

# 1 introduction: the study of chinese religion

*Our use of the word religion in the singular is intended, then, to convey our interpretation that the character of religious expression in China is above all a manifestation of Chinese culture. To attempt to understand religion in China as several systems of doctrine is to read Western experience into a quite different set of circumstances.*

—L. Thompson 1989:1

**R**eligion is a fundamental aspect of human culture. In order to fully understand ourselves, we must grasp not only our relationship to the religious aspects of our own culture, but the nature of religion *sui generis*. History of religions (comparative religion) enables us to explore the meaning and the function of religion globally. To begin such study, we should avoid a priori, often conflicting, distinctions. Among many examples one could cite the following: the understanding that people of the past (“homo religiosus”) were inherently more religious than those of modern civilizations; that only the religions of literate cultures or only the literate facets of literate cultures are worth studying; that since the religions of South Asia and Europe/West Asia have common characteristics, these characteristics define the parameters of religion. The latter viewpoint ignores the many shared linguistic and mythological features of the two cultural complexes, as well five thousand years of nearly continuous cultural interaction. Outside of this macrocultural sphere, other civilizations in East Asia, Africa, and the Americas developed uninfluenced or but slightly influenced from cultures speaking Indo-European languages.

Chinese civilization, with a considerably longer continuous tradition than that of Europe, for much of its history also encompassed a larger territory and population. China provides an ex-

ample of a culture that had comparatively little contact with comparable civilizations in its formative period. Hence, the study of religion in China offers the opportunity to increase our awareness of the nature of religion. Such study, however, has been confused by a combination of historical factors in the field of history of religions.

The fundamental difficulty in studying Chinese religion is that, as in all non-Western languages, there is no traditional Chinese linguistic equivalent of the word *religion*. A secondary problem endemic to the study of nonuniversal religions—that is, religions other than Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and so on—is separating religion from culture in general. Until recently, the tendency in Western studies has been to force Western assumptions and categories on non-Western traditions and artificially create religions that do not exist in actuality, such as the ubiquitous “three religions” of China. (For more detailed analyses of the effects of Eurocentrism on religious studies see Paper 1991, 1993a.)

### The Understanding of “Religion” in China

The term *zongjiao*, borrowed from the nineteenth-century Japanese translation (in turn taken from an obscure Chinese Buddhist text), has been used as the standard Chinese translation for *religion* since the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly, at first, by Christian missionaries. It was primarily applied to Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism understood as two distinct religions in China) with extension to other religions of alien origin in China, such as Buddhism and Islam. Now, particularly in Taiwan, the term is used for any religion which is to some degree institutionalized

The word *jiao* itself has a considerably longer history in China. It was applied to Buddhism (*fojiao*), an entirely foreign religion in China into the second century C.E., and institutional Daoism (*daojiao*), which partially developed out of failed revolutionary religiopolitical movements at the end of the same century. Hence, *jiao* may be understood as applying to heterodox

religious institutions, that is, religious institutions outside of the "orthodox" state (Imperial clan) and clan religion. In the medieval period, when Buddhist and Daoist institutions rivaled those of the state and found favor at court, *kungjiao* (Confucianism) developed as temples devoted to Confucius and related scholars, the patron saints of the civil service examination system, were built in population centers.

*Jiao* was not applied to the dominant mode of Chinese religiosity, involving most religious behavior: the state, clan, and family sacrificial complex, of well over four millennia in age (see Chapter 2). Hence, the Chinese tend to consider "religion" (as *zongjiao*) to be an alien phenomenon. A standard Chinese response to being queried on "religion" in China is to say that the Chinese do not have one. Few Western scholars are acquainted with the actual Chinese equivalent question: "To whom (or what) do you offer sacrifice?" It is a question that elicits a detailed response on Chinese religious understanding and behavior from many of the same people who state that China has no "religion."

From the standpoint of modern religious studies, it would have been better if other terms had been used to translate *religion*. Following Clifford Geertz's well-known definition of religion (1966), the Chinese term *wen* (modern term: *wenhua* = "culture"), which includes among its meanings, "the matrix of culture," could have been used. *Wen* (etymology: person with tattooing on the breast; Karlgren 1957:131) does mean "writing," derived from its sense of design or pattern, but it also derives from the latter the sense of embellishment and of civilization or cultural pattern. Extending the concept of Geertz from religion as a system of symbols with particular functions to the concept of a symbol itself having similar functions, *wen* could be translated as "religion."

Although Geertz's definition has been criticized by some as being so broad that it does not clearly distinguish religion from culture, this feature could also be understood as its strength. Chinese religion is not a universal religion as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam but is an ethnic religion. In ethnic religions, such as Judaism for a Western example, religion can only be mean-

ingly separated from culture for the purpose of comparison with universal religions. Within the relevant cultures, the separation is so artificial and dependant on Christian expectations, it has little if any analytical validity.

Alternatively, from a Chinese perspective, the term *li* (modern term: *liyi*), which includes all formal religious behavior, would have also served well (see Chapter 2). It has been suggested that a new Chinese term, *wenli*, could be coined to approximate the term *religion* as it is used by scholars of religion in the West (Paper 1993b).

### The Understanding of Chinese Religion in the West

Without rehearsing the history of religious studies, it is sufficient to note that comparative religion developed from the encounter of Christian missionaries with non-Western religions and has served to perpetuate Eurocentric values. Among the earliest of these encounters are those of the Jesuits with China to the far east of Europe and with native America to the west. Jesuit perceptions of non-European religions were based on their cultural background, missionizing strategy, and political situation. Sixteenth- to seventeenth-century Jesuit *Relations* from these regions, written to encourage continued support of their missions, were highly influential on European intellectuals, especially Leibnitz and Voltaire.

Jesuit missionaries were brought into the Chinese government because of their knowledge of European astronomy as well as the training they sought in written Chinese and the literature essential to Chinese elite status, including texts on ritual. (Explicit official appointment began with Johann Adam von Schall after the Manchu occupation of the capital, and the papacy eventually authorized Jesuits to hold such offices.) The Jesuits needed to be able to participate in state rituals without being deemed heretics. They also needed to identify Chinese religion in a manner that presented them with an opponent to their missionizing, on the order of Judaism in Europe.

Matteo Ricci, the most important early Jesuit missionary in China, developed an understanding of Chinese religion that al-

lowed him to interact with the Chinese government—all such interactions explicitly involving ritual. He deemed the state religion to be based on enlightened monotheism and, therefore, compatible with, rather than to be opposed by, Christianity. The state rituals—including sacrifices to the Imperial ancestors and to nature spirits—were virtually the same as those of the Chinese people, except on a grander scale. Yet Ricci considered popular religion to be idolatrous, although, for pragmatic purposes, rituals directed to the ancestors were tolerated. This interpretation of a non-Western religious complex to suit particular Christian missionary needs led to an incorrect understanding of a quarter of humanity's religion for four centuries.

The Jesuit understanding was opposed by Franciscans and other missionaries who did not become government officials and believed all of Chinese religion to be incompatible with Christianity. The century-long "Rites Controversy" which ensued ended when the Vatican decided against the Jesuit position, resulting in Christian missionaries being expelled from China, until they re-entered behind Western guns in the last century.

It is normal for people to view the world around them from their own cultural perspective and to assume their own cultural values to be universal. Hence, the study of non-western religions still tends to proceed from a normative western European Christian viewpoint; for example, monotheism as a value, priority given to "sacred" texts, focus on faith, assumptions that religions have "founders," an understanding that the goal of religion *sui generis* is transcendence, an assumption that religious institutions are separate from those of the state, and so on. These values are responsible for the continued misunderstanding of Chinese religion.

#### *Separation of Religious from State Institutions*

Since the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, there has been a tension in western European Christendom between state and church, a tension previously present from the founding of Christianity to the collapse of the western Roman state. This conflict and struggle for political ascendancy between powerful institutions is particular to western Europe, in that eastern European

Christianity tended to continue the model of Byzantium, where the heads of the church and the state were the same person (as is theoretically the situation in England).

Ricci, as a sixteenth-century Jesuit, was part of the Counter-Reformation. He understood religious institutions to be separate from and often in conflict with the state. In China, the Buddhist and Daoist institutions could be seen to play this role, although tensions with these institutions were considerably weakened with the last major suppression of Buddhism in the mid-eighth century. (Christianity itself was frequently perceived by the Chinese government as both heterodox and seditious.)

Furthermore, it was essential for Ricci and his fellow Jesuits, if they were to accept government support and office, to understand the state not to be a religious institution per se. The Roman Catholic church of Ricci's time, within a century of the expulsion or forced conversion of Moslems and Jews from Spain, had absolutely no tolerance for Christians' participating in non-Christian rituals and executed those convicted of such participation. For example, Spanish traders at that time in what is now the southwestern United States were charged with heresy by the Inquisition for participating in those native American rituals essential for trade (see Kessell 1978).

Related to the Western view of religion discussed above is one that assumes religious functionaries are separate from government officials. The Jesuits were members of the Christian priesthood, a role that in post-feudal Europe became increasingly removed from governmental functions. Although the Jesuits were well aware of the ritual roles of the emperor and the government officials, they had to turn a blind eye to that understanding. They could not serve a government in which the head of state was the chief priest of society and the officials all had major religious roles. Nor could the Jesuits promote Christianity as compatible with Chinese culture if they understood the head of every clan and of every family to have priestly functions.

Hence, the Jesuits looked only on those institutions outside the state, that is, Buddhism and Daoism, along with popular religion, as opponents. The state religion and that of the literati, as well as local temples dedicated to Kongfuzi, were identified as a

distinct sect, one that in essence worshipped a male supreme deity (see Chapter 8), compatible, with minor modifications, with Christianity.

### *Sacred Texts and Founders*

The Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions are unique in limiting the basis of truth to fixed texts. Buddhism, as an alternative model of a literary, universal religion, considers religious texts to be on a par with the Buddha and with the monastic establishment; the bases of its truth are particular experiences.

The early Jesuit missionaries found three canons in China, and from them identified three religions. However, the Chinese Buddhist and Daoist canons are not fixed, and the Classics (*jing*) primarily functioned to define the ideological basis for the selection of civil officials. The ritual texts in the Classics do not delineate the rituals of popular Chinese religion nor contain its myths, although they are compatible.

In the West, sacred texts are ostensibly understood to be created by the deity who transmitted them via human scribes: Moses received the Torah from God; the Gospels contain the teachings of Christ; Mohammed received the Quran from Allah. For Westerners, it was natural to focus on the Dharma, understood to be transmitted by Shakyamuni; on the collection of Daoist texts, the assumed earliest ascribed to Laozi; and on the Classics, incorrectly considered by Ricci to have been primarily created by Kongfuzi. The latter were understood as the basis of ritual practices that actually preceded Kongfuzi by at least a thousand years. Viewed in this manner, the three Chinese "religions" delineated by Ricci are compatible with the Western model of religion.

As Christianity was named after Jesus Christ, and until relatively recently Islam was in Europe incorrectly called "Mohammedism," in Ricci's time it was assumed that religions by their very nature must have a founder and be so denominated. Thus, with regard to Chinese religion, the term *Buddhism* is quite compatible with *Christianity*. Ricci's Jesuit colleague, Alvaro Semedo, who arrived in China in 1613, assumed Daoism must be named after a founder; hence, he mistakenly thought Laozi

was named Daozi ("Tausu," in Mungello 1989:88). Ricci understood Kongfuzi to be "a key to his Chinese-Christian synthesis" (Mungello 1989:17); hence, the creation of the Western concept, "Confucianism" (to be distinguished from the functions of its Chinese equivalents, *rujia* and *kungjiao*, combined in the recent term *rujiao*).

### *The High God*

Israelite religion came to define itself, sometime in the first half of the first millennium before the common era, through allegiance to a single god, later understood as the only god. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam maintained monotheism as their primary value, aspects of polytheism continuing under the guise of angels, devils, saints, and so on. When Westerners admired another culture, they interpreted, if not created, a high god for that culture, so as not to be forced to consider the culture inferior.

Ricci overlaid a Christian patriarchal and European feudal structure on the Chinese religious understanding, creating by 1583 the concept of the "Master of Heaven" (Tianzhu), incorrectly understood as the primary Chinese deity, and using this term as the translation for *God* (Gernet 1985:26). This application of European ideology to a non-Western culture is identical to the contemporaneous Jesuit creation of the "Master of Life" in regard to native American religions (Paper 1983b). The sixteenth-century Jesuit view of both traditions has persisted to this day among at least some Western historians of religions.

In Ricci's understanding, Chinese polytheism, with its focus on ancestral and ghost spirits and the complementary dualistic female Earth-male Sky nonanthropomorphic deities, was subsidiary to a male singular high god:

From the very beginning of their history it is recorded that they recognized and worshipped one supreme being whom they called the King of Heaven, or designated by some other name indicating his rule over heaven and earth. (Ricci 1953: 93)



We shall further discuss Ricci's attitude towards female spirits and the continuation and consequences of these views up to the present, in Chapter 8.

#### *Nonrecognition of Popular Practice*

In Europe, Jesuits served as confessors to powerful political figures. Ricci focused his mission on the Chinese elite. He followed the Jesuit missionary tactic, which assumed that if the leaders of a society could be converted, they would bring the people they led with them to Christianity. Becoming a member of the Chinese elite himself, both his attitude that the common people were unimportant and his lifestyle left him unconcerned with popular religious practices, which he considered idolatry. Hence, he did not connect the religious rituals of the state and the powerful clans with those of the common people. He did not understand that all these rituals had a common basis and structure.

The Franciscan missionaries, who lived among the common people, developed a very different attitude toward the state rituals, which they saw as idolatry, and the Jesuit participation in it as heresy. Although their viewpoint was ultimately successful in the Vatican, it did not change the European understanding of religion in China. Historians of religions, until quite recently, continued to focus on elite traditions, leaving study of the religious practices of the vast majority of the Chinese to missionaries, sociologists, and anthropologists.

#### *Transcendence and Faith*

The Western focus on transcendence in the study of religion put considerably greater emphasis on Daoism and Buddhism in Chinese religion than can be justified by any available measure of their relative importance. The Daoist goal of becoming a *xian* (see Chapter 3) has interested only a small minority of the elite, at least since the medieval period. Popular practices understood to be related to Daoism usually have pragmatic ends. Similarly, the Buddhist goal of nirvana in China became amalgamated with

rituals directed toward departed members of the family and toward material benefits in this life. Again, only a few, primarily of the elite, oriented their lifestyles to the Buddhist concepts of transcendence. The emphasis on transcendence in the Western understanding of religion has biased religionists away from studying normative Chinese religious behavior and understanding.

Definitions of religion based on the centrality of faith, a particularly Christian notion, ipso facto determine virtually all educated Chinese to be irreligious, supporting the Chinese understanding that religion is alien to Chinese culture. For missionaries, China appeared to be ripe for conversion, the elite seen as agnostic, and the peasants, sunk in ignorant idolatry. That the Chinese intelligentsia, at least since Xunzi, could consider a major object of religious ritual to be maintenance of the social fabric itself (see Chapter 2) is beyond Western religious and most scholarly understanding.

Many Western scholars have since interpreted ambiguous statements attributed to Kongfuzi in the *Lunyu* (Analects) to indicate that he was himself agnostic, the precursor of an attitude towards the supernatural among the late Zhou elite that matched the attitudes of many twentieth-century sinologists. "This change reflects what many scholars have already described as an apparent but unexplained rise of rationalism in Chinese culture in this period" (Mote 1971:22). What these Western scholars did not realize was that these assumed super-rationalists were also being ritually possessed by ancestral spirits (see Chapter 4) and putting themselves into trance for aesthetic pursuits (see Chapter 6).

### *Religious Pluralism*

Sixteenth-century Europe understood different religions as essentially hostile to each other; indeed, only with Vatican II in the second half of the twentieth century has this attitude begun to change. For Christianity, other religions were intolerable because there was only a single truth. Judaism was anathema because it was a constant reminder of an alternate understanding of Jesus. Islam was a hated political and military rival. Indigenous European religions had long been brutally suppressed. It was incon-

ceivable that distinct religious traditions could coexist as elements of a larger religious complex, as was the case in China and other non-Western complex cultures.

Hence, Ricci found religious pluralism where none was present. The long-established Chinese term, *san-jiao*, meaning the "Three Doctrines," was reinterpreted by Ricci to mean "Three Sects," a very different concept. Ricci was well aware that his understanding was not the Chinese one:

The most common opinion today among those who believe themselves to be the most wise is to say that these three sects are one and the same thing and can be observed at once. By this they deceive themselves and others too. (*Fontani Ricciani* 1, 32 in Gernet 1985: 64)

Ricci was adamant that the literati only adhered to the Confucian "sect" and would never "belong to any other sect." He apparently was completely oblivious to the important role of Daoist and Buddhist ideology and practices among the elite, as is normative, for example, in literati aesthetics (see Chapters 6 and 7). More important, the term *san-jiao*, in effect, excludes the vast majority of Chinese religious behaviors: the sacrificial complex found at all levels of society.

Ricci's sixteenth-century interpretation became a religious studies dogma, persisting to this day. This understanding was reinforced in this century by Soothill's popular volume *The Three Religions of China*, first published in 1913. It begins, "There are three recognized religions in China . . . and the three religions may be considered as three aspects of the established religion of the country." The latter phrase, as well as its inconsistency with the former, has been ignored by the authors of world religions textbooks, where the "fact" of three religions in China is a virtual constant. Texts treating Chinese religion as singular were not published until the mid-twentieth century, the most important being Laurence Thompson's *Chinese Religion, An Introduction*, first published in 1969 (see Girardot 1992).

It is still difficult for most Western historians of religion to understand that religion in China is a single complex of considerable antiquity, held together by the practice of frequent ritual

offerings of elaborate meals to departed members of the family and to nature spirits, and embellished by many related subsidiary practices, including fertility rituals and rituals of social bonding. Perhaps it is time that we took Ricci's Chinese critics seriously.

Social science approaches have not only enormously enhanced our understanding of modern Chinese religion, but increasingly of the past as well. For example, applying modern historical techniques to the study of popular culture in the past, Valerie Hansen has recently determined the inception of popular religion as found in modern culture to the Southern Song period (twelfth–thirteenth-centuries), an inception due to socio-economic transitions. Hansen, trained as a historian, had to struggle with the Western understanding of Chinese religion as three religions, none of them highly relevant to popular religion:

Something . . . has puzzled me since my first visit to Taiwan. I had assumed Chinese people would categorize their own religious beliefs much as we did. . . . All Chinese, I had reasoned would similarly be Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian. To my surprise, none of the people I met identified themselves as such. And, as far as I could tell, they all attended the same Buddhist, Daoist, and popular religious temples. (Hansen 1990:ix)

A revision of this widely held understanding would have saved her and other scholars from the constant need to tilt at the windmill of "Three Religions in China."

### Recent Trends in Western Studies of Chinese Religion

Until a few decades ago, a Christian profession was a *de facto*, a *priori* requirement to study non-Western religions at the major American university history of religions graduate programs; the qualifying examination for a research doctorate (Ph.D.) was identical or similar to the requirements for a theological (M.Th.) or practical ministerial (B.D.) degree. Since the mid-1960's, however, the expectations of religious studies faculties have changed;

graduate students are no longer expected to be qualified Christian ministers to do advanced study in religion.

Shifting from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago to the Oriental Institute in 1961 to study Chinese religion, I was taught by H. G. Creel that Chinese culture was superior to Western culture in that it had no religion. Another scholar of the same generation has articulated this view in a major compilation of Chinese philosophical and religious texts: "Indeed, as compared to Japan and India, the dominant traditions of Chinese thought have been less markedly religious in character, there being a noticeable disjunction between the popular practice of religion and the intellectual activity of the ruling elite, which has a more secular orientation" (de Bary 1960:1:v). The popular practice of religion is considered at the tail end of the same work and discussed only in pejorative terms. Labelled "popular cults and superstition," some being "grosser forms of superstition," "primitive Chinese religion" is understood "to subsist on a low cultural level" and is imbued with a "facile syncretism." But the elite were above the ignorant masses, since "there has been a strong tendency in China for the educated and the uneducated to go their separate ways in matters of religion" (2:285-86).

It took me a dozen years to begin to realize the fallacy of these attitudes. Many of the generation of scholars trained after me, fortunately, have been relatively free of these influences and have begun to analyze its motivating factors:

What [H. G. Creel and Fung Yu-lan] and many other modern interpreters, seem to project is a sort of generic "protestant" attitude, an attitude that generally abhors ritual and virtually every form of social religious activity, and esteems instead an individualistic striving for a more abstract spiritual exaltation. (Kirkland 1992:79)

It is this orientation toward China that has pervaded religious studies, an orientation radically different from modern social science studies of Chinese religion. The latter approaches actually examine religious behavior in China and find, it would seem, a very different culture. For China is not bicultural,

although there are of course a range of cultural behaviors. Aside from the Imperial family, the elite were not a hereditary caste. Entry to elite status was based on written examinations, and biographical studies indicate that families tended to maintain this status for an average of no more than three generations. Moreover, there was a substantial middle class of professionals, government clerks, and others, many of whom were part of the social and intellectual milieu of the elite. As will be argued in Chapter 2, the basic religious practices of all Chinese are essentially the same, only the details vary according to region and status.

When religious studies departments multiplied in North America during the late 1960s and early 1970s, some scholars of Chinese philosophy, particularly students and colleagues of the scholar of Neo-Confucianism, Wm. Theodore de Bary, quoted above, declared themselves scholars of religion, without changing their methodology, subject, or attitudes. As Kirkland (1992:83, n.16) succinctly analyzes: Confucianism's

religious dimension has been Protestantized by interpreters like [Rodney] Taylor and Tu Wei-ming to the point that there seems to be little meaningful explanation for the traditional Confucian cultus. One need hardly mention that Tu's vision of Confucianism is even more thoroughly sanitized, purified of any lingering cultural baggage that might put off the modern individual.

A number of younger sinologists trained in the new, more open religious studies programs also became familiar with social science methodologies. This development has led to new approaches to the study and understanding of Chinese religion by historians of religions, and this has born fruit in the last decade. No longer has the study of Chinese religion per se by default been left only to anthropologists and sociologists (e.g., Ahern 1973, Jordan 1972). Of several historians of religions, one could point to Norman Girardot's major comparative study (1983), Julian Pas' many studies of popular Chinese religion (e.g., 1984), and the fruitful collaboration of Daniel Overmyer with David Jordan (1986). The number of recent excellent studies on Buddhism and Daoism, as well as those in the realm of ritual studies, substantially increases this list.

## Traditional Chinese Elite Values and Marxism

The traditional Chinese elite developed out of a protohistoric warrior-priestly hereditary class. These functions were not separated as in the early Near Eastern and Indo-European-speaking civilizations. With the development of kingship, the clan chieftain of the ruling clan became the chief priest of the state. The king or, after the third century B.C.E., the emperor was understood as the one person who could sacrifice to the most powerful spirits.

As the elite shifted from a hereditary class to one based on passing a series of written examinations, the elite functioned as assisting and deputy priests in the performance of the state sacrifices. Their education included texts on ritual; approximately 60 percent of the contents of the Five Classics, excluding texts utilized as commentaries, consists of explicit texts on ritual. Simultaneous with this development was a transformation in the interpretation of the rituals, whose focus shifted from spirits to humans. Rituals from the third century B.C.E. came to be understood in China from an indigenous sociological perspective.

With a reorientation in values from spirits to society, the elite came to view the religious understanding of those not formally educated with a mild disdain, even though their practices differed little in essence from those of the elite. Popular religion, other than the family sacrifices, was understood as *xie* (heterodox). However, when the elite functioned as local magistrates, they were practical enough to follow local understanding for functional purposes. For example, Han Yu (768–824), who was exiled for arguing that the emperor should not follow repugnant alien Buddhist practices, sacrificed to a local crocodile deity when exiled to the far South as a magistrate (*Ji o yu wen*, in Birch 1965:1:253–55).

In periods of Chinese revitalization, nonelite religious professionals such as Daoist priests were treated with suspicion. Monks and nuns not only were understood to violate filial piety, the basis of Chinese ethics, but were also the butt of ribald humor (e.g., “The Monk’s Billet-Doux” in Yang and Yang 1957:64–76).

The adaptation of Marxist-Leninist thought strengthened this attitude. The labeling of popular religion as *mixin* (superstition) in the modernization movement of the early twentieth century (Duara 1991) accorded with the understanding of religion as “the opiate of the people,” particularly when elite sacrificial practices were not identified as religion. It was expected that with universal literacy and mass education, religion would disappear as other “feudal” remnants had. Professional religious, as in the past, were treated with suspicion and considered unproductive leeches on society.

The temples reopened during the last decade are served by Buddhist and Daoist clergy under centralized institutions subject to government control and earning salaries supplied by the government. Although some are dedicated to the traditional nun and monk’s lifestyle (see Chapter 6 for contemporary examples), others wear the garb of the monk or nun on the job but return to home and family after working hours.

### Religion in Contemporary China

From a foreign relations standpoint, the convergence of traditional and modern attitudes toward religion created a problem. Western countries consider freedom of religion a mark of modern civilization. Although often honored more in theory than in practice in the West—considering the continued suppression of aboriginal religions in Australia, Canada, and the United States—lack of religious freedom is used to disparage nations considered unfriendly. Hence, Communist China placed freedom of religion in its constitution.

Furthermore, countries contiguous to China are heavily Buddhist, and China could improve foreign relations by projecting a Buddhist image. Buddhism continued in China under traditional state control. As Daoism tends to be understood as an indigenous version of Buddhism, to continue limited Buddhist institutions required limited continuation of Daoist institutions as a balance. Besides, there has been a growing interest in Daoist studies outside of China, along with a growing consideration of



Daoism as *the* Chinese religion, which has in turn influenced its increased internal recognition. With the recent rise of travel by Chinese on Taiwan to mainland China, Daoist centers for the initiation of those from Taiwan have developed into a source of foreign exchange.

Many in the western parts of China are Muslim and China wishes to continue friendly relations with Muslim countries; so Islam continues to be openly practiced in China. Minority cultures within China are allowed to maintain aspects of their traditions and many of their religious practices.

But only institutional religions (*jiao*) and the practices of non-Han minorities are accorded nominal religious freedom. As Chinese religion per se is officially deemed "superstition" rather than "religion," it is not accorded any protection.

All of these aspects of Chinese religion suffered considerably, as did all Chinese traditions, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). However, the last decade has witnessed a growing resurgence of religious practices. In this regard, at least two contradictory factors affect Chinese religion per se. On the one hand, Chinese religion centers on a sacrificial complex based on the patrilineal family, but this focus is contrary to the extreme need in China for population control. It would be virtually impossible to carry on the single-child policy while it is considered religiously essential for each family to have a male heir (see Paper and Paper 1994a). On the other hand, the Chinese government has recognized that the destructive aspects of the Cultural Revolution left a culture without a basis for "civil behavior." Aspects of traditional Chinese culture and religion are being revived as a socializing force. The incompatibility of these two needs have yet to be harmonized, and the repeated swings of government policy have left the population unsure about what are politically safe activities. However, the shift away from Communist economic theory and the resultant opportunities, as well as uncertainties, have increased the need for spiritual support, so that the practice of traditional religion is becoming both visible and of seemingly long duration (see Paper 1992).

## The Study of Religion in China

In 1964, the Institute for Research on World Religions (*Shijie zongjiao yanjiusuo*) was developed within the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (for details, see Seiwert et al. 1989). The organization reflected the Western understanding of Chinese religion discussed above; hence its title and mandate. It was also organized to criticize religion and to promote Marxist-Leninist atheism. However, its activities were soon terminated by the Cultural Revolution. In 1977, the Institute again began to function, publishing several journals. The primary one, *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* (Research in World Religions), was first published in 1979. Beginning with a single annual issue, by the third year the journal was being issued quarterly. An analysis of the articles contained in the journal serves to delineate the Institute's research priorities and methodologies.

In the first issue, a third of the articles were on Buddhism, a third concerned atheism and Marxist issues and the remainder of the articles were on Islam and Christianity. In summary, all the articles concerned religions of alien origin. The second issue (1980) added several articles on Daoism, one on minorities, and one on the study of religion as a Western phenomenon.

After the first two years, a fairly consistent pattern developed in the distribution of articles. An analysis of the issues from 1979 through 1986, excluding translated articles, indicates that 80 percent of the articles covered five topics: Buddhism (39 percent), Taoism (14 percent), Islam (10 percent), minorities (9 percent), and atheism/socialism and religion (8 percent). Most issues had one or two articles on Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism. More variable were the articles on Christianity and on Chinese philosophy. There were also a few articles on Hinduism, Jainism, Judaism, protohistoric Chinese religion, pre-Buddhist Tibet, Shinto, art and religion, Western philosophy, and primal religion. In the last few years, there have been two new topics which will be discussed below.

Although the Institute for Research on World Religions is the most prestigious center for research on religion in China, several provincial academies of social sciences also have sections devoted to the study of religion, particularly local aspects

(except for the institute in Shanghai, which focuses on Christianity). Approximately a half dozen universities also have units focusing on the study of religion, often as part of a philosophy department, as is the case in many American colleges. Members of these various programs are among those who publish in *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu*.

Generally, those interested in aspects of Chinese religion other than Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and Christianity work outside of these institutions (except for the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences). Most articles on the religion of minorities in China are by researchers at the Academy of Social Sciences Institute for Research on Minorities (equivalent to the Western discipline of ethnology) and allied institutions. Those interested in primal religions and protohistoric Chinese religion include researchers at the National Historical Museum.

China has a long history of textual and historical studies, and the World Religions Institute's methodological orientation reflects this scholarly tradition. Although the Institute is part of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, the available social science methodologies are considerably dated. While Marx and Engels are among the founders of Western social science, methodologies available in China until quite recently had been frozen by Stalin's preferences and understanding. From conversations I had in Beijing in 1986, those interested in comparative religion apparently were aware of only Morgan for anthropology (who influenced Engels) and Frazer for history of religions. Now (1992) Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, and perhaps other social scientists are becoming available to Chinese scholars.

Over the last decade, scholars have been sent to the West from the Institute. Usually, they were given specific assignments that reflected the bias toward alien religions and textual and historical studies. The scholar who is now director of theoretical studies at the Institute studied with Hans Küng, the Liberal Catholic theologian, leading to an assumption that theology and religious studies are one and the same in the West. However, association with Western scholars has increased the awareness at the Institute of other subjects and approaches. These effects are apparent in articles of the more recent past.