

# Religious Practice, Contemporary

Dāngdài zōngjiào huódòng 当代宗教活动

**Contemporary China is a country of diverse but strictly regulated religions. People continue to practice the traditional Chinese religions—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—along with Islam and Christianity, but under control of the state.**

**M**ost world religions are or have been at one time practiced in China. Several—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—either originated in China or underwent history-altering transformations there. The Chinese Communist Party, in keeping with the tenets of Marxism, is atheist and requires its members to reject religious belief. At the same time, however, Chinese law officially supports religious freedom for its populace at large, though only in sanctioned channels, which can cause conflicts. The government's appointing of Roman Catholic bishops without seeking approval of the Vatican has led to tension and, in the past, even to excommunications. Similarly, in 1995 the Dalai Lama and Chinese authorities chose rival reincarnations of the tenth Panchen Lama, the second-highest figure in Tibetan Buddhism.

## Religious Demographics

China's basic religious heritage comprises the *san jiao* (three traditions, 三教)—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. According to official Chinese reports, there

are more than 100 million religious believers in China, and most profess faith in one of these three traditions. As of 2007 China had about 13,000 Buddhist temples and 200,000 Buddhist monks and nuns, and more than 1,500 Daoist temples and more than 25,000 Daoist priests and nuns.

Islam and Christianity were introduced into China in the seventh century. As of 2007 there were some 18 million Chinese Muslims and 30,000 mosques. Christianity is catching up, with 4 million Roman Catholic adherents worshipping at more than 4,600 churches and 10 million Protestants worshipping at more than 12,000 churches.

The Chinese government has paid special attention to ethnic religious beliefs. The Law of the People's Republic of China on National Regional Autonomy, promulgated in 1984, grants the right to freedom of religious belief to all Chinese. Since the reform movement initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978–1979 to modernize China, Tibetan Buddhism and Islam have been practiced all the more vigorously in Tibet and Xinjiang, respectively. The Chinese government reports that since 1980, it has invested about ¥200 million (about \$29 million) for the maintenance and reconstruction of religious sites in Tibet, including Potala Palace—the residence of the Dalai Lama—and the Jokhang Temple and Tashilhunpo and Samye monasteries. Because these sites are also tourist attractions, the investment also yields economic benefits to the Chinese state: over 1,700 places of worship and religious activity in Tibet, housing 46,000 resident monks and nuns. It is difficult, however, to evaluate precisely the level of religious freedom in Tibet, for, as a 2002 report

from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor points out, the Chinese government strictly controls access to and information about Tibet.

## Chinese Religions and the Chinese Communist Party

The ultimate goal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the creation of a Communist social system. To fulfill that goal, and in accordance with China's constitution, the party takes Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought as its guide. Atheism is a central tenet of Marxism. Marxism holds that God is a mere fabrication, invented by people to soothe the misery of this world, a fabrication exploited by the ruling classes to oppress the

working class. From the Marxist perspective, the abolition of religion and the abolition of the capitalist system go hand in hand. The party requires its members to profess Marxist atheism and to educate the masses in the Marxist perspective on religion.

After the party came to power in 1949, the Chinese government began to monitor and regulate all religions, cutting Chinese religious organizations off from foreign countries. In 1950 the first Chinese Christian conference drafted the Christian Manifesto: The Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China, which launched the Three-Self Movement. The movement was based on the Three Self-Principles—self-administration, self-support, and self-propagation—originally introduced by Christian missionaries in the mid-1800s. These principles stressed that Chinese Christians must organize their churches themselves, not let

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**Chinese people clamoring to touch the stone lion at the 1,700-year-old Guangxiaosi Buddhist temple. There are reportedly more than 100 million religious believers in modern China, and most profess faith in one of these three traditions—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. As of 2007 China had about 13,000 Buddhist temples and 200,000 Buddhist monks and nuns. PHOTO BY ROBERT EATON.**





**In South China attached houses are built of cement and have tiled roofs, and at the New Year they all display traditional decorations. Paintings and calligraphy honor the Kitchen God and other auspicious guardians who will keep the evil spirits away from the door. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.**

them be organized by foreigners, and that Chinese Christians must support the new socialist China. Many believers felt that the Three-Self Movement was evidence of the government's plotting actively against all religions. During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), all religions were denounced, all religious believers were persecuted, all religious meeting places were closed, all religious activities were prohibited, and property belonging to religious institutions was confiscated.

After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government tried to restore freedom of religious belief and reopened sites for religious activities. Reports on religious activities, including the celebration of religious festivals, have been published regularly in the official press. In the 1990s China began to join international religious groups and to participate in international religious activities, such as the World Council of Churches, the Fifth World Conference on Religion and Peace, and World Catholic Youth Day. The associations of Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam have also developed international exchanges. Roman Catholicism has developed slower than Protestantism and other faiths have because of the Vatican's

recognition of Taiwan and the Chinese government's consecration of bishops without Vatican approval. In 2007 Pope Benedict XVI demanded that all Chinese bishops declare allegiance to the Vatican, but he also approved the four government ordinations made in 2007, which Chinese government authorities took as a sign of improving relations.

## **Nature of Religious Freedom and Practice in China**

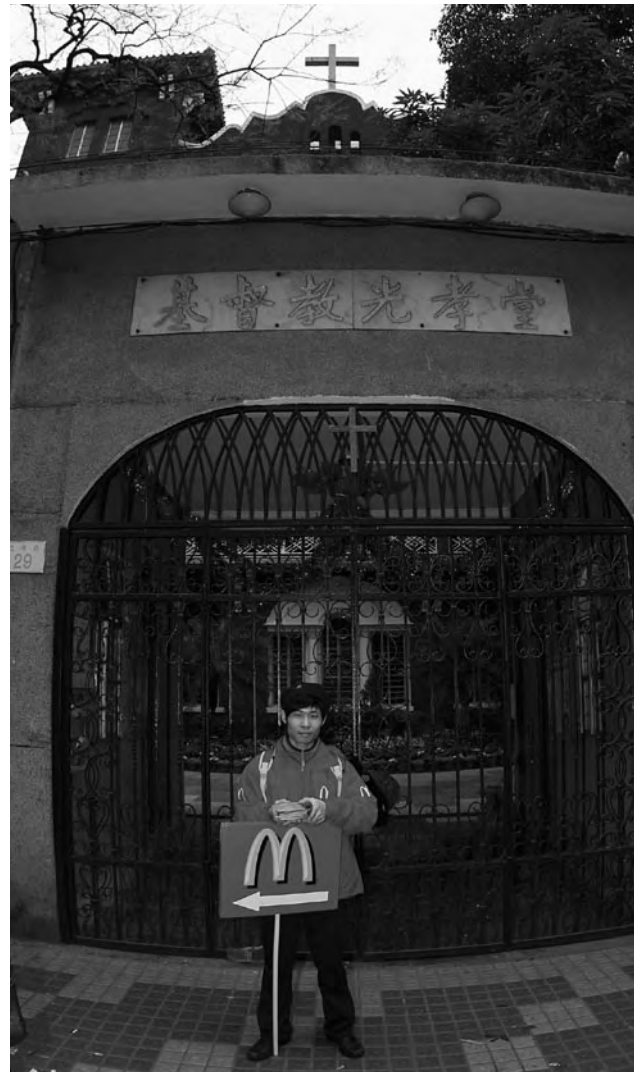
Under the Chinese constitution in all its incarnations, the Chinese people have the right to religious freedom. Every version of the constitution protects freedom of speech, assembly, association, procession and demonstration, and religion. The Constitution of 1975 even stated that citizens have the freedom to practice a religion and the freedom to not practice a religion and to promote atheism. Still, only five religions are constitutionally protected: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestant Christianity, and Catholic Christianity.

## Normal and Abnormal Religious Activity

To control Chinese religions, the Chinese government makes distinctions between what it designates normal and abnormal religious activities. According to the Chinese government, abnormal religious activities are usually conducted by “a small number of people, actuated by some abnormal purposes, who conduct religious activities in an excessively frequent and long manner.” To prohibit abnormal religious activities, the Fifth National People’s Congress adopted a law in 1979 that banned people from organizing secret societies and sects to practice “feudal superstitious beliefs” to carry out counterrevolutionary activities. Later the term *counterrevolutionary* was deleted from the statute, but the party has applied this term in practice—for example, in making distinctions between the activities of Falun Gong (a system of mind-body cultivation involving meditation and exercise, which has been treated as a religion) and so-called normal religious activities, and considering Falun Gong counterrevolutionary.

## CCP’s Religious Hierarchy

Party organs and a state hierarchy manage religions in China. The party/state controls Chinese religion first through promulgation of official Chinese ideology, Marxism-Maoism-Dengism. All schools, colleges, and universities educate students in Marxism, communism, and atheism. Second, the state controls religion through religious policy, which is made by the party and put into practice by the associations of different religions, for example, the Buddhist Association of China, the China Daoist Association, the China Islamic Association, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of Protestant Churches of China, the China Christian Council, and the China Catholic Patriotic Association. These associations act as liaisons between religious institution and the government. The Religious Affairs Bureau, a government agency, mediates between religious organizations and the party. The United Front Office represents the party in making religious policy. And the Public Security Bureau ensures that all religious groups and believers implement party policy. If religious believers



**Central Beijing churches are carefully controlled and mostly locked tight when not in use for worship. After the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, the government began to monitor and regulate all religions. Based on the Three Self-Principles (self-administration, self-support, and self-propagation) that were originally introduced by Christian missionaries in the mid-1800s, the CCP’s Three-Self Movement established three criteria for Chinese Christians: (1) They must organize their churches themselves, (2) must not let their churches be supported by foreigners, and (3) must support the new socialist China.** PHOTO BY ROBERT EATON.

## Qi and Challenge

**F**alun Gong (also known as Falun Dafa) is a movement founded by Li Hongzhi in 1992. A system of mind and body cultivation partially derived from qigong (气功, traditional Chinese breathing patterns, which are practiced with physical postures and movements). Since its ban in China, it has become a familiar name in Western media. Falun Gong grew quickly in the 1990s, perhaps because, according to the Economist, “Falun Gong [claimed] that it could heal without the need for medicine” when China’s “cash-strapped state-run hospitals usually sell medicines to patients at inflated prices in order to boost their revenues.”

Falun Gong’s practitioners say their goal is to develop the principles of truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance and that they are a peaceful group, following a philosophy that leads to spiritual awareness and improved health. The Chinese government accuses them of “spreading fallacies, hoodwinking people, inciting disturbances and generally jeopardizing social stability.” The exact number of Falun Gong practitioners is not known, but the Chinese government estimates that the movement has as many as 70

million followers. In 1999, alarmed by Falun Gong’s organizational prowess (it organized a massive demonstration outside the Jongnanhai government compound) and its challenge to the official ideology, the Chinese government declared it a “heretical organization” and launched a full-scale campaign against Li and his followers. The campaign included arrest and re-education of Falun Gong’s followers. Since that initial crackdown, the Chinese government has continued to arrest Falun Gong members and to suppress the spread of Falun Gong propaganda. In July 2002, the U.S. House of Representatives expressed disapproval of Chinese policy by passing a resolution calling on China to stop persecuting Falun Gong practitioners.

While the organization has attracted sympathy from Western activists, many view it as a cult. Around the world, followers of Falun Gong stage protests against the Chinese government and publish a newspaper filled with articles attacking the Chinese government.

The Editors

or organizations violate party policies, the Public Security Bureau punishes them according to the criminal law.

## Religious Policies

On 31 March 1982, the central committee of the Chinese Communist Party issued an important statement of religious policy: Document 19. Document 19 summed up the historical experience of the party on religious matters; promoted a moderate religious policy; and called for restoration and administration of churches, temples, and other religious sites. At the same time, the document also declared that religion must not interfere with politics, education, or marriage and family life, and reaffirmed that the government prohibited criminal and

counterrevolutionary activities committed under the cover of religion.

Regulations Governing Venues for Religious Activities—Decree No. 145—and Regulations Governing the Religious Activities of Foreign Nationals within China, issued by Premier Li Peng in January 1994, were subsequent important regulations for religious organizations and believers. Registration is the key to the Chinese government’s control of religion. According to Decree 145, registration is required for the establishment of a venue for religious activities. Registration requires three things: patriotic association, a fixed meeting place, and activities confined to a specific geographic area. The regulation reaffirms that venues for religious activities shall not be controlled by persons or organizations outside China. Land, mountains, forests, and buildings cannot

be used for religious purposes without the government's permission. Donations from persons and organizations outside China cannot be accepted. And the publication of religious articles and artwork is forbidden. If violation of this regulation threatens public security, the public security organs are empowered to mete out penalties in accordance with the relevant sections of China's Public Security Administration Penal Code. If the violation constitutes a criminal act, the judiciary is to undertake an investigation to determine criminal responsibility.

The Regulations Governing the Religious Activities of Foreign Nationals within China stipulate that foreign nationals may participate in religious activities in religious venues in China, including monasteries, temples, mosques, and churches, which are recognized by the Religious Affairs Bureaus of the People's Government at or above the county level. They may invite Chinese clerics to conduct such religious rituals as baptisms, weddings, funerals, and prayer meetings. However, they are not permitted to establish religious organizations, liaison offices, or venues for religious activities or run religious schools or institutes within China. They are not allowed to seek to convert members of the Chinese public or to appoint clergy or undertake other evangelistic activities. When foreign nationals enter China, they may carry printed materials, audio and visual materials, and other religious items for their own use, but if greater quantities are brought in, the materials will be dealt with according to the relevant Chinese customs regulations.

## The Outlook for the Future

In recent years, the Chinese government has begun instituting more liberal policies for Chinese religions, but the government retains authoritarian control. Traditional Chinese religions, and especially imported religions such as Christianity and Islam, continue to experience difficulty. Nevertheless, even in the face of difficulties, religion continues to flourish. The number of Chinese Christians, for example, is expected to continue to grow by 7 percent annually, a sign that religions and religious feeling remain robust even when restricted.

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## Further reading

- Regulation governing venues for religious activities: Decree No. 145 of the State Council of the PRC signed by Premier Li Peng, 31 January 1994. Retrieved February 16, 2009, from [http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Regulation\\_Governing\\_Venues\\_for\\_Religious\\_Activities.pdf](http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Regulation_Governing_Venues_for_Religious_Activities.pdf)
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- Xie, Zhibin. (2006). *Religious diversity and public religion in China*. Aldershot, U. K.: Ashgate.

