

# The Religious Revival in China

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## Abstract

Since 1979, China has experienced a widespread revival of religious faith and practice. This article aims to provide an overview of this phenomenon, by examining the causes behind it, the variety and popularity of religions and the different profiles of believers. It suggests that China's religions are diverse, encompassing official, unofficial, and folk religions, and that the revival is significant and visible. According to official statistics, the five largest religions in 2003 counted 144 million believers, while the non-official sources give the figure as nearer 200 million. The revival has been fuelled by a number of factors: the state's lifting of the ban to freedom of worship; popular disillusion with the official ideology; economic and social uncertainties in the wake of economic reforms and modernization; and the enduring resilience of religion and tradition. For ethnic minorities like Uighurs and Tibetans, the revival of their religion has been accompanied by a similar cultural renaissance. Buddhists and Daoists among the Han in Hubei Province come from a wide range of educational backgrounds and professions, although the majority of them are women or were born before 1956. The Han Buddhists and Daoists turn to religion primarily for practical reasons, that is, to gain some advantage in their earthly lives rather than looking for rewards in the afterlife. For this reason, religious fundamentalism may have limited appeal to the Han Chinese.

## Introduction

China's religions experienced a transformation in the post-1979 era, as evidenced by an increase in the number of places of worship as well as the rise of unofficial religions. This article seeks to provide an overview of religious revival in China, including its scope, variety, and causes. It suggests that China's religions are diverse, encompassing official, unofficial, underground, and folk religions, and that their revival is significant and visible. The revival has been fuelled by a number of factors: the state's lifting of its ban on freedom of worship; by widespread disillusion with the official ideology; economic and social uncertainties in the wake of modernization and reforms; and the enduring nature of religious belief. Data from one province reveal that Han Buddhists and Daoists come from a wide range of educational backgrounds and professions. The majority of them are females or were born before 1956.

The Chinese Han, especially Buddhists and Daoists, turn to religion primarily for utilitarian reasons, that is, to seek benefits in their earthly life, rather than looking for rewards in an afterlife.

This article will review religions that attract the largest numbers of followers but which have drawn far less attention in the West.<sup>1</sup> They include Mahayana Buddhism and a variety of folk religions. It will also survey Tibetan Buddhism, underground Catholicism and Protestantism, and Falun Gong, which has recently come under the spotlight in the US and European media, in Western policy-making, and even academic circles. As far as Tibetans and Uighurs are concerned, religion has remained an inherent part of their culture and life, and the state's relaxed policies have helped to aid the revival of religion as well as their cultural heritage.

## Different Religions in China

This article adopts the following definition of religion:

*Religion is a set of beliefs, symbols and practices based on the notion of supernatural forces and in some cases, an afterlife, and which unites believers in a socio-religious community.*<sup>2</sup>

This broad definition incorporates folk religions that are peculiar to China, plus the five main religions.<sup>3</sup> Following recent studies on China's religions,<sup>4</sup> this article leaves out Confucianism from the discussion, largely because in present-day China it exists primarily in the form of ethical teachings, rather than religion *per se*. Rarely is Confucius worshipped in China today, nor is Confucianism viewed as a religion.

As Liu and Leung persuasively demonstrate, the growth and revival of the Catholic Church in China is deeply shaped by its relationship with the state as well as its indigenization (Liu and Leung 2002: 121-38). Furthermore, political constraints on religious activities persist despite relaxed governmental policies.

In a similar vein, Myron L. Cohen categorized Chinese religions into three categories, namely: official, heterodoxy, and popular. Following Cohen's methodology, for the purposes of this article and to facilitate the discussion (as Table 1 indicates), three types of religion in China will be discussed (Cohen 1992: 17-31).

- 1. The five big, officially recognized religions**, namely, Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. These religions enjoy relatively well-demarcated places of worship and open and publicized nationwide associations.

2. **Unofficial religions**, comprising underground churches, sects related to the big five yet not recognized by the state, and Tibetan Buddhists and Xinjiang Muslims who challenge Beijing's control. Within this category, there are three subgroups:
- The clergy and followers in the *underground Protestant and Catholic churches* make up the unofficial Protestant and Catholic gatherings. A significant number of believers prefer to attend the unofficial underground churches, which they see as independent from any government interference.
  - Booming alongside these underground churches are *unofficial sects*. Their doctrines resemble the five main religions, yet their teachings and practices may differ from those of the big five. Some choose to maintain a low profile in order not to invite a government crackdown. Others, such as Falun Gong, choose instead to confront the state and assert publicly their organizational independence.
  - Lastly, a number of *Tibetan Buddhists and Xinjiang Muslims* ignore or challenge the state's control and support independence of their regions.
3. **Indigenous religions, or folk religions**. Folk religions come in varied and diffused forms, including utilitarian ancestor or lineage worship (worshipping one's ancestors so that the ancestor's soul can intervene on behalf of its living descendants), local god worship, divination, geomancy (most notably *fengshui*), witchcraft (sorcery, exorcism and planchette writing), physiognomy, and certain taboos.<sup>5</sup> Many of the folk religions tend to vary across regions, and their followers generally believe in several at any one time.

There have been a limited number of studies on religions in post-Mao China, but the number is growing. Most of these studies focus on Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam and folk religions in China. A few studies also survey official policies and religious practices in China. These studies enrich our understanding of the state's regulations, its operation of religious institutions, and the views and practice of religious professionals. As many of these studies are anthropologically oriented and based on fieldwork, they reveal much of the interaction on the one hand between these institutions and their followers and, on the other, between religion and the local political structure.

Nevertheless, these studies have noticeable limitations. First, few of them provide sound data on the popularity of all the five religions as well as folk religions. While there is some analysis of the number of

**TABLE 1:** Types of Religion in China and the Ethnicity of Followers

Followers	Official Religions	Unofficial Religions	Folk Religions
<b>Han</b>	Mahayana Buddhism Daoism Protestantism Catholicism	Unofficial sects: Falun Gong, Zhong Gong, Zhusheng Jiao, etc.	Ancestor worship, local god worship, geomancy ( <i>Feng Shui</i> , etc.), fortune-telling (divination, or through reading birth statistics, faces, and palms), witchcraft and taboos
<b>Ethnic Minorities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Islam: 10 minorities – Hui, Uygurs, Kazak, Dongxiang, Kirgiz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bonan and Tatar</li> <li>2. Tibetan Buddhism: Five minorities – Tibetans, Mongolians, Menba, Tu and Yugur</li> <li>3. Mahayana Buddhism: Two minorities – Koreans and Bai</li> <li>4. Theravada (Hinayana) Buddhism: Three minorities – Blang, Dai and De'ang</li> <li>5. Shamanism: Six minorities – Daur, Ewenki, Hezhen, Manchu, Orenqen and Xibo</li> <li>6. Daoism: Three minorities – Monan, Mulao and Yao</li> <li>7. Orthodoxy: Russians</li> </ol>	Pro-independence Tibetan Buddhists and Xinjiang Muslims	Various primitive religions: 25 minorities – Achang, Bouyei, Dong, Dulong, Gaoshan, Gelao, Hani, Jing, Jingpo, Jino, Lahu, Luoba, Li, Lisu, Miao, Naxi, Nu, Primi, Qiang, She, Shui, Tujia, Va, Yi and Zhuang
<b>Mixed Ethnicities</b>	Protestantism, Catholicism	Underground churches; unofficial sects	

*Note:* The table lists one main religion for each of the minorities, and leaves out, due to limited space, their minor religions.

*Source:* Du *et al.* (eds) 1994: 449-52.

followers of Islam, Protestantism and Catholics, yet discussion on the number of followers of Daoism and the most popular Buddhism and folk religions is scant. Furthermore, many studies fail to take account of changes in the number of places of worship over the past two decades and the main religions among the different ethnic groups in China.<sup>6</sup> Second, there is a lack of systemic analyses backed by data on why the Chinese have turned to religion in the post-Mao era. Third, we have yet to know who exactly the religious Chinese are and what sort of profile they have. We thus remain unsure about why the Chinese embrace religion and who the religious followers are.

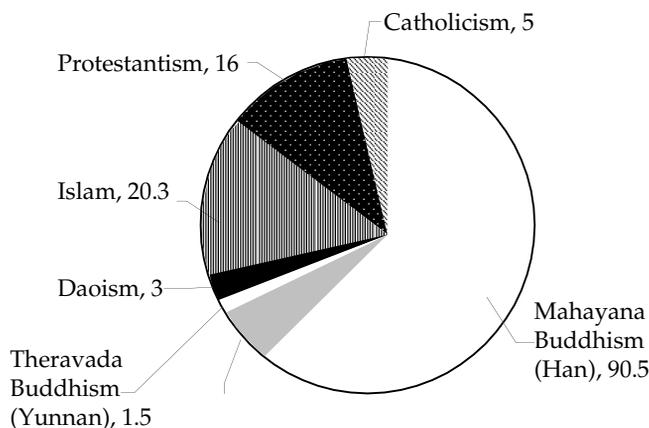
This article attempts to fill in these gaps in our understanding by utilizing official and non-official data on the number of followers of the various religions, the places of religious worship, the profile of believers, and published survey data on the various reasons they turn to religion. It also underscores the utilitarian motivation for religious practice among the Han Chinese, which has been under-emphasized in the existing literature.

## Religious Revival in Post-Mao China

### *Five Official Religions*

Internal official statistics on the followers of the five major religions in China paint the following picture. According to official data, Buddhism is the most popular religion among the five in China, claiming over 100 million followers in 2003, including 90.5 millions Han Mahayana Buddhists, 7.6 millions Tibetan Buddhists, and 1.5 millions Theravada Buddhists (most of whom reside in Yunnan). Islam is the second most popular religion, claiming 20.3 millions followers, followed by Protestantism (16 million), Catholicism (5 million), and Daoism (3 million) (see Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> The big five thus claim 144 million followers, or 11 percent of the total population. Non-official estimates suggest a higher number of followers for the following religions: 132.7 million Mahayana Buddhists,

**FIGURE 1:** Official Data on Followers of the Five Major Religions in 2003 (millions)



Sources: Chinese officials of the Religious Affairs Bureau; Argue *et al.* 2000: 61; Gong 1998: 24; *Liaowang* [Outlook] 1999; 'Zongjiao tuanti' [Religious Groups] 2003.

25 million Protestants, and 10 million Catholics. According to *non-official* estimates, the number of followers of the five main religions (Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism and Daoism) in 2003 reached around 200 million, or over 15 percent of the population (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2: Official and Non-official Estimates of Believers (millions)**

Religions	Official, 1999	Official, 2003	Non-official, 2003
Mahayana Buddhism (Han)	90.5	90.5	132.7*
Tibetan Buddhism	7.5	7.6	7.6
Theravada Buddhism (Yunnan)	2.0	1.5	1.5
Daoism	3.0	3.0	3.0
Islam	19.0	20.3	20.0
Protestantism	15.0	16.0	25.0
Catholicism	4.0	5.0	10.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>141.0</b>	<b>143.9</b>	<b>199.8</b>

*Sources:* Official data on 1999 come mainly from 'Zhongguo zongjiao yanjiu zhongxi wenzhang toulu: Zhongguo xianyou gezhong zongjiao xintu yiyi duoren' [Paper from China Religious Research Center Reveals: China Has over One Hundred Million Followers of Various Religions] 2003; Editorial Department of China's Religions 2000:30. Official data on 2003 come from 'Zongjiao tuanti' [Religious Groups] 2003. Data on Mahayana Buddhists comes partly from Argue *et al.* (2000). Non-official data on followers of Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism in 2003 (Gladney 2003: 451; Madsen 2003: 469; Bays 2003: 491). Non-official data on followers of Tibetan Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism in Yunnan are considered official data, because non-official data are unavailable.

*Note:* \* Extrapolated data based on the official data in 1999, using the averaged official growth rates of those of Protestantism and Catholicism between 1999 and 2003.

These numbers should be treated with caution though for the following reasons. First, it is difficult to distinguish actual practitioners from self-proclaimed believers. Second, even though the state permits religious activities, it refuses to endorse them, and even openly promotes atheism. Therefore, many religious activities take place covertly, so it becomes problematic to estimate the numbers of followers of unofficial religions and sects. The *official* statistic of 144 million followers in 2003 for the five religions can only give us a very rough guide to the current status of religion in the country.

The case of Hubei Province sheds light on the popularity of religion over the past few decades. Information on the province has been published jointly by a Professor of Theology at the leading provincial university and a Deputy Secretary General of the provincial legislature, who had ready access to both religious survey data and internal gov-

ernmental data. Since Hubei is at a medium level of socio-economic development among the 31 provinces in China, it can be regarded as an average Chinese province. In the early 1980s religion was still on the wane as a result of devastation caused by the Cultural Revolution of 1966.<sup>8</sup> After the late 1980s, religious groups expanded, as reflected

**TABLE 3:** Number of Buddhists and Daoists in Hubei Province

<b>Year</b>	<b>Buddhists</b>	<b>Daoists</b>
<b>1966</b>	98,000	65,300
<b>1982</b>	93,000	46,000
<b>1996</b>	800,000	300,000

*Source:* Gong and Zhou 1999.

**TABLE 4:** Places of Worship and Religious Meeting Places in China

<b>Period</b>	<b>Meeting Sites</b>
<b>Early years of Communist rule</b>	120,000
<b>Late 1980s</b>	40,000
<b>1992</b>	60,000
<b>Late 1990s</b>	100,000
<b>2003</b>	100,000

*Sources:* Zhu 1994; He 1999; 'Zongjiao tuanti' [Religious Groups] 2003.

in the rise of Buddhist and Daoist followers in Hubei (see Table 3), and this was matched by a similar trend nationwide. The numbers of places of religious worship nationwide for all the five mainstream religions, especially Daoism, Buddhism (among the Hans), Protestantism and Catholicism rose rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s (see Table 4). By the late 1990s, the number of religious centres and churches established by the five main religions nationwide rivalled the period immediately after the Chinese Communists came to power. Religious places of worship include churches, monasteries, mosques and make-shift meeting places. They totalled over 100,000 in 2003. In addition, the number of clerics of the five religions also expanded, reaching 300,000 in 2003 (see Table 5).

In Table 5, Buddhist and Daoist meeting places are fewer than those of other religions for two reasons. First, the number of Buddhist and Daoist temples may be under-estimated. In Hubei in the 1990s, for example, only 476 Buddhist and 206 Daoist temples were registered,

**TABLE 5:** Number of Official Religious Clerics, Places of Worship, and Religious Colleges around 2003

Religions	No. of Clerics	Places of Worship	Religious Schools/Colleges
<b>Mahayana Buddhism (Han)</b>	70,000	9,000	14
<b>Tibetan Buddhism</b>	120,000	3,000	4
<b>Theravada Buddhism (Yunnan)</b>	10,000	1,600	1
<b>Daoism</b>	25,000	1,500	4
<b>Islam</b>	45,000	35,000	10
<b>Protestantism</b>	20,000	37,000	18
<b>Catholicism</b>	4,000	5,000	36
<b>Total</b>	294,000	92,100	87
<b>Total (official source)</b>	300,000	100,000	74

Sources: 'Zongjiao tuanti' [Religious Groups] 2003; data on Daoist and Islamic religious schools (Wang 2003); 'Bentai dui Zhongguo Yisilanjiao Xiehui fuhuizhang Xiamusi Ding de caifang shilu' [Interview by Our Station of Xiamusi Ding, Vice Director of China Islamic Association] 2003.

whereas 2,067 Buddhist and Daoist temples were not. Second, one Buddhist or Daoist temple can serve many more followers than one site of other religions.

In the post-Mao period, the state revived the official associations of the five religions, which were set up in the 1950s and then abolished during the Cultural Revolution. Official associations play a dual role in mediating the relations between the state and religion. On the one hand, they help the state to implement official religious policies and manage local religious organizations, for example, by setting the number of Buddhist temples to be opened and by preventing religious groups and believers from stepping outside the official lines. In this sense, the associations serve as the enforcers of state rules (MacInnis 1989: 147). On the other hand, they voice the concerns (like local officials' infringement on religious freedom) to governmental agencies and top leaders for their religious groups and the believers. Official religious associations also endeavour to promote the religion they represent. For example, by 1999 the official Protestant association had printed 25 million copies of bibles and 10 million copies of hymnals, set up 18 seminaries, trained 3,800 graduates and were publishing 100,000 copies of *Tianfeng* (a monthly journal), (*Liaowang* [Outlook], 1999 (21): 23-27).

## Unofficial Religions

### *Underground Catholic Church*

The centralized Chinese state has had a long history of conflict with the Catholic Church. An early example is the rites controversy between 1640 and 1742. The controversy resulted, on the one hand, in the Pope's edict that Catholic missionaries should forbid the practice of Chinese rites and, on the other hand, the Qing Emperor's expulsion of the Jesuits from China, which lasted for about 100 years. Antagonism between the Vatican and the Chinese Communists erupted during the Chinese civil war, resulting in the uneasy development of Catholicism in China in the following decades. In the 1950s, the CCP encouraged a Three-self Movement in order to sever the Catholic Church's ties with the Vatican. It arrested pro-Vatican bishops, priests and nuns, and drove pro-Vatican Catholics underground. The Vatican, in return, has been rejecting archbishop and bishop appointments by the Chinese official church and has officially recognized Taiwan instead of the People's Republic.

The underground church consecrates new bishops, ordains priests, organizes national episcopal conferences and secures the Vatican's authorization. Some elements of the underground church may be more confrontational toward the state than Rome would expect them to be (Hunter and Chan 1993: 241; Gong and Zhou 1999: 73). An estimate placed the number of official bishops in 1995 at 70, and that of the underground bishops at 60 (Mainland China Commission, 1996: 89). The underground Catholic Church appears to have attracted more followers than the official church by the early 1990s. The underground church exists mainly in the rural area of Hebei, Shaanxi, Guangxi, Gansu and Xinjiang. It was estimated that in the early 1990s only one-fifth or less of the total number of Catholics attended the official church, and that in some provinces the underground church attracted twice as many followers as the official one. However, the official church has managed to reverse this trend in recent years. Many underground Catholics now also attend the official church (Hunter and Chan 1989: 236-41; Chan 1994: 19,13-14; Mainland China Commission 1996: 82-89; Liu and Leung 2002: 126; personal communication with officials from China's Bureau of Religious Affairs of the State Council in March 2002).

### *Independent Protestant Church*

During the Cultural Revolution, some Christians kept their faith by attending the secret 'house churches'. Like the underground Catholic Church, the independent church operates without the state's authorization, sometimes even overtly. The independent church exists for three reasons. First, some Protestants regard the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) – the official Protestant church – as having compromised too much vis-à-vis the atheist state, and therefore they refuse to acknowledge it. Second, believers persecuted by the state during the late-Mao era are reluctant to join the state-sanctioned church. Many Christians still widely despise the TSPM's cooperation with the high-handed state in the 1950s at denunciation meetings and thought reforms. Third, the sparse geographical distribution of the buildings of the official church (partly due to the government's cap on new church buildings) also encourages the congregation to assemble at a nearby building of the independent church. Retired and devout believers who want to pray more often find house churches suit their needs best. The state restricts and occasionally cracks down on these two underground churches (Hunter and Chan 1993: 81-88; Chan 1995; Mainland China Commission 1996: 89).

### **Unofficial Sects**

Unofficial sects differ in their preaching and practice from the five official religions, and they also try to avoid the state's control. These sects have multiplied in post-Mao China. In Hunan Province alone, nearly 10,000 of these sects were eradicated in the course of five government campaigns in the 1990s. These included unofficial Christian sects, such as Lingling Jiao [Oriental Lightning], Zhushen Jiao [Religion of the Main God], as well as unofficial Buddhist, Daoist, and folk-religious sects, such as Buddhist-like Falun Gong, Guanyi Famen, Daoist Yiguan Dao, and probably *qigong*-based Zhong Gong (claiming 38 million followers at its peak, with an extensive business network and under the leadership of Zhang Hongbao).

The state has viewed these sects with suspicion and has at times cracked down on them. For example, Falun Gong and Zhong Gong have been banned, and their founders placed on the government's wanted lists. The state is wary of the organizational independence and secrecy of these unofficial sects, their apocalyptic appeals, the challenges they pose to the Party, as well as their foreign ties. Reportedly, the unofficial sects the state has suppressed share most of the following characteristics:

- secretive activities and elaborate organizations;
- personality cult of the sect leader;
- preaching about doomsday;
- tight control of their members;
- mysticism and claimed supernatural abilities of the sect;
- independence of the CCP, or even hostility toward it;
- condemnation of official religious associations and the official church (such as the TSPM); and
- links with the West, Taiwan, South Korea, and other overseas places (Cao 1999: 29-30; Tan and Kong 2000: 28-30).

### **Falun Gong as an Unofficial Sect**

As an unofficial sect attracting the international limelight in recent years, Falun Gong deserves a brief discussion here. Falun Gong is based on an unofficial and exclusive theology and boasts an extensive organizational network. Founded by Li Hongzhi, Falun Gong fuses Daoist meditation and Buddhist doctrines. Li preaches about an apocalypse (*mo jie*),<sup>9</sup> encourages mystic and inward-directed development of the self, and attracts followers by claiming his and his followers' 'supernatural' abilities. Li preaches truthfulness, benevolence and forbearance as the core principles of Falun Gong, and promotes personal cultivation of virtues and supernatural abilities through meditation and practice. He condemns the corrupting influence of the capitalist system, claims to know about a higher truth, and demands a high standard of morality (Shue 2001). Falun Gong practice provided millions of anxious, insecure, and ill followers with spiritual peace and medical relief (Li 1994; Liu 1999; Liu 2000: 103-34; Wong 1999).

Falun Gong's large nationwide organization operated at four levels, namely, national, provincial, local, and grassroots levels. At the top level was its headquarters, established in Beijing in 1992. At the grassroots level were 28,000 sites where it was practised. As the overall leader, Li was able to quickly issue instructions through telecommunications (including e-mails) to each level. Many national, provincial and local cadres and officials became followers, and even supplied inside information regarding the government's policies toward the sect.

Under close scrutiny, Falun Gong may have propagated itself through means that contradict its own axioms. Li reportedly altered his birthday to that of Buddha in order to claim himself as the new saviour. He also proclaims that he and his master set the lifespan for the earth and that he could postpone an imminent explosion of the earth. Li claims to have

supernatural abilities, even though his mother, neighbours, colleagues, and even he himself privately deny their existence. Li has accumulated a large amount of wealth yet has evaded income tax (Hua and Zhong 1999: 132, 99-101, 148-56).

Li and his followers staged a dozen mass protests in front of government offices, newspaper offices, and TV stations to challenge criticisms by the local media, scientists and sceptics (Wong 1999: 8, 11). Since 1999, the conflict between Falun Gong and the state has intensified. In April 1999, over 10,000 Falun Gong followers caught the state off-guard by staging a peaceful protest and surrounding Zhongnanhai in Beijing, the Chinese White House. This event demonstrated to the state Falun Gong's extensive mobilizational capacity. Chinese leaders were well aware of large-scale rebellions led by religious sects or followers in China in recent centuries. Between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, the Qing empire was rocked by large rebellions led by the White Lotus Sect and the Heavenly Principles Sect. In the mid-nineteenth century the Taiping Rebellion destabilized the Qing Dynasty. Hong Xiuquan, the leading rebel, was a proclaimed Christian follower who claimed to have received a message from God. Chinese leaders, especially the top leader Jiang Zemin, soon learned and worried about Falun Gong's infiltration into the Party and government, its large following, and its potential to rally the support of millions of discontented people into nationwide mass protests.<sup>10</sup> In July 1999, the state declared Falun Gong an evil cult and outlawed it; key organizers were arrested soon afterwards.

Since then, Falun Gong followers have been engaged in a war of attrition with the state, yet have seen their influence waning. Occasionally small groups of Falun Gong followers protest in and outside mainland China, including staging publicly disruptive acts. Most of these protesters in mainland China have been quickly arrested. By August 2000, at least 151 Falun Gong followers had been convicted of leaking state secrets, creating chaos, or other crimes (Human Rights Watch 2001). In early 2001, several Falun Gong followers, in response to Li's call for action, set themselves on fire in protests at Tiananmen Square. The official media quickly used the footage of these acts as sensational material to portray Falun Gong as a suicidal and evil cult to the general public. Since then, Falun Gong has staged several acts in public defiance of the state. During May and June 2001, Falun Gong followers used timed radio devices to broadcast publicly in ten provinces Li Hongzhi's preaching and his organization's precepts. These followers were soon arrested. In 14 July, Falun Gong followers who had been imprisoned in Harbin

attempted to commit suicide, and the authority rescued all but three. The state blamed overseas followers for instigating the event. After the 11 September attacks in the US, Communist Party leaders even accused some Falun Gong followers of committing terrorist acts (*South China Morning Post*, 14 December, 2001). In November 2001, 35 Falun Gong followers from ten Western countries (including the US, Canada, Germany and Australia) staged a protest in Tiananmen Square and were expelled from China. In the first half of 2002, Falun Gong followers on several occasions disrupted cable and satellite TV programs in China and aired Falun Gong messages, one of which occurred during the World Cup Championship Game broadcasts ('Qiongtu molu de aiming' [Wails in Despair], 2001; *South China Morning Post*, 21 November 2001; *South China Morning Post*, 14 December 2001; 'A Record of China's Xinnuo Satellite Attacked by Falun Gong's Illegal Signals,' 2002).

### **Religious Revival and Movements in Tibet and Xinjiang**

Religion has been an intrinsic part of the culture and tradition of a number of ethnic minorities. The largest and most visible ethnic groups comprise Tibetans and Uighurs. Tibetan Buddhism has pervaded Tibetan daily life for centuries and many Tibetans see the Dalai Lama, their supreme religious leader, as their spiritual leader. Uighurs in Xinjiang accepted Islam as their faith hundreds of years ago and Imams wield significant influence on their lives. Religion is also an underlying factor in the movements of independence of Tibet and Xinjiang from China's rule.<sup>11</sup>

The Cultural Revolution devastated Buddhism in Tibet, as in other provinces in China. With relaxed control in the post-Mao period, Tibetans revived their religious beliefs and traditions. As Beijing's liberal leaders, such as Hu Yaobang, relaxed control in the 1980s, Tibetans demanded greater autonomy, for example, by claiming Tibetan as their official language. Their drive toward greater social freedom posed a direct challenge to the authority of the Party and Beijing. Unemployed urban Tibetans were unhappy with competition from Han people in Tibet; while monks and nuns, along with conservatives and traditionalists, despised secular developments in the wake of reform. Some radical Tibetans played down the central government's generous subsidies and blamed the backwardness of Tibet solely on the Communist rule; these groups supported the independence of Tibet. In addition, exiled Tibetans tried to exert their political influence in Tibet in various ways, including disseminating their political views during visits to Tibet, which tended to attract Beijing's suspicion. In the 1980s, many Tibetan

intellectuals and officials objected to radical movements that would derail gradualist reform and liberalization in Tibet. Nevertheless, other elites tolerated radicals in order to enhance their position vis-à-vis the central government and to obtain more subsidies (Shakya 1999: 419-21; Xu 1999: 147-61).

The pro-independence movement grew and took to the streets in the October 1987, March 1988, March 1989 and May 1993. In the first three protests, the police opened fire on the Tibetan protesters, who were shouting slogans for Tibetan independence and throwing rocks at the police, resulting in six to sixteen deaths in each incident (Xu 1999: 147-61).

In Xinjiang, Muslims total over 10 million, which is equivalent to 60 percent of the population and 95 percent of the religious followers in the province. Muslims worship at most of the 24,000 mosques in Xinjiang. Pan-Islam gained initial support in Xinjiang in the 1930s, and seems to have undergone something of a revival with the rise of post-Soviet Central Asian countries, the support from several Middle Eastern Muslim countries, and recently, the NATO intervention in Kosovo. To supporters of full autonomy and even independence for Xinjiang, Beijing's policy of promoting economic development is merely a facade to erode the Uyghur culture and Muslim beliefs. Resentment over competition from the Hans also provided the potential for schism among the ethnic minorities (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 April 2000: 25; *Ming Bao*, 2 September 1999; *South China Morning Post*, 28 August 2000; Mackerras 1994: 194-96; Becquelin 2000: 65-90). Uighurs are also unhappy with Beijing's restriction of their religious activities as well as their lack of political power. Former Mujaheddin fighters in Afghanistan might have aided militancy in Xinjiang (Lufti 2002: 204-05).

Many independence advocates in Xinjiang operate under the banner of Islam. Working as religious clerics, they condemn the CCP and the government, interpret the Koran as advocating an Islamic state and militant *jihād*, and propose independence as the best way to preserve local cultures. Chinese official sources suggest that explosions, assassinations, and other violent acts in the 1990s totalled a few thousand, and that in 1998 alone, over 70 serious incidents occurred, resulting in more than 380 deaths (Becquelin 2000: 87). Southern Xinjiang (such as Kashi), where the population is overwhelmingly non-Han and Muslim and where unemployment and economic underdevelopment are severe, as well as Yining, the former capital of East Turkestan, may be hotbeds of the separatist movement (Becquelin 2000: 65-90; *Ming Bao*, 3 November 2001).

The state has suppressed religious separatism in Tibet and especially Xinjiang. Since the 11 September attacks in the US, Beijing has stressed that violent Muslim radicals constitute a terrorist threat in China and has stepped up its crackdown.<sup>12</sup>

## **Folk Religions**

Scholars have long documented Chinese folk religions.<sup>13</sup> Folk religions quickly regained their popularity in the countryside in the 1980s, as suggested by anecdotal evidence. As early as 1982, peasants in Chuansha County in suburban Shanghai flocked to visit fortune-tellers at a fee, and were willing to pay a sorceress large sums of money for cures to their diseases. In 1986 in a market town in Guangdong Province, a total of 393 ancestor halls were erected. Locals there regularly worshipped the spirits of ancestors in order to bring good luck to their living descendants. In 1988, in a village in Sichuan, ancestor worship took place during the holidays, and religious rites were performed at funerals (MacInnis 1989: 387-89, 368, 373, 395, 394).<sup>14</sup>

A survey (summarized in Table 6) provides circumstantial evidence for the extent of the popularity of folk religions. Of all the respondents, more than 41 percent believed totally or partially in some form of superstition, and more than 38 percent had at one time participated in such rituals; 19 percent had done both. Folk religions have become very popular in rural areas where most Chinese live, resulting in a marked rise in the number of new temples being built and a boom in sales of manuals and books on folk religions. As followers of folk religions may account for 19 percent of the population, as noted above, and as many of these followers may also belong to one of the 'big five' religions, one may assume that one-fifth of all the Chinese in the mainland accept some form of religious faith.

## **Profile of Religious Followers**

In 1997, the People's Political Consultative Conference of Hubei Province conducted a survey on 1,160 Buddhists and Daoists in 26 townships within 12 cities, counties and municipal districts. This appears to constitute the only published data on the background of religious followers in China. Given Hubei's medium level of socio-economic development in China, it can be regarded as a representative Chinese province. In addition, as the above-mentioned statistics on religious followers suggest, Buddhists and Daoists constitute the majority of believers of the five major religions in China, especially among the Han. The same is true

**TABLE 6:** Chinese Involvement in Superstitious Beliefs, 1990

Attitudes and Participation	% of All Respondents
Believe or partially believe	41.4
Have participated	38.3
Believe, or partially believe, and have participated	<b>19.4</b>
<i>Breakdown of the answers:</i>	
Do not believe and have not participated	38.0
Do not believe but have participated	18.9
Believe to some extent and have participated	15.7
Believe to some extent but have not participated	16.3
Believe but have not participated	5.7
Believe and have participated	3.7
Other responses	1.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

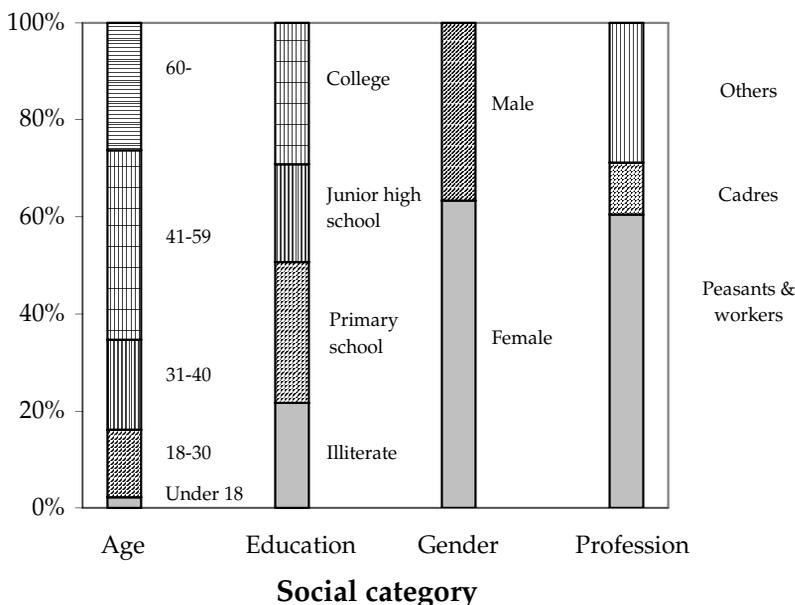
Source: Le and Jiang 1998: 75.

Notes: The respondents totalled 619. The surveyors defined superstitions (folk religions) as physiognomy, fortune telling, worshipping deities for help, divining, and believing in lucky numbers.

for Chinese societies in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Therefore, these data can be illuminating. Data on Buddhists and Daoists in Hubei in 1997 (see Figure 2) suggest the following profile:

1. The majority (65.3 percent) were born before 1957 and grew up (or were growing up) before the CCP's prohibition of religions of 1966-78. Those who were born between 1957 and 1967 accounted for 14 percent, those between 1967 and 1979 for 19 percent, and those after 1979 for merely 2.2 percent.
2. The educational background of believers was diverse. Among the Buddhists and Daoists, 29 percent were college graduates, 20 percent left after high-school, 29 percent left after primary school, while 22 percent were illiterate.
3. Females (63 percent) accounted for the majority of the believers.
4. Believers were more or less representative of professions among the population, with peasants and workers making up 60 percent of the believers, and other professions 29 percent. Even though many cadres and teachers were Party members, and even though the Party prohibited its members from believing in religion, cadres and teachers still made up 11 percent of the believers (Gong and Zhou 1999: 71).<sup>15</sup>

**FIGURE 2: Social Composition of Buddhists and Daoists in Hubei, 1997**



Source: Gong and Zhou 1999: 73.

### Causes of Religious Revival

Chinese officials and both local and overseas scholars have proposed social and psychological explanations for religious revival in present-day China (Hunter and Chan 1993: 168-75; MacInnis 1989: 155-63; Luo 1991: 85-112). One indisputable cause of religious revival in China is the state's lifting of restrictions on open religious activities, especially those that do not challenge the state directly (MacInnis 1989: 1-36; Hunter and Chan 1993: 168-70). Mao's heavy-handed repression wiped out most religious activities, driving the residual underground. Maoist political campaigns and ideological indoctrination either scared many of the believers away from religious practices entirely, or even converted them into non-believers. In the post-Mao era, the state has openly acknowledged its extreme practice under leftist leadership, and has tolerated religious practice that does not pose a potential organized threat. As a result, the populace have revived their beliefs in religion, although some political constraints remain.<sup>16</sup>

Second, the end of Maoist-style ideological indoctrination and the state's denunciation of leftist abusive use of political campaigns have weakened belief in the official ideology. The post-Mao leadership stressed *economic* development and de-emphasized ideology, especially after

Deng's Southern Tour in 1992. Rampant corruption has further undermined the official ideology, with an increasing number of people turning to religion for an alternative set of beliefs to fill the spiritual vacuum.<sup>17</sup>

Third, religion meets the population's needs for psychological comfort and spiritual fulfilment, especially in confronting a variety of problems inherent in the modernization program, including increasing marketization, rapid social transition, and emerging social problems. A large body of literature on modernization suggests that this process could transform and disrupt the existing class structure, ethnic and tribal relations, political power structure, and even the values system. Modernization in several Western countries and many non-Western countries was accompanied by social disruption, political upheavals, protest, revolution, and even large-scale wars. These examples included the civil wars in Great Britain, the United States, Russia, and China as well as numerous coups and armed movements in Africa and Latin America. Modernization also gives rise to deviant social behaviour and leads to the breakdown of traditional values and ethics.<sup>18</sup>

In a similar vein, recent economic and social changes in China since the late 1970s have created considerable social stresses and ruptures. Millions are dislocated socially and economically; many have been laid off and hence are experiencing a loss of social safety and security (including free health-care and guaranteed income); rural income grows sluggishly; and rural workers face discrimination in the cities. Alienation in the form of loneliness and helplessness in an increasingly competitive world, together with the prevalent social anomie, as evidence in money-worship, prostitution, and the breakup of families and family values, are taking their toll on the people. Religion, on the other hand, provides spiritual peace to a population troubled and disillusioned with present-day social and political turmoil. This is just as significant as the lessening of state prohibition in explaining the religious revival.

Fourth, religious influence survived even the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution the influence of religion abated yet persisted, especially in the countryside. Religions, such as Buddhism, exercise their subtle influence on people through literature, art, philosophy and family (MacInnis 1989: 155-63; Hunter and Chan 1993: 168-75). These residues of religious beliefs can be rekindled once conditions are favourable.

Fifth, not only the Chinese cultural traditions but also the state shape the revival of religions. On the one hand, religious revival reflects the resilience of the traditional culture. Many Chinese Catholics maintained their faith during the Cultural Revolution because the Church upheld

their bonds to kin and ancestors, which is an important traditional Chinese value. On the other hand, as a result of the state's past efforts to eliminate religion, some popular religious rituals today are modified traditional elements that differed from those before the Communist reign, or are merely cultural fragments (Madsen 1989; Siu 1989).

### **Han Buddhist and Daoist Utilitarian Belief**

The studies on China's religious revival cited above also touch on factors that motivate individual Chinese to turn to religion. However, they are not based on any comprehensive survey. In this article, I proceed via a different approach, by examining the results of the aforementioned survey on Buddhists and Daoists in Hubei (see Table 7) and drawing conclusions. Respondents were allowed to choose multiple causes for turning to religions.

From the survey, we can see a utilitarian tendency in the Han Chinese religious belief. The largest portion (51.6 percent) of believers turned to religion out of a hope that the divine would bring them material benefits. Specifically, 36 percent sought prosperity, 9.4 percent wanted material well-being, 6.2 percent hoped to obtain medical cure or relief through their religious beliefs. That is to say, the Han Buddhists and Daoists accept religion hoping that supernatural forces would bring them material benefits in their mortal lives (Hou and Fan 1994: 9-10, 86-129; Gao 1994: 332; Xu Shaoqiang, cf. Hunter and Chan 1993: 174). Only 30 percent of the believers sought spiritual guidance from religion, 9.8 percent reported an intellectual fascination with religion, and about one-fifth turned to religion out of their political and social discontent. A number of the respondents accepted religion because of family influence.

As discussed, recent political, economic, and social changes in China, such as unemployment, losses of social security and medical care, corruption, money-worship, prostitution, and the breakup of families, may have contributed to religious conversion. Surprisingly, only 1.5 percent of the respondents reported a loss of confidence in the CCP and socialism, probably out of the political sensitivity of the choice. Nevertheless, religious conversion signals the official ideology's declining appeal.

**TABLE 7:** Reasons Hubei Residents Gave for Believing in Buddhism and Daoism, 1997

Reasons	%
1. To seek prosperity and material well-being	51.6
• Escape poverty and seek prosperity	36.0
• Seek material well-being in this life	9.4
• Seek remedy for and escape serious illness	6.2
2. To have spiritual sustenance	29.7
• Disillusioned with and escape from the material world	5.9
• Seek happiness in an afterlife	9.8
• Hope divinity would grant wisdom	7.0
• Hope the soul would be purified	7.0
3. Driven by political and social discontent	20.5
• Dissatisfied with corruption, social evil, and social inequality	19.0
• Losing confidence in the CCP and socialism	1.5
4. To seek knowledge (and fascinated by theologies)	9.8
5. Influenced by a religious family	Unknown

*Source:* Gong and Zhou 1999: 72. I regroup the subcategories under more appropriate categories. The survey allowed the respondents to choose more than 1 answer

## Conclusion

In China today three categories of religion exist: (i) official religions, namely, Buddhism, Daoism (Taoism), Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism, represented by official associations and approved monasteries; (ii) unofficial religions that operate without the state's permission, including underground Catholic and Protestant churches, unofficial sects (such as Falun Gong), and pro-independence Tibetan Buddhists and Xinjiang Muslims; (iii) folk religions of various forms, whose practitioners are usually not well organized. All the above three categories of religion expanded rapidly in the post-Mao period.

Religious revival in China is driven by the state's abandonment of Mao's ban on religion, a decline in the appeal of the official ideology, and the populace's inherent psychological needs for security amidst rapid modernization, increasing commercialization and social dislocation. More importantly, religious revival raises questions about the future of religions in China as well as the state's policy towards religion.

Indeed, in today's China, modernization and commercialization are no substitute for religion (Luo 2000: 407-17). In fact, China's economic reform has generated much insecurity and anxiety among its peoples, whereby individuals feel a deep sense of alienation from society and a considerable number of people stoically endure physical suffering because formerly affordable public health-care services have been dismantled. Religion thus provides mental solace and spiritual fulfilment.

However, except perhaps for ethnic minorities (especially those in Tibet and Xinjiang), the Han Chinese, at least Buddhists and Daoists who make up the majority of religious believers, have been materialistic and practical in outlook. The Han Chinese will continue to turn to religion primarily hoping for improvement in their mortal lives, and secondarily for their afterlives, but seldom for the administration of the state or to exact revenge on foreign enemies, as do fundamentalists in the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. For Tibetans and Uighurs, however, religion is ingrained in their culture and tradition, and it is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For recent US media coverage of China's religions, see *New York Times* 19, 20 May 2001; *Time* 2001: 18-24; Xiao 1999: 33.
- <sup>2</sup> This definition is a modified version of that used by Marshall 1998: 562.
- <sup>3</sup> For historical studies of Chinese religions, refer to Jochim 1986; Ching 1993; Wolf 1974; Gao 1994. For contemporary studies, see MacInnis 1989; Madsen 1998.
- <sup>4</sup> See Daniel Overmyer's explanation for excluding Confucianism (Overmyer 2003: 315). As Overmyer argues, Confucianism might have influenced the veneration of ancestors. However, ancestral worship can be traced back to the state's practice under the Zhou dynasty prior to Confucius. Confucianism only reinforces this tradition. See 'The Origin of Kanyu,' 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> For studies of folk religions, see Gao 1994: 330-55 and MacInnis 1989: 367-74, 385-410; Dean 1993; Siu 1989: 121-37; for anthropological studies, refer to essays in Faure and Siu 1995; for a historical study, see Feuchtwang 2001.
- <sup>6</sup> These comments apply to the articles in *The China Quarterly* 174. (June 2003)
- <sup>7</sup> For sources of Chinese official statistics, refer to sources for Table 2 and Gong 1998: 24. Two facts also are worth noting. First, the majority of Tibetans believe in Tibetan Buddhism. Second, Islam is an accepted faith among 10 minorities, including Hui, Uyghurs, Kazak, Dongxiang, Kirgiz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bonan and Tatar.
- <sup>8</sup> The number of believers in religions might have reached the lowest point shortly after 1966. Protestantism might be an exception in the 1980s, because its popularity grew rapidly

- with China's opening to the West and the Chinese fascination with the Western culture.
- <sup>9</sup> Although William Liu (2000: 120) disputes this view, Li did claim himself as a propagator of the true Dharma before the last millennium in his much-publicized *Zhuan falun* (Li 1994: 33, 11).
- <sup>10</sup> For an inside look at the Chinese leaders' crackdown on Falun Gong, refer to Zong 2001: 47-70.
- <sup>11</sup> For a discussion of religion and culture in Tibet, refer to Kvaerne 2002 and Grunfeld 1996. For overviews of Uighur religion, culture and history, refer to Lapidus 2002: 351-55, 725-31, and Rossabi 2002: 355-73. Arguably, ordinary Tibetan Buddhists and Muslims in Xinjiang are vague and silent about their position toward independence of their own ethnic regions. Vocal separatists may use their religious background to mobilize support and organize protests, resistance movements, and even violent acts.
- <sup>12</sup> For further discussion on religious or religious-inspired movements in Tibet and Xinjiang and Beijing's responses, refer to Lai 2003.
- <sup>13</sup> For historical studies on folk religions, see Feuchtwang 2001; for case studies, refer to Faure and Siu 1995; Faure 1986.
- <sup>14</sup> For further analyses of Chinese folk religions in post-Mao China, refer to Feuchtwang 2001.
- <sup>15</sup> Gong is Professor at the Department of Religious Studies, College of Philosophy, Wuhan University, and Zhou is a Deputy Secretary General of the Standing Committee of the People's Congress of Hubei Province. They have good access to internal data on religious followers in Hubei.
- <sup>16</sup> For detailed discussion on the logic of state's policies toward different religions, refer to Lye 2002.
- <sup>17</sup> For discussion on the spiritual crisis, refer to Madsen 1998: 8-11 and Wong 1999: 5.
- <sup>18</sup> For classical studies of revolutions and civil wars in countries experiencing or in the process of modernization, refer to Moore 1966 and Skocpol 1979. For discussion of effects of modernization on the political structure, refer to Huntington 1968. For sociological discussion on modernization, see Parsons 1959. For a discussion on social problems and protests in modernization, refer to Eisenstadt 1966.

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