

The Flourishing of Religion in Post-Mao China and the Anthropological Category of Religion

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In his provocative critique of Geertz's 1966 definition of religion, Talal Asad (1993) suggests that the very project of defining the category of religion is rooted in the historical rise of Western secularism in societies formerly dominated by Christianity. In post-Mao China, there has been an explosion of activities that might be categorised as religious in the Geertzian sense, including church attendance, temple building, *qi gong* practice, pilgrimage, and geomancy. This paper examines two such activities, the participation of women in a Protestant church in rural Shandong and the recent protest by members of the Fa Lun Gong (Buddhist Law Qi Gong) society in Beijing, and asks what their emergence in a post-Maoist communist state tells us about the historical processes that frame the possibility of defining religion. Working with theories of religious participation from Geertz, Asad, Tambiah, and Feuchtwang, the paper develops a conception of 'symbolic participation' to illuminate the flourishing of religious practice in post-Mao China.

The intersection of two questions forms the point of departure for this paper. The first, 'What is religion?', long predates the emergence of anthropology as a discipline and occupied some of anthropology's earliest theorists (Tambiah 1990). The second, 'Why are various forms of religious practice and participation flourishing in the face of science and modernity?', has occupied researchers within and beyond the discipline of anthropology for at least a century. Both questions continue to receive anthropological attention. Talal Asad (1993), Stephan Feuchtwang (1992), and Morton Klass (1995) have all addressed the problem of defining religion during the 1990s, while Susan Harding (1993) and Laura Kendall (1996) provide excellent recent anthropological discussions of the power of religion in the face of predictions of its imminent demise in the American and Korean contexts respectively.

Placed side by side the two questions stretch each other. The first suggests that we cannot assume something called 'religion' is flourishing without agreement on what it is, while the second implies that the continued power of what is today commonly called religion is too important a phenomenon to be ignored because of definitional difficulties. **[page 33]** One way of combining the questions is to ask what is this flourishing thing, what is the significance of calling it religion, and why is it flourishing? This paper addresses these questions in the context of post-Mao China.

Insights from the work of Tambiah (1990) and Feuchtwang (1992) along with Asad's (1993) critique of Geertz's influential 1966 definition of religion clarify my approach. Geertz defined religion as:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. [1973:90]

Geertz further took pains to distinguish religion from science, law, common sense,

aesthetics, and other categories of thought and consciousness. Asad criticises Geertz's definition for its mimicry of the institutionalised categories of secular Western states. He traces the genealogy of Geertz's concern for symbols, meaning, interpretability, models *of* and models *for* to the rise of secularism in societies formerly dominated by Christianity. Following Foucault (1988), Asad describes the rise of confession as a mode of social regulation in medieval Christianity, and argues that the form of truth confession generates is both linguistic and tied to the external expression of inner states. From this form of truth, Asad argues, comes the Western association of religion with problems of inner meaning, and Geertz's insistence on the primacy of belief and cultural meaning. Asad then describes the dis-empowerment of institutionalised Christianity by secular government and science. This institutional dis-empowerment, he argues, is the source of Geertz's separation of problems of meaning from problems of power, or, more specifically, Geertz's search for the coherence of religious systems of symbols in themselves rather than in the acts of power by which authoritative institutions enforce standardised interpretations. In sum, for Asad, the rise of secularism from Christianity has generated a category, called 'religion,' where 'freedom to believe' is the defining characteristic, provided that this 'freedom' does not become problematic for either the truths of science or the laws and policies laid down by the secular mechanisms of the state. Geertz, he concludes, theorises a sphere of contemporary Western societies—involving supposedly coherent symbolic systems, but distinct from government, science, common sense, and aesthetics—into a universal anthropological category.

Examining Geertz through the lens of Asad is certainly not fair to Geertz, who has written much on the topic of religion since 1966. But fairness is not my purpose. In general terms, though I accept much of Asad's (institutional) historicisation of the concept of religion, I still assume that the power of symbols cannot be reduced to the power of authoritative institutions to compel standardised interpretations. The value of Geertz's 1966 definition lies in its ability to help describe the category of practice, most usually called religious, that is growing in post-Mao China. Though I will not use all of Geertz's definition, his emphasis on symbols and models, the importance of addressing questions of 'a general order of existence,' and religion's distance from science, law, and common sense all inform my take on what is growing in China. The value of Asad's critique lies in its illumination of the historical conditions under which a category of religion in these terms has come to make sense.

Finally, the work of Stanley Tambiah and Stephan Feuchtwang adds to my understanding of what is occurring in China by making clear the importance of social participation in symbolic worlds. In his comparative discussion of magic, science, religion, [page 34] and the scope of rationality, Tambiah (1990:105-10) opposes 'participation' and 'causality' as two contrasting modes of ordering the world, while Feuchtwang (1992:2) uses the dimensions of 'temporality' and 'inclusion/exclusion' to frame his discussion of Chinese ritual. Inspired by but not exactly following these two concepts, I use the notion of symbolic participation to emphasise the social aspects of a Geertzian concern with symbols. By symbolic participation I do not mean anything like shared beliefs or psychological orientations, but rather the experience of both symbols and their referents that enables communication, social exchange, and participation in a particular socio-symbolic world. It is a form of participation that enables disagreement, variation in interpretation, and the manipulation of socio-symbolic worlds towards a multiplicity of purposes rather than a unified form of thought.

The category of religion in China

Since the early 1980s, China has witnessed an explosion of activities commonly called religious, including church attendance, pilgrimage, geomancy, temple building, *qi gong* practice, and so on. The body of this essay focuses on two such activities, the participation of women in a Protestant church in rural Shandong and the recent protest by members of the Buddhist Law Qi Gong society in Beijing, and asks what their emergence in a post-Maoist communist state tells us about the historical processes that both frame the possibilities of defining religion and encourage its growth. The story of the category of religion in China, however, is a long one and a bit of historical background serves to further illustrate its contingency.

Students of religion in China during the Ch'ing dynasty and earlier usually speak of three elite religions, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and popular religion. The elite religions involved textual traditions and elites trained in interpreting them, while popular religion included the worship of various deities derived from the three elite religions, local myths and legends, and other sources, as well as rites and ceremonies associated with lineages. In Chinese writings, Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and other traditions of written thought were referred to as *jiao* or 'teachings.' The categories of 'science,' 'religion,' and 'politics' did not apply. Indeed, as Joseph Needham (1978) has demonstrated, these *jiao* were closely intertwined with the various forms of practical technology, mathematics, and medicine now often called 'traditional Chinese science.' Likewise, the imperial Chinese state usually ruled in the name of one or another of these *jiao*, and either co-opted, banned, or ignored the other ones as well as various popular festivals, cults, and temples. Local organisers of popular religious activities also often sought official state recognition. Though the resulting politics of orthodoxy and heterodoxy were constant (Feuchtwang 1992), there were no clear categories distinguishing government and religion.

The 'Rites Controversy' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was perhaps one of the first attempts to use Western categories that approach the modern notions of 'religious' and 'secular' in categorising Chinese doctrine. Jesuit missionaries argued over what in Chinese thought contradicted Christianity and was thus 'idolatry' and what was simply 'civil.' Though Jensen (1993) reminds us that the Jesuits' efforts in naming and interpreting Chinese thought have had ongoing significance in both Western and Chinese interpretations of Chinese tradition, the most visible impact of Western categories on the labelling of Chinese thought takes place much later. In the early twentieth century, after decades of semi-colonialism, Chinese intellectuals rallied behind 'science' as the institution [page 35] of thought and practice that would lead China to national strength. D.W.Y. Kwok (1965:161) calls the extent of their 'intellectual and emotional attachment to science-as-doctrine ... science worship'. Borrowing heavily from Western empiricist thought, these intellectuals attacked all forms of traditional Chinese teachings, ritual, and institutions, as well as religions of non-Chinese origin (1965:30). Influential enough during the Nationalist regime, under Mao's leadership the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) institutionalised a form of this science worship under the banner of a legislated commitment to the leadership position of 'the science of Marxism'.¹

¹ Science worship, of course, is not limited to China. It originated intellectually in the West, was first institutionalised in the Soviet Union, and continues to attract adherents throughout the world. In the official ideology of post-Mao China, where Maoism is criticised for its 'volunteerism' and 'scientific Marxism' is offered as a corrective, science worship remains powerful.

The religion of communism

When I used to teach about Mao's China to American undergraduates, I would say that one way to understand Maoism was as a theocracy. Such a statement certainly counts as Marxist blasphemy, but I did not mean it only in a critical manner. To many of my conservative midwest American students, religion was good and communism bad, so describing communism in religious terms disrupted a bit of cold war prejudice. However, I also take this perspective as offering serious insights. Marxism, as institutionalised in Mao's China, had its own form of teleological history (beginning in 'primitive communism' passing through the stages of feudalism, capitalism, and socialism before ending in communism), its own imagination of heaven (communism), its own sacred texts (the heavily edited collected works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao), its own morality, and its own experience of the numinous (Mao worship). Significantly, through what Richard Madsen calls 'ceremonies of innocence and rituals of struggle' (1984:21), the plenitude of Maoist political campaigns provided ample opportunities for the great majority of Chinese people to directly participate in the religious fervour. Moreover, like other fundamentalisms, Maoism imagined the need for complete control over both the mechanisms of state and the generation of knowledge, and demanded that all forms of knowing, from physics to history, from Buddhism to Islam, from chemistry to literature, and from medicine to education be controlled by the authoritative institutions it created. Interpretations that diverged from party orthodoxy were labelled 'superstition' or '(bourgeois or feudal) ideologies,' thereby consolidating Marxism's identity as the ultimate science. As with any science, communism needed some form of magic as its other.

Under high Maoism, the practices usually categorised as science and religion in Western liberal states were either eliminated or brought under Marxist guidance. For the large international religions, like Buddhism, Catholicism, and Islam, small, party-led organisations were allowed to exist, mostly for foreign policy purposes. No mass participation was tolerated. With the exceptions of these few small and tightly controlled organisations and, of course, endless forms of Mao worship, very little activity that Western liberals would categorise as 'religious' existed. Likewise, experimental sciences, when not politicised out of existence, were required to subject their interpretations of the universe to party approval. As in the former Soviet Union, the CCP insisted that Marxism was the ultimate science, and that physicists, chemists, and biologists needed their theories [page 36] approved by the experts in Marxism/Maoism. Mao himself took an interest in the philosophy of nature and during the Cultural Revolution he was credited with developing a theory of elementary particles supposedly more coherent than quantum mechanics (Gu 1999). As a consequence of conflicts between party appointed experts in Marxism and those trained in disciplines like physics, chemistry, and geology, the latter often emerged as high profile dissidents in both China and the Soviet Union (Miller 1996).

In calling high Maoism a form of theocracy, I, perhaps like Geertz, reveal my own, Western/liberal values. Theocracy implies a deficient state of affairs in which 'religion' is given too much control over 'science' and 'policy,' and I do approve of the post-Mao effort to carve out distinct institutionalised niches for science and law. In contrast, as mentioned above, Maoism considered itself the ultimate 'science,' and doubtlessly would have dismissed my lecture as just so much ideologically driven false consciousness. Under Maoism, the major categories of practical consciousness, 'scientific socialism,' 'superstition,' 'feudal ideology,' and 'bourgeois ideology,' were defined primarily in political terms and secondarily in the opposition between 'science' and 'superstition'. Not only did the Marxist/Maoist categories of practical consciousness differ from Western/liberal ones (law, science, art, religion), but they existed under entirely

different institutional imperatives. Whereas the Western categories served primarily to create separate institutional realms for different types of activity, the Maoist ones existed to promote one form of consciousness at the expense of all others.

Post-Mao religion

With the end of high Maoism and the gradual dis-empowerment of Maoist ideas and institutions, new modes of state classification of consciousness and governmentality have emerged. The post-Mao categories come closer to but don't quite match those of Western/liberal regimes. Though much more room for mass participation exists, the term 'religion' still includes only the major, institutionalised world religions of Protestant Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism. Consequently, many forms of popular religious practice call themselves forms of Buddhism or Taoism and/or face persecution as illegal 'superstitions'. Like religion, 'science' has both gained greater institutional independence in post-Mao China and retained some cultural specificity, as certain practices not usually labelled scientific in Western societies, including traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, and certain forms of *qi gong* (techniques of self-healing and curing that involve focusing and manipulating *qi*—breath/life force/energy), have greater scope to claim themselves to be scientific.

The post-Mao regime thus grants religion and (non-Marxist) science greater legitimacy than before, at least tolerating their existence. However, the CCP also places strict controls on their institutionalisation and practice. These activities must fit state-defined criteria, avoid 'politics,' and submit their organisational structures to state supervision (Ying 1997). For religions, this means regulation by the Bureau of Religious Affairs, and control over the training and appointment of religious leaders, the building of religious structures, and at times even the content of sermons. For *qi gong* associations and teachers, this means registering with the 'Qi Gong Regulatory Bureau', which certifies whether a particular form of *qi gong* is based in 'science' or 'superstition' (Chen 1995). Though this control may seem extreme, the situation has many similarities to Western secular states, in that 'religion' has become a legitimate activity as long as it keeps a proper distance from the [page 37] mechanisms of state, while 'science' must be approved (e.g. peer reviewed) before it can claim its title.

Within this evolving post-Mao institutional framework, popular activities that could be called religious in the Geertzian sense of the term—providing both models of the world and models *for* action in the world, involving a general order of existence, and divorced from both the mechanisms of state and institutionalised science—have emerged with striking rapidity. For the rest of this paper I will focus on two such practices: one that calls itself a proper form of *qi gong* cultivation, but which the government dismisses as an illegal superstition and Geertz might call a religion, and a second that fits into the category of proper religion by the standards of all three.

Buddhist Law, Qi Gong

Attempting to describe and translate 'Fa Lun Gong' (Buddhist Law, Qi Gong) immediately raises the problem of categorisation. Like many other forms of *qi gong*, it can be viewed as a sort of exercise combining meditation and movement to promote health and spiritual attainment. Beginning in the 1980s, Fa Lun Gong was developed and popularised by Li Hongzhi, a popular *qi gong* master. Li has since become quite rich from the sale of books, audiotapes, and videotapes promoting the exercises and the related philosophy, and now lives in New York City.

Li's original book, *Zhuan Fa Lun (Spinning the Wheel of Buddhist Law)*, has been

translated into ten languages, and combines bits of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy with traditional Chinese exercise and meditation principles into his own formula for self-improvement and spiritual salvation. Li distinguishes Fa Lun Gong from other forms of *qi gong* by focusing the attention of practitioners on cultivating a ‘wheel of law’ in their stomachs (*zai xiao fubuwei xiulian yige falun*) (Li 2000: Lesson I, Part 7). His writings additionally include moral injunctions (against consumerism, rock and roll, and sexual promiscuity, for example), lectures on distinguishing good people from bad people, and depictions of healing. A large number of web sites scattered around the world now introduce his philosophy and promote his products under the slogan ‘truthfulness, benevolence, and forbearance’ (*zhen, shan, ren* [see www.falundafa.org]). The websites offer a wide range of written materials, including introductions to Falun Dafa’s understanding of physics and the human body, the etiology of disease, health and wisdom, and testimonials from practitioners.² Li’s English translator describes his first book as ‘the greatest book since the beginning of human civilisation’ (*SMH* 7 May 1999) and, according to the website, the mayor of Houston, Texas proclaimed 12 October, 1996 Li Hongzhi Day and said:

Falun Dafa transcends cultural and racial boundaries. It resonates the universal truth to every corner of the earth and bridges the gap between east and west. Li Hongzhi has worked tirelessly to convey Falun Dafa from China to the rest of the world. Along the way, he has touched the lives of countless people in many countries, earning an acclaimed international reputation.³

[page 38] When pressed, especially in the institutional context of post-Mao China, Li says that what he promotes is simply a form of spiritual cultivation and health training based in principles that are above and beyond, but not against, science. And though he claims that over 100 million people practise Fa Lun Gong (Faison 1999b), he argues that with no worship, rituals, or formal organisation, these practices do not constitute anything like a ‘religion’ (*SMH* 7 May 1999). Though he says he left China because of official harassment over the meetings he used to hold, he also claims no objections to the atheistic (communist) rule of China.

If it were not for the sudden protest that materialised in Beijing on 26 April 1999, the Chinese government might have accepted this claim. On that day, despite the fact that Beijing’s security apparatus was geared up to prevent any sort of protest during the run-up to the tenth anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre, ten thousand Buddhist Law practitioners suddenly and silently amassed in a politically sensitive location (Zhongnan Hai—the residency complex of China’s highest leaders) to protest the reaction of Tianjin officials to a petition against an article in a Tianjin magazine that criticised Buddhist Law (Faison 1999a). When this startling protest made Fa Lun Gong front-page news, Western newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* began calling it a ‘cult’ and its practitioners ‘followers,’ while the Chinese government, after a two and a half months hiatus, launched a major propaganda campaign denouncing Fa Lun Gong as a form of ‘superstition,’ an illegal organisation, an ‘abnormal’ religious activity, and generally destructive force (*HXWZ* 7 May, 23 July and 30 July 1999).

² Falun Dafa is a romanisation of the Chinese name that Li Hongzhi gave to his organisation that is centred in New York. The Fa Lun Gong practitioners in China may or may not recognise Li Hongzhi’s official organisation and leadership.

³ See <http://minghui.ca>. Having a mayor name a day after a particular person is not too uncommon in the United States, requiring only a bit of successful lobbying. I quote the mayor to provide a taste of the proselytising flavour of many Fa Lun Gong materials.

The discourses of both the Chinese government and Fa Lun Gong supporters continue to focus attention on issues of categorisation. An article on a North American pro-Fa Lun Gong website, titled 'What is Falun Gong?,' addresses both the attacks of the Chinese government and the language used by English language reporters:

Falun Gong is not a cult. Cults dominate all aspects of their member's lives [which is not the case with Falun Gong]...

Falun Gong is not a religion. There is no act of worship in Falun Gong, no liturgy or catechism, no temples or churches, and no formal organisation.

Falun Gong is not anti-science or anti-medicine...

Falun Gong is not a movement. A movement, on analogy with the civil rights or environmental movements suggests a political agenda. Falun Gong has no political agenda, and does not engage in any political activity...

Falun Gong is a method of cultivation that employs physical exercises and the development of a practitioner's heart and character. (Gregory 1999)

Though the major Western newspapers rapidly dropped the 'cult' label, the CCP has only become more antagonistic. It accuses Li Hongzhi and Fa Lun Gong of everything denied in the above article and more. The party claims that Fa Lun Gong had a highly structured organisation in China with a central office in Beijing (*zongzhan*), 39 central instruction centres (*fudao zongzhan*) in major cities, 1900 instruction stations (*fudao zhan*) in city districts and smaller towns, and over 28,000 practice spots (*liangong dian*) scattered throughout the country. It further claims that this organisation was tightly disciplined, with members coerced into following the orders of Li Hongzhi by threats of *qi gong* being focused against them (*Xin Hua She* 2 August 1999). Official press releases depict Fa Lun Gong leaders denying the validity of 'scientific' medicine and discouraging practitioners from seeing 'scientific' medical authorities. They further develop a series of stories about individuals whose health was severely damaged by practising Fa Lun Gong. A typical [page 39] article, titled '59 Cases of Injury and Death Related to Falun Gong Reported in Founder's Home Province,' reported that 23 practitioners died because they insisted that their diseases needed no medical attention other than Fa Lun Gong, and that many others became delusional and committed suicidal acts (Embassy of The People's Republic of China 1999, Ministry of Civil Administration 1999). The official book, *Li Hongzhi and his 'FaLun Gong': Deceiving the Public and Ruining Lives* (Shi 1999), includes graphic bloody pictures of people who committed suicide or attempted to literally rip a 'wheel of law' from their own stomachs. One recent article even linked Fa Lun Gong with cannibalism (*Fazhi Ribao*, 8 January 2000).

Despite the long prison terms dealt out to many Fa Lun Gong practitioners, on 26 January 2000 other supporters dared to unfurl a giant portrait of Li Hongzhi over the image of Mao Zedong that overlooks Tiananmen Square. The police expelled the two from Hong Kong involved in this act and arrested fourteen others (*CND* 30 January 2000). The cycle of defiance and suppression continues with new reports of protests and arrests appearing regularly. Meanwhile the government is widening the anti-Fa Lun Gong campaign to include other *qi gong* groups as well (Hutzler 2000).

The widening of the campaign reflects the CCP's longstanding fear of any organisation that it does not control. In the case of Fa Lun Gong, this fear has been compounded by its ability to recruit socially powerful participants. The involvement of people who have held high positions in the party and even the army is said to have personally shocked Jiang Zemin, the CCP's current leader (Xia 1999). My own unsystematic interviewing of people who have known Fa Lun Gong participants suggests that retired people in general, including retired cadres, are

particularly attracted to *qi gong*, while Xia (1999) describes how many past party leaders have themselves turned to *qi gong* healers in their old age.

All sides seem to agree that many Fa Lun Gong practitioners are motivated initially by a desire to improve their health. In the *New York Times*, Dai Qing, a famous intellectual and social commentator, is quoted as saying that Chinese, especially older Chinese, seek spiritual comfort because they are overwhelmed by the change and competition of the Dengist era. Moreover:

Ms. Dai said one reason Falun Gong thrives is that it promises to improve the health of practitioners by harnessing Chinese breathing and meditation exercises, known as qigong. Such remedies may provide some comfort at a time when the state no longer provides free health care. 'Nowadays people have to pay 70, 80, 90 percent of their medical expenses,' Ms. Dai said. But many people find it impossible to pay such large costs, so they turn to other ways of staying fit and healing themselves. That's why Falun Gong and other types of qigong have so many adherents. (Landler 1999)

It is not my intention here to undertake a detailed analysis of the April 1999 protest, the July 1999 campaign, or Fa Lun Gong's activities in China.⁴ Undoubtedly, Fa Lun Gong is different things to different people. To some Chinese citizens it is no more than a form of exercise. To some it is a source of healing or at least hope for healing. To others it is an interesting philosophy. The protest proves its political potential and indicates that at least some practitioners are organised in one form or another within China, while the existence of Fa Lun Gong associations in the USA, Australia, Europe, Hong Kong, and South [page 40] America and their abilities to hold meetings and organise conferences give the movement a global institutional locus. Its Internet presence and the international connections of many of its practitioners further create the possibility of coordinated global actions, and the interaction of Chinese and non-Chinese practitioners. For my purposes, I am content to note that Fa Lun Gong fits my adaptation of Geertz's definition of the religious (it provides models of and for a general order of existence, and can be categorised as neither science, art, nor common sense), that it is potentially able to be utilised for a variety of purposes, and that its existence is strongly shaped by the institutional contexts in which it has arisen. In China it grew within the institutional space allocated to apolitical self-help/healing practices based on 'scientific' principles. In Western nations it has occupied institutional space opened under the rubrics of freedom of religion and association, and appears to outsiders as just another New Age religion/healing practice.

Zouping Christianity

My second and final example of the explosion of 'religious' activity in post-Mao China involves the growth of the Protestant church in Zouping county, Shandong, in rural north China. A Baptist church was established in Zouping by British missionaries in the late 19th century (Stauffer 1922:204, *Zouping Nianjian* 1992:878-9), but was closed from the mid-1950s to the end of the Maoist period. During the early 1980s, a handful of surviving Zouping Christians convinced the local government to allow them to reclaim the still standing church (building) and resume Sunday services. They requested that the Religious Affairs Bureau appoint a minister and held their first official service in 1984 (*Zouping Nianjian* 1992:879).

Since then, the Zouping church has expanded rapidly. By 1988 there were roughly 900 baptised Protestants in Zouping County (out of a total population of about 650,000). In addition to Sunday services in the church in the county seat, smaller groups of Christians held bible study

⁴ *Kaifang* magazine has produced some of the best analyses of the conflict to date (eg. Xia 1999, Wu 2000). Doubtlessly, numerous analyses will soon appear in English language academic journals.

and hymn singing sessions in their villages during the week. By 1998 there were over 3300 baptised Protestants in Zouping County and many others who attended services or bible study sessions without having been baptised. In addition to the main church in the county seat, Zouping Protestants purchased ten other buildings scattered throughout the county (with money raised amongst themselves) and converted them into churches. They also managed to get two new ministers appointed (for a total of three), including a local woman whose tuition at seminary was paid for by local church members. In 1998 the three ministers were rostered among the eleven churches scattered throughout the County.

In addition to growing rapidly, the Zouping church has become an overwhelmingly female institution. On the days that I attended services in the county seat, over 90% of the congregation were women. The minister said that the County's other congregations were even more heavily female. As I have analysed this gender disparity elsewhere (Kipnis n.d.), I here only wish to note that, as with Fa Lun Gong, many have attributed the church's growth and female dominance to a need for spiritual and physical healing. Some Zouping residents (male and female) told me the female dominance of the church reflected the relative emotional and social weakness of rural Chinese women. Excluded from many spheres of public political and economic life, and partially displaced from their natal kin networks by predominantly patrilocal and village exogamous marriage practices, women more often than men find themselves with little social support. Hunter and Chan (1993) use a similar argument to explain the predominance of women in religious activities throughout [page 41] China, while Mobo Gao (1999:90) relates the rise of Christianity in a Jiangxi village to the decline of public health services. In Zouping prayer meetings and sermons, images of Jesus as compassionate, caring, and sympathetic of the poor and sick abound. As Sangren (1983) points out, these are just the sorts of images that attract Chinese women to the 'Goddess of Mercy' (Guanyin) in Buddhist temples as well.

Some Zouping Christian women explained their own religious conversion in terms of healing as well, telling stories of diseases cured as a result of prayer. Many seemed to enjoy the sisterly solidarity of attending church together, singing hymns together, and praying, if not for the same things, at least in the same place. Others described their Christianity in terms of the call of God, or a desire to 'do good deeds' (*zuo hao shi*). One told a story of spending more time caring for a sick aunt after joining the church. Regardless of their motivations, most Zouping Christians emphasised the seriousness of their practice—their dedication to studying the bible, prayer, listening to sermons, and doing good deeds. The ethos of universalistic compassion embodied in the Zouping church appeals to women both for the sisterhood and healing that it offers and the feminine mode of sociality and morality it entails.

Like Fa Lun Gong, Zouping Christianity involves the expansion of Geertzian religious activity into the institutional spaces freed up during the post-Mao period. Perhaps because this religious activity is precisely that form of monotheism that Asad ties to the problem of 'belief,' Zouping Christians in fact explicitly concerned themselves with that concept. Like the missionaries of an earlier era, some Zouping Christians insisted that believing in Christ meant not worshipping any other form of God. They also continually asked me, a white foreigner, if I believed (*xin*). This concern with belief, along with the practice of studying the bible, demonstrates the importance of interpretive practice in this form of post-Mao Chinese religion. Healing and doing good deeds suggest two of the ends towards which participation in this religion might be turned.

Unlike Fa Lun Gong practitioners, Zouping's Christians have never undertaken any explicitly political activity. Their ability to gain official approval for their expansion has in part

rested in their apolitical image, which is perhaps reinforced by the fact that few men participate. However, as with Fa Lun Gong, the potential for politicisation always exists. Since the state defines what the appropriate boundaries for 'religious' and 'scientific' activities are, renegotiations over these boundaries can easily become politicised. In fact, in May 1999 Protestants in the city of Xian took to anti-government protests when the city leadership, alarmed at the large gatherings of Protestants at the church in the centre of the city, forced the removal of the church to the suburbs (*CND* 25 May 1999).

Discussion

The two examples given in this paper cannot pretend to be an introduction to the vast, now twenty years long, expansion of activities that could be called religious in China. However, I hope they can shine some light on the questions posed at the beginning of this paper. As Asad might argue, a secular liberal sense of religion depends upon the opening of institutional spaces distinct from both science and the levers of state power. Further, regardless of how anthropologists define religions, the institutional contours of this space often determine how the practitioners label their own activity. The Christian church grew into an institutional space that was termed religious and designed and policed to keep its distance from politics and science, whereas Fa Lun Gong grew initially into a space termed **[page 42]** scientific, but was insulated from the spaces formally acknowledged as institutionalised science in Western countries.

Ironically, the state requirement that these activities keep their distance from 'politics' creates the potential for their politicisation. As the institutional boundaries of 'religion' and 'science' are continually policed and renegotiated, the practitioners of these 'apolitical' activities, in China as well as in liberal, secular democracies, are compelled to focus on their relation to the state. The CCP's attacks on Fa Lun Gong for promoting harmful, 'unscientific' healing practices parallel the regulation of Christian Science and other non-mainstream medical practices in Western nations. Like the Chinese exclusion of religion from politics, the American principle of separating church and state consistently leads to political battles over how this doctrine is to be interpreted, as in the ongoing controversy over prayer in public schools.

However, though Asad's critique illuminates the situations in which certain activities acquire the label 'religion,' it tells us little about why these types of activities emerge in the first place. Here I find the notion of symbolic participation, derived from Geertz, Tambiah and Feuchtwang, more useful. The end of high Maoism, it is often said, left China in a moral, ideological, and spiritual vacuum. I would add that this vacuum was not simply a matter of absent or discredited symbolic systems, but also the absence and discrediting of the modes by which the great majority of the people participated in those symbolic systems. The party has not been able to fill this void. Though science is a great producer of models of and models for, including ones of a general and all encompassing scope, it does not and perhaps cannot provide significant avenues for mass participation. The interpretation and manipulations of scientific models is limited to an elite. Nationalism, likened to religion by Anderson (1991), seems more likely than science to play this role, but not yet on the scale that Maoism did. As Jian Xu (1999) argues, the post-Mao equation of national prowess with scientific modernisation and entrepreneurial wealth creation leaves little imaginative space for non-scientists and non-entrepreneurs to make a contribution.

What Zouping Christianity and Fa Lun Gong provide are not just symbolic models of significant moral and cosmic scope, but also opportunities for participation in particular symbolic worlds for people with a wide range of motivations and mastery of the symbolic

resources at hand. In her discussion of the popular religion of the Song dynasty, Valery Hansen (1990:13) suggests that the very absence of written materials ‘testifies to the participation of the illiterate.’ Now that the majority is literate, the absence of text can no longer be considered a sign of popularity. On the one hand, both Fa Lun Gong and Zouping Christianity provide significant textual resources for those so inclined. These standardised texts allow the creation of symbolic arenas that transcend local communities. On the other hand, both also provide opportunities for participation for the less textually inclined. Fa Lun Gong offers exercise sessions whereas Zouping Christianity includes prayer, rituals, church attendance, and hymn singing. Moreover, both religions integrate the textual with the non-textual aspects of their practice.

As Robert Weller (1987) points out, participation in a single type of religious activity hardly guarantees a unified form of religious interpretation. Even the rituals of Maoism, though emanating from a well-organised, authoritarian, and powerful centre, were unable to control the myriad of local ways in which they were interpreted, let alone the purposes to which they were turned. Unlike Geertz’s 1966 definition, the type of symbolic participation I am pointing to here does not involve the inculcation of a unitary or unified cultural style. The joys of entering a particular symbolic universe involve arguing with other participants [page 43] as much as agreeing with them, participating without believing, and manipulating others towards private and variable ends.

In post-Mao China, the divorce of religious symbolic arenas from the levers of state power reinforces the potential for variations in interpretation and practice. The absurdity of the CCP’s accusation that Li Hongzhi disciplined Fa Lun Gong members with threats of *qi gong* underscores the limited means groups like Fa Lun Gong have to discipline their members. The textual/symbolic plays a crucial role because, in the absence of other disciplinary mechanisms, it is what links the members of a given symbolic arena.⁵

Psychological functionalisms hold that people participate in religious activities to reduce anxiety whereas more sociologically oriented ones see religions as acting to increase social solidarity. Though I would argue that symbolic participation involves something intrinsically human, both social and linguistic, I do not translate this generic vision of humanity into a singular cause for the rise of religion in China. The two examples discussed above both point to a desire for healing as a causal factor for participation, but the use of other examples, or an even more detailed examination of my two cases, would reveal other motivations as well. The social joys of participation in a symbolic community (especially for those excluded from other such communities) and the search for moral guidance (cf. Madsen 1999) come to mind easily. Less obvious from these two examples, but evident enough in simply the number of small businesses that burn incense for the God of Wealth, are cases in which the pursuit of wealth motivates religious participation (see Kendall 1996 for a discussion of this in Korea). In addition, case studies of religious activity in post-Mao China have emphasised the political uses of the social memories reconstructed in religious practice (Jing 1996), the mobilisation of religious identities for attracting foreign investment or beneficial state policies (Gladney 1991, Pang 1996), and the building of community infrastructure by religious organisations (Dean 1999). Vibrant arenas of symbolic participation accommodate all of these motivations. Addressing questions of a general order of existence speaks to diverse desires, while attracting a significant following provides a

⁵ As Asad points out, the shift in the meaning of the word ritual from a disciplinary technique for controlling moral dispositions to the ‘modern conception of ritual as enacted symbols’ (1993:57) reflects the historical disempowerment of religious ritual.

basis for pursuing larger social, political, or economic goals. Symbolic participation can always be seen as both an end in itself and as a means to other ends.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me return to the questions posed at the beginning of the paper: what is this flourishing thing called religion, what is the significance of calling it religion, and why is it flourishing? In the case of post-Mao China, as seen through my two case studies, what is growing are arenas of symbolic participation, concerned about a general order of existence, and institutionally separated from both science and the formal levers of state power. These arenas offer models of the cosmos and the place of humans. In it, as well as models for acting in that cosmos. In addition to models, laid out in texts in my two cases, they offer opportunities for participation for both the textually and non-textually inclined. They are growing in part because other sources of world ordering models in post-Mao China do not accommodate mass participation, and in part because participation in them facilitates a wide-range of local and even individual motivations. Western liberals call them religion to distinguish them from the models of institutionalised science and the ideological [page 44] expressions of governments, whereas the CCP designates them as permissible or illegal religions in order to keep them from impinging on the institutionalised spaces of science or the government itself

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HXWZ=*Hua Xia Wen Zhai*, a news weekly [on line at <http://www.cnd.org/HXWZ/>]

NYT=*New York Times*

SMH=*Sydney Morning Herald*

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