

# Multiple Secularities in Culturally Chinese Societies

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## 1 Introduction

Despite extensive academic discussion about de-centring the concept of secularity, very few academics have looked at contemporary China. This should not be surprising as the concept of ‘secularity’, and its cognates ‘secular’, ‘secularisation’, and ‘secularism’ rarely translate well into Chinese.<sup>1</sup> This article explores whether and how Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt’s conceptual framework for understanding secularity beyond the West and beyond modernity can be applied to China.<sup>2</sup> My focus here is on a case of secularity beyond the West, in modernity. I will present axiomatic arguments generated by the scholarship on secularity and assess their relevance to China. In other words, this article looks into the lessons we can derive from China’s own recent history of relations between religious and non-religious social spheres to enrich our understanding of secularity beyond the West, and, at the same time, contribute to the de-othering of China and the critique of positive orientalism.<sup>3</sup>

Translating the ‘secular’  
in Chinese

A major argument made in this essay is that the particular features of secularity in China are not the inevitable result of a cultural configuration determining institutional arrangements between religion and the spheres of the secular. Although the language and terminology of these arrangements may be culturally specific and intelligible only within the sinosphere, i.e. to people who can understand

1 For a critical discussion of secularisation in the Chinese context, see José Casanova, “Asian Catholicism, Interreligious Colonial Encounters and Dynamics of Secularism in Asia,” in *The Secular in South, East, and Southeast Asia*, ed. Kenneth Dean and Peter van der Veer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

2 See also Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, “Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities,” *Comparative Sociology* 11, no. 6 (2012).

3 This concept, deployed years ago by Goodman, White, and Kwon, deconstructed the projection of an ideal-typical corporatist/residual welfare state in East Asian societies. See Roger Goodman, Gordon White, and Kwon Huck Ju, eds., *The East Asian Welfare Model: Welfare Orientalism and the State* (London: Routledge, 1998).

Taiwan: a secular state  
in a Chinese society

written Chinese, this does not pre-ordain the creation of a specific form of secular state such as the current mode of regulation of religion enforced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The case of Taiwan, another important centre within the sinosphere where secularity differs from that seen in China, illustrates the vast repertoire of institutional arrangements possible in Chinese societies, and highlights the importance of agency in shaping institutions.

## 2 Secularity in China and Taiwan

In the case of China, Goossaert has noted a gap between scholars in the humanities who do well at taking religious values into consideration based on their knowledge of classical Chinese, and the social scientists who are often very strong on the politics of religion but rather weak on religious values and their influence on society.<sup>4</sup> One challenge faced by the study of secularity in Chinese societies is that the concept of secularism and the secular state is largely absent from the Chinese political lexicon, and the concept of secularisation barely appears in discussion of China, or to put it differently, China is most often absent from comparative discussions on secularism, the secular state, and secularisation. For those who believe that religion had little influence in China, discussions about secularity in the country are irrelevant.<sup>5</sup> The massive evidence of religious life in China since time immemorial, however, has led others to conclude that secularity may perhaps be irrelevant because both the conceptual distinctions and structural differentiations between religious and non-religious spheres of society remain unclear.<sup>6</sup> However, China matters too much to leave it out of the debate on secularity. Moreover, while the People's Republic of China is the most obvious example of relations between religion and other social spheres in a society with a Confucian heritage, the case of Taiwan shows that societies with such a cultural heritage can also produce other outcomes.

Importance of  
Chinese societies

4 Vincent Goossaert, "For a History of Religious Ideas in Modern and Contemporary China," in *Concepts and Methods for the Study of Chinese Religions*, vol. 1, *State of the Field and Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. André Laliberté and Stefania Travagnin (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019).

5 A two-tome history of atheism in China since the Qin dynasty makes this point strongly. See Ya Hanzhan 牙含章 and Wang Yousan 王友三, *Zhongguo wushenlun shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2011).

6 On that claim, see John Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2010).

Starting from the axiom that contemporary societies have institutionalised specific forms of secularity as a result of historical struggle, Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt define four ideal-types of secularity that address specific reference problems, each of which are resolved by the application of a specific guiding idea. The first reference problem has to do with domination by a religious institution, ecclesiastical orders, or dogma; the guiding idea mobilised to address this problem is the promotion of individual freedom. The second reference problem of religious heterogeneity and the risk of inter-religious conflicts if not domination by a majority religion over minority ones calls for the management of religious diversity through regimes of collective rights and legal recognition to guarantee tolerance and non-interference in religious affairs. The third problem of ensuring national and social integration and development, which conservative clerical and lay leaders in powerful religious establishments have sought to resist, has been resolved by the promotion within and outside of religious institutions of the values of enlightenment and progress. Finally, the last reference problem of unclear boundaries between different institutional domains is resolved by the guiding idea of efficiency and autonomy.<sup>7</sup>

Secularity as the outcome of historical struggles

In order to assess the extent to which Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt's approach can be applied to China, I will systematically assess the extent to which, and under what conditions, each of the four reference problems and their solutions are relevant to two Chinese societies. This examination could include at least four societies: China under the Qing dynasty, the Republic of China (ROC) from 1911 to 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as the ROC in Taiwan after 1949. For reasons of brevity, I will focus on the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the ROC, or Taiwan, since 1949.

Testing the relevance of secularity to contemporary Chinese societies

### 3 Secularity in China

Although the CCP has ruled the PRC unopposed since 1949, its approach to religion has varied in that time, partly in response to factional disputes. At least five distinct periods can be identified in the time since the CCP took power. Two occurred under the shadow of Mao Zedong's rule. The first was a period of regime consolidation

Five periods and the PRC's religious policy since 1949

7 Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, "Multiple Secularities," 890.

between 1949 and 1957 when the government sought to win over religions. The second, from the outbreak of the ‘anti-rightist’ campaign until the rule of the ‘Gang of Four’, soon after Mao’s death, was a period of radicalisation during which the CCP implemented an anti-religious policy.<sup>8</sup> In the third period, under Deng Xiaoping (1978–1989), religions received recognition and there was a clearly visible process of differentiation between state-recognised religions and other social institutions. At the time, however, other religious phenomena, such as ‘qigong fever’, went undetected abroad. During the fourth period, under Jiang Zemin (1989–2002), the CCP attacked *qigong* as an ‘evil cult’ (*xiejiao* 邪教), while provincial governments promoted a cult to the Yellow Emperor that suggested a reduction in differentiation between religion and culture.<sup>9</sup> Under Hu Jintao (2002–2012), the promotion of ‘harmonious society’, with its reference to Confucianism, suggested a deepening of that process. Under Xi Jinping, two simultaneous movements indicate a further stage in the ongoing process of lessening differentiation: There have been calls to make religions ‘Chinese’ and efforts to promote as ‘culture’ Buddhism, Daoism, and certain practices which many Western scholars call ‘popular religions’.

### Secularity to protect against religious domination

In the first years of Mao’s rule, the CCP promoted the objectives of social revolution. Here, the reference problem *was not* individual freedom, but liberation for the masses and, ultimately, emancipation from the structures of power inherited from the ‘old society’. Relying on a simplified reading of Marxism about religion as the “opium of the people”, CCP cadres regarded communal religions at least as a source of oppression that reproduced landlords and rich farmers’ domination over poor ones if not as ‘superstitions’ that maintained people in ignorance. It looked at Christians as the accomplices of foreign imperialists, and at followers of sectarian religions as ‘reactionary’ saboteurs. In that context, CCP cadres thought that their materialist philosophical position emancipated people from what they

Forced marxist  
emancipation from  
the ‘old society’

8 This chronology is partly inspired by that of Duan: Duan Dezhi 段德智, *Xin Zhongguo zongjiao gongzuoshi* 新中国宗教工作史 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2013).

9 See T rence Billeter, *L'empereur jaune: Une tradition politique chinoise* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2007).

saw as their wrong conceptions of the world. Aware that an overly dogmatic attitude toward all religions risked alienating the peasants that they claimed to represent, the CCP leaders first adopted a relatively pragmatic approach, based on a theory of ‘five characteristics’, which argued that religion is mass-based, ethnic, long-lasting, international, and complex.<sup>10</sup> The Cultural Revolution, however, threw away this cautious approach and attacked all religions as part of the ‘old society’, only to proclaim a kind of civil religion centred on Chairman Mao, who was described among other things as “the Messiah of the Working People”.<sup>11</sup> During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP left wing regarded individual freedom as a ‘bourgeois value’. The views on Mao’s exalted status and on religion in general that the CCP imposed on the entire population could not amount to a form of secularity.

A policy indifferent to individual freedom

While the CCP’s extreme position during the years of intense political mobilisation sought to hasten the withering away of religion, the return in 1978 to a semblance of normalcy with Deng Xiaoping’s ascent to power revealed the failure of that policy. Religious belief had continued to exist, albeit underground, and during the brief period between the ‘Beijing Spring’ of 1978 and the student movement of 1989, China experienced a period of relative freedom of expression. The guiding idea of freedom from religious domination was not taken seriously by the regime as most religions had lost the material resources required to exercise any influence on society. The Cultural Revolution had destroyed many places of worship and nullified the authority of most clerics, and for the first twenty years after, the institutionalised religions focused their energy on recovering from the damage inflicted upon them. In the 1990s, with Jiang Zemin as President, emergent religious movements that were not recognised by the state were repressed while state-recognised religions, and Buddhism in particular, gained favour. Arguably, state-recognised religions dominated minority religions – a setback for the guiding idea of individual freedom of conscience.

Softening of CCP policies but still limited freedom of conscience

<sup>10</sup> This theory was proposed by Li Weihai, a party leader in charge of formulating party ideology.

<sup>11</sup> Zuo jiping, “Political Religion: The Case of the Cultural Revolution in China,” *Sociology of Religion* 52, no. 1 (1991): 101.

### Secularity to prevent inter-religious conflicts

The reference problem of religious heterogeneity in China has two dimensions: a long history of conflicts between religious heterodoxy and the state; and the conflicts between the official religions of the centralised Han state and the religions of the minorities. The first problem relates to opposition between religious orthodoxy (*zheng* 正) and heterodoxy (*xie* 邪), which includes popular religious movements and sects among the Han population. As Hubert Seiwert argues, what is deemed orthodox has changed over the course of China's history. Before the imperial era, political rulers regarded Confucian teachings as heterodox, and it was only after the Han dynasty adopted the Confucian canon that they became orthodox.<sup>12</sup> Daoism and Buddhism would go through a similar process in subsequent dynasties.<sup>13</sup> By the Song, these three traditions constituted an orthodoxy that expected support from the state in combatting sectarian movements that used their teachings. The practice of 'polytrophy', or the simultaneous worship of rites affiliated to these three traditions, as well as the practice of communal religions that incorporated them in a ritual system approved by the state, have left the impression of a harmonious heterogeneity.<sup>14</sup> However, from the beginning, attacks against heterodoxy have countered this impression with the state interpreting eschatological beliefs about a future of peace and justice promoted by heterodox religious groups as political dissidence.<sup>15</sup> From the Yellow Turban (184-205 AD) during the Han dynasty, to the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), the intertwining of the religious and the political can be observed throughout China's imperial history.

State tradition that determined religious orthodoxy

Between 1949 and 1966, the CCP sought to address the problem of heterodoxy among the Han population. Although it used different terminology, the CCP essentially reproduced the policies against heterodox associations that had previously been imposed

12 Hubert Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 30.

13 Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 32.

14 I thank my colleague Sven Bretfeld for introducing me to this idea by Carrithers: Michael Carrithers, "On Polytrophy: Or the Natural Condition of Spiritual Cosmopolitanism in India: The Digambar Jain Case," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (2000). See also Dionigi Albera, "Digressions on Polytrophy: An Exploration of Religious Eclecticism in Eurasia," *Entangled Religions* 9, no. 5 (2019).

15 Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 14.

by emperors. In a ‘campaign against reactionary sects’, it ruthlessly clamped down on heterodox movements that it saw as a potential threat to its rule.<sup>16</sup> During the same period, as mentioned above, it adopted a more lenient policy towards Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. The Cultural Revolution, when the CCP briefly changed its approach and the Red Guards forcibly closed down the institutions of state-recognised religions, can be regarded as an exception. The CCP subsequently repudiated its Cultural Revolution policy and introduced its policy of reform and opening. Since then, the government has maintained its approach of limited and state-controlled religious plurality. It recognises the same five religions and enjoins them to enforce orthodoxy and police their followers to ensure that they do not oppose the party and love their country before they love their religion (*aiguo aijiao* 爱国爱教). The CCP has failed to produce a guiding idea to address the reference problem of religious heterogeneity. To the contrary, it limits this heterogeneity, persecuting so-called ‘evil cults’ and rejecting calls to have Confucianism or popular religions promoted as a ‘sixth’ religion of China.

Rigid suppression of religion during the Cultural Revolution as an exception

CCP restriction on diversity

The CCP has also failed to come up with any guiding idea to address the reference problem of the sometimes-tense relations between the Han and minorities with different religions. No credible constitutional guarantee protecting the rights of minorities to self-determination, power-sharing arrangement, or independent inter-religious dialogue exists. The regime of autonomy, which was put in place to protect the culture, language, and religions of minorities has failed in its aims.<sup>17</sup> The CCP’s paternalistic supervision of the national minorities does not appear to be secularity in the name of conflict prevention. The CCP has called for national unity and denounced “extremism, separatism, and terrorism”, making reference to ethnic conflicts rather than disputes over religious matters. Minority leaders regard these calls for national unity

Limited protection of minority rights

16 I am using the term ‘heterodoxy’ in its Chinese sense of deviation from what the state considers ‘orthodox’ (zheng). The CCP is concerned about political orthodoxy, i.e. compliance with its policies. I thank Hubert Seiwert for bringing this nuance to my attention.

17 André Laliberté, “The Two Shadows of Empire and Still-Born Federalism in China,” in *Assessing Territorial Pluralism*, ed. Karlo Basta, John McGary, and Richard Simeon (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015).

as a denial of their religions, and the assertion of the Han majority value system and its religious antecedents.

### Secularity for social development

To a certain degree, the CCP has successfully used the guiding idea of progress and enlightenment to solve the reference problems of social integration and development, which were at least as pressing as, if not more pressing than that of national unity. When developing the CCP's approach to religion with respect to development, the intellectuals at the institutes for the study of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping's theory, as well as the Institute of World Religions at the Academy of Social Sciences, have looked to Marxism, the experience of various developing economies, and the practice of the imperial state .

Borrowing from the reading of Marxism according to which the ideological superstructure legitimises social hierarchies, CCP leaders saw that it was imperative to undercut the authority of religious leaders, especially at the village level. This occurred in a number of stages. Between 1949 and 1978, it merely amounted to taking most resources owned by religious institutions at the village level to ensure that they would not gain influence by providing social services. Simultaneously, the CCP aimed to provide services in every domain of social policy, including health care, education, social insurance and social assistance, to ensure welfare from the cradle to the grave. During the land reform campaign of 1950–1951, the new regime requisitioned the remaining plots belonging to Daoist, Buddhist, and communal religious temples that the previous regime had not seized to accumulate the means to deliver services. During the Great Leap Forward, the difficulties experienced by religious institutions merely mirrored the misery faced by the population in general as the economy and social services collapsed. During the Cultural Revolution, the CCP saw the remnants of religions as standing in the way of the resolution of a host of economic and social development problems created by previous policies. Religious institutions had to close and clerical personnel return to lay life as part of the productive masses.

After 1978, the CCP changed its economic and social policy and looked to the example of Taiwan, which was entering the second decade of its 'economic miracle', and other East Asian developing

CCP aimed to provide social services in all domains

State monopoly of social provisions under Mao



economies.<sup>18</sup> It explored the possibility of using the resources of religious actors to develop tourism in local economies as overseas Chinese started to restore ancestral halls and help rebuild Buddhist and Daoist temples. That period of opening to foreign investment and economic reform, however, led to the collapse of public health care in the countryside, an increase in the number of migrant workers with limited eligibility to social protection, and destitution for many of the laid-off workers in the de-industrialising northeast. This social dislocation presented opportunities for healers who promoted ‘working on the life force’ (*qigong* 气功), a concept central to popular religions, as a remedy for ill health, depression, and other ailments. The CCP was alarmed by the growth of movements promoting *qigong*, regarding it as a challenge to its legitimacy, and launched a campaign of repression.

Further challenges emerged in the later stages of the policy of reform and opening, when the massive influx of migrant workers into cities generated new social categories of excluded populations such as homeless people and left-behind children. Furthermore, decades of the one-child policy had led to a dramatic ageing of the population and the emergence of a skewed sex ratio which saw millions of men facing poor to non-existent marriage prospects. To respond to these issues, the CCP briefly considered mobilising the resources of the state-sanctioned religions to assist the government in the delivery of social services to vulnerable populations, thereby imitating policies adopted by the liberal and conservative Western welfare states. These policy experiments primarily targeted the disabled, orphans, elderly people without relatives, and people suffering from AIDS. Under Xi, it is still not clear whether the CCP wants to pursue this policy. Indeed, religions appear to be succumbing to museumification.<sup>19</sup>

Economic reform and opening led to massive social problems

CCP mobilised resources of state-sanctioned religions for social services

Since 2012, CCP hesitates on letting religions help the state

18 Starting with the activities of the Taiwanese Tzu Chi charity in China in 1992 and the opening of the Nanputuo temple’s charity association in 1994, Buddhism has received a lot of attention from scholars and officials. An edited volume by Wang Jia brings together texts on this subject by epistemic communities of experts in social policy and religious affairs: Wang Jia 王佳, ed., *Zhongguo fojiao he cishan gongyi shiye* 中国佛教和慈善公益事业 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe 宗教文化出版社, 2014).

19 Robert J. Shepherd, *Faith in Heritage: Displacement, Development, and Religious Tourism in Contemporary China* (London: Routledge, 2016).

### Secularity for the differentiation of specific domains

Functional differentiation of religion from other spheres of social life represents a key marker of modernity as religion loses influence and power to the benefit of the political system, the economy, and other domains. China has presented a special problem for sociologists looking into how the country undertook this process because historically many aspects of its religious life have remained intertwined with other spheres of society. This intertwining has often been unclear to outside observers who were not familiar with China and did not see a religious dimension inherent in some of its social practice, which was either hastily dismissed as ‘superstition’ or presented as ‘alternative medicine’ or ‘culture.’<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the practice of geomancy (*fengshui* 风水), generally construed as an art form in Chinese metaphysics, or the divination text *Book of Transformation* (*yijing* 易经), are in a grey zone between ‘superstition’, ‘religion’ and ‘pseudo-science.’<sup>21</sup> Although they do not receive official endorsement from the CCP, the abundance of titles discussing geomancy and divination sold in bookstores near sections on religion, philosophy, or ‘national study’, reveal the popularity of this worldview, but also its ambiguous status, undifferentiated from other domains of social life. Although Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian scholars may refer to the *yijing*, it has no religious institution with a personnel exclusively dedicated to its interpretation.

No clear distinction of ‘religion’, neither to ‘superstition’ nor to ‘culture’

The *qigong* movement constitutes another telling example of a lack of differentiation between religion and other social domains, in this case medical science. As Palmer explains in his research on the movement, many proponents of this calisthenics have praised the therapeutic value of breathing exercises, and made statements about the nature of *qi*, or ‘vital force’, ‘energy flow’, whose main characteristics cannot be apprehended via ordinary scientific knowledge. During the 1990s, *qigong* masters made bold claims about the superiority of this uniquely Chinese form of medical knowledge and

Overlapping of ‘medicine’ and ‘religion’ in *qigong*

20 I admit that this etic perspective raises some thorny problems: the Chinese do not count these practices as religions. When non-Chinese observers characterise them as religious, they have to rely on theories or conceptualisations of religion that can be controversial and do not make the boundaries between the religious and non-religious any less blurry.

21 On *fengshui*, see Ole Bruun, *Fengshui in China: Geomantic Divination between State Orthodoxy and Popular Religion* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003).

gained officials among the adoptees of their practices.<sup>22</sup> Falungong, one of the most popular of the *qigong* groups, faced criticism from the medical establishment for its lack of scientific and professional credentials, and from the religious establishment for its ‘heterodox’ teachings. After some media outlets denounced Falungong as a ‘cult’ and the movement’s response to the negative publicity was either ignored or ridiculed, thousands of its followers responded by surrounding the CCP headquarters in 1999, asking for public recognition of their services to society. Following a promise by the Premier Zhu Rongji that the CCP would consider their grievances, an investigation revealed that many veterans and retired CCP members had joined Falungong. Jiang Zemin saw this as a concatenation of some of the CCP’s worst fears: namely, infiltration of the CCP by a sectarian movement to undermine its authority. Jiang ordered a crackdown on all *qigong* groups, which the CCP labelled as ‘evil cults.’<sup>23</sup>

This crisis brought to light the practical consequences of the problem of a lack of differentiation between religions and other social spheres in the PRC. As a self-proclaimed vanguard organisation, the CCP could not compete with any other social organisation about matters of absolute truth and had difficulty accepting the constitution of an independent sphere of religion. The imposition of a structure of control over religious affairs for each of the five religions reflected this. With Xi Jinping, concern about the independence of religious actors has only increased. In 2018, in a move to further tighten its control over religious affairs, the CCP announced the dissolution of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) as a separate entity.<sup>24</sup> The institution is now under the direct supervision of the CCP United Front Work Department, a unit charged with communicating party directives to mass organisations, and gaining intelligence about how the latter receive them. This type of relationship evokes the totalitarian system that Mao sought to impose on the entire society, and represents a trend opposite to that of social differentiation, religious associations becoming a conduit

**Ambiguity led to criticism from medical and religious establishment, as in the case of Falungong**

**CCP tried to crackdown *qigong* als ‘evil cult’**

**State control to limit the development of an independent religious sphere**

22 David Palmer, *La fièvre du qigong: Guérison, religion et politique en Chine, 1949–1999* (Paris: Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2005).

23 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).

24 SARA itself resulted from a restructuring of the Bureau for Religious Affairs.

for the political order. The realities of local governance, which vary across a country as large and diverse as China, are likely to limit this.<sup>25</sup> However, it is evident that there are obstacles preventing differentiation between the political and the religious.

To sum up, secularity in China exists for the sake of ensuring development. This means a nominal acceptance that some people have a right to believe in religion, but also the view that the state has a duty to deliver atheist education. The CCP's claims of protecting against religious group domination over individuals ring hollow when set against the numerous cases of egregious human rights abuse targeting practitioners of Falungong and the harassment of Christians among the Han. The assertion that the CCP aims to pre-empt potential religious conflicts amounts to no less than an Orwellian statement in light of the re-education campaign against Muslims underway in Xinjiang, which is likely to stir up resentment rather than decrease it. The guiding idea to solve the largely non-existent problems of religious domination and inter-ethnic conflicts are neither the promotion of individual freedom nor inter-religious dialogue but the paternalistic idea that atheistic education can best address both issues. Finally, the CCP's institutionalisation of its bureaucracy for religious affairs and the patriotic religious associations under its close oversight are the antithesis of the independent development of institutional domains, which the CCP regards with a high degree of suspicion.

State atheism to pre-empt religious conflicts and domination

Close intertwining of religion and state domains through control and absorption

#### 4 Secularity in Taiwan

The periodisation of Taiwanese history from 1949 to the present day is considerably simpler. Taiwan underwent a straightforward transition from a hard authoritarian regime to a vibrant democracy in the space of a few years. Between 1949 and 1987, the Nationalist Party, or *Guomindang* (GMD), imposed martial law and kept religious activities under close supervision. The party imposed a structure of

25 See, for example, the case study by Ashiwa and Wank, which describes how many local bureaus for religious affairs and local Buddhist associations have managed to defend their own interests relatively successfully: Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank, "The politics of a reviving Buddhist temple: state, association, and temple in southeast China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 2 (2006).

corporatist control on the religious activities it recognised, and police surveillance on those it deemed ‘secret societies’ or ‘obscene cults’. It generally disparaged the local communal religions as ‘wasteful superstitions’. While some of the GMD elite held sceptical views on religion, others maintained their affiliation with Buddhist associations, new religions that were banned in the PRC, or Christian churches. Some of the GMD elite had radically opposite views on the issue of national identity.<sup>26</sup> During the process of democratic transition, many perspectives on religious affairs competed openly, and were promoted by government officials, civil society actors, and religious associations.

Restrictive religious policy until the democratisation

### Secularity to protect against religious domination

Religious domination was not a salient issue before or after democratisation in Taiwan. No religious institution had the power to impose its views on society. When the GMD took charge of the island, it eradicated the remnants of Japanese influence, leaving little trace of Shinto, which had briefly been imposed when the island was under Japanese rule. Because Taiwan’s leaders adhered to different religions, including different Christian denominations, and held a diversity of views on religion itself, there was no unanimity to impose within society besides the rejection of Communism.

Individual freedom of conscience in Taiwan since the process of democratic consolidation has found expression in the island’s constitutional approach and laissez-faire policy towards religion.<sup>27</sup> However, only a minority of the population thinks that the law must protect the population against abuse in the name of religion and very few believe that religion dominates their lives. Even when Taiwanese society witnessed cases of fraud and exploitation by religious entrepreneurs in the 1990s, calls for legislation on religions remained muted. Moreover, no countermovement emerged to advocate the silencing of religious voices when religious associations formed a coalition to oppose a legal amendment recognising same-sex marriage in 2018, which received

Diversity and religious freedom after the democratic transition

26 Chiang Kai-shek, the authoritarian ruler between 1945 and 1976, promoted the idea of a ‘free China’ and ordered the killing of Taiwanese independence activists. President Lee Teng-hui was a devout Presbyterian. The Presbyterian Church advocated for Taiwanese self-determination.

27 Cheng-tian Kuo, “State-Religion Relations in Taiwan: From Statism and Separatism to Checks and Balances,” *Issues and Studies* 49, no.1 (2013).

Absence of religious domination

support from the majority of the population. Since there was no reference problem of religious domination in Taiwanese society, not many social actors took up preserving individual freedom as a guiding idea of secularity.

Secularity to prevent inter-religious conflicts

Absence of religious conflicts

Taiwan did not experience major inter-religious conflicts before or after 1945. No religion was ever in a position to impose its values and authority on the population because none counted more than a third of the population as its adherents, and no major political party represented one religion. The diversity of religious affiliations in both the GMD since 1945 and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) since it was established in 1987 has reflected the plurality of religious identities found in wider society. The GMD's chairpersons have belonged to different denominations and religions, starting with Methodism (Chiang Kai-shek), Presbyterianism (Lee Teng-hui), Catholicism (Ma Ying-jeou), and Buddhism (Wu Po-Hsiung), or professed none. Likewise, the leaders of the DPP have had different religious affiliations or none. It is also telling that in the 1996 presidential election, both Lee Teng-hui and the DPP's candidate Peng Ming-min were Presbyterians.

Secularity for social development

Government appreciated religious engagement in the social sector

In Taiwan, the GMD seldom referred to the ideas of enlightenment and progress when addressing the issue of national development. Although the government looked down on the practices of popular religions as wasteful during the martial law period, it could not prevent them. The GMD elite appreciated the contribution religion made to alleviating the state's burden when it came to social assistance and recognised the value of charity performed by religions in providing support to marginalised parts of the population. To that end, the government provided land grants and other forms of support to encourage the establishment of care homes for the elderly, clinics, and other forms of social services by churches, and later encouraged Buddhist institutions to provide similar services. During democratisation, as citizens expected the state to invest more in social services, and political parties outbid each other in this area in order to win votes, the contribution of religions changed slightly. Local governments

promoted popular religions as cultural heritage, and the central authority advertised freedom of religion in Taiwan and the overseas relief work of Taiwan-based Buddhist NGOs as diplomatic assets.

### Secularity for the differentiation of specific domains

In Taiwan, social differentiation succeeded even when the island was under martial law. During that period, the GMD sought to control the direction of the economy as much as possible and enforce its monopoly on the political system. However, it did not feel threatened by economic actors, professional corporations, and religious associations. Most of these actors did not have an antagonistic relationship with the GMD so there was no reason to prevent their development. Religious associations shared the state's broad objective of economic development within the framework of a market economy, freedom of movement, and freedom of conscience. For this reason, the process of social differentiation did not encounter any major obstacles.

The process of democratic transition has only reinforced the trend of differentiation of religions from other spheres of society.<sup>28</sup> This became embodied by a gradual disengagement of the government from religious affairs, which varied from religion to religion. Although institutional religions such as Buddhism and Christianity have successfully established their autonomy from the state, popular religions remain intertwined with the social fabric. This is especially visible during electoral campaigns when politicians visit temple committees and ask them to deliver votes in their constituencies. While the last two guiding ideas have contributed to the development of secularity, calls to protect against religious domination and the prevention of inter-religious conflicts never became a major guiding idea the way they did in the PRC.

Democratisation reinforced social differentiation of religion

To sum up, as in China, development is a guiding idea behind secularity in Taiwan. However, religious associations work in concert with the government, not against or in spite of it, to help address the

<sup>28</sup> For an appreciation of the role of religion during democratisation, see Richard Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007). Contrary views have emerged in the media following the controversies of 2017.

problems of economic development and social welfare.<sup>29</sup> Unlike in China, in Taiwan the guiding idea of development has been reinforced since the 1980s by the guiding ideas of inter-religious dialogue, and of a functional differentiation between religious actors and other types of actors. This has shaped the distinctive character of secularity in Taiwan. Inter-religious dialogue has promoted the protection of minorities, ensuring no religion ends up in a position to impose its views on society. Taiwan's vast inter-religious and intra-religious diversity has certainly provided a powerful incentive to support this. Functional differentiation has also been relatively effective as a substantial proportion of the population is either indifferent to religion, or even atheist. Non-believers support the idea of a clear separation between religious institutions and other institutions, even if these boundaries, as seen above, may get blurred in electoral campaigns, or when religious associations provide relief following natural disasters.

## 5 Conclusion

In China, most Christians, Muslims, and believers in other religions acknowledge the reality of secularity, in which the religious systems whose specific rules they observe exist alongside the legal and political systems that govern relations between their religious institutions and the rest of society. Many individuals who profess indifference on religious or political matters are aware of distinct spheres of religious and non-religious domains in society, and the conflicts between some religions and the CCP. The PRC has 'secularity with Chinese characteristics', understood by many religious believers to be 'subordination of religion to the state'. This understanding is shared by other citizens indifferent to religious matters who care about freedom of conscience. Such 'secularity with Chinese characteristics', however, can hardly lead to the institutionalisation of a secular state, whether understood as a strict separation between two equally legitimate spheres of the religious and the political or as state indifference on religious matters.

Taiwan, on the other hand, has seen secularity recognised but not imposed by the state elite. As a result, the gradual institutionalisation of a secular state has not faced much resistance, even from religious

29 David Schak and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, "Taiwan's socially engaged Buddhist groups," *China perspectives* 59 (2005).

China: state ambition  
of subordinating  
religion



leaders, because of the laissez-faire attitude on religion exhibited by successive governments during the process of democratic transition.<sup>30</sup> The Taiwanese government does not see a threat in the double allegiance of many citizens to earthly and otherworldly authorities. The Taiwanese perceive secularity as encouragement towards inter-religious understanding, religious institutions' philanthropy as a positive contribution to society, and the clear institutional separation between religion and state as a guarantee of impartiality.

Taiwan: state outsourcing of welfare to diverse religions

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30 See Cheng-tian Kuo, *Religion and Democracy in Taiwan* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008); Kuo, "State-Religion Relations in Taiwan;" André Laliberté, "The regulation of religious affairs in Taiwan: From state control to laissez-faire?," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2009).

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