Religious Studies and Research in Chinese Academia: Prospects, Challenges, and Hindrances

Jean-Paul Wiest

Under the impetus of Deng Xiaoping’s guiding principle that “education should be geared to the needs of modernization, of the world, and of the future,” Chinese academia has undergone important changes since the early 1980s. Travels abroad for conferences and research have become commonplace, ties with Western academic institutions are flourishing, salaries are much higher, and the government has made grants and subsidies available. Not surprisingly, Chinese universities are registering a growing number of foreign visiting professors and a steady increase in the number of returning Chinese graduates to fill vacant or new positions. This situation has contributed to a steady improvement in the depth and scope of Chinese academia. Today, courses and research at top Chinese universities compare well with those at renowned Western institutions. Prospects of finding well-paying jobs with joint ventures and high-flying local enterprises have swollen the ranks of students majoring in business, engineering, and computer science. But other faculties and departments are also well attended, including some that had been banned for a long time, like sociology, psychology, and religious studies.

In 1978 Deng revived the United Front. But unlike the United Front formed by the Communists and non-Communists to defeat the Japanese invaders during the Sino-Japanese War, this new United Front was an alliance to muster all the forces in the society toward the common task of modernizing the country. This policy called for a more benevolent and open attitude toward religion. Among the many signs of such a change was the reappearance of representatives from the five officially recognized religions—Taoism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam—at the meeting of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Then, in 1982, China’s new constitution dropped the ultraleftist content of the preceding ones and made matters more favorable for atheists and the eradication of superstitions so as to implement atheism and the eradication of superstitions.

This inclusion of religion in the common task of modernization also required a reinterpretation of the history of Christianity in China. In 1978, with the restoration of colleges, universities, and other academic institutions, the Institute of World Religions reopened, including its Department of Christian Studies.

In 1987, the specialty in the Department of Chinese Christianity in the Chinese Catholic Church, Past and Present (1989), by Gu Yulu. The Chinese University in Beijing.

Three articles published in the early 1990s in the Institute of World Religions’ journal, Studies in World Religions, are typical of academic studies during that period. The first essay, by Fang Litian, entitled “Ten Years of Religion in China,” analyzes changes that took place in the religious world as “changes for the better.” Although the author acknowledges that problems still exist, he credit the “harmonization between Christianity and socialism” for the rapid increase in numbers of believers. The second article, by Wang Weifan, is entitled “Forty Years of Christianity in China.” In it Wang states that “if it had not been for the creation of a new China under the leadership of the Communist Party, there would have been no possibility of an entirely independent Chinese church and no possibility of radical changes in Chinese Christianity.”

He Guichun wrote the third article in 1991 under the title “A Summary of Research in the Last Ten Years into the History of Christianity in China.” Regarding the contemporary religious situation, the author concludes: “There is a shortfall between research and actual needs. Very little systematic, rigorous research has yet been carried out into the reasons for and effects of the rapid growth in numbers of Christian believers in China. We must increase research into the situation of the church and believers in all parts of China and aim at developing education on atheism and the eradication of superstitions so as to implement fully the religious policy. This approach has great significance for positive attitudes toward the development of socialism among believers and nonbelievers.”

The most significant change during this period was indeed the gradual abandonment of the government’s dogmatic Marxist interpretation of religion and the adoption of a more open attitude toward religions. The idea of religion as the opium of the people gave way to the idea of “religion as culture,” an expression coined by Chinese scholars to describe “religious phenomena closely connected with human cultural phenomena.” One of these scholars wrote very appropriately: “Looking back at the road religious studies has traveled since 1949, we can say that no other theory or idea restrained the thinking of scholars of religion so severely as the idea of religion as ‘reactionary politics,’ and no other theory or idea played a liberating role so great as the idea of ‘religious culture’.”

Pioneer Studies on Religion

This inclusion of religion in the common task of modernization also required a reinterpretation of the history of Christianity in China. In 1978, with the restoration of colleges, universities, and other academic institutions, the Institute of World Religions reopened, including its Department of Christian Studies. Until the late 1980s this department remained the only institution entrusted with the study of Christianity.

Meanwhile, the lifting of the prohibition on religious activities and of the persecution of religious people led to a rapid revival of religions, which was reinforced by the spiritual void caused by a widespread disillusion with Communism and a rampant moral chaos. Such a revival could not escape the attention of scholars and some government officials. Four major studies published in the 1980s testify to an increasingly positive view of Christianity among Chinese academics: Missionaries and Modern China (1981), by Gu Changsheng; The History of Religious Conflicts in China (1987), by Zhang Li and Liu Jiantang; Religion Under Socialism in China (1988), by Luo Zhufeng; and The Chinese Catholic Church, Past and Present (1989), by Gu Yulu.

Study and Research Programs on Christianity

The effort to adjust the relation between religion and socialism and to look at religion from the standpoint of culture led a

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Growing number of intellectuals to undertake more in-depth studies of Christianity, its influence on the development of Western civilization, its past dealings with China, and its possible contribution to contemporary Chinese society. Some of these scholars were themselves undergoing a personal reorientation of values, and they thought that religion might provide something to fill the spiritual void of the Chinese people.

Under their leadership over the past fifteen years, a number of universities and local academies have established centers and institutes devoted to the study and research of religions. These organizations function mainly under the umbrella of departments of philosophy and history. Among those that focus primarily on Christianity, several train undergraduate and graduate students, organize local and international conferences, head research projects and surveys, and publish scholarly studies and journals. Yet full-fledged academic departments of religious studies are still a rarity because the State Council, also known as China Central Government, and the Ministry of Education seem reluctant to let them be formed. This in turn tends to keep down the number of China-trained scholars with M.A.’s and Ph.D.’s in religious studies.

Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, three research institutions on religion were created. The Religious Studies Institute of the Department of Philosophy at Peking University was the first one to be launched, and to this day it has maintained a solid curriculum of Christian studies. In 1995 it also became the first such program to be elevated to the rank of department, although it shares its faculty with the philosophy department. Zhao Dunhua serves as chair of both departments.

In 1989 Zhang Kaiyuan, president of Central China Normal University in Wuhan, launched the Center for Historical Studies of Chinese Christian Colleges as part of the History Department. The center has strong links with the Department of Religion at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Ricci Institute of the University of San Francisco. It has convened several international colloquia, and the scope of its research has broadened to include all Christian educational institutions formerly established in China.

Chen Cunfu of the Department of Philosophy at Hangzhou University (now Zhejiang University) spent three years planning for the Center for the Study of Christianity before he could finally launch it in March 1991. When it opened, it became the first such center operating within a university setting. In September 1999, during my first meeting with him, Chen told me why he decided

Centers for the Study of Christianity in China

Listed here, by locality, are more than forty centers, institutes, and departments across China that support an academic program of Christian studies or sponsor research on Christianity and other religions. The information appears “largest to smallest” in the order: name of the university or institution, then department, then specific institute or center. When known, dates of the beginning of journals and of the founding of institutions appear in parentheses.

Beijing Municipality
Beijing Normal University, Research Center for Culture and Values.
Beijing Union University, College of Arts and Sciences, Institute for the Study of Nationality and Religion.
Central University for National Minorities, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Institute of Religious Studies.
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences:
Graduate School, Department of Religious Studies.
Peking University, Departments of Philosophy and Religious Studies (1988).
Tsinghua University, Philosophy Department, Center for the Study of Morality and Religion (2001).
Yenching Graduate Institute, Institute of Western Civilization and Religion.
Fuzhou, Fujian Province
Fujian Normal University, Philosophy Department, Institute for the Study of Religious Culture.
Guangzhou, Guangdong Province
Zhongshan University, Philosophy Department, Institute of Comparative Studies of Religions, and History Department, Institute of Religious Culture.
Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province
Huhhot, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region
Inner Mongolia Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for the Study of Religion.
Jinan, Shandong Province
Shandong University, Philosophy Department, Institute for the Study of Religious Culture.
Kunming, Yunnan Province
Yunnan Provincial Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for the Study of Religion and Institute for National Minorities.
Lanzhou, Gansu Province
Gansu Provincial Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for the Study of Religion.
to establish what is now known as the Institute for the Study of Religious Culture. "Since the fourth century Christianity has been the main factor of Western culture and has influenced all aspects of Western society. Western philosophy, including some of its newer trends, is intertwined with Christian thought. Therefore without understanding Christianity, one cannot fathom Western society and culture—and by the same token Western philosophy." Chinese scholars consider Chen to be the pioneer in grassroots research on contemporary Christian communities. The articles he has published on the subject and his firsthand experience are much admired and valued.

Listed below are more than forty institutions in China that currently have an academic program of Christian studies or do research on Christianity. In addition, nine journals in the field of religious studies are listed.

**Prospects for Grassroots Research**

Nowadays Chinese scholars on the mainland encounter very little official constraint in teaching, researching, and publishing about religion before the advent of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. I am impressed by the quality of articles, books, and dissertations that have appeared since the late 1990s. Although many academics remain wary of possible adverse repercussions and therefore prefer the “safe zone” of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, more and more are venturing beyond and even into contemporary Christianity.

One-sided and sweeping criticisms of Christianity in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries are rare. Studies of this period rightly expose the appallingly imperialistic and culturally insensitive character of some Catholic and Protestant missionaries, but scholarly attention seems to have shifted to the contributions made by a much greater number to the Chinese state and the Chinese people. Rather than playing obediently to the tune of Marxist propaganda, recent studies by Chinese scholars are more complex, for they consider closely all the factors—economic, social, cultural, and political—that contributed to the ups and downs in the relationship between Christianity and China. The role of some Christian individuals and agencies in the development of modern Chinese education, medical care, the press, and social and relief services is being documented and acknowledged from sources sometimes not available to, or overlooked by, Western scholars.

On the 1937 Japanese invasion and its aftermath, Chinese

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**List of Institutions**

**Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region**
Tibet Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for the Study of Religion.

**Nanchang, Jiangxi Province**

**Nanjing, Jiangsu Province**
Nanjing University, Philosophy Department, Institute for Religious Studies (1979).

**Shanghai Municipality**
Fudan University, Department of Philosophy, Center for Christian Studies.
Huadong Normal University, Department of Philosophy, Research Center of Religious Culture.
Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for Religious Study, Center for Contemporary Religious Research.
Shanghai University, Department of Philosophy and History Department, Center for Religion and Peace.

**Taiyuan, Shanxi Province**
Shanxi Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for the Study of Religion.
Shanxi University, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Research Center of Religion.

**Tianjin Municipality**
Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for the Study of Religion.

**Wuhan, Hubei Province**
Central China Normal University, History Department, Center for Historical Studies of Chinese Christian Colleges.
Wuhan University, Department of Religious Studies.

**Wulumuqi, Xinjiang Province**
Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for the Study of Religion.

**Xi’an, Shaanxi Province**
Shaanxi Normal University, Institute of Christian Cultural Studies.

**Xining, Qinghai Province**
Qinghai Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for the Study of Religion.

**Yinchuan, Ningxia Autonomous Region**
Ningxia Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for the Study of Religion.

**Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions**
Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions have six institutions with a strong focus on Christianity. They often work closely with several of the above in Mainland China but remain entirely free from government interference or control.

Baptist University of Hong Kong, Department of Philosophy and Ethics.
City University of Hong Kong, Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies.
Chinese University of Hong Kong, Chung Chi College, Department of Religion and Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society (1996).
Tao Fong Shan (Hong Kong), Institute of Sino-Christian Studies (1995).

—Jean-Paul Wiest
scholars have also begun to look beyond the de facto backing of the Nationalist regime by the Christian churches to study the commitment and contributions of Western missionaries to the drive of the Chinese people for national development and liberation. Some academics have even told me that the time might be near when Fr. Vincent Lebbe, who did so much for China but is still considered a villain by the present government because of his Nationalist ties, could be recast in a much more favorable light.

Research in the postliberation and contemporary periods is the most difficult because of government control and censorship. Yet a very low-key, government-authorized gathering in October 2003 shows that academia might be gradually getting more freedom for field research on contemporary religions in present-day China. At this two-day event thirteen scholars, all engaged in such research, met in Beijing to discuss the theme “Contemporary Religions and the Methodology of Empirical Research.” This informal meeting centered on two main topics: (1) the presentation of findings and the discussion of the pros and cons of various investigative methods, and (2) the sharing of strategies and ideas on how to gain the trust of the people, the cooperation of local religious leaders, and the support of local officials.

Of the seven major papers presented at this conference, four looked specifically at Christianity, and one focused on Chinese Buddhism. The other two studied new expressions and practices of faith. Many issues were considered, but all the papers in one form or another dealt with the challenges brought to religion by a fast-changing society and the advent of a market economy. Some focused on how this new situation is positively and negatively affecting the life and religious practices of ethnic minority Christians, as well as those of rural and urban Han Christians. Others discussed how this rapid economic change and social dislocation have also led new urban dwellers who are not Christians to find religious expressions that give meaning to their personal lives. For instance, one scholar focused on the special economic zone of Shenzhen, just across the border from Hong Kong, documenting the rise of a new spiritual consciousness thriving on elements of the popular religion that were once considered forgotten or moribund. These city dwellers have incorporated such elements into their contemporary life as a source of personal meaning and spiritual nourishment.

These researchers concurred that in recent years more and more Chinese scholars have begun to attach importance to empirical research on the present situation of religion in China. But coverage of the field is still in its initial stages, too sporadic, and very limited in scale. They agreed that there was a great need for more comprehensive methodologies, for better-constructed questionnaires, and for analyses based on reliable data rather than merely on common assumptions. I would add that many studies would also benefit from a historical perspective that looks back further than the time of the liberation in 1949.

The Chinese scholars were quick to point out that the shortcomings of empirical studies did not all stem from the inexperience and the poor training of researchers but were too often due to the lack of cooperation from the relevant government offices and religious organizations. At present, grassroots studies still cannot occur freely because these activities are often classified as intelligence gathering and therefore are restricted. Any research based on interviews of believers requires prior approval of the localities to be investigated, of the format and content of questionnaires, and of the list of persons to be interviewed. From the discussion, it became very clear that in places where local officials are friendly and accommodating, these measures are a mere formality. Researchers in many other areas, however, have encountered words and measures of intimidation, as well as official distortion of facts. Furthermore, the authorities’ strict control of publications on religion continues to muffle academic freedom of data analysis by preventing the dissemination of studies deemed inadequate.

Unanticipated events can also easily turn a rather favorable atmosphere into one that is difficult, if not impossible. The 2000 flare-up of the dispute between the Vatican and the Chinese government regarding the ordination of bishops and the canonization of 120 martyrs had negative repercussions on several empirical projects. A grassroots research project on Catholic communities in Zhejiang province was severely disrupted when local government and religious affairs officials heretofore very cooperative became afraid of being blamed by Beijing. They withdrew their cooperation, thus preventing the completion of the survey administered by graduate students of Chen Cunfu. In some rural communities the Catholics (who were already naturally suspicious of outsiders) became afraid and gave researchers the cold shoulder. And in the city of Hangzhou, the bishop, incensed by Rome’s denunciation of his recent consecration, forbade the research team to administer the survey in his cathedral.

It was good to see how the scholars who assembled at this October 2003 gathering shared ways to minimize the harm coming from the difficulties and obstacles they faced. The discussion was especially interesting to observe because of the participation of a representative of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) United Front Work Department. At no time did that person attempt to control the discussion or to hand down directives from higher up. At the same time, I was struck by the unrestrained freedom of expression of the scholars. The conversation, with its frank sharing of experiences, solutions, and suggestions, seemed to represent a genuine effort on both sides to foster a friendlier climate for research in contemporary Chinese society. I was not able to assess, however, whether the absence of papers on Taoism, Islam, and Tibetan Buddhism had been due to the lack of significant current studies on these religions or whether scholars expert in these fields had had other engagements that prevented them from attending. In the cases of Islam in western China and of Tibetan Buddhism, I would not be surprised if government restrictions and the reticence of religious authorities has made such research nearly impossible.

In March 2004 at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, a panel entitled “Field Research on Christian Communities in China Today: Insights and Implications” gave international exposure to indigenous grassroots research. Yet, while two of the three presenters were ethnic Chinese, they were not Chinese citizens. Moreover, they and the chair were all attached to American universities. From what has been said above, it should come as no great surprise that neither panelist came from an academic institution in the People’s Republic of

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It would be wrong to end on such a pessimistic note. From my conclusion of foreign and Chinese researchers, the threat remains very real. Local representative of the state security bureau. Yet in the past, locality to another, depending mostly on the disposition of the case in China, the enforcement of this document varies from one to another, depending mostly on the disposition of the local representative of the state security bureau. The bureau has the prerogative not only to amend questionnaires and monitor the way they are administered but also to review the data collected and decide what can be released to foreign researchers. The document, obviously aimed at restricting collaboration between Chinese and foreign scholars on contemporary issues, at first had a chilling effect. Since the bureau of state security is in charge of its application, anyone trying to go around it is open to charge of peddling or stealing state secrets. As is so often the case in China, the enforcement of this document varies from one locality to another, depending mostly on the discretion of the local representative of the state security bureau. Yet in the past few years, as we know too well from press reports of the jailing of foreign and Chinese researchers, the threat remains very real.

Conclusion

It would be wrong to end on such a pessimistic note. From my understanding of Chinese academic journals and books on religion, I see scholars dealing with sensitive topics and giving broad hints about what is really going on, even though the government’s censure prevents them from being too explicit. Within the limitations explained above, these studies are often honest and as thorough as they can be. I wish I were as adept as my Chinese colleagues at reading between the lines!

Moreover, while studying Christianity, several Chinese researchers have come to discover in it a moral code and altruistic principles very much needed in present-day Chinese society. This valuation stands in sharp contrast to the collapse of the traditional Confucian system of moral values and the erosion of the Communist ethic under the assaults of modernization. The material, scientific, and economic progress brought about by the process of modernization goes hand in hand with terrible evils such as moral decay, rampant corruption, selfish pursuit of money, and the deterioration of the environment. These academics view the present time as a golden opportunity for religion, and Christianity in particular, to play an important part in the building of a modern spiritual and civilized China. Chinese society is undergoing a spiritual crisis centered on a moral vacuum. A code of morality and ethics such as the one provided by Christianity is one of the viable avenues that could simultaneously strengthen the process of modernization and defeat modernization’s negative effects.9

Without getting involved in the controversy surrounding the use of the ambiguous expression “cultural Christians,” one must recognize the existence of a significant group of Chinese intellectuals who have gained a profound knowledge of the Bible and Christian values, and their message on the meaning of life and of our world. A small number have actually converted and joined a church. The majority, however, refuse to belong to a church or to be identified as converts. They prefer to identify themselves as friends who admire and espouse the moral values and Christian values, and their message on the meaning of life and of our world. A small number have actually converted and joined a church. The majority, however, refuse to belong to a church or to be identified as converts. They prefer to identify themselves as friends who admire and espouse the moral values and Christian values, and their message on the meaning of life, and to be identified as converts. They prefer to identify themselves as friends who admire and espouse the moral values and Christian values, and their message on the meaning of life, and the Baptist Church, past and present) (Shanghai: Huaxia, 1996). 11

Notes

2. The Institute of World Religions was created in 1963, and the Department of Christian Studies one year later. They were shut down during the Cultural Revolution. In 1978 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was founded, and the Institute of World Religions was placed under it.
5. He Guichun, “Jindai shenhuaizhuyi zhongguo jidujiao yanjiu yu zongjiao” (A summary of research in the last ten years into the history of Christianity in China), Shijie zongjiao yanjiu (Studies in world religions), no. 4 (1991): 115–25. In this article He Guichun also reviewed the two previous articles by Fang Litian and Wang Weifan.
7. Lu Daji, quoted in ibid., p. 10.
8. Interview with Chen Cunfu in Hangzhou, September 1999.
10. Sentence spoken by Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference of nonaligned nations in 1955.
11. In most academic institutions, institutes are attached to departments. In the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, however, the Institute of World Religions is the larger umbrella under which function eight departments: Buddhist Studies, Christian Studies, Islamic Studies, Taoist Studies, Confucian Studies, Contemporary Religious Studies, Studies on the General Theory of Religion, and Studies on Religious Culture and Art.