

# UNOFFICIAL RELIGION IN CHINA: BEYOND THE PARTY'S RULES

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## ROUNDTABLE BEFORE THE CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA ONE HUNDRED NINTH CONGRESS FIRST SESSION

MAY 23, 2005

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## UNOFFICIAL RELIGION IN CHINA: BEYOND THE PARTY'S RULES

MONDAY, MAY 23, 2005

CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE  
COMMISSION ON CHINA,  
*Washington, DC.*

The Roundtable was convened, pursuant to notice, at 2 p.m., in room 2255, Rayburn House Office Building, John Foarde (staff director) presiding.

Also present: Susan Roosevelt Weld, general counsel; Mark Milosch, special advisor; Katherine Palmer Kaup, special advisor; Steve Marshall, special advisor; William A. Farris, senior specialist on Internet and commercial rule of law; and Laura Mitchell, research associate.

Mr. FOARDE. Ladies and gentlemen, let us begin this afternoon.

Welcome to this Issues Roundtable of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China. On behalf of our chairman, Senator Chuck Hagel, and our co-chairman, Congressman Jim Leach, and the members of the CECC, welcome to our panelists and to all who have come to listen to their testimony this afternoon.

One of the issues that our Commission members most care about is freedom of religion. Of all the questions that we get from the 23 members of our Commission on a regular basis, freedom of religion questions predominate.

Over the past three and a half years, we have looked at a number of aspects of religious freedom in China and the restrictions on religious practice, but we have not looked at what might be termed "unofficial" religions in China.

After the reform and opening up period began in the late 1970s, the Chinese Communist Party changed its previous policy toward religion from complete repression of religious belief and practice to a rigid system that permitted believers a narrow range of Party-controlled religious practices. The growing number of believers and their flourishing new creeds, however, frequently has not fit within the government and Party-approved structure. So this roundtable seeks to examine the beliefs of these believers and how they have grown rapidly outside the official system, and also to assess the Chinese Government's efforts to control them. To help us with this inquiry this afternoon we have three distinguished panelists, and I will introduce each at some length. We have Patricia Thornton, David Ownby, and Robert Weller.

As we have in the past, we will ask each of our panelists to speak for about 10 minutes. When they have all spoken, we will go to a question and answer session that the staff panel up here

will participate in, asking our panelists questions for about five minutes each. We will do as many rounds as we have time for before 3:30 arrives, or we exhaust the topic, whichever comes first.

So let me now first recognize David Ownby. David is director of the Center of East Asian Studies at the University of Montreal in Canada, and has come fairly far afield for panelists at these roundtables. Professor Ownby earned his B.A. in History from Vanderbilt University and his Master's degree in East Asian Studies and a Ph.D. in History and East Asian Languages from Harvard University. His research and publications include "Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China: The Formation of a Tradition," "Scriptures of the Way of the Temple of the Heavenly Immortals," "Imperial Fantasies: Chinese Communists and Peasant Rebellions," "Comparative Studies in Society and History," "Sous presse," and "Is There a Chinese Millenarian Tradition? An Analysis of Recent Western Studies of the Taiping Rebellion."

Welcome, David Ownby. Thank you for being here. Over to you for 10 minutes or so.

**STATEMENT OF DAVID OWNBY, DIRECTOR, THE CENTER OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF MONTREAL, MONTREAL, CANADA**

Mr. OWNBY. Thank you very much.

I think probably the most important thing that any of us can do today, for the panel and for the broader issue, the broader understanding of what religion is in China, is to come to terms with what "religion" means in China and what "unofficial" religion might be.

In traditional China, there was no word that meant "religion." The word came in during the late 19th/early 20th century from the Japanese, who had translated it from European languages. It is not that the Chinese were not religious, it is just that they did not divide the world up into what was religion and what was not religion. So in the early 20th century, Chinese intellectuals and the Chinese state adopted a definition of Chinese religion which was modeled after definitions that they found in the West. This definition has been incorporated into Chinese Constitutions since 1912.

Religion, then, in the Chinese context, the word *zongjiao*, which maintains still a very foreign sort of flavor to it in the Chinese context, means a world historical religion with clergy, with a textual corpus, a textual body surrounding the faith, and a set of institutions. The Chinese adopted this definition as a part of a modernizing enterprise. They were building a state. They looked around the world and found that most modern states had some sort of posture vis-a-vis religion, and they just took this one. Although we can find some continuities between what these modernizers did in the early 20th century and what Confucian administrators did over the centuries, this was not a Chinese thing. This was new. This was Western.

They borrowed it because they wanted to look like the rest of the world as they wrote their first Constitutions. They were not attempting to find a definition that accorded in any sense with Chinese religious reality, as it was experienced on the ground. Indeed, when we look in the Constitutions from 1912 forward, we find not

only the definition, but they go on to specify what these religions are in China. There are five: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism.

Now, what is interesting for us as we contemplate the phenomenon of unofficial religion and its explosion in the post-Mao period is that almost everything that was religious in China at that point, and prior to that point, and since that point, everything that is authentically Chinese and religious, remained outside of those categories. There were Buddhist and Daoist churches, but these had not been flourishing for some centuries. Islam had a presence for some centuries, but there was a minority presence. Neither Protestantism nor Catholicism, despite the efforts of missionaries since the Jesuits in the 16th century, had managed to convert large numbers of Chinese, so these were at the margins of what the Chinese religious experience was.

The major point I want to make here is that unofficial religion equals Chinese religion, to a very large degree. In other words, the Chinese state and Chinese intellectuals who think about religion in this tradition have not accorded a space to what most Chinese would have considered to be their spiritual practices. People who go to the local temple do not think of themselves as practicing religion, and it would not make sense to them if you asked them, "Do you want your religion to be protected?" They would just simply look at you blankly.

Now, when we look at this in a historical perspective, this definition has largely stood from the early 20th century until now. So for these 100 years, from the point at which the Chinese state decided to give a definition to what religion was in China until now, that has been pretty much it. That is the way the state has defined things. The state has chosen to enforce that definition to varying degrees over time. The Communist state did it much better, or much more thoroughly, than its predecessor. The Nationalist state was rather weak and had other things to do. The Communist state was very strong and unified China, and was able to enforce this vision.

What happened with the death of Mao Zedong and the eclipse of the revolutionary impulse is that the Chinese state, beginning roughly 1978 to 1980, backed off. They stopped trying to micro-manage every aspect of popular life and consciousness. This created a space for religion of all sorts to blossom. We know that, since 1980, there has been an enormous expansion, both in the practice of officially recognized religions, and in the practice of unofficial religions.

The changes since this reform era began have been largely in the state's decision to look the other way and to allow much more latitude. This was rarely a formal recognition of any particular right to people who were outside the formally approved churches. It was just that the state had other things to do and decided not to invest the enormous amounts of money it takes to tell people what to believe and what not to believe.

So what has changed, then, in addition to the state looking the other way, is that technology has enabled religions to take a variety of different forms. But when we think about unofficial religions, I think the important thing to bear in mind that they are not necessarily new. The volume is new, but this is a return to the lati-

tude that a weaker state had accorded in a previous period. Unofficial religions that have appeared, we can categorize in a number of ways. I would call qigong and Falun Gong unofficial religions, of a sort. In the question and answer period, I can address how they emerged and how this fits in with the general argument I am presenting.

The “home church” Christianity movement is an unofficial religion which has gained many followers in China. In addition, there are more traditional forms of unofficial religions, such as local cults, local village cults, pietistic cults, secret societies.

Again, what is new in all of this is the degree to which the state looks the other way, and also, when we look at Falun Gong or qigong, or even home church Christianity, technology has enabled, via cybertools, via Web sites, via cell phones, people can build networks much more easily than they did in the past, and they have done this in China. So, technology has changed the basic rules of the game, to some degree.

Another basic difference that I will just mention very briefly, is that the Chinese community outside of China has changed, the Chinese diaspora has changed enormously in such a manner as to have an impact in important ways on the practice of unofficial religion in China. The first place that this is important would be Taiwan. Rob Weller will talk about this in more detail. But the fact of Taiwan’s democratization and Taiwan’s relative openness to a variety of what heretofore had been considered unofficial religions in both China and Taiwan has invigorated similar things in China. People from Taiwan can go back to China. This is true as well for Christianity. Lots of missionaries come. It is a weird sort of map, when you think of it. A Mormon missionary leaves Utah and goes to Taiwan, converts Taiwanese to Mormonism, the Taiwanese goes back to China and converts Chinese. But this is the way that it works.

The other difference in terms of the Chinese diaspora is that ever since the early 1980s, there has been a new Chinese diaspora forming in North America and the rest of the West. This is a different sort of group than has been present heretofore. In North America, we are used to thinking of these sort of bachelor restaurateurs and laundry workers in San Francisco who came over in the early part of the 20th century. But ever since the early 1980s, with China’s openness to the world, waves of immigration have been coming out of China and the filter of immigration in the West has tended to select Chinese who are well-educated, well-off, able to integrate, able to speak English.

As a result, then, we see this very much in the context of Falun Gong, for instance, following the campaign of suppression launched by the Chinese state from the summer of 1999 forward, Falun Gong practitioners in the West have been extremely effective and active in bringing pressure to bear, both on Western governments and on the Chinese state, to stop the campaign. Not only do they bring pressure using the various technological tools that I mentioned a while ago, but also they bring together discourses of freedom of religion and freedom of belief which were not there in China previously.



So to sum up, the latitude of the Chinese state, which has had other things to do than to tell believers at every moment what they should believe and how they should practice, allied with the growth of a Chinese diaspora in Greater China and in the West in general, have reinvigorated this return to religiosity which we have seen in China for some 20, 25 years. It is likely to continue, in my view, and an ongoing cycle of openness and repression, unless there is some breakthrough in the state of mind of the Chinese Government. But I will stop there and leave that for the question and answer period.

Mr. FOARDE. You are remarkably disciplined, because you ended just as the time was running out. I appreciate it, because I know normally you are used to speaking for a little longer during class periods.

Mr. OWNBY. It is a pleasure not to have to speak longer.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Ownby appears in the appendix.]

Mr. FOARDE. I am sure. And thank you for getting us started with such a rich set of issues that we can come back to during the question and answer session.

I would now like to recognize Patricia Thornton, Associate Professor of Political Science at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Patricia earned her Bachelors degree from Swarthmore College and a Master's degree in Political Science from the University of Washington. After earning her Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California at Berkeley, she spent one year as an An Wang Post-doctoral Research Fellow at Harvard University's Fairbank Center for East Asian Research. Her research centers on social organizations and syncretic sectarian groups in contemporary China. In 2003, she was awarded a grant from the J. William Fulbright Foundation's New Century Scholars program, allowing her to spend several months abroad researching syncretic cybersects and other Internet-based groups in Greater China and elsewhere. Her current research focuses on how syncretic sects in contemporary China have made use of high-tech resources such as the World Wide Web, Internet, and e-mail. Professor Thornton, thank you very much for being here. Please.

**STATEMENT OF PATRICIA M. THORNTON, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, TRINITY COLLEGE, HARTFORD, CT**

Ms. THORNTON. Thank you.

Beginning in 1978, the opening of Chinese markets to international exchanges, the dismantling of Mao-era institutions, and the general relaxation of central political controls all helped to set the stage for widespread religious revival in the PRC. Syncretic sects of various types have emerged in large numbers in recent years, many with ties to traditional religious groups that were largely suppressed during the early years of Communist Party rule. At the same time, the development and availability of high-technology resources, including fax machines, cell phones, text messaging systems, and of course the Internet, has facilitated both communication and social mobilization, culminating in a new type of threat to the current regime. In the eyes of many Chinese authorities, the confluence of these three trends, the relaxation of

political controls, the resurgence of popular interest in spiritual and religious practices, and the development of new information technologies has created a virtual “perfect storm” for Internet-based dissent against the current regime. Highly sophisticated transnational networks of committed political and religious dissidents have emerged to challenge the leadership of the Party and the state on several fronts.

One result of this confluence of trends has been the emergence of what I call cybersectarianism in transnational China. The most successful of the new Chinese cybersects combine Web-based strategies of text distribution, recruitment, and information-sharing strategies with multi-faceted international media campaigns and periodic, but high profile, episodes of protest both in and outside the PRC. Funded at least in part by overseas Chinese communities, some of these cybersects have begun pooling their resources, both with other like-minded religious or spiritual groups, as well as with other dissident organizations based abroad. Like the Internet itself upon which they have relied so heavily in their recent development and expansion, the new cybersects have morphed into far-flung transnational networks in which the political and religious dissidents speak and secure the support of international authorities and non-governmental organizations to frame issues and to pursue various political agendas.

In my written statement, I refer to several such groups. But for the sake of brevity here today, I will focus in my opening remarks on the group commonly referred to as Falun Gong because it is both the best-known and best-elaborated example of this phenomenon.

Li Hongzhi, the group’s founder and leader, created his unique system of meditation involving particular postures and bodily movement and began teaching it to the broader public in the PRC in 1992. Despite the movement’s popularity in China, Falun Gong, also known as and commonly referred to as Falun Dafa, was little known outside the PRC until April 25, 1999, when 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners staged a mass sit-in in front of the walled leadership compound in Beijing. Weeks later, when Li was asked how the group managed to pull off such a large-scale event, he confirmed that they had relied on the Internet in order to organize the protest. The earliest history of Falun Gong’s use of the Internet was most likely the result of an uncoordinated effort of a few Web-savvy practitioners. Web sites devoted to Falun Gong first began appearing on the Internet in 1993 or 1994, and were generally created and maintained by Chinese college students, academics, or other practitioners residing here in the United States. These first pages comprised little more than a series of links to downloadable copies of Master Li’s published works, along with a brief introduction to the group’s beliefs and practices. Most provided news of U.S.-based Falun Gong chapters, which were often centered on American college campuses and which also held regular sessions open to the public. There was a fair amount of latitude among the local chapters’ Web sites during the early phase of the movement, and the information available from them frequently varied in content.

The initial efforts at centralization of these sites came in 1995, when the Foreign Liaison group of the Falun Dafa Research Soci-

ety established a protocol for monitoring the group's presence on the Web. In 1997 and 1998, a series of notices appeared on Falun Gong sites that attempted to reign in the virtual movement by redirecting viewers to a few main sites with more carefully controlled content, monitored bulletin boards, and updated information from the organization's central leadership. These central Web sites continue to serve as a vital source of information for practitioners across the globe, helping to organize collective actions of various kinds, as well as to provide venues for sharing religious experiences within the community of the faithful. Despite the attempts of mainland authorities to block access to these Web sites, practitioners in the PRC continued to evade controls by using untraceable Web-based e-mail accounts accessed in Internet cafes, proxy servers, and new anonymizing software. Many sites provide instruction on how to evade official surveillance by using proxy servers to log on in order to view or download banned information.

The banning of Falun Gong and other heterodox sects in 1999 shifted the struggle in large part to virtual reality, with the banned cybersects adopting what some have called "repertoires of electronic contention," including the use of Web sites and e-mail to mobilize participants for conventional demonstrations, as well as "hacktivism," which includes tactics of disruptive electronic contention, and even cyberterrorism, by which I mean physical harm done to groups and individuals by the disruption of power grids, traffic control, and other systems of resources delivery and public safety. With the help of supporters based abroad, underground Falun Gong cells in Greater China have managed to hijack the satellite uplink feed to Central Chinese television on numerous occasions, and to broadcast pro-Falun Gong videotaped messages to many locations across the PRC. More recently, Chinese authorities have also accused Falun Gong members of sabotaging or defacing public transportation systems, and even of obstructing the government's attempts to control the spread of SARS.

Falun Gong followers and other dissidents have in turn accused Chinese officials of performing surveillance on and penetrating online sites where dissenters tend to congregate in order to engage in various forms of cyber-espionage and entrapment schemes.

In summing up, it is important to note that, as sophisticated as official surveillance and repression of such groups has become in the PRC, such measures have not only not eliminated the new cybersects, but have in fact intensified their reliance upon Web-based high-tech strategies of contention. As necessity is indeed the mother of invention, these efforts have arguably made them more capable of planning and carrying out difficult, ambiguous, and complex tasks. At the same time, the move to virtual reality has not been without its costs to the groups in question. The decentralization of Web-based movements has already contributed to some splintering and fragmentation of the membership of these groups. While such power struggles are by no means unheard of in more traditional religious orders, such issues seem destined to revisit the banned cybersects in the future. Nonetheless, as the case of Falun Gong amply demonstrates, access to the Internet has proved to be a real lifeline for groups driven underground by the brutal crack-down.

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions in the upcoming session.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Thornton appears in the appendix.]

Mr. FOARDE. Thank you very much. We look forward to asking you some questions about all of those interesting issues that you raised.

Let us go right on then and recognize Professor Robert Weller, Professor of Anthropology and Research Associate in the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University. Professor Weller earned his doctorate in anthropology from Johns Hopkins in 1980 for work on the role of religious variation in Taiwan's changing economy and society. He taught at Duke University before going to Boston University, where he is a Professor of Anthropology, as well as a member of the university's Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs. His most recent book is "Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan." Other books include "Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion and Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts, and Tiananmen." I am happy to say that two new books will appear this year: "Civil Life, Globalization, and Political Change in Asia: Organizing Between Family and State," and the second, "Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan."

Professor Weller, welcome. Thank you very much for sharing your expertise with us this afternoon.

**STATEMENT OF ROBERT P. WELLER, PROFESSOR OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, INSTITUTE ON CULTURE, RELIGION, AND WORLD AFFAIRS, BOSTON UNIVERSITY, BOSTON, MA**

Mr. WELLER. Thank you very much for having me. Forgive me also for reading.

Most Chinese religious activity has never been part of any broader organized church and it has never had much institutional existence beyond the local community. This is still true today, where people across China burn incense to gods and ancestors, but they have no affiliation with any of China's religious organizations. This sort of popular worship, for lack of a better name, is by far the largest part of China's current religious resurgence. It is also the most neglected.

But let me just go to the 20th century, where religions of all kinds have struggled in China throughout the entire century. The Nationalist government, the KMT that took over from the last imperial dynasty in 1911, saw most religion as a remnant from pre-modern times, embarrassing to their hopes of modernity, draining valuable resources from the people that should be invested in more economically productive ways. They looked with particular disfavor on popular worship and instituted massive campaigns to convert temples to secular use. As I am sure you all know, it only got worse after 1949 with the Cultural Revolution essentially ending all external forms of religious activity.

Since the 1980s, though, there has been a significant relaxation in attitudes. Although there are still periodic crackdowns—the most significant recent one, of course, was after the Falun Gong

demonstrations in 1999 and for a few years thereafter—there is still a general feeling of distrust of religion from many local cadres and a continuing lack of any legal status for popular worship. That is, not only are there not even the nominal guarantees of freedom of religion in the Constitution, because this does not count as religion, but local temples are technically illegal because they are social organizations that have no registration with the state.

In spite of all this, the last two decades have seen an enormous increase in religious activities of every type in China. I will stick to what we are calling informal religions, whatever exactly that is supposed to indicate. Of those, I would guess that the kinds of pietistic sects that David referred to very briefly, or secret societies, are quite widespread, but they are thoroughly underground. They are quite illegal and really do not dare stick their heads above ground. That is especially true since the repression of Falun Gong. We have no reliable research on them because it is so thoroughly underground. I could only speculate about them, and I will not.

Popular religion, though, popular worship, is a quite different state of affairs. It is coming back powerfully, especially in rural areas, not equally across the country, but certainly in some areas. In northern Fujian, for instance, we have the most thorough study of the revival of popular worship. In a survey of 600 villages, every village has rebuilt temples. The average village has 2.4 or so—I did not bring the exact number—temples. In 600 villages, something like 6,000 god images were documented in this survey, and that represents the current situation.

This kind of thing is not typical of China. This is probably the extreme. I expect it rivals what religion had ever been like in that area. It is rarer in north China, say. Nevertheless, we have reports of active local popular worship across the entire country. As a wild guess—and I will not be held to the figure and will not take responsibility for it—something like half the rural population, maybe. That would mean we are talking about 300 or 400 million people, far larger than any other religious activity in China. If it were a world religion, it would be one of the largest religions in the world.

Legally, China has created space for religions that are officially recognized, the sort of thing David talked about, and institutionalized within a state-dominated corporatist framework. Two kinds of religious activity clearly fall outside of even that limited framework. First, there are those religions that, since 1999 or 2000, have been condemned as “evil cults” *xiejiao*. It is the resurrection of an old Imperial term. That includes essentially all of the secret societies and pietistic sects, Falun Gong, of course, and really any institutional religious activity that falls outside of state control. The second is activity that has very low levels of institution, does not have texts, does not have priests, does not meet the kind of modernist definition of religion that China has adopted, and is not religion by their definition. This is all popular worship of local gods. The government condemns this as feudal superstition, so it has not even those nominal protections of freedom of religion. Nevertheless, outside of purely economic relationships like the market, religion and kinship remain the two most important sources of social ties in a village. That social role has been critical, I think, first in Taiwan, and maybe now also in China.

Let me turn to Taiwan for a few minutes. The Nationalists who took over Taiwan after the Japanese occupation in 1945 tolerated popular worship, but just barely. They campaigned against it consistently in a continuation of their policy from before World War II on the mainland. They never repressed it to anything like the extent to which it was repressed by the Communist regime. The Nationalists did campaign against it as wasteful, as superstitious, and just plain unsanitary.

By the 1960s, the academic literature thought this sort of religion was dying out in Taiwan, as of course we thought it was dying out in China in the 1970s. Nevertheless, as the island grew wealthier around this period, people began to rebuild popular temples on ever more lavish scales, ritual events became larger and more elaborate, and a few temples really became important at the level of the entire island.

With the democratization of Taiwan in the late 1980s, those campaigns against popular religion ended. In fact, the tides reversed completely. Politicians now regularly visit local temples in attempts to appeal to the electorate. The religious boom that I think has been going on for three decades now in Taiwan continues, and temples remain really closely entwined with daily life, both in the countryside and in the city now.

At roughly the same time popular religion began to boom again, that is, the 1970s, various forms of more organized religion also drew a lot of attention. The most striking, was growth among these pietistic sects, the inheritors of the old White Lotus kind of tradition. These had also been illegal in Taiwan and were repressed. They operated underground in Taiwan, although, in fact, they are very conservative. I read spirit possession texts from these groups: when the god comes down and says, here is what you must do, be filial to your parents and obey the Constitution, that kind of thing. Nevertheless, the rebellious potential that had been realized in the past was enough to keep these illegal. Unlike temple religion, these sects were built more of voluntary members who got together secretly for regular meetings as congregations, often featuring texts revealed by spirit possession.

By the 1980s when they were finally legalized, they claimed millions of members, including some of Taiwan's wealthiest entrepreneurs. The man behind Eva Airlines, for instance, or Evergreen Shipping, is a very prominent member of one of these groups.

But democratization in 1987 ended political campaigns against temple worship, opened up space for new Buddhist-based social philanthropic groups with millions of followers—these are not formal religion; I will not talk about them, but would be happy to take questions—and legalized the pietistic sects.

Just as important, we can see how local religion could help consolidate the civil society that quickly developed in Taiwan. It was one of the few areas where local social ties were there and could develop outside the powerful authoritarian control of the KMT before 1987. Temple religion provided an important resource to put democracy on a strong social base. In contrast, in countries where authoritarian rule was more successful in destroying alternate social ties that has tended to be replaced by "gangsterism." Look at Albania, for example.

While temple religion did not directly cause Taiwan to democratize, it has been crucial in consolidating an effective democracy there. We see the role especially where temples help organize local people to protect their welfare, for instance, by protesting against polluting factories.

Now, if we turn back to China, what are the possibilities there? The growth of informal religion in China beginning in the 1980s is reminiscent of Taiwan a decade or two earlier, and it is possible because local officials, in practice, are willing to turn a blind eye toward what is going on, or in fact cooperate with local people in finding ways to legitimize newly rebuilt temples and revive festivals, even though beneath that they always retain the power to repress them, and that power is sometimes realized. In some ways, this has encouraged local temples to mobilize social capital even more in order to negotiate with the state. One successful temple in Shaanxi, for example, achieved legitimacy by building an arboretum attached to the temple, and eventually attracted the attention of national and international NGOs, completely delighting the local government, of course. Others build schools or call themselves museums of local cultural history, and so forth. Now, maybe these activities are undertaken cynically just to keep the state off their backs, but in a sense it does not matter. Once undertaken, they are real activities that have real effects on Chinese society. There was a recent dissertation on the delivery of public goods in China that found that villages with strong temple committees also tended to have better roads, newer schools, and other, better social goods than villages without those committees.

In the current political climate where China is trying to encourage local society to take over many welfare functions that it can no longer even claim to provide, we can expect to see religion of all kinds, both formal and informal, to increase its role. Temples in China also sometimes help organize popular protests, mobilizing social capital on behalf of the rights of a village. In one case in Gansu, for instance, local fertility goddess cults organized an environmental protest movement, the argument being that the pollution threatened the health of their children, and that is why they turned to fertility goddesses. This hardly qualifies as civil society, but I think it does show the potential of religion to develop means for direct expression of popular needs. None of this means that informal religion is going to push China toward democracy. I do not think it will. Such religion does have some democratic features in its internal organization; leadership is chosen by lot, for instance, by divination. It is a core reservoir of social capital. It is also limited by a fundamental localism and great difficulties in scaling up. Nevertheless, the Taiwan experience shows that informal religion can be very helpful in consolidating democratic openings. The current direction in China shows the way religion can improve the quality of life, not just spiritual life, but material life, and even under the current regime.

I think it must be time for me to stop.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Weller appears in the appendix.]

Mr. FOARDE. Thank you very much for your discipline as well.

Let me let the panelists rest their voices for a minute and just say that I see a great many familiar faces attending this afternoon.

But if you are not familiar with the CECC Web site, I would invite you to visit it at *www.cecc.gov*, where you will see the written statements of today's panelists, and in due course, the full transcript of today's roundtable.

Let us move on deliberately, then, to the question and answer session. Again, I will give each of the members of the staff panel about five minutes to ask a question and hear the answer, and we will keep going around. If a question is not directed specifically at a panelist but you have a comment, we would definitely like to hear it. So, sometimes I will invite you, but do not wait to be invited if you have something to say.

Let me exercise the prerogative of the chair then and pose a question to both Patricia Thornton and David Ownby about qigong and Falun Gong. One of the problems that we had in trying to figure out how to frame this particular roundtable was what to call the phenomenon that we were trying to examine. So after much debate and an unsatisfactory set of exchanges of ideas, we ended up with "unofficial religions," a term that everyone understands is not a particularly good formulation.

But I was struck by David picking that up and saying that qigong and Falun Gong could be considered unofficial religions of a sort. Patricia also raised in her discussion of Falun Gong a number of things that got me to wonder: is qigong, is Falun Gong, a religion, in your view?

Mr. OWNBY. Well, I will go first and confuse issues completely. The best way to look at this is through the history of where these things came from. It is little known, but qigong was actually created by the Chinese state or by the Chinese medical establishment in the 1950s.

The context was that of rapid Westernization, which at that time meant Sovietization, of the medical establishment in China, which troubled some otherwise right-thinking Communist doctors who felt that much of what was valuable about the Chinese medical tradition was being lost. Specifically in this context, what was being lost was a whole host of techniques, practices, visualizations, therapies, of a variety of holistic sorts that were not recognized then, or now, very much by Western science-based medicine.

So a handful of people in 1950 decided to go out and get these techniques and practices, these therapies, back, to clean them up. In other words, if they were attached to "feudal" beliefs or things that would otherwise not be accepted within Communist discourse, to get rid of these attachments but to just keep what worked. In other words, to take Daoist visualization and turn it into bio-feedback. That would be some kind of parallel.

This was qigong, which was created during that period. It was a very small part of the Chinese medical establishment. They trained clinical personnel and some of the leading cadres in the government and Party circles had their aches and pains taken care of by qigong clinicians in sanatoria set up to this effect. So this was a very obedient sort of non-problematic, non-religious—I mean, it was religious in the sense that they went out and got this stuff out of the baskets of medicine men. I mean, they asked people who knew how to cast spells and otherwise cure illnesses how they did



it, and then they transformed them into something that looked mildly scientific and they gave it a new name.

What happened was that the Cultural Revolution intervened. During the Cultural Revolution, qigong was disparaged as being feudal superstition, as were many other things. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, when qigong came out of hiding, it came out in a different form.

Qigong masters who felt themselves to be possessed of some sort of spiritual discipline were teaching healing techniques in public parks, and they called it qigong instead of something more religious because it was a much safer thing to call yourself. Qigong had a perfectly respectable pre-Cultural Revolution lineage and heritage, so you could say, “this is qigong, it is all right.” It probably would not have been all right, because it really was religion or religious spiritual techniques that they were teaching. But some scientists “discovered” the material existence of qi supposedly in the late 1970s, and this gave a thoroughly scientific dialectical materialist imprimatur to the entire enterprise.

So from about 1980 onward, this *qigongjie*, the qigong world, came together where journalists sang the praises of qigong and masters came out of the woodwork all over the place, and it just got completely—they did not know it at the time—out of control.

Now, part of this would not be religious. It would have been sort of like calisthenics, in that there are forms of qigong where you do the exercises and you feel better, and that is it. But one study found almost 500 qigong masters, which means that there were a large numbers of schools of qigong. Most of these masters brought together traditional morality with these gestures and practices, be it visualization or meditation, and they explained the workings of it by reference to traditional spirit discourse, even if it was not religious. Even if it did not identify specifically where this came from, much of qigong quite clearly bore the mark of traditional religious and spiritual practices. So that is why, in my mind, there were religious overtones to it, even if no one in the entire tens or hundreds of millions of the qigong practitioners would have said, “we are doing religion.” It was a willful blindness on the part of the state in some ways to allow the fact that qi supposedly had a scientific existence to lead them away from the fact that people were going into trance and having what otherwise would be considered religious experiences. Falun Gong grew out of this as well.

I do not know what you want to add to that, but that is the history of where qigong came from.

Ms. THORNTON. I think that is a fairly exhaustive history, so I do not know how much I could add. But I would say that, with reference to Falun Gong, there are many documents and there is a long, ongoing struggle between Falun Gong and the Chinese Government over this very question. Of course, the Chinese Government sees it as a cult and Falun Gong argues that it is adamantly not a cult, and not even a religion.

I suspect that the truth probably lies somewhere in between those two poles. It is not a cult insofar as the leader is not revered in the way that a messiah might be, or a messiah-like figure would be regarded from within a true cultic-type organization, and it is not as hierarchical and formally organized as a cult might be. But

on the other hand, it is not simply an exercise or a very loose set of spiritual practices, because there are distinct religious overtones in the texts that are associated with the movement.

Mr. FOARDE. Very useful. Thank you very much.

Organizing these issues roundtables, of which we have done about 45 now since the beginning of 2002, takes a lot of work and a lot of coordination. But there is always somebody at the top of the pyramid, and I am happy to recognize that person, our general counsel, Susan Roosevelt Weld. Susan, for your questions.

Ms. WELD. Thanks, John.

This topic is a fascinating one to me because of the decision that was made to select five categories of beliefs as the five religions, and observance and practice outside of those five as unofficial and not legitimate. It is very strange. It requires seeing the world in a particular way. A large portion of Chinese spirituality and religion is therefore left out. I have recently heard, at a conference organized by Professor Weller, that it is conceivable that in China they might decide to create another category of permitted religious behavior and belief, and it would be called *minjian zongjiao*, which I suppose is popular religion. That is a rather vague term. It is hard to make that one rigid. I wonder what the impact of that additional category might be in your view. Would that create a much larger space for religious practices like those you are studying?

Mr. WELLER. Everybody is pointing at me, so I will comment on that. This was kind of an ending comment after a conference on the category of religion, where we spent a lot of time talking about things like, “can you call Falun Gong a religion, and what is a religion, anyway?” Several people mentioned that they thought there would be a sixth category added to the current list of five official religions. Some people had heard it, but it may all be pretty unreliable. Some people thought that certain provinces had already experimented with registering at this more local level, using a category called *minjian zongjiao*. That would be interesting. In English, we usually say folk religion or popular religion, and *minjian zongjiao* is a direct translation of that. In Taiwan or Hong Kong, it is also used exactly in that way in Chinese.

In China, the term usually did not refer to that, but was used all the time for secret societies. That is, for things that fit this definition of religion that they did not like. Recently, a number of academics have been using *minjian zongjiao* in this more international kind of way. I have taken that as a sign that there is a certain loosening up in the category and a willingness to consider these kinds of things as religion. Now, will it end up as a sixth category? None of us really knows. This is a rumor. But I would not be surprised to see some experimentation in China to see what happens. I do think it is possible. If it happens—I would rather like to see it happen—but it carries some dangers along with some opportunities. It means these people can come up from underground. It means that it is not illegal to have these temples that they already have. It protects them in some senses from sorts of repression.

On the other hand, it opens them up to a kind of supervision that they currently do not have to put up with. I feel sure it is going to involve pressure on them to conform to a more “religious” idea of what a religion is, like they need a sacred text or something

like that which may get invented. So if it happens, I think it may lead to some real creativity.

Ms. WELD. Thank you very much. Anybody else?

Mr. FOARDE. Does anybody else have a comment?

[No response].

Mr. FOARDE. All right.

Then let me recognize Kate Kaup, who joins us for the year as our special advisor on minority nationalities.

Some questions, please?

Ms. KAUP. Government religious policy and controls over those who adhere to the five state-sanctioned religions have been quite different in minority and non-minority areas. The enforcement of religious regulations also varies greatly by region and by ethnic group. We held a roundtable here in April on differing practices of Islam among the Uighurs and the Hui, for example. Does government tolerance for unofficial religious practices also differ in minority areas and non-minority regions? Have you noticed different levels of government control in the minority areas and Han areas?

Mr. WELLER. This automatically goes to the anthropologist, although you should know that none of us actually works on minority areas. I have spent a little bit of time there, but doing poverty relief kinds of things for the World Bank, and not something related to religion.

The situation varies widely. The first thing probably to say is that in the initial kind of Stalinist attempt to classify the minorities, as they ultimately did, religion is a core piece of what you have to have to be a minority. Only the Han are not supposed to have any religion. For minorities, you have to have a culture, and that really was read as a religion. So they are supposed to have something, and they have been encouraged to have folkloric, cute, harmless religion, a big festival day where tourists will come and pay money. That you see especially in the Southwest, where they tend to be more colorful and not so Islamic. You see an awful lot of that down there. So, at that level, it is encouraged. Is that formal or informal religion? There is a huge amount of variation in what we have in China and the way it is structured, but at least it exists. You can have a priest, you can be literate in Yi language, or instance, which usually was just a priestly skill among the Yi. The Islamic situation—again, if you want to be a Hui you have to be Islamic, whatever exactly that means. There, if you talk to the Religious Affairs officials in local areas, they are often fairly knowledgeable.

Let me give one case from a poverty relief project that I worked on. We were resettling people, including Muslims, the Hui people, and I said, "When you are putting aside money for public buildings, you need to put aside money for a mosque, too." They said, "No, no, no, we could not possibly do that. That would be government support for religion." I said, "All right, but you are asking for trouble." They said, "But we can do this: we can put aside money for public construction where the community itself decides what to do with. They knew well the community would build a mosque with it. So, I think there is room. That would not have happened if they were resettling a Han village. It did not happen when they were resettling Han villages. So, I think there is a certain amount of

flexibility there that the Han have not been able to enjoy. Nevertheless, it obviously has strict limits. I think they are related to those “evil cult” strict limits. If you show you can organize institutionally on a large scale, they are going to worry about it.

Mr. FOARDE. Do either of the others have a comment? Please.

Mr. OWNBY. I would just say, and this goes back to the question that Susan asked, it seems to me that if the category of popular religion is created as a sixth category, the danger is exactly that danger, that it will become the equivalent of the relationship between the state and minority nationalities, which is that they need to be cute and bring in tourist dollars. I think we should be very careful, when we talk about the creation of a category, not to ignore the possibility that it is not necessarily a liberalizing impulse. It is far more a managerial impulse. If they create a category, as Rob said, popular religions will have to sign up. If they sign up, they have to conform to whatever the regulations may be, or they have to choose not to do that, in which case they are making another very difficult choice. I doubt very seriously that they have studied the history of the Puritans’ move to New England and decided that this is a good thing.

Mr. FOARDE. Patricia Thornton’s presentation dealt with some issues that our next questioner is quite interested in, and that is the Internet and technology. William Farris is our expert on freedom of expression, and particularly on the Internet, and also handles the media relations for us. William.

Mr. FARRIS. Thank you. Yes. In fact, my question was going to be directed to Ms. Thornton. It is actually a couple of questions, or maybe one question that just requires some clarification. In your statement just now, and in your written statement as well, you used words to describe the Falun Gong movement, like “covert,” and “underground,” and you mentioned “cyberterrorism.” My understanding is that Falun Gong is completely open in areas where it is not forbidden, i.e., mainland China. I did not have an understanding that Falun Gong is covert or underground in the United States or Hong Kong or Taiwan. So, I just wanted to clarify, when you say it is covert and underground, I assume you mean by virtue of the fact that it is oppressed and illegal to practice Falun Gong in mainland China, and therefore they are unable to freely practice this spiritual movement. Is that correct?

Ms. THORNTON. Yes. That is exactly what I mean. When I refer to the underground part of the movement, I am referring only to those Falun Gong cells that might still be in existence in mainland China.

Mr. FARRIS. All right. And in terms of the aspect of cyberterrorism, the incidents that might fit into the types of activities that you describe in your written statement, what little I have seen of that has been in the Chinese Government’s state-controlled media. I am wondering, other than these accusations which the Chinese Government obviously has an ulterior motive for putting forward in attempting to suppress Falun Gong, are you aware of any other accusations regarding these types of behaviors from sources not controlled by the Chinese Government?

Ms. THORNTON. No, I am not. The only references that I have seen to the disruption of any kind of transportation or public serv-

ices comes from the state-controlled Chinese media itself. I have not seen or heard of any other acts that might be considered cyberterrorism from sources that are not associated with the Chinese Government, so I cannot confirm that.

Mr. FARRIS. Maybe just one more. I am wondering if it is possible for you to distinguish between a cybersect and a religion or spiritual organization that merely makes use of the Internet. When you describe Falun Gong or other groups as "cybersects," what makes them different from, say, the Catholic church, which has its own Web site, and other religions that may run forums or bulletin board systems on the Internet and make extensive use of e-mail newsletter distributions, and things like that?

Ms. THORNTON. When I began looking at these groups as an example of a distinct phenomenon, my interest was piqued by the fact that they were all banned, overtly banned, in 1999 as *xiejiao*, the heretical sects. So, therefore, the known practitioners were of course rounded up and sent off to thought reform or labor reform, or detained, or in other ways harassed. Those who continued to practice, by all reports, did so secretly. Their only chance of linking to the larger community of believers would be through the use of such communications resources as were afforded to them by Internet access. Over a period of time, what was of most interest to me was the way in which, at a certain level, the medium became the message. These groups, barring any other types of open opportunities for social communication or social organization, were forced to organize themselves in virtual reality.

So, actually, the topic of my research, and one of my continuing interests, is how forcing a group to rely on the Web might change that group's organization. There is some suggestion that, by forcing these groups to make the move into virtual reality, the groups themselves have splintered and fragmented somewhat. So, it has had some kind of an impact. I am trying to trace out what the ramifications of that have been among not only Falun Gong practitioners, but other groups as well.

Mr. FOARDE. Our staff expert who has this year been concentrating on Catholicism and Protestantism in China, is Mark Milosch. Mark.

Mr. MILOSCH. Thank you, John. I have a question for anybody who might care to answer it, but perhaps in the first place for Patricia. I am interested in two religions that we have not mentioned, Orthodoxy and Judaism. Both are unofficial, both have very few believers. I believe Orthodoxy claims, at the most, 15,000 believers; Judaism, probably only a few hundred believers. But they are both relatively non-threatening to the government and find diplomatic support abroad. I would be curious to hear from you whether you think that there are any developments in which these religions are setting a precedent that would be helpful to other, larger unofficial religions. Orthodoxy, at least, seems to be moving toward a kind of quasi-official status.

Mr. WELLER. We are clueless. [Laughter.] There are 1.3 billion people, and Orthodox and Jews are not very many of them. It may be they are granted national status of this sort. I think the point you made in passing there about international support is absolutely crucial, though. The reason Islam, for instance, survived as

well as it survived is because there was a diplomatic side to what China was doing with Islam, and there is a diplomatic side certainly with Judaism right now and changing relations with Israel, and I would assume with Orthodoxy, there being such a large Orthodox world outside of China. So, I think those are very special cases. Beyond that, I think I know nothing.

Mr. MILOSCH. Maybe I will get a second chance later.

Mr. FOARDE. You have got time. Go ahead, if you have another question.

Mr. MILOSCH. My next question was how far do you think policy toward Falun Gong drives policy toward other religions? I am wondering if we might have a situation something like this: Falun Gong, as the dominant concern, drives policy toward underground Protestant and Catholic churches because the Chinese Government is afraid, when dealing with the underground Protestants, to set precedents that would then haunt the state in its dealings with Falun Gong. Have you seen any examples of this or anything that would lead you to think this?

Mr. OWNBY. I think it is probably hard to overestimate the extent to which that is driving the policy. We were talking about popular religion as a category before the entire discourse on that. Discussion had begun in the early 1990s, if not the late 1980s. There were books published. I have a huge book on the history of popular religion in China in which the introduction, for instance, was a fairly subtle defense of that as a category.

When Falun Gong broke out my colleagues in China could no longer say such things. The Chinese state very clearly called on other scholars in the community who had very different views.

What Rob said a little while ago, that in China the term used is equal to secret societies and other dangerous activities, that wing of the scholarly debate in China took over. So, it is very clear that Falun Gong has been the counter example which has inspired large amounts of thinking within the scholarly community and within the government about how you want to define religion, how you want to make religion work on the ground. This goes into a whole variety of different ways. For instance, strangely enough, I guess, as I read through the mountains of material generated by the campaign against Falun Gong having to do with the definition of religion, how religion should function, there was a large body of commentary—again, this is scholarly commentary—having to do with how wonderful “real” religions are, how they brought social stability to China. There was one sentence I recall that said, “even those new religions in the West seem to be largely positive phenomena,” which was an amazing thing to say. In China, the category of “new religious movement” does not exist for the reasons that we just enumerated a little while ago. And yet, here is a scholar from, I think it was the World Religions Institute in Beijing, saying, “Look at Scientology. Those are good guys. We are stuck with Falun Gong.” Basically, that is what he was saying. I was stunned to run across that.

On the other hand, as you said, within the recognized Christian community—I wrote in the written version of what I presented here today—I recalled an instance when I was in Beijing at an anti-Falun Gong conference where a gentleman from the Nanjing

Theological Seminary was there, an elderly Chinese Christian, a man with great dignity, but he had little choice but to jump with both feet very hard on Falun Gong, the fear being that if you are not very careful, all these intellectual constructions about, what is religion, what is feudal superstition, what is popular religion, it is all much of a sameness at a certain point. You can all get grouped into that category. Once you are grouped in that category, the bulldozers come and knock down your church.

So, yes, Falun Gong has been immensely destructive to what was under way prior to that, which was a more subtle negotiation of what religion might mean, how you might work with it within China. They have not been able to say anything intelligent from a scholarly point of view. I could have an interesting discussion with my colleagues in China about religion, popular religion. We can have them now, but we cannot have them on paper. We cannot have them in public.

Mr. WELLER. I just wanted to add one word. There is no doubt that there was a huge impact immediately after 1999 on Christians, on Catholics, on these kinds of popular festivals that I have talked about, just across the board on everything. On the other hand, when David, in his earlier presentation, talked about the kind of expansion and retraction process, that is how I see this. The law on cults, which does not specify Falun Gong but was clearly written in response to Falun Gong, applies to everybody.

On the other hand, the discussion about religion is very much back again to a pre-1999 stage. Those canceled popular festivals are back. House Christians are active. Again, we say it is underground, but a lot of it is not exactly hidden, it is just not official. Informal is a good word, I think, for something like that.

Mr. FOARDE. Also a member of our religion team is Laura Mitchell, who is our research associate. Laura, your turn.

Ms. MITCHELL. Thank you. Some observers have said that in China there are regional differences in the extent to which local officials allow the practice and organization of unofficial and/or popular religious practices. Professor Weller, you mentioned Fujian, in particular. Could you discuss these regional differences further and explain why the differences exist?

Mr. WELLER. Yes, I will try. I think, if the Congress gave huge amounts of research money, one of the things I would like to find out is the actual regional variation, because we do not know. We just know there is a lot of regional variation, so even just mapping it in the first place is a bit beyond what we can manage.

Once we have it, there are a number of ways of trying to explain it. One is that it might represent a pre-20th century pattern. It could just be that the wealthier South always had a lot more religious activity than the poorer North, for instance. That is another gigantic research project, to try to figure that one out. We do not even know enough to answer that.

I can start to speculate. For instance, Fujian has a huge amount, through the whole province. Guangdong, right next door, also has a significant amount. It is much harder to get a temple constructed in Guangdong than it is in Fujian, even though they are right next to each other, and even though they are both really far from Beijing. I think the places where religion has been most active relate

to two things. One, is overseas connections. Those clearly help you reestablish this kind of popular religion because it is a way of attracting overseas people and their money back to China. So, that has had a huge effect, but that does not distinguish Fujian and Guangdong from each other. They both have that advantage. In Gansu or Shaanxi or something, that is a different story.

So what is the difference between Fujian or Wenzhou—which also has very active popular religion—and Guangdong? I think it has to do with their relation to the central state. Some places have been relatively cut off. Geographically, Fujian is surrounded by big mountains. Wenzhou, a city in the next province to the north, is also in a kind of basin, traditionally rather isolated from the rest of China. Both areas directly face Taiwan. That is what has been for a long time a strategically important area, and therefore one in which China is not going to invest a lot of money in industry.

Now, in retrospect, that was a good thing for people because they do not have all of this highly centralized, Cultural Revolution remnant economy to deal with. But it also meant they were kind of freer and reacted faster to the opportunities of the reforms, and I speculate that that has been true for religion, as it has been for economy.

If you look at the rate of economic change in Fuzhou or Xiamen compared to even places in Guangdong, it is a quite different kind of reaction. Or Wenzhou, with the real extreme of that family economy kind of pattern rather than a state economy kind of pattern.

Mr. FOARDE. Steve Marshall handles a number of things for us, but we probably think of him first as our expert on Tibet and on Tibetan Buddhism.

Steve, questions?

Mr. MARSHALL. This will not be a question about Tibetan Buddhism. With respect to the so-called “unofficial” religions that we are talking about here today and the idea of centralization, can any of you give us any thoughts about comparing similar types of religious practices that are more centralized in one particular area, less centralized in another particular area, and where that difference in centralization leads to a difference in the success of the practice? And particularly if it leads to less persecution for the practice? And following on from that, have you see any example of a practice of religion that has, as a defensive strategy, moved from being more centralized to being less centralized and deflected a certain amount of trouble by doing that?

Mr. WELLER. That is a very good question, and we are clearly struggling with it. Does anybody want to struggle first?

[No response].

Let me talk about Taiwan as an example, although I cannot think of any decentralization strategy. I feel like there must be, and I will probably think of it at 3:31, or something.

In Taiwan, several things happened that we can see before and after democratization. Those really big Buddhist movements, for instance, that have millions of members and branches all over the world, including here in Washington, I am certain, those existed before 1987, but in a rather small way. Instead, what we had was the proper corporatist Buddhist Association of the Republic of China, which controlled things like ordinations, and therefore real-



ly controlled what was going on and nobody could depart from it too much. After 1987, these groups are suddenly freed up so there is a decrease of central control, but such a major political change that you cannot really talk about it as a strategy. But it really allowed those groups to open up.

Taiwan also had officially recognized religions, more or less the same ones as China, and that is not popular religion. But you could have a temple and you could register a temple with the government just as a local temple. Many did, but many did not. So, what would happen in China if we had a *minjian zongjiao* category? My guess is this: some would register, others would not.

The government had a terrible time, at least in Taiwan, tearing temples down. Even when they wanted to repress, they could not get workers. I had complaints from national parks that could not get the temples out, that workers would not tear them down because they did not want to die by the hand of the god. Once people believe in this stuff, it has a power of its own. So, I think something like that would happen.

The diffuseness of it is important. The diffuseness of it is the defense of it. It is also what makes it very flexible. We used to think, with modernity, religion went away, right? So here is this stuff absolutely thriving, not just in Taiwan, but in Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities, and everywhere.

One reason is the lack of a big institutional structure, the lack of all those educated priests who know what is proper. It makes it really flexible in adapting to new kinds of situations. Should that get lost by centralizing it, I think it is potentially a problem for the group. Daoists, for instance. There are probably more Orthodox than Daoists, if we mean ordained Daoists who can do the rituals, actually.

Did that give either of you time to think of something more sensible to say? [Laughter.]

Mr. OWNBY. Sensible will not characterize what I have to say, I do not think.

If you think about this question of centralization and decentralization in the context of qigong schools and Falun Gong, it is a different sort of thing because some of the qigong schools were extremely centralized on a very corporate sort of scale. They were businesses, some of these. Falun Gong was far less centralized, though. It is hard to know whether it contributed to their success or not. A number of things happened all at the same time, which makes it very hard to analyze cause and effect. But Li Hongzhi, although he tried to be, I think, a good corporate leader for a little while, either found that it really was not his thing, or he had to leave the country. These two things happened at the same time. But what that wound up creating in the case of Falun Gong was a group that was not particularly centralized. What is interesting about it when you think about the effects of things like this on the character of the movement, is that one of the differences between Falun Gong and virtually every other qigong school is the emphasis Li Hongzhi and his followers place on his scriptures. There are books in other qigong schools that demonstrate the exercises, they tell you why they work, but they are not really scriptures. They do

not have that character. Whereas, in Li Hongzhi's case, or Falun Gong's case, they do.

My suspicion for the origin of this—because it was not always like that. This came about in late 1994, early 1995—at the moment when Li Hongzhi left China and started his worldwide mission, I suspect that in his head he said to himself, “How am I going to keep my relationship with my followers while I am away? I am going to lose my followers to the practitioners that are going to stay in the other parts of the organization that I have built up. What I am going to do is say that we are going to have a one-to-one relationship, me and my practitioners, via my scriptures made available through the Web site.” It makes for a strange sort of thing. On the one hand, it is very much focused on the master and what he says. On the other hand, it is extremely diffuse. So, obviously it did not save him or his organization, being more diffuse and less centralized than other schools, but it played out somehow in the evolution of the group.

Ms. THORNTON. I would just add, in support of that point, that in 1994 and 1995, prior to the ban on all heretical sects, I think a lot of the qigong masters saw where this was going, and Li Hongzhi in particular, I think, briefly considered trying to have the government formally recognize his group in some sort of way, but then for various reasons decided not to do that. As we got closer to the period of the ban, Li Hongzhi and his close leadership, now operating in the United States, sent out notices basically instructing what had been a fairly structured web of what they called practice points and other schools that would teach his method that they needed to disband and basically decentralize.

So, they did deliberately adopt that as a strategy, in part because the strategy of the Chinese Government in banning Falun Gong, at least in the early phases of the crackdown, was to pin them as an illegal social organization. By dismantling the very formal and more hierarchical structure, it did provide some sort of legal protection, at least nominally, for the group. But then the Chinese Government caught up by creating new laws and a host of new regulations by which they could demonstrate retroactively that Falun Gong was, in fact, operating illegally. So there is some sense in which decentralization was adopted as a strategy. But again, I think, as David pointed out, there was also a way in which the one-on-one relationship worked through the Web, and through shared texts, and continued to tie those followers in mainland China back to the leader.

Mr. FOARDE. Thank you very much.

Let me now pick up the questioning and try to do a couple of things for clarification. All of us who study these things are aware of the lexicon of describing groups like this, but since this is for the record, I wondered if each of you would clarify your understanding of the meaning of two terms, “syncretic” and “pietistic,” so that the readers of the record will be able to pick up those ideas.

Does anybody want to start?

Mr. WELLER. “Pietistic” is used in the literature, and that is the only reason I use it. David is trying to claim that my using it is the only reason he used it. The scholar of religion who really started us looking at these things, Daniel Overmeyer, used the term in

an initial description of these groups. He was explicitly thinking of early Protestantism and trying to make a comparison there, and there are some interesting comparisons to be made. But I think the term is useful in certain senses. So if we are looking at popular worship, I even hesitate to use “religion” for that, because belief has very little to do with what people are doing. They are offering incense and they call this, in Chinese, usually *bai* or *jing*, both of which mean to pay respects, and they are used in secular senses just as much as in religious senses.

But then come these groups that, yes, still burn incense and things, but what really matters is what you believe. It is a new set of beliefs. So it is the sort of thing that you might talk about converting to, but it does not make sense to say, “I will convert to popular religion.” It is a mismatch of categories, somehow. So, I think that is all we mean by pietistic. We, at least at this table, I guess, do not want to read a lot more into it.

Syncretic was the other one. Again, the literature on Chinese religions simply usually refers to groups that are quite self-consciously claiming to combine various religious traditions. We see these well before the 20th century. In fact, we get the groups called the “Three Religions in One,” being Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam at that point, and then it becomes in the 20th century, usually, the “Three Plus Two,” or just, “The Five Religions are One.” So that term refers to a specific historical phenomenon in China.

Mr. FOARDE. Really useful. I will not make either of you pick that up unless you want to. I just wanted to ask another question to you, Rob, about the relationship between what has been going on in Taiwan for some time and what may now be going on in China. Is there any evidence that there has been some retransplant of popular religion from practice in Taiwan back into Fujian, Guangdong, other places where people in Taiwan hail from originally?

Mr. WELLER. Yes. The very first thing that happened when people from Taiwan could go back to the mainland legally, and actually to a small extent before it was legal, is they went back to the mother temples of all the temples in Taiwan, the ones they had branched off of. That is big business. So a place like Meizhou, an island off Fujian, which is where the most important deity in Taiwan came from, just lives off this at this point. The temple is taking over the whole island.

Then people have really interesting stories of going back and forth to the mother temple. They will bring texts, say, from Taiwan back to the mainland, and then they are published in the mainland, but now are claimed to be the “authentic” and original text. There is a huge amount of going back and forth there.

And people debate unification or independence in Taiwan, but in a sense, on the ground, there is a kind of unification, but it is not a Taiwan-PRC unification, it is a pan-Southern Min civilization unification, Southern Fujian and Taiwan, which is the single linguistic and cultural area. That is where it is having a really powerful effect.

Beyond that, I do not think there is much of a direct effect. I will tell you where I would guess it would have an effect, is these pietistic sects that I feel fairly sure are being spread underground,

partly with help of these Taiwanese businessmen in places like Shanghai. But again, I speculate. I would be shocked if it were not true, but I do not really know.

Ms. THORNTON. I would like to add, in response to that question, that some of the cybersects that I have been looking at appear to have originated in Taiwan, or at least are openly operating in Taiwan, and then from there expanding their contacts in mainland China, although in an underground sort of way.

One of the groups that I have been looking at goes by the name of *Quanyin*, or is more commonly called in mainland China, *Guangyin Famen*. That group was founded by a woman named Suma Qinghai, who is a Vietnamese woman of Han Chinese descent who married a German doctor, and then left him to go back to India to study with certain gurus in the Santmat tradition. She then went on to Taiwan, and studied there. I am not sure in exactly what context, but she then had a revelation and, I believe it was in 1992, created her own school for teaching the Santmat tradition. Suma Qinghai is now in the United States, but continues to operate from a base in Taipei and has expanded throughout mainland China from Taiwan.

Mr. FOARDE. Useful. Thank you. Susan, another round of questions? Please.

Ms. WELD. Thank you very much. I am interested in the way in which social services and social organizations overlap with religious organizations. In Taiwan, the best examples are Buddhist organizations, which seem less focused on religion than on social service.

Mr. WELLER. I would call them religious.

Ms. WELD. From what I remember you just said, those flourished after the lifting of the ban on religious organizations. Can you help us understand how that worked? In the new religious regulations in China there is a little window for establishing religious social service groups in a rather limited way. Will that enable China to replicate the success of Taiwan in this area? Many official texts in China now talk about how to get private groups to help with social service, which is a real problem now in many parts of China.

Mr. WELLER. Yes. That is a good question. I do think it is a window of opportunity. So the largest of these groups, and I think the earliest, the *Ciji Gongdehui*, the Compassion Merit Association, is run by a nun, but is mostly a lay organization. They have stopped releasing membership numbers, but the last they did was something like 4 million people.

And remember, Taiwan's population is only 23 million, or something like that. That is a huge number of people, with branches in, I do not know, 100 countries, and at least a dozen American cities, based on philanthropy. The idea is initially medical, and then other kinds of philanthropy. They run, I think, the largest Asian bone marrow transplant database, for instance. That, in the world of filial piety, is a tough thing to do. That is not an easy thing to get going. So, they really do a lot of great work. So they started in 1966, well before democratization, but they start in Hualian, a minor, poor city on the poor side of Taiwan, the east coast, but they do this welfare stuff.

The government realizes there is a lot of good PR in this, so foreign groups, by the early 1980s, anyway, when I was in a delega-

tion that traipsed out there—in fact, that is how I first started doing research on them —were showing them off to people. They built hospitals. I mean, they did all kinds of stuff. So, the government really liked this. That exact window is, in fact, opening in China because China wants to privatize these kinds of functions, and they would love NGOs to pick that up. In fact, Ciji is incorporated as an NGO within Taiwan's legal framework for such things, and in fact they are active in China. The deal was they would not try to recruit or start any branches, but they were certainly welcome to come and give aid. I have even had Chinese say, oh, Zhengyan, who is the nun who runs it, she is like Taiwan's Lei Feng, who you must know is a do-gooder mainland Chinese culture hero. So, there is an opportunity there.

A few Buddhist organizations in China are trying to pick up on it, although none nearly as effectively as these Taiwan groups. The Nanpotuoshan, a very important Buddhist temple in Xiamen, for instance, is doing some work like this. Sociologist David Wang has written or done some research on that. So, there are a few. I think that is a real window of opportunity and that may be an important growth area. It is certainly something to watch for religion.

Mr. FOARDE. Do any of the other panelists have questions? All right, let me recognize Kate Kaup for the last set of questions for this afternoon. Kate.

Ms. KAUP. We have talked some about regional variations in enforcing policy. I found in my own work on ethnic affairs that in some areas the Ethnic Affairs Commission is seen as an advocate for the minority groups, while in other areas it is seen more as a tool of the state for imposing policy. I would expect similar variations in popular perceptions of the Religious Affairs Bureau [RAB]. Who staffs the Religious Affairs Bureaus? Have you found that the general population tends to view the RAB as advocates for religious believers or more as state representatives sent to impose government controls?

Mr. OWNBY. I can speak briefly and partially about that. My information is dated, but when I was in Henan doing limited research on unofficial Christian communities, we often went through the local cadres of the Religious Affairs Department. They shared one thing in common, all of those cadres: they eagerly wanted to be doing something else. It was not that they had been punished, but they had not had the ambition to get elsewhere. This was just all over them. Some of them developed a minor interest in religion. Most of them did not, though they were in no way at that point, in Henan, defenders of religion, although some of them did recognize that Christian communities were easier to deal with than communities with no structure whatsoever. This did not make them, however, fans of religion, it just made them fans of that particular village.

Mr. WELLER. That is a question about variation, too. I have found a huge amount of variation. But I should preface this by reminding you that I am an anthropologist and have a real worm's eye view. High for me is a county, and for a Religious Affairs Bureau, that is low. There is huge variation there.

In a largely Han place where religion is seen as a secondary or tertiary kind of phenomenon, at the county level, there has to be

a Religious Affairs representative, but it is usually somebody whose real job is something else and he just has an extra sign on his door, and is not particularly knowledgeable, is not particularly enthusiastic, but does his job as a good cadre. If you go out in the Hui areas or something like that, you do get sometimes the Ethnic Affairs and the Religious Affairs that are combined in a single person, sometimes they are separate, but they work closely with each other. There, it is an important job. My sample was random and accidental, but I have been fairly impressed at how knowledgeable those people were.

In fact, in areas where religion is not minority religion and not so much of an issue, the people that actually know anything about religion are not the Religious Affairs people, they tend to be the Cultural Affairs, kind of folklore collection, those kinds of people. With the work that is being done now, there is a lot of kind of folkloric work happening on popular religion. It is those sorts of people and never the Religious Affairs people.

Mr. FOARDE. Does anyone else have a comment?

[No response].

I see that the shadows are getting long. As we have experienced in this room many times in the past, I think the mean temperature has gone down about 12 degrees since we started. So I admire our three panelists and all of you who have stayed here and started to freeze. So, all this suggests that it is probably time to wrap up for this afternoon.

So, on behalf of Senator Chuck Hagel, our chairman, and Congressman Jim Leach, our co-chairman, and the Members of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, thanks to our three panelists, David Ownby, Rob Weller, and Patricia Thornton, and to all who came to attend this afternoon. Please watch the Web site and sign up for our Web-based Internet news list to learn about the next roundtables and hearings that we will be doing through the rest of the spring and summer.

Thanks very much. Good afternoon.

[Whereupon, at 3:29 p.m. the roundtable was concluded.]

## **A P P E N D I X**

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## PREPARED STATEMENTS

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAVID OWNBY

MAY 23, 2005

If it were possible to measure such things, I would wager that the growth rate in popular participation in both official and unofficial religions in China has been equal to if not greater than the growth rate of the Chinese economy over the past twenty-five years. Both a flourishing economy and a lively religious scene have resulted first and foremost from an important redefinition of the state in the period which followed the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. While the Chinese state remains decidedly authoritarian, it has largely withdrawn from daily micromanagement of many economic and social affairs, thus allowing a greater latitude in almost any sphere except the strictly political than at any time since 1949. This latitude, which has translated into the virtual absence of Party control in many parts of village China, has done much more to foster the expansion of religious activity—and in particular unofficial religious activity—than any formal policy statement, although the latitude can of course be reduced or revoked at will by authorities.

The religiosity of contemporary China is often explained by reference to the failure of the Maoist revolutionary impulse: according to this view, religion has filled the “spiritual vacuum” created by the failure of communist ideology. This explanation is dangerously misleading. Not only does it perpetuate the positivist error of imagining that a “normal” society will have no need for religion, it also seriously underestimates the profoundly religious character of traditional Chinese society (not to mention the religious overtones of the cult of Mao Zedong and other aspects of the Chinese revolutionary experience). In other words, while the level of religious activity observed in China since 1980 may be new to the People’s Republic of China, it is by now means new in the broader context of Chinese history. The Chinese are not “newly religious.” Rather the Chinese have been permitted once again to practice religions which have been suppressed since 1949, and even to create new religions, such as the Falun Gong, although this latter story is somewhat more complicated.

One of the reasons that it is hard to come to terms with religion in China is that the Chinese themselves have a hard time understanding and explaining their own religious heritage and contemporary landscape. There was no Chinese word for “religion” until the late nineteenth century when it was imported from the West (via Japanese translations) together with a host of other modernist concepts through which the Chinese attempted to understand their past, present, and future. As part of an effort to build a modern state, Chinese reformers sought to define what a “modern” religion might be, and chose to limit the designation “religion” to world-historical faiths having well-developed institutions, clergy, and textual traditions. Every Chinese constitution since that of 1912 has adopted this definition, and has even listed the five creeds worthy of the label “religion” in China: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. With one stroke of the pen, the modern Chinese state thus relegated ancestor worship, local cults, pietistic sects—in short, the religious activities of the vast majority of the Chinese people—to the status of “feudal superstitions” to be at best tolerated and at worst violently suppressed. It would never have occurred to a victim of this discrimination to demand that his “freedom of religion” be respected, because “religion” had been defined in such a way as to exclude his spiritual practice. Even now, if you approach worshippers at a popular shrine in China and ask them if they are happy to be able to practice their “religion,” they will stare at you blankly, because the word itself continues to have no meaning other than that imposed by the state.

The history of Falun Gong, and of the larger qigong movement from which Falun Gong emerged, illustrates that the importance of this point is more than simply academic. The qigong boom was a mass movement involving tens if not hundreds of millions of Chinese from the early 1980s through the early 2000s. Led by charismatic masters, the movement promised miracle cures and supernormal powers, to be obtained through physical exercises, meditation, visualisation, trance, and/or speaking in tongues. Parallel phenomena in the West would be called new religious movements or new age movements. The Falun Gong emerged in 1992, toward the end of the boom, and was in fact one of the least flamboyant of the schools of qigong. The qigong boom and the Falun Gong were not only tolerated but actively supported by the Chinese state and the Chinese Communist Party, many members of which were enthusiastic practitioners of qigong and Falun Gong. Why, it is worth asking,



would Chinese authorities endorse a mass movement with spiritual and supernatural overtones?

The answer is that the Chinese authorities were blinded by their own definition of “religion.” Qigong was first created in the 1950s by part of the Chinese medical establishment concerned with the Westernization of medical practice in China. Chinese medicine has a long and rich tradition, and is closely linked to religious and spiritual disciplines in the way that “holistic” medicine is in the modern West. Champions of traditional Chinese medicine in the 1950s borrowed healing techniques from what we might call “medicine men,” modernized and “sterilized” these techniques by removing the superstitions which surrounded them, and created a new therapeutic tradition which became part of the traditional Chinese medical curriculum. These efforts were encouraged by Chinese authorities; indeed, /qigong/ in the 1950s and 1960s was chiefly practiced in sanatoria where China’s leaders took refuge to have their aches and pains treated by trained personnel well-versed in these neo-traditional techniques.

After the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), however, qigong left the sanitarium and reemerged in public parks in Beijing and other Chinese cities, where charismatic masters taught traditional, “magical” healing techniques to anyone desiring such treatment. Such activities were frowned upon by authorities until scientists working in respected universities and research centers purportedly discovered, in the late 1970s, that qi possessed a material existence which could be measured by scientific instruments. If qi had scientific status, then qigong did as well; it could not be considered superstitious (science having “proved” its existence) and no one thought to characterize qigong as “religious”, since religion by definition meant churches, priests, and scriptures. As a result, the Chinese state gave its blessing to qigong, believing that it was witnessing the birth of a uniquely Chinese science, and the massive qigong boom followed as a matter of course.

Few of the millions of those participating in the /qigong/ boom were aware of the “religious” dimensions of what they were doing, although many /qigong/ masters explained the workings of /qigong/ by reference to traditional spiritual and religious discourses, and a very common element of /qigong/ practice was an emphasis on traditional moral behavior as a necessary complement to the more esoteric techniques. Many people were drawn to /qigong/ by its promise to heal their illness or assuage their pain. Others were drawn by a fascination with supernormal powers. I would also argue that many practitioners drew comfort from being able to reconnect with traditional popular cultural and spiritual practices which had been banned for many years. The /qigong/ movement as a whole demonstrates the readiness of an important part of the Chinese population to embrace ideas and practices which we would label as spiritual or religious, particularly when such ideas and practices are related to concerns of the human body. I would emphasize as well that /qigong/ practitioners included many members of the educated urban elite; this was not primarily a movement of the rural illiterate. I would also note that /qigong/—and Falun Gong—readily found an audience on Taiwan, which should illustrate that we should not see them solely as a reaction to Communism, the failure of Mao’s revolution, or the particular challenges of life in today’s fast-paced and increasingly unequal Chinese economy.

Falun Gong emerged at a moment when the /qigong/ boom had begun to attract criticism for its overemphasis on supernatural powers and other “parlor tricks.” This is one reason that Falun Gong founder Li Hongzhi emphasized that he was teaching /qigong/ at a higher level than that of miracle cures and magic tricks. Another difference between Falun Gong and other schools of /qigong/ evolved as a result of Li’s decision to leave China in early 1995: instead of emphasizing master-disciple contact through lectures delivered by the master (Li gave many such lectures in China between 1992 and 1994) or stressing the relationship of a practitioner to the Falun Gong organization, Li came to underscore the importance of his writings. Even if the master was not there, practitioners were to establish a personal relationship with him via the study of his scriptures, and to achieve corporal and moral transformation through the lessons learned therein and through the personal interventions of the master (which occurred on a spiritual plane unobservable by the individual practitioner). In hindsight Falun Gong may appear more “religious” than some other schools of /qigong/, but in my view this explains neither the popularity of Falun Gong (it was not the largest of /qigong/ schools) nor its eventual conflict with the Chinese state. Practitioners were drawn to Falun Gong for the same reason that they had been drawn to other /qigong/ schools; in fact many Falun Gong practitioners had tried other forms of /qigong/ before discovering Falun Gong. As for the conflict with the Chinese state, this was the result of the erosion of support for /qigong/ among Chinese authorities and the spectacular miscalculation of Li Hongzhi in authorizing the demonstration at Zhongnanhai on 25 April 1999. The

consequences of this misjudgment have been disastrous not only for Falun Gong but for all forms of official and particularly unofficial religions in China.

It is difficult to generalize about these unofficial religions. /Qigong/ and Falun Gong were the only forms of unofficial religion to establish nationwide organizations and to enjoy the support of Chinese authorities. All other forms of unofficial religion achieve at best a localized presence (although some larger networks may exist) and a marginalized, liminal status. In rural areas, particularly, the diminution of state presence in the face of persistent poverty and under development (more pronounced in some regions than in others) has encouraged the revival of local cults, pietistic sects, and secret societies. The revival of local cults and ancestral temples in South and Southeast China has been investigated and documented to some degree by Western (and some Chinese) scholars. We know much less about conditions in other parts of China, as information is largely anecdotal. These organizations appear to have resumed the roles they played in traditional China, providing a framework for social cooperation, offering miracle cures in the absence of adequate medical care, spiritual solace in the absence of hope for a better tomorrow.

We know somewhat more about the unofficial Christian movement than about local cults, pietistic sects, and secret societies, because Western missionaries attempt—with some success—to follow the fortunes of this movement. Often referred to as the “home church movement”, because services are held in believers’ homes rather than in a church, unofficial Christianity has become important particularly in certain regions (Fujian, Zhejiang, Henan), and exists in an uneasy relationship both with the state-approved Christian churches and with the state. I did a limited amount of fieldwork among such groups in rural Henan in the mid-1990s. My impressions were that many such groups traced their origins to pre-1949 communities; often the revival of the Christian community was the work of a charismatic elderly man or woman whose faith had survived the intervening years. In addition, the movement is nourished by external and internal missionaries. Overseas Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and North America take advantage of the greater openness of today’s China to smuggle in bibles and to spread the gospel. Itinerant native evangelists travel from congregation to congregation within China, creating “revival-like” conditions in some areas.

During the worship services that I attended, I noted the same emphasis on the healing power of faith which also motivated many /qigong/ practitioners. Christianity, like other Chinese religions, must demonstrate its practical power and efficacy if it is to win followers, and many worship services in rural Henan included “witness statements” from members of the congregation whose aches and pains had been assuaged through the power of prayer or through other divine interventions. The church also clearly provided a sense of community, particularly in villages not otherwise bound together through family or other ties. Much of rural China is dangerously poor, under-organized and under-serviced. Christians were clearly grateful to their local church for the limited protection it afforded them in an otherwise bleak world.

The mid-1990s, when I did my fieldwork in Christian villages in Henan, coincided with a period of general latitude in state attitudes toward religion; indeed, I would not have been able to do such fieldwork during a less open period. Although most local cadres with whom I spoke were scornful of religion, some openly admitted that Christian villages were much easier to “manage” than non-Christian villages: such villages possessed a clear leadership structure which was respected by most villagers, and this village leadership was predisposed to cooperate with state authorities, if only because their marginal status meant that they had little choice. As a result, many Christian villages were more cooperative in the implementation of state policies on birth control, for example, than were non-Christian villages. I recall being impressed by this odd marriage of convenience, and believing at the time that I was perhaps witnessing the birth of a new “civil society” in rural China.

The anti-Falun Gong campaign has surely aborted such possibilities, at least for the foreseeable future. The latitude which had marked state practice on matters of religion disappeared immediately with the onset of the campaign, and the state reiterated with a vengeance its discourse on the proper definition and role of religion in modern China—the same discourse defended by the Chinese state since the beginning of the twentieth century. On paper, this discourse ironically defends “real religions” as conservative bastions of social stability, but in practice, all religions have been on the defensive since the summer of 1999, when the campaign against the Falun Gong began. In the fall of 2000, I attended, as a “foreign expert” on Chinese secret societies and popular religion, an international anti-Falun Gong conference hosted by the Chinese state in Beijing. Among the many sad aspects of this occasion, perhaps the saddest for me was the intervention by a leading member of the Nanjing Theological Seminary, an elderly, well-educated, dignified, decent Chi-

nese Christian who had devoted his life to defending his faith and his flock, but who felt compelled not only to denounce Falun Gong, but also to denounce the Christian home-church movement. His motivation was to attempt to draw a clear line between the state's definition of religion—to which his seminary obviously belonged—for fear of being tarred with the same brush that had blackened the image of Falun Gong, then other schools of /qigong/, and finally anything that smacked of “feudal superstition.”

Long term trends concerning the fate of unofficial religion in China are contradictory. On the one hand, the Chinese state seems unlikely to modify its stance on religion in favor of a greater openness to popular or unofficial religion, and can easily identify other modern states with similar postures—France comes to mind, for example—as an additional justification for this rigidity. On the other hand, the Chinese state has neither the resources nor the political will to turn back the clock and to reimpose Maoist-like controls on daily activities and popular consciousness. From this perspective we can expect cycles of greater and lesser latitude, perhaps a slow, secular movement toward openness, but perhaps not—much will depend on particular unofficial religious movements, on particular Chinese leaders, and on China's relationship with the outside world. Indeed, among of the most important changes on this front since the end of the Maoist era are China's engagement with the world economy, China's emergence as a geopolitical power in East Asia, and the growth of a vocal, educated, and materially well-off Chinese Diaspora in North America, Australia and Europe. All of these factors influence China's policy toward religion—both official and unofficial.

The impact of the new Chinese Diaspora is clearly illustrated by the response of Falun Gong practitioners outside of China to the Chinese campaign of suppression. To the chagrin of the Chinese state, these practitioners—particularly but not exclusively in North America—have proven extremely adept at using the cybertools provided by advances in communication technology to challenge the campaign of suppression within China and to supplant the negative image of Falun Gong as depicted by the media in China. These initiatives include web sites, web-based newspapers, and hacking into cable and even satellite television transmission within China. On the Chinese-language version of Clear Understanding/Minghui, the main Falun Gong web site for veteran practitioners, one finds an abundance of technical information on the use of proxies and on other ways to circumvent the attempts by the Chinese state to control the Internet within China, as well as videoclips that can be downloaded onto VCDs for “guerrilla distribution” within China. Falun Gong practitioners outside of China have also been adept at adopting the Western discourse on freedom of thought and freedom of religious belief (although neither is a basic Falun Gong “value” per se) and using these discourses to influence public opinion and political decisions in the West. Although such efforts may not suffice to resurrect Falun Gong in China, they remain nonetheless immensely impressive (when compared, for instance, with the efforts of expatriot Chinese democracy activists), and illustrate that the Chinese community outside of China will almost certainly play an important role in the evolution of such issues in China proper. This is doubly important because a significant number of Chinese immigrants to the West have joined Christian churches, which has undoubtedly sensitized them to the fate of their Christian brethren in China.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF PATRICIA M. THORNTON

MAY 23, 2005

The dramatic resurgence of popular interest in religious traditions and spiritual practices during the post-Mao reform era has been a continuing source of concern for both central and local authorities in the PRC. The opening of Chinese markets to foreign goods and Chinese borders to international exchanges, the dismantling of Mao-era institutions and general relaxation of central political controls, all helped to set the stage for widespread religious revival. Syncretic sects of various types have emerged in large numbers in recent years, many with ties to traditional religious groups that were largely suppressed during the early years of Communist Party rule. At the same time, the development and availability of high technology resources—including fax machines, cell phones, text messaging systems as well as the internet—has created new resources that facilitate both communication and social mobilization, culminating in a new type of threat to the current regime. Pre-revolutionary spiritual traditions, resurrected, remixed and retransmitted to a larg-

er audience via new information technologies, have resulted in unique hybrid form of social mobilization that I refer to as cyber-sectarianism.<sup>1</sup>

In the eyes of many Chinese authorities, the confluence of these three trends during the post-Mao reform era—the simultaneous relaxation of political controls on a number of fronts, the resurgence of popular interest in spiritual and religious practices, and the development of new information technologies—has created a virtual “perfect storm” for internet-based dissent against the current regime: highly sophisticated transnational networks of committed political and religious dissidents that continue to expand and diversify as they challenge the leadership of the Party and the state on several fronts. The most successful of the new Chinese cybersects combine web-based strategies of text distribution, recruitment and information-sharing strategies with multi-faceted international media campaigns and periodic but high-profile episodes of protest both in- and outside the PRC. Funded at least in part by overseas Chinese communities based in other Asian and Western nations in which they operate more openly, some of these sects are pooling their resources, both with other like-minded religious or spiritual groups as well as with other dissident organizations based abroad. Like the internet itself, upon which they have relied upon so heavily in their recent development and expansion, the new cybersects have morphed into far-flung transnational networks in which political and religious dissidents seek and secure the support of international authorities and non-governmental organizations to frame issues and pursue various political agendas. Elements of their organizational structure and modes of operation are also in evidence in other marginalized or illegal organizations across the globe, including underground criminal gangs, terrorist networks and religious fundamentalist sects of all stripes. Yet what is unique about these new Chinese cybersects is their reliance upon the internet and related high-tech communication strategies to blend spiritual or religious concerns with anti-regime messages and activities.

The ability of these new cybersects to pursue their goals rests in large part upon the existence of highly dispersed small groups of practitioners that remain anonymous within the larger social context and operate in relative secrecy, while still linked remotely to a larger network believers who share a set of beliefs, practices and/or texts, and often a common devotion to a particular leader. Overseas supporters provide funding and support; domestic practitioners distribute tracts, participate in acts of resistance, and share information on the internal situation with outsiders. Collectively, members and practitioners construct viable virtual communities of faith, exchanging personal testimonies and engaging in collective study via email, on-line chat rooms and web-based message boards.

Perhaps the best-known Chinese cybersect is the group commonly referred to as the Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, which at its height claimed an estimated 70 million adherents in mainland China. Li Hongzhi, the enigmatic founder of the movement, created his unique system of qigong—a traditional form of meditation involving particular postures and bodily movement—by incorporating lessons from both Daoist and Buddhist teachers. By his own account, Li retired from his position at the Changchun Cereals and Oil Company in 1991 and began teaching his method to the broader public the following year, at the peak of what was widely acknowledged to be a qigong craze in mainland China. The main principles of the movement include the cultivation of the virtues of zhen, shan, ren—sincerity, compassion and tolerance—combined with daily qigong practice sessions in order to eliminate bad karma from the body.

Despite the fact that Li moved the United States in 1996, the movement was virtually unknown outside of mainland China until April 25, 1999, when ten thousand Falun Gong practitioners staged a mass sit-in in front of the walled leadership compound in Beijing. The massive but peaceful demonstration appeared to take the police by surprise, who appeared to be at a loss as to how to handle such a large group. The protest lasted for more than 14 hours before the practitioners voluntarily vacated the site. Weeks later, when Li was asked how the group managed to pull off such a large-scale event, he confirmed that the group had relied on the internet to organize the protest.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, central leaders officially banned Falun Gong less than two months later, launching a major campaign to wipe out all “heretical sects” (xiejiao). Two of the less well-known sects also targeted during the crackdown, which continues in full force to this day, are the qigong sect Zhonghua Yansheng Yizhi Gong

<sup>1</sup>“The New Cybersects: Resistance and Repression in the Reform Era,” in Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (second edition) (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 247–270.

<sup>2</sup>Transcript of Li Hongzhi’s meeting members of the press in Sydney, Australia on May 2, 1999, at <http://www.falundafa.org/fldfbb/news990502.htm>.

[hereafter Zhong Gong], and the Surat Shabd Yoga- or Sant Mat-inspired Quan Yin Method, better known in China as Guanyin Famen. Prior to the 1999 ban, all three of these groups had established formal corporate offices in mainland China, either under the guise of privately owned companies or research societies. Some of these corporations produced and sold goods associated with the spiritual practices of the group in question; Chinese government officials have accused these enterprises of turning excessive profits at the expense of believers. During the crackdown that officially began in July 1999, the offices, schools and other facilities of all three groups were forced to close down, their assets confiscated and their key personnel detained or arrested.

Two of the groups in question quickly turned to high-tech methods to protest the ban. Zhang Hongbao, the Zhong Gong founder, responded with the so-called “Action 99-8” campaign, encouraging his supporters to fax, post and distribute two letters of protest against the ban apparently penned by Zhong Gong members who were also public security personnel. In a move reminiscent of the mobilization strategies used by pro-democracy supporters during the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, in August 1999 the two documents were distributed to a hundred thousand local police substations, two thousand county police offices, three hundred municipal public security bureaus, 31 provincial public security departments and ten thousand departments in the judiciary as well.<sup>3</sup> Shortly thereafter, Zhang Hongbao and an associate fled to Thailand and then to Guam, where both applied for political asylum in the United States. Likewise, Falun Gong practitioners continued to stage public protests, increasingly around state-planned celebrations of major holidays and/or high-profile political events.

As the repression of so-called “heretical sects” intensified on the Chinese mainland, all three groups shifted the brunt of their organizational work in the PRC to virtual reality. The Foreign Liaison Group of the Falun Dafa Research Society had established a protocol for monitoring Falun Gong’s presence on the web as early as 1995, and relied increasingly on the internet in the aftermath of the ban;<sup>4</sup> the main /Zhong Gong/ group site was established some five years later, in April 2000, and carried information on the situation of its followers during the crackdown. The group known as /Quan Yin/ also established a ring of websites that publish and archive newsletters on-line, all of which carry regular updates of their activities both in- and outside of mainland China.

Over the past several years, all three groups have developed elaborate virtual locations where they house downloadable texts of lectures and speeches, often in multiple languages by their leaders, photographic images of both leaders and practitioners, and information about the situation of their practitioners in mainland China. Some maintain electronic bulletin boards and email distribution lists that provide interested parties with newsletters and updated news information. These continue to serve as the central source of information for practitioners across the globe, helping to organize collective actions of various kinds, as well as to provide venues for sharing religious experiences within the community of the faithful. Despite the attempts of mainland authorities to block access to the websites, practitioners continue to evade controls by using untraceable web-based email accounts accessed in internet cafes, proxy servers and new anonymizing software. Most of the websites in question provide instructions on how to evade official surveillance by using proxy servers to log on in order to view or download banned information.

Several of these sites link on-line to networks of members of other suppressed religious or ethnic minorities, and political dissidents. For example, when Zhong Gong leader Zhang Hongbao began a hunger strike to press for his release from detention in Guam while awaiting transfer to the United States, several overseas Chinese dissident organizations—including the Free China Movement, the Chinese Democracy Party and the Joint Conference of Chinese Overseas Democracy Movement—rallied to his cause, organizing a press conference to draw attention to his plight.<sup>5</sup> After winning his bid for political asylum in the US, Zhang returned the favor by joining forces with the banned Chinese Democracy Freedom Party, and by establishing an organization designed to push for the release of political dissidents from mainland

<sup>3</sup> Guan Kaicheng, “Zhong Gong ‘99.8’ quanguo xingdong neimu baoguang” [Exposing Zhong Gong’s behind-the-scenes national ‘99.8’ action] (February 2, 2000), <http://www.zgzzg.net>; see also Wei Zhen, “Zhong Gong 199.8’ quanguo xingdong zhuandi de xin zhi yi,” [The first letter transmitted by followers to the whole country during Action 1999.8] and Li Kejiang, “Zhong Gong 1999.8’ quanguo xingdong zhuandi de xin zhi er” [The second letter transmitted by followers to the whole country during Action ‘99.8’], and other relevant documents at <http://www.zgzzg.nets>.

<sup>4</sup> The Foreign Liaison Group of the Falun Dafa Research Society, “Falun Dafa’s Transmission of Internet Notice” (June 15, 1997), <http://www.falundafa.org/fldfbb/gonggao970615.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Newswire, “‘Campaign to Free Master Zhang Hongbao’ to Hold Press Conference Dec. 20,” (December 19, 2000).

Chinese jails.<sup>6</sup> The virtual links between Zhong Gong and other overseas organizations, most notably Liu Siqing's Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, were quite close in the past.<sup>7</sup>

With the struggle between Chinese authorities and these syncretic organizations moved at least in part to virtual reality, the banned cybersects have adopted what some have called "repertoires of electronic contention"<sup>8</sup>—including the use of websites and email to mobilize participants for conventional demonstrations, as well as "hactivism" (tactics of disruptive electronic contention) and even cyber-terrorism (which may involve physical harm done to groups and individuals by the disruption of power grids, traffic control and other systems of resource delivery and public safety). With the help of supporters based abroad, underground Falun Gong cells in greater China have managed hack into and hijack the satellite uplink feed to Central China Television [CCTV] on numerous occasions and broadcast pro-Falun Gong video messages television stations across the PRC. In recent years, Chinese authorities have accused members of various undergrounds sects of sabotaging or defacing public transportation systems, and even of obstructing the government's attempts to control the spread of SARS. Chinese public security officials have also responded in kind: for example, within days of the July 1999 decision to ban the movement, several Falun Gong website operators abroad complained that they were being targeted by a "denial of service" attack that was shown to have originated from the Beijing offices of the Public Security Ministry's Internet Monitoring Bureau.<sup>9</sup> Falun Gong followers and other dissidents have also accused Chinese officials surveilling and penetrating on-line sites where dissenters tend to congregate in order to engage in various forms of cyberespionage and entrapment schemes.

This increased level of surveillance and repression has not only not eliminated the new Chinese cybersects, but has in fact intensified their reliance upon web-based high-tech strategies of contention, which has arguably made them more capable of carrying out difficult, ambiguous and complex tasks. Research on similar covert networks has found that they are far more effective than the secret societies of decades ago precisely because of the advent of computer-based communications tools: whereas in the past, communication and coordination within covert networks required the use of buffers to maintain secrecy at the cost of lowering communicative effectiveness, the information-processing capabilities of current technologies, combined with the anonymity of virtual reality, has eliminated this obstacle.

Yet the move to virtual reality has not been without cost to the Chinese cybersects in question. The high-speed efficiency and decentralized organizational capacity of web-based communications has created some institutional casualties, even within the enormously popular Falun Gong network: the decentralization of the web-based movement has likely contributed to splintering and fragmentation of its membership. Some underground Falun Gong cells in mainland China have purportedly been overtaken by charismatic "tutors" or "facilitators" to whom practitioners can more readily relate, or now follow scriptures neither written nor approved by Li.<sup>10</sup> Some 30-odd members of Falun Gong's Hong Kong chapter experienced a collective revelation on Buddha's birthday that a 37-year old activist in their midst was in fact the "Lord of Buddhas." A former owner of a trading company, Belinda Pang announced that all of Li Hongzhi's most recent revelations must be false because he had already clearly left to "quietly watch the practitioners and people in world" perched atop a cliff somewhere in the United States, presumably leaving her in control.<sup>11</sup> Since he was granted asylum in the United States, Zhong Gong leader Zhang Hongbao has been engaged in an on-going string of lawsuits against a variety of his former associates, claiming that they have attempted to wrest control over the movement's membership and assets. While such power struggles are by no means unheard of in more traditional religious orders, such issues

<sup>6</sup>The group established by Zhang Hongbao and Yan Qingxin, the colleague who secretly fled the mainland with him, is "The Chinese Anti-Political Persecution Alliance" [Zhongguo fanzhengzhi yapo tongmenghui]; for information on Zhong Gong's involvement with the Chinese Democracy Freedom Party, see <http://www.zgzg.net>.

<sup>7</sup>The Information Centre was established by former Tiananmen Square student activist Liu Siping after he fled mainland China in 1989.

<sup>8</sup>Sasha Costanza-Chock in "Mapping the Repertoire of Electronic Contention," in Andrew Opel and Donnalyn Pompper, eds., *Representing Resistance: Media, Civil Disobedience and the Global Justice Movement* (Praeger, 2003).

<sup>9</sup>Peter Svensson, "China Sect Claims Sites Under Attack," Associated Press online report, July 31, 1999.

<sup>10</sup>Craig S. Smith, "A Movement in Hiding."

<sup>11</sup>Craig S. Smith, "Split Develops on Leadership of Sect," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2000, p. 10; Linda Yeung, "A Buddha Called Belinda," *South China Morning Post* (July 27, 2000), p. 13.

seem destined to revisit the banned cybersects in the future, particularly as adherents across the globe are encouraged to post and share their personal revelations, visions and experiences on movement websites alongside those of their leaders.

In conclusion, the internet may indeed invite broad-based participation by dissolving formidable boundaries, but it erects others that are no less imposing. The unequal distribution of technological expertise allows alternative hierarchies to emerge, creating a condition some have referred to as crypto-anarchy.<sup>12</sup> Within newly emerging cybersects, technical and media wizards play a much greater role in defining the movement, sometimes rivaling that of the spiritual leadership. One astute observer noted that having been driven underground and on-line, Falun Gong had undergone “a dark evolution” that involved the emergence of “a hard core of radicalized followers” who were no longer dependent upon Li’s guidance for the movement to grow.<sup>13</sup> The high level of technological and public relations expertise required to keep such a group in working order requires considerable organizational skill that may well be in short supply among charismatic mystics, and the marriage between technological expertise and spiritual vision may not always be a harmonious one.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF ROBERT P. WELLER

MAY 23, 2005

The great majority of Chinese religious activity has never been part of any broader organized church, and has never had much institutional existence above the local community. This continues to be true today, where people across China burn incense to gods and ancestors but have no affiliation with any of China’s religious organizations. This kind of popular worship is by far the largest part of China’s current religious resurgence, and also the most neglected. Officially, the government considers this the practice of “feudal superstition,” and such worship does not even receive the nominal guarantees of freedom to practice “normal” religion in the Chinese Constitution.

In this statement I will very briefly consider the history of this and other important forms of informal religion in China today. I will compare it to the situation in Taiwan, especially in the 1970s, when an authoritarian government made a similar attempt to create corporatist control of all organized religion, and to discourage practice of popular worship. Finally, I will consider the role of informal religion in Taiwan’s democratization and construction of a civil society, and suggest possible implications for the People’s Republic of China.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Most popular religious practice in China focused around worship of ancestors and spirits of various sorts at community altars. The basic organization of this worship is well known by now, especially from numerous studies in Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> Important features included community ownership of temples, widely variant deities sometimes known only locally, worship generally by individuals rather than congregations, a strong emphasis on votive requests, widespread use of spirit mediums, and involvement of Daoist or Buddhist priests usually only for major events. There were no sacred texts comparable to the Bible or the Buddhist and Daoist canons.

At the same time, China developed other traditions that were widely available. Buddhism and Daoism are the best known, and their priests were hired for nearly all large-scale popular ceremonies. By the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), China had also developed a strong tradition of what Overmyer calls “pietistic sects,” which did not require the priestly virtuosity of the Buddhist or Daoist clergy, but did have a much stronger voluntaristic and congregational structure and a stronger textual em-

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<sup>12</sup>For examples, see several of the essays in Peter Ludlow, ed., *Crypto Anarchy, Cyberstates and Pirate Utopias* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup>Susan V. Lawrence, “Faith and Fear,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 20, 2000, p. 16.

<sup>1</sup>For a general overview of the development of this field, see Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, “Introduction: Gods and Society in China,” in *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, ed. Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996), 1–36. For a very useful review of the literature on Taiwan, see Hsun Chang, “Guangfu Hou Taiwan Renleixue Hanren Zongjiao Yanjiu Zhi Huigu [A Review of Anthropological Studies of Han Chinese Religion in Taiwan, 1945–1995],” *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica* 81 (Spring 1996): 163–215.

phasia than popular worship.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese government from imperial times to the present has been highly suspicious of these groups, because a few fomented rebellions, most notably the White Lotus. The vast majority, however, remained peaceful.

The most important twentieth-century developments in China were political. Most religion of all kinds has struggled there throughout the century. The Republican government that took over from the final imperial dynasty in 1911 was dedicated to modernity. Some of the leaders were Christian, but the general attitude to religion was unfavorable. They saw it as a remnant from premodern times, embarrassing to their aspirations and draining valuable resources from the people. They looked with particular disfavor on popular worship, and instituted massive campaigns to convert temples to secular use.<sup>3</sup> As is well known, attitudes in the People's Republic after 1949 were even harsher, and included periods of powerful religious repression.

#### THE CURRENT SITUATION

There has been a significant relaxation of attitudes toward religion in China since the 1980s, but even that is marked by periodic crackdowns (as after the Falungong demonstrations), a general feeling of distrust from many cadres, and a continuing lack of legal status for popular worship. In spite of the problems, the last two decades have seen a huge increase in religious activities of every type in China.<sup>4</sup>

Christians have received the most attention; recent growth has been rapid by all accounts, although estimates of numbers vary widely. Even with the rapid growth, Christians remain a small minority of perhaps 5–7 percent of the population. Organized Buddhism and Daoism were never large, but their clergy provided crucial services to the rest of the population. Both have been revived since the Cultural Revolution, and are again training a new generation. Pietistic sects also appear to be widespread, but they are thoroughly underground (especially since the repression of Falungong) and we have no reliable research on their current state. Popular worship is coming back more in rural than urban areas, and not equally across the country. In some areas, like Fujian, every village has rebuilt one or more temples. This is rarer in north China. Still, we have reports of active local worship across the entire country, and can guess that perhaps half the rural population is involved—that would be something like 300–400 million people, and far larger than any other religion.

Legally, China has created space for religions that are officially recognized and institutionalized within a state-dominated corporatist framework. Two kinds of religious activity clearly fall outside of even that limited framework, however. First, some religions are condemned as “evil cults” (*xiejiao*), a piece of imperial language that was brought back with the repression of Falungong. This includes essentially all of the pietistic sects, Falungong, and any institutionalized religious activity that falls outside of state control. The second is activity that has very low levels of institutionalization, and thus does not count as “religion” at all—this is primarily all popular worship of gods. In many cases such activities are in practice permitted as local officials choose to turn a blind eye. Nevertheless, they are legally precarious, and subject to repression at any time.

Religion has long been one of the most important reservoirs of social capital in Chinese villages. Outside of purely economic ties like land tenancy or trade, religion and lineage were the two kinds of ties that most linked together villagers. Most temples were controlled directly by community members, often through a committee whose leaders were chosen by lot. In many areas, temples had the ability to tax local households to support their rituals, and they frequently provided rallying points in times of need. In some ways, their difficult legal position has actually reinforced this role over the last decade or two. A recent dissertation on the delivery of public goods in China, for example, concludes that villages with strong temple

<sup>2</sup>Daniel L. Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>Prasenjit Duara, “Knowledge and Power in the Discourse of Modernity: The Campaigns Against Popular Religion in Early Twentieth-Century China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 1 (1991): 67–83.

<sup>4</sup>Popular worship in China remains badly understudied, but important recent works include Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Lizhu Fan, “Popular Religion in Contemporary China,” *Social Compass* 50, no. 4 (2003): 449–57; Chau, Adam Yuet, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, i.p.



committees tend to have better roads, newer schools, and other social goods.<sup>5</sup> I will return to this point below.

#### LESSONS FROM TAIWAN

Frontier conditions in Taiwan through the nineteenth century may have encouraged some uniquely local developments in the broad patterns of Chinese religion, but probably no greater than what characterized any part of China. The Japanese occupation of 1895–1945, however, repressed many forms of popular religion, pushed Buddhism to affiliate with Japanese sects, and began to promote Shinto toward the end of the period. The motivations were a combination—in part yet another version of the modernist attack on popular religion, and in part an attempt to draw Taiwan into Japanese religious culture.

The Nationalists who came in 1945 undid much of what the Japanese attempted.<sup>6</sup> Shinto disappeared, and a new Buddhist power structure that came over from the mainland ended any move in the direction of Japanese Buddhism. They tolerated popular religion, never repressing it in ways comparable to the mainland, but campaigning against it for decades as wasteful, superstitious, and unsanitary. As the island grew wealthier, however, people began to rebuild popular temples on ever more lavish scales, and ritual events at a few temples, especially the important temples to Mazu in the south, became important across the entire island. With democratization in the late 1980s, campaigns against popular religion ended, and politicians have often visited local temples in attempts to appeal to the electorate. The religious boom of the last three decades continues, and temples remain closely entwined with daily life.

At roughly the same time as popular religion began to boom in the 1970s, various forms of more organized religion also drew significant attention. The most striking initial growth occurred among the pietistic sects, including the Yiguan Dao and similar organizations. These groups had long been illegal under the KMT government, although their politics in Taiwan were in fact very conservative. Unlike temple religion, these sects were built of voluntary members who got together secretly for regular meetings, often featuring texts revealed by spirit possession. By the 1980s, when they were finally legalized, they claimed millions of members, including some of Taiwan's wealthiest entrepreneurs.

Taiwan's new Buddhist groups—dedicated to the humanitarian aims of building a "Pure Land on Earth"—also began around this time, and achieved huge followings by the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Three of these groups now have massive global followings, accounting for millions of people. Much more than either temple worship or the pietistic sects, these groups have an explicit social mission, building hospitals, founding universities, bringing aid to the poor, and providing emergency relief around the world. They have not yet established independent branches in China, due to the political sensitivities, but they are active in delivering aid there.

Taiwan's democratization in 1987 ended political campaigns against temple worship, opened up space for a new Buddhist-based social philanthropy, and legitimized pietistic groups. Just as importantly, it let us see how local religion could help consolidate the civil society that quickly developed there. As one of the few areas where local social ties could develop away from the powerful authoritarian control of the KMT before democratization in 1987, temple religion provided an important resource to put democracy on a strong social base. In contrast, authoritarian rule that more thoroughly destroyed all social ties has tended to be replaced by gangsterism, as in Albania, for instance. While temple religion did not directly cause Taiwan to democratize, it has been crucial in consolidating an effective democracy.<sup>8</sup> We can see

<sup>5</sup>Lily Lee Tsai, "The Informal State: Governance and Public Goods Provision in Rural China" (Ph. D. diss., Harvard University, 2004). On the recent growth of Christianity, see David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Lanham, MD: Regnery, 2003).

<sup>6</sup>On the history of Buddhism through this period, see Charles Brewer Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660–1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup>Hwei-syin Lu, "Taiwan Fojiao 'Ciji Gongdehui' de Daode Yiyi [The Moral Significance of Taiwan Buddhist 'Ciji Merit Association']," paper presented at the International Conference on Chinese Buddhist Thought and Culture (Shanxi University, July 12–18, 1992); Lin, "Zongjiao Yundong de Shehui Jichu—Yi Ciji Gongdehui Wei Lie [The Social Base of a Religious Movement—the Example of the Compassion Merit Society]."; Chien-yu Julia Huang, "Recapturing Charisma: Emotion and Rationalization in a Globalizing Buddhist Movement from Taiwan" (Ph. D. diss., Boston University, 2001).

<sup>8</sup>Weller, Robert P. *Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999.

its role especially where temples help organize local people to protect their welfare, for example by protesting against polluting factories.

POSSIBILITIES IN CHINA

The growth of informal religion in China beginning in the 1980s is reminiscent of Taiwan a decade or two earlier. It is worth noting that while China continues to repress signs of religion that it feels might challenge its political monopoly, it has also allowed its people far more personal space than they had earlier. This has directly encouraged the current religious resurgence. Temple religion has no legal legitimacy in China, but local officials nevertheless often either turn a blind eye or cooperate in finding ways to legitimize newly rebuilt temples and revived festivals.

In some ways this encourages local temples to mobilize social capital to negotiate with the state. One successful temple in Shaanxi, for example, achieved legitimacy with the local government by building an arboretum attached to the temple grounds, eventually attracting the attention of national and international NGOs.<sup>9</sup> Others build schools, or call themselves museums to enhance local culture. Such activities may be undertaken cynically, just to keep the state from forbidding them. Once undertaken, though, the activities are real and have an effect on Chinese society. In the current political climate where China is trying to encourage local society to take over many welfare functions that it cannot provide, we can expect to see religion of all kinds, both formal and informal, to increase its social role.

Temples also sometimes help organize popular protest, mobilizing social capital on behalf of the rights of a village. In one case in Gansu, for instance, local fertility goddess cults organized an environmental protest movement.<sup>10</sup> The argument that pollution threatened the health of their children provided the connection to the fertility goddesses. Such arguments are particularly powerful in rural China now because of the one child policy. While this hardly qualifies as civil society, it does show the potential of religion to develop means for the direct expression of popular needs.

None of this means that informal religion is likely to push China toward democracy. While such religion has some democratic features in its internal organization and is a core reservoir of social capital, it is also limited by a fundamental localism and difficulties in scaling up.

It has also survived for centuries under undemocratic regimes of every kind. Nevertheless, the Taiwan experience shows that informal religion can be very helpful in consolidating democratic openings. In addition, its current direction in China shows the way it can improve the quality of life—material life as much as spiritual—even under the current regime.

Hundreds of millions of people are involved in temple-based local religion in China. While current Chinese policy has made room for this remarkable resurgence, it has also left local religion in a precarious legal position where it can be repressed at any moment and at the whim of any local official. China's government has a century-long modernist prejudice against local religion. Comparative evidence from Taiwan and Hong Kong, though, shows the important social and personal functions of these practices. They show clearly how these practices that the government dismisses as "feudal superstition" are perfectly compatible with modernity, and indeed how they can contribute to the successful construction of a modern and successful people. Simply broadening the political and legal understanding of religion in China to include these practices would be an important first step in improving the lives of many millions of people.



<sup>9</sup>Chau, Adam Yuet. *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, i.p.

<sup>10</sup>Jing, Jun. "Environmental Protests in Rural China." In *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, edited by Mark Selden and Elizabeth J. Perry. New York: Routledge, 2000.