

## ***Popular Religion in China Today***

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### **The Renewal of Popular Religion after Mao**

The 1975 Constitution guaranteed freedom of religious belief, but each individual was also exhorted *to propagate Marxism and its scientific vision of the world, to raise the people's level of intellectual enlightenment and to destroy religious superstition.*

Chinese authorities apparently did not foresee that, with the liberalization launched by Deng Xiaoping in December 1978, and the economic reforms in the countryside, there would also be a strong revival of traditions, customs and religious phenomena. Popular religion again began to flourish: annual feasts were celebrated, temples were restored or constructed; the faithful and the devout visited the temples, familial cults took place in the home and at the graves of the ancestors; religious catalysts of all kinds both in the temples and in private regained their popularity. Among the latter were experts in various kinds of qigong and martial arts which brought about a renewal of activities in their schools and secret sects.

Finally, in the wake of the economic reforms, there was a rush for a comfortable lifestyle, the cult of money and capitalism, along with a tendency towards monotheism found especially among intellectuals. We will now examine in some detail the various aspects of this revival.

#### **Resumption of Festivals and Annual Celebrations**

The authorities looked favorably on the resumption of festivals and annual celebrations according to tradition even though, at each celebration, the press urged that all elements too obviously religious be excluded from the celebrations. Often the



villages named leaders to prepare each feast and posted the list of names in the ancestral temple.

At the national level the most celebrated festivals are the Lunar New Year now called the Festival of Spring, with the revival of standard greetings, images of Guardians (*Menshen*) and the god of wealth (*Caishen*) on the doors of the houses, fireworks, the organization of the temple fairs and the exchange of visits; the lantern festival, *Yuanxiao*, *Chingming* and *Chongyang* with visits to the graves, the feast of *Duanwu* with its dragon boat races, the mid-autumn festival with its moon cakes, etc.

At the local level there are also feast days or special celebrations in honor of the local deity, solemn public processions for special needs, etc. For example, some villages in Guangdong in 1981 organized the feast of the "Great King and Father who chases away the evil spirits". A woman dressed like a goddess, with a spear in hand, accompanied by a group of warriors, was carried aloft on a throne, through the street and through the fields in order to exorcise the surroundings. The feast lasted for several days, and all the inhabitants and children on school holidays participated in the event.<sup>1</sup>

Officials pay special attention to the celebrations of the traditional festivals of the ethnic minorities-- always with the view of secularizing them--: the torch festival of the Dongs, the water splashing festival of the Dais, the torch festival of the Yis, the feast of *Nadam* of the Mongolians, the frog revering festival of the Zhuangs, of song festivals of the Yaos and the Jings, etc. Among the most popular traditional religious ceremonies, is the Jiao, of Daoist origin, celebrated generally for many days, by several villages together and with each village taking its turn. In February 1986, near Zhangzhou in Fujian, a five-day Jiao festival took place, the first since 1949, under the guidance of Daoist priests from Anxi and their families (22 persons, of whom there were 12 priests, 6 musicians and 4 assistants).

During the Cultural Revolution all such practices had been violently suppressed but by no means extinguished. Many religious practices were carried on in secret on a small scale. The revival of more or less open religious practices began in some areas as early as 1978, but wide-scale construction of local temples did not take place until 1981. Proceeding hand in hand with economic reforms, growing personal prosperity, and greater

freedom of conduct, religious rituals were revived throughout Fujian. But conditions varied from one locality to the next, depending on the attitude of local authorities and the determination of the villagers. The decision to hold a five-day *jiao* was therefore both ambitious and audacious. Such a ceremony would surpass anything performed in the entire district in the last several decades. Most communities in the last two or three years had been content with a one-day or at most a three-day *jiao*.<sup>2</sup>

## The Reconstruction of Temples and Religious Revival

The government, motivated more by cultural/tourists interests than by religion, authorized the subvention and restoration of famous temples.

Many temples were also renovated either with state funds or with money collected locally or with donations from compatriots overseas. Once the money and materials were on hand, everyone helped with the reconstruction by donating free time or even taking time off from work. Often these initiatives were motivated by rumors of "the apparition of deities" or by "orders received from heaven."

The village ideally located a few kilometers outside Zhangzhou in Fujian, ... has three temples, a *citang* and an ancestral hall. The temples are dedicated to *Jialan* (Buddhist guardian similar to *Tudi gong*, to *Xuantian Shangdi* and to *Taizi ye*, two martial gods, and *Zhuye gong*, a deified brave general. These are all single room structures. The ancestral hall is one of the largest buildings in the village, with a gate-building consisting of two side chambers, a courtyard and a spacious back hall built completely out of wood. The ancestral hall also serves as the headquarters of the martial arts association, which is well known in the surrounding area. Each household has a domestic altar with an offering table and pictures of various gods (usually *Guandi* and or *Guanyin*).<sup>3</sup>

Large groups of visitors and faithful are once again turning the temples into beehives of activities. People burn incense, bow, genuflect and prostrate themselves (*koutou*), especially in front of statues and images of the main deities; they recite litanies, tell their beads, light candles, make offerings and while the greater number of them walk around admiring the decorations inside the temple, others stop to chat with the monk or the guardian.

Some on their knees shake the box of divinations filled with

numbered tablets until one falls on the floor; they pick it up and take it to the monk or the guardian for him to read the divine text's answer to their prayer. It is easy to see superstitious practices resurfacing, e.g., throwing money to a statue. If it falls in the hand of one of the statues of the deities or in some other designated place, this is seen as a sign of good fortune.

Crowds can also often be seen around fountains or ponds trying to float money on the surface of the water for good luck. To obtain healings many touch statues, braziers, incense burners with the hands then rub their face or any painful part of their body. Where there is a screen decorated with the *fu* character (fortune), people, with their eyes closed, walk towards the screen and consider it good luck if they succeed in touching it. Many use their visits to the temple to eat a vegetarian meal, especially doufu (soya cheese). The temple garden has become a gathering place for the elderly who hang their bird cages on the branches of the trees or for card or chess playing enthusiasts; some even recite verses or sing. More and more vendors' stands for the sale of religious articles and souvenirs can be seen at the door of the temples: wreathes, joss sticks, fire crackers, amulets and statues of the deities, paper money, lucky pendants, decorations, New Year's wishes, etc., according to the feast. There has also been a large scale resumption of pilgrimages, undertaken with great religious enthusiasm, especially to holy mountains and famous national temples.

### Familial Religious Practices

Images of sacred statues, before which incense is burned and fruit is offered, are once again seen in the homes. There is also a resumption of solemn birthday and anniversary celebrations, marriages with big banquets and traditional marriage bridal processions in which the bride is accompanied by musicians; extravagant funerals with solemn processions, especially in rural areas where cremation is not so strictly controlled as in the city, and anyone traveling by train in the countryside today can frequently see highly decorated tumuli. Children, especially, are required to wear amulets and pendants to protect them from misfortune, or have a red dots painted on their forehead, which is now considered a sign of beauty.<sup>4</sup>

Ancestral cult worship is flourishing once again as entire

families or clans, once or twice yearly, visit the graves of the ancestors to offer food and drink, to burn incense, paper money and paper articles.

Activities such as compiling genealogies, constructing ancestral temples, restoring ancestral tombs, asking members of the clan to offer sacrifice to the dead, organizing clan associations, etc., have all become very popular in certain rural areas. This calls for vigilance on the part of leaders at every level,<sup>5</sup>

and the official press frequently sends out words of warning.

All these activities are thriving, above all, among the ethnic minorities: the Yao, for example, have resumed their funeral ceremonies, with the entire population of the village following the dead seated on a baldaquin, while sorcerers and magicians go before sacrificing poultry at every corner and every stream to pacify the spirits.

### The Reappearance of Sorcerers and Healers

Sorcerers and mediums that pretend to communicate with spirits and to personify deities; astrologers, diviners, magicians and physiognomists that foretell the future and read horoscopes; alchemists, experts in *qigong* and healers that guarantee a healing for every kind of illness and discomfort are everywhere. This is generally a ruse to extort money from the credulous and naive, by having them come for consultation for every kind of need: whether for constructing a new building, or for a cure or in the case of some misfortune, for choosing a profession or before taking any decision whatsoever.

Often there are persons in the public gardens of the city boasting of their special magical powers, in the art of *gigong* or in the transmission of vital energy, messages, acupuncture or traditional pharmacology, going around selling their secrets *to cure illnesses, to prolong life and to become immortal.*

They pass themselves off as incarnations of divinities and sometimes succeed not only in convincing the uneducated masses, but even Party workers and cadres "to *swallow poison* under the guise of *magic potions* or to put their head to the sword in order to go to heaven immediately and become supernatural beings." <sup>6</sup>

## Reemergence of Secret Religious Sects

There are many stories about the revival of secret societies and religious sects throughout the country. In Xi'an the leaders of religious sects who pretend to have miraculous powers have taken up their activities again.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years there have been indications that superstitious sects and reactionary secret societies are again operative in certain regions. Scoundrels and counterrevolutionaries have reappeared pretending to be *emperors* or even the *Jade emperor* or *Yudi* come down from heaven, confusing and poisoning the minds of the people with feudal superstitions. These criminals even openly commit crimes such as rape and infanticide.<sup>8</sup>

In Tianjin, in September 1983, five persons belonging to the Yiguandao sect were arrested for distributing materials and recruiting members.<sup>9</sup> A few days previously, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in setting the norms for punishing criminals, had specified, "anyone who organizes societies or secret reactionary sects and uses feudal superstitious beliefs to conduct counterrevolutionary activities and to endanger public security."<sup>10</sup>

At the end of July 1980, Wang Wenhua and Zhang Congde, decided to reorganize "the way of the imperial system," *Huangjidao*, a secret sect outlawed since 1953, and recruited hundreds of members in Luotian and other places in Hubei; spread false rumors about imminent calamities, distributed large quantities of materials and *sacred scriptures*. Finally, in July 1984, they were arrested and condemned to death.<sup>11</sup>

A proof of the strong revival of activities within secret sects is the fact that at every meeting organized by the Party for the members of various religions, the proliferation of clandestine organizations is always denounced. At the National Conference on religious works convoked by the State Council in December 1990, the first issue discussed dealt with the ancient secret Yiguandao sect, which is still active in various provinces and whose activities are considered dangerous to social stability.

According to a 1994 report the Public Security authorities had to admit that, in the past ten years, "reactionary religious secret societies" have vigorously resumed their activities developing at a annual growth rate of more than 30%

There is quite a number of them, with old and new names, such as Yiguandao, Xiantiandao, Changshengdao, Tianguangdao, etc.... Their members include many illiterate, but there are also teachers and Party cadres. Many of their leaders boast extraordinary divining and healing powers, extorting from the ignorant masses money and even sexual favors.<sup>12</sup>

### **The New Cult: Money and Capitalism**

The economic reform begun in 1979, with the principle that it is all right to get rich, launched a mad dash for wellbeing and private enterprise. In this kind of situation, the majority of the people are not too careful about the means they take to gain their objective. The first to profit were the cadres and the leaders of the Party who know well how to use their power and their personal contacts (*guanxi*). Given their low level of education and the lack of other interests, to get rich has now become an obsession with many. This factor, along with the almost total loss of confidence in the Marxist ideology, and the Communist Party, the corruption within the membership, the inefficacy of the system, the cult of money has now become a blind infatuation with Western capitalism and *bourgeois liberalization*. The official press has lost no time in attacking both the cult of money and capitalism by launching nationwide campaigns such as the one against *bourgeois liberalization and total Westernization*, at the beginning of 1987. There were also the efforts to revive ideological works in September 1988, and the campaign against the tendency to *do anything for money*. Repressive measures were also taken during the second half of 1989. The results, however, were pathetic. Direct contacts with persons (tourists, delegations, business people, etc), literature or audiovisual transmissions (television programs, foreign radio programs, etc.), have only served to heighten interest in Western culture among students and intellectuals. These contacts have also brought attention to the problem of religion, with many coming to a more objective understanding of religion and even adopting a monotheistic faith. The official press has been quick to denounce any religious fervor among the youth and members of the Party--some who quit to embrace a Christian faith.

## Restrictive and Punitive Measures

The authorities did not stop at making laws, distinctions or giving directives; they took restrictive and punitive measures,

From the moment that religion becomes a problem of world view; that is to say, an ideological and gnostical problem, it cannot be resolved by administrative orders. The Gang of Four tried to eliminate religion using brutal and barbarous methods or administrative orders; their actions violated the religious policies of the Party and of the government. They were completely mistaken.

Marxism dictates that the proletariat and its political party may not use violent means to compel the masses to change their world view; they can only permit freedom of belief, that is, leave the people free to choose to believe or not to believe in a religion...As regards feudal superstitions, the Party and the State cannot adopt a policy of religious freedom because this is not a problem of world view but rather a ploy used to confuse the masses and extort money and property from them, something which is forbidden in a socialistic society. It is for this reason that, after national liberation, the Party and the State adopted a policy to eradicate all feudal superstitions and to reeducate and reform the agents.<sup>13</sup>

The official press began a scathing denunciation of *feudal superstitious practices* accusing them of deleterious effects, waste of money, interruption of work production, disturbance of the public order and being a threat to peace and given the illegal and deceptive means employed; the psychological and financial destruction of families; the renunciation of matrimony for superstitious motives; the death of persons who became gravely ill or died after taking *magic potions* or putting their faith in *spirit healings*... The press disparaged the "restoration of temples and the erection of monuments", demanded that "historical materialism be used to analyze which monuments to erect and which temples to restore". It inveighed against extravagant funeral and matrimonial celebrations which last for days and keep the villagers from their work. It complained that many students go to temples before exams or during "cultural visits" organized by the school in order to pray and offer incense there.

Clans were also criticized as instigators of quarrels. Hong An in Hubei has experienced clashes between rival clans not only during the Dragon Boat competition, but also during the



recitation of the history of the clans, the re-decoration of the household shrines and also interference in marriages.

In the commune of Mi'en, where there were 43 Dragon Boat festival cases reported, around 200,000 *yuan* were collected--an average of 20-30 per person. Those who refused to contribute were threatened with ostracism. In six cases the people sensed the need to have recourse to the authorities of the chief clans who ordered 23 attacks on innocent individuals, three of them rather terrifying, having made use of armed men.

In the commune of Feng Gang, a certain Li Yougao with some followers even proclaimed a mini republic of the Li family. About 2000 farmers of the neighboring villages joined him in order to "return to the religion of the ancestors". They rejected all efforts of the local members of the Party to reason with them.

In another case more than a hundred members of the He family attacked another family because one of their women was so abused by her husband, that she committed suicide. The attack caused 4,700 *yuan* worth of destruction.

The policy of the government is oftentimes, and by many, erroneously interpreted. Some openly proclaim that, "the villages must be reorganized according to clan structures. This creates terrible confusion in the social order and inflicts heavy financial damages..."<sup>14</sup> Authorities as well as provincial and local newspapers broadly exposed the frauds and tricks of "feudal superstitions"; they launch "campaigns in favor of cremation, simple marriages, frugal celebrations, and social ethics". They long for a stricter control over "unhealthy tendencies in superstitious practices and illegal activities". In addition, as a deterrent, they publish the punishments and the public executions of those guilty of grave crimes of superstition.

### **The Reasons for the Revival of Popular Religion**

In taking restrictive and punitive measures, the authorities also seek to identify the reasons for the revival of popular religion. According to Ye Hanzhang, expert and official spokesman:

One of the main reasons is that many of the cadres responsible are not able to distinguish religion from feudal superstition.

They believe that whatever revolves around spirits and divinities is religion. And so, they believe erroneously that the policy of religious freedom applies to feudal superstitions and consequently permit these activities. Some cadres close their eyes to these practices and do not forbid them. There are also those who defend these superstitions by saying, 'We ought not to interfere in the practices of the masses because they have a right to freedom of religion. We have set up policies of liberty for the people, why should these not also apply to the divinities?' There are many who think this way.<sup>15</sup>

Not only do cadres or members of the Party fail to distinguish religion from superstition, but often they themselves actively promote superstitious practices for personal gain. They are openly denounced in the mass media and berated for their involvement and accused of being the main cause for the increase in superstitious practices. They are told to stop immediately and follow the regulations of the Party and the State.

A second reason for the revival of popular religion is the low level of education, especially in the rural areas.

The cultural life in the mountains, in ethnic minorities areas and isolated areas is extremely poor. The old feudal and superstitious culture has taken advantage of this weakness and flourished in many places, to the detriment of agricultural production and social order, by corrupting the minds of the farmers and above all of the youth.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear to all that this is a question of education:

Because of social, cultural or other reasons, superstitious beliefs persist in varying degrees in the minds of a considerable portion of the masses.

This problem should be resolved principally by making general and scientific education available to the people and with the patient teaching of ideology to increase their knowledge and awareness.... We must with patience strive diligently to persuade and educate the masses in view to dissuade them from superstitious practices. They must arm themselves with a dialectical and historical materialism, and with atheism in order to free themselves from the shackles of superstitious ideas and strengthen themselves against feudal practices.<sup>17</sup>

Practical measures taken included launching a campaign of socialist ethics, using audio-visuals to diffuse literature and scientific films against the subterfuge of superstition, meetings

to sensitize leaders at the lowest levels, programs and courses in atheism, etc. and all this was done with persistent tenacity.

In January 1987, *The Red Flag*, the Party organ, once again exhorted all to "commit themselves to educate the masses in atheism."

On the occasion of the Spring Festival, we must take care to eradicate all superstitions and change all the old customs and traditions. Above all it is absolutely necessary to abide by the law which prohibits the resumption of organized feudal superstitions and the revival of clan activities, and to punish criminal elements that foment superstitious tendencies, deceitfully extorting money, property and harming the people. But in a long run, this is not enough. We must educate the masses, especially those in the rural areas, in dialectical and historical materialism, endeavoring especially to make them really understand the principles of atheism.

Developing an atheistic education and doing away with feudal superstitious ideas are important matters in a socialistic spiritual civilization which is both scientific and progressive. It cannot be based on ignorance and on underdevelopment. The decision of the Central Committee of the Party regarding the directives for creating a spiritual socialistic civilization (taken in the sixth plenary session of September 1986) emphasized clearly: 'In the vast rural and urban areas, it is necessary to make an active commitment to transform the predominant usages and customs, to promote a civil lifestyle which is healthy and scientific and to eliminate the manifestations of ignorance and regression in habits and traditions. All the undesirable practices in marriage ceremonies and in funeral services ought to be reformed and every manifestation of feudalism and of superstitions ought to be eliminated.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, the campaign for a spiritual socialist civilization to raise the cultural level and to inculcate high ethical values was launched.<sup>19</sup> Students and young people were to be given a moral education whose aim was to form "new persons with ideals, morality, culture and discipline (*siyou xinren*), and whose content was based on the 5 loves: the country, the people, work, science and socialism. Within this context there was a revival of models to imitate, among whom the most popular was Lei Feng, with his spirit of total sacrifice and service, but many others were also added such as Jiao Yulu, Gu Wenchang, Su Ning, etc. In the fall of 1989, the campaign against the six vices was launched which aimed at eradicating superstitions, and the blind infatuation with capitalism and the cult of money.

## Conclusion

Many documents from official as well as from direct sources testify that there is a strong revival of popular religion. This is evident just about everywhere throughout the country, but it is especially so in the rural and ethnic minority areas. The most prominent provinces in this regard are Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, Hainan, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Liaoning, Shandong. Since Chinese authorities have a completely negative view of popular religion seeing it as nothing more than *superstitions*, they have been extremely concerned about it. Whenever they mention the subject, the national or local media call for strict control and punishment of the offenders.

Have the national and provincial regulations, with their restrictive and punitive measures succeeded in stopping or at least impeding the revival of popular religions? In general, local leaders keep a certain distance from the organizers of local feasts and religious workers; they almost always close their eyes. They concern themselves with public order, provide assistance, usually attend to problems of transportation and movement and not infrequently, they themselves also participate in an active way.

Given the lack of funds for the construction of schools and the need to improve teaching methods, the level of education of the masses and the leaders in the countryside, will remain very low for years to come. The traditional mentality with its beliefs, habits and traditions is deeply rooted. Very few persons have succeeded in overcoming the fear of spirits or their beliefs of the next world. This is true also of the city population.

As various religious and magic-religious practices are reviving after a long period of hibernation, it is only a matter of time before many other old traditions will regain acceptance. This especially affects the rural areas, where possibly many traditions never fully disappeared. As the economic well-being of the people rises, it is only to be expected that surplus money will find its way into temple funds and into the hands of religious practitioners and diviners.<sup>20</sup>

A different evaluation must be made for rural and urban areas. In urban areas the intolerance of the government towards

religions and its activities has alternated between persecution and relaxation for more than 40 years, and the harmful propaganda and education in atheism have resulted in whole generations of people almost completely ignorant even of religious terminology. At present, without any doubt, there is a revival of curiosity and interest in traditional religious practices, especially, in the celebrations of the annual festivals, in visits to temples and practices within the family circle, but this is all at a rather superficial and folkloric level.

Among intellectuals and students, as I have already pointed out, there is a broad interest in religions within the context of their enthusiasm for Western culture, but the majority of the urban population, having lost faith in the system, the Communist ideology and rushing to make money, have found a new god in Mammon. Even traditional religious practices now take as their aim the achieving of physical and financial well being.

## Notes

1. *Nangfang Ribao* (Southern Daily), 5,5,1981.
2. *The Turning of the Tide*, ed. J.F. Poe, Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, p. 54.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 53-54.
4. *Ibid*, p. 181. Now that religious freedom has been restored, the old custom of protecting young children is once again a lively concern. It is even more urgent today: because of the one-child policy, parents who are lucky enough to produce a baby boy cannot take any chances and one of the best ways to protect babies against evil fortune is to have them wear good luck amulets.
5. *Nangfang Ribao*, 5,11, 1981.
6. *New China News Agency*, 12,8,1980.
7. *Xi'an Ribao* (Xi'an Daily), 8,11,1982.
8. *New China News Agency*, 28,11,1982.
9. *Tianjin Ribao*, 5,9,1983.
10. *New China News Agency*, 2,9,1983.
11. *Hubei Ribao*, 25,7,1984.
12. *Qian Xian* [Front Line Magazine], August 1994, No. 8, pp. 27-29.
13. *Guangming Ribao* [Journal of Illumination], 20,4,1981.
14. *Nongmin Ribao* [Agricultural Journal], 19,11,1983.
15. *Guangming Ribao*, 20,4,1981.
16. *Renmin Ribao*, 9,4,1980.
17. *New China News Agency*, 28,12,1982.
18. *Hongqi*, 16,1,1987.
19. For an analysis of the document, cf. my article in *Mondo Cinese*, 1987, N. 57, pp.77-87.
20. *The Turning of the Tide*, op.cit, p. 182.