
THE WORD OF GUEST EDITOR

The current Constitution of the People's Republic of China has provisions on "freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration" (art. 35) as well as the freedom of religion (art. 36),¹ and the documents of the central government, issued after the Cultural Revolution, condemn the former policy of religions elimination². Although The Communist Party of China is officially atheist, it recognizes and declaratively supports: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism, listed as the main religions of the country³. As a sign of support of the first two, the government has organized World Buddhism Forums since 2006 (every 3 years) and International Forums on the Daodejing (in 2007 and 2011), transforming them into media events. It also endorses religious festivals, gives permissions and finances rebuilding of historical temples, etc. From the point of view of legal regulations and the information available in the media, the atheist government seems not only tolerant towards religions, but also creating favourable conditions and not limiting the religious life of citizens. However, the policy of China towards religions is more complex.

First of all, not all religious traditions and movements can enjoy the declared freedom and support. The situation of folk cults, ethnic minorities religions and new religious movements is not regulated; the ones not subject to control are regarded as illegal and banned. Religious groups not affiliated with one of the five great religious traditions mentioned above are denied legal protection. Secondly, the five supported religious traditions are under permanent supervision (by the State Administration for Religious Affairs, which supervises Religious Affairs Bureaux at the provincial and local levels), as well as restrictions. The famous and still binding *Document No.19* from 1979, which guarantees those religions a legal status, as well as art. 36 of the constitution from 1982, contain a provision on protecting collective "normal religious activities", without specifying what such normal activities are supposed to consist in. Other documents, such as *Regulations on Religious Affairs of the People's Republic China*, impose on them functioning within the frames of registered associations (e.g. in relation to non-native traditions: Three-Self Patriotic⁴ Movement Committee of the Protestant Churches in

1 Documents available at: <http://www.lawtime.cn/zhishi/fagui/index.html> See also: William C. Jones, *The Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, Washington University Law Quarterly, vol. 63, issue 4 (1985), p. 708 and footnote 4. available at: <http://digitalcommons.law.wustl.edu/lawreview/vol63/iss4/4> (accessed 05.10.2012).

2 Document No. 19 available in an English translation at: http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Document_no_19_1982.pdf (accessed 5.10.2012).

3 <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/zjxy/t36492.htm> (accessed 03.09.2012).

4 'Three-Self Patriotic' meaning free from foreign influence, being self-administering, self-supporting, and self-propagating. Pik-wan Wong, Wing-ning Pang and James Tong (eds.), *The Three-Self Churches and 'Freedom' of Religion in China, 1980–1997*. Chinese Law and Government, vol. 33 No. 6, Nov/Dec. 2000, pp. 37–39.

China, Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association) in registered headquarters and led by a religious personnel registered and approved by the authorities. Religious organizations are supposed to mainly promote moral values, not necessarily focusing on other philosophical or theological aspects of their doctrine, which is reflected in the subjects of the mentioned forums or festivals appealing to social harmony, harmonious world, etc. The big five operate under constricted guidelines of the institutions, concerned about national integrity, protected but also monitored by central and local political authorities. As clearly visible in the case of Buddhism in Tibet and Islam in Xinjiang, but also as regards the underground, independent church movements, developed among Catholics and Protestants – it is not an easy task. Some researchers say outright that the goal of the Chinese policy towards religions is control rather than protection⁵. And finally, the Party consenting to the co-existence of religions with the socialist ideology and including them into nation-building discourses, assumes an utilitarian view according to which since uprooting religions and superstitions was unsuccessful, they should at least be useful. Therefore, the economic potential hidden in religions is used through organizing a pilgrimage movement, taking off the necessity to maintain the places of religious worship from the local authorities, etc.⁶

Despite a former radical policy of Chairman Mao and the modern day restrictions, China has been experiencing a religious revival in the last thirty years, especially in the rural areas. A significant percentage of citizens, mostly in the age group between 16-39 is described as believers. Since 1990 official sources have stated in relation to the recognised and registered religions 100 million religious believers, more than 100,000 religious sites and about 300,000 professional religious personnel with over 3,000 religious organized religious groups (宗教团体).⁷ On top of that there are also adherents to various non-registered religions, such as numerous Christian groups and also movements like Zhong Gong and Qilin culture, folk cults as well as followers of Dragon King or God of Fortune, etc. More recent Chinese studies state as many as 300 million of religious believers.⁸

This special edition, dedicated to China, features five articles on various aspects of politics and religion in this country, questioning them from both historical and contemporary perspectives, exploring the continuity and discontinuity between the past and present. Some of the articles present more historical overview, others place greater emphasis on the latest developments, for instance on how individual religious traditions adapt to today's political reality and nego-

5 Cf. Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*, Oxford University Press. New York 2012, chap. 4.

6 Yoshiko Ashiwa, David L. Wank, *The Politics of a Reviving Buddhist Temple: State, Association, and Religion in Southeast China*. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 65(2), 2007, p.344.

7 'Religious Believers', http://english.gov.cn/2006-02/08/content_182603.htm, and 'The Present Conditions of Religion in China', http://www.china.org.cn/living_in_china/abc/2009-06/29/content_18032670.htm, accessed 12.06.2012.

8 Wu Jiao, *Religious believers thrice the estimate*, China Daily, 7.02.2007, p. 1, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-02/07/content_802994.htm (accessed 05.10.2012).

tiate their position. The authors are researchers with various academic focuses and backgrounds, which ultimately results in an interesting polyphony of opinions on a complex issue, a polyphony often provoking tumultuous discussions as early as at the stage of reviewing submitted materials.

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