

On not learning from the Soviet Union: Religious Policy in China, 1949-65

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Abstract: Scholars have contrasted the apparently accommodating “religious policy” of the early People’s Republic of China to the explicitly “anti-religious” policy of the Soviet Union. However, recent material suggests that the religious policy actually carried out was not so very different from its Soviet counterpart, despite emollient statements from Zhou Enlai. It is on this paradox that the title of the article plays, in as much as the Chinese Communists chose, on the one hand, “not to learn from” the Soviet Union in the sense of not to follow an anti-religious policy; and on the other, failed to learn lessons from a Soviet policy that had been massively counter-productive. The article does not seek to trace the influence of the Soviet Union directly on the CCP’s religious policy, since we do not yet have access to documents on internal policy-making in the PRC. Rather it compares differences and similarities between the religious policies of the two states; and by exploring policy in action, shows that the practice of the PRC deviated significantly from the inclusive tenets of the united front policy. It goes on to show that with the adoption of a policy of socialist construction, especially with the Great Leap Forward, the policy towards religion became steadily more repressive. Ironically, this may have happened partly because following the Sino-Soviet split, Mao Zedong was afraid that the PRC was being outflanked by the hardline anti-religious policy of the “revisionist” Khrushchev.

Keywords: religious policy of the People’s Republic of China, Soviet anti-religious policy, Khrushchev’s anti-religious policy, Zhou Enlai on religion, Mao Zedong on religion

论“勿学苏联”：1949-1965年中国的宗教政策

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摘要：关于中华人民共和国早期表面和缓的“宗教政策”和同时代苏联外在清晰的“反宗教政策”的异同，学者们已经进行了研究比对。然而，新近档案资料表明，尽管周恩来早期做出了一些稳健缓和的讲话与声明，新中国推行的宗教政策与同时期的苏联相对，似没有那般大相径庭。本文正是想强调这种似是而非（或：矛盾）的观点。由于中国共产党人的选择，一方面，“勿学苏联”，从某种意义上说，是不跟随（苏联）“反宗教政策”的步伐；另一方面，（中共）却没有因此从已经带来大规模相反效果的苏联方针中吸取教训。因为缺乏对中国内部政策制定方面的相关材料，本文不研究苏联对中华人民共和国宗教方针实施直接造成的影响，而是旨在研究比较中苏两国宗教政策的异同点并探索此项政策是如何贯彻落实的。由此本文不仅说明了中国在实践上已经偏离了（中苏）联合战线的内部宗旨，而且也展示了宗教方针在新中国社会主义建设中的走向，特别是在大跃进运动中，宗教政策越发呈现其压抑性（或：镇压性）。具有讽刺意味的是，上述的结果可能并没有大规模发生，因为随着中苏关系的破裂，毛泽东担心在与“修正主义者”赫鲁晓夫关于反宗教路线的争论中中方会甘拜下风，导致理论上的一败涂地。

关键词：中华人民共和国宗教方针、苏联反宗教政策、赫鲁晓夫的反宗教政策、周恩来论宗教、毛泽东论宗教

The 1950s was a time when the newly established People's Republic of China modelled its policies closely on those of the Soviet Union. Yet policy towards religion seems to constitute something of an exception. On 25 June 1950, Zhou Enlai reported to the party cell of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference that there were two types of religion in China: one was connected to ethnic minorities – Islam, Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism – and should always be treated with respect; the other – Christianity – was linked to imperialism, and should also be handled with care. Where a minority of hardened reactionaries sought to exploit religion for political ends, this should be treated as a political and not a religious matter. In the course of his speech he commented that while Lenin's statement of 1909 that religion is the opium of the people and an instrument of bourgeois reaction was appropriate for a period of revolution, it was not a suitable slogan for a government in power.¹ This statement, mildly distancing him from Lenin, was unusual for a Communist leader to make at this time. Zhou had elaborated on this position the previous month in a speech to Christian leaders: the government had to respect the religious beliefs of its people and reject the use of coercion to suppress religious activity: "Whoever tries to abolish religion artificially will find it impossible. The Soviet Union is a socialist country but it still has religion. We emphatically do not intend to do this. If we imagine that things we don't like will simply cease to exist, then that is not in accordance with objective reality."² Zhou's position has led scholars, both Chinese and western, to argue that the new PRC government consciously rejected Soviet policies towards religion.³ One early western scholar contrasted what he called the "accommodating" policy of the CCP towards religion with the harsh policy of the Soviet government.⁴ A recent scholar is more nuanced, but again stresses contrast: "Despite similar bases and theoretical arguments, the Soviet

¹ *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949-1976* [Zhou Enlai, a chronicle, 1949-1976], vol.1 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997), 49-50. The statement to which Zhou is referring was Lenin's essay 'The Attitude of the Workers' Party towards Religion', written in 1909.

² *Zhou Enlai tongyi zhanxian wenxuan* [Selected Works of Zhou Enlai on the United Front], (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1984), p.185.

³ Jin Yifeng, 'Xin Zhongguo zongjiao zhengce de zhengzhi jichu' [The Political Foundations of the Religious Policy of New China] (2009) <http://www.wxyjs.org.cn/GB/186517/11365043.html> (accessed 7 August, 2012).

⁴ W. Lee Rensselaer III, 'General Aspects of Chinese Communist Religious Policy, with Soviet Comparisons' *The China Quarterly*, No. 19 (1964), 161-173.

and Chinese approaches to religious repression are actually more different than they are similar.”⁵ Until we have full access to the policy documents of the CCP, it will not be possible to come to a definitive judgement. Clearly, there were salient differences in policy between the two communist states, which we shall explore below. However, material from recently opened archives in China allows us new insight into how religious policy was actually carried out on the ground, and it suggests that contrary to the emollient statements of Zhou Enlai, policy in practice was often not so very different from Soviet policy in that it was broadly – though never solely – repressive. It is on this paradox that the title of the article plays insofar as, on the one hand, the CCP opted ‘not to learn from’ – in the sense of chose not to follow – Soviet religious policy; but on the other, failed to learn lessons from a policy that had been massively counter-productive in the Soviet Union. The paper does not seek to trace the influence of the Soviet Union directly on the making of the CCP’s religious policy – this is impossible since we do not yet have access to documents on internal policy-making: rather it explores policy in action, showing that from the start practice deviated significantly from the irenic statements of some party leaders. Moreover, we show that CCP policy towards religion became steadily more repressive from the time of the Great Leap Forward onwards. Where appropriate, the paper highlights differences and similarities between the constituent elements of PRC religious policy and those of earlier Soviet policy in the 1920s and 1930s.

Forging a Religious Policy

The religious field in China was radically different from that in the Russian Empire. In October when the Bolsheviks seized power, they faced a powerful Orthodox Church which, though organizationally separate from the imperial bureaucracy, was governed by a state department, the Holy Synod, and funded to a significant extent by government. According to the 1898 census, about 70% of the population belonged to the Orthodox Church, and its rituals and beliefs permeated the daily life of the Russian population, especially in the countryside. There were substantial Muslim, Buddhist,

⁵ Christopher Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 256.

Catholic and Protestant minorities, but Orthodoxy was the only religion allowed to proselytize. In China, by contrast, the religious field was highly pluralistic, and the CCP was not confronted by a powerful religious establishment. Daoism and Buddhism, for example, had enjoyed imperial patronage at various times across the centuries, but they had never received endorsement as religions of state. Confucianism was the ideology of statecraft, and in the mid-Ming and early Qing periods was propagated among the populace via the local gentry, especially through the promotion of ancestor worship, but the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911 left Confucianism bereft of its symbolic centre and it went into gradual decline. The religion of the overwhelming majority of Han Chinese was neither Buddhist, Daoist nor Confucian, but drew selectively on all three traditions and combined these with elements of local ritual and belief. Popular religion was par excellence local, rooted in networks of cults, festivals and ancestor worship based on the household, territorial communities, guilds and other associations. Diffuse in character, it lacked many of the features associated with the modern conception of religion, such as institutionalised structures, trained personnel and a coherent belief system. Partly for this reason, the struggle against religion in the PRC – in the absence of centralised institutions that characterised Russian Orthodoxy – was never as important a priority for the Chinese Communists as it was for their Russian comrades. The CCP did not have to fight an institution with considerable resources and symbolic capital, as the Bolsheviks did in the civil war (1918-20), and this fact, together with the United Front policy that characterised the Chinese Revolution, oriented the CCP towards neutralising rather than suppressing religious organizations (albeit with significant exceptions).

The Bolsheviks came to power committed to disestablishing the Orthodox Church and to nationalizing its land. The Decree on Separation of Church and State, passed on 20 January (new style calendar: 2 February) 1918, nationalized the property of the Church, deprived religious bodies of recognition as legal entities, forbade religious education in schools and made the registration of births, marriages and deaths a civil matter. It also ordered the removal of all religious symbols and rituals from public places. Positively, the Decree proclaimed freedom of conscience without any restriction and the right to profess any religion or none. It did not mandate the persecution of

believers or prohibit public worship.⁶ A further feature of Bolshevik anti-religious policy was that the Soviet Constitution of 1918 deprived priests of voting rights, restricted their entitlement to rations and housing and required them to pay higher taxes. Clerics were also obliged to serve in a non-combatant capacity in the Red Army. Despite this legislation, there was no unanimity within the Bolshevik party concerning how religion should be eliminated or indeed about whether this should be a policy objective at all. Some party leaders argued that religion would wither of its own accord as the social conditions of the masses improved; some argued that combating religion was a matter of long-term education whereas others believed this goal could be advanced through “administrative methods.” There was no unified organizational centre responsible for anti-religious activity. The Union of Godless, a supposedly non-state organization which was set up in 1925, advocated the use of persuasive methods of propaganda and education in opposition to the so-called “priest eaters” of the Young Communist League (Komsomol), who favoured a more confrontational approach, revelling in antics such as setting pigs loose in church or staging “anti-festivals” at Easter and Christmas. Even within the Union of Godless, however, a minority condemned the Kulturträger majority, arguing instead for a “class struggle” approach to religion. And, crucially, during Stalin’s “revolution from above” (1928-31), which unleashed all-out collectivization and crash industrialization, the Union went on the offensive, accusing both the Komsomol – which by this stage had moderated its approach to anti-religious work – and the Commissariat of Enlightenment, responsible for anti-religious education in schools, of having compromised excessively with religion.

Upon coming to power in 1949, the CCP made several statements about the supposed freedoms enjoyed by believers in the Soviet Union. Article 5 of the Common Programme, passed by the People’s Consultative Conference on 29 September 1949, guaranteed “freedom of thought, speech, publication, assembly, association... religious belief and the freedom to hold processions and demonstrations.” In addition, Article 53 promised that “All national minorities shall have freedom to develop their dialects and languages, to

⁶ William B. Husband, *‘Godless Communists’: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), ch.2.

preserve or reform their traditions, customs and religious beliefs.”⁷ Despite public references to the Soviet example, the religious policy of the PRC in reality was more influenced by the example set by the Guomindang government. The 1912 constitution of the republic had declared state and religion separate and proclaimed freedom of religion (*zongjiao xinyang ziyou*). The latter, however, applied only to those religions deemed to possess the criteria associated with modern religion, namely, the five “world” religions of Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. These religions had clergy, bodies of doctrine, places of worship and training centres, and thus accorded with an essentially western notion of a proper religion. Nevertheless the Guomindang government required Buddhism and Daoism to modernize by creating national bureaucratic organisations and formalized procedures. By contrast, it deemed the religion of the majority of the population to lack these crucial defining features and thus dismissed it as “superstition” (*mixin*). Between 1928 and 1930, the Guomindang government launched a movement to destroy superstition (*pochu mixin*), on the grounds that it kept the populace in thrall to ignorance and prevented its development into a modern, rational citizenry.⁸ In practice, it was not that easy to differentiate between popular religion and the officially recognised religions of Buddhism and Daoism, since these were not easily separable from local cults and lay communities.⁹ In key respects, however, it was this model developed by the Guomindang, rather than a Soviet model that did not fit Chinese conditions which the CCP opted to follow.¹⁰ Freedom of religion was confined to the five modern religions and the one religion not recognised by the PRC government was that of the majority, which was dismissed as “feudal

⁷ The Common Programme. 29 September 1949. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1949-ccp-program.html> (accessed 6 August 2012).

⁸ Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 11-16.

⁹ Vincent Goossaert, ‘Republican Church Engineering: The National Religious Associations in 1912 China’, in Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (ed.), *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 209-32.

¹⁰ Ryan Dunch, ‘Christianity and “Adaptation to Socialism”’, in Yang (ed.), *Chinese Religiosities*, 160.

superstition” and had no given legal status. Indeed between 1962 and 1986 the term “popular religion” was never used.¹¹

Bolshevik propaganda portrayed the clergy as inveterate reactionaries: visual propaganda depicted priests as drunkards and gluttons, monks and nuns as sinister “black crows,” the faithful as innocent dupes of ruling-class propaganda. For their part, the majority of the hierarchy portrayed the Bolsheviks as Christ-haters, German hirelings, “Jewish-Masonic slave-masters,” men who led the simple people astray by false promises of salvation in the here-and-now. Lenin was not consistent in his views on religion. In November 1918, at a time when many of the Orthodox hierarchy had sided with the Whites, he argued for extreme caution in fighting “religious prejudices” and pointed to the danger of “offending religious feelings.” “We must use propaganda and education. By lending too sharp an edge to the struggle we may only arouse popular resentment...The deepest source of religious prejudice is poverty and ignorance; and that is the evil we have to combat.”¹² In spring 1922, however, when Russia was blighted by an atrocious famine, he took a much harsher stance. The Bolsheviks ordered the Church to hand over valuables to ease the plight of the starving; but believers, appalled at the thought of losing consecrated liturgical objects, resisted. In Shuia, a textile town near Moscow, on 15 March 1922 believers clashed with Red Army soldiers and this resulted in the death of five believers, the injury of many more, and the serious wounding of three soldiers. Lenin was enraged and demanded the decisive suppression of the “Black Hundred” clergy.¹³ In fact, Bolshevik policy towards the Church eased somewhat in the mid-1920s, yet a ferocious onslaught was resumed when Stalin launched his “revolution from above” in 1928. As pell-mell collectivization got underway, a Law on Religious Associations was enacted on 8 April 1929, which banned public

¹¹ Stephan Feuchtwang, ‘The Problem of “Superstition” in the People’s Republic of China’, in Gustavo Benavides and M. W. Daly (eds.), *Religion and Political Power* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 43 -68, p.46.

¹² V. I. Lenin, Speech to Conference of Working Women (November 1918) <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/nov/19.htm> (accessed 6 August 2012).

¹³ N. A. Krivova, ‘The Events in Shuia: A Turning Point in the Assault on the Church’ *Russian Studies in History*, Fall 2007, Vol. 46 Issue 2, pp. 8–38; Letter from Lenin to Molotov, 19 March 1922. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/ae2bkhun.html> (accessed 6 August 2012).

worship, closed the majority of places of worship, removed church bells, authorized the mass arrest of clergy, and imposed burdensome taxes and insurance fees on functioning congregations.¹⁴ The leitmotif of Stalinist discourse at this time became the “class enemy is carrying out its work under the cover of religion.”¹⁵

Such a relentlessly negative policy was in sharp contrast to that of the PRC in the immediate years following Liberation. Significantly, whereas the Soviets had an “anti-religious policy,” the CCP chose to have a “religious policy.” In 1953 Li Wei-han, head of the Central Committee United Front bureau, outlined what was to become the crucial formula summarizing the CCP approach to religion, namely, its “five characteristics” (*wuxing*): its longevity, its mass nature, its link with ethnic minorities, its international connections, and its complexity (*fuzaxing*).¹⁶ Party ideologists condemned attempts to combat religion using violent or administrative methods, and although they seldom referred to Soviet experience publicly, they consciously distanced themselves from it. Religion would, they argued, die away as the country advanced towards socialism, as economic well-being increased, and as the Chinese people became more educated and more scientific in their understanding of the natural and social worlds. The elimination of religion would thus be a long-term process so “any idea about taking coercive action is useless and positively harmful.”¹⁷ In his Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan (1927), Mao Zedong had argued that “supernatural authority” (*shenquan*) was one of “four thick ropes” binding the Chinese people, together with political authority, lineage authority, and patriarchy. He observed with delight how during the revolutionary movement initiated by the Northern Expedition of the National Revolutionary Army in 1926-27, the peasant associations destroyed statues of gods within local temples.

¹⁴ A. Luukkanen, *The Religious Policy of the Stalinist State* (Tampere: Tammer-Paino Oy, 1997), 66-7.

¹⁵ S. Khudiakov, ‘Itogi Ispolbiuro TsS SVB, 28-30 marta 1932’, *Antireligioznik*, 9, (1932) 28-32.

¹⁶ Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang yu Zhongguo de zongjiao wenti* [The Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Religious Issues] (Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2006), 128.

¹⁷ *Renmin ribao*, 23 Sept 1950, 4.

It is the peasants who made the idols, and when the time comes they will cast the idols aside with their own hands; there is no need for anyone else to do it for them prematurely. The Communist Party's propaganda policy in such matters should be, "Draw the bow without shooting, just indicate the motions." It is for the peasants themselves to cast aside the idols, pull down the temples to the martyred virgins and the arches to the chaste and faithful widows; it is wrong for anybody else to do it for them.¹⁸

Whereas the CCP saw the erosion of religious belief as an indirect consequence of economic, social and cultural change, the Bolsheviks believed that atheism should be vigorously propagated. The Soviet state was, in the words of William Husband, "the first modern government... to promote the rejection of all religious deities as a sustaining national ideal."¹⁹ The party programme of 1918 called for "systematic anti-religious propaganda to free the masses from their prejudices but without irritating the feelings of others." In the 1920s, the burden of anti-religious education fell on schools, the Komsomol and the Union of Godless. China, by contrast, did little to promote atheism through organs of state, although religion was banned from the classroom. No mass organization such as the Union of Godless existed, and no academic journal promoting atheism was published during the Mao era. There was, of course, an elaborate programme of political education – especially for party cadres – and this emphasised the incompatibility of religion with historical materialism, class struggle and anti-imperialism. And many books and journal articles were published in the 1950s that explained basic atheist and materialist principles; but it was only at the beginning of the 1960s that the government began to produce simple booklets aimed at a mass readership. The most notable of these was *Bu pa gui de gushi*, "Stories about not being afraid of Ghosts," which appeared in 1962 and in the production of which Mao himself took a hand.²⁰ In general, however, the united front policy in the

¹⁸ Mao Zedong, "Report on an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan," http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_2.htm#n22 (accessed 6 August 2012).

¹⁹ Husband, "Godless Communists," xii.

²⁰ Marsh, *Religion and the State*, 173; Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 174.

1950s stressed the desirability of materialists (*weiwu lunzhe*) and idealists (*weixin lunzhe*) working together to build socialist China, rather than the incompatibility of religion and socialism.²¹

Religious policy of the PRC was thus framed by the united front and by the need to manage ethnic minorities. The united front policy presumed that all Chinese shared a common heritage and that the real enemies of the CCP were only 5 to 10 per cent of society. In the religious sphere this entailed reinforcing friendly elements within each of the five recognised faith communities so that, with CCP guidance, they could lead an internal struggle to purge “reactionary” leaders and reorient their members towards patriotic support for the government. In respect of Buddhism, Daoism and Islam, the more particular aim was to purge them of “feudal” features and structures of exploitation, whereas in respect of Protestantism and Catholicism, it was to sever their ties to overseas bodies, purge them of “imperialist” influence, and put the churches under Chinese control. Officially approved religious leaders were offered places in government bodies, in line with Mao’s principle of “three-thirds,” whereby non-party progressives and “intermediate sections who are neither left nor right” sat alongside representatives of the CCP, who naturally played the leading role.²² In sharp contrast to Soviet practice, religious leaders were appointed to political bodies such as the People’s Congress and the People’s Consultative Conference at local, provincial and national levels.²³ At the Second Political Consultative Conference of 1954, for example, twelve religious leaders were elected to its committee, and in September 1954, fourteen religious leaders were present at the First National People’s Congress.²⁴ This policy of co-opting religious leaders was closely bound up with policy towards ethnic minorities, one of the most sensitive problems the PRC faced. Among groups such as Tibetans, Mongolians and Uighurs, religion was intimately associated with a nascent national identity, although there was no neat congruence between the two, insofar as some ten different

²¹ Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 149.

²² Mao Zedong, “On the Question of Political Power in the Anti-Japanese Base Areas,” 6 March 1940, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_33.htm. (Accessed 6 August 2012).

²³ Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), 153.

²⁴ Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 150.

ethnicities were Muslim. In general the CCP policy was to implement “democratic reform” of religious bodies, but far more slowly than in the case of the Han population. The initial policy of confiscating land belonging to religious bodies, for example, was quickly modified in national minority regions.²⁵ The Soviet government, despite a strong commitment to nation-building in areas such as Central Asia, never showed comparable sensitivity to the religious feelings of its own ethnic minorities.

From the first, however, freedom of religion in the PRC was always conditional on broad support for government policy. As Venerable Juzan, editor of *Modern Buddhism*, put it: “New Democracy takes as its premises the struggle against imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism, the overthrow of the reactionary power of the KMT and the purge of open and hidden counter-revolutionary forces. Buddhists who do not accept these premises are either reactionaries or backward elements. Reactionaries have no political rights.”²⁶ The policy of the PRC may best be characterised as one of *Gleichschaltung*, of bringing into line the five recognised religions through top-down coordination and monitoring of activities and personnel. The national associations that the five recognised religions were required to establish were the crucial instruments in this. In May 1953 the Islamic Association was formed and the following month the Buddhist Association. In July 1954 the Three-Self Movement was set up, which aimed to unify different Protestant denominations, the three selves being self-governance, self-support (i.e., financial independence from foreigners) and self-propagation (i.e., indigenous proselytization). Not until April 1957 did the government succeed in forming a Daoist Association, and not until August 1957 was the Patriotic Catholic Association fully operational. The tasks of these associations, which relied on subventions from the government, were to communicate state policies to their members, to report on their activities to the authorities, to ensure that local congregations registered with the authorities, and to mobilize their members in state campaigns such as those to eliminate corruption, increase production, or support the war effort in Korea.²⁷ The associations were staffed by religious leaders approved by the government. If the Buddhist

²⁵ Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 132-3.

²⁶ Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 6.

²⁷ Welch, *Buddhism* 30-36.

Association, for example, wished to appoint an abbot it had to submit a name for approval to the Religious Affairs Bureau, and religious leaders were expected to bring the doctrine and practices of their faith into broad alignment with government policies, if necessary by promoting internal schism.

Buddhism, being the largest of the five officially recognised religions, was probably the religion of most interest to the government. This was mainly because of its centrality to the peoples of Tibet and Inner Mongolia, but also because of its centrality to foreign relations with neighbouring Asian countries. From 1952 to 1966, at least 36 foreign Buddhist delegations visited China and 11 Chinese delegations went abroad.²⁸ The Buddhist Association of China was organised around a core of progressive Buddhists, one of the more radical being the aforementioned Venerable Juzan (1908-1984), who in the mid-1940s had launched the New Buddhist Movement (*Xinfojiao yundong*) to campaign against the corruption of the sangha, or monastic order. He embraced the revolution, inveighing against the “feudal” and “backward” character of Chinese Buddhism, and championed the ideal of monks engaging in “self-reform through labour.”²⁹ The first president of the Buddhist Association was the Tibetan, Geshe Sherab Gyatso, 喜饒嘉措 (1884–1968), who had also been active in the republican era in reforming monastic education in Tibet. He too was an enthusiastic supporter of the revolution.³⁰ In general, however, it proved far more difficult for the CCP to coopt Tibetan Buddhist leaders, and this was one reason why the later attempt by the Buddhist Association to win leadership of the World Fellowship of Buddhists – and thus serve the foreign policy of the PRC – failed.

The policy of control through regulation and cooptation did not prove easy to implement. Document 19, the decree of 1982 that signalled a sharp change of policy towards religion following the end of the Cultural Revolution, pointed to “the many twists and turns in the party’s work with

²⁸ Ji Zhe, ‘Secularization as Religious Restructuring: Statist Institutionalization of Chinese Buddhism and its Paradoxes’, in Yang (ed.), *Chinese Religiosities*, 246; Welch, 1972, 185-201.

²⁹ Xue Yu, ‘Buddhist Contribution to the Socialist Transformation of Buddhism in China: Activities of Ven. Juzan during 1949–1953’, *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 10 (2009), 217-53.

³⁰ The Treasury of Lives. Sherab Gyatso. <http://www.tibetanlineages.org/biographies/view/Geshe%20Sherab%20Gyatso/4642> (accessed 30 July 2011).

regard to the religious question.”³¹ Such twists derived partly from tension within the party leadership between those who favoured a moderate, gradualist approach to religious policy and those who hoped to extirpate it by force. They also derived from inadequate coordination between the different agencies involved in implementing religious policy. In the Soviet Union this had been a huge problem prior to the Second World War; there the organizations tasked with formulating and executing anti-religious policy included the Anti-Religious Commission of the Bolshevik Central Committee (from 1922), the security organs (OGPU), the Permanent Cult Commission of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets (set up in 1929) - plus its departments at the lower levels of the soviet apparatus - along with inspectors of religious affairs in local soviets (who often acted independently of the local commissars of the Cult Commission), the Commissariat of Justice, the Commissariat of Enlightenment, the Komsomol, and the League of Godless. Such competing jurisdictions led to what Arto Luukkanen has called “anarchy in the middle,” whereby local officials acquired a certain leeway to ignore central directives, often in order to impose greater restrictions on religious activity than was desired by the centre, especially by squeezing money from clergy and churches to boost the revenue of local soviets.³² In China administrative incoherence was less than in the Soviet Union, yet under-institutionalization and overlapping jurisdiction allowed local officials to determine religious policy to some degree.

The Religious Affairs Bureau was the body tasked with implementing a coordinated religious policy and with monitoring religious activity at the grass roots. Set up in 1951, the Bureau was initially a department of the culture and education commission of the Government Administrative Council, but became a bureau of the State Council after the latter was created in 1954. Political direction of the Bureau’s work was provided by the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee (*Zhonggong zhongyan tongzhan bu*), the organ that supervised all non-party groups.³³ Offices of the Religious Affairs

³¹ “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period” [http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Document_no. 19 1982.pdf](http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Document_no.19.1982.pdf)

³² Luukkanen, *Religious Policy*, 29, 103; Terry Martin, “Interpreting the New Archival Signals,” *Cahiers du monde russe*, 40: 1-2, 1999, 116.

³³ Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, “Making Religion and Making the State in

Bureau were established at provincial, county and municipal level if there were sufficient religious sites and believers to warrant this. In many rural areas, however, these offices did not exist. In two prefectures (*qu*) in northern Shaanxi province, for example, the civil affairs bureaus (*minzhengbu*), based in county governments, had charge of religious affairs.³⁴ This meant that the same officials staffed the local united front and religious affairs bureaux.³⁵ Even where local religious affairs bureaux did exist, cadres, many of them former soldiers in the People's Liberation Army, for the most part had little understanding of the religions they were meant to supervise.³⁶ And in respect of popular religion – of which they had most understanding, given their own backgrounds – they crucially had little sense of whether a particular practice was lawful or “superstitious,” as we shall see below.

Despite the fact that the PRC sought to craft a religious policy different from the anti-religious policy of the Soviet Union, we know that it kept a close eye on post-war developments in the Soviet Union. In December 1954, for instance, the Religious Affairs Bureau sent a package of materials entitled “To broaden the propaganda of science and atheism” to all provincial party committees which consisted of four documents on the recent, abortive attempt by Nikita Khrushchev to revive a more militant style of anti-religious work. On 7 July 1954, against a background of agricultural crisis and plentiful evidence that religion was flourishing in the countryside, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union issued a decree entitled “On mistakes in carrying out scientific-atheist propaganda among the population.” In effect, it called for a return to the *Sturm und Drang* methods of the 1930s: “Churchmen and sectarians are seeking different methods to poison the consciousness of the people with the drug of religion.” The intensification of anti-religious work, however, quickly proved divisive, given that Soviet society was still coming to terms with the trauma of war and the implications

Modern China: an Introductory Essay,” in Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank (eds), *Making Religion, Making the, State. The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 10.

³⁴ Adam Yuet Chau, “Expanding the Space of Popular Religion: Local Temple Activism and the Politics of Legitimation in Contemporary Rural China,” in Ashiwa and Wank eds., *Making Religion*, 218.

³⁵ Goossaert and Palmer, *Religious Question*, 154.

³⁶ David L. Wank, “Institutionalizing modern “Religion” in China’s Buddhism: Political Phases of a Local Revival,” in Ashiwa and Wank eds., *Making Religion*, 130-1.

of Stalin's death. On 10 November 1954, the campaign was brought to a halt with a new decree "On mistakes in the implementation of scientific-atheist propaganda among the population." This claimed that "instead of systematic and deep propagation of natural-scientific knowledge and broad explanatory work, based on the reality that believers are consciously leaving behind the influence of the Church and other religious prejudices, some officials have begun to apply administrative methods to religious ministers and believers and to insult their feelings."³⁷ A translation of this decree was included in the package sent by the Religious Affairs Bureau to the provincial committees of the CCP, along with the editorial from *Pravda*, 24 July 1954, "To develop more broadly scientific-atheist propaganda," which had announced the campaign in the first place. The other two pieces in the package included an article from the journal *Party Life*, entitled "Improving work in propagandizing scientific materialism," plus a report from the Cultural Group of the Chinese Embassy in Moscow offering a commentary on the abortive campaign.³⁸ We can infer that the Religious Affairs Bureau was sending a coded warning to provincial party officials to abide by the principles of patient educational work and eschew administrative methods. But if policy towards religion was as motivated by patient education and patriotic unity as officials statements proclaimed, why was such a warning considered necessary?

Religious Policy in Practice

Land reform in China was a very different process from the spontaneous dispossession of landlords by peasant communes that had taken place in Russia in 1917-18. In Russia millions of believers had taken part in the seizure and redistribution of private landholdings, including the three million hectares that belonged to the Church. Of this, over 900,000 hectares belonged to monasteries and convents and supported around 95,000 monks and nuns; it was these monastic communities that were the principal target of Bolshevik suppression in the early years of the revolution, with 673 of the 1,253

³⁷ M. V. Shkarovskii, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' v XX veke* (Moscow: Veche, 2010), 350-353; Joan Delaney Grossman, "Khrushchev's Anti-Religious Policy and the Campaign of 1954," *Soviet Studies*, vol.24, no.3, 1973, 374-86.

³⁸ Hubei Provincial Archive: SZ D 175. The titles of the *Pravda* and *Party Life* articles are my back-translations from Chinese.

monasteries and convents that existed in 1918 passing into state ownership by 1921.³⁹ In China land reform was a party-directed process, but as in Soviet Russia the teams that came into the villages targeted land belonging to monasteries for confiscation, along with that belonging to landlords and rich peasants. On average, Chinese monasteries had relatively little land, and such land as they had was often worked by monks themselves, although there were a few very wealthy Buddhist and Daoist temples. The exception was Tibet where monasteries owned over a third of land, property and livestock.⁴⁰ Land reform entailed that monastic estates were confiscated – as were the often much more substantial lands belonging to lineages – and the management of temples was transferred from senior monks or priests to management committees involving local peasants. Religious organizations, however, were allowed to rent out buildings, and their property was not subject to taxation. Moreover, in June 1950 the government decreed that religious personnel who were able-bodied and willing to work should be given a share of land.⁴¹ This was a more nuanced policy than that practiced by the Bolsheviks, yet local officials were often guilty of “excesses”. A few “monk-lords of feudalism” (*fengjian sengfa*) were put to death and some cadres arbitrarily banned the giving of gifts to temples or forbade the repair of religious buildings.⁴² This prompted Zhou Enlai to complain that local cadres were calling on the masses to “thoroughly combat the residues of religion” and carrying out anti-religious propaganda in temples and church precincts.⁴³

In the Soviet Union closure of churches began almost as soon as the Bolsheviks came to power, although initially these were only the private chapels of the nobility and churches attached to state institutions. With Stalin’s “revolution from above,” however, a massive campaign of closure and

³⁹ M. V. Shkarovskii, “Monastyri severo-zapada Rossii v 1920-1930-e gody,” in *Tserkov’ v istorii Rossii*, sb.1 (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 1997), 18; Boris Kandilov, *Monastyri-muzei i antireligioznaia propaganda* (Moscow: Bezbozhnik, 1929) 78.

⁴⁰ Vincent Goossaert, *Dans les temples de la Chine. Histoire des cultes, Vie des communautés* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000), 148; Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 188

⁴¹ Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 155.

⁴² Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 157-8; Ji Zhe, “Secularization,” 244.

⁴³ Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 130.

frequent demolition of churches got underway.⁴⁴ Whereas in 1914 there were 38,220 churches in the Russian territory of the tsarist empire, by 1936 there were 14,090, and by 1940, just 950 within the 1936 boundaries of the Russian Federation.⁴⁵ There was nothing similar in the PRC, prior to the Cultural Revolution. Again, the policy of the CCP had more in common with that of the Guomindang than with that of the Soviets, or from the last decade of the Qing dynasty, a steady drive had unfolded to turn local temples into “useful” buildings such as schools, granaries and government offices. Whereas it is estimated that in 1900 there were at least one million temples in China, by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937 more than half had ceased to have a religious function.⁴⁶ After 1949 the PRC government accelerated this policy of converting temples to other uses, but at the same time supported the restoration of showcase temples as a way of demonstrating good will towards ethnic minorities and to their co-religionists outside China. Between 1951 and 1958, over 100 monasteries and pagodas were repaired - not a large number, given that in 1949 there were 230,000 temples with resident monks and nuns, yet a not insignificant outlay for a cash-strapped government.⁴⁷ And in a move that would have been unthinkable in the Soviet Union, the government even built a few new temples, notably the Buddha’s Tooth temple outside Beijing, as part of a charm offensive towards Buddhists in Burma and Vietnam; it also sponsored celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the Sakyamuni Buddha’s achievement of nirvana.⁴⁸

For the ordinary village temple, Liberation was not such good news. The restoration of social and political order, together with the benefits brought to many poor peasant households by land reform, meant that many villages had the financial wherewithal to rebuild temples damaged or destroyed during

⁴⁴ S. A. Smith, “Contentious Heritage: Churches in Russia and Temples in China in Communist and Post-Communist Times” in Paul Betts and Corey Ross eds., *Heritage in the Modern World: Historical Preservation in Global Perspective* (Past and Present supplement, 10, Oxford University Press, 2015), 178-212.

⁴⁵ J. S. Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), 10; M. I. Odintsov (ed.), *Religioznye organizatsii v SSSR nakanune i v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny, 1941–1945 gg.* (Moscow: RAGS, 1995), 44-5.

⁴⁶ Vincent Goossaert, “Le destin de la religion chinoise au 20ème siècle,” *Social Compass*, 50 (4), 2003, 436 (429-40).

⁴⁷ Welch, *Buddhism*, 150. This figure seems too high.

⁴⁸ Welch, *Buddhism*, 153.

years of war. Most local cadres appear to have turned a blind eye to this. Where more substantial temples were concerned, however, they could be more hostile. On 16 June 1951, the Central Committee ordered that there should be no occupation of temples without the agreement of resident clergy; that no damage should be done to temples; and that all historic relics should be preserved. If temples were to be confiscated, it stated, they should be ordinary temples without abbots (*zhuchi*) - in fact such temples were the vast majority - or else be voluntarily handed over to the local government in areas where temples were numerous.⁴⁹ That the government felt the need to issue such a decree tells us something about situation on the ground. Further directives ordering the protection of temples and other historical monuments followed, including one in 1954. On 21 March 1960, the Political Section of the Red Army ordered soldiers to respect religious belief and not to use temples for target practice.⁵⁰

Monks and nuns were encouraged to abandon their monastic vocation, and between 1950 and 1952, as farm rents, fees from religious services and contributions from the faithful dried up, many opted to return to lay life.⁵¹ In the course of the 1950s, the number of Buddhist monks fell from around 500,000 to over 100,000.⁵² With the onset of the cooperative movement, local officials put increased pressure on monks and nuns to join the cooperatives. In Anhui province, not a region of Buddhist strength, there were 3,158 Buddhist temples, 3,933 monks, 2,797 nuns and 3,500 lay Buddhists (*jushi* 居士) in 1949. By 1955, there were 1,942 temples, of which only 800 were “fully” (*wancheng*) functioning, staffed by 4,962 monks and nuns, together with almost 1000 lay Buddhists. By 1962, only 700 temples remained, staffed by 560 monks, 889 nuns and fewer than 200 lay Buddhists.⁵³ So far as Daoism was concerned, it is estimated that in 1949, there were 10,000 Daoist temples (*guan*, i.e. larger temples, and smaller *miao* or *si*) in China, with perhaps

⁴⁹ Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 129.

⁵⁰ Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 185.

⁵¹ Beatrice Leung, “China’s Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity,” *China Quarterly*, 184 (2005), 894-913, p.899.

⁵² Goossaert and Palmer, *Religious Question*, 160.

⁵³ *Anhui difang zhi*. <http://61.191.16.234:8080/was40/pdf/shzh/63> (last accessed 22 March 2011), 215.

50,000 priests, divided between the Zhengyi and Quanzhen schools.⁵⁴ In Anhui province incomplete figures show that in 1949 there were around 120 Daoist temples, with some 800 priests, but that by 1958 there were only ten temples and 130 priests left.⁵⁵ Daoism posed particular problems for the authorities, since the great majority of ritual specialists were not ordained, but were so-called *fashi*, who were married and operated outside formal structures. Their main function was to assist at funerals and community rituals and to organise spirit mediumship: so their activities overlapped to a considerable extent with the “feudal superstition” of the masses and so were not considered legitimate religion. Worse still, the authorities often made little distinction between Daoist activity and that of the *huidaomen*, or redemptive sects, who were mercilessly targeted for suppression. Daoist temples came under pressure from public security officials to cooperate in eliminating these sects (in Anhui official Daoist bodies helped to uproot the Wuweidao 无为道 and the Xiantiandao 先天道).⁵⁶

Official policy towards the redemptive sects was entirely comparable to Stalinist anti-religious policy in the 1930s, and bore no relation to the professed policy of letting religion die out gradually. The sects were voluntary congregations, relatively open to new members, and were committed to an ideal of universal salvation, irrespective of family, lineage, or place of residence. Many believed in a creator deity and in three cycles of creation and destruction (*kalpas*) which would terminate in the third *kalpa*, when a savior (generally the Maitreya Buddha) would appear on earth to deliver the faithful from worldly torment. They explicated their often apocalyptic doctrine in “precious volumes” (*baojuan*) and were adept at spirit writing. In the unsettled conditions of the 1930s and 1940s, these societies flourished, especially in the cities and villages of north China behind Japanese lines. By 1949, well over 300 redemptive sects existed in China with a total of 820,000 ritual specialists and more than 13 million disciples, roughly 2.4% of the

⁵⁴ Chen Yaoting, “Taoism in the People’s Republic of China,” Fabrizio Pregadio (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, vol.1 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 174.

⁵⁵ *Anhui difang zhi*, 218-20.

⁵⁶ Yang Der-Ruey, “From ritual skills to discursive knowledge: Changing styles of Daoist transmission in Shanghai,” in Adam Yuet Chau (ed.), *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 81-107.

population.⁵⁷ Some leaders, especially of the Yiguandao, had undoubtedly collaborated with the Japanese occupation, while others made the fateful choice to side with the Guomindang during the civil war. It seems to have been largely for these reasons that they were so hated by the Communist regime. According to the government of Xiangshan county in Zhejiang in 1951: “The feudal superstitious sects carry out counter-revolutionary activity under the control of bandits and secret agents... they deceive and hoodwink the masses, they swindle the people’s finances, they spread rumours, foment discord, disrupt production, and destroy public order.”⁵⁸ Some sects undoubtedly did take part in anti-Communist rebellions in the early 1950s, especially in the southwest, but most were quietist congregations that confined themselves to reading sutras and charitable activity.⁵⁹ The campaign to suppress the societies, begun in 1948 in the liberated areas of north China, escalated to a national scale in late 1950, following the outbreak of the Korean War. It was government policy to execute the most notorious leaders of the sects, especially those who had collaborated with the Japanese and Nationalists or who had betrayed Communists to the secret police; to imprison those guilty of serious offences; and to put ranking leaders not guilty of crimes under surveillance. The millions of ordinary rank-and-file disciples were encouraged to “repent” and publicly withdraw from the sects (*tuidao*).⁶⁰

Leaders of the five officially recognised religions who refused to cooperate with the authorities were also subject to repression. Catholic clergy, for example, put up considerable resistance to the demand that they renounce obedience to the Vatican; and in 1951 two archbishops, two bishops and fifteen priests were killed or died in prison.⁶¹ It was not until 1957 that the

⁵⁷ Shao Yong, *Zhongguo huidaomen* [Chinese Redemptive Societies] (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1997), 452. These are conservative figures.

⁵⁸ *Zhongguo huidaomen shiliao jichang bianzuan weiyuanhui* (ed.), *Zhongguo huidaomen shiliao jicheng – jin bai nian lai huidaomen de zuzhi yi fenbu* [A Collection of Historical Materials on the Chinese Sects: Their Organization and Distribution across a Century], two vols. (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004), 451.

⁵⁹ S. A. Smith, “Redemptive Societies and the Communist State, 1949 to the 1980s” in Jeremy Brown and Matthew Johnson (eds.), *Between Revolution and Reform: China at the Grassroots, 1960-1980* (Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

⁶⁰ Chang-tai Hong, “The Anti-Unity Sect Campaign and Mass Mobilization in the Early People’s Republic of China,” *China Quarterly*, 202, June 2010, 400-420.

⁶¹ David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, Washington DC: Regnery, 2006), 208.

government succeeded in forming the Catholic Patriotic Association, which recognised the pope's spiritual authority but denied him the right to interfere in the affairs of Chinese Catholics. Shanghai Bishop Gong Pinmei bitterly opposed the Association, and spent thirty years in jail for his pains. The Protestant Three-Self Movement was led by progressive Christians, such as Wu Yuzong, who had been a leading light in the YMCA, and Ding Guangxun, an Anglican priest who had served as mission secretary for the World Student Christian Federation. Ding's attempts to point up the parallels between Christianity and Communism by stressing the centrality of good works, however, did not go down well with co-religionists of a more evangelical persuasion.⁶² So although about three-quarters of the Protestant churches registered with the Three-Self Movement, a minority refused to do so.⁶³ Ni Tuosheng (1903-72), an evangelical with a millenarian outlook, had inspired the formation of some 700 local churches during the republican era and in 1952 was arrested. In 1956 he was condemned as the head of a "counter-revolutionary clique" and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Today, the Little Flock (Xiaoqun), as his movement is known, has become the largest Christian denomination in China and has an international following.⁶⁴

As these examples suggest, the gap between the official policy of conditional religious toleration and policy as practiced could be yawning. Nevertheless, compared with what was to come, the period up to 1958 was one of relative moderation. It was only with the onset of the Great Leap Forward that religious policy radicalized. In March 1958, *Red Flag* carried an article "A Major Victory for Atheism," which deprecated the waste of valuable resources on superstitious activity and claimed that the campaign to "smash gods and spirits" and obliterate superstitious beliefs in the villages was emanating from the "basic desire of the masses...to raise production and improve livelihood."⁶⁵ During the Great Leap, the number of churches in Shanghai fell from 200 to 8;

⁶² Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Politics of Faith: Patterns of Church-State Relations in Maoist China (1949-1976)," *Historia actual online*, Núm. 17 (Otoño, 2008), 129-138; Dunch, "Christianity and "Adaptation to Socialism"," 161.

⁶³ Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 134.

⁶⁴ Watchman Nee. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watchman_Nee; Daniel H. Bays, "From Foreign Mission to Chinese Church," *Christian History and Biography*, 98:2, 2008., <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/2008/issue98/2.6.html> (accessed 22 March 2011).

⁶⁵ Hongqi, March 1958. *Selections from China Mainland Magazines*, 138, 1958, pp.5-17.

in Beijing from 66 to 4.⁶⁶ In Beijing more than 2,000 temples, most of them very small, were confiscated or demolished.⁶⁷ In Dachuan county in Gansu officials launched an “anti-feudal privilege campaign” in August-September 1958 in which the county’s major Daoist, Buddhist and popular temples were dismantled. Materials taken from these buildings were used to construct bridges, schools and irrigation facilities. Only a nationally protected group of Buddhist shrines was spared.⁶⁸ In Liaoning the provisional people’s council extended the ban on “reactionary redemptive sects” to spirit mediums and sorcerers.⁶⁹ Clergy began to be “targets of dictatorship” (*zhuanzheng duixiang*) and many were packed off to labour camps. Chen Jinlong cites an astonishing statistic that by the end of 1961, only 8% of places of worship that had existed in 1949 were still operational; and in some areas the percentage was as low as 1% to 2%.⁷⁰ Despite *Red Flag*’s talk of an “all-out campaign,” however, the extent to which the anti-religious campaign was actually implemented seems to have varied, being heavily dependent on the initiative of local cadres, for whom the elimination of religion was usually a relatively low priority compared with the requirement to increase grain production.

As is well known, the Great Leap Forward led to a ghastly famine that killed millions of peasants. What is less well known is that in the aftermath of the famine there was a vast and spontaneous upsurge in religious activity of all kinds. The one million plus members of the work teams sent into the villages as part of the Socialist Education Movement (1963-66), ostensibly to stamp out corruption on the part of officials, were horrified to discover the scale of the revival. Money, they reported, was being “wasted” on temple reconstruction, on extravagant temple festivals and on lavish marriage and funeral rituals. A report by the propaganda department of the county party committee on religious activities in Shazhou county in Jiangsu stated that after the anti-rightist movement (1957), priests, monks and nuns had ceased their

⁶⁶ Goossaert and Palmer, *Religious Question*, 162.

⁶⁷ “Beijing: the Fate of the Old”. http://www.chinaheritagenewsletter.org/features.php?searchterm=001_beijing.inc&issue=001

⁶⁸ Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, 1996), 52.

⁶⁹ *Liaoning ribao*, 1 September 1957, *Survey of the China Mainland Press* (SCMP), 1656, 21 Nov. 1957.

⁷⁰ Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 233.

activities, while the ritual specialists associated with popular religion, such as spirit mediums, Daoist fashi, fortune-tellers and geomancers, had lessened their activities. Since 1962, however, the report complained that religious activity of all kinds was flourishing.⁷¹ In Changshu in Jiangsu a preliminary survey in 1962 revealed the existence of 599 professional practitioners of superstition, including Daoist priests, spirit mediums, expounders of scripture (讲經), ritual drummers, fortune tellers and geomancers. In the tenth brigade of Wushi commune, 49 cases of superstitious activity were uncovered that were said to have led to a loss of 400 labour days.⁷² The religious revival was particularly marked in the coastal regions of the south. In 17 counties and cities of Zhanjiang (Tsamkong) in southwest Guangdong, 2,173 temples were rebuilt in 1963.⁷³ In Liaoning the provincial public security bureau announced in August 1963 that, according to incomplete statistics from 22 counties, 4,182 practitioners of superstition were active, among whom the most numerous were the 3,400 female and male spirit mediums. It noted with alarm that around a quarter of these had taken up this activity only recently: “some young people, with no care for expense, become apprentices of masters.”⁷⁴ In Haidian district of Beijing, 87 “phoney monks” were discovered officiating at a repentance ritual known as *gan jing chan* (赶经忏): of these, four were authorized Buddhist monks, four were monks who had resumed the secular life, 47 were commune members, 16 were unemployed workers, five were casual workers and eleven were building workers or employees of the Shijingshan iron and steel foundry. The party cell in the Haidian district people’s committee was ordered to suppress the phoney monks, and to assist local officials in differentiating between fake monks and real monks. Authorized monks were to be encouraged to engage in productive labour if they were of working age but were to be allowed to practice rituals within temple compounds.⁷⁵

What was new in official discourse in the early 1960s was the claim that the religious revival was being stirred up by landlords, rich peasants, counter-

⁷¹ Jiangsu Provincial Archive: 3089-长-67

⁷² *Neibu Cankao*, 24 January 1962, p.14.

⁷³ Guangdong Provincial Archive, 217-1-133.

⁷⁴ *Neibu cankao*, 15 August, 1963.

⁷⁵ Haidian District Archive in Beijing: 2-115-90.

revolutionaries and “bad elements” in order to sabotage socialist construction. This echoed the emphasis in Stalinist discourse during the ‘revolution from above’ that religion was being used by class enemies to undermine the revolution. According to the seventh national congress on religious work in December 1962 and January 1963, religion had been used by the exploiting classes during the Great Leap Forward in order to undermine socialist construction, with religious leaders not only rejecting the two-line struggle but making every effort to strengthen reactionary forces. The congress called for a class approach to religious policy.⁷⁶ The previously salient distinction between “religion” and “superstition” was now increasingly challenged, as the earlier rhetoric of treating religion with respect was jettisoned. In July 1963, the Tibetologist, Ya Hanzhang, wrote an article in *People’s Daily* “On the Question of Religious Superstitions” which effectively denied any distinction between religion and superstition: “As long as class and class struggle are present, the struggle against religious superstitions will always be associated with the class struggle.”⁷⁷ Yet *People’s Daily* also carried an article by Chen Yu, entitled “Be on the Alert,” which warned against the use of compulsion: “eradication of superstitious belief in gods and spirits has to depend on the voluntary awakening of the masses.”⁷⁸ But the initiative seems to have been seized by radicals in the party leadership, who opposed the relatively moderate policies advocated by such as Zhou Enlai. In December 1963 the party cell in the Religious Affairs Bureau, having gathered information about the revival of superstitious activities in a sample of counties, drew up draft recommendations that referred promiscuously to “religious superstitious activity” (*zongjiao mixiu huodong*).⁷⁹ Many local party organizations, however, while toughening policy, continued to advocate a more differentiated approach. Prior to the recommendations of the Religious Affairs Bureau in July 1963, for example, the Bazhong county people’s committee in Sichuan enjoined officials to uphold the distinction between “religious activities” and “superstitious activities.” The former, it said (somewhat surprisingly), included such rituals as burning incense sticks, chanting scriptures, worshipping and making small

⁷⁶ Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchangdang*, 232.

⁷⁷ *SCMP*, 3048, August 15, 1963.

⁷⁸ *SCMP*, 3048, August 15 1963.

⁷⁹ Shanghai Municipal Archive: B22-1-134.

offerings to the gods – things that many local authorities certainly classed as “feudal superstition.” Even more intriguingly, it divided “superstitious activities” into “ordinary superstitious activities of the masses,” such as ancestor worship, and “organised superstitious activities,” such as those that took place at temple fairs. The committee warned officials to come down hard on the latter since these were the kind of events instigated or exploited by class enemies, but it advocated tolerance of the former.⁸⁰ As yet, the turn towards a “class” approach to religious policy was a straw in the wind, but the wind would become a gale by 1966, with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. Already by October 1965, an article in *New Construction* could demand without qualification a “rigorous struggle against religion on all fronts, the pulling up and destruction of its poisonous roots.”⁸¹

It seems persuasive to read the radicalization of religious policy from late 1962 as partly a response to the upsurge in religious activity on the ground in the wake of the famine; but it became caught up with the struggle by Mao Zedong to combat what he increasingly perceived as the danger of ‘revisionism’. Chen Jinlong, the principal historian of the CCP’s religious policy, has made the thought-provoking claim that a “major cause” (*zhongyao de yuanyin*) of the growing radicalization of religious policy was Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign of 1959 to 1964.⁸² Unfortunately, he provides no evidence to support this, although it is a claim made by others. Khrushchev seems to have felt that following the launch of sputnik into outer space, it was high time the Soviet people threw off the shackles of religion. His anti-religious campaign, first attempted in 1954 but now relaunched in 1959 on a large scale, led to the widespread closure of churches and monasteries, restrictions on parents’ right to teach their children religion, and a ban on the presence of children at church services (beginning in 1961 with the Baptists and then extended to the Orthodox in 1963). Khrushchev was a contemptible

⁸⁰ Sichuan Provincial Archive: 50-349.

⁸¹ *Xin Jianshe*, 10:3, 20 October 1965; *Survey of the China Mainland Press*, 3599, Nov.1965, 17.

⁸² Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*, 239. He cites in support of his view that Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign had a “negative influence” on China’s religious policy an article by Fu Shuzheng and Lei Liping, “Heluxiaofu shiqi de fan zongjiao yundong ji qi jiaoxun,” [The Anti-Religious Movement in Khrushchev’s Time and its Lessons] *Shehui kexue zhanxian* 4(1996), 211-17. But the latter does not contain compelling evidence for the claim.

revisionist in the eyes of Mao Zedong, so it not impossible that his radical policy caused Mao to feel that he could not be seen to be any less zealous at a time when the contest for domination of the world communist movement was at its peak.

Conclusion

The story of China's religious policy highlights the complexities of the Sino-Soviet friendship of the 1950s. It affirms Chang-tai Hong's claim that "Soviet models were never blindly followed and, on many occasions, were either rejected by Chinese officials or appropriated for their own use."⁸³ It is entirely possible that the Soviets broadly endorsed the determination of the CCP to carve out an independent policy – a "religious policy" as opposed to an "anti-religious policy" after 1949 – since they surely recognised how different was the religious field in China from that in the Soviet Union, and may have accepted that the struggle against religion was not a political priority in the same way it had been for the Bolsheviks. Moreover, the CCP's departure from Soviet policy in the sphere of religion was not a recent development: it had begun as early as 1937. From that time, the CCP had gained considerable experience in connecting a more liberal policy to the needs of the united front and the maintenance of good relations with ethnic minorities. It may well be, therefore, that this was an area in which Moscow accepted that the PRC could deviate significantly from the Soviet model. Until the relevant archives in China are finally open, however, this can be no more than speculation. Speculating further, we may discover that there were elements to the CCP's religious policy to which the Soviets were less forbearing, such as the reluctance of the CCP to carry out mass atheist propaganda. Yet as we have seen, religious policy in practice – and from the first - frequently departed radically from the peaceful and inclusive tenets of the united front, partly because local officials were often ignorant of, or in a position to ignore, central directives, and partly because central government itself was not prepared to countenance any religious activity that was not in strict conformity with policy laid down by the Religious Affairs Bureau. Redemptive societies, priests

⁸³ Chang-tai Hong, *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 257.

loyal to Rome, or evangelical Christians were beyond the pale from the first, and central government showed little inhibition in crushing them. At least until the early 1960s, however, repression was not the principal means used by central government: rather it preferred to use its power productively through regulation, cooptation and cooperation, in order to define the appropriate sphere of religion and to shape the forms of acceptable religious activity.

As the New Democratic phase of the revolution gave way to the phase of socialist construction in the mid-1950s, however, it is clear that some CCP leaders became increasingly impatient with a scenario in which religion was set slowly to wither away. With the onset of the Great Leap Forward, officials at every level of the party-state itched to move swiftly to socialism; and although curbing religious practice never had the same priority as boosting grain production, the utopian sense that communism was just beyond the horizon led some officials to adopt a much tougher stance towards public manifestations of religion. Finally, in the wake of the death of millions and a mass religious revival in the early 1960s, the regime opted for an outright anti-religious policy that was not so very different from the one pioneered by Stalin, with “administrative methods” well to the fore and with religion excoriated as a tool of the class enemy. In little more than ten years, therefore, the PRC moved from endorsing Zhou Enlai’s belief that China should not seek to emulate Soviet policy in the religious sphere to a policy that was thoroughly redolent of the Soviet prototype. Ironically, this may have happened in part because Mao Zedong was afraid that the PRC was in danger of being outflanked in revolutionary fervour by the revisionists across the border.

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