

Limitations on the Right to Believe on the Chinese Mainland

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State Organisation of Religion

During the last few years, many foreign visitors to China have commented on the increased freedom for people who wish to attend religious services held in special buildings — Christian buildings, Buddhist temples, Chinese Muslim mosques and mosques belonging to some northwestern nationalities. In addition services are often held in private houses where members of cults are prepared to allow their homes to be so used.

The decision as to whether to allow such meetings is determined by local controlling bodies in the light of central government policy. These local bodies come under the control of the United Front, a loose locally-organised committee which has representatives from the municipality or local area, the police, the Women's Federation, the Religious Affairs Bureau, the local Minority Nationalities Bureau and other bodies. Not all these various local bodies are found throughout the whole of China and the United Front will have a different composition in different places. In large minority areas, for example, mosques would come directly under the control of the local Nationalities Bureau, whereas in most other areas they would be under the control of the Religious Affairs Bureau. These control committees will consist entirely of full-time civil servants. Since officials within the religious organisations are not paid directly by the state, they will not be represented within the United Front committees. Approximately one fifth of the United Front members will be members of the Communist Party who will also meet separately at party meetings and act as a check on these committees to see that they are carrying out party policy. It is impossible for the most part for a party member to be also a member of a religious cult. This mostly rules out representatives of religious bodies being members of the United Front directly as all members of the United Front, in theory at least, ought to be anxious to be asked to join the Communist Party. This rule seems to not be enforced in some Hui (Islamic) minority communities where there seem to be Islamic Communist cadres in

some instances.¹

The situation in China is thus different from the situation in the Soviet Union, where the Council for Religious Affairs has total administrative control over the activities of religious associations from a central organisation in Moscow. The Religious Affairs Bureau in China is by contrast a very low-level bureaucratic organisation and attracts few capable officials because of its limited independent decision-making powers. It is only very recently that it has recruited any university graduates as cadres. A foreign visitor asked the late Head of the Religious Affairs Bureau in Beijing in 1984 why a certain bishop of the non-patriotic Catholic Church in Shanghai was still in prison. The official replied that he knew nothing whatever about the fact that the bishop was in prison, or even his name. This was probably true, and demonstrates the much higher degree of decentralisation in the administration of cult affairs in China than in the USSR.

Every permanent resident of an urban area in China belongs to a local organisation called the *danwei*. A *danwei* may have as few as 15 members or as many as 5,000 or 6,000 in large industrial enterprises. All workers belong to the *danwei*, which pays them; and without the permission of the *danwei* one cannot for example travel, change jobs or move house. Even in the case of divorce, the courts will not proceed to a decision unless they obtain the approval of the *danwei* of the husband and of that of the wife. The family is not a basic administrative unit, because the head of the house, the adult children and the wife will in all probability belong to different *danwei*. When the police raid parks where couples come together for illicit sexual relations, they do not charge adulterous married individuals with promiscuity but refer the problem to the *danwei* to bring pressure on the couple. Retired people, non-working wives, the unemployed and others who are not workers will be registered with the local neighbourhood committee which is also constituted as a *danwei*.

Within each *danwei* there is a small administrative office which holds all the members' records and is in the charge of an administrator (who may also hold another position). Full time administrators are called *ganbu* (often mistakenly translated into English as "cadres"; a better translation would be "supervisors"). The extent to which *ganbu* are controlled by or take the advice of the members of a *danwei* varies widely. The *ganbu* often defers to higher authority outside the *danwei*: every *ganbu* is basically appointed by the *ganbu* higher up in the hierarchy. (There is no requirement that a *ganbu* be a member of the Communist Party.)

¹Dru C. Gladney, "Muslim Tombs and Ethnic Folklore: Charters for Hui Identity", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 46 No. 3 (August 1987), p. 500.

Paid employees of religious groups are subject to the same organisational rules as other workers. For example, all the employees of the three main churches, the mosque and the reconstituted temples in Wuhan belong to different *danwei* (with the "class" status of "religious workers"). The Three-Self theological college, although occupying the same premises as one of the churches, was also constituted as a *danwei* separate from that church. The extent of religious freedom enjoyed by members of any *danwei* depends ultimately on what kind of control is exerted on the *ganbu* by his superiors outside the *danwei*. The full-time *ganbu* control the appointment of the "religious workers", who may be ordained or non-ordained, full-or part-time. Part-time workers often receive their salaries from outside (for example, old age pensions from the municipality). Below the "religious workers" are lay people whose power is very slight: they are unable in practice to discharge the permanent employees.

State Attitude Towards Religion

The official attitude of the government of the People's Republic towards religion is not very different from that of the government of the USSR. From a Marxist point of view, all religions are fundamentally false and exploitative. At the time of the Liberation no distinction was made between religion and superstition. The Foreign Ministry was responsible for controlling and reducing the power of Christianity (because of its alleged basis in imperialism), Buddhism was under the control of the Ministry of Education and Islam was regarded as a form of behaviour of certain minorities and hence under the control of the Minorities Commission. This policy of hostility towards all religions (including superstitions) reached its triumphant conclusion in the Cultural Revolution when all kinds of "reactionary" ideas such as feudalism, landlordism and imperialism were opposed and their proponents killed or imprisoned. As far as religion is concerned, the main offensive was undertaken by the Red Guards in their campaign against the "four olds". Red Guards entered practically every home, throwing out all ancestral tablets and altars and all religious books including the Bible, and destroying most cult buildings.

It is impossible for any individual to be at the same time a member of the Party and also a member of a religious cult. Similarly those persons who are members of a cult should not be in an authoritative position in any government organisation. However, certain cults, namely those which claim to be connected with the four Great

Religions (Protestantism and Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism and organised Daoism), are deemed capable of supporting the advance of the Chinese people under the leadership of the Communist Party and the government policy of the Four Modernisations. Representatives of such religions may be nominated to the People's Congress. Other systems of belief are denied government recognition on the grounds that they are *mi shin* (superstition, literally "false belief") and are not protected by the rules laid down in the Constitution (which is interpreted as applying, in other areas, only to religion).² Those religions which are approved of by the government are organised on a *danwei* model. This is a form of recognition.

Restoration of Sacred Sites

As well as being rewarded by being permitted to organise themselves along the lines of the *danwei* system, the recognised religions enjoy other advantages. In many cases the United Front arranges for buildings to be returned to religious groups. Finance becomes available to redecorate old and worn out buildings when a religious community so requests. Chairman Ding of the Three Self (Christian) movement has several times stated that the active support of the Religious Affairs Bureau has made the recovery of churches possible and that without such support, the chances of reopening old churches would have been slight. According to the head monk of the Yu tong shih Buddhist temple in Wuhan, the structure was being totally rebuilt by the archaeological branch of the government; the three new enormous statues of Buddha in the main hall were a gift from the Buddhist Society in Hong Kong and support for the twenty new acolytes came directly from government funds. To help cover expenses the temple had opened a very expensive vegetarian restaurant on its precincts. The head monk estimated that there were no more than three to four hundred regular Chinese worshippers per month and that these were mostly old pensioners. In other words, the operation and maintenance of the temple rested almost entirely on government aid. No religious worker I spoke to, whether in a temple, a mosque or a church, really believed that the present position of partial government support would continue indefinitely. The priest of this temple pointed out that freedom of religion and modernisation were closely

²There is some variation in the classification of religions in various parts of China. A new Manchu organisation has recently been created in North China which indicates government recognition of Shamanism as a "religion" among the remnants of the Manchu community there. Amongst the Han Chinese, however, Shamanism is still classed as "superstition" and is therefore liable to persecution. See the author's review of *Households of God on China's Soil*, RCL, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 223-25.

connected, that during the few weeks before my recent visit no fewer than three foreign Buddhists from Canada, Japan and America had visited this temple and that it was because of such foreign visitors that the government was prepared to invest money in the temple.

Some mountains are famous pilgrimage centres. I have visited two large ones, Wudang and Emei. Both are under the direct control of special area municipalities. Both are in areas of great rural poverty. At Mt Wudang, the government has poured in quantities of money to repair the pilgrim paths, improve access, replace traditional buildings and encourage mass tourism, including visits by pilgrims. I doubt, however, whether there are more than a dozen pilgrims a day who climb this mountain for religious reasons. The overwhelming majority of visitors are young people hiking in the mountains who know nothing of the history of this particular one. There are various monuments of archaeological importance from the Yuan dynasty on the mountain. These are now being rebuilt. The whole area is being thought of as a tourist investment and on the way up the mountain, villagers may hire small stalls where they can sell cheap trinkets to the climbers. It is obvious even to the foreign visitor that the government's policy is very successful from an economic point of view: the standard of living has noticeably improved in all the surrounding villages.

As part of the policy of encouraging tourism the authorities have provided funds to rebuild important temples on their original sites. Since a temple is no temple without priests, they have encouraged priests to return to those reconstructed temples. At the top of Mt Wudang, which is built in the form of an old Yuan fortress, there are a number of graduates of the new Daoist seminary in Beijing who were sent there on graduation. Although this Daoist temple is supposed to be where *Tai chi*³ was founded, none of the priests have any knowledge of *Tai chi*. The priests themselves are ultimately government servants: such a community would not be able to support itself from the meagre offerings of the tourists (although there is a small Daoist hostel at the top which competes with hostels run by the local government-supported youth organisation, and a semi-private hotel). These particular Daoists make a small pittance by fortune telling; but their primary function is cosmetic. It is important to note that nowhere on the pilgrim paths or at the foot of the mountain is there any public notice about the religious significance of the site. None of the stalls sells specifically Daoist objects, although they do sell small Buddhist medallions which formerly were not allowed to be sold at this Daoist sanctuary. Even the guide book does not deal with

³A system of breathing exercises and physical movements popular both in China and the West. It is reputed to have originated in Daoism.

the mountain as a religious object. The aim of the government is clearly one of secularisation: to develop the mountain as a tourist attraction on account of its (secular) history, and while denying the mountain any sort of religious significance, nevertheless to keep a certain number of "religious workers" to bang the drum and blow the horn.

At Mt Emei in Sichuan Province, the policy of the government is clearly the same, but it has proved more difficult for the authorities to carry through the process of secularisation than at Mt Wudang. Mt Emei is one of the most sacred mountains in China, and much more famous than Mt Wudang; and whereas the religious buildings on Mt Wudang had fallen into disrepair through neglect, the destruction of most of the temples on Mt Emei was carried out by the Red Guards under semi-government sponsorship. Mt Emei formerly had at least a hundred temples and sacred sites. Today only about half a dozen large temples remain from the period before the Cultural Revolution: and these survive only because they were occupied by units of the Red Army as barracks. All the other temples were totally destroyed by groups of Red Guards. Some of the partially and temporarily reconstructed temples in which I stayed had even had their stone foundations removed. The temples themselves, being constructed of wood, had been easy to burn down. Describing the destruction, the pilgrim peasants with whom I travelled refused to call the perpetrators "Red Guards", but used such terms as "bandits" and "robbers". I was told that after destroying most of the temples the "bandits" split into two factions and fought each other. The officials and local population try to distance themselves as far as possible from these events, regarding the Cultural Revolution as an unmitigated disaster. I was told that the temple destroyers did not come from the immediate environs of the mountains but from a considerable distance; but the outsider cannot help wondering how many of the people one talks to did in fact take part in this mass destruction, despite the fact that nobody will admit to having done so.

Administration of Mt Emei and Mt Wudang

When I visited Mt Emei there were plenty of tourists, mostly young people from China and overseas. But about twenty per cent of those ascending the mountain were in groups from particular villages, mostly middle-aged, staying in accommodation previously booked with the temple authorities. At each temple or former temple they presented incense and food and attended the services at those temples which offered them. Their motives for climbing the mountain were

traditional in the sense that they wished for some kind of spiritual or material benefit or else wished to carry out a spiritual action which they had not been able to do in their own rural home areas, where their ancestral altars had been destroyed and where there were very few operating temples after the Cultural Revolution in the countryside. At home they would very likely be criticised by their fellow villagers or the village *ganbu* for performing religious actions publicly; but away from home there was no public criticism. The "tourists" and the pilgrims were as far as possible kept separate from each other on the ascent. Each group of pilgrims had a special authorisation issued by the Buddhist association on the mountain, and on the one night I slept with the other pilgrims in temporary accommodation on a reconstructed temple site, the priest at first tried to refuse me admittance on the grounds that the police had refused foreigners the right to stay in this temple. He finally registered me as a Chinese with my Chinese name.

Of the three priests in the temple, only one was a Sichuanese. The particular priest who befriended me actually came from Fukien province and proudly showed me his government authorisation to travel from Fukien to Emei. His language was very difficult to follow as his native dialect was Hokkien and he had a peculiar local accent. It was clear to me that he had been instructed to come to Emei where there was religious work available for him: he at least had avoided becoming a mendicant itinerant priest.

After the recitation of part of the Lotus sutra in the temple, several of the more literate pilgrims tried to copy down some of the text, presumably because no texts were available in the village from which they had come. It surprised me that no religious books were available for sale.

As at Mt Wudang, I was struck by the fact that whereas the pilgrims are allowed to perform cult practices within their own group, there is an absolute restriction on public religious activities of any sort. Like Wudang, Emei is under the total control of the local development organisation. Nowhere on the road or outside the temple could one obtain officially any copies of the Pilgrim Song of Mt Emei⁴ or the simple texts traditionally available to pilgrims. On the way down the mountain I saw one person who was secretly selling five of these texts in front of a secular shop. He was obviously frightened and afraid of being accosted. Inside the base temple there was a special shop selling religious objects. It clearly belonged to the Buddhist association *danwei*, whereas another shop nearby, selling cheap trinkets and artistic prints, belonged to the tourist *danwei*. Few people patronised the former, and the only objects they seemed to be buying were

⁴Copies of this song are in the Keston College archive.

rosaries. I questioned several of these customers after their purchases. All of them laughed heartily at the idea that they might be Buddhists. They said they were buying rosaries for aged relatives whose rosaries had been taken away during the Cultural Revolution and who had since been unable to say their prayers properly.

The quality of the priests on the mountain varied considerably. Some were obviously trying conscientiously to carry out their duties under difficult circumstances. Some had the monotonous job of beating the drum or ringing the bell next to the altar every time someone uttered a prayer. In the evenings, others tried to instruct pilgrims without any form of written aid. Some seemed to be almost illiterate, apparently knowing only a few texts which they had learnt off by rote. In one temple, the priest did nothing but urge the pilgrims to contribute as much money as possible towards the rebuilding of the temple. As far as I could tell he had received no religious instruction of any sort and had apparently not been ordained. All the priestly appointments on the mountain seemed to be under the control of the Mt Emei Buddhist association which controlled the religious *danwei*. The main criterion for appointment was apparently not the individual's effectiveness as a priest but his ability to carry out the minimum organisational tasks associated with the pilgrims. In all fairness I must admit that I did not visit the temple on Emei which was training new recruits to become Buddhist priests, and it may have been that, as a temporary measure, anyone was being recruited just to sit at the receipt of custom. On the other hand, on a previous visit to Beijing some five years ago I found that the two temples I visited were controlled by 11 lay Buddhist monks who were clearly agents of the Party and more or less tried to prevent me talking to the two priests who had been genuinely ordained.

The situation on Mt Wudang and Mt Emei has been brought about by application of an administrative structure based on the *danwei* and the *ganbu*. In the *danwei* on Mt Emei the higher ranks would require the approval of the development commissioner of the mountain to retain their positions. They could not, for example, allow open proselytisation of non-members on the public roads of Mt Emei. The qualification for low *ganbu* appointees would not be ordination or ability to run a temple, but rather sympathy with the general guidelines of the Party on running temples as a business. Many of the temple administrators are not validly ordained priests but married lay clerics whose position rests not on their ordination but on their appointment.

Financing of Religious Organisations

Religious organisations in China are having to meet ever-increasing expenses. This is in part due to an increasing number of religious buildings and training colleges, and a corresponding increase in the number of fully funded *ganbu*. The Three-Self Movement church in Wuchang usually holds between three and six hundred people. The church constitutes one *danwei*. A second *danwei* is the theological college which was opened in 1985 and now has about eighty students in two years. There are four full-time and several part-time teachers.⁵ Students receive an allowance of about fifty *yuan* a month making an annual support budget for eighty students of 48,000 *yuan* plus salaries of the four full-time teachers. Although the churches from which the students come and to which they will return after graduation in two years' time contribute towards the expenses, it would seem to be impossible that a church with a congregation of this size could cover the total expenses of this seminary.

The fact is that a good deal of the money for the salaries of Chinese religious workers comes directly or indirectly from the state, and not necessarily from only one government department (although properly audited accounts of Chinese religious organisations are not available). In a number of European countries too the salaries of priests and ministers are paid by the state; but in the circumstances obtaining in China this practice is bound to call into question the independence of approved religious cults. In the case of the Three-Self Movement it seems to contradict the very essence of one of these three — "self-support" — which should surely imply not only freedom from financial dependence on foreign churches but also from similar dependence on government departments within China.

One practical result of this situation is that the freedom to practise one's faith on officially-approved premises is often purchased at the price of accepting the authority of the state-supported *ganbu*. A document issued by the Three-Self Movement Provincial Christian Conference of Shanxi on 16 January 1987 lays down rules for churches within Shanxi province. Some of these rules go into detail. One concerns baptism.

Regarding those seeking baptism into the faith, their motives must be understood in depth. They must undergo a fixed period of investigation, and be led to understand Christian doctrine and faith clearly. Once their daily lifestyle and behaviour, moral character, political attitude, reputation and popularity in society

⁵ A description of this college can be found in *Bridge*, May-June 1986 (Hong Kong), p. 8.

and other such factors are known in detail, and having been collectively discussed by the church and judged up to standard, they may then be baptised by a pastor or properly appointed elder. It is absolutely forbidden to propagate religious ideology towards, or proceed to baptise, Party or Communist Youth League members or young people under 18.⁶

This rule, then, rejects infant baptism; makes no mention of the role of the Holy Spirit, referring only to an understanding of "Christian doctrine"; and states that baptism must be carried out by a "pastor or properly appointed elder". If a congregation happened to believe in infant baptism, or to believe that any person may baptise someone else provided this is done in the name of the Trinity, it would immediately find itself at variance with the state-supported authorities. China being China, there are of course many congregations which persist with their own practices. I know of churches which practise infant baptism freely. I have seen young people under 18 attending Bible classes and I am sure that in many areas healing services are held in churches. But as the administration is tightened up and state support for religion increases, the area of freedom of religious practice becomes ever more circumscribed.

The Right to Believe

Under these circumstances, it is possible to distinguish various levels of restriction on the "right to believe" in China. Some systems of belief are defined from the outset as "correct", others as "incorrect". "Superstitions" (such as faith healing by a shaman) are clearly incorrect. Proof that one's belief is "correct" is one's affiliation to an organised recognised *danwei*. However, even if one is affiliated to such a *danwei* there are still various practical restrictions on what one may or may not believe. In the Protestant churches I have visited the "correct" approach has included a belief in adult baptism, the recognition of the independence of each local group of believers as a church, the recognition of the legitimacy of the political system under the guidance of the Communist Party, and an undertaking not to convert those not already connected with the members of the church by (say) putting up a public notice inviting outsiders to attend services. Belief *per se* is never threatened, but only as long as it does not result in actions unacceptable to the authorities. I met one Catholic priest who had been imprisoned for about five years and he assured me that the whole time he was imprisoned he was never once put under

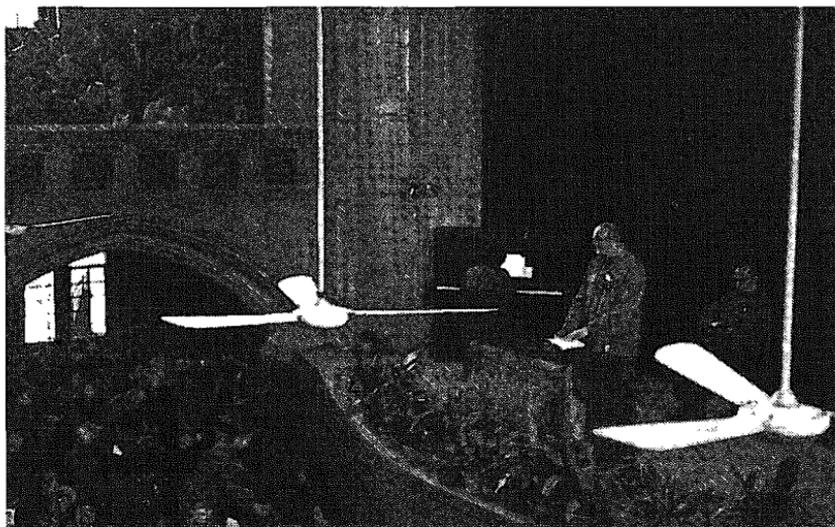
⁶ *China News and Church Report*, 23 October 1987 (Shatin).



The Daoist monastery at the top of Mt Wudang, China. The walls of this ancient Yuan fortress are still in good condition.

See article on pp. 135-145. *(Photos courtesy William Newell)*

A Three-Self church service held in the former Moore Memorial Church, Shanghai.





A Buddhist priest in the Temple of Universal Rescue, Beijing.
(Photo courtesy Keston College)



The Ganden monastery, about thirty miles from Lhasa. It was destroyed by the Red Army, but the building in the foreground has been restored. The well-behaved dogs are a feature of Tibetan life.

(Photo courtesy William Newell)

pressure to abjure his faith. He was only expected to admit that his actions had been misguided or wrong in that they had constituted opposition to the secular authorities.

For the most part, control over religious activity is effected *within* the religious institutions.⁷ Recent information indicates that out of the 41 theological students at the Wuhan Three-Self Zhong Shan theological college, eight were expelled for trying to obtain special Christian literature from Hong Kong, after which another 28 students resigned from the college. Their resignation may have been prompted by a desire to escape from the “patriotic” teaching in this Three-Self Movement college, or the result of specific pressure from the authorities to produce conformity on matters which the government felt to be important. In order to encourage such conformity to state policy, approved religious cults receive substantial state aid. As we have seen, part of this aid comes in the form of grants for the training of theological students and future priests. In exchange for this aid the government expects the religious officials to prevent any political deviance (especially in those cults which are suspected of connection with any form of independent nationalism or traditional links with imperialism). At the same time any attempt to proselytise openly, by (for example) trying to use public funds in a particular village to build a temple there, or allowing a Christian evangelist to sell Bibles publicly on the streets under the guise of opening a bookshop, would be strictly prohibited.

The government thus attempts to remove religious practice from the public to the private sphere by strengthening the authority of the officials controlling believers’ activities. This arrangement is very satisfactory from the point of view of the government: it can claim that it is not infringing freedom of religious belief as guaranteed by the constitution since the regulations under which the cults operate are initiated by the cults themselves. Nevertheless, I believe that government support of officials within approved churches or religious cults constitutes one of the greatest threats to the freedom of the members of these cults to exercise their “right to believe”.

⁷ *China News and Church Report*, 6 March and 13 March 1987.