but follow in the age-old sacred tradition of worshipping each the particular ancestors of their own clan.

If worshipping the deceased members of one’s own family is in fact the religion of China, then the notion is absurd that a person must have the right to freely choose his or her religious affiliation. As a Chinese person you have faith in your family and you perform or participate in the rites of your clan. That is the center of your orientation, although you do not perceive it as specifically “religious” but simply as Chinese. This view is, or was, the traditional and conservative Chinese position. However, young and modern Chinese increasingly see the option of combining loyalty to their relatives, dead as well as alive, with overarching religious belief systems as they are known and taken for granted worldwide.

But according to Yutang Lin, unquestioned loyalty to one’s relatives is the case “first of all” because of “the Chinese family system, which was so well-defined and organized as to make it impossible for a man to forget where his lineage belonged” (Lin 1936: 32). The orientation toward ancestors as members of the preceding generations is mediated via parents and grand-parents. It combines the principle of immortality with the requirement of reality and thus results in a religion that is not weakened by fundamental doubts.

In the established World Religions by contrast, believers are urged to accept divine and saintly personages as real, even though the faithful have merely anecdotal knowledge of them. By comparison the Chinese person has potentially a very intimate knowledge about his or her forebears. This foundation of Chinese culture “is enhanced by the ritual of ancestor worship, and the consciousness of it had penetrated deep into the Chinese soul” (Lin 1936, ibid.). Nevertheless, as I indicated before, from the perspective of the members of this culture, it is not counted among the “religions.”

It is the result of an extended process of cultural evolution how, what we describe here as the not acknowledged religion of China, has entered into a mainly peaceful combination with Confucianism and Buddhism. Daoism deserves special attention because it can be looked at as the evolutionary point of departure for later religious orientations in the Zhong Guo (中国), the Center

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Daoism grew out of Chinese cultural history itself rather than being imported from outside, as has been the case with Buddhism and, with lesser quantitative result, with Christianity and Islam. But neither Confucianism, nor Buddhism, and certainly not Daoism are perceived as weakening or ever questioning the family-oriented religion of China.

Aggravated by its own Western tradition of religious intolerance, the lack of their willingness to acknowledge the religions of China as religions, was one of the problems the Christian missions encountered there. As long as Christianity approached China with the uncompromising attitude that was normal in Europe since the days of Saint Boniface (born 673 or not later than 675, died 754 or 755) and Charlemagne (747 or 748–814), that deistic religion will correctly be perceived as potentially wiping out the foundations for ancestor worship. It was and will be deeply resented in China, Japan, and Korea. If, on the other hand, as Catholic missionaries of Korean descent have been able to do in South Korea since the end of World War II, Christianity can be presented as compatible with venerating one’s own deceased relatives, then it has the potential of becoming part of the Asian cultures.

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2 These and the following figures obviously refer to years in the Common Era. Historians do not agree on an exact year.