

# ***Religious Charity Work: Opportunity and Challenge under the New Circumstances***

---

---

*Zhang Guanglai*  
*Translated by Bibiana Wong*

*(Editor's note: The original article in Chinese was published in Tripod issue #184, pp. 30-39.)*

## **Introduction**

The religious sector in China has a long history of performing charitable work, with a noble tradition and rich experience. Ever since the country's economic reforms and opening-up in the late 1970s, priests and lay faithful in the religious sector have once again given themselves to charitable work, especially in caring for the socially underprivileged. Their perseverance in dedicating themselves to providing loving care is obvious to all. In today's increasingly secularized environment lacking in religious belief, religious charitable services bring a breath of fresh air to Chinese society that is undergoing rapid transitions.

With the enactment of the Regulations on Foundation Management in 2014 and its update in 2016, as well as the promulgation of the Charity Law in March 2016, social welfare and charity work in China, including those run by religious groups, face new development opportunities and challenges.

First of all, the sensitivity of a religious identity seriously militates against and imposes restraints on religious charitable causes. They receive very little mass media coverage and limited social support. Religious foundations and NGOs with religious backgrounds are even under "dual management." In other words, they face many more difficulties than ordinary NGOs.

## **Looking back at religious charity work in China**

Since the 1980s, the religious sector in China resumed their charitable works in response to social needs. At first, they began

with medical and healthcare services, adoption of orphans and foundlings, early childhood education, care for the elderly and people with Hansen's disease. The Catholic Church in China, for instance, began running clinics to serve patients in 1981, adopting foundlings with disabilities in 1982, setting up nursing homes to take in the homeless elderly in 1986, opening kindergartens in 1989, and the first batch of religious sisters began visiting rehabilitation institutes to look after people with Hansen's disease in 1991. Founded in 1985, the Amity Foundation was the first foundation with a religious (Christian) background to be officially registered since China's reform and opening-up. It has achieved tremendous results in poverty and disaster relief services.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1990s, the Chinese religious sector has turned to comprehensive social service. The five major (government-recognized) religions have set up "social service committees" one after another to undertake a wider range of charitable causes, and serve the general public in a more professional way.

The Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008 raised public awareness of the importance of charitable work in China as a whole. But even prior to the quake, the religious sector had already been concerned with, studied and developed charity work on its own initiative. For example, "The First Religion, Public Welfare and Charity Forum" was co-organized by the religious sector and academia in June 2007.<sup>2</sup> This was one of the earliest efforts by China's religious charitable organizations to evaluate, sum up and look ahead at social needs, offering an impetus, guidance and encouragement.

The figures below show the total number of registered religious foundations in China since the time of the reform and opening-up: There was only one in the 1980s—the Amity Foundation; four in the 1990s; the peak appeared between 2000 and 2009 with 15 foundations. This number dropped to seven during 2010-2011.<sup>3</sup> Following the promulgation and implementation of the Charity Law, my hope is that more religious foundations could

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.amity.org.cn/>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.chinacatholic.org/feature/Charities2007/index.html/>.

<sup>3</sup> According to [www.foundationcenter.org.cn](http://www.foundationcenter.org.cn), data as of 25 May, 2012.

register themselves to go into social service and fulfill their potential to serve the community.

### **Religious charities are still subjected to “dual management”**

The Charity Law on the one hand lowers the bar for the registration of foundations, which means that new foundations can directly apply for registration to the departments of civil affairs. On the other hand, the revised draft of the “Regulations on Foundation Management” proposed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs will put a mixed system of “direct registration” and “dual management” into practice at the same time. The latter implies that a foundation “shall first go through the review and get the permission from a professional supervisory unit, and be subjected to monitoring by the unit after registration.”<sup>4</sup>

The Ministry of Civil Affairs has not yet published the revised “Regulations on Foundation Management” in correspondence with the new Charity Law. Therefore, local religious affairs departments have yet to draw up any rules for managing religious foundations. Still, it seems inevitable that religious foundations will be under the mixed system of “direct registration” and “dual management.” There are three reasons for this:

First, religion has long been a sensitive issue in China; thus as long as a foundation is publicly known to have a religious background, it would most likely be subject to “dual management.”

Second, inspection teams sent by the central and the provincial governments to appraise religious affairs departments at national and local levels in 2016 pointed out that they either paid insufficient attention and lacked supervision in their work with religious groups, or asked them to strengthen such supervision.<sup>5</sup> As a result, some

---

<sup>4</sup> Articles 12 and 17; see “Amendment to the Regulations on Foundation Management (*The Draft to Solicit Public Opinion*; released 26 May, 2016); the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (<http://www.mca.gov.cn/>)

<sup>5</sup> The Central Committee No. 10 Inspection Team’s Feedback to SARA (State Administration for Religious Affairs of PRC); published by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (8 June, 2016); [http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yw/201606/t20160606\\_80062.html](http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yw/201606/t20160606_80062.html)

local religious affairs departments have formulated new rules for managing religious foundations and published their drafts for public consultation. For example, one of these drafts made clear that the provincial religious affairs department is the authority in charge of all business regarding religious foundations in a province.<sup>6</sup>

Third, despite the fact that the Charity Law eases restrictions on social welfare charities, why does it say not one word about religious charities, and adheres to the original policies and regulations? Apparently, the authorities cannot put their minds at ease, or they feel worried about losing their control over religion. Dual management and dual responsibility ensure a greater factor of safety, so they should feel relieved and secure. This is also very likely a major reason that the Charity Law does not touch upon religious charities in its stipulations.

While the sensitivity to religion and its charities has yet to subside, the mixed system of registration and dual management has its pros and cons. Dual management implies that you have to go through two rounds of examination, for approval and declaration of procedure. The workload of registration will be no less than in the past. Nevertheless, given that religious affairs departments are well acquainted with religion, as being the authority, they will at least not be overly sensitive to religious groups, in contrast with other departments. In this sense, the religious affairs departments are able to assist religious foundations in coordinating with civil and social sectors, promoting fundraising activities and performing charitable services. Of course, they can also impose restrictions.

### **The absence of religious charities in the Charity Law**

On March 16, 2016, the fourth session of the Twelfth National People's Congress approved the Charity Law, which benefits the development of all social welfare charities. It also signifies that China is taking a major step forward toward realizing "the rule of law." From historical and practical experience, religious charities

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. a provincial "Regulation to Strengthen Management of Religious Foundations" (*The Draft to Solicit Public Opinion*).

have always been an important part of social welfare charities around the world, because religion is a driving force of charity. Regrettably, the new Charity Law does not have any provisions on religious charities, nor does it say a word to encourage the religious sector to develop their traditional advantages in aid of social welfare. Obviously, ignoring the religious sector's contributions to charitable causes throughout the years is unfair, and is also unfavorable to the healthy development of other social welfare charities. Therefore, even if there is the new Charity Law, we still need to create an atmosphere to encourage the religious sector to actively participate in launching various charitable services. At the same time, it is also necessary to "desensitize" religious charities as early as possible, while China is moving towards "the rule of law."

From the international perspective, the origin and the development of modern charities are related to religion. Religious beliefs, their social teachings and charitable service laid the foundation for modern charities. The saying "religion is the mother of charity" points out the inseparable relationship between religion and social welfare charities.

From the domestic perspective, China's first modern charities were derived from religion and their charitable causes, particularly from Christianity. They include running hospitals and clinics to provide medical and healthcare service; setting up orphanages, leprosy rehabilitation institutes, schools for the visually, hearing- and speech-impaired, sign language schools, promoting anti-drug and anti-foot binding campaigns, to express concern for vulnerable groups; establishing libraries, universities, primary and secondary schools, kindergartens to eliminate illiteracy and provide education to women. Various charitable organizations set up by the Chinese religious sector in the past are the forerunner of some local public welfare agencies today. These contributions have become an indisputable historical fact.

Since China's reform and opening-up, apart from government-run social welfare agencies and foundations, the religious sector has unstintingly committed to charitable causes. Some grassroots social services organizations with religious backgrounds serve generously, even though they are not officially recognized, and receive no social or financial benefits. Over the years, groups of religious

sisters have faithfully and uncomplainingly taken care of people with Hansen's disease at rehabilitation institutes in remote areas. Our society today seriously lacks integrity and morality, and people's values are confused and distorted. In such an environment, the dedication of these nameless and humble sisters who seek no fame, fortune or reward is so valuable that society should affirm, encourage, exalt, and support them.

At the same time, the religious sector in China has made significant contributions in disaster relief, counseling and psychological services, healing the wounded and rescuing the dying, assisting impoverished students and building schools, alleviating rural poverty, caring for the elderly, providing medical and healthcare services, and carrying out social development projects in recent years. Its far-reaching influence has won social recognition and attention at large. Its potential and leading role should not be underestimated.

As Zhu Weiqun, director of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, said: "The religious sector has done a lot of work in charitable causes, which is a good complement to the government's charity work. They run the services earnestly even at times when conditions are difficult."<sup>7</sup>

The fact that the Charity Law does not mention the religious sector's charitable services is quite unreasonable and unusual. Charitable services ought to be the most beautiful image of the world. Besides external legal protection, they need continuous internal purification. The utilitarian thinking and behavior prevailing among charitable organizations are harmful to the healthy development of our country's social welfare charities. Religion can play a certain role in the aspect of purification and cultivation.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the absence of clauses regarding religious charities in the Charity Law will be unfavorable to the development of the religious sector's positive energy. It can neither arouse

---

<sup>7</sup> Zhu Weiqun thinks the Charity Law will promote religious charity works. Chinanews.com (10 March, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Li Jianguo's clarification on the Draft Charity Law of PRC; www.ce.cn (9 March, 2016).

enthusiasm in numerous religious believers nor create a charitable atmosphere of integrity and fraternity in the entire society, just as the lack of care for a person's soul and mind is unfavorable to the healthy development of his or her personality.

### **Religion continues to be the spiritual motivation and ideological root of charity work**

Despite the rapid development of charities in China for the past 20 years, as the Minister of Civil Affairs said, "The charitable atmosphere of society is still not strong enough." Take the total amount of charitable donations made around the country in 2011 as an example. 89.46 percent of the donations were from corporate entrepreneurs. As for the ordinary people (e.g. the working class, college students, military personnel, peasants and private businessmen), their annual donations were only 1.76 yuan (about US\$0.25) per capita.<sup>9</sup> The figures show that the enthusiasm for making charitable donations of the general public has yet to be aroused. Although online donations have become more convenient, the proportion of netizens participating in online donations is still very low. For instance, merely two percent of Tencent mobile apps (such as QQ and WeChat) users made use of its online donation platform in 2013. Certainly, there has been an upsurge of online charitable giving in the last couple of years. In light of a consensus that the government will gradually withdraw from the fundraising market, the pressing matter of the moment is to consider how to boost public interest in supporting charitable causes.

Chinese society's weak charitable atmosphere has resulted in some foundations seeking other ways for survival and development. A public university in a western province set up and registered an educational foundation. Owing to the difficulty of collecting voluntary contributions from the public, the university authorities privately asked parents who wished their children to enter the university to donate "a sponsorship fee" to the foundation, nominally on a voluntary basis. Then, the foundation sponsored the

---

<sup>9</sup> "The average citizen donates fewer than 2 yuan yearly; work units are still the primary driving force" (*China's Charitable Donation Report 2012* by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, cited by <http://www.people.com.cn/>).

education programs of the university in a feigned manner. The phenomenon of “private compulsion” and “public solicitation” for donations and “self-sponsoring” shows that Chinese society has not yet formed a charitable atmosphere of conscious and voluntary self-giving to people in need.

Some foundations target charitable activities touted by leaders or the media; some charities serve as advance guards to dress up corporate marketing and sales initiatives. Their utilitarian motivations are evident.

Meanwhile, the religious sector in China has maintained its enthusiasm and capacity in making donations of a considerable amount of money, in spite of its relatively small membership. In some spheres of voluntary service, such as the care of orphans, the disabled, the elderly and people with Hansen’s disease, kindhearted persons are willing to persist in long-term service regardless of dirtiness, tiredness or pay, all because of their faith. Can the charity workers be retained or their quality of charitable services be guaranteed merely by empty sloganeering, commendation from higher authorities, media coverage or social encouragement? Or can these incentives boost donations in the long term? The driving force or the spiritual power of charitable causes, including voluntary contributions, comes from religious belief.

Accordingly, it is worth paying attention to raising the irreplaceable traditional advantageous role and function of religion in charitable causes, when the government draws up the Charity Law to encourage, protect, supervise, restrain and attach importance to social welfare charities as a whole.

In places like Singapore, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Europe and the United States, the civil sector values the spirit of love and selfless giving behind religious charities, and facilitates religious charitable work. At present China still retains a kind of “bottleneck” of prejudice and restrictions regarding anything religious. Various departments at different levels still need to liberate their thinking and overcome administrative “walls” in order to implement the Charity Law effectively. Only by promoting the healthy development of all social charitable works, which include religious charities, can a charitable environment take hold in the whole society.



### **“Desensitize” religious charities and promote equal rights**

The Charity Law (draft) stipulates that charities “can release donation information via radio, television, newspapers and other mass media” in public fundraising [Article 27 (3)] and at the same time, “radio, television, newspaper, internet service providers and telecommunications operators should use their platforms to verify the registration certificate and the public fundraising certificate of a charitable organization, which carries out public fundraising” [Article 32]. At present, when charities with a religious background cooperate with the mass media, such as radio, television and newspapers, even if they may not bear a religious name, once their religious background is known, the matter becomes sensitive immediately. To a lesser degree, the mass media would refuse the charities kindly, saying that they dare not to mention the contributions of religion, or more seriously, the media would stop contact with the charities altogether, and without delay.

Besides government-run foundations and the China Charity Federation, private foundations including religious charities never had the chance to conduct public fundraising all the time. The new Charity Law states that “charitable organizations which are registered according to the law for two years or more, and are in normal operation, may apply for a public fundraising certificate to the civil affairs department under which they are registered” (Article 26). This equal treatment under the new rule will certainly arouse the general public’s enthusiasm to participate actively in charitable causes and will effectively promote the healthy development of religious and other social welfare charities. Yet, it remains to be seen whether local government departments will implement the rule—to issue timely public fundraising certificates to qualified charities, or whether the process of issuing certificates would be difficult on the pretext of religious sensitivity.

As charitable organizations with a religious background, members of the religious sector seek no special privileges, but only equal status with other social charities. When religious charities enjoy equal rights and obligations, as well as gain acceptability in society, then they can enjoy equal opportunities to serve the public through charity work.