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“Religion in a State Society: China”

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I. INTRODUCTION: CENTRAL POINTS

China, the world’s largest society both now and in pre-industrial times, provides an excellent case for consideration of the multifaceted role of religion in the expression of social and political relationships.

- China, because of its size and complexity, furnishes an especially important illustration of **religion’s role in the political and social integration of a traditional agrarian state.**
- China also is an excellent example for consideration of **how religion was involved in the manifestation of the village and family autonomy characteristic of peasant populations in pre-modern state settings.** In addition to reinforcing links between state and society and at the same time expressing the interests of local kinship and community groups, religion also was very importantly involved in expressions of hostility by some groups both to the state and to the larger social status quo.
- Because within one society there was this variety in religious expression, China provides an especially good example for considering religion in terms of social context and function.
- In modern times China has undergone a painful and tumultuous process of social, political, and economic change. Given religion’s deep penetration into its traditional social fabric, China can be used as an equally important case study of the relationship between traditional religions and the modern transformation of society.

II. MAJOR TOPICS

INTRODUCTION

For purposes of the following discussion, traditional China refers to the period when the last of the imperial dynasties, the Qing or Manchu, held sway. Following the Manchu conquest in 1644, Qing rule was not significantly threatened until the onset of incursions by the modern Western powers in the mid-nineteenth century; this was followed in 1912 by the collapse of the Qing and the establishment of the Republic of China, and then by the formation of the People’s Republic of China with the Communist triumph in 1949. This sequence of political events was linked to important changes in culture and society and provides the framework for consideration below of traditional religion, pre-Communist change, and religion in the People’s Republic.

Diffuse and Institutional Religion

Religion was deeply involved in all aspects of social life in traditional China and there can be distinguished a “diffuse” or popular religion looming largest in the daily lives of the people and the major formal institutional religions of Buddhism, Taoism, and the State Cult. The religious beliefs and behavior of the vast majority of the Chinese are characterized as diffuse because they were expressed largely in family and community contexts and not conditioned by acceptance of a specific doctrine or through affiliation with a particular church. Daily ritual and worship typically was a family affair, and lineages or territorial communities also would manage their own periodic rites. On the other hand, the Buddhist or Taoist clergy of institutional religion usually lived in temples away from villages, which they entered purely as hired ritual specialists for weddings or funerals and during community and other special observances.

CHINESE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

The historical development of Chinese religion in both its institutional and diffuse aspects involved several traditions, including folk or popular beliefs in gods, spirits, and ghosts; ancestor worship; the imperial or state ritual; divination and geomancy; Confucianism; Taoism; and Buddhism. Buddhism, imported from India, underwent important changes as it developed in China in conjunction with the other traditions that were almost entirely Chinese in origin. Even before the Qing period, elements from these traditions had already combined into the diffuse religion that was a coherent set of practices and beliefs for the individual, the family, and the community. In China, therefore, diffuse religion and popular religion for all intents and purposes were the same, a situation unlike that in many other pre-modern societies where popular and institutional religion were far more tightly linked. Thus, it is most useful to focus not on these separate traditions, but on how they contributed to Chinese popular

religion as a whole. Because this popular religion framed much of social life, it will be viewed first in conjunction with the official rites that emphasized links between state and society, and then in contrast to the salvationistic traditions that rejected state, society, and the "orthodox" religion that supported both.

THE OFFICIAL RELIGION

The official religion or State Cult gave powerful ritual emphasis to key elements of state ideology and to the basic political organization of the state. Participants in the official rites were the emperor, his bureaucracy, and also other degree-holders (those passing the imperial examinations, which served to create a national elite and a smaller pool of high-ranking degree-holders for recruitment to the bureaucracy). There was no independent priesthood, for worship, guided by bureaucrats according to government regulations, was considered an official duty. The emperor, as the Son of Heaven with the Mandate of Heaven to rule over human society, worshipped Heaven and Earth as his symbolic parents and in expression of the anciently established Chinese state ideology which held that the emperor was not divine but rather divinely appointed; his duty was to insure that society expressed its natural order, which was but an aspect of the cosmic order of humanity (society), heaven, and earth. The emperor also worshipped his own ancestors, expressing the Confucian ethic of filial loyalty. Among other objects of imperial worship were the sun, the moon, Confucius, the emperors of earlier dynasties, the god of agriculture (in a ritual which included the symbolic plowing by the emperor of the first furrow of the new farming season), and other divinities representing important natural or social forces (e.g., the god of learning).

The arrangement of state ritual below the emperor was coordinated exactly with the national administrative system. At each administrative level—province, prefecture, and county—there was a city or town serving as the administrative seat, where in addition to the government compound (*yamen*) which was the officiating magistrate's headquarters, there were several official religious establishments: among the most important were the Confucian or civil temple (*wen miao*), and the military temple (*wu miao*), which were the ritual foci of the two major divisions in the Chinese bureaucracy; and also the City God temple (*chenghuang miao*). A city serving as both prefectural seat and county seat would have two *yamen* and two sets of state temples. In the civil temples were tablets bearing the names of Confucius, his disciples, and certain later eminent scholars and officials, while military temple tablets were dedicated to the god of war (Guan Yu), historically a military leader, and to other military leaders of the past renowned especially for their patriotism and loyalty. Rites at these temples were held by and for government officials, and for the vastly larger number of degree-holders not in office.

Ritual and Belief in the State Cult

In considering the State Cult, a question is whether emphasis should be on ritual or on religion, on the symbolic expression of those social and political values given emphasis in state ideology, or on the

worship of the supernatural. For many Chinese thinkers in the Confucian tradition, there was a natural order linking humanity to the rest of the cosmos, which, as a totality, operated on moral principle. Humans are endowed with a nature that is good, and only selfish desires and passions place them in conflict with the (or their) natural order. Confucius himself stressed the use of ritual and sacrifice as means to inculcate values of ethical and social importance for the living; rituals thus were used to encourage greater conformity to this natural order, rather than to express dependence on the supernatural. The arrangement of state ritual largely was compatible with such Confucian views; the focus of sacrifice and reverence was on natural forces or historical sages represented as inscribed tablets and not personified by images. Whether these beliefs were “religious” has been a matter of some debate; however they may be characterized, these elite convictions did contrast with the beliefs in the supernatural held by the masses and indeed by many if not most officials and degree-holders.

Popular Religion and the State.

While a high-ranking Confucian scholar-official and the average person might interpret rituals in different ways, the state did make an effort to control popular religion. The imperial government actively manipulated its own pantheon of deities into which the more important gods of popular religion were incorporated. An important religious link between state and society was the City God, whose temple was found at every administrative seat. The City God was popularly considered the magistrate’s supernatural or divine counterpart. Both held sway over the same administrative area, the magistrate attending to this-worldly affairs and the City God to the supernatural. The magistrate, depending on one’s interpretation, either paid formal reverence to the City God or worshipped him, and was expected to appeal to the City God for supernatural assistance during droughts, floods, or other crises beyond direct human control.

POPULAR RELIGION

Projection of State and Society in the Cosmos of Popular Religion

The state encouraged the belief of most people that the City God occupied an important position in a pantheon of gods organized in a supernatural hierarchy paralleling that of the imperial government. This divine hierarchy was arranged into the three major divisions of heaven, earth, and the underworld; it comprised gods and spirits represented in temples and at shrines or domestic alters by carved images or woodblock prints. The belief was that the gods, although having supernatural powers, closely resembled in their desires and behavior living government officials. On earth, each household was kept under scrutiny by its own Stove God (*zao jun*). Also in close contact with the living were the Earth Gods (*tudi*) of local territorial communities, be they rural or urban neighborhoods, entire villages, towns, or other settlements. Each Earth God was believed to protect the area under its jurisdiction as a subordinate of the City God. Thus the local arrangement of communities within an administrative district was given a religious dimension.

The City God was also linked to the second major division of the cosmos of popular religion: the underworld of the dead. A person’s death was announced by surviving family members to the local Earth God, who was quite familiar with all residents of his domain. The Earth God in turn reported to the City God, who arranged for the soul’s delivery to the underworld. Although partially derived from Buddhism, the underworld in its Chinese form had long been assimilated into the hierarchical framework of popular religion and was seen as the domain of ten judges or magistrates. The soul of the dead passed through each magistrate’s department for judgment and, if appropriate, submission to sometimes horrible punishments. While those who had led exemplary lives might obtain early or even immediate release, prayers and rites for the soul in the underworld loomed large during funeral ritual.

The third major division of popular religion’s cosmos was the heavenly court of the Jade Emperor, thought to be the supreme ruler of all the supernatural domains described so far. The Jade Emperor was the analogue in popular religion of the more abstractly conceived Heaven of the State Cult. Likewise, he was the divine parallel of the living emperor. Attending the Jade Emperor in the heavenly court were many other gods, some the spirits of historical figures who had led lives of merit, others representing the forces of nature, and yet others adopted from Buddhism. Generally, a local temple’s major god (often together with other deities), worshipped both by individuals and during community rites, was considered by local residents to be a member of this heavenly pantheon.

Kinship Solidarity and the Worship of Ancestors.

Like other aspects of Chinese religion, rites for the ancestors could have differing elite and popular interpretations. Scholars and officials could see these rites as expressions of principles governing human relationships. People owed their parents obedience, respect, and gratitude for having been given life and sustenance; and they had the responsibility to support them in their old age. Such obligations were expressions of filiality (*xiao*), a fundamental ethical concept of Confucianism. *Xiao* was to be manifested even after the parents’ death through sacrifices and obeisance in front of tablets or scrolls bearing their names. Because among the Chinese descent was through the male line, women married into the family were expected to honor their husband’s ancestors. Likewise, when a woman died her sons honored her and her husband. Ancestral rites also expressed the idea of an unbroken line of descent, whose preservation was another important duty of filiality. Thus the ancestral rites could unite, in life and in death, not only parents and children, but also a larger group of kinsmen who traced their descent from more remote ancestors. In many parts of China, especially in the south, such large lineages tended to remain together in the same village or neighborhood. In addition to tablets for nearer ancestors kept in their separate homes, the lineage would build in common a larger ancestral hall, often an impressive edifice with row upon row of tablets placed in the main room and arranged by generation. The achievements of prominent ancestors were recorded in such halls, and sometimes their tablets were arranged separately and given pride of place; these ancestors were meant to be sources of both pride and inspiration for their descendants.

Ancestors held in common could bring together the rich and the poor, the Confucian scholar and the ordinary farmer. They could all articulate, though in different ways, the moral and ethical obligations

underlying the ancestral rites. But for the majority, once again there was a religious and supernatural component; for them, it was ancestor worship. The spirit of the ancestor resided in the tablet; the ancestors were nourished by sacrifices, and if the line of descent were broken, or if for any other reason worship was discontinued, these ancestral spirits would turn into “hungry ghosts,” malicious and feared by the living, and doomed to wander about the earth.

Ghosts and Ancestors in Popular Religion: The Religious Expressions of Kinship and Community Solidarity in a Dangerous World

The contrast between ancestors and ghosts was crucial to popular belief. Ancestors and hungry ghosts were in that domain of the supernatural closest to the world of the living, and there were also the masses of ghosts in the underworld. The ancestors were spirits who were socially intimate with the living; they took great interest in the affairs of their descendants, drew sustenance from their good fortune, and might at times render them assistance. Ancestors, in fact, were analogous to living kinsmen and, by extension, to all those with whom one had important social ties based upon familiarity and propinquity, that is, with the members of one’s own community. Because ghosts, the spirits of the unworshipped dead, were cut off from living kin (or had none) they were readily identified with beggars, bandits, and others among the living who lacked kin and community roots and were thus not controlled in their behavior by a network of social ties and obligations. More generally, ghosts were viewed as the supernatural analogues of strangers, always potentially dangerous because they did not belong to one’s own community. The correspondence of ghosts to strangers helps explain why some of the most important religious activities undertaken by the community as a whole involved special prayers for the otherwise unworshipped dead. Although communities in many ways were linked to each other and to Chinese society as a whole, community religion emphasized a desire for community security and prosperity, which because of traditional China’s scarce resources might be obtained only at the expense of others. By propitiating ghosts, Chinese community religion expressed local solidarity.

Popular Religion in Daily Life

Popular religious activity included a family’s offerings to the ancestors and to other household and local spirits, and also series of festivals and feasts, some celebrated throughout the country (such as the lunar new year), some by particular local communities (e.g., the birthday of the village god), and some linked to important events in the lives of individuals and their families (weddings, birthdays of the elderly, and even funeral banquets). Popular religion also involved communication with the gods and the dead in the underworld through spirit mediums, shamans, the casting of wooden blocks, and a variety of other means. Geomantic and horoscopic prognostications also loomed large in popular belief, and implied direct interaction with the forces of the cosmos unmediated by the gods or other supernatural entities. Geomancy or “wind and water” (*fengshui*) was most significant with respect to the siting of graves and structures: experts were hired to determine the proper placing of such edifices, so as to ensure, for example, good fortune for those entombing their ancestor or for a family building a new home. Experts, or the commonly available farmer’s almanacs, were also consulted for horoscopic guidelines regarding “good” or “bad” days for marriage, travel, and a variety of other activities.

Salvation in Popular Religious Belief

In popular religion the idea of salvation involved belief in a Pure Land, Western Heaven, or Western Paradise which formed yet another domain of the supernatural universe; unlike earth, heaven, and the underworld, however, paradise was not a projection of the arrangements among the living but rather represented joyful release from the human situation. The popular conception of paradise also was obvious evidence of the strong influence on the masses of the dominant Pure Land sect of orthodox Chinese Buddhism. However, religious thinkers firmly linked to institutional and canonic Buddhism could view ultimate salvation as enlightenment, or release from the cycle of birth and rebirth (reincarnation) through the higher understanding that existence is but a manifestation of the suffering of egoism. In popular religion the focus was squarely on salvation as taken to mean entrance into a true paradise and the enjoyment of blissful immortality.

Deemphasis of Salvation in Popular Religion

Under most circumstances, concern for salvation did not loom large in religious activities, which usually focused on gods and other supernatural beings and reflected the this-worldly hopes, needs, and anxieties of individuals, families, and communities. Salvation also was deemphasized due to the popular belief in multiple souls: one in the grave, one represented by the ancestral tablet, and one in the underworld. The soul in the underworld might hope for release to paradise, but far more probably would be reincarnated. Although the deceased’s family and relatives prayed for such release during the funeral and on other occasions, the deceased had additional religious significance as an ancestor and as the spirit in the grave, which, if properly sited according the principles of geomancy, could bring good fortune to his descendants. Most of the time, therefore, salvation was a religious concern of persons having to confront their own mortality, especially the elderly and the ill. When so limited, salvation as a religious concept coexisted with the larger body of religious beliefs, which reflected the society of the living and was concerned with its needs. Indeed, these beliefs, as described so far, were basically supportive of the social and political status quo.

“HETERODOXY”: THE EXPRESSION OF DISSENT IN CHINESE RELIGION

In reaction to famine, drought, increasing poverty, or other conditions giving rise to large-scale social distress, salvational concerns might loom larger and form the basis of religious movements that called into question the validity of the existing social and political order and met with the state’s bitter opposition. Such movements, which sometimes developed into full-scale insurrections (e.g., the White Lotus and Eight Trigrams rebellions in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries) were manifestations of dissenting religious traditions with deep roots in China, traditions involving particular syntheses of elements drawn from other areas of religious life, including popular religion, Taoism, and Buddhism. Yet the dissenting traditions stood in opposition to the other religious beliefs

and practices and also challenged the legitimacy of traditional Chinese political and social arrangements.

Some of the religious traditions labeled “heterodox” (*xie*) by officials of the Chinese imperial state in fact denied major tenets of the religious system, both official and popular, that have been described above. If the state cult expressed the idea of humanity’s place in an integrated and enduring cosmos, the White Lotus heterodoxy proclaimed the coming destruction of the universe. Instead of seeing the emperor as the nondivine mediator between heaven, society, and earth, White Lotus movements focused on a divine Buddha-savior who would save from destruction those believing in his mission. By distinguishing believers from nonbelievers, such movements denied both the efficacy of the gods and spirits of popular religion and also the community and other social arrangements validated by these supernatural entities. White Lotus heterodoxy rejected the this-worldly concerns of popular religion at the same time that it promised believers immortality and paradise on earth. In other heterodox traditions the Western Paradise familiar in ordinary popular religion became the sole focus: for the poor and uprooted attracted to heterodox sects, the aim was to obtain release from the cosmos which humans inhabited together with gods, ghosts, and ancestors.

Although small numbers of heterodox believers were found in different parts of China during the Qing period (and earlier), the emergence of large-scale heterodox movements and insurrections was symptomatic of the inability of growing numbers of people to derive minimum security from traditional economic and social arrangements. Although within the heterodox tradition there was an emphasis on greater economic and sexual equality, such movements never succeeded in conquering state or society. Heterodoxy, a religion of opposition, was unable to provide a workable alternative to the orthodox social and religious order.

RELIGION IN MODERN CHINA

The British defeat of China which concluded the Opium War (1839–41) marked the onset of a succession of encroachments by the Western powers (later joined by Japan), which posed military, political, and ideological threats that China’s traditional ruling elite were unable to resist. The onslaught of the industrialized nations coincided with a deepening internal crisis largely resulting from the traditional agrarian economy’s inability to keep up with population growth. Neither the Western penetration nor the economic crisis had substantial direct effect on religious practices in China as a whole during the remainder of the nineteenth century. This period did mark the intensified penetration of China’s interior by Western Protestant and Catholic missionaries, but they failed to gain many converts in the countryside or even in those cities that were made treaty ports and partially placed under foreign control.

The Taiping Rebellion: From Revitalization Movement to Civil War

One early devastating, but largely indirect Western contribution to religious ferment was the Taiping Rebellion (1850–65), led by Hong Xiuquan, a man who proclaimed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ, sent by his heavenly father to destroy the Manchus, as well as the traditional religion and learning, and establish a new heavenly kingdom where the Christian holy scriptures would replace the classical texts of Confucian orthodoxy. The founder of this movement was from a village near Canton, where he had taken and repeatedly failed the traditional examinations, both before and after that city came under British attack and occupation during Opium War battles. His first information about Christianity was also obtained in Canton from a Chinese missionary. These events obviously had an enormous impact on this one individual, and in his synthesis and propagation of a new religion there could be seen in China an example of a syncretic revitalization movement of the kind associated in many parts of the world with cultural contact, especially in the context of Western expansion. Thus the Taiping religion differed from traditional heterodox messianism, which had a long history of development in China itself. Unlike the traditional White Lotus movements, the Taiping followers linked their religious goals to a concrete program for radical social and economic change. Like earlier heterodoxies, however, many initial recruits to the Taiping cause had been uprooted from their communities. To the imperial government, the Taipings represented total cultural confrontation; they were crushed only after a bloody fifteen-year civil war, during which Taiping iconoclasm was manifested by the large-scale destruction of the temples and other religious structures of institutional, popular, and official religion alike. After their defeat, little if anything remained of Taiping religion; their most enduring legacy may indeed be their iconoclasm, which at least anticipated later developments.

The Emergence of Iconoclastic Nationalism and the Assault on Popular Religion

By the end of the nineteenth century, a new school system based upon Western models and curricula was forming in China, and increasing numbers of Chinese students were abroad, in Japan, especially, but also in Europe and the United States. The emerging educated class was both ideologically and structurally in conflict with the old elite, which had studied for the traditional examinations. The new elite possessed skills appropriate for the developing modern sectors of China's cities, while those with only the classical education could best preserve their elite standing in communities and settings where traditional standards were not threatened by the new developments. The new elite were passionately nationalistic, and linked China's frequently demonstrated military weakness to the nation's "backwardness," which they defined as China's old culture, including the country's religious and social traditions. There thus emerged a link between nationalism and rejection of tradition that became increasingly characteristic especially of China's urban intelligentsia. With the fall of the dynasty and the establishment of the Republic, the assault on "superstitious" and "backward" customs intensified; taking the country as a whole, however, the traditional practices of popular religion tended to be maintained, although in some areas temples were converted to schools or other nonreligious uses. It is important to note that during the period of the Republic hostility to traditional elite and popular religious practices and institutions was shared across a broad political spectrum. Nationalists, liberals,

socialists, and even warlords might violently oppose each other politically and ideologically, but they could share common hostility to and contempt for traditional religion and other “backward” customs. Thus Marxism-Leninism was not the sole source of the anti-religious attitudes and policies of the founders and later members of the Communist party, although the party expresses opposition to religion in Marxist terms.

Post-1949 China

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, freedom of religion, as well as freedom to propagate atheism, has been guaranteed in the Chinese Constitution. Yet the Communist party has consistently maintained a negative attitude; active suppression was greatest during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and more recently has considerably abated. Although diffuse religion played a much larger role in daily life than did institutional forms, the government now only grants official recognition as religious groups to the major organized churches of Islam, Christianity, Taoism, and Buddhism. All but the last two had been significant for only a minority of the population, and institutional Buddhism and Taoism had only a specialized and limited role in the religious life of most people. Under the Communists, the number of believers affiliated at least publicly with the institutional religions had decreased significantly, but in the more permissive atmosphere of recent times, especially since the several national religious associations were reactivated in 1979, Buddhism and Christianity in particular have shown signs of revival.

Pressure against popular religion, considered to be “feudal superstition,” has always been greatest, and even to the present this religious system continues to be most disfavored. Since popular beliefs constituted a religious framework for traditional social organization, they were viewed by the Communists as a major obstacle to the goal of radical reorganization. The Communist attack on popular religion thus was greatest during the periods of land reform (1950–1954) and collectivization (1954–1979), for popular religion reinforced traditional social alignments by emphasizing community solidarity and autonomy, values the Communists wished to replace with class consciousness and the integration of collectivized communities into a socialist economy and polity. Thus while popular religion as a whole was denounced and suppressed, community religion came under the strongest attack. Throughout China village temples, local Earth God shrines, ancestral halls and other such structures were dismantled or converted to nonreligious uses.

Important elements of popular religion have survived, however, to varying degrees in different parts of the country. During periods of greater repression, almost all such religious practices were carried out within the family, thus offering testimony to the continuing vitality and autonomy of family organization. Ancestor worship remained widespread, especially in the countryside, although even today it is sometimes practiced covertly: in some villages the objects of worship are tablets, scrolls or photographs kept at home; in others, tablets destroyed during the Cultural Revolution have not been replaced, but the rituals of ancestor worship are maintained. The joint worship by several families of a common ancestor is practiced far less frequently, for this involves organization above the family level. Within the family there continues the worship of other gods and spirits, at least in some parts of the

country. It is not surprising that funerals appear to have consistently retained more of their religious content than other rituals. This presumably reflects concerns about mortality that cannot be satisfied by more contemporary worldviews.

The reform of the rural economy beginning in the late 1970s has led to large-scale decollectivization, such that almost everywhere in China the basic unit of agricultural production once again is the individual family, which now rents land on a long-term basis from the collectives which previously had also been the key units of agricultural organization. With this development there also has been considerable lessening of state pressure against popular religion, the renewal of which is increasingly apparent. Although the government continues to most strongly oppose community religion, instances of large-scale community religious celebrations are now reported. As far as religion is concerned, it is safe to say that the political atmosphere in China following decollectivization has been more relaxed than at any other time since the establishment of the People’s Republic. Even the heightened political suppression following the 1989 Tiananmen killings does not appear to have significantly involved an intensification of the Communist government’s anti-religious activities. However, it remains to be seen how traditional religion ultimately will fare under circumstances so vastly different from those that nurtured its development.

III. ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Compare the roles of institutional and diffuse religion in China with circumstances in the United States or any other culture which you are familiar with.
2. Compare the attitude of the state toward popular religion in traditional China with the current situation in that country.
3. What were the circumstances encouraging people to focus on religious salvation in traditional China, and what were those that tended to deflect interest in such religious beliefs?

IV. SELECTED READINGS

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