

RELIGION *in* CHINA

SURVIVAL & REVIVAL
UNDER COMMUNIST RULE



FENGGANG YANG

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*Survival and Revival under
Communist Rule*

FENG GANG YANG

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*This book is dedicated to my father,
Yang Liansheng (1924–2009),
a lifelong Chinese Communist Party member
who was baptized into Christ on his deathbed upon
his request*

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PREFACE

This book has taken about a decade to complete from its initial conception to its current form. I began to conduct systematic empirical research on religion in China in 2000. The original plan was focusing on Christian ethics in the market transition, a project that draws theoretical reference from Max Weber,¹ one of the founding fathers of sociology. If the Protestant ethic, as Weber argues, was conducive to the emergence of modern capitalism in the West, would there be some Chinese Protestant ethic, and would it be conducive to the transition toward a market economy in China? However, during the process of collecting fieldwork and interview data in eight cities throughout China, I was frequently puzzled by various religious phenomena burning for understanding and explanation. To sum it up in one large question: How could religion survive and revive in China under Communist rule? Without answering this prime question first, I felt it impossible to move further to examine religion as a causal factor or an independent variable in the process of social change within contemporary China.

THE PREPARATION

To tackle this basic question about religion in China is not an easy undertaking for a person like myself, who was born and raised in China when religion was very much absent from the schools and the larger society. At school, if there was anything we learned about religion, it was that religion was the opium of the people; only the oppressed and the weak would resort to superstitious religious beliefs. In the rural community in northern China where I grew up, religion was not part of village life. The only remotely religious things in my childhood that I can now recall are a few ghost stories told by the old villagers during long, dark, and boring nights and an occasion of Daoist ritualists performing at a funeral. Upon hearing such stories or seeing such rituals, people, at least my peers, would simply laugh them off. We were taught at school that we must establish a scientific outlook on life (*jianli kexue de rensheng guan*); it was believed that only science and technology and Mao Zedong Thought would make society progress toward the future beautiful Communist Society.

My personal experience of growing up in China is not an exception. An American visitor observed during his trip to China in 1972: "During our visit we saw almost no evidence of surviving religious practice.... We saw no functioning Buddhist temples. Some of those we visited had been converted to use as tea houses, hostels or assembly halls; others were maintained as museums.... Some Chinese with whom we talked were curious about religion. They were amazed to learn that educated persons in the West continue to believe and practice religion. For them, they said, the study of scientific materialism had exposed the logical fallacies and absurdities of religion."²

From kindergarten to college, the absence of religion in school lasted well into the 1980s. Many years after that, religion was still absent in most communities, even though, beginning in 1979, a limited number of temples, churches, and mosques were allowed to reopen for religious services. Moreover, even if there was a church or temple in a neighborhood, most of the local residents might not be aware of its presence. During my 2000 field research in several cities in China, I asked several times for directions to a nearby church or temple, but people in the street simply had no clue that there was a church or temple in the neighborhood, even though the church or temple was within a hundred meters from where we were standing.

After entering graduate school in 1984, while studying Western philosophy, somehow I became fascinated with Hegel's Absolute Spirit, Kant's ideal of pure reason and postulate of practical reason, and the concepts of God and religion in general. In my master's thesis, "On the Evolution of the Notion of God in Western Philosophy,"³ I examined the arguments by major philosophers from ancient Greece until modern times. After receiving my master's degree in Western philosophy, I took a job in religious studies in the philosophy department of Renmin University of China in Beijing. That was in 1987, when both religion and the study of religion were recovering from elimination during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). To my surprise, in the "Introduction to the Study of Religion" (*Zongjiao Xue Gailun*) course, which I taught for a semester, about 120 students from various departments were enrolled. Besides the curious and enthusiastic students, I also encountered devout believers at tourist or religious sites. Such phenomena of living religion eventually led me to pursue a doctorate in the sociology of religion.

Through a series of fortuitous opportunities, or by divine providence, as one may say, I arrived at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., in early 1989 and in fall began my PhD studies under the guidance of the well-known sociologist of religion Dean R. Hoge.⁴ After the Chinese Communist authorities sent tanks into Tiananmen Square and crushed the democracy movement in 1989, many Chinese students and scholars studying in the United States began to flock to Christian churches. Actually, in both China and North America, large numbers of Chinese began actively searching and turning to Christianity for the meaning of life and the future of the Chinese nation. I have been drawn to this unprecedented cultural and social phenomenon of mass conversion to Christianity in the history of China and Chinese America and have conducted a number of empirical studies of it.⁵ I have also studied various immigrant religions in the United States.⁶ Since 2002, I have been teaching “Religion in America” to Purdue undergraduates on a regular basis. Through all of these learning and research experiences, I have gained knowledge regarding both the various religions and the sociological theories of religion, which has prepared me to tackle the basic and general questions of religion in China.

THE SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The rapid social changes in Chinese society have attracted many scholars to conduct original research, but until recently, religious change has been very much neglected by social scientists both inside and outside China. This negligence may have historical and intellectual reasons. Since the May Fourth

and New Culture movements around 1919, Chinese elite intellectuals, influenced by European Enlightenment discourses, have become critical of and despising toward religion. The received wisdom has been that the Chinese as a whole have never been religious. Hu Shih, one of the most influential Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century, states, “China is a country without religion and the Chinese are a people who are not bound by religious superstitions.”⁷ Many Chinese scholars and Western sinologists share this view.⁸ However, this is a problem of the armchair philosophers and theologians who read texts instead of observing human beings. Anthropologists and sociologists who have been there and done observations report a totally different reality. Fifty years ago, the Chinese-born American sociologist C. K. Yang published *Religion in Chinese Society*, which argues effectively with empirical evidence that until the Communist Revolution, religion was very much diffused in all social institutions. “There was not one corner in the vast land of China [before 1949] where one did not find temples, shrines, altars, and other places of worship [which] were a visible indication of the strong and pervasive influence of religion in Chinese society.”⁹

What has happened to religion since the Communist Revolution? Since the work of C. K. Yang, there have been some sinological and anthropological studies of religious rituals and local communities that have shed light on some aspects of the religious life in contemporary Chinese society. However, no publication has described and explained the overall religious landscape or the macro process of religious change within Chinese society. The exceptional few sociological studies of contemporary religion focus on one particular religion in Chinese society.¹⁰ With this book, I attempt to

present a comprehensive overview of the religious change under the Chinese Communists and suggest a theoretical explanation for it.

The immense diversity of religion and regional variations within China deserve to be documented and analyzed with numerous volumes of books. However, we have to struggle to stay above water without drowning in the countless details in the attempt to present a bird's-eye view. Throughout the book, I try to be parsimonious yet sufficient, two essential principles of the scientific enterprise.

To implement this project, here is the plan. Chapter 1 reviews the literature of the sociology of religion, discusses the shift from the secularization paradigm to the new paradigm of religious vitality, and proposes a political-economic approach to explain religion in China under Communist rule. Chapter 2 presents a definition of religion combined with a classification scheme, which is needed for the political-economic approach that examines religion and its competitive alternatives within the larger society. Chapter 3 examines the Chinese Communist understanding of atheism and its implications for the religious policy. Chapter 4 describes the historical evolution of the religious policy under Chinese Communist rule. Chapters 5 and 6 make up the theoretical core of the book, articulating the triple-religious-market model in a shortage economy of religion. In the concluding chapter 7, I argue that religion in China under Communist rule is only one case of religious oligopoly; that is, not a single one but a selected few religions are sanctioned by the state. Oligopoly is the most common type of religion-state relations in the world today. What we have learned by examining contemporary China may be applicable to or indicative of religious dynamics in other oligopoly societies under heavy regulation.

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THIS ENORMOUSLY CHALLENGING work would have been impossible without help from various institutions and numerous individuals, to whom I am very grateful. The initial financial support for my empirical research on religion in China came as small grants from Professional and Educational Services International, the University of Southern Maine Faculty Senate Research Fund, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Research Grant, the Religious Research Association Research Grant, the Purdue College of Liberal Arts Dean's Research Incentive Grant, and the Purdue Research Fund Summer Faculty Grant.

From 2004 to 2008, a couple of generous grants from the Henry Luce Foundation supported the annual Summer Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion in China, with participants from universities throughout China. Through the Summer Institutes, I have not only learned about various kinds of religious phenomena in China but have also received good feedback during the process of my theoretical development of the triple religious market model and the shortage economy of religion theory.

Since 2006, I have received several generous grants from the John Templeton Foundation, supporting an interview project in the Spiritual Capital Program to study “Faith and Trust in the Emerging Market Economy of China” and organizing the Beijing Summit on Chinese Spirituality and Society in 2008. The current Chinese Spirituality and Society Program supports the annual Summer Institute and provides research grants to scholars studying religion in China.

Throughout the last decade or so, I have had the good fortune to work with many fine scholars in China. They are too many to be listed here, but my theoretical thinking has especially benefited from exchanges with Gao Shining of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Li Xiangping of East China Normal University, and Wei Dedong of Renmin University of China, who has been my longtime collaborator in organizing the annual Summer Institute. Meanwhile, many colleagues in America and Europe have offered constructive critiques of my ideas and writings in a span of many years. Again, the list of these people would be too long. However, I must acknowledge the very helpful comments received from Grace Davie, Roger Finke, Graeme Lang, Daniel Olson, and R. Stephen Warner. Lewis R. Rambo read through the manuscript and provided many helpful comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to editor Theo Calderara for his helpful suggestions, patience, and encouragement throughout the process. Of course, all of the remaining deficiencies of this book are mine alone.

This book integrates several of my previously published articles with important revision, expansion, and updates: “Between Secularist Ideology and Desecularizing Reality: The Birth and Growth of Religious Research in Communist China,” *Sociology of Religion* 65, no. 2 (2004): 101–119; “The

Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China,” *Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006): 93–122; “Religion in China under Communism: A Shortage Economy Explanation,” *Journal of Church and State* 52, no. 1 (2010): 3–33; and “Oligopoly Dynamics: Consequences of Religious Regulation,” *Social Compass* 57 (2010): 194–205. The long processes of reviews, rejections, responses, and revisions of these journal articles tested and improved my theoretical arguments. Receiving the 2006 Distinguished Article Award from the American Sociological Association Section of the Sociology of Religion for the triple market article significantly boosted my confidence in the theoretical development. All of these show that the sociology of religion is a collective enterprise, even though the book bears my name as the author.

Finally, I am indebted to my wife, Joanne, and my daughters, Connie and Minnie. Their love, patience, understanding, and support have sustained me throughout these years.

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EXPLAINING RELIGIOUS VITALITY

IN CHINA, RELIGION has survived a brutal attempt at eradication during the so-called Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. Since then, in spite of continuous Communist rule, many kinds of religions have been reviving and thriving. The Chinese Communist Party maintains an atheist ideology; continues to enforce atheist propaganda through the education system, mass media, and numerous party and state organs; and carries out frequent crackdowns on religious groups. Yet religion has been growing by leaps and bounds throughout the country since the late 1970s.

That religion can survive and thrive under atheist Communist rule raises important theoretical and practical questions. How much can the state control the growth or decline of religion? Specifically, why did eradication measures fail? To what extent can a secularist state promote secularization? If heavy regulation is not effective in reducing religious participation, what are the reasons and consequences? What theory may help us understand the resilience of religion in a society with one-fifth of the world's population?

For a long time, the dominant theory in the sociology of religion was secularization theory, which anticipates the decline, or the declining significance, of religion in modern societies. This theory is apparently of no value for understanding

religious vitality in China. In fact, secularization theory has served as the theoretical justification for the Communist governments, in the name of social and political progress, to carry out political campaigns to eradicate religion. By the end of the twentieth century, it became evident that Communist eradication efforts had failed, as documented by an increasing number of scholars.¹ The irreligiousness of the masses under Communist rule was superficial, illusory, or temporary at best. In most of the post-Communist European societies, religion rebounded quickly after the collapse of the Soviet regimes. A rare exception is East Germany, where the rebound of religiosity in conventional religion has been modest. However, the deviant case or outlier cannot overturn the general pattern, although it is valuable to seek explanations.²

Against the general pattern of religious vitality, Chinese Communist officials and researchers have repeatedly denounced the “religious fevers” spreading in society. In their eyes, religious vitality is abnormal in the current social context. China has been undergoing rapid modernization under the leadership of the atheist Communist Party. Within its own logic, religion should decline in such a context, as predicted by secularization theory, be it Marxist or another kind. However, this is “abnormal” only because of the Communist officials’ dogmatic mentality, because they cannot think unless it is in terms of secularization theory. But to seek the truth in facts (*shi shi qiu shi*), as a mantra of the reform-era Chinese Communists goes, one needs first to acknowledge the facts before seeking a theoretical explanation. The obvious fact of religious change in China is not decline but resilience. Then, to explain this obvious fact, we have to seek a suitable theory. Secularization theory does not provide the kind of

conceptual tools proper for the task in front of us. In spite of variably nuanced recent articulations and cautious qualifications, secularization nonetheless remains a theory of religious decline. It would be simply inept to apply it to explain the facts of religious survival and revival in China under Communist rule.

In the 1990s, a new paradigm in the sociology of religion arose to explain religious vitality in the United States and elsewhere. Among the various theories within the new paradigm, the market theory of religion or the so-called economics of religion appears to be the most promising approach to explain the macro-level of religious change in a society. To achieve a clearer understanding of religion in China under Communist rule, however, the set of concepts and propositions that have been developed largely by examining religious phenomena in America and Europe needs substantial improvement. My theoretical position is that adopting the scientific approach is seeking to explain general patterns amid variations and particularities; conversely, the empirical examination of variations and particularities should inform and improve the generalized concepts and propositions in the theoretical development.

THE PARADIGM SHIFT

Secularization is a social theory, a political ideology, and a sociological paradigm, all of which are entangled together. As a social theory, it predicts the inevitable decline of religious beliefs and/or the declining social significance of religion along with modernization. Following many modern thinkers, including the founding fathers of sociology,

Peter L. Berger in the 1960s articulated a refined version of secularization theory.³ Religious pluralism, he argued, fractures the “sacred canopy” of a society. As people of multiple faiths come to interact in the modernized society, each faith system becomes inevitably relativized in their truth claims. Over time, more and more people would lose faith, and religion is destined to wither away. In 1968, Berger told the *New York Times* that by the twenty-first century, “religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.”⁴ This expressed the common view of intellectuals at that time. In North America and Europe, “God is dead” was pronounced by intellectuals, including some Christian theologians.⁵ On the other side of the planet, Chinese Red Guards wiped out religious vestiges of the past backward times throughout China (at least, it seemed so on the surface).

Secularization theory served as the theoretical justification for the political ideology of secularization. As British sociologist of religion David Martin first suggested in the 1960s, “it was *in part* an ideological projection on history based on an apotheosis of reason, on an existentialist anticipation of autonomous man, and on a Marxist leap into freedom and into reality with the conclusion of the historical dialectic in class society.”⁶ With secularization as a political ideology, believers in secularization have mobilized state power and other resources to fight against religious beliefs and to drive religion out of political, educational, and other social institutions. This has happened in France, the United States, and many other Western societies. The ideological nature of secularization took a violent turn under the Communist regimes.

Both the social theory and the political ideology were fossilized and reinforced by the sociological paradigm of

secularization. As Martin puts it, “certain assumptions taken together constitute a paradigm, and as Thomas Kuhn argued, we are extremely reluctant to alter that paradigm. Evidence may pile up against it, but we prefer to keep explaining *away* the evidence to altering the paradigm.”⁷ Martin very well summarizes the secularization paradigm: “what, then, of what used to be the undisputed paradigm of secularization? Sociology and modernity were born together and so the focus of sociology was on what happened to religion under conditions of modernity and accelerating change. Basically it characterized modernity as a scenario in which mankind shifted from the religious mode to the secular. Secularization was made part of a powerful social and historical narrative of what had once been and now was ceasing to be.”⁸ In other words, as a sociological paradigm, it frames macro-, meso-, and micro-level theories that treat religious decline or declining significance as the norm, against which it tries to explain away the so-called exceptional or temporary phenomena of religious persistence in modern societies. This paradigm began to erode in the 1960s through the 1980s. By the 1990s, it was effectively dismantled by an increasing number of sociologists of religion in the United States and elsewhere who were actually “seeking the truth in facts” through empirical studies.

The massive fact is that religion in the United States remained vibrant throughout the twentieth century and is still vibrant today. While mainline Protestant denominations have been losing members since the 1960s, evangelical and Pentecostal churches have been growing.⁹ While some individuals have lost their faith and dropped out of church, others have returned to church, and still many more have switched denominations or converted to different faiths.¹⁰

There certainly have been religious changes but no clear sign of overall religious decline in this modernized society.¹¹ In fact, some scholars have shown that between the founding of the United States and the 1990s, when American society went through the modernization process, the proportion of religious adherents in the population increased.¹² Moreover, as José Casanova and many others have shown, religion continues to play significant roles both in American politics and in other parts of the modern world.¹³

Facing this empirical evidence of religious vitality within the United States, the secularization paradigm at first led some people to resort to American exceptionalism as an explanation. That is, the United States must be exceptional in going against the modern trend of all-encompassing secularization; it is only a matter of time before the United States begins to follow the norm of the modern world and see religious decline. However, dissatisfied with the secularization assumptions that go against the mounting empirical facts, an increasing number of American scholars began to develop alternative theories to explain the religious vitality in the United States. By the early 1990s, this innovative theorizing had reached such a level that R. Stephen Warner heralded the emerging new paradigm of the sociology of religion in the United States.¹⁴ This new paradigm, in a nutshell, treats religious vitality in the United States as a normal state, although the theoretical explanations of the religious vitality by various scholars vary. Warner's conceptualization of the new paradigm stirred up intense debate.¹⁵ By the early twenty-first century, the new paradigm has consolidated and prevailed,¹⁶ even though a number of scholars continue to carry on the secularization debate. Indeed, some European scholars have continued vehemently rejecting the new paradigm,