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Religions, Charity, and Non-State Welfare in Contemporary China

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Religions, Charity, and Non-State Welfare in Contemporary China

1 Introduction

This paper is part of broader research on social welfare, understood in its broadest sense as social security, education, and health care, which the state has taken over gradually from religions as it has established its authority and thereby the ontological and the teleological legitimacy of secularity as a pillar of modernity. The paper explores the Chinese Communist Party's evolving attitude towards religious affairs and philanthropy.

In many societies, secularity has been the response to the problems of individual freedom, inter-religious conflict, and social differentiation for the sake of efficiency and due to industrialization. In these societies, the state, and, subsequently, medical and educational establishments, gradually wrested social welfare management away from religious institutions. This process has advanced most in highly industrialized societies, and has taken different forms based on denominational differences, political alignments, and class coalitions.¹ The process still faces contestation from conservative forces that would like to see religious associations take charge of a greater array of social services. This is particularly the case in the United States.

In post-colonial societies,² there has been considerable variation in the welfare state's commitments and ideals. However, most new states have failed to match the achievements of the liberal, industrialized economies of North America, Western Europe, Oceania, and Japan. Religious institutions have remained important providers of social welfare and have even become involved in development. This reality has received increasing recognition from international organizations, and there has also been significant progress in research on this subject.³

1 Kees van Kersbergen and Philip Manow, eds., *Religion, Class Coalitions, and Welfare States* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

2 'Post-colonial societies' denotes both the countries that emerged following the late eighteenth-century revolutions in the Americas, and those that emerged following the post-World War II revolutions in the MENA, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Southeast Asia.

3 Melani Cammett and Lauren M. Mclean, "Introduction: The Political Consequences of Non-State Social Welfare in the Global South," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 46, no. 1 (2011); Emma Tomalin, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Religions and*

A third category of societies such as Russia and China that experienced radical social revolution remains largely unexplored.⁴ These countries and the societies under their influence promoted a sudden resolution of what they viewed as the problems created by religion. However, since the fall of the Soviet Union and China's turn to neo-mercantilism, they present us with a theoretically challenging problem. In both cases, the societies have appeared to retreat to the pre-revolutionary situation, with the Orthodox episcopate in Russia becoming important again, and traditional forms of religiosity in China becoming more visible again. What to conclude from this observation? A retreat away from the condition of secularity appears highly implausible after colonialism imposed it worldwide.

A return to the status quo ante is highly unlikely in China. There is too much at stake in the current bureaucracies that regulate religious affairs; many people, especially in the younger generation, cut off from their religious heritage, consider it irrelevant to their lives. Despite this, the vehement campaigns against Falungong, Christian underground churches, Muslim communities, and Tibetan Buddhists loyal to the Dalai Lama, suggest that the Communist Party considers religious actors to be important sources of challenges to its authority. The current development in China is perhaps best understood as a neo-traditional moment. The state, confident in its ability to master the technologies of government, can subcontract to religious actors the delivery of some social services for vulnerable and marginal segments of the population without fearing challenges to its legitimacy. The control the state asserts over discourse on tradition, culture, and history ensures that such outsourcing of social welfare does not imply a return to the political influence of religion that occurred on many occasions in the past and challenged imperial authority.

This paper explores two key aspects of the provision of social services by religious institutions. First, it considers the relations between the CCP and religious institutions in the ideological, political, and legal spheres. Second, because philanthropy has constituted an important part of religious practice that historically intertwined religions with the state, it looks at the evolution of legislation on charity. This will be split into four periods. The first period, primarily defined by the rule of Mao (1949–1976), saw a complete rejection

Global Development (London: Routledge, 2015).

4 For some exceptions, see Robert P. Weller et al., *Religion and Charity: The Social Life of Goodness in Chinese Societies* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

of the approach to religious philanthropy adopted in imperial and republican times. In the second period, shaped by Deng Xiaoping (1978–1989) and Jiang Zemin (1989–2002), the CCP partially restored religions as legitimate actors, and there were also efforts to recreate a culture of philanthropy that would develop without any religious influence. The third period, under Hu Jintao (2002–2012), witnessed something close to a revival of the imperial and republican practice of monitoring religious philanthropy in order to serve the state. The last period, under Xi (2012–), shows evidence of continuity with Hu’s policy. However, some additional restrictions have been placed on religions that are deemed to be ‘foreign.’

2 Religious Work and Philanthropy from 1949 to 1978

In its first three decades in power, the CCP asserted control over religions and, seeing that they gained legitimacy and influence from philanthropy, the CCP sought to eliminate the latter altogether, regardless of whether it was linked to religion. The CCP argued that under socialism, people should benefit from social welfare as a result of social production. The CCP leadership recognized that achieving this ideal would take time and thus initially sought to minimize social contradictions and create the best possible conditions for rebuilding China after decades of warfare. The government had two objectives: ensuring that religious believers would not oppose the regime; and stopping them providing any form of social assistance on the grounds that they derived influence from doing so. The CCP reasoned that if the social condition of deprivation led people to look for solace in the promise of a better afterlife offered by a religious system, abundance under socialism would make religion unnecessary. Since the withering away of religion would occur naturally as China became more prosperous, its leaders reasoned that the persecution of religion would not be effective and might in fact generate resistance against socialism from the religious milieu. While the state avoided confrontation with religious leaders, it sought to ensure that they would obey its directives and would not oppose its policies. It also guaranteed that they would lack the resources and the legitimacy to mobilize people against the state and, to that end, put an end to all charitable activities.

Duan Dezhi 段德智, historian of religious work in China, has observed two stages in the CCP's policy on religious work between 1949 and 1978:⁵ The first stage (1949–1957) saw the assertion of the CCP's control over religion; the second (1957–1978) was a period of mobilization, which aimed at precipitating the disappearance of religion. Although Duan does not pay attention to charity per se, his chronology points to an initial period of re-construction in the wake of the civil war, followed by a period of deterioration and attacks on religions prior to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. The first period provided a basis for the CCP's policy on religion. The second halted the approach of monitoring the natural decline of religions, replacing it with a more aggressive attempt to eliminate them.

The CCP's position on religious charity remained clear and unaltered from 1949 to 1978: it rejected it altogether. During the first period, it actively sought to dismantle charity and philanthropy, and stopped religious associations from pursuing such activities. Throughout the Great Leap Forward, the collapse of production and the general misery undermined the material foundations for charity. Moreover, the transformation of mentalities promoted by the CCP cadres, the Red Guards and the PLA during the Cultural Revolution ensured the obsolescence of the concept. If the first decade of CCP rule laid down the foundations of its policy on religion and charity, the following two decades represented a series of extreme measures that only later on the regime would recognize as 'mistakes' that it would repeal. The erosion of the concept of philanthropy throughout this period would make its revival all the more difficult during the subsequent period of 'reform and opening.' Today, even when they praise the tradition of philanthropy in China, the writings promoted by Chinese charitable associations remain silent on the 1949–1978 period.⁶

5 Duan Dezhi 段德智, *Xin Zhongguo zongjiao gongzuoshi* 新中国宗教工作史 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2013).

6 See, for example, the studies commissioned by the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, which each devote only one paragraph to the period in their historical accounts of charity in China. Lu Hanlong 卢汉龙, ed., *Cishan: Guan'ai yu hexie* 慈善: 关爱与和谐 (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004); Xu Lin 徐麟, *Zhongguo cishan shiye fazhan yanjiu* 中国慈善事业发展研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2005).

2.1 Corporatist Regulation and the Disappearance of Religious Charitable Activities

The first stage of the CCP's policy on religious work identified by Duan corresponds to the first period of Mao's rule, from 1949 to 1957. Duan labels this period as 'opposing the infiltration of religion' (*fan zongjiao shentou* 反宗教渗透).⁷ Despite what the name suggests, this was a period of relative openness to religious matters. The Organic Law of the Central People's Government, which served as the supreme organ to exercise power before the adoption of the Constitution in 1954, ensured a large number of rights, including freedom of religion. In 1951, the CCP United Front Work Department (*tongzhanbu* 统战部 UFWD) supported the establishment of the Bureau for Religious Affairs (*zongjiao shiwuju* 宗教事务局 BRA) to oversee the activities of religions, transmit directives from the government, and collect information on religious activity, including numbers of followers, religious practices, and beliefs. In the same year, the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement created a national committee to ensure that churches in China would remove foreign influence and become self-sustaining. In 1953, Buddhist clerics and laypeople founded the Buddhist Association of China, and Muslims established the Islamic Association of China. In 1957, just when the political climate was about to become less hospitable to religions, bishops and laypeople created the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, and Daoist leaders established the Daoist Association of China. Known collectively as the 'big five,' Protestantism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, and Islam are the only religions the CCP recognizes.

The CCP subscribed to the theory of the 'five characteristics' (*wuxing* 五性) of religion. This theory was gradually elaborated by Li Weihuan 李维汉, head of the UFWD since 1948, in a series of meetings between 1951 and 1957.⁸ According to the summary written in 1996 by Ye Xiaowen, Director of the BRA⁹, religion is: long-term (*changqi* 长期), mass-based (*qunzong* 群众), ethnic (*minzu* 民族), international (*guoji* 国际) and complex (*fuza* 复杂).¹⁰ Cadres advocating the theory recognized that religion's

7 Duan, *Xin Zhongguo zongjiao gongzuoshi*, 1.

8 The theory emerged after several meetings of the UFWD between 1951 and 1957. Duan, *Xin Zhongguo zongjiao gongzuoshi*, 91–93.

9 The BRA became the State Administration for Religious Affairs (*guojia zongjiao shiwuju* 国家宗教事务局 SARA) in 1998, and Ye would remain its head until 2009.

10 Ye Xiaowen 叶小文, "Dangdai woguo de zongjiao wenti: guanyu zongjiao wuxing de zai tantao 当前我国的宗教问题——关于宗教五性的再探讨," *Shijie zongjiao wenhua* 4, no. 1 (1997).

influence would be long-lasting and therefore that they should avoid rash action against believers lest they oppose the party.¹¹ They also argued that although the number of religious believers was impossible to know, there were too many of them among the masses and therefore it would be unwise to confront them.¹² Religion and ethnicity, they thought, belonged to two different categories, but in a multinational country such as China, religious matters often linked with the nationality question, as the cases of Tibet and Xinjiang demonstrated early on.¹³ Party cadres also believed that, because of its international nature, religion was able to influence relations between states and undermine national unity, especially when foreign countries used religions to infiltrate other countries.¹⁴ Finally, party cadres viewed religion as a complex system in which internal elements such as sentiments and knowledge are linked with the ideological superstructure, while external elements such as behavior and institutions constitute aspects of social life the government must take into consideration.¹⁵

To prevent opposition from the recognized religious actors and even gain their support, the CCP initially avoided confronting spiritual leaders and their followers. This policy also served to reassure Tibetan Buddhist and Muslim minorities living in territories outside of the area populated by the Han majority that the state would respect their way of life, which was closely related to their religion. The establishment of the BRA was an expression of the state's willingness to recognize the legitimacy of religion in a socialist regime, but it also reflected how anxious the CCP was to limit religion's influence and oversee its expected demise in the long term. The incorporation of clerics, temple committee members, and other religious personnel into one of the seven national religious associations that managed the affairs of the 'big five' constituted a key state policy ensuring supervision of religion by the regime.¹⁶ The CCP UFWD used these

11 Ye, "Dangdai woguo de zongjiao wenti," 1–5.

12 Ye, 5–7.

13 Ye, 7–9.

14 Ye Xiaowen 叶小文, "Dangdai woguo de zongjiao wenti: guanyu zongjiao wuxing de zai tantao (xu) 当前我国的宗教问题——关于宗教五性的再探讨(续)," *Shijie zongjiao wenhua* 4, no. 2 (1997): 1–2.

15 Ye, "Dangdai woguo de zongjiao wenti: guanyu zongjiao wuxing de zai tantao (xu)," 2–5.

16 Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam each had an association, while Protestantism and Catholicism each had two associations, with a distinction made between clergy and laypeople.

associations as conduits for conveying its instructions to religious believers. More crucially, it saw the associations as means to help it achieve its objective of undermining the social influence of religions by restricting religious activities outside designated places of worship. These policies, however, related to institutionalized religions with a clergy and a canonical scripture that the state wanted to recognize. They left unresolved many other aspects of religious work for religions the state did not recognize.

The vast majority of the population in 1949 abided by the moral codes of Confucianism, believed in supernatural forces that cadres dismissed as “feudal superstitions” (*fengjian mixin* 封建迷信), and practiced rituals often involving communication with gods, ghosts, and ancestors. These communal religions, with their emphasis on filial piety and ancestor worship, reproduced the patriarchal nature of traditional society and represented an important source of inertia that undermined the new regime’s ambitions for social change, especially during the Land Reform campaign of 1950. When the CCP collectivized land it focused its action on ‘landlords’ and ‘rich peasants,’ who were often active in temple committees, and only occasionally confiscated surplus land owned by temples, shrines and monasteries for redistribution, or encouraged the destruction of temples.¹⁷ Because the CCP had already endorsed the distinction made before by the GMD between ‘religion’ and ‘superstition,’ it did not see a contradiction between violent campaigns against ‘landlords’ and its pledge to respect religious freedom. The state simply did not regard the physical destruction of an important part of Chinese traditional religion as being such because it believed, in its own words, that it was conducting a campaign against “reactionary forces” and “feudal superstitions.”

The CCP showed no mercy towards a third category of religion. Although the terminology and the technologies employed differed somewhat from that used under the previous regime, the CCP essentially reproduced previous policies against religious associations that were not recognized by the state. In imperial China, the government had made a distinction between heterodox (*xie* 邪), or immoral (*yin* 淫) practices and religious associations, and those it considered orthodox (*zheng* 正).¹⁸ The CCP used

17 Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 151.

18 On this distinction, see Vincent Goossaert, “State and Religion in Modern China: Religious Policy and Scholarly Paradigms,” (paper presented at “Rethinking Modern Chinese

the more modern taxonomy of reactionary secret societies (*daohuimen* 道会们 and *mimi shehui* 秘密社会). It found out about their subversive potential during the War against Japan and the Civil War, and feared that religions such as the Way of Unity (*Yiguandao* 一贯道) would adopt the same techniques that the CCP had used when it waged its own clandestine operation of infiltration into the GMD to weaken and overthrow it. The CCP saw four reasons to worry about Yiguandao in particular: it was extremely popular in North China, where it spread rapidly; its esoteric practice made detection difficult; some CCP chiefs and police were members; and, finally, the sect's teachings stood in opposition to those of communism.¹⁹ To pre-empt any organized resistance by these religions, from 1951 to 1953 the CCP organized a 'withdraw from the sects' movement (*tuidao yundong* 退道运动). Such resistance continued well beyond that period, albeit in muted forms that did not threaten the regime.²⁰

The CCP wasted no time in targeting the philanthropic activities of all religions, whether officially recognized or illegal, whether local or transnational. The new regime saw in the relationship between civil society and philanthropy a source of resistance to its control. Moreover, it adopted a crude reading of Karl Marx and denounced charity as a hypocritical approach used by religion and superstition to keep people in servitude.²¹ As a result, the concept of charity disappeared from the official lexicon for at least three decades. The CCP's policy decoupled religious practice from philanthropy, an activity that had for centuries seen a very close intermingling between state and religion. The case of Yiguandao illustrated the importance of charity as a source of influence for religion. Because it had operated unharmed in the puppet state of Manchukuo, the GMD had regarded Yiguandao as a treasonous association and imposed a ban on its activities after victory against Japan. However, aware of its popularity among the populace, the government allowed the association to continue socially acceptable activities as the China Moral Philanthropic Association

History: An International Conference to Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Institute of Modern History," Taipei, Academia Sinica, 2006), 3.

19 Hung Chang-Tai, "The Anti-Unity Sect Campaign and Mass Mobilization in the Early People's Republic of China," *The China Quarterly* 202 (2010): 403–04.

20 Resistance against the CCP continued into the fall of 1957. See Elizabeth J. Perry, "Rural Violence in Socialist China," *The China Quarterly* 103 (1985): 420–24.

21 Wang Hui, "Changes in the China Charity Federation System," *China Development Brief*, no. 45 (2010): 24.

(*Zhonghua daode cishanhui* 中华道德慈善会). The CCP regarded this arrangement as evidence of Yiguandao's untrustworthiness, and therefore imposed a ban to prevent the emergence of a competitor.²²

Although the CCP policies differed from the more rigid ones enforced in the USSR, it had to relinquish its philanthropic activities, which it saw as a problem. Even before it took power, the CCP had classified charities as 'anti-revolutionary forces.'²³ Liu Pengfei noted that as soon as the CCP took power, it dissolved the non-state associations that delivered social services, which it considered "tools used by the ruling class to cheat people and poison their minds." It divided them into three categories and devised ways to deal with each of these groups: It banned, dissolved and closed the local and provincial charities established by the previous government; it took over and reorganized non-governmental charities led by local gentry or merchant elites; and, finally, it incorporated social services operated by foreigners, such as hospitals and orphanages, into the new political system.²⁴ The expulsion of foreign missionaries accelerated with the onset of the Korean War, leading to the abandonment of the social services they had offered and the closing of their institutions. The concept of philanthropy disappeared from the local culture and from the collective memory.²⁵ This first period of religious policy laid the foundation for China's current policies on religion and charity, with one key difference. In the first decade of its rule, the CCP was relatively tolerant of religion, but did not allow any kind of religious charity. In the period that followed, factions within the CCP sought the eradication of both religion and charity.

2.2 The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution

The second period of religious policy identified by Duan, euphemistically named 'tortuous development' (*quzhe fazhan* 曲折发展) started in late 1957 and lasted over twenty years.²⁶ The period started with the extreme material deprivation experienced during the Great Leap Forward famine and continued throughout the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. In this

22 Hung, "The Anti-Unity Sect Campaign," 403.

23 Outi Luova, "Charity paradigm change in contemporary China: From anti-socialist activity to civic duty," *China Information* 31, no. 2 (2017): 138.

24 Liu Peifeng, "Development of Charities in China since the Reform and Opening up," in *NGOs in China and Europe*, ed. Li Yuwen (London: Routledge, 2011), 73.

25 Luova, "Charity paradigm change in contemporary China," 138.

26 Duan, *Xin Zhongguo zongjiao gongzuoshi*, 99.

period, the iconoclastic and fanatic fervor seen in enthusiastic cadres and young people who were keen to accelerate the demise of belief in the after-life and ‘superstitions’ was more what might have been expected during an outbreak of religious fever. Although the CCP agreed in principle with the Marxist maxim that “religion is the opium of the people,” it had learned from its time in the opposition and in exile that it could also act as the “spark that will light a fire,” as Mao’s approval of the Taiping and the Boxer uprisings showed. The government took religion seriously from the beginning, from the Jiangxi period until the first decade of the PRC’s existence, and avoided confronting believers too directly, lest they seek martyrdom and engage in a bitter conflict with the state. Whatever the reason behind the change of course at the end of the 1950s, Mao operated a complete reversal and saw religion as an obstacle on the path leading to socialism, and those who believed otherwise were often accused of plotting against the party.

A number of bitter controversies on religious policies erupted at the start of this period, within the broader context of the ‘anti-rightist struggles’ of 1957–1959. The party’s religious work was the target of attacks at the highest levels that spared no religion. Hence, only one year after his election as the first President of the Daoist Association of China, Yue Chongdai 岳崇岱, was labelled a rightist and hanged himself as a result. In the same year, Ma Zhenwu 马震武, Deputy Director of the Islamic Association of China, faced false accusations of plotting with Japan to establish an Islamic state in Ningxia during the War and passed away in 1961, disgraced.²⁷ The 10th Panchen Erdeni, Deputy Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in 1954, faced dismissal and imprisonment in 1964 because of a letter he wrote to Zhou Enlai, protesting Chinese policies in Tibet. Lay and clerical Buddhist leaders, such as Zhao Puchu 赵朴初 and Geshe Sherab Gyatso (*Jirao Jiacao* 喜饶嘉措) also endured attacks against them. The BRA ceased activities between 1965 and 1979. Even the leadership of the UFD was rebuked having been judged as being too lenient on religious matters. This culminated in attacks against Li Weihai, whom the CCP accused of anti-party activities in 1966 before expelling him from its ranks one year later. The punishment meted out to the leaders of the national religious associations affected the local associations as well.

²⁷ Duan, *Xin Zhongguo zongjiao gongzuoshi*, 105.

Duan Dezhi devotes much attention to the issue of Tibet, as well as to two controversies with international ramifications in the Protestant and Catholic churches. However, he does not dwell on the material destruction throughout the whole period, which would have significantly undermined religious associations' ability to continue their activities, let alone mobilize the resources required to offer social services. Besides the reality of the material destruction of religious infrastructure, the collective trauma engendered by the unrelenting ideological campaigns had a heavy psychological toll that gravely undermined social relations. The three years of the great famine, which witnessed scenes of cannibalism, the denunciation of parents and teachers by children, and exposure to the cruelty of mass executions, gravely dented both public trust in the party, and people's trust in each other.²⁸ The call for class struggle precluded any idea of compromise and accommodation for presumed enemies. In that context, the idea of social harmony implicit in charity and philanthropy, which hid relations of domination, or worse, gave them some form of metaphysical justification, became a legitimate target in the eyes of the most dogmatic party ideologues. The attack on philanthropy, understood as part of a broader attack on wealth, may have resonated with many among the poor, but it gravely damaged social relations.

Another aspect of the period is the intensity of the fervor expressed by people during the Cultural Revolution, which many compared to a form of religious fanaticism.²⁹ Lucy Jen Huang has outlined the religious elements present in the mass movements launched by the CCP at the beginning of the last decade of Mao's rule.³⁰ Worried about the lack of revolutionary zeal among the party cadres and the population, after the setback they had experienced following the Great Leap Forward, Mao and his followers urged the young Red Guards to continue the "spirit of the Long March."³¹ Mao became the central figure of a personality cult, his birthplace a revolutionary pilgrimage site, his utterances in the Little Red Book the sub-

28 On this tragedy, see the two tomes by Yang Jisheng 楊繼繩, *Mubei: Zhonguo liushi niandai da jihuang jishi* 墓碑: 中國六十年代大及黃紀實 (Hong Kong: Tiandi 天地, 2008).

29 See Ninian Smart, *Mao* (New York, NY: Fontana/Collins, 1974); Stephan Feuchtwang, "Religion as Resistance," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, ed. Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2006).

30 Lucy Jen Huang, "The Role of Religion in Communist Chinese Society," *Asian Survey* 11, no. 7 (1971).

31 Huang, "The Role of Religion," 698.

ject of countless debates. There was a messianic quality to the personality cult surrounding Mao. Indeed, local newspapers throughout China, told of people who were miraculously cured after studying Mao Zedong's thought.³² Although the Red Guards and many cadres did not lack abnegation and a sense of self-sacrifice, the idea of compassion often inherent in philanthropy was lacking. While one might welcome the demise of condescending feelings such as pity that reproduce social hierarchies, the cruelty of the struggle sessions against 'class enemies' was a disastrous substitution.

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the trial of the Gang of Four, Deng Xiaoping asserted power, overturned many of Mao's decisions, and prepared the country for a new round of radical economic reforms, including social welfare reforms. A sense of elation prevailed: during the brief Beijing Spring of 1978, when the CCP promoted its 'four modernizations,' some even went as far as promoting democracy as a 'fifth modernization.' Some of Deng's reforms necessitated much negotiation because they required many groups to relinquish privileges, guarantees or recently made gains. In relative terms, the rehabilitation of religion was an easier matter to tackle. The CCP granted full rehabilitation to Li Weihai, who served as Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference from 1978 until 1983. Religion, driven underground by the political campaigns of the previous two decades, bounced back to an embarrassing degree, rebutting the prediction that had been made about its rapid demise.

3 Religion and Philanthropy under Deng and Jiang

Duan Dezhi outlines two periods during the overlapping administrations of Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin when they separately or jointly oversaw religious work policies. He describes the first period, from the arrest of the Gang of Four to the brief freeze in the politics of reform and opening that followed the crackdown in Tiananmen Square, as a '(post-) disorder rectification' (*boluan fanzheng* 拨乱反正) period.³³ The second period, which lasted from 1991 to 2001, he characterizes as a second cold

32 Huang, 702.

33 Duan, *Xin Zhongguo zongjiao gongzuoshi*, 151–206.

war, with renewed concern about religions infiltrating the party.³⁴ Overall, there are more commonalities between these two periods than during the two under Mao.³⁵ Religion mattered to the regime because it constituted a source of stability and a way to prevent tensions from accumulating in society in a context of growing discontent caused by economic reforms and some of their adverse consequences. Showing tolerance for religion also signaled to the international community a change of approach on the part of the CCP. After the fall of the Gang of Four, the policy of absolute control over religion experienced a brief respite. However, the crisis experienced by the CCP in 1989 led to a loss of confidence in its ideology and a return to what Ji Zhe terms a ‘secularization without secularism,’ where the neo-totalitarian state took a utilitarian approach to religion. The disastrous results of the personality cult surrounding Mao having discredited the original socialist ideology, the CCP under Deng and Jiang promoted the ‘secularization’ of socialism. In this context, disenchantment with politics went hand in hand with a state use of religion within the parameters it had defined.³⁶ At the beginning of that period, no social basis of wealthy philanthropists existed, but this changed significantly at the end of that period.

3.1 The Return to An Accommodating Policy on Religion in a Changed Context

The policy of reform and opening had some positive repercussions for religious life, but it also reinforced the CCP’s capacity for control.³⁷ The policy of rectification, or redress, included overturning the excesses of the previous policy on religion and the publication in 1982 of Document 19, which formalized the role of the government in religious affairs.³⁸ It signaled a

34 Duan, 207–64.

35 Duan’s chronology reflects the official distinction between the second and third generations of CCP leaders, led respectively by Deng and Jiang, but because Deng’s authority and influence continued into the 1990s, this distinction is somewhat arbitrary.

36 Ji Zhe, “Secularization without Secularism: The Political-Religious Configuration of Post-89 China,” in *Atheist Secularism and its Discontents: A Comparative Study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia*, ed. Tam T. T. Ngo and Justine B. Quijada (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 109.

37 Merle Goldman, “Religion and the State: The Struggle for Legitimacy and Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 483 (1986): 151.

38 CCP Central Committee, “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period,” 1982. In 1982, Li Weihai, the proponent of the ‘five characteristics of religion’ theory, was Vice Chairman of the party Central Advisory

clean break from the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and heralded a return to Li Weihan's moderate line on the five characteristics of religions, and religion's compatibility with socialism. However, the adoption of that policy also meant maintaining the mindset behind the pre-1957 policy against infiltration by religions. This approach included both opposition to a 'religious craze' (*zongjiao kuangre* 宗教狂热) and resistance to interventionism from abroad.³⁹ The latter revolved around three main controversies: the predication of Witness Nee; the popularity abroad of the Dalai Lama; and disputes with the Vatican over the nomination of bishops.

CCP General Secretaries Hu Yaobang (1982–1987) and Zhao Ziyang (1987–1989), who are both widely regarded as the more open and liberal leaders of the CCP, did not have a specific policy on religious affairs. They both focused their attention on the central issue of implementing the 'four modernizations' in agriculture, education, science, and military affairs, as they faced resistance on economic policies and political reforms from their more conservative colleagues. Their laissez-faire attitude on religion created a climate that made possible the release of the more accommodative Document 19, just before the abolition of the People's Communes. The document, which still constitutes the equivalent of a 'basic law' for the CCP and the government, admits that the Party went too far during the Cultural Revolution, but it does not repudiate its policies on Yiguandao and foreign missionaries. The document guarantees the right to believe, but it also asserts the right to promote atheism.⁴⁰ It proclaims freedom of religion as the "freedom to believe," but it imposes a number of restrictions on practicing religion.⁴¹ For example, it warns against preaching to or initiating people under the age of 18 and forbids any religious activities outside of places of worship. At various points, Document 19 emphasizes a desire to ensure that religious believers can perform 'normal religious activities,' and that the government promotes the 'normalization' of religion, without giving more specific details. This left some leeway when it came to how the document was interpreted by both religious associations and the government. This ambiguity and the experience of religious associations after

Commission, headed by Deng Xiaoping.

39 Duan, *Xin Zhongguo zongjiao gongzuoshi*, 188–206.

40 For detailed discussions of this document, see Pitman B. Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China," *The China Quarterly* 174 (2003).

41 Beatrice Leung, "China's religious freedom policy: The art of managing religious activity," *The China Quarterly* 184 (2005).

1949 slowed down the growth of religious charity, with people unsure as to whether philanthropy constituted a ‘normal religious activity.’⁴²

The government encouraged the reconstitution of the ‘big five’ national associations, but the religious landscape had changed considerably in the few years between 1966 and 1982. As Elizabeth Perry describes, while the CCP had eliminated communal religions as sources of resistance to the state in the 1950s, it found that once control over them had relaxed in 1978, they resumed activities, but for different purposes. Some of them even started to provide leadership at the local level and sanctioned feuds between enemy lineages and communities in the countryside.⁴³ Another development that concerned the authorities was the growth of Protestant Christianity. This particularly became apparent in the immediate aftermath of the crackdown on June 4th, when many, having lost faith in the possibility that the CCP might support political reform, found solace in Protestantism.⁴⁴ A further cause for concern for the party was the realization that church leaders were playing a critical role in the political transitions then underway in South Korea, Taiwan, and South Africa.⁴⁵ Especially jarring in the eyes of leaders in Beijing was the collapse of socialist regimes in Poland and East Germany, facilitated by the action of churches.

The administration of Jiang Zemin, which saw Deng Xiaoping gradually retreat into the background, made possible a greater institutionalization of religion but also provided a basis for greater control. The first law, on religion (*zongjiaofa* 宗教法), aimed to regularize the conditions for the registration of religions, while the second, on the establishment of better rules for internal governance (*zongjiao lifa tixi shexiang* 宗教立法体系设想), sought to ensure that religions complied with the government’s regulations. Jiang had to deal with three issues that revealed important changes in China’s religious landscape. The most important, near the end of his mandate, had to do with the rise of *qigong* and the immense popularity of organizations such as Falungong. The CCP felt so threatened by the latter movement and a few other similar ones that it passed legislation against

42 Document 19 does not include a single mention of charity or philanthropy.

43 Perry, “Rural Violence,” 432–36.

44 See Yang Fenggang, “Lost in the Market, Saved at McDonald’s: Conversion to Christianity in Urban China,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (2005): 430, 435–36.

45 Although the outcome of these transitions from 1987 to 1989 was uncertain, it was known that in Seoul, Taipei, Leipzig, and Pretoria, the security forces’ response to demonstrations had been restrained.

‘evil cults’(*xiejiao* 邪教), and launched an aggressive campaign against its adherents that remains in force at the time of writing.⁴⁶ A second source of anxiety related to what the CCP saw as the three independence movements of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, and their alleged religious component.⁴⁷ Finally, the CCP under Jiang also singled out the United States for supporting independent churches and for giving a voice to religious dissidents in relation to human rights violations.

Because of its self-imposed rigid and narrow definition of what constituted a ‘real religion’ vs. a ‘cult,’ the CCP found it difficult to deal with religious movements that were somewhere between religion and science. The case of *qigong*, which had existed even at the time of Mao, became intractable only after Jiang consolidated power. The practice of the ancient form of gymnastics had been encouraged from above as a relatively inexpensive and efficient form of health care. However, the claims of some spiritual masters that their knowledge exceeded that of existing ‘science’ led to criticism from the medical profession. Despite this, in the last few years of Jiang’s administration, the popularity of many *qigong* movements and their increasingly visible presence in the public sphere appeared a public health care’s failure and thereby became a major political problem.⁴⁸ The mobilization from overseas by Falungong’s leader Li Hongzhi to protest next to the CCP headquarters proved too much. The hardening of the government on religious matters that followed cast a shadow but it did not prevent religious institutions from providing social services.

3.2 The End of Class Struggle and the Rehabilitation of Charity

In the early years of the policy of reform and opening, China was poor, the direction of the economy and its politics remained unsettled, and despite the efforts in the previous three decades to alleviate poverty the country faced a scarcity of resources to meet the needs of the destitute and the poor. The welfare of vulnerable populations depended both on provision by the

46 The official translation is ‘evil cults,’ but ‘heterodox teaching’ is more accurate. See Edward Irons, “Falun Gong and the Sectarian Religion Paradigm,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6, no. 2 (2003): 258.

47 The Dalai Lama preached autonomy, not independence; the Uyghur leaders did likewise and their movement did not have a religious leadership. The Taiwan Presbyterian Church supported self-determination.

48 Patricia M. Thornton, “Framing Dissent in Contemporary China: Irony, Ambiguity and Metonymy,” *The China Quarterly* 171 (2002).

government and on international assistance. In 1981, CCP-sponsored mass organizations joined forces to establish the first foundation concerned with the welfare of children and youth. The government established other foundations in the following years and encouraged wealthy patrons to do likewise.⁴⁹ In 1982, it sponsored the creation of the Soong Ching Ling Foundation, which along with a variety of political objectives such as fostering cross-strait relations, managed charitable work relating to children. In 1984, Deng Xiaoping's son established the Foundation for Disabled Persons. By 1987, China had over 200 foundations, 33 of which had a national scope.⁵⁰

This official effort to promote charities was a response to sudden changes in China's political economy. The demise of the People's Communes in 1983 exacerbated the existing social inequalities that the Maoist era had failed to eradicate, the inability of reforms to immediately improve welfare generated increasing frustration throughout the Deng and Jiang era. The student uprisings of 1986–1987 and 1989 revealed the social malaise regarding inequalities, and dissatisfaction with the demise of the social protection provided by state-owned enterprises and the government. The crackdown against the latest of these protests led to opprobrium from the international community, and with the fall of the USSR, China ended up isolated in the international community, with Deng's policy of reform and opening threatened by conservative forces inside the CCP. After much publicized visits to the cities of Shenzhen and Shanghai in 1992, Deng used his residual authority as veteran 'paramount leader' to lend his support to those who wanted to pursue his policies, who prevailed over conservative opponents within the CCP Politburo's Standing Committee.⁵¹

During that period, as discussed above, Document 19 did not give clear directives regarding the charitable activities of religious institutions. This did not prevent some individual religious leaders taking initiative to help the less fortunate. In her investigation of philanthropy in

49 These included the Welfare Institute, the Committee for the Defence of Children, the Women's Federation, the Federation of Trade Unions, the CCP Youth League, the Youth Federation, the Writers' Association, the Association for Science and Technology, the Sports Federation, the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, and the Federation of Industry and Commerce. Liu, "Development of Charities in China," 74.

50 Liu, "Development of Charities in China," 74.

51 For a detailed account of these struggles, see Zhao Suisheng, "Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour: Elite Politics in Post-Tiananmen China," *Asian Survey* 33, no. 8 (1993).

Jiangsu and Shanghai, for example, Wu Keping found evidence of such undertakings among Buddhist clerics. She found that Zhenchan 真禪, the abbot of the Shanghai Jade Buddha temple (*yufu si* 玉佛寺) had donated to the Children's Welfare Association for four years before founding the Master Zhenchan Children's Welfare Foundation in 1988.⁵² According to Wu Keping's informants, Zhenchan adopted that approach because the temple could not raise funds for charity under its own name, but individuals could. The first charity inspired by the Protestant Church, the Amity Foundation, started operations in 1985.

Between 1989 and 1992, when the policy of economic reform and opening appeared jeopardized by international isolation and the prevalence of more orthodox views on the centrally-planned economy, religious philanthropic activities slowed down, especially those that involved foreign co-operation. That changed in the spring of 1992, when the central government quickly approved the delivery of relief by international organizations, including religious NGOs (RNGOs), in response to a series of floods that had affected South China. This approach contrasted with the attitude following the Tangshan earthquake in 1976. In addition to expressing genuine concern for the victims of the natural disasters and thereby partly undoing the damage done to the CCP's reputation since 1989, that decision had a further benefit: it improved relations across the Taiwan Strait. One of the NGOs allowed by Chinese local governments was the Canadian branch of the Ciji Foundation, a major Taiwanese Buddhist philanthropy. A year later, a meeting in Singapore between unofficial representatives of China and Taiwan offered a framework for Ciji to operate in China, a decision that would have important repercussions for Chinese philanthropy.⁵³

The central government's support for philanthropy finally became clearer with an editorial published in February 1994 in the People's Daily praising the concept of charity.⁵⁴ The same year, the Ministry of Civil Affairs sponsored the establishment of the China Charity Federation

52 Wu Keping, "The Philanthropic Turn of Religions in Post-Mao China: Bureaucratization, Professionalization, and the Making of a Moral Subject," *Modern China* 43, no. 4 (2017): 428.

53 On this story, which unfolded over nearly three decades, see André Laliberté, "'Love Transcends Borders' or 'blood is Thicker than Water'? The Charity Work of the Compassion Relief Foundation in the People's Republic of China," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2003); André Laliberté, "The Growth of a Taiwanese Buddhist Association in China: Soft Power and Institutional Learning," *China Information* 27, no. 1 (2013).

54 Luova, "Charity paradigm change in contemporary China," 137.

(*zhonghua cishan zonghui* 中华慈善总会). Over 240 local associations at provincial and municipal levels joined the China Charity Federation in the following years.⁵⁵ The CCP also endorsed fundraising by religious associations, by supporting relevant legislation. Acknowledging that religious believers give to their churches and temples, the government issued specific directives on “voluntary offerings of alms, donations, and contributions” in the Regulation on Governing Venues for Religious Activities.⁵⁶ The same regulations, however, limited the scope of these charities, with the Article 8 stipulation that activities had to remain within the limits of temples, churches, and mosques.⁵⁷ Despite this, the same year, the Shaolin temple registered the first Buddhist non-profit social organization, the Shaolin Charity and Welfare Foundation (*Shaolin cishan fuli jijinhui* 少林慈善福利基金会).⁵⁸

Toward the end of the Jiang Zemin period, social inequalities had grown, enormous fortunes had emerged, and there was a perception that ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ was a front for the emergence of unfettered capitalism under an authoritarian regime. In a context of growing needs and expectations, private philanthropy was inadequate and left authorities looking for other options. As Ma Qiusha noted, by the end of Jiang’s tenure, many local governments had failed to meet urgent needs for a variety of public services, “so they [...] turned to the private sector for help. The voluntary organizations, private non-profit institutions, and all kinds of social issue organizations are a direct response to this new situation.”⁵⁹ Two key developments in the second half of Jiang’s tenure contributed to the growth of RNGOs. First, the convening in Beijing of the 4th World Conference on Women of the United Nations in 1995 led the Chinese authorities to reshape their definitions of what kind of organizations qualify as NGOs.⁶⁰ Second, the emergence of Falungong, as discussed above, contradicted the impression that the CCP had achieved control over religious affairs, and forced it to reconsider the matter of RNGOs.

55 Zonghua Cishan Zonghui, *Zhonghua Cishan Nianjian 2008* (Beijing: Zhonghua Cishan Nianjian Bianji, 2008).

56 Wu, “The Philanthropic Turn of Religions,” 430.

57 Wu, 430.

58 Wu, 429.

59 Ma Qiusha, “The Governance of NGOs in China Since 1978: How Much Autonomy?” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2002): 318.

60 Ma, “The Governance of NGOs,” 307–08.

In 1999, the National People's Congress (NPC) passed a law on Donations for Public Welfare Undertaking. It defined these undertakings as follows:

relieving disasters, helping the poor, assisting the disabled as well as other social groups and individuals in trouble; education, science, culture, public health and sports; environmental protection, construction of public facilities; and other social and public welfare undertakings promoting the development and progress of society.⁶¹

Two years later, the NPC passed the Trust Law, which sought to define what constituted a charitable trust, and, more specifically, to indicate what constituted being in the interest of public welfare. This included six elements: poverty alleviation; disaster relief; helping the disabled; developing education, science, technology, culture, art and sports; developing medical and public health undertakings; and environmental protection.⁶² At the end of his tenure, in 2000, Jiang Zemin promoted his theory of the 'Three Represents.' This statement, incorporated into the CCP charter in 2002, signaled the end of class struggle. It also suggested an end to the idea of the CCP as a revolutionary party, instead considering it the 'ruling party.'⁶³ New thinking about religious philanthropy appeared plausible in such a context.

4 Religious Charity and Civil Society under Hu

To this day, Hu Jintao's personal views on religion and charity are as unclear as those of his predecessor. Hu's political philosophy, like Jiang's, consisted mainly in maintaining the broad strategy of 'opening and reform' promulgated by Deng, including his policy on religious work. While Jiang had made his own mark with the idea of the 'Three Represents,' Hu pressed the CCP to adopt his idea of establishing a 'harmonious society,' in a marked departure from Mao Zedong's views on class struggle. The harmonious society ideology seemed to suggest a rehabilitation of Confucianism if not its promotion as a religion. In his survey of the mentions of Confucianism in the People's Daily, Wu Shufang notes that the CCP appeared eager to

61 Liu, "Development of Charities in China," 71.

62 Liu, 71.

63 Bruce J. Dickson, "Whom does the party represent? From 'three revolutionary classes' to 'three represents,'" *American Asian Review* 21, no. 1 (2003).

adopt core elements of Confucian morality because they ‘softened’ the appeal of the existing political order. Confucianism also mattered to the CCP because it allowed the ruling party to appear more clearly as the upholder of ‘Chinese tradition.’ However, Wu cautions that the CCP under Hu was unlikely to adopt Confucianism as an official alternative to the official historical materialist philosophy promoted by the ruling party.⁶⁴ During the period under observation, most academics had reached a conclusion about the idea of a Confucian religion (*rujiao* 儒教): they rejected calls by prominent intellectuals such as Jiang Qing 蒋庆 and Kang Xiaoguan 康晓光 to proclaim the Confucian religion (*rujiao* 儒教) as the ‘national religion’ (*guojiao* 国教).⁶⁵ A key difference between Hu and his predecessor is that, under his rule, the idea that religion could become involved in philanthropy had become acceptable.

4.1 Religious Work under Hu

Duan Dezhi sees the religious work of Hu’s government as the continuation of the so-called ‘second cold war’ with continued opposition to infiltration by religions.⁶⁶ However, he also sees improvements in the legal sphere, with the passing of a law (*zongjiao shiwu wuli* 宗教事务条例) to regularize the conditions for registration and of a law recognizing the usefulness of religion in Chinese society (*zongjiao lifa tixi shexiang* 宗教立法体系设想). However, the CCP also issued directives that advised religious associations to cut links with any source of external support, by reminding them of the necessity of upholding the principle of independence in self-management (*zhichi duli zizhu ziban yuanze* 支持独立自主自办原则). Near the end of Hu’s mandate, the debate about enlarging the number of officially recognized religions had concluded: there was no question of recognizing Confucianism, ‘popular belief’, communal religions, or any of the redemptive societies such as Yiguan-dao, never mind Falungong, as religions. Moreover, as Alice Miller’s analysis shows, there was no convergence between the ‘harmonious society’ ideology and the utopian themes attributed to Confucius and his followers, such as the ‘world of great harmony’ (*datong shijie* 大同世界).⁶⁷

64 Wu Shufang, “The Revival of Confucianism and the CCP’s Struggle for Cultural Leadership: a content analysis of the People’s Daily, 2000–2009,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 89 (2014): 991.

65 Wu, “The Revival of Confucianism,” 982.

66 Duan, *Xin Zhongguo zongjiao gongzuoshi*, 265–338.

67 Alice Miller, “Hu Jintao and the Sixth Plenum,” *China Leadership Monitor* 20 (2007): 7.

In 2004, new regulations on religious affairs mentioned for the first time the ‘positive contribution’ of religions to the public good.⁶⁸ This translated into the promotion of religions in international conferences, such as the World Buddhist Forum (*shijie fojiao luntan* 世界佛教论坛) in 2006 (Hangzhou), 2009 (Wuxi), and 2012 (Hong Kong); and its Daoist equivalent (*guoji daojiao luntan* 国际道教论坛) in 2007 (Hong Kong), and 2011 in Mount Hengshan (Hunan).⁶⁹ The clearest indication of Hu’s policy on religious affairs was the series of debates on the contribution of religion to the public interest in Beijing between 2007 and 2012, discussed below. This happened in a context of growing concern about social stability and unrest, and the recognition that the existing social policies had not done enough to address the grievances of the population about their welfare.

Under Hu, however, religion remained a source of concern for authorities. In 2003 the ‘610 office,’ established by the CCP under Jiang to deal with Falungong, changed its name to the ‘Central Leading Group on Dealing with Heretical Religions’ (*zhongyang fangfan he chuli xiejiao wenti lingdao xiaozu* 中央防反和处理邪教问题领导小组).⁷⁰ This body was directly under party control, rather than under the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and operated outside of the legal and state system. The same year, the body’s mandate was expanded to include monitoring 28 other ‘cults.’ These included Christian churches that rejected the authority of the Three-Selves Patriotic Church, the official association for Protestants; many qigong groups; and other groups under spiritual leaders such as Jingkong 净空, a native of Anhui who became a monk in Taiwan and has preached the Dharma abroad since.⁷¹ The other two major sources of concerns about religion, in Tibet and in Xinjiang, remained intertwined with problems of ethnicity.

68 Wu, “The Philanthropic Turn of Religions,” 430.

69 The International Daoist Forum was established in 2011. Its founder retrospectively regarded the International Forum on the Dao De Jing as the First International Daoist Forum. See Zhuo Xiping, *Religious Faith of the Chinese* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2018), 88.

70 ‘610’ refers to the date of the office’s establishment on June 10, 1999. See James W. Tong, *Revenge of the Forbidden City: The Suppression of the Falun Gong in China, 1999–2005* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

71 Most of the groups were on the list of groups banned in 1995, 2000, and 2014. See Edward Irons, “The List: The Evolution of China’s List of Illegal and Evil Cults,” *The Journal of CESNUR* 2, no. 1 (2018): 33. On Jingkong, see Guillaume Dutournier and Ji Zhe, “Expérimentation sociale et ‘confucianisme populaire’: Le cas du Centre d’éducation culturelle de Lujiang,” *Perspectives chinoises* 106 (2009).

4.2 Establishing the Substance of 'Harmonious Society' with the Help of Philanthropy

Under Jiang and Premier Zhu Rongji's stewardship of China's economy, the option of relying on non-state provision of social services had become compatible with the view that in state policy, growth should take precedence over wealth redistribution. In 2004, the Shanghai Municipal Foundation for Charity and the Shanghai Research Center for the Development of Charitable Activities co-sponsored a conference on philanthropy within the context of establishing a harmonious society.⁷² The exploration of charity by a Chinese and international team of scholars saw two main sources for philanthropy: the state and private corporations (*qiye* 企业). The discussions on society and charity focused on the abstract concepts of the third sector and presented the role of NGOs, but not one chapter discussed the intervention of religions. The comparative studies with Taiwan and Singapore did not make a single mention of Buddhist philanthropy either, a striking omission when one considers that the early twenty-first century constituted a high point in the activities of such associations.

Publications on charity emphasized the considerable contributions made by wealthy patrons in 2004. For example, Huang Rulun 黄如论, head of the Jingyuan real estate corporation, gave ¥211 million in that year; the second most generous donor that year, Zhang Zhiting 张芝庭, gave ¥128 million, followed by Li Jinyuan 李金元, who gave 66 million.⁷³ This emphasis on philanthropy by prominent individuals reproduced a widespread approach to charity in the U.S. It should be noted that a study on giving and philanthropy in the U.S. suggests that recent trends in that country towards a concentration at the top by a few extremely wealthy donors present two major risks. Increased volatility and unpredictability will make it very difficult to budget for long-term projects, and there is an increased risk of philanthropy being used as an extension of power and to protect privileges.⁷⁴ The report's focus on wealthy individuals suggested that official charities in China did not seek to emulate the other

72 Lu, *Cishan*.

73 Liu Jing 刘京, ed., *2006 Zhongguo cishan juanzeng fazhan lanpishu* 中国慈善捐赠发展蓝皮书 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2007), 190.

74 Chuck Collins, Helen Flannery, and Josh Hoxie, *Gilded Giving: Top-Heavy Philanthropy in an Age of Extreme Inequality* (Washington, DC: The Institute for Policy Studies, 2016), 4.

component of US philanthropy, where religions are important provider of services.

Likewise, a report sponsored by the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau (*Shanghai shi minzhengju* 上海市民政局, SCAB) proposed a comprehensive survey of philanthropy in China, but offered no information at all on religious charity.⁷⁵ Under the direction of Xu Lin 徐麟, then director of SCAB, the report looked at charity in China from a comparative perspective, including observations made in the US, the UK, Canada, Singapore, and Taiwan.⁷⁶ The report established a clear link between charity and three state missions: social insurance (*shehui baozhang* 社会保障), social relief (*jiuzhu* 救助), and social welfare (*fuli* 福利). In the same year, the CCP launched the first of many consultations to discuss the necessity of a law on charity, as it became clear that NGO registrations had accelerated. The government wanted to increase accountability and transparency, ensure state oversight, and manage an increasingly diversified sector, which included charitable organizations, foundations, private non-enterprise units, and a variety of social groups.⁷⁷ The proposed legislation revealed that a paradigmatic shift had occurred, with philanthropy, seen under Mao as hypocrisy, fully restored as a central expression of civic duty.⁷⁸

Corporate philanthropy was much more limited than that of wealthy individuals. Indeed, in 2006, only eight of the charities set up by Chinese corporations raised more than Sony, whose philanthropy had amassed ¥52 million.⁷⁹ In Shanghai, China Unicom (*Zhongguo lianhe tongxin* 中国联通) raised close to ¥9 million in 2006. Other major contributors included Minmetals Development (*wukuang fazhan* 五矿发展), Sinopec Shanghai Petroleum (*Zhongguo shihua Shanghai shiyou* 中国石化上海石油), Hunan Changfeng Motors (*Hunan changfeng qiche* 湖南长丰汽车), Yangtze Power (*changjiang jianli* 长江电力), and the Gemdale Corporation (*jinti jituan*

75 Xu, *Zhongguo cishan shiye fazhan yanjiu*.

76 A key supporter of Xi, Xu later rose to become head of the Shanghai Communist Party Committee's propaganda department in 2013. He was director of the Cyberspace Administration of China from 2015 to 2018, before becoming director of the State Council Information Office (*xinwen bangongshi* 新闻办公室) in 2018.

77 Ruth A. Shapiro, "Changing Laws or Taxing Changes: Policies in Flux," in *Pragmatic Philanthropy: Asian Philanthropy Explained*, ed. Ruth A. Shapiro, Manisha Mirchandani, and Heesu Jang (Hong Kong: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 78.

78 Luova, "Charity paradigm change in contemporary China," 138.

79 Liu, *2006 Zhongguo cishan juanzeng fazhan lanpishu*, 219.

金地集团). All these firms raised over ¥5 million in 2006.⁸⁰ These numbers paled in comparison to the commitments made by Huang Rulun and other wealthy individuals.

The relief effort following the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, widely known abroad as it occurred just ahead of the Beijing Olympic Games, was a watershed moment for philanthropy. The number of private foundations increased substantially in the aftermath of that disaster: Between 2006 and 2012, the number of foundations grew from 1046 to 3043.⁸¹ Likewise, in 2008, total public donations saw a 300 percent increase from the previous years after the quake.⁸² Of the NGOs that received donations from these foundations, however, those with a focus on religion, protection of rights and labor migrants, could not gain much support: When making decisions about funding an NGO, individuals and companies want to ensure that their donation will face little risk of opposition from the government, and therefore they focus on safe issues like education.⁸³ However, the post-disaster relief effort highlighted a difficulty faced by public foundations when it came to fundraising: NGOs were prevented by law from soliciting donations publicly. This situation, wrote Wang Hui for the China Development Brief, did not foster the growth of a culture of giving.⁸⁴

Likewise, in her study on charity supermarkets in Tianjin, Vivienne Shue shows that after a few years of experiments, these initiatives had not developed as anticipated.⁸⁵ Furthermore, and more damaging for charity in general, the Red Cross Society of China was found to have mismanaged the Sichuan quake relief funds.⁸⁶ Although the Society reformed its management, it took time for negative feelings toward it to dissipate. These separate events deeply shattered people's trust in state-sponsored charities. Moreover, the over-reliance on a few very wealthy individuals raised

80 Liu, 217.

81 Global China Philanthropy Initiative (GCPI), "Philanthropy in Greater China," 2019.

82 Wang, "Changes in the China Charity Federation System."

83 Liu Haiying, "The Impact of Private Foundations on Domestic NGOs in China," *China Development Brief*, no. 42 (2009): 16.

84 56% of public donations were raised by different levels of government, while the Red Cross Society of China and the CCF (two government-organized NGOs) raised 21% and 15% respectively. See Wang, "Changes in the China Charity Federation System."

85 Vivienne Shue, "The Political Economy of Compassion: China's 'charity supermarket' saga," *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 72 (2011): 755.

86 Caroline Reeves, "The Red Cross Society of China: Past, Present, and Future," in *Philanthropy for Health in China*, ed. Jennifer Ryan, Lincoln Chen, and Tony Saich (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

another issue: encouraging individual philanthropy as an alternative to state-sponsored philanthropy presented the government with the dilemma of encouraging the growth of an oligarchy that could challenge the state's authority. It is in that context that throughout the Hu administration, academics, officials, and representative of religious associations debated the issue of faith-based charity in China.

4.3 Towards a Restoration of Religious Charity?

The issue of whether religion and philanthropy relate to each other is still a subject of debate in China. The fact that this debate has gone on for years highlights the complexity of the issue. Some officials argue that the link between religion and philanthropy primarily exists in Western societies while in China philanthropy depends on social relations. This view points to Confucianism to explain a perceived distinction between inherently individualistic Westerners and more collectively minded East Asians.⁸⁷ Notwithstanding the separate issue of whether Confucianism is religious or not, many other Chinese scholars argue that there has been a very close relationship between traditional religious thinking and philanthropy since ancient times. As such, it is evident that behind a unanimous façade, diverse views have been expressed in the course of successive meetings on the subject of religious philanthropy.

In 2005, Huang Jianbao 黄剑波, then a young researcher at the Institute of Minorities and Anthropology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), published an article about the social capital of religious institutions that described positively their contribution to social welfare in ancient China.⁸⁸ His article would be the first of a number of publications he wrote over the years on the subject of belief (*xinyang* 信仰). Representative of many discussions ongoing in academic meetings during the Hu administration, such articles discussed the topic of religious charity in the past, and avoided the implication that it could be relevant to contemporary China. As late as 2006, Wu Keping reported that many officials did not

87 See, for example: Yang Yongjiao, Zhou Wen, and Zhang Dong, "Celebrity Philanthropy in China: An Analysis of Social Network Effect on Philanthropic Engagement," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 30, no. 4 (2018): 704.

88 Huang Jianbo 黄剑波, "Fuli cishan, shehui ciben yu shehui fazhan: lun zongjiao zai dangdai zhongguo shehuizhong de canyu xuyao he keneng 福利慈善、社会资本与社会发展-论宗教在当代中国社会中的参与需要和可能," *Guangxi minzu yanjiu* 广西民族研究 3, no. 81 (2005).

accept the idea that other actors beside the state could provide social services. As an official of the Jiangsu Provincial Religious Affairs Bureau explained to her, NGOs and religious groups are ideologically incompatible with the government's socialist ideal so they could not perform such work.⁸⁹

However, public events soon suggested otherwise. In June 2007, Renmin University, in coordination with the Hebei Province Xinde Cultural Research Institute (*Hebei xinde wenhua yanjiusuo* 河北信德文化研究所), the Foundation Aide (*Aide jijinhui* 爱德基金会), and the Jinde Association (*Jinde gongyi xieban* 进德公益协办), convened a workshop to discuss the question of religions and the public interest.⁹⁰ A summary of that meeting appeared in the official journal of the CASS Institute of World Religions (IWR): *China Religions* (*Zhongguo zongjiao* 中国宗教).⁹¹ The 2007 conference on religion and charity and the conferences that followed in subsequent years suggested some government interest. However, state officials also saw the perils inherent in government recognition as religious institutions could gain credit for their relief work, at the expense of the government. As Wu Keping noted in a seminar convened at the Chinese Philanthropy Research Institute at Beijing Normal University, the officials present at the event lauded the participation of religions in philanthropy while acknowledging the need to “harness them.”⁹²

Notwithstanding the above qualification, the discussions appeared prescient in the context of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. Some observers interpreted the rapid response in delivering relief to victims of the disaster as the emergence of civic engagement in China.⁹³ In November of that year, a “second forum on religion and the public interest (*dierjia zongjiao yu gongyi shiye luntan* 第二届宗教与公益事业 论坛),” which focused on “emergency crisis and Buddhist charity (*zainan weiji yu fojiao cishan shiye* 灾难危机与佛教慈善事业),” convened in Nanputuo temple. It discussed lessons from the tragedy and debated how Buddhists had responded. Soon

89 Wu, “The Philanthropic Turn of Religions,” 427.

90 I have tried in vain many times over the years to obtain details of the workshop proceedings but could only find a partial account online. Over the years, I have also interacted with many of the workshop attendees. Many of them do not have details of the workshop proceedings.

91 Yu Ning 余宁, “Zongjiao yu gongyi: shoujie zongjiao yu gongyi shiye luntan zaijing juxing 宗教与公益: 首届宗教与公益事业论坛在京举行,” *Zhongguo zongjiao* 中国宗教 86, no. 6 (2007).

92 Wu, “The Philanthropic Turn of Religions,” 431.

93 Xu Bin, *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

after, their websites reported the deliberations online, making them available to the broader public.⁹⁴ The list of participants suggested an interest from academics and from Buddhist associations in exchanging experiences about what the latter had achieved, but it did not suggest much interest from state authorities above a certain level. Nevertheless, these meetings revealed that the religious milieu, and not only those that were Buddhists, had not waited for the government before acting to provide relief.

At the meeting, scholars of Buddhism and religious studies such as Wei Dedong 魏德东, Wang Jia 王佳, Lin Zhigang 林志刚, and Liu Yuanchun 刘元春, exchanged views with monastics who already had experience in philanthropy, such as the host Zhengxing 正兴, but also others such as Chang Hui 常辉.⁹⁵ Lay Buddhists associated with philanthropy in Taiwan and Japan presented their views, along with other representatives from other Buddhist charities in China. The organizers also invited speakers from other NGOs such as the Chinese Ageing Development Foundation (*zhongguo laoling shiye fazhan jijinhui* 中国老龄事业发展基金会) to share their insights. Among the officials present, only Chen Jiande 陈建德, Secretary for the Party Bureau for Nationalities and Religions (*minzong dangzu shuji* 民宗局党组书记) for the Xiamen municipal party committee, represented the CCP. The other officials present were state representatives: Lin Zhizhi 林致知, Vice Director for the Fujian Province Bureau for Religions (*fujian sheng minzongting futingzhang* 福建省民宗厅副厅长), and Liu Wei (刘威), Vice Director of SARA's first department (*yisi fusizhang* 一司副司长), responsible for research on Buddhism and Daoism. None of them led their respective organizations.

Other meetings followed, including a third one in Xining, Qinghai, in 2009; and a fourth one a year later on faith-based social services, which met at Renmin University and focused again on the role of lay Buddhists in charity.⁹⁶ The idea discussed in these meetings of epistemic communities

94 See Fjnet (fojiao zaixian), "Jiaojie, xuejie guanyu zhongguo fojiao cishan shiye de jiti sikao, 教界、学界关于中国佛教慈善事业的集体思考," 2008.

95 Zhengxing was director of the Nanputuo Temple Charity; Changhui was active in the Hebei province Buddhist charity.

96 No details of the proceedings of these events have been published, and little trace has been left online. See Yisilan zhiguangxun, "300 xuezhe zhuanjia jiqi gaoyuan jiabei jiaoyu yu zongjiao cishan shixian," 2009; Gaoxiaowang (zhongguo gaoxiao renwen shehui ke-xue xiuxiawang 中国高校人文社会科学信息网), "Di 4 jia zongjiao yu gongyi shiye luntan ji 'jushi fojiao yu cishan wenhua' yantaohui zai zhongguo renmin daxue juxing 第4届宗教与公益事业论坛暨“居士佛教与慈善文化”研讨会在中国人民大学举行," 2010.

of scholars and religious representatives, received cautious and indirect endorsement in the CCP. For example, Gao Hong, who worked in a local branch of the Party School, which trains cadres, published a paper in 2010 suggesting that Chinese society could benefit substantially from Buddhist charities. Using the example of Shanghai-based Buddhist philanthropy, she argues that the practice of charity affirms the religious values of adherents to that religion, and the co-operation between entrepreneurs and lay followers is a good example of welfare supply and what she terms ‘institutionalized good deeds.’⁹⁷ The article did appear in a relatively less prominent journal published in Gansu, an impoverished province in the Northwest, far away from Shanghai, the focus of the case study, and from Beijing, where the central government makes decisions. However, considering the role of religious charity in fighting poverty and the location of the journal in a province known for its difficult conditions, it may appear most relevant to the local authorities.

Some other meetings also happened in addition to those sponsored by Renmin University. In 2011, Shanghai, which has a long tradition of exchanges with Protestant churches, hosted a conference on religious charity and social development, extending invitations to international experts.⁹⁸ At the conference, there was convergence between secular and religious institutions on the issue of justice, perhaps not surprising in the birthplace of the CCP, a city with the largest proportion of Catholics in any province-level division of the PRC, and where many Protestant missionaries had resided. As was the case at previous events, Buddhist perspectives received much attention, with no fewer than 16 interventions regarding Buddhism.⁹⁹ Christian perspectives, however, received an equal amount of attention, if one includes the interventions about Hong Kong. This contrasted with three interventions about Daoist charity, and one about Islamic philanthropy. The event also offered a unique opportunity to hear perspectives on two religions other than the ‘big five,’ Judaism and Bahai’i, which both had a presence in the city.

97 Gao Hong 高虹, “Fojiao cishan shiye yu shehui fuli wenti yanjiu- yi Shanghai fojiao xinyang shixian weili 佛教慈善事业与社会福利问题研究—以上海佛教信仰实践为例,” *Gansu shehui kexue* 甘肃社会科学 3 (2010): 158.

98 Tao Feiya 陶飞亚 and Liu Yi 刘义, eds., *Zongjiao cishan yu zhongguo shehui gongyi* 宗教慈善与中国社会公益 (Shanghai: Shanghai daxue chubanshe, 2012).

99 Of the interventions about Buddhism, four looked at Taiwan-based Ciji.

There were many events in 2012 that suggested a greater state interest in religious charity. There was a 6th forum devoted to the issue of religious-based social services, which was attended by the Taiwan-based Ciji.¹⁰⁰ In the same year, the government also convened a forum on Protestant churches. The 8th of its kind, the forum considered the social relevance of churches in Chinese society.¹⁰¹ The debates explored the capacity of China's different religions and listened to a mixture of academics as well as representatives of the religious milieu. It was also in 2012 that SARA launched the first "religious charity weeks" which were supposed to become yearly, during which religious institutions at all levels raised money for philanthropy. The sums collected at the end of that event amounted to 260 million RMB.¹⁰² This represented more than the money raised by large Chinese and transnational enterprises. As Wu Keping found out in her investigations in Eastern China, however, religious actors had mixed feelings about these initiatives, some looking at it as due recognition of the importance of religion, others as a way for the government to extract money from them.¹⁰³

A major development occurred in the last year of the Hu administration, as officials at the top recognized what had already been happening in the preceding years with the tacit approval of some local leaders. In 2012, SARA, the CCP UFWD, the State Council Commission for Development and Reform, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the National Tax Administration, jointly supported the issuance of a legal opinion that encouraged religious actors to organize philanthropic activities that were in the public interest. Although not legally binding, this opinion opened the way for religious institutions to provide different social services according to their abilities. For the religious milieu, it mattered because it not only reflected the pragmatic policies of a few local governments, but, as approval from the top, could inspire hesitant local governments to follow suit. The opinion appeared then to herald a major change of approach, but at the time of writing, it has yet to be turned into legislation.¹⁰⁴ It remains unclear how much Xi Jinping, who was already on the CCP Standing Committee when it issued the opinion, intends to follow suit with his own policies.

100 Dakongbao 2012.

101 SARA, "第八届'基督宗教在当代中国社会作用及其影响'高级论坛在南京召开," 2012.

102 Wu, "The Philanthropic Turn of Religions," 432.

103 Wu, 432.

104 Magda Hornemann, "China: Changing climate for religious NGOs?" *Forum 18 News Service*, July 12, 2012.

In addition to the conferences discussed above, which ostensibly included members of all the ‘big five’ religions, Buddhist associations have met at conferences that addressed their specific concerns. This does not necessarily mean that Buddhism has received preferential treatment. As mentioned, Protestant churches also had meetings dedicated to them. Tan Yuanfang, a researcher in political science and civic education at Guangzhou University, published a paper in 2012 outlining the difficulties faced by Buddhist charities, and looked at the achievements of those in Taiwan as possible solutions to these problems.¹⁰⁵ The paper revealed a greater appreciation than before of Buddhist associations’ potential to serve the state in its social policies during the last years of the Hu administration. It also expressed a key reservation: the adoption of the management methods NGOs use in the provision of welfare risks undermining the spiritual authority of monastics towards their followers.

Numbers from the official religious associations reveal that religious milieus have not waited for the ‘2012 opinion’ to develop charities. Between 2003 and 2014, *Fayin* (法音), the journal of the Buddhist Association of China, reported 106 charitable activities performed by Buddhist associations.¹⁰⁶ *Tianfeng* (天凤), the journal of the Three-Selves Churches recorded 89 philanthropic activities sponsored by Protestant churches. *Zhongguo Tianzhujiao* (中国天主教), the periodical for the Patriotic Catholic Association, counted 46 such activities for the same period. *Zhongguo Dajiao* (中国道教), the official journal for the Daoist Association of China, counted 48. These numbers provide another example of what Robert Weller calls “blind-eye governance,” wherein the government tolerates activities that are not subject to legal protection, as long as they do not challenge its authority.¹⁰⁷ The following section looks into debates on religious charities under Xi and tries to assess to what extent the attitude under Hu will continue unabated.

105 Tan Yuanfang 谭苑芳, “Fojiao cishan shiye feiyingli zuzhi zhili jiegou de juxian jiqi huiying 佛教慈善事业非营利组织治理结构的局限及其回应,” *Guangzhou daxue xuebao (shehui kexueban)* 广州大学学报 (社会科学版) 11, no. 11 (2012).

106 A list of all these activities is available upon request.

107 Robert Weller, “Responsive Authoritarianism and Blind-Eye Governance in China,” in *Socialism Vanquished, Socialism Challenged: Eastern Europe and China, 1989–2009*, ed. Nina Bandelj and Dorothy J. Solinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

5 Religious Charity under Xi Jinping

The transition from Hu to Xi was a staggered process. Although the CCP Standing Committee changed almost completely in 2012, there was a lot of continuity at the policy level. The leadership of SARA, under Wang Zuo'an, ensured a measure of stability in religious affairs. Appointed in 2009, Wang remained in that position throughout the last third of the Hu administration and the first half of Xi's administration. Indicative of the political importance of religious work for the CCP, Wang was also Vice Director of the CCP UFWD, a position in which he served until March 2018, when SARA fell under the direct control of the CCP. A similar degree of constancy endured in the other relevant ministries of the State Council responsible for charity and different aspects of social welfare. Hence, the Minister for Civil Affairs, Li Liguo, served from 2010 to 2016 in that capacity.¹⁰⁸ The health care minister, Chen Zhu, remained in his position from 2007 to 2013.¹⁰⁹ The minister of education, Yuan Guiren, served between 2009 and 2016. Finally, minister Yin Weimin remained in charge of Human Resources and Social Security since its founding in 2008 until 2018.

As seen above, debates on religions and charity continued throughout the last year of the Hu administration as the CCP prepared for Xi to succeed Hu. Yet, many of these debates happened behind closed doors, and their conclusions are difficult to access. Very few of them divulge their results to the public. One rare example is the conference organized by the IWR, under the auspices of its director Zhuo Xinping in 2012.¹¹⁰ Perhaps indicative of continued resistance to religious charity within the higher ranks of the CCP, details of the proceedings of that forum convened in 2012 were published three years later.¹¹¹ Support from the party appeared tepid at best. Apart from the Director and Vice Director, who may count as officials, no high-ranking members of the government or the CCP participated in the event. The highest official was Zhang Daocheng 张道成, Deputy Secretary General of the CPPCC and Vice President of the CCF. Only the BAC, which sent its

108 However, following an investigation by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the CCP demoted him from that position in 2016.

109 In 2013, the Health and Family Planning Commission superseded the Ministry of Health.

110 Zhuo Xinping 卓新平 and Zheng Xiaoyuan 郑筱筠, eds., *Zongjiao cishan yu shehui fazhan* 宗教慈善与社会发展 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2015).

111 This could also reflect uncertainty in the higher echelons of power as Xi was launching his campaign against corruption in the CCP and the state administration.

Executive Director, Miao Xian 妙贤, and the DAC, which delegated its Vice President, Zhang Jiyu 张继禹, sent high-ranking officers.

The design of the conference, as it transpires from the details of its proceedings, suggested a strong preference for Buddhism. Besides the conceptual interventions on the nature of charity and the general principle that religion should serve society, the discussions on the specific inclinations of religions to contribute to the public interest have tended to focus on the views of that specific religion.¹¹² The texts on religion and development have likewise paid more attention to Buddhism than to other religions. The details of the proceedings present three case studies of charities based in Beijing, Tianjin, and Jiangsu, as well as the activities of another one in Tibet, which are all Buddhist. Only one chapter introduces charities from Protestant churches, which, as shown above, have established almost as many of these activities as Buddhists have. Observations on religious charities' contributions to social development also pay more attention to those operated by the BAC than to charities run by the other religions among the 'big five.'¹¹³ The proceedings also present the reflections of international scholars, who wrote on the theme of religious charity in social development.¹¹⁴ None of these academics came from the global South or an Asian country, and of the ten, four were members of the Church of Latter Day Saints, and three associated with the Catholic Church.

In 2013, the annual report on China's philanthropy development for the previous year outlined at length the challenges faced by the sector and offered a rare attempt to provide a comprehensive view on RNGOs.¹¹⁵ The report submitted by Zheng Xiaoyuan, Director of the IWR, put things in perspective following the 'Opinion of 2012.'¹¹⁶ According to the report, the

112 Of the ten texts on religious ethics and charity, four present reflections from officials, four focus on Buddhism, one on Daoism, and one on popular religions.

113 The other case texts include observations about charities in the USA, the Church of Latter Day Saints, Catholicism in Hebei, Islam in Ningxia, and the devotion to the Eternal Mother in Shanghai.

114 These discussions on religious experiences and case studies in an international comparative perspective have looked likewise at three Buddhist charities, and one charity for each of Catholicism, Islam, and the Church of Latter Day Saints. Two other chapters include a wide-ranging discussion on charity in the USA, and a consideration of the Catholic Church in Shanghai before 1949.

115 Yang Tuan 杨团, *Zhongguo cishan fazhan baogao (2013)* 中国慈善发展报告 (2013) (Beijing: shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013).

116 Zheng Xiaoyuan 郑筱筠, "2012 niandu zhongguo zongjiao cishan fazhan baogao 2012 年度中国宗教慈善发展报告," in *Zhongguo cishan fazhan baogao* 中国慈善发展报告, ed. Yang

activities paid for by foundations with links to religious associations covered a wide range of needs.¹¹⁷ Of the 69 such foundations, most delivered services that count as social welfare. Seven of these associations provided services related to individual safety following natural disasters (*anquan zainan* 安全灾难), 10 provided medical help, 10 provided services in education, and most of the rest provided services in different aspects of social assistance. The medical services included emergency medical relief (*yiliao jiu zhu* 医疗救助, 8), and mental health (*xinli jiankang* 心理健康, 2). Several associations were involved in helping disabled people (*canji* 残疾, 4), supporting the elderly (*laonianren* 老年人, 4), supporting children (*ertong* 儿童, 3), and public health insurance (*weisheng baojian* 卫生保健, 3). Some of the activities could count as development activities and long-term forms of support: poverty alleviation (*fupin* 扶贫, 5); environment (*huanjing* 环境, 4); rural improvements (*sannong* 三农, 3); and support for minorities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族). Furthermore, 12 of the philanthropic associations with a religious affiliation were cultural in nature.

In a separate document, Wang Qun noted that the number of religious foundations grew from five in 2003 to 50 ten years later, most of them affiliated to Buddhism and supervised by the Civil Affairs Department or the BRA.¹¹⁸ However, the number of religious foundations remained very modest in proportion to the total numbers for foundations of all kinds. In the China Statistical Yearbook, Wang found 954 foundations in 2003, and 3549 ten years later.¹¹⁹ Barely 0.5% of foundations had a religious identity in 2003, a proportion that would change little after.

The sums given by religious associations to welfare activities represent a very small amount compared to those donated by corporations and wealthy individuals. Zheng found that the sum that all Buddhist associations cumulatively raised from 2007 to 2012 amounted to 1.86 billion yuan; followed by Protestants (350 million); Catholics (250 million); Daoists

Tuan 杨团 (Beijing: shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013).

117 The information in this paragraph is from Zheng, “2012 niandu zhongguo zongjiao cishan fazhan baogao 2012,” 109.

118 Wang Qun, “A Typological Study of the Recent Development and Landscape of Foundations in China,” *Chinese Political Science Review* 3 (2018): 314. There is a significant discrepancy between Wang and Zheng’s numbers. Wang uses official numbers from the government while Zheng relies on a research center for foundations, whose site, at the URL, <http://crm.foundationcenter.org.cn/html/2012-07>, was down at the time of writing.

119 Wang, “A Typological Study,” 299.

(240 million); and Muslims (180 million). However, these numbers are an underestimation. For example, if one adds the YMCA and its sister organization, the YWCA, two charities affiliated to Protestant Christianity, this means an additional amount of 48.81 million yuan raised by Protestant associations for the same period. Catholics have done likewise with their own foundation, such as the Jinde 进德 Catholic Service Center, which they founded in 1998.¹²⁰

2013 saw four milestones for religious charities, which showed concretely that the government wanted to give religious charities some responsibilities.¹²¹ Seven ministries jointly issued a communique enjoining them to improve the work of looking after abandoned babies: in that year, 878 establishments took over that responsibility, of which 60% were temples and other religious bodies.¹²² SARA formally issued a communique that institutionalized the ‘religious charity week.’ 2013 also marked a bumper year in the creation of religious foundations at the provincial level in Yunnan, and at the municipal level by Buddhists at Emeishan and Shijiazhuang, by Daoists and Protestants in Wenzhou, and Catholics in Shantou. Finally, working with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, religious charities coordinated a conference on raising children.¹²³ Zheng also reported seven developments that rationalized religious activities: the regularization of a ‘religious charity week’; recognition of charity as a traditional religious activity; diversification in these activities; better coordination with other organizations; increased co-operation with international RNGOs; cultivation of a culture of charity; and, finally, greater accountability for religious charities.

In the first years of the Xi Jinping administration, the conferences on religion and the public interest continued. The 7th forum on the issue met in Zhoukou, in Henan, in May 2013.¹²⁴ While some of the previous meetings had seemed to privilege Buddhism, other conferences included other religions. In April 2014, reports Teresa Carrino, the Religious Affairs Bureau

120 Zheng, “2012 niandu zhongguo zongjiao cishan fazhan baogao 2012,” 107–09.

121 Zheng Xiaoyuan 郑筱筠, “2013 zhongguo zongjiao cishan baogao 2013 中国宗教慈善报告,” in *Zhongguo cishan fazhan baogao* 中国慈善发展报告, ed. Yang Tuan 杨团 (Beijing: shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2014), 120–30.

122 Zheng, “2013 zhongguo zongjiao cishan baogao 2013,” 115.

123 See also: MCA (Ministry of Civil Affairs), “Notes on Information Concerning Homes Run by Religious Organizations for Orphans and Abandoned Babies,” 2014.

124 Zhongguo zongjiao xueshuwan 中国宗教学术网, “diqijiao zongjiao yu gongyi shiye luntan zai Henan Zhoukou shi juxing 第七届宗教与公益事业论坛在河南周口市举行,” in *Xinwen* 新闻, May 28, 2013.

of Jiangsu Province invited the Amity Foundation to organize a program to train people interested in the contribution of ‘faith-based NGOs’ to social development. The event organized by Amity trained people from all of the ‘big five’ religions and included lectures by experts in social development. Following the event’s success, the government designated the Foundation the “training hub in social development work for the five major religions in Jiangsu Province.”¹²⁵

In 2016, the report from the annual Nationwide Working Meeting on Religions, organized by the United Front Work Department and chaired by Xi, mentioned the need to build “a socialist theory of religion with Chinese characteristics.” In the 19th Congress of the CCP, Xi formally imposed his views on religion in what he called the sinicizing (*zhongguohua* 中国化) of religion.¹²⁶ In the same year, the National People’s Congress finally adopted a Charity Law, the crowning achievement of a process that had lasted eleven years.¹²⁷ As Wang Qun’s research on NGOs demonstrates, those of the associations that he classifies as religious charities serve the public in general rather than their adherents.¹²⁸ They frame their activities as non-religious and, aware of the government regulations, avoid proselytizing. The religious NGOs scrupulously follow official directives, aware that this represents a condition for their operation. This does not protect them from abuse, however. Some local governments outsource to religious foundations the delivery of services even if the latter lacks the capacity to deliver such services.¹²⁹ As Wu Keping argues, the government outsourcing of service delivery to religious associations changed the latter as the provision of relief and other public goods required a process of bureaucratization and professionalization.¹³⁰

As Xi convened the CCP 19th Congress, religious philanthropy had re-emerged as an important aspect of social life, presenting the state with

125 Theresa C. Carino, “Religion, Ethics, Values, and Development in a Changing China,” *The Ecumenical Review* 68, no. 4 (2017): 446.

126 The official translation was ‘be Chinese in orientation’, as Vermander noted: Benoit Vermander, “Sinicizing Religions, Sinicizing Religious Studies,” *Religions* 10, no. 2 (2019): 3.

127 Ruth A. Shapiro, “Asian Philanthropy Explained,” in *Pragmatic Philanthropy: Asian Philanthropy Explained*, ed. Ruth A. Shapiro, Manisha Mirchandani, and Heesu Jang (Hong Kong: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 9, 18.

128 Wang, “A Typological Study of the Recent Development,” 314. Wang is the co-founder of the Research Infrastructure of Chinese Foundations.

129 Wu, “The Philanthropic Turn of Religions,” 442.

130 Wu, 434.

an increasingly difficult quandary. Religious philanthropy was increasing, while at the same time, the central government's policy appeared more repressive against religion. As Susan McCarthy has shown with her case studies of two faith-based philanthropic associations in Gansu and Yunnan, the government's efforts to address social problems have opened up opportunities for them to pursue their religious goals.¹³¹ The local government support for the Gansu Province Association for Minority Nationality Cultural and Educational Promotion (*Gansu sheng shaoshu minzu wenhua jiaoyu cujinhui* 甘肅省少數民族文化教育促進會), however, happened barely a year before the mass internment of Uyghur Muslims. Likewise, the Yunnan government's co-operation with the Gospel Rehab (*fuyin jiedu* 福音戒毒), a Christian NGO, occurred just a few months before the Zhejiang government forced churches to remove crosses from church roofs. These contradictory signals suggest that two different approaches to the outsourcing of social services to non-state actors have emerged. The CCP can rely on two types of actors, with their respective advantages and liabilities: private philanthropy from wealthy individuals; and philanthropy from volunteer-based organizations, including RNGOs.

The potential for private philanthropy had increased considerably by the time Xi took power, and continued to do so after the renewal of his mandate in 2017. By 2016, China counted more billionaires than the United States, and seeing in that wealth a potential source of support for the government, Xi has urged the most fortunate to help the poor through philanthropy.¹³² This approach has a distinct advantage in the eyes of the regime: it contributes to 'stability maintenance' and reproduces the existing social and political order. As many of the critiques of private philanthropy in Western society have underlined, however, this approach reinforces the power of the wealthy and entrenches social inequalities, thereby generating the sources of social discontent that threaten social stability in the first place.¹³³

For some other analysts, reliance on volunteer-based philanthropy represents a more positive alternative to reliance on wealthy individuals, which depends on an individual's goodwill and preference, without any mandatory

131 Susan McCarthy, "In Between the Divine and the Leviathan: Faith-based Charity, Religious Overspill and the Governance of Religion in China," *China Review* 17, no. 2 (2017): 67.

132 Shapiro, "Asian Philanthropy Explained," 2.

133 See Rob Reich, *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018).

requirement for transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to acute needs. As some more liberal-minded Chinese social scientists saw it until recently, reliance on NGOs invigorates civil society's potential for self-determination, and can serve as a vehicle to promote a more progressive and liberal society at grassroots level.¹³⁴ However, the CCP under Xi appears to fear precisely this possibility. In 2018, the government revised the law that allowed foreign NPOs to work in China by adding more restrictions, as it feared their advocacy work.¹³⁵ Some religious NGOs, however, can be considered an important advantage to the regime if they sustain the existing social order, and if they accept the authority of the state.

6 Conclusion

Chinese scholars closely attuned to the developments of the CCP's religious work remain skeptical about the likelihood that it will relinquish its tight control over religious affairs anytime soon. For example, Yu Tao believes that the experience CCP leaders gained during the formative stage of struggle against the GMD taught them early on about the disruptive potential of religious organizations and secret societies. The vulnerability of the CCP during the republican regime, however, also made clear to its members the potential benefits of rallying religions and secret societies to their cause.¹³⁶ With the benefit of hindsight, the destructive phase of the anti-religious policy of Mao, which targeted all expression of religiosity, appears to be an aberration in the party's general approach to religion. Notwithstanding the persecution of new religious movements such as Falungong, and the harassment of older faiths such as the Protestant churches and Islam, the CCP appears willing to co-exist with religious institutions, confident that it will outlast them. What the recent policies and actions of local governments have made increasingly clear, however, is the differentiated approach adopted by the CCP towards religion. On the one hand, it celebrates Buddhism and Daoism as examples of Chi-

134 See, for example: Yu Jianxing 郁建兴 and Chen Kejian 陈可鉴, "Fuli guojia wei shenme xuyao cishan bumen? 福利国家为什么需要慈善部门?," *Zhejiang daxue xuebao (renwen shehui kexue ban)* 浙江大学学报 (人文社会科学版) 46, no. 1 (2016).

135 Shapiro, "Asian Philanthropy Explained," 9.

136 Yu Tao, "The Historical Foundations of Religious Restrictions in Contemporary China," *Religions* 8, no. 12 (2017): 10.

nese heritage, and on the other hand, it expresses almost open hostility towards Christianity and Islam as foreign religions, barely veiled by the discourse on 'sinicizing religion.' Moreover, the CCP under Xi appears inclined toward approving Buddhism and Daoism as 'culture' rather than 'religion,' a sentiment espoused by some intellectuals associated with the Buddhist and Daoist milieus. This logic may ultimately dissolve the boundaries between the sphere of the religious and the political, completing a project of total secularity with the CCP as a vanguard.

China thus offers a key test in the current debates about the reversal of modernity, whereby the decline of the welfare state coincides with an increase in faith-based provision of social services. The state's retreat from many aspects of social policy since Mao has yet to stop, despite claims from Deng's successors that China will soon implement a more generous welfare state. The religious landscape of China, and the CCP's overbearing attempts to supervise its withering away, make it unlikely that any established religion could play a role comparable to that played by Christian Churches in Western societies. China does not experience the kind of religious freedom that liberal societies in Asia and in the West know, and which empowers churches to act as substitutes for the state.¹³⁷ However, as the considerable development of Buddhist philanthropy in Taiwan shows, faith-based social welfare is likely to remain an important option in Chinese societies, keeping in mind the forecast of a rise in the number of elderly people in need of long-term care, and the present regime's difficulties in coping with it.

137 Surveys in the US found that in 2012 the three largest charities were United Way, World Vision, and Catholic Charities. While the latter is still an organic component of the Catholic Church, the two other ones are offshoots of Protestant religious organizations. See Josef Hien, "The Return of Religion? The Paradox of Faith-Based Welfare Provision in a Secular Age," *MPJfG Discussion Paper 14/9* (Cologne: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, 2014), 18.

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