Religion and the Chinese State - Three Crises and a Solution

This paper will introduce four recent developments in Chinese religion, focusing in particular on the relationship between religion and the Chinese state. Three of the four developments, the ones identified in the titles as “crises,” will be at least familiar to anyone who is following current events. Specifically, these are the repression of Falungong, frequent conflict with Tibetan Buddhists and ongoing suspicion of Christianity. In turn, each of these groups has responded with sophisticated and successful public relations campaigns aimed largely international audiences, such that many will immediately associate religion in China with state-led violence and repression, and assume that all religion is under threat. However, it is important to remember that a great deal of religion in China is either legally or informally tolerated. Keeping this in mind, instead of simply repeating the usual litany of atrocities, we might do better to ask why the Chinese government finds these three groups to be particularly threatening, and why it would be willing to devote so much political and diplomatic capital to seeing them eradicated.

As a historian, I would like to go beyond the news headlines to offer a bit more perspective on the origin of each of these three crises. News coverage of current events often lacks exactly this sort of perspective, which is why much of what goes on in places like China might seem so mysterious to outside viewers. But of course, historical perspective is vital, not merely because the people making decisions base their thinking on history, but also because they see themselves in history—they know that one day, history will remember them as a hero or villain, and their particular understanding of history obviously shapes what sort of image they wish to leave behind. Even more than this, historical perspective reveals patterns that we might not otherwise see. Change the names, places and details, and much of what is happening today has happened many, many times before.

So what I would like to do is present each of the three flashpoints of conflict between religion and the Chinese state to see where there might be a bigger picture, a longer history, or a deeper current of ideas that could help us to better understand what is happening and why. In the same way, I will add a fourth example—the resurgence of Confucianism—to show that the state does not simply repress religion, it sometimes promotes it. State-sponsored Confucianism is what I identify in the title as a possible solution, its promotion is not so much a change of heart for the Chinese state, as another side of the same process of what I see as the central question: what is religion in China, and what role could and should religion play in this rapidly changing society?

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Falungong
Although not currently as prominent in the news as they were a decade ago, Falungong remains a consistent and visible presence on university campuses. In countries where such demonstrations are allowed, Falungong practitioners will often be seen sitting, usually wearing yellow, in silent vigil in front of the Chinese Embassy or Consulate. The reason for their protest is the treatment they have received at the hands of the Chinese government, which banned the group in 1999, and continues to persecute them at home, and harass them abroad.

Falungong began in the early 1990s as a school of meditation and exercise, and operated quite openly in China until the summer of 1999, when approximately ten thousand members converged on the head of the central government in Beijing to request formal recognition. For reasons that nobody really understood (we will discuss some possibilities later), then president Jiang Zemin unleashed the full force of the state against the group, initiating an intense propaganda campaign, banning its practice, and persecuting its followers. In the face of such pressure, most followers abandoned the group, but a significant number, concentrated particularly among Chinese students overseas, remained with it, and responded with a propaganda campaign of their own demonstrating the violence of the repression. Today both sides remain deeply entrenched: the Chinese security apparatus very closely follows Falungong movements abroad and pressures governments to drop any hint of support or sympathy for them, while Falungong itself has developed a variety of media outlets, including newspapers, cultural shows and a television station, to further propagate its message.

The obvious question that people first asked in 1999 (and continue to ask today) was why the Chinese state would react with such disproportionate alarm and violence to Falungong. I will return to this question further on, but would like to begin with another question: is Falungong a religion?

By this, I do not mean to ask whether Falungong fits an objective definition of religion. We may have an instinctive idea of what a religion should look like (i.e., a religion should have an idea of a divine creator, a promise of an afterlife, an ethical code, a sacred text or the like), but even these ideas are less objective than we might think; for most people, they derive from modern Christianity. Rather, I would like to know whether the two parties most involved in the crisis—the Falungong itself and the Chinese state—consider it to be a religion.

The answer, interestingly enough, is inconsistent. Falungong itself often suggests that it is something less than a religion, emphasizing that it is merely a regimen of meditation and exercise, similar for example to yoga. Even the name suggests this limited aspiration: Falun is a gong, an art or practice (like the collection of medical and martial arts practices lumped together under the name qi gong), rather than a jiao, a religion (as are Buddhism, fo jiao or Daoism, dao jiao). When presenting itself to outsiders, the group will often downplay its metaphysical teachings, and foreground its ethical teaching of Truthfulness, Compassion and Forbearance (真, 善, 忍) on the assumption that non-believers will find this limited
presentation more easy to accept. Similarly, the campaign against Falungong will refer to the group as superstition, a cult, a criminal organization, or simply nonsense—almost anything except a religion.

Despite this, both sides do use the language of religion to make their case to the public. Particularly since the campaign against them was initiated in 1999, Falungong has freely incorporated religious metaphors into its own imagery. Paintings, for example, might portray Falungong practitioners being accompanied by angelic cherubs, either Chinese (Figure 2) or Western ones (Figure 3). Some of the images clearly allude to themes from Chinese religious art, being painted in a style to suggest the Buddhist grottoes at Dunhuang (Figure 4), or the “heavenly hosts” imagery from Mahayana sutras (Figure 5). One painting seems to suggest the Daoist theme of the immortals crossing the sea to Penglai (Figure 6). Others appear more European in inspiration, such as this one showing a meditating practitioner surrounded by an interracial collection of angels and devas in classical poses (Figure 7).
Figure 2-3: Angelic figures in Falungong art

Figure 4: A Falungong painting that evokes the style of classical Buddhist art
Figure 5: The “heavenly hosts” motif, frequently seen in Chinese scriptures

Figure 6: A possible allusion to the Daoist theme of “Immortals Crossing the Sea”
However, the most striking religious themes are seen in Falungong depictions of the persecution itself. Naturally, the central element of such pictures is the suffering of a single individual. Rising above her pain, the martyr-to-be looks away calmly to the comforting scenes of cherubs, and a copy of the text of Falungong, the *Zhuanfalun*. (Figure 8) These images are foregrounded against those of her tormenters, who are painted in darker colors, and depicted with the demonic traits of bulging eyes, unnatural skin color and exaggerated expressions. Clearly these images are meant to provoke an emotional response (either of sympathy for the tortured Falungong practitioner or revulsion for the Chinese government) from the viewer, but what I find particularly striking is the obvious allusion to Christian artwork on similar themes. Paintings depict the tortured practitioners with halos (Figure 9), and in one, a floating cherub appears to be offering the woman the crown of a martyr (Figure 10). Perhaps most striking of all is a depiction that seems to be an unmistakable allusion to the crucified Christ. (Figure 11)
Figure 8: Cherubic visions comforting a Falungong practitioner in jail

Figure 9: A tortured practitioner portrayed with a halo
Figure 10: A Falungong practitioner being presented with what appears to be a martyr’s crown.

Figure 11: Although the person hanging on the wall is not being crucified, the pose is an unmistakable allusion to the image of Jesus on the Cross.

Such images are important because they show how Falungong’s own self-image has transformed in response to the persecution. Certainly, much of the Christian imagery is meant to elicit sympathy from a largely Western base of human rights organizations and a growing number of Falungong practitioners who are not of
Chinese origin. Yet I would suggest more fundamentally that the allusion to the early Christian martyrs packs a more universal statement about the injustice of religious persecution. If the comparison is followed further, it clearly is meant to imply that the Chinese government has lost its legitimacy, and will suffer the same fate as the Roman Empire that once persecuted the early Christian Church.

For its part, the Chinese government has taken up the challenge posed by Falungong by refuting its religious credentials—in essence calling it an illegitimate religion. This is not a particularly new phenomenon—for nearly six hundred years, the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911) banned and actively persecuted a group of religious teachings known to history as the White Lotus. Their reasons for doing so were obvious: White Lotus teachings sprang up from among the people and were thus impossible for the state to control, and moreover, they often dwelt upon matters such as the apocalypse, which made them a genuine threat to public order. In response, the imperial state drew a clear line between legitimate or orthodox religions (zheng jiao) such as Buddhism or Daoism, and illegitimate ones, which scholars call heterodoxy, but we might better term heresy. The current campaign on the one hand dismisses the beliefs of the Falungong as superstitious nonsense, but also reveals many of the same concerns, and even some of the same language as this centuries-old war against White Lotus-style teachings.

But Falungong is not White Lotus—they never predicted the apocalypse and never plotted to overthrow the state—so returning to the original question, why did the government turn so violently against them? One argument is that the Chinese Communist Party knows that socialism is an ideologically spent force, and so reacts violently against any competing ideas, regardless of how innocuous. This is the theory raised by political scientist Maria Hsia Chang in her book on the Falungong, and she bolsters her argument with a very unflattering depiction of the Falungong itself. The idea is that if the Party is sufficiently sensitive to mobilize the full weight of the state against this sort of new-age nonsense, it must truly be on its last legs.

While I do not agree with Chang’s theory, nor do I discount a political motive for the campaign. Some have suggested, plausibly I believe, that the violence of the campaign was a panicked overreaction to the use of new technologies—instant messaging and the Internet in particular—to organize the ill-fated 1999 demonstration. Such technologies had toppled presidents in Indonesia and the Philippines, and this was after all the era of the “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe. And the fact that Falungong was able to organize ten thousand members to sit on the doorstep of the Chinese central government clearly suggests that the security apparatus was caught by surprise.
But perhaps government’s intentions could be best understood by analyzing a much earlier campaign that did go according to plan. Barely a year after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the new government prepared for its first political campaign, one aimed at solidifying its power, and purging old enemies. First on the list was a religious group called Yiguandao, who the government accused of theft, fraud and treason. Through a well-planned propaganda blitz, including movies, newspaper serials and traveling sideshows, they spread word of the group’s supposed crimes. An integral part of the strategy was to criminalize the leadership, while portraying the rank and file membership as innocent victims. Ordinary members were urged to stand up and give testimony about the group and its crimes, and how they were duped into joining. And lest people mistake this campaign for a purge against religion, leaders of the state-sanctioned Buddhist, Daoist and Christian churches also made prominent public statements against the Yiguandao.

The 1951 campaign was a huge success. It drove the Yiguandao out of the Chinese mainland. It was also quite clearly the model for the campaign against the Falungong half a century later, even if the results were not as quick or conclusive. Here I mean not only the tactics and propaganda, but the result of mobilizing the population in a campaign against a common enemy. It is quite likely that this secondary goal was at least as important as the eradication of the Falungong itself.

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Minority religions

With the publicity of the Beijing Olympics and anniversary of the Chinese military occupation of Lhasa, the past year has been full of news about Tibet. In the past few weeks alone, the Dalai Lama has called Tibet under Chinese rule a “living hell,” and 100 monks were jailed for civil disturbances. And these are only the events that we know of.
In contrast, another of China’s ethnic minorities, its 28 million Muslims, rarely find themselves the headlines. To take a somewhat more cynical view of the world’s media, it seems that reportage about China is one of the few times that the word Islam isn’t automatically proceeded by the word “militant.”

This difference may indeed simply be one of perception, but it does warrant a closer look at how China regards the religions of its minorities, and why certain minority religions, such as Islam, would seem to be treated so much more gently than others, in particular the Tibetan Buddhists.

Before asking how China views its ethnic religions, we need first to understand how China views its minority nationalities, and for that we must step back even further to the former Soviet Union. As the first socialist state, the Soviet Union was in many ways the model, not just for China, but for any socialist country. The Soviet experience provided practical guidance on how a socialist state should organize production, how it should build an industrial base, how it should fight a war, etc., and as with any older sibling, the Soviet example included elements both of what to do and what not to do. One area where the example of the Soviet Union was especially important to China was its treatment of ethnic minorities.

Like China, the Soviet Union was a multi-ethnic state, where much of the most strategic land was not traditionally occupied by the majority Russians or Han Chinese, respectively.

The question the Soviets and later the Chinese would both ask is what should the central government do with expressions of minority identity—such as language, dress, and religion? One choice would be to repress ethnic identity in name of national unity. This is a response that we associate with nation states—think of historical policies to curtail the use of the Welsh language in the United Kingdom or Catalan in Spain. Alternately, a government can choose to support such expressions—to define the state as something more expansive than ethnic nationalism and thus make the state and its approved bodies the proper conduit for nationalist expression. This response is something more common to empires, and lies behind the caricature of ethnic diversity portrayed in Japanese wartime propaganda of its empire in Asia.

Over the years, the Soviet Union went back and forth on this question, but by the 1950s had come down firmly on the side of the latter. This policy is visible in the “happy nationalities” motif of propaganda, where all the component people of the

Figure 34: Propaganda displaying ethnic diversity in the Japanese Empire. The children hold the flags of Manchukuo, Japan and China, respectively.
empire, visibly identifiable as minorities because of their ethnic costumes and languages, put up a show of unity on behalf of the state or its ideals. (Figures 15-16)

The Soviet Union followed a similar trajectory in its treatment of ethnic religion. From the outset, the Soviet authorities were very violently anti-religious, not just because of Marxist sentiment about religion being the “opiate of the masses” but also because the new state faced the opposition of a strong, wealthy and hostile Russian Orthodox Church. Soviet authorities responded by arresting priests, closing churches and expropriating ecclesiastic property—by 1939 only about 500 of over 50,000 churches remained open. They were also aggressive towards minority religions, sometimes very much so. Ukrainian and Lithuanian Catholics and Jews were frequently viewed as fifth column and harshly suppressed. The treatment of the Muslims in Central Asia was more mixed. Muslims did go through periods of oppression, but overall were more gently treated—partially for fears that too much force would drive them towards pan-Islamic separatism, partially in order to protect vital oil and other resources in the Caucasus during the war with Nazi Germany. The lesson is that while Soviet policy did treat religion considered as a part of ethnic identity, because of the anti-religious stance of the state, it was a particularly dangerous
part. The campaigns against ethnic religion were both ideological, but also tempered by practical concerns not to push people too far, especially during times of crisis such as the Second World War, when the country needed all the friends it could get.

So how did these policies work in China? Between the two countries, there are some similarities, but also very important differences. In China, like the Soviet Union, ethnicity policy follows the happy nationalities model. There are officially 54 ethnicities in China, and they are featured very prominently on occasions such as the National People’s Congress or the opening of the Beijing Olympics, and always in exaggerated ethnic dress. However, in contrast to the Soviet Union, the policy towards religion in China is that the people themselves, not the government, should overthrow it. While in the Soviet Union, it was the Communist Party which led the drive to destroy religion, in China, the ideal is for the Party to lead the people (the “masses” in correct parlance) to the stage of social consciousness where they realize that religion is not necessary. This ideal was voiced by none other than Mao Zedong, who always resisted the idea that China should always follow the Soviet model. In his 1928 “Report on the Hunan Peasantry” (which would become the ideological standard for later policy towards the countryside), Mao said that “it is the peasants who made the idols, and when the time comes they will cast the idols aside with their own hands; there is no need for anyone else to do it for them prematurely.” In 1954, this same basic idea appeared as Article 88 of the first Constitution of the People’s Republic, which clearly stated that “every citizen shall have the right to religious belief.” A right, yes, but one that was assumed to be temporary. Moreover, since each ethnic minority is on its own developmental track—some being faster or slower than others—so too must each ethnicity come to the stage development where it throws off religion on its own and at its own pace. Of course, reality was never so tidy, but it is important to remember how powerful this ideology has been over the past half century. Even when the reality was very different, control of ethnic religions always had to take the form of popular action, in which the people of that minority rose up and overthrew their own imams, lamas or priests.
As it had been in the Soviet Union, Islam in China is a particularly sensitive issue because many of its adherents live in strategic or sensitive areas, such as the resource-rich northwest. While many of China’s Muslims, such as the Central Asian Uighurs, are racially and ethnically distinct from other Chinese, the 9 million Hui are otherwise almost indistinguishable from the majority Han. Thus, for many of China’s Muslims, it is impossible to draw a line separating religion and ethnicity: they are quite literally the same thing. Although there have been periods of very overt suppression of Islam, especially in the late 1960s, (when imams were forced to consume pork, mosques were used as pig farms, and the like), the overall policy has not been to purge Islam, as much as to control it by taking over its authority. For example, an uncooperative Muslim cleric might be arrested and replaced with someone more sympathetic to the Party. When such a change took place, it would be accompanied by a propaganda initiative to portray it as a “liberation” of loyal Muslims from a corrupt feudal leadership. As with campaigns against the Yiguandao or Falugngong, this propaganda would emphasize the secret crimes of counterrevolutionary leaders, who murdered, raped, stole and plotted against the revolution, all unbeknownst to the ordinary faithful. Moreover, these portrayals always emphasized that the government did not depose the troublesome leader; the revolution gave people the courage to get rid of corrupt leaders for themselves.

At the same time, the People’s Republic has very actively sponsored Islam both as part of a larger policy of visibly promoting ethnic identity, and as a way of reaching out to potential allies and business partners in the Middle East. Particularly since the 1980s, the Chinese government has enacted preferential policies for minorities (in areas such as university admissions, urban residence, and exemption from the one child policy) from which the Muslim Hui have benefited. The government has also rebuilt historic mosques, given special travel permission and financial assistance for tens of thousands of pilgrims to join the Hajj, and sponsored instruction in the Arabic language and Islam. Even if such support is part of a larger process of exerting control over religion, it is important to remember that the story is not simply one of repression.

In many ways the story of Tibetan Buddhism is similar to Islam, the fundamental difference being the ambiguity that surrounds Tibet’s political status. For most of its history, Tibet did not have a particularly strong political or economic connection to China. The region did spend much of the past thousand years under Chinese rule, but always as an independent and autonomous entity, with a discrete political structure: essentially a kingdom within an empire. It was made part of the People’s Republic in 1949, but as a formally self-governing region. China came to exert more direct control over Tibet during the mid-1950s, and in 1959, the People’s Liberation Army moved in and brutally crushed the Tibetan independence movement. The Buddhist monks, known as lamas, and the landed lamaseries were at the center not only of this movement, but of almost every other aspect of Tibetan society and economy, as well. For this reason, methods
used to exert control over Tibetan Buddhism were always much more harsh than those directed towards Islam.

Over the Himalayas in the Indian city of Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama has maintained a Tibetan government in exile since he and tens of thousands of followers arrived there in 1959. The Dalai Lama has always maintained that his goal is not to separate Tibet from China, but merely to regain the autonomy for the region. In response, the government of the PRC continues to portray him as a dangerous fringe group with traitorous motives. As with Islam, propaganda about Buddhism in Tibet is careful to separate the religion from the leadership, emphasizing that the problem only comes from what it generally characterize as “a handful of troublemakers.” The state is no enemy of Buddhism: by their own depiction, they are its truest friends. Official portrayals always emphasize that Chinese troops did not capture Tibet, they liberated it. Under the guidance of the revolution, the Tibetan people themselves removed the “corrupt Dalai Lama” clique from power, and overturned their feudal society. In order to help bring the Tibetan people into the modern world, the state instituted “democratic reform” in the monasteries, rebuilt the Potala Palace, sponsors classes in Tibetan Buddhism and language, and most recently, completed the engineering miracle of a railway to Lhasa.

This perspective not stop at the government. For most Chinese people, the overwhelmingly negative reaction against the passage of the Olympic torch through Tibet was a bewildering surprise. Hadn’t China spent many billions of yuan and lost numerous lives improving Tibet’s infrastructure? Isn’t the Tibetan economy far more prosperous under Chinese rule? Conversely, many of the pro-Tibet activists were equally surprised at the reaction their activities prompted, not merely from the Chinese government, but from ordinary Chinese people in chat rooms and online newsgroups. Certainly, most Chinese people do not see themselves as occupiers of Tibet, and indeed, there is a wave of fascination with the exotic cultures of China’s ethnic minorities. Recent years have seen a boom in tourism, not only to Tibet itself, but even more to places like the Huanglong Gorge, in eastern Sichuan, where Han and Tibetan cultures mix, and where middle class tourists from Shanghai can sample a small piece of borderland exota. Another recent trend is an upsurge of interest in Tibetan traditional medicine, with Tibetan hospitals popping up in all of China’s major cities, including ones such as Ji’nan, which are very far from Tibet. The lure of the Tibetan exotic has found its way into marketing, including such unlikely products as mineral water.
Figure 19: Tibetan monks at a tourist site in Sichuan

Figure 20: The newly constructed hospital of Tibetan medicine in Jinan, Shandong
My point here is that, without in any way backtracking on the question of repression, it is important to take Chinese views of ethnic religion seriously. In contrast to the former Soviet Union, religion in China is accepted and even promoted as a vital part of ethnic identity, and because of this, religion remains an area that the state seeks to control, but not to destroy.

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Christianity

Like Islam and Tibetan Buddhism, Christianity in China is a foreign religion that is effectively the private belief of a small minority, but unlike them, it is a religion of choice, rather than one that is connected with any ethnicity. Christianity is legal, but in practice, it is subject to a great deal of suspicion, and highly restricted. Because of Christianity’s foreign origins and connections: missionaries are strictly prohibited, nor does the Chinese Catholic Church does not recognize the religious authority of the Vatican. Owing to fears of Christianity spreading beyond the control of the official churches, even Chinese Christians are not allowed to spread their religion outside church walls, and a growing proliferation of unofficial, or “house” churches face growing repression.

The difficulty, it would seem, is that Christianity and Christians are viewed by many within the government as untrustworthy and incompatible with Chinese culture. We may well ask, can Christianity ever be Chinese? Or more precisely, how far can Christianity adapt to China and still remain genuine? This is in fact not a new question at all—Christians have been asking it for over four centuries, and rarely agreed on the answer. During the early seventeenth century, competing orders of Catholic missionaries disagreed on whether Chinese Christians should be allowed to participate in traditional Confucian funeral rites. After Rome finally came to the decision that Confucian ritual was in fact idolatry,
the Chinese Kang Xi emperor responded by banning the religion altogether. For the
next three centuries, this question of exactly where to draw the line between
Christianity and Western culture continued to haunt foreign missionaries and
Chinese Christians, and occasionally produced some disagreements that in
retrospect seem rather silly: should the name for God be translated to match the
*sound* of Deus or Jehovah, or should it recycle the name of an ancient Chinese
deity called Shangdi? Is it permissible to depict Jesus and the twelve apostles
wearing shoes (in Chinese style) even when the Bible says they went about
barefoot? These trivialities aside, the deeper, and more important question was
deciding when Chinese Christians would become equal partners? By the end of
the 19th century, there were thousands of Catholic and Protestant missionaries in
China, compared to nearly two hundred thousand Chinese Protestants and a
million Catholics. Many Chinese had been Christian for generations, and passed
through repeated waves of anti-Christian violence, such as the Boxer Uprising.
By the early 20th century, many were coming to resent foreign control over their
church, and some began to call for a truly Chinese Christianity—one that would
give Chinese Christians control not only over the material wealth of the church,
but also a say in interpreting doctrine.

Put these two together: government mistrust over foreign religious influence, and
the Chinese Christian desire for an indigenous Church, and you have the
foundations of policy towards Christianity in the PRC. One of the main agents for
the new place of Christianity under the PRC was a man named Wu Yaozong,
commonly known in English as Y. T. Wu. Born in 1893, Wu converted to Protestant
Christianity as an adult, and attended seminary in the big foreign enclave at
Shanghai. This was a very politically active time, and Wu developed sympathy
for social revolution and thus for the Communists. He bridged his beliefs and
politics through the “social gospel,” that is, an emphasis on *ethics* as the true
essence of Christianity. As he became politically active, Wu began to incorporate
Marxist language into theological writings, saying for example that the missionary
class was a “reactionary organization” that was “molded by anachronistic
capitalist society.” After 1949, he became the chief voice of a very political
Christianity that prospered under official patronage. In 1950 he wrote his
“Christian Manifesto” (an obvious reference to Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*)
that expressed the need to purge Christianity of its “imperialistic influences.” This
redefinition of Christianity also sought to capture its moral authority—in essence
saying that a *true* Christian is one who does not listen to foreigners.

Political Christianity also spawned the development of state churches. Although
these churches were first founded under the People’s Republic, some of the
ideas of Chinese state Christianity actually originated with the missionaries.
Going back in the 1870s, there were missionaries who understood their mission
to be to spread the gospel and get out—that is, to leave the new Christians to
form their own churches under their own control. One of these voices, an
American named Rufus Anderson, came up with the phrase of “Three Self” to
describe the ideal of a truly independent (self-governing, supporting, and
propagating) native church, and very nationalist Christians like Wu picked up this phrase as the slogan of their Christian indigenization movement. In 1951, as anti-Western sentiment intensified after outbreak of Korean War, all religions were put under government control. In that same year, the Catholic Church was severely repressed (as part of the same campaign that destroyed the Yiguandao), and almost all foreign missionaries were sent home. In 1958 all Protestant congregations were combined into the “Chinese Peoples Patriotic Protestant Church,” and the Catholics, already separated from the Vatican, into “Chinese Patriotic Catholic Church.”

Figure 22: Christmas morning at the Protestant Church in the northeastern city of Changchun
Figure 23: A Korean ethnic dance as part of the Christmas service. In this part of China, many of the Christians are ethnic Koreans.

Figure 24: A slightly more incongruous dance, also performed during the Christmas service. Overall, the Protestant churches are less concerned with maintaining liturgical tradition. A Catholic mass, in contrast, appears largely as it would anywhere else.

In this formulation, Christianity was deemed to be entirely compatible with socialism, but it was in many ways a very different religion than what the missionaries had intended to spread. It is without doubt a Chinese Christianity, but having been stripped of much of its theology and forcibly torn from its foreign roots, it is also a Christianity that is uniquely acceptable to the government of the People’s Republic.
Confucianism

So far I have presented only problems—three cases that show the Chinese government reacting, often violently, to perceived threats. These are what we are likely to see in the news, but that is not the entire story. One very recent development—just over the past few years—has been a renewed interest by the state in reviving Confucianism.

This interest began in the late 1970s and 1980s with a group of intellectuals, and was quickly reciprocated by the government, who made Confucianism a priority in state funded research. Confucius himself was returned to a place of social honor, or to use the language of political purges, he was “rehabilitated.” In the mid-1980s, local governments began rebuilding Confucian temples and erecting statues of the sage, and places like Confucius’ birthplace of Qufu held large ceremonies on occasions such as his birthday. Official promotion of Confucius picked up speed during the 1990s. Over recent years, Qufu itself has become a tourist Mecca, and cities such as Changchun are even planning Confucian theme parks. At the top levels, Confucianism is portrayed as China’s national essence, its unique contribution to the modern world, and a counter to Western values of individualism and unchecked personal freedom. It is no coincidence that the new wave of China studies centers being founded with Chinese government grants in universities across the world are officially named “Confucius institutes.”
In the short-term, official promotion of Confucianism may appear as something of a mystery. It certainly does seem odd for a socialist state to be promoting any belief system, but particularly Confucianism which many over the past hundred years felt was backward, conservative—basically the embodiment of everything that was wrong with China. In a relatively gentle expression of this sentiment, writers of the 1910s and 1920s ridiculed Confucian hypocrisy in satire and fiction. Anti-Confucian movements during the mid-1970s were more direct and violent, with crowds of students, goaded by official propaganda, destroying Confucian books and relics.

However, looking at the bigger picture, successive Chinese governments were far more likely to promote Confucianism than to suppress it. Over two and a half millennia, Confucianism has evolved in numerous directions, but at its core, the teaching is an ethical philosophy that tells people to respect those above them and be kind to those below. It is, in short, designed to promote social stability and political loyalty, both of which are obviously very desirable to those in power. Confucius himself never achieved his dream of becoming a royal advisor, but his students quickly gained a reputation as competent and loyal functionaries, and were soon to be found in courts across China. In the first century AD, the Han dynasty proclaimed Confucianism to be the state ideology. Although official support for Confucianism would wax and wane over the next centuries, by roughly the year 1000, the Chinese imperial state was fully committed to Confucius and his teachings. From then until the collapse of the final dynasty in 1911, Chinese imperial courts conducted their foreign relations through Confucian idioms, recruited their civil servants on basis on Confucian knowledge, and used an expanded legal code to push Confucian ethics into the daily lives of its subjects.

But when we see the current government of China apparently continuing updated versions of imperial-era policies: sponsoring Confucian scholarship, rebuilding Confucian temples and selling T-shirts bearing the likeness of the Great Sage, it is important to remember that Confucianism can mean many things to many people. For example, Confucianism is based on the assumption that personal morality tangibly affects society. This means that in a well-structured society, everyone will have an innate sense of duty and decorum, and as a result, the society will function smoothly, and be politically, militarily and diplomatically
successful. Conversely, if the country is in peril, a natural Confucian response is to seek out a moral failing and find a moral solution. Beginning with the Opium Wars of the 1840s, China entered a century of rapid decline, and political figures called for China to examine its conscience and embark upon a moral regeneration. Some of these figures were indeed deeply conservative, the image of the bearded old man, scowling and wagging his finger at the sad state of today’s youth. But they were not the only ones. For over a hundred years almost everyone, and every political faction used the language and idioms of Confucian moral regeneration. Even the Japanese Empire, which brought untold suffering to China when it invaded in 1937, officially stated its aims to helping China by bringing about a great moral rebirth, and engineering a Confucian unity across Asia.

At the same time, in Confucianism just as in Christianity, a focus on ethics can come at the expense of theology. Although Confucianism is an ethical system at its core, it is not exclusively so. For centuries, Confucian thinkers explored questions of metaphysics and especially ritual—topics that we would normally associate with more with religion than philosophy. Historically, some of these topics were integrated into state Confucianism. The law of the Ming dynasty carefully regulated personal rituals, such as how people were supposed to conduct funerals or sacrifice to their ancestors. One of the most important tasks of imperial magistrates was to perform Confucian sacrifices to Heaven, and to the Great Sage. During the 1930s, a political movement that combined elements of Confucian morality and Italian fascism tried to revitalize the Chinese people by combining ethical instruction with strict rules of behavior and deportment. As Confucian teachings evolved over millennia, they branched into hundreds of eccentric directions. And when intellectuals of the 1980s started to talk of reviving Confucianism, not only did they have all of these historical Confucianisms to choose from, they also invented a few new variations of their own. As the current government of the People’s Republic revives its interest in Confucianism, it is important to remember that they are also actively choosing what to keep, and what to leave behind.

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Conclusion
So, what do we see when we put these four examples together?

First, it is very clear that the influence of the state is still very limited. Despite images that some may hold of Chinese authoritarianism, the fact is that the state is nothing like all-powerful, and is only one of many actors that makes social policy. Moreover, even when the state and religious actors in China do find themselves in opposition to each other, they very often continue to share many ideas about nationalism, the need to support a national code of ethics, and the need for at least some regulation of ideas, speech and beliefs.

Where conflict does occur, it is often based on the fine tuning of one vital question—what is the place of religion in China? The Falungong was persecuted not because it is a religion, but because those with the power to decide on such matters felt that it was an illegitimate religion. Tibetan Buddhism and Islam are given special concessions as reflections of minority culture, but for the same reason are placed under very tight state control. In the same manner, Christianity is acceptable only when it is bereft of its theological independence, and fully subjected to Chinese control and culture. Under these conditions, one particular image of Confucianism is poised to become a domestic priority and valued cultural export. In each case, most people involved do see religion as somehow connected to the state, working with official approval towards nationalist ends. Only rarely—with the notable exception of Falungong after 1999—do they view religion in the way it is seen in the West: as an autonomous and inviolate force within civil society.

Acknowledgements:

This paper was first presented at the Flinders University Annual Asia Studies Lecture. I am deeply grateful to the university, and to Professors Michael Barr and Anton Lucas for their gracious hospitality.

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Figure 1 is from Stefan Landsberger’s outstanding collection of Chinese propaganda posters (http://www.iisg.nl/landsberger/)
Figures 2-11 are from Falunart.org
Figures 12-13 were part of a serial printed in a Tianjin newspaper during the campaign. See Chapter 6 of DuBois, Sacred Village.
Figures 15-17 were supplied by my colleague Dr. Jack Fairey.
Figure 18 is from an article by Dr. James Leibold in the China Beat (http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com/2008/12/whose-peoples-games.html)
Figure 19 is from an article by Donald Sutton and Xiaofei Kang on religion and ethnic tourism in Sichuan. See DuBois, ed. Casting Faiths.
Figures 20 and 22-25 are the author’s own photographs. 
Figure 21 is from the website of 5100 brand mineral water (www.5100.net) 
Figures 14 and 26 are widely available online 

Suggestions for further reading:

_____. (2005) 'Un-mapping Republican China’s Tibetan Frontier: Politics, Militarism and Ethnicity along the Kham/Xikang Border', The Chinese Historical Review, 12.2 (Fall): 191-227. (Preprint version - pdf 300 KB, or published version) 