RELIGION IN CHINA*

The volume contains work previously published from 2004 onwards, including the influential article on "The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China" from the Sociological Quarterly volume 47 in 2006 which won the Distinguished Article Award from the American Sociological Association in the same year. Reprinted as chapter 5, it represents the core argument of this collection. Other chapters such as chapter 3 on "Chinese Marxist Atheism and its Policy Implications" explore the history of Communist Party strategies to suppress religion in general and Christianity in particular, resulting in what he calls in chapter 6 "The Shortage Economy of Religion under Communism". The book concludes with chapter 7 ("Oligopoly Dynamics: China and Beyond") in which he explores four types of state-religion relationships, namely pluralism, oligopoly, monopoly and total ban. Religion in China provides a coherent and comprehensive account of religious revivalism as China moves from a total ban to pluralism, albeit with many contradictions and punitive regulations.

In his sociology of Chinese religious revival, Fenggang Yang has explained the character of religion via the so-called economic or market model of religious growth, which was developed originally to criticise the secularisation thesis and to explain the vitality of religion in America. The market model assumes that the demand for religion is more or less constant, and therefore fluctuations in religious activity are explained by supply. The theory suggests that open religious markets in which religious groups (or "firms") are relatively free to compete for followers ("customers") produce an open dynamic environment in which religious groups can prosper. By contrast, restricted markets, where the state seeks to suppress or regulate religion, produce black or grey markets in which illegal or semi-legal groups attempt to provide religious "products" within a limited market. The more restricted the market, the more we can expect a sizeable grey market to evolve. The theory also assumes that individuals in restricted markets will face high costs, such as ostracism or imprisonment, in "buying" and "consuming" religious services. The model has obvious prima facia relevance in comparing China and the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Whereas America has had, in the absence of an established church, a robust religious market producing

* About Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China. Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (Oxford, University of Oxford Press, 2012).

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a diversity of providers of religious services, China is the classic example of what Yang (2012, pp. 123-158) calls the "shortage economy of religion". We might add that the relevance of the market approach to American religiosity is perfectly illustrated by the growth of Protestant mega-churches which embrace corporate strategies of growth.

In the struggle to gain political control over China, both Communists and the Nationalists embraced secularisation as their dominant approach to traditional religions which were regarded as mere superstitions. The CCP, embracing radical atheism as its preferred ideology, set out to expunge religion from Chinese society, and during the Cultural Revolution this atheist movement against all forms of religion was further intensified. Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Deng Xiaoping launched economic reforms and open-door policies in 1978, and in 1982 adopted a more pragmatic policy towards religion in the famous Document No. 19 which admitted past policy mistakes towards religion. The Document recognised the social complexity of religion and the fact that in China especially religion is interwoven seamlessly with culture, ethnicity and national traditions. The new approach also allowed academics to study religion as "culture" and at the same time allowed lay people to engage in religion under the umbrella of cultural practices. While Western observers have often seen this development as a momentous sea-change, Yang draws attention to the fact that there are still significant restrictions remaining on the practice of religion, including activities that claim to be purely cultural.

Falun Gong has become a notorious illustration of these continuing restrictions which are often draconian. Combining Buddhist-Daoist beliefs and traditional exercises, Falun Gong claimed the right to assemble in order to practise their healing exercises in public spaces. Its founder Li Hongzhi was born in 1952 and embraced the therapeutic practices of qigong at an early age. He established his own school of traditional healing in 1992 and initially gained political approval for these beneficial practices. However Falun Gong appealed to the powerless and the dispossessed and was banned by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 1999. Falun Gong responded with acts of civil disobedience in China and with the dissemination of evidence of its plight overseas. The authorities in turn responded with a mixture of extrajudicial measures that amounted to administrative discipline: hard labour for re-education, custody for repatriation, detention for further investigation, loss of jobs and so forth. The CCP has defined religious heresy as a crime and employed state institutions to reinforce its commitment to a socialist civilization against superstition. Falun Gong is simply one illustration of

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the many qigong groups that have emerged in China to offer health services to the poor and underprivileged.

The result of China's religious policies is deeply ambiguous. The CCP continues to embrace atheism as its ideology, but it also encourages religion as culture in order to attract overseas Chinese to participate in religious sites and practices. In the 1990s the Party encouraged the rebuilding of Buddhist temples as a contribution to its tourism policy with the aim of attracting overseas Chinese back to China. This strategy is known as "Build the religious stage to sing the economic opera" (Yang, 2012, p. 110). At the same time the CCP attempts to suppress Protestant evangelism and the re-emergence of an independent Catholic Church, and it has been brutal in its response to "evil cults". The result according to Yang is the creation of a tripartite market in which the red market is the legal space for religion, the black market provides illegal services, and finally there is a large grey market where both legal and illegal suppliers provide a bewildering mixture of religious activities.

Fenggang Yang's economic or market model of Chinese religion provides important insights into contemporary developments and carefully analyzes the contradictions and complexities of official policies in which continuing restrictions on religious practice inevitably fuel a large grey market of religious services. Yang's study inevitably raises questions about what is a religious revival. Are qigong groups aspects of an urban health movement or examples of a religious revival? The situation is complicated because many leaders of such movements claim they are not religious in order to avoid official surveillance and possible punishment. On this and related issues, the economic model does not provide much guidance. It is essentially an account of the efficiency of a religious market in quantitative terms. The model does not look at demand-side issues such as the meaning of religion to participants, because it takes demand as a constant and, because it is focused on the efficiency of supply in both open and closed markets, it does not attend to the quality of the product only its quantity. As Yang (2012, p. 21) admits, the economic model "concerns only the process of exchange, not the nature of the religious 'products'". However it is worth pursuing the argument to test the limits of the economic model of supply. For example when I buy an automobile I am not only interested in its price as a measure of efficiency, but in the quality of the product. Is it beautiful, does it enhance my social status, and does it work? As a market theorist, one might speculate as to whether inflationary pressures inside an over-heated spiritual market in America have produced low quality religious products. If we accept the model, we might reasonably ask of

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these religious manifestations in China, such as state-sponsored Buddhist temples for tourism, is this the real stuff? The model does not attempt to distinguish between religious products and it does not attend systematically to the consequences of this religious revival for Chinese civil society.

Where for example is the real dynamism of the religious market? Western observers have been looking towards the introduction of evangelical Protestantism and Pentecostalism from outside China as the principal levers of religious revival inside the society. Much of the vitality of Protestant evangelical Christianity in the past lay in its ability to draw on traditional religion. Indigenous popular Christianity, deriving support from the peasantry and working class, was an emotional religion, concentrating on individual conversion rather than addressing social and economic problems, and indigenous preachers were often critical of the presence of foreign ministers of religion. In retrospect popular rather than official Christianity was the most important development in China, growing from under one million in 1949 to around fifty million today. Indigenous popular Christianity is very different from the contemporary Christianity that has been promoted by the puritanical and disciplined Protestant churches. Indigenous Christianity gained its social importance from its elective affinity with traditional Chinese culture. While rejecting the traditional pantheon of gods, indigenous Christians affirmed many traditional beliefs such as the malevolent intervention of demons in their everyday lives. This observation suggests that the demand-side (the meaning of religion) cannot be wholly ignored.

Despite the continuing prominence of secular Marxist-Leninism as the official political discourse, it is difficult to understand Chinese culture and politics outside the framework of Confucian political philosophy of good government and peace in civil society. The main point of official opposition to ''evil cults'' is to avoid social unrest. While constitutional lawyers, dissident groups and foreign human-rights lobbyists attempt to impose the rule of law, we might better understand Chinese politics as a rule of virtue. The traditional legal arrangements of imperial China were based on Confucian values and a system of moral familialism. This system involved unconditional filial piety, the welfare of the dominant status group over the individual and reverence for seniority. In many respects the criminal law was the cornerstone of this system, because it was the basis of social control. This system broke down during the Cultural Revolution and one can interpret the contemporary period of institution building and law reform as an attempt to prevent any return

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to the excesses of class struggle and generational conflict. The 1999 national plan for managing public order sought to contain the growth of criminal gangs and the rise in juvenile delinquency, to control the production of fake consumer goods and the proliferation of ''evil cults'' and to manage the problematic wave of internal migration of peasants to the cities. As a response to Westernisation, citizens are called upon to embrace Confucian values in the form of the ''four beautiful virtues'' or si mei (beautiful thought, language, behaviour and environment) and the ''four haves'' (si you) (consciousness, morality, culture and discipline). In terms of Fenggang Yang's theory, one can expect this moral regulation of the population to create a large grey market of religious providers, attracting periodic crack-downs by the CCP. In short, the external impact of the state on the religious market will produce dramatic fluctuations in ''investments'' for the foreseeable future.

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