



## CHAPTER ONE

BETWEEN SECULARIST IDEOLOGY AND  
DESECULARIZING REALITY: THE BIRTH AND GROWTH  
OF RELIGIOUS RESEARCH IN COMMUNIST CHINA<sup>1</sup>

Fenggang Yang

[I was] overwhelmed by the total secularization of a society and culture that once placed high value on religious shrines, festivals and symbols. During our visit [to China in 1974] we saw almost no evidence of surviving religious practice. . . . We saw no functioning Buddhist temples. Some of those we visited had been converted to use as tea houses, hostels or assembly halls; others were maintained as museums. . . . Some Chinese with whom we talked were curious about religion. They were amazed to learn that educated persons in the West continue to believe and practice religion. For them, they said, the study of scientific materialism had exposed the logical fallacies and absurdities of religion. (MacInnis 1975: 249, 251–52)

Merely three decades ago, China appeared to be the most secularized country in the world. Not a single temple or church was open for public religious service, and people appeared to believe wholeheartedly in atheism, as reported by this American observer. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, China may have become one of the most religious countries in the world. All kinds of religions, old or new, conventional or eccentric, are thriving. American and other Western media often feed images and stories of spectacular revivals of various religions and reckless crackdowns on religious organizations by the Communist government. The growth of various religions and the government's religious policies are important research topics both for understanding China and for theoretical development in the social scientific study of religion, which have received limited scholarly attention (e.g., Hunter and Chan 1993; Madsen 1998; Overmyer 2003; Kindopp and Hamrin 2004).

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published in *Sociology of Religion* 65(2) 2004: 101–19, the official journal of the Association for the Sociology of Religion.

However, between the atheist ideology and repressive religious policy of the government on the one hand and the desecularizing reality of thriving religions on the other hand, religious research in China has emerged as a third entity playing complicated but increasingly important roles in China's religious scene. This chapter focuses on the changing scholarship of religious research.<sup>2</sup> What are the roles of religious research in China under the rule of the Communist Party? Is the scholarship merely part of the atheist propaganda and for the purpose of controlling religion? Or is it serving the interest of religions? What are the predominant theories, perspectives, or approaches in religious research? How are these changing and why?

I will show that during the last two decades of the twentieth century, the birth and growth of religious research in China have been dramatic. In a sense it parallels the paradigm shift in the sociology of religion in the United States (Warner 1993), in which the new paradigm offers a more objective, scientific, and consequently more balanced approach to religion than the old paradigm that favors secularization as religion's destiny (Stark and Finke 2000). Religious research in China remains limited and restricted in many ways. However, scholarship has shifted away from ideological atheism—a radical form of secularization theories—to a more scientific, objective approach that affirms both the positive and negative functions of religion. This intellectual history has three distinct periods: the domination of atheism from 1949 to 1979, the birth of religious research in the 1980s, and the flourishing of the scholarship in the 1990s. Religious research in Communist China was established for the purpose of atheist propaganda and religious control, but it grew into an independent academic discipline that has become more responsive to the desecularizing reality.

#### *1949–1979: Religious Research as Part of Atheist Propaganda*

In the ideological lexicon of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), atheism is a basic doctrine, which manifests in two major forms: scientific atheism and militant atheism. Scientific atheism, as an

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<sup>2</sup> In this chapter religious research includes all scholarly research on religion, such as studies of religion in social sciences, humanities, and theology. 'Religious studies' in the North American context often refers to a discipline, as in such named departments in some universities, which tends to be in the humanities, such as historical and textual studies.

offspring of the European Enlightenment movement, regards religion as illusory or false consciousness, non-scientific and backward; thus atheist propaganda is necessary to expunge religion. In contrast, militant atheism, as advocated by Lenin and the Russian Bolsheviks, treats religion as the dangerous opium and narcotic of the people, a wrong political ideology serving the interests of antirevolutionary forces; thus counter-force may be necessary to control or eliminate religion. Scientific atheism is the theoretical basis for tolerating religion while carrying out atheist propaganda, whereas militant atheism leads to antireligious measures.

In practice, almost as soon as it took power in 1949, the CCP followed the hard line of militant atheism. Within a decade, all religions were brought under the iron control of the Party: Folk religious practices, considered feudalist superstitions, were vigorously suppressed; cultic or heterodox sects, regarded as reactionary organizations, were resolutely banned; foreign missionaries, considered part of Western imperialism, were expelled; and major world religions, including Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism, were coerced into patriotic national associations under close supervision of the Party. Religious believers who dared to challenge these policies were mercilessly banished to labor camps, jails, or execution grounds.

Within such a political environment, academic research on religion was no more than a means for atheist propaganda. A Chinese scholar who lived through that period states:

Scholarly research on religion was considered an important means for atheist education to the masses of people, thus it stressed the differences and conflicts between theism and atheism, and between idealism and materialism. (Dai 2001: 41)

Religious research was indeed an almost forbidden field because of the political risks involved (Wu 1998: 3). Any religious research could be easily labeled as pure scholarship (i.e., an irrelevant subject and a waste of resources), or with feudalist-capitalist content (i.e., reactionary substance), thus subject to reproach and penalty.

In the 1950s and 1960s, very few publications about religion appeared in China. Among these, most were edited collections of source materials from the ancient past. Some made comments on ancient scriptures such as the Daoist *Taiping Jing* (Taiping Scripture) and the Buddhist *Tan Jing* (Chan Sutra), and the sole criterion of evaluation was whether the text was for the peasant revolution, which was good, or for the feudalist ruling class, which was antirevolutionary

and reactionary. It is said that the supreme leader Mao Zedong spoke positively about *Tan Jing* (Huang 1998b: 135; Dai 2001: 42), which was attributed to an illiterate peasant monk Hui Neng (638–713 C.E.), who was the key founder of the Chinese sect of Chan Buddhism. Following such a hint, some scholars ventured to apply Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to the analysis of Chinese Buddhism. The most notorious work of this type was the *Collection on Buddhist Thoughts in Han-Tang* by Ren Jiyu (1962; also see Chen 1965), which won Mao's favor. In 1963, Ren was called in to meet with Mao, and then entrusted to establish a religious research institute. This was to become the Institute for the Study of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The designated task of the institute was to apply Marxism-Leninism-Maoism systematically to explore the essence and causes of religion for the purpose of defeating theism. However, started in 1964 but interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, it did not become functional until 1978. Ironically, in the 1980s and 1990s, this Institute played a leading role in the process of shifting away from completely opposing religion to affirming religion.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), even the little freedom for writing about Buddhism vanished. In pre-1949 China, there were three major Buddhist magazines, which were closed out one-by-one in 1953, 1955, and 1958. *Modern Buddhism* magazine, which was started in 1950 and was put under the patronage of the patriotic China Buddhist Association, also stopped publication in 1964. From 1967 to 1974, not a single article on religion was published in journals, magazines or newspapers in the People's Republic of China (Huang 1998a: 102). It was during this period that the American observer Donald MacInnis (1975) visited China, reporting a totally secularized society with empty churches and temples and willing atheist young people. What he saw was only on the surface, which was maintained by a terrifying dictatorship (also see FitzGerald 1967; Bates 1968; Welch 1969; Huang 1971; Strong and Strong 1973):

During the Cultural Revolution, under the slogans of 'class struggles are the guiding principle' and 'completely break up with conventional ideas', religion was listed as part of the four olds [old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits] and of feudalism, capitalism and revisionism that should be eradicated. Religious beliefs of the great masses were said to be reflections of class struggles in the sphere of ideology and signs of political backwardness and reaction; religious believers were subject to crack-downs as 'ox-monsters' and 'snakedemons',

resulting in many framed and fabricated cases. Religion was a realm of heavy catastrophes. The Religious Affairs Administration was dissolved; religious cadres were censured for their crime of following the wrong political line. All religious venues were closed. Many religious artifacts were destroyed. Religious research completely halted. The criticism of theism quickly became in practice the theoretical declaration for struggling and eliminating religion in society. (Dai 2001: 43)

Therefore, scholarly research on religion completely ceased to exist. The few scholars who had written about religion in the past were muted, and many of them suffered physical and psychological tortures, as did many religious believers.

However, militant atheism and merciless suppression failed to eradicate religion in Chinese society. Although religious organizations were disbanded, churches and temples were closed and clergy were dismissed, many believers went underground—keeping one's faith to oneself or gathering in homes amidst vigilant secrecy. Instead of declining, religions persisted and resurfaced as soon as the suppression policy relaxed.

#### *The 1980s: The Opium War*

Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Deng Xiaoping emerged as the paramount leader of the CCP and at the end of 1978 launched the economic reforms and open-door policies. Deng Xiaoping himself had little to say about religion, except mentioning it in passing when addressing ethnic relations, such as Tibetan problems, or international relations, such as Buddhist exchanges with Japan (in order to win investments and loans). Nonetheless, as political pragmatism was prevailing over ideological dogmatism, religious policy also changed from complete eradication to limited toleration (MacInnis 1994). In order to mobilize people of all walks of life for the central task of economic development, beginning in 1979, a limited number of Christian churches, Buddhist temples and other religious sites were allowed to reopen, bringing religious life back to the public scene.

Following a brief period of confusion in religious policies, the CCP Central Committee formulated “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Affairs during the Socialist Period of Our Country”—which has become known as Document No. 19 and has been the basis of the religious policy since then. This document concludes that

religion in socialist China has five characteristics (*wu xing*): it will exist for a long time; it has masses of believers; it is complex; it entwines with ethnicity; and it affects international relations. Therefore, religious affairs should be handled with care; religious believers should be rallied for the central task of economic construction; religious freedom should be guaranteed as long as the believers love the country, support CCP's rule, and observe the socialist laws. It acknowledges the mistakes of militant atheism. But it also clearly reaffirms the atheist doctrine: religion will eventually wither away and atheist propaganda should be carried out unremittingly.

Document No. 19 reports the reality of religious persistence: From the early 1950s to the early 1980s, the number of Muslims increased from over 8 million to over 10 million. Catholics increased from 2.7 million to over 3 million. Protestants increased from 0.7 million to about 3 million. Buddhism and Daoism have also persisted, although no enumeration was provided. Given that the whole population has about doubled from 1950 to 1980, the absolute number of religious believers has increased, but the proportion of believers in the whole population of the country has decreased (RAB 1995: 56). This was noted in the document, and later by some officials as well, as a partial victory of atheist propaganda.

However, after so many years of pervasive atheist education and fierce suppression, the persistence of religion itself was very puzzling. Document No. 19 simply states that there may be psychological and social roots for religion to continue to exist in socialist society. But what are such roots? What is the nature of religion? Document No. 19 set the basis for tolerance and restriction policies, but it also set off debates on the nature and roots of religion.

Initially, the debate was around the opium thesis. "Religion . . . is the opium of the people." This statement by Karl Marx in his "Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*" (1844 [Marx and Engels 1975: 38]) was once regarded by the CCP as the foundation of Marxist atheism. After this position was reiterated by Party ideologues around 1980, other theorists, under the cloud of thought liberation (*jiefang sixiang*), spoke out in challenge. Many scholars and ideologues were drawn into the debate (see He 2000; Gao 2000; Dai 2001). The leftists insisted that the opium thesis was the cornerstone of a Marxist view of religion, whereas the liberals offered counter arguments within the parameters of upholding orthodox Marxism, making painstaking efforts with delicate rhetoric. The liberals argued,

- the opium statement was only an analogy, and an analogy is not a definition;
- the opium analogy by Marx should not be understood in complete, negative terms, because opium was used as a pain reliever at Marx's time;
- this analogical statement did not represent the complete view of Marxism on religion since Marx, and especially Engels, made other important statements on religion; and
- before Marx other people had already compared religion to opium, so this was not a uniquely Marxist view.

Gradually, liberal thinking prevailed, especially attracting younger scholars. Many leftists also softened, or even completely abandoned, their original position. A striking example is Lü Daji, as will be discussed later, who eventually turned away from Marxist atheism in favor of scientific neutrality and objectivity.

This debate has been referred to as the 'opium war' because of the involvement of numerous scholars and ideologues from both sides. It also stimulated interest in religion among young scholars. The most important contribution of the opium war debate was probably that it legitimized religious research as a discipline. The Institute for the Study of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences expanded. Some provincial academies of social sciences also established religious research institutes, including Shanghai in 1980, Yunnan in 1984, and Tibet in 1985. Several specialty journals for religious research were launched, including the *Journal for the Study of World Religions* (Beijing, 1979), *Religion* (Nanjing, 1979), *Sources of World Religions* (Beijing, 1980), *Scholarly Research on Religion* (Chengdu, 1982), *Contemporary Religious Research* (Shanghai, 1989), and several other journals for internal circulation. Meanwhile, several major universities, including Fudan University, the People's University of China, and Beijing University, formed a section for teaching and studying religion, most of which were based within philosophy departments. Books about religion began to be published, including introductions or general surveys of various religions, and historical studies of Chinese Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and Christian missions (e.g., Ren 1981; Gu 1981; Jiang 1982; Tang 1982; Ma 1983; Zhang 1986; Yu 1987; Zhang and Liu 1987; Luo 1988; Qin 1988–1995). The overall tone of the publications gradually changed from completely negative criticism of religion to a more balanced evaluation.



*The 1990s: The Culture Fever*

The economic reforms and thought liberation policies in the early 1980s set off a series of intellectual or cultural movements, including the scar literature, which condemned the evils of the cultural revolution and other leftist political campaigns; the humanist literature, which called for the return of humanity against political brutality, and the hazy poetry, which questioned the orthodox or clear-cut artificial normality. Various Western philosophies and social theories, such as existentialism, psychoanalysis and Nietzscheanism, were reintroduced, and they aroused fascination especially among college students and young scholars. Meanwhile, modernization and democratization, which were old themes of the May Fourth and New Culture Movement in the 1910s and 1920s, sparked new enthusiasm.

Within the new social and cultural climate, cultural comparisons of the East and West became hot (see Gu 1999). The culture fever (*wenhua re*) excited the whole intelligentsia and spilled over to the public, climaxing in the student-led democracy movement in 1989. After the Tiananmen Square Incident on June 4th, 1989, when the democracy movement was violently crushed by the government, political discussions muted, but cultural debates continued. Catching the waves of the culture fever, religious research expanded its horizon.

In the late 1980s, some vanguard scholars began to argue that to understand culture and cultures, it was necessary to study religion as part of culture and to study the relationships between religion and other cultural components, including folklore, literature, arts, music, philosophy, science, morality, politics, economy, laws, and so on (e.g., Ge 1987; Fang 1988; Zhuo 1988; see also He 2000). In the 1990s, the cultural approach to religion made vivacious waves. Several new journals were launched, including *Buddhist Culture* (Beijing, 1989) and the *Review of Christian Culture* (Guiyang, 1990). The well-established journal *Sources of World Religions* was renamed *World Religious Culture* in 1995. By the late 1990s, several more book-form journals appeared, including *Religion and Culture* (Hangzhou 1994) and the *Journal for the Study of Christian Culture* (Beijing 1999). Meanwhile, several publishers brought forth culture series of books: Religious Cultures Popular Readings by the Qilu Press,<sup>3</sup> Religious Cultures by China Construction

<sup>3</sup> Including such titles as *Aspects of Buddhist Culture*, *Aspects of Christian Culture* and *Aspects of Islamic Culture*.



Press,<sup>4</sup> and Religion and the World translation series by Sichuan People's Press.<sup>5</sup> A newly established publisher was even named the Religious Culture Press.<sup>6</sup>

Culture is an all-encompassing and esteemed term in the Chinese context. The importance of the cultural approach to religious research is two-fold. First, when religion is studied as a cultural phenomenon, its ideological incorrectness becomes unimportant and its scientific incorrectness obscure, eliminating two key criticisms of religion by the militant and scientific atheisms respectively. Culture has its own significance and its own life. Religion as part of culture has its own reasons for existence and its own logic. Therefore, religion cannot be reduced to social or psychological factors. Studying religion as culture, therefore, is necessary and respectable. Second, the cultural approach makes religious research wide reaching and consequently academically rewarding. Scholars of both religious research and other disciplines can now write and publish about religion and its related aspects of culture and society, such as the arts, philosophy, literature, education, politics, archeology, and science. The topics are indeed limitless, and the new book series and new journals provided outlets for such scholarly studies. The effervescence of cultural discourses of religion in effect pushes leftist ideologues to the margins, for the stifled reiteration of atheism and antireligious position, still backed by certain Party and government officials, appeals to few people in the market of ideas.

During this period, some scholars became openly sympathetic to religion in general or to a particular religion. The phenomenon of cultural Christians (*Wenhua Jidutu*) is the most interesting development in this regard. In the past, Chinese intellectuals as a whole were most resistant to and critical of Christianity, which was perceived as a foreign religion and a means of Western colonialism and imperialism (Yip 1980; Lutz 1988). In the 1990s, however, quite a number of Chinese scholars began to publish about Christianity with sympathy and empathy (see ISCCC 1997; Chen and Hsu 1998; An 2000; Zhuo 2001). Some of them have even openly or semi-openly taken

<sup>4</sup> Including *A Hundred Questions of Christian Culture*, *A Hundred Questions of Buddhist Culture*, *A Hundred of Questions of Islamic Culture*, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Including a variety of scholarly books in humanities and social sciences.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, it is under the direct control of the State Religious Affairs Bureau. More interestingly, it has published Christian apologetics and Buddhist sutras.

up the Christian faith. These scholars are commonly based in universities and research academies in the disciplines of philosophy, history, and literature. They have translated Western books of Christian theology, philosophy and history into Chinese, published books and articles to discuss various aspects of, or in relation to, Christianity or Christian culture, and lectured on university campuses to introduce Christianity. It is the cultural approach to religion that has legitimized such activities in academic settings, for they can claim to be studying and introducing Western culture, not religion per se. Because of their prolific publications and enthusiastic promotion of Christianity, these cultural Christians have been dubbed as China's Apollos by outside observers (see ISCCC 1997).<sup>7</sup> Amid the culture fevers, these cultural Christians have stirred up a Christianity fever among the college-educated urbanites while underground house churches spread with zeal in the rural areas. Many college students and intellectuals have been drawn into Christianity initially through reading the publications of the cultural Christians rather than through contacts with the church or Christian believers.

Lately, some people began talking about a comparable phenomenon of cultural Buddhists within academia. Actually, there have been more Buddhist studies scholars who have been openly sympathetic or adherent to Buddhism. Although cultural Christians and cultural Buddhists are not necessarily converted religious believers, precisely because of their nonbeliever status they are often considered in a better position to speak positively, and critically as well, about religion. They can, and do, claim academic neutrality and objectivity when they talk about positive contributions of religions to social stability and morality. Religious leaders appreciate such expressions. On the other hand, however, some of these scholars have also advocated reformation in theology and religious organizations, which is not always pleasing to religious leaders.

Lü Daji, a scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who exemplified the shift of approach to religion, says,

In reviewing the path of scholarship on religious research since 1949 we may say this: there was no other theory or concept but 'religion

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<sup>7</sup> According to the book of Acts (18:24–28) in the New Testament, Apollos is a Jewish teacher and follower of John the Baptist, but became an enthusiastic and effective preacher of the Christian gospel before his Christian baptism.

is reactionary politics' that was more fettering to scholars of religious research; and there has been no other theory or concept but 'religion is culture' that is more liberating to scholars of religious research. (quoted in He 2000: 85)

*Defining Religion: From the Marxist to the Scientific*

Religious research in China has changed from virtual nonexistence from the 1950s to the 1970s to flourishing in the 1990s. Moreover, the predominant perspective in the scholarship has clearly shifted from antagonistic atheism up to the early 1980s to a more objective and consequently affirmative understanding in the 1990s. This dramatic shift crystallized in the efforts to define and redefine religion by Lü Daji (1989, 1998), who has become one of the most respected theorists of religious research in China.

During the 'opium war' debate in the early 1980s, as described earlier, the leftist camp was based primarily in Beijing at the Institute for the Study of World Religions (ISWR) at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the liberal camp was loosely clustered in Shanghai, although there were liberals in the North and leftists in the South as well. Lü Daji has been a research fellow at the ISWR since it became functional in the late 1970s. He was one of the major representatives of the Northern leftist camp, who followed Lenin's emphasis that the opium statement was the cornerstone of the Marxist view of religion. By the end of the 1980s, however, Lü publicly moved away from that position. Still insisting on following the line of Marxism, Lü took a statement of Engels as the key to define religion. Engels, the cofounder of Marxism, says in *Anti-Dühring* (1877), "All religion . . . is nothing but the illusory reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces" (1939: 353). Following this line but expanded to include elements from Durkheim and other scholars, Lü offered this definition:

Religion is a kind of social consciousness, an illusory reflection in people's minds of the external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which terrestrial forces assume the form of superhuman and supernatural forces, and the consequent believing and worshiping behaviors toward such forces; it is the normalized socio-cultural system that synthesizes this consciousness and these behaviors. (Lü 1980: 80–81)

This is clearly an atheist definition for it presumes gods being illusory. But it has also clearly moved away from Leninist radicalism. His book, *A General Theory of Religious Studies* (1989), was widely praised by scholars of religious research and won an award.

About a decade later, Lü (1998: 74–75) has further discredited Engels' statement. First, Lü said that the statement was a value judgment, biased by a strong atheist position, thus unacceptable as a scientific definition. The scientific definition should be value-neutral or value-free, and should not negate at the onset the existence of god or gods. Second, this statement was only about the notion of god, not about the whole religion, which should include the social organization as well as the religious ideas. Therefore, a new definition of religion was formulated:

Religion is a kind of social consciousness regarding superhuman and supernatural forces, and its consequent believing and worshipping behaviors toward such forces; it is the normalized and institutionalized socio-cultural system that synthesizes this consciousness and the behaviors. (Lü 1998: 81)

By then, Lü did not insist that this was a Marxist definition. Instead, he stated that this was a scientific definition with reference to various theories of religion, including both Marxist and non-Marxist ones. More important, by then it did not matter anymore whether or not the definition was Marxist. He contended, “we should not indiscreetly negate a view or blindly accept a stand” (1998: 81). He even expressed appreciation of theism for its liberating effects to primitive people (1998: 88), which had become a shared view among most scholars of religious research. Obviously, this new definition of religion and the corresponding new attitude have come a long way. What is more interesting, instead of being reprimanded by the authorities for his open departure from Marxist doctrines, Lü's definition has been widely praised by scholars of religious research for its scientific nature and liberating effect.

#### *Factors for the Dramatic Shift*

The most important factor for the dramatic shift of perspectives of religious research in China is the desecularizing reality. In 1982, Document No. 19 acknowledged the persistence of religions, yet concurrently claimed a partial victory for the proportional reduction of

believers in the population, and confidently proclaimed the eventual victory of atheism. As soon as the suppressive policy relaxed, however, religious revivals burst through the vast land. A report based on a government census of religions provides the following statistics (Li 1999): Catholics grew from 2.3 million in the early 1950s to 3 million in 1982, to 4 million by the end of 1995. Protestants grew from 0.7 million in the early 1950s to 3 million in 1982, and to over 10 million by the end of 1995. The Muslim ethnic minority population more than tripled from 5 million in the 1950s to 18 million. Buddhist and Daoist believers cannot be enumerated due to the lack of a membership system but seem to have increased in multitude as well.

If these numbers seem extraordinary, the reality is even more astonishing. Every scholar of religious research in China and overseas China watcher believes that the estimates published by the Chinese government are severe undercounts (Overmyer 2003). For instance, there could be as many as 80 million Protestants by the mid-1990s (Chao and Chong 1997). While the Communist Party has failed to reduce the number of religious believers in reality, some officials seem to have taken comfort in reducing the numbers at least in the official records.<sup>8</sup> However, first cannot be wrapped in paper. The reality cries for proper recognition and serious understanding. Whereas officials may be reluctant to face the challenge of the reality due to a belief that their political fortune is at stake, some scholars in academia have made the effort to reveal and reflect upon the desecularizing reality. When this is done in a proper tone, and at the right moment, it can be rewarding for their academic career. Religious believers and those prospective converts are eager consumers, thus books, journals and magazines on various religions are popular. Religious research scholars, once despised by other scholars for their obscure scholarship far removed from reality, have now won respect,

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<sup>8</sup> Ye Xiaowen, the Head of the State Religious Affairs Bureau, in a speech to the Chinese Communist Party Central School in 1996, acknowledged problems of receiving inaccurate counts of religious believers. A major problem is because of this rule of the Chinese political game: the numbers come from the cadres, and the cadres come from the numbers. More exactly, Ye says, regarding religion, it is "the negative numbers come from the cadres, and the cadres come from the negative numbers" (2000: 9). In other words, local officials who report negative growth of religious believers are more likely to get promoted, consequently there has been the chronic problem of serious undercounts of religious believers.

sometimes even celebrity stardom, among intellectuals as well as ordinary religious believers. Obviously, the desecularizing reality provides social grounds for the change of perspectives in religious research.

The possibility of academic rewards for serious scholarship leads to the other important factor for the paradigm shift, namely, the relaxed political climate for scholarly research. Although Chinese academia today is not completely free from political restrictions, the free space of scholarship has been significantly enlarged. Opposing views among scholars in various disciplines have become normal. Despite periodical purges and repressions of the most outspoken dissenters against the official positions of the CCP, disagreements on government policies, and their underpinning theories as well, have become common among scholars as well as the masses. Scholars are usually left alone to perform academic research and publish scholarly writings as long as there are no open and direct criticisms of certain government leaders and policies. Moreover, ironically, a scholar who got singled out by the authorities for a reprimand almost always gained more respect both in academia and by the public.

Although the dramatic shift of religious research scholarship in China has developed quite independently with its own internal dynamics, the change has also been facilitated by international exchanges. Since the early 1980s, some scholars have made tremendous efforts to translate Western classics into Chinese and publish them in China. The most influential translation series in religious research is *Religion and the World* published by Sichuan People's Press under the editorship of Professor He Guanghu, a highly respected scholar previously at the ISWR before joining the faculty of the People's University of China. Another highly influential translation series is the Daofeng collection of Christian thought published by the Daofeng Press in Hong Kong under the editorship of Dr. Liu Xiaofeng, who has become a star pursued by many young intellectuals and college students. These and other translated classics have inspired ideas, concepts, and theories for the dramatic shift of perspectives. Meanwhile, some Western scholars have visited China, and many Chinese scholars have spent time in North America and Europe. Some Western scholars and foundations have also provided resources for cooperative research projects inside China. These international exchanges have helped Chinese scholars engage with Western scholars, consequently helping to expand the horizons of religious research scholarship in China.

By the late 1990s, religious research became a solidly established discipline with a significant accumulation of scholarly works and networks. Nationally, about 500 people were believed capable of doing serious research and scholarly writing about religion (Wu 1998). Additionally, several prestigious universities have established departments of religious studies. In 2000, there were over 60 institutes focusing on religious research and over 60 journals on or of religion. In the last five years of the twentieth century, a total of over a thousand books on religion had been published, and over 100 articles on religion were published every year. The number of such publications is increasing (Cao 2001). Overall, given the critical mass of scholars, outlets for publications, and networks, religious research has become a self-sustaining discipline. Such a status of the discipline, backed by the significant level of academic freedom, has made it possible to theorize independently without much fear of political ramifications and the consequent administrative reprimands.

*Dancing Under the Shadow of Shackles*

The discipline of religious research in China has become lively and interesting. Mainstream scholars have gained considerable freedom and shown significant creativity. They are dancing with many new ideas. However, they are still dancing under the shadow of shackles. This can be seen clearly in the uneven development of different subfields within the discipline. Two contrasts are noticeable: the uneven development of Buddhist studies versus Christian studies, and the uneven development of historical studies versus contemporary studies.

Publications and conferences in Buddhist studies far exceed Christian studies. Over 1000 books on Buddhism were published between 1979 and 1998 (Wu 1998: 30), whereas less than 200 books appeared on Christianity, the majority of which were translations of Western works (Wu 1998: 16). The very few historical studies of Christianity in China, especially those which appeared in the early 1980s (e.g., Gu 1981, 1985), tended to stress the imperialistic nature of Christian missions. In the 1990s, historical studies of pre-1949 Christian universities offered more objective and balanced evaluations (see Shen and Zhu 1998).

Meanwhile, over 60 conferences specifically on Buddhism took place from 1980 to 1988; also there were many other conferences



with Buddhism as one of the major subjects in discussion (Huang 2000: 251). In 2000 alone, ten conferences on Buddhism were held covering topics ranging from Buddhist Arts, Tiantai and Chan Sects, Mi-Le Culture, 120 Birthday Commemoration of Master Hong Yi, to the mutual adaptation of Buddhism and socialist society. By comparison, conferences on Christianity have been fewer and have often encountered difficulties in obtaining permission from the authorities.

Two reasons account for this contrast between Buddhist studies and Christian studies. First, there are more historical and textual materials of Buddhism available to China's scholars than those of Christianity, so it is easier to research and write about Buddhism. Second, the political risk in publishing about Buddhism is less than about Christianity. A book or article on Christianity is more likely to be censored or banned from publication than one on Buddhism. Certain persons, events, and issues regarding Chinese Christianity are still off limits for open discussion or publication. This is a reflection of the skewed policies of the CCP toward different religions, which deserves a focused analysis, but is beyond the scope of this chapter. It will suffice to say here that some leaders in the CCP and the government tend to favor Buddhism (and Daoism) as a Chinese native religion over Christianity as a foreign religion, hence wish to impede the rapid growth of Christianity.

The lack of studies of contemporary religions in Chinese society is another indication of the shackles. The majority of publications are historical studies, whether on Buddhism, Christianity, or any other religion. Empirical research on contemporary religions is extremely rare. Several reasons may account for this. First, availability of historical materials is far more abundant than contemporary data. Second, there is a greater political risk in discussing issues of contemporary religions. This is the greatest obstacle (Wu 1998: 39–40). Contemporary religious phenomena are often politically sensitive due to their direct association with social stability and government policy. The research offices of the CCP and the government have conducted investigative studies of contemporary religions for policy-making purposes. Occasionally, these studies were contracted out to academic institutes. But the authorities clearly prefer issuing internal reports to publishing the findings in journals or books. In cases where publication is permitted, it is closely scrutinized; interesting information is often taken out from such publications. In addition to political risks, scholars are also discouraged by such publication limits, for the academic principle in China is the same—publish or perish.

In 1999, the Chinese government officially banned Falun Gong and other qigong groups, along with over a dozen heretical sects of Christian background. They were labeled as evil cults that endanger the health of the masses and disturb the stability of the society. Responding to this anti-cult political campaign, many scholars of religious research have shied away from speaking against the specific Chinese cults; instead they have danced around the issues by publishing books and articles about cults or new religious movements in the West (e.g., Dai 1999; Luo 2002). A few scholars have argued tacitly that the natural enemy of cults is conventional religions, so the solution is to allow the growth of those religions (e.g., Jiang and He 2000). Meanwhile, some scholars and universities have seized this opportunity to call for allocating more resources for the study of contemporary religious phenomena. This appeal seems to be receiving its due attention from government officials as well as scholars. Contemporary Western books in the sociology of religion are being translated and published in China. Some scholars have started to gather empirical data systematically. A symposium was held in October 2003 in Beijing focusing on the methodological issues surrounding the study religions in China today. In July 2004, several Western sociologists of religion taught a Summer Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion in Beijing.

However, there are important obstacles for studying contemporary religion in China. One significant obstacle is the lack of a sophisticated methodology. Most religious research scholars in China today migrated from other disciplines of the humanities, especially philosophy, literature, and history. They commonly lack training in social scientific methodology. Meanwhile, few social scientists are interested in religious research; even if some are interested, they lack the necessary knowledge of religion to conduct religious research. Relatedly important, social scientific research projects of contemporary religion usually require larger funding, and such funding is very scarce and extremely difficult to obtain in China. Religious research scholars in China do seem eager to learn sociological methods and to find international collaborators.

Despite such difficulties and uneven developments, the relationship between academia and the government on religion has become more interactive. While the Party and the government often set limits for academic research, scholars often test the limits and push to expand the boundaries. Some research projects have even made evident impacts on religious policies. One example is the research team

at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, which published their empirical research findings and a rereading of Marxist works in the book *Religious Problems in the Era of Socialist China* (Luo 1987). It argues that religion and socialist society can be compatible, and they should adapt or accommodate to each other. The book immediately stirred up debates: some ideologues wrote in direct opposition on the basis of atheism, but more scholars spoke in favor or offered support (see Wei 2000; Ng 2000). Eventually, in 1993, the authorities officially adopted the language of mutual adaptation, although with its own twists in the policy application to guide religions to adapt actively to socialist society.

The ideological core of CCP remains atheistic and anti-religious, as continuously expressed by Ye Xiaowen, the tsar of religious affairs: “we always hope to effect a gradual weakening of the influence of religion” (2000:5). However, religious research scholars decreasingly follow the Party line. In the current sociopolitical contexts, Chinese scholars can be dancing with many new ideas; only the shadow of shackles keeps most of them self-restrained from directly challenging established religious policies.

### *Conclusion*

Religious research in China has developed from nonexistence to a growing, self-sustaining discipline. The predominant perspective has shifted away from the completely anti-religious, atheist position to the more objective, scientific approach. Between 1949 and 1979, religious research was only to serve atheist propaganda. The opium war debate about the nature of religion in the early 1980s gave birth to the discipline, and the culture fevers since the late 1980s significantly expanded the horizons of the scholarship. Despite repressive policies toward religion and restrictive policies toward academia, religious research has become increasingly autonomous and responsive to the desecularizing reality. By the late 1990s, Marxist dogmatism has evidently given way to scientific principles, which require neutrality and objectivity, thus making it possible to affirm both the positive and the negative functions of religion.

The dramatic change of religious research in China has developed independently with its own internal dynamics. But international scholarly exchanges have evidently facilitated the change by providing ideas, theories, collegial support, and material resources. In the

era of increasing globalization, religious research in China is poised to expand and destined to merge into the global streams of religious scholarship. Given continuous evolvments without sudden disruptions, religious research in China is likely to unveil new empirical findings and to engender further theoretical development in the sociology of religion within and beyond its borders.

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