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**Changing Chinese Attitudes Toward Religion and Culture:  
A Comparative Perspective**

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Religion is a sensitive issue in China. It carries with it a mysterious air and brings up uncomfortable feelings. When discussing the topic of religion, most people in China do not necessarily refer to spiritual matters. Religion in China is both tangible and abstract at the same time. Generally speaking, there are three historical phases of religious changes in China: pre-1949, 1949 to 1979, and post-1979.

### **Phase 1, Pre-1949: Utilitarianism and Indifference**

Before 1949, the government did not directly prohibit or restrain religions, aside from occasional anti-religious activity motivated by domestic political concerns. The best example may be the Empress Wu Zetian's order to wipe out Buddhism from the capital of the Tang dynasty. This also wiped the Nestorians out of existence. Before 1949, the most popular religions were Buddhism and Taoism; while Catholicism arrived in China in the Middle Ages, and Protestantism in the 19th century, both forms of Christianity had difficulty taking root. Most Chinese were not particularly spiritual but rather held a utilitarian view of religion.

Ordinary Buddhists, for example, believed in Buddhism only to avoid illness or misfortune. A Chinese idiom says: 平时不烧香,临时抱佛脚, which translated into English means, "I can be cheap when spending on incense offerings, yet in times of trouble I can still have access to Buddha's mercy as long as I get a hold of his feet in time" (this is a positive translation). Because most believers held that type of view of Buddhism, and intellectuals did not embrace Buddhism, few people had a good understanding of Buddhist doctrines, and Buddhist teachings in China have internal contradictions even today.

Intellectuals were notably fond of the teachings of Confucianism. They followed a general principle, which has become another Chinese idiom: 敬鬼神而远之. Translated to English, this means, "Respect spiritual beings, gods or devils, but keep a distance from them." Intellectuals did not practice spiritual rituals.

Ordinary people, believers and non-believers, held utilitarian views of religion; intellectuals followed lofty Confucianism. Whether or not these two major groups of people shared a common fear and respect of gods, they were all more concerned about earthly authorities than invisible gods. Chinese religions were reduced to mere idol worshipping or dry scholarly talks.

Before 1949, with all major western Christian missions present in China, the combined number of all Chinese Catholics and Protestants was no more than four million. The slow conversion rate was caused less by Chinese governmental interference than by the Chinese people's overall indifference to religion.

Compare this to the United States: Puritans were among the first colonists in America and their ideas formed the foundation of U.S. nationhood. In addition, there were several great spiritual awakenings in the early years of the U.S. This established Christianity as the *de facto* national faith of the U.S., as an outsider can easily see.

## **Phase 2, Post-1949: Surviving Governmental Suppression**

After 1949, the party's policy was to minimize religions while, at the same time, replacing them with Marxism as the only valid ideology. The number of places of religious worship was reduced sharply, and many priests were sent away. During the Cultural Revolution, the major religions were almost destroyed but did not die out completely. That was probably the lowest point of Chinese religious communities, as almost all churches were destroyed, monks and nuns were sent back home, and religious leaders were sent to factories and farms for reeducation through forced labor. Many of them died. The number of religious believers fell dramatically. Christian activities were completely forced underground.

As Mao became a "living Buddha figure," this cult of personality replaced all religions and philosophies, including even true Communist philosophy.

It is interesting to note that the desire to replace God or gods with other ideologies took place on American campuses during this same era. The protest counter-culture of the Vietnam War era also sought to tear down established religions such as Christianity, although it did not, of course, go as far as the Cultural Revolution.

## **Phase 3, Post-1979: Revival and Competition**

With the end of the Mao era, religions started to revive. From 1978 to 1982 this religious revival reached a historical high; the revival may be interpreted as an extreme reaction to the previous crackdowns on religion. Generally speaking, the period from the 1970s to the 1980s experienced a volcanic eruption of religious enthusiasm for many major religions: Lamaism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Taoism. The number of believers increased tenfold or more over 1949 numbers, with the number of Christians increasing most dramatically.

From 1953 to 1979 no active foreign missionaries were present inside China, and, somewhat ironically, the increase in the number of religious believers after the end of the Cultural Revolution appeared to the Chinese people as an local development, not the result of Western "imperialist imposition" of religion on China. In particular, people started to have a change of mind on the nature of Christianity in China, as people could no longer claim that Christianity was a purely foreign idea. This is an important concept. There was a statement that said that there are no Chinese Christians because "*a converted Chinese is no longer Chinese.*" However, as Chinese people began to see that Christianity could be an indigenous religion, Chinese believers were no longer hated as Chinese who were "lost to Christianity."

Because of the earlier crackdown on Christianity, denominational splits became less visible among churches in China. Furthermore, the crackdown led to a localization of Christianity, as churches could only meet in small groups. This localization stirred up the post-Mao revival as strong grassroots-level churches moved to spread Christianity to their respective local communities. Rather than a top-down approach to evangelism, the bottom-up approach created rapid exponential growth. During this era, a clause guaranteeing freedom of religious belief was written into the Chinese Constitution, and government media attacks against religions decreased considerably. Meanwhile, in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, U.S. evangelicals and Catholics enjoyed growth in cultural influence and

gained more political power. (Some people say that this is now happening again.)

During the 1980s religious communities in China maintained a steady increase of influence. Many religious places were established or rebuilt. Dozens of religious schools were started or resumed. The Chinese attitude toward religion became more friendly, even as they retained a strong undercurrent of utilitarianism in their religious outlook.

During 1990s, rapid economic growth further changed the Chinese religious picture. Economic growth improved the material life of the people, but the natural desire to seek more prosperity introduced a new idolatry: the worship of money, or materialism. The acquisition of wealth replaced moral progress as the primary criterion for judging social standing among ordinary people. The materially poor, despite their traditional moral integrity, were constantly put to shame in unavoidable social occasions while immoral men and women with greater possessions were placed high up on the social hierarchy. These pressures encouraged corruption among poorly-paid government officials; clerks who had access to cash transactions; police officers; and even teachers who felt left behind in the “money chasing” game.

Corruption is still one of the toughest problems facing the government. Unlike in the U.S., in China most assets of value are still publicly owned. As a result, there are more chances for corruption to occur because the interests, burdens and resources to protect against corruption in China are not as evenly spread among individual owners and their agents as in U.S.

Intellectuals concerned with social consciousness have sought to introduce traditional religions in order to counterbalance materialistic influences. The government has revealed its positive attitude toward the ability of traditional religions to ease many aspects of new social diseases caused by materialistic urges.

The Chinese government does not have a lot of realistic options with respect to its treatment of religion. The first option is to return to the ideology of the Communist state of bygone times. But one does not need a poll to discover that almost no one wants to return to earlier times and go through another experiment in enforced atheistic ideology.

The second option would be to open China wide to all religions. This is not a favored option for current party leaders, who are, personally, followers of Marxism and Leninism. Rejection of this option is not necessarily out of fear of foreign political influence through Christianity-based religions, but out of the concern that Communism may be forced into a competition for the favor of the masses. This in turn might create a disadvantage for the party agenda. Additionally, the newly acquired fear of Islam discourages the party from pursuing this approach.

The third option is Neo-Confucianism. The state would encourage a religious system with Confucian principles that could be regulated closely and would serve the political ends of the new leadership class. Apparently, the leadership is quietly choosing this option.

The party knows that it has to develop an effective response to the rise of religious practice. Religious belief is increasingly fashionable among urban youth. Intellectuals have started to embrace religion. Cleverly packaged and “sanitized” religious books and media, published primarily by

government-owned companies, find their way to bookstores. Publication of religious books is becoming a booming business.

To reduce the risk of religious problems becoming political ones, it is wise for governments to align their political relationship with religious communities: that is, to guarantee the appropriate relationship between church and state, to show more respect for individual conscience, and to let religions compete on an open but level playing field.

Compare this with the U.S.: concerned about the national indifference to moral teachings in the 1990s, evangelicals and Catholics have gained ground in convincing Americans of the Christian version of family values and moral discipline. The presidential election in 2004 showed the strength of religion in steering the direction of a nation.

China and the United States have, in recent years, both faced the influence of materialism as a force undermining traditional values. It may be that both countries, in their own ways, find it to be in their economic, political, and social interest to turn to traditional religions as a buffer against the social problems created by such out-of-control materialism.