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**multiple secularities**

Thomas David DuBois

**“Be a civilized citizen!”**  
Corporate social responsibility  
and the new Chinese secular

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## “Be a civilized citizen!”

### Corporate social responsibility and the new Chinese secular

“Be a civilized citizen, don’t cross against the red light!”

The automated announcement blaring from the curbside gate at first surprised, and then wildly amused the two middle-aged women, who spent the next few minutes laughing and waving hands and bags over the infrared sensor to provoke the recorded response. Nearby, another woman, significantly older and visibly impoverished, sat on the ground, just below a sign calling for a “civilized society” to care for the elderly. If she did notice the irony, she certainly didn’t seem to care.

Over the two decades that I have been studying religion in mainland China, the country’s religion policy has cycled through a series of familiar elements: brief but intense campaigns to purge illicit teachings are set against a constant murmur of contempt for various types of “cultural pollution,” while finite bursts of enthusiasm for resurrected iterations of Confucianism and Marxism form part of a longer trajectory of defining and creating social value, embodied in the language of the “civilized” (*wenming*) society, and the “quality” (*suzhi*) of the citizen.<sup>1</sup>

Religion – defined both legally and linguistically as *zongjiao* – occupies a very closely circumscribed niche within this larger cultural policy. Even as the new Religious Affairs Law<sup>2</sup> took pains to constrain their physical presence, lavishly restored religious sites have prospered, at least materially. Both the public image of the five officially-recognized religions, and state sanctioned religious education emphasize cultural tradition, and patriotism over theology. Yet even these protected religions exist within a gilded cage, and face the challenge of maintaining relevance as they are physically and socially marginalized from public life. In contrast, official campaigns to inculcate the public values of state and citizen are deeply rooted and pervasive, and visually ubiquitous. In city and countryside, it is rare to go

1 There is a large growing literature on the discursive use of *suzhi*. See Ann Anagnost, “The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*),” *Public Culture* 16 (2004); Andy Kipnis, “*Suzhi*: A Keyword Approach,” *The China Journal* (2006).

2 Religious Affairs Regulations were promulgated in 2004 and revised in 2017. Translation and comparison are available at: [https://www.academia.edu/28414977/Chinas\\_Religion\\_Law\\_2005\\_vs.\\_2016](https://www.academia.edu/28414977/Chinas_Religion_Law_2005_vs._2016).

for long without seeing propaganda extolling “core socialist values” or the image of the animated campaign mascot Meng Wa, her name itself a play on the Xi Jinping-era slogan “China Dream.”



An image of the campaign mascot Meng Wa, set against a background in the style of a traditional Chinese paper cutting. The black characters are the campaign slogan “China dream, my dream.”

By this description, China’s official definition of religion sounds like an appendage of its political ideology, which itself might resemble religion. There is no consensus on the definition of basic ideas – culture, ideology, religion –and what lines separate them. But China has long confounded the vocabulary of religious and secular, to the point that it might seem reasonable to dismiss the language altogether. This paper aims to do something different: to leave behind the usual focus on the presence or absence of religion to examine afresh whether an understanding of what we might call the “new Chinese secular” might shed light on some of the country’s key social transformations.

It does so in four parts: It begins by expounding a definition of the secular based on terms advanced by Charles Taylor, as the relation of a society to its own ideological diversity. Second, it examines how the Chinese social and political system is grounded in moral performance, positing an idea of a secular order that exists outside of any real or imagined dichotomy between religion and non-religion. Third, it shows that the Chinese secular neither tolerates religion without political condition, nor does it purge religion from the public sphere, but rather defines confessional religion as a subject of the state-centered moral order. Finally, it shows how the recent

rise of corporate philanthropy illustrates the political tendency to co-opt independent social initiative through subject organizations.

### Where is the Chinese secular?

“Secularism” is a Western concept, that much is obvious. Even in a Western context, the secular could signify many things, from a simple absence of religion to a philosophy of where religion should figure within the political sphere. The precise meaning of secularism is historically and culturally specific to individual societies, and can vary significantly even within modern democracies. Contrasting the two foundational cases of the United States and France, Charles Taylor notes how American secularism originally sought equality among Christian denominations, and from there developed its present meaning that government should refrain from interference in individual expression of faith. French secularism, in contrast, grew out of resistance to the political dominance of the Catholic Church. Far from encouraging religious expression, this iteration seeks to purge displays of religion from the public sphere. In each case, secularism is many things: a set of laws, but more deeply, an iconic statement about the nature of the social contract, often expressed in a simplified, idealized, and in Taylor’s phrase, “fetishized” understanding of the principles involved. In both cases, specific confessional and sectarian concerns developed into a far broader statement on how a liberal society responds not merely to religion, but more broadly to ideological diversity.<sup>3</sup>

The possibility of an organic definition of secularism (if one is needed at all) grows more elusive when trying to understand how comparable ideas developed in a place like China, one of the world’s oldest, richest and most populous civilizations, but one that the Western study of religion often seems determined to relegate to the status of perpetual “case study.” This disciplinary disconnect should not surprise us. The conceptual vocabulary of religious studies (including such basic ideas as faith, belief and “religion” itself) is often a poor match to China, and by extension to much of East Asia. Studies of Chinese religion often feel marginal to religious

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3 Charles Taylor “The Meaning of Secularism,” *The Hedgehog Review* 12, no.3 (2010); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

studies theory, while many scholars of the vast corpus of Chinese scriptural and philosophical texts insist, not without justification, that the linguistic and cultural uniqueness of this tradition makes China essentially a world to itself.

At the same time, western understandings of religion have become very influential in China itself. As is well known, the Chinese term for “religion” (*zongjiao*) is a repurposing (not so much neologism as *re*-logism) of recent vintage, having into common use only in the late nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Other terms, such as the one used for the Christian God, date back to the sixteenth century encounter with the Jesuits. But regardless of their origins, these ideas have taken root and developed meaning within Asian languages and conceptual systems. Late nineteenth century Japanese jurists and scholars (even the nativist folklorist Yanagita Kunio was not immune), adopted and adapted this new language of religion, and were followed by generations of actors who used them in their own way and for their own ends.<sup>5</sup> The first Japanese constitution in 1889 thus included a clause protecting the right to “religious belief,” a phrase that appeared subsequently in numerous Chinese codes and constitutions, including those of the People’s Republic (e.g., Art. 86 of the 1954 constitution).<sup>6</sup> Until recently, China had a State Administration of Religious Affairs (in 2016 this office was incorporated into a larger body), and a set of Religious Affairs Regulations, which were revised in 2018. Every province, city and township reserves a formulaic space for “religion” when portraying itself to the outside world.

Yet although the newness of terminology for “religion” is well known, its “secular” counterpart is in fact much older. *Shisu* 世俗, the most commonly used contemporary translation, is composed of two characters meaning worldly and customary, and appears frequently in classical Chi-

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4 Chinese pronunciations given here. The common use of Chinese characters by Japan and (at the time) Korea made these terms natural cognates across East Asia.

5 On the changing definition of religion in Asian contexts, see Vincent Goossaert, “1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?” *Journal of Asian Studies* 65, 2 (May 2006); Peter van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia. The Secular and the Spiritual in India and China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Thomas David DuBois, ed., *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

6 1889 Constitution of the Empire of Japan, Article 28 “Japanese subjects shall, within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects, enjoy freedom of religious belief.” The American-modeled Japanese constitution of 1947 (Art. 20) rephrases this to emphasize the right of religious affiliation.



nese texts with the meaning of “common.” This was the meaning implied when the Confucian disciple Mencius (372–289 BCE) said that he could not enjoy the music of the ancient kings, but only the *shisu* music of the present day, or again when he spoke of the *shisu* understanding of an idea, meaning that of the common man on the street.<sup>7</sup> The neologism for religion, in contrast, is composed of two characters meaning sect (*zong*) and a teaching (*jiao*), linguistically signifying the *separateness* of the religious realm by defining it around confessional or monastic structures, neither of which enjoy the sort of prominence in Chinese religion that they do in the Christian tradition. It is not surprising, then, that this term for religion was brought to prominence in the context of treaties meant to protect people who self-identified as religious, specifically Christian missionaries.<sup>8</sup> In terms of historical etymology, *secular* is the world, *religion* is a realm that is conceptually, and newly distinct from it.<sup>9</sup>

The poor fit of such terminology to real religious life in China has complicated attempts to conceptually or legally divide the “religious” from the “secular,” and is reflected in a long history of Western misperceptions. Voltaire claimed that China’s enlightened and rational high civilization was free of religion, while the lower classes reveled in ritualistic Buddhism, the “highest pitch of superstition” that was “tolerated in China for the life of the vulgar, a coarse sort of food proper for their stomachs.”<sup>10</sup> As Catholic mission spread in China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Church became bitterly divided over the question of whether Chinese ritual activities, specifically the funeral offerings demanded by Confucian propriety and Chinese law, were properly *religious*, and thus idolatrous. Less known was the reversal of this decision in the twentieth century, as the Vatican instructed the faithful how to respond to the ritual requirements of Japanese fascism, deciding in the 1936 papal letter *Pluries Instanterque* that public veneration for the war dead was a civic, rather than a religious

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7 These two quotes come from *Mengzi* [Works of Mencius], King Hui of Liang II., 8, and Lilou II 58, respectively. A keyword search for the term on ctext.org will reveal many similar usages from other ancient texts.

8 Here we see echoes of Elizabeth Shakman Hurd’s characterization of religion legislation as being predisposed to recognize the interests of *self-defined* religious communities (Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015)).

9 This meaning is similar to the dichotomy used in medieval Catholicism.

10 Voltaire. *Essay on Universal History: The Manners and Spirit of Nations*, Vol. 1 (London: J. Nourse, 1759), 27.

activity.<sup>11</sup> The Church came to view political ceremony quite differently just a few years later, when the newly founded People's Republic expelled Catholic missionaries, and turned violently against Chinese Catholics. In this setting, religion was again seen as a direct competitor to Chinese political ritual, especially the political ceremony that accompanied what was often referred to as the "cult" of Mao Zedong.<sup>12</sup>

So where does this leave the Chinese secular? Without a strongly defined oppositional counterpart, the term becomes much less clear. Having had no term for religion as an abstract entity until the late nineteenth century, China also had no clear conceptual use for the *secular* as a world outside of religion's boundaries, nor an idea of *secularism* as a political program dedicated to the principle of marginalizing clerical influence. Conflicts around religion, such as the violent purgation of a popular sect, or court intrigues involving monks or lamas, did most certainly occur, but they were not phrased as ones that would define or limit the place of religion on principle. Applying the idea retroactively is thus of limited explanatory value. Yet as we shall see, elements of secularization theory, especially Taylor's work on secularity in the civic lives of Western societies, do resonate with recent social and political transformations in China.

## The moral public

As any visitor to China will attest, Chinese smartphone users (colorfully known as the "head down tribe" *ditouzu*) are uniquely addicted to their smartphones. Beyond entertainment, officially-promoted social media platforms like WeChat (*weixin*) have become truly indispensable for daily life, most notably for commercial transactions. But WeChat and other web platforms are also filled with messaging, product advertising most obviously, but also didactic campaigns promoting China's traditional morality, "harmonious society," "core socialist values," and the "China dream." Those who do look up from their phones will find similar messaging across all

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11 Thomas David DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

12 For one of many examples of this sort of reductionism, see John Pomfret, "China and the Korean War loom over Trump and Kim" *The Washington Post*, June 11, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/06/11/china-and-the-korean-war-loom-over-trump-and-kim>.

public spaces – paper advertising, painted slogans, and increasingly, the large and small LED screens that appear in elevators, bus stops and along the sides of buildings. Each in slightly different terms, these ubiquitous messages all revolve around the basic idea of service to the state, family and society. The core message is a repurposing of what are commonly known as Confucian values: respect for the elderly, honesty in commercial dealings, and politeness in public. Message boards in parks and along sidewalks praise the contributions of moral exemplars, living and dead (including a revival of interest in the iconic Cultural Revolution-era propaganda figure Lei Feng), who have served society through deeds large and small. Admonitions to public obedience and good citizenship are written in terms both of social progress, and of individual personal “quality” (*suzhi*), a vague term that has of late attracted the attention of anthropologists, but is itself hardly new.

In fact, apart from their newfound technological sophistication, very little of these campaigns is new. Six centuries before the founding of the People’s Republic, the first Ming emperor, aiming to restore Chinese culture after an extended period of Mongol rule, initiated an ambitious program of social education, consisting of traveling morality lectures, posted writings, and criminal penalties for such wicked activity as neglecting an aged parent. The national education and New Life Movements of the early twentieth century capped another restorationist trend that had been brewing among intellectuals as a remedy to the country’s rapid political decline. Like the early-Ming transformation, such campaigns as Chiang Kai-shek’s New Life Movement were at their core moral causes, ones that sought to rebuild Chinese society around a new individual, refashioned by the rules of decorum, etiquette, and civic values. In its early years, the Communist regime communicated the ground rules of the new society through public spectacle: destructive events like the “struggle sessions” that aimed to break down the structure and loyalties of the old society, as well as constitutive ones, like the mass rallies that mobilized schools, work units and villages around the idea of membership in a new China and a new socialist world.

For all of their differences, what all of these historical movements shared in common was the ideographic domination of public space. Whether it was the arches and shrines erected in memory of deified moral exemplars during the imperial era, or the increasingly ambitious citizen education

campaigns of the twentieth century, what was being policed was visible public display, rather than interior belief or morality.<sup>13</sup> It could of course be argued that the two were inseparable: that the foundation of Chinese ritual (*li*) is the expectation that rote *external* performance, for example of rituals of gratitude towards Heaven, is the root of *internal* ethical transformation. Certainly, a breach of mores need not have been performed in public view to be perceived as a civic concern: ritual norms such as rites to placate ancestors or local deities served the common good by maintaining cosmic order and preventing the trespass of harmful forces. But the didactic recreation of social values permeated even private ritual. In these many different ritual settings – ranging from the ancestral shrine to the show trial – correct public performance often trumped belief, sincerity or good intentions.

By Taylor's description, the core of western secularism is the relationship of the public to religious expression, which he gives as a proxy for ideological diversity writ large.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the public code of the Chinese secular is defined less by the absence or presence of religion, than by the active promotion of ideology through a public code of decorum. One part of this is the weak role of confessional religion itself.

### Confessional subjects

If moral performance was the core of the public, where then was its boundary? Ironically, not at the church gate. When John Lagerwey called imperial China a “religious state,” he was speaking of political realities – the preeminence of the imperial institution over monastic structures, and the axial position of the emperor in a ritual cosmology that connected Heaven and Earth – rather than confessional ones.<sup>15</sup> Even as Buddhist and Daoist clergy jockeyed for favor within the corridors of power, there was very little in the past thousand years of Chinese history to suggest a struggle between the principles of political and religious authority. To avoid the trap of cultural determinism, we should remember that as much as in Europe, these norms

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13 On public space in Republican cities, see Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in Republican China, 1911–1929* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

14 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

15 John Lagerwey, *China: a Religious State* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2010).

arose from historical contingency. In China, the question of clerical autonomy was settled definitively by moments like the late-ninth-century purge of Buddhism from the realm of political power. Rulers like the first Ming emperor were happy to reinscribe this precedent as the imperial institution continued to evolve. Yet things looked very different in nearby Korea, where monastic Buddhism came to a peaceful and lasting accommodation with the early Joseon dynasty, and in Japan, where a late-sixteenth century conflict with armed Buddhist and Christian militants extended across a prolonged period of political instability, ending in a confrontation that violently subordinated clerical to state power for the next two hundred fifty years.

Since at least the fourteenth century, the Chinese imperial institution sat atop monastic structures and religious communities, their ordination and their property, serving as both patron and watchdog. The benefits of this relationship were not entirely one-sided. Daoist and Buddhist ritual did play an important role in court life, while some rulers, such as the Qing Yongzheng emperor, were known for their friendships with learned monks.<sup>16</sup> Yet while a strong dynasty could afford to be magnanimous to law-abiding religious structures, transgressions would provoke a swift response. Monasteries that had been politically allied to the deposed Mongol dynasty lost rights and property during the Ming. Catholic missionaries of the seventeenth century had been able to gain as many as three hundred thousand converts before their public infighting and flouting of ritual conventions convinced exasperated Qing emperors to expel them from the country. Even worse than political intrigue was dark magic. Popular teachings (especially those identified in sources as “White Lotus” teachings) were persecuted without mercy. In addition to stylized charges of holding nighttime orgies and stirring up the people with predictions of a coming apocalypse, political powers feared these groups precisely because they believed their baleful magic to potentially be real.<sup>17</sup>

But in the big picture, such instances of political suppression were the exceptions that proved the rule. Formally, the policy of the territorially expansive Qing dynasty resembled the “legal pluralism” of the Ottoman Em-

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16 Barend ter Haar, “Yongzheng and his abbots,” in *The People and the Dao: New Studies of Chinese Religions in Honour of Prof. Daniel L. Overmyer*, ed. Philip Clart, and Paul Crowe (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2009).

17 Barend ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (Honolulu: Uni-

pire, that granted mediated subject identity to internal minorities who, like Russian Jews or Hellenic Christians, combined ethnic with confessional identity.<sup>18</sup> This was quite unlike the Han majority, few of whom embraced anything like an exclusive religious affiliation, especially for China's two identifiable "-isms," Buddhism and Daoism.<sup>19</sup> Most people freely mixed religious traditions, regarding clergy, deities and temples as resources. Structured ritual life was based on clan or locality, rather than religious identification in any manner resembling the Western tradition of confessional affiliation. Distinct ethnic communities were quite different. Until the gradual institution of direct administration during the early 1700s, many of the distinct ethnicities within China's boundaries lived under community self-rule, encountering the Chinese state through the mediation of chieftains or princes.

Religious structures often played a key role in the political lives of these ethno-religious communities. In Tibetan and Mongolian areas, Buddhist monasteries enjoyed the legal right to collect tax and labor from farmers and herdsman. Chinese Muslims lived in a variety of settings, often in close proximity to Han neighbors, while maintaining a separate communalized identity that left them as perennial outsiders ("familiar strangers," as historian Jonathan Lipman has called them), meaning that a breakdown of trust could result in violent, and collective recriminations against even well established communities.<sup>20</sup> Two very different uprisings of the nineteenth century (grouped together as "Muslim rebellions") resulted nearly twenty million deaths. Near the capital, the breakdown of public order during the Boxer Uprising provided the opportunity for violent recriminations between Han and Muslim villages.<sup>21</sup>

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versity of Hawaii Press, 1999); Bingfang Han. "The Taigu School and the Yellow Cliff Teaching: Another Case of Transformation from Confucian Academic Group to Religious Sect," in *Popular Religion and Shamanism*, ed. Xisha Ma, and Huiying Meng (Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2011); Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990).

- 18 Karen Barkey, "Aspects of Legal Pluralism in the Ottoman Empire," in *Legal Pluralism and Empires*, ed. Lauren Benton, and Richard J. Ross (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
- 19 Vincent Goossaert, *The Taoists of Peking, 1800–1949: a social history of urban clerics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007).
- 20 Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997).
- 21 See the account in Peill, Arthur D. *The beloved physician of Tsang Chou life-work and letters of Dr. Arthur D. Peill, F.R.C.S.E*, ed. J. Peill (London: Headley Bros, 1908). A more

The policy of treating ethno-religious minorities as distinct internal communities continued into the twentieth century and beyond. Ethnic classifications were formalized in the early years of the People's Republic, a time that actual treatment of religion was highly inconsistent. Numerous Buddhist monasteries, including those in Tibet and Mongolia, were sacked and looted. Muslim clerics were beaten, humiliated and forced to break dietary restrictions by consuming pork. In 2017, the world came to know the scale of abuses against the Uighur population of Xinjiang, including the secret detention of as many as half a million in "re-education camps." The reasons, including fears of ethnic separatism in a place that is historically non-Han, often remain unspoken. Instead, policing of Xinjiang is justified in the name of rooting out radical Islam.<sup>22</sup>

But like other forms of religious persecution, it is important to remember that such religious brutality has come in waves. There have also been periods of greater tolerance, and many places did go to significant lengths to visibly accommodate a select set of officially approved cultural differences, especially in areas that were administratively designated as ethnic autonomous regions. Looking specifically at diet, state planners in the 1950s accommodated local Muslims in places like Harbin by subsidizing the price of beef to keep parity with pork, and local governments still keep strategic reserves of halal meat in order to stabilize prices in minority areas. Even under the People's Communes, Muslims were often allowed to maintain a separate halal diet, maintain a separate slaughtering grounds, and keep dairy cattle for their own milk consumption.<sup>23</sup>

Chinese Christians, particularly those who had been in contact with missionary institutions, presented a more difficult case. While Muslims could be fit into the neat parameters of Stalinist ethnic classification, Christians were often characterized as a minority of choice, people who had vol-

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detailed account may be found in Thomas David DuBois, "Religious violence in China since 1850," in *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, Vol. 4, ed. Louise Edwards, Nigel Penn, and Jay Winter (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2019).

22 This is currently being documented in numerous journalistic, human rights and government reports. Rian Thum, "What Really Happens in China's 'Re-education' Camps," *New York Times*, May 15, 2018. Accessed March 8, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/opinion/china-re-education-camps.html>; Megha Rajagopalan, "This Is What A 21st-Century Police State Really Looks Like." Accessed March 8, 2019. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/the-police-state-of-the-future-is-already-here>.

23 Interviews in Yunnan and Hebei.

untarily turned their back on their own culture. They also made for easy scapegoats. The timing of the first major anti-Catholic political movement as part of the 1951 Suppress the Counterrevolutionaries Campaign, suggests that the ill treatment of Chinese Christians during the early years of the PRC had less to do with real suspicion, than with their usefulness in establishing the authority of the new regime.<sup>24</sup>

Aiming to preemptively curate what would constitute religion in the reform era, the official rehabilitation of religion since the 1980s has combined control of religions under state administration with alternating indifference to and persecution of those outside it. On the one hand, the five state-linked religions enjoyed protection and even patronage. During the 1990s, even as the full force of the state was being mobilized against groups like Falun Gong (a topic that has been written about extensively elsewhere<sup>25</sup>), the temples, religious sites, schools and seminaries of the five state-linked religions were being rebuilt or refurbished, often in lavish fashion and at state expense. In return, these religions would operate under, and submit fully to political leadership. The other side of this policy, the part that is reflected in the violent repression of underground Christian congregations and Xinjiang Muslims, is one face of what some have called China's "comprehensive war on religion."<sup>26</sup> But it is not universal. Even as clear repression takes place against certain groups, much of the Chinese landscape remains dotted with temples, religious iconography, and a strongly traditional ritual component in activities such as rural funerals. We can debate the real freedom or future of this unofficial religious sector, but its existence is fairly easy to confirm.

Policy tangibly shapes how state-linked religions express themselves theologically. Although China's religion law allows proselytization within the premises of designated sites, content is monitored against the deliberately soft parameter of "state security." The result is often a watered-down

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24 Thomas David DuBois, *Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

25 David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

26 Fifield, Anna. "With wider crackdowns on religion, Xi's China seeks to put state stamp on faith," *The Washington Post*, September 16, 2018. Accessed March 8, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/with-wider-crackdowns-on-religion-xis-china-seeks-to-put-state-stamp-on-faith/2018/09/15/b035e704-b7f0-11e8-b79f-f6e31e555258\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.27d36ba92ee3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/with-wider-crackdowns-on-religion-xis-china-seeks-to-put-state-stamp-on-faith/2018/09/15/b035e704-b7f0-11e8-b79f-f6e31e555258_story.html?utm_term=.27d36ba92ee3).



theology of the sort that characterizes interfaith dialogue, emphasizing generalizable expressions of community, social service and morality. To those who hear only of religious persecution, it will come as a surprise to learn that churches in China are often packed for Sunday and weekday services, which are held in well-maintained buildings that are adorned with Biblical quotations about love and justice. But writings and sermons themselves play down the more potentially contentious aspects of the Gospel: such as the call to evangelize the non-believer, or the idea that the single road to Heaven lies through Christ.

The point here is that state-linked religions are as compelled as anyone to treat the public space as one of active moral performance, even within the walls of the church. Just as Chinese law bans expressions of religion or proselytization outside of designated religious sites (i.e., the secular public), so too does the performance of religion within the officially-designated religious sphere (the religious public, or to use terms literally, the *religious secular*) demand a theological reformulation that subjects difference to the themes of morality and social unity, and above these still: subjection of religious structures to state and the Communist Party.

### Charity begins at work: The rise of China's corporate citizens

Political ambivalence to the activities of private institutional actors, notably NGOs and charities, far predates the current regime. Imperial China had its own well established charitable tradition, which was deeply affected by the arrival of mission institutions in the late nineteenth century. Much of the change was organizational. Native charities had tended to be small, personal networks, tied parochially to clan or native place. Inspired by the arrival of larger and well-funded mission hospitals, soup kitchens and orphanages, Chinese activists of the twentieth century established a new generation of hybrid charities, including a Chinese branch of the Red Cross, and a native adaptation called the Red Swastika Society. As this new charity sector grew, the government of the Chinese Republic enacted the first of a series of laws that aimed to police its finances and foreign connections.<sup>27</sup> The private charitable sector continued to expand in response to the human suffering caused

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<sup>27</sup> Joanna F. Handlin Smith, "Benevolent Societies: The Reshaping of Charity During the Late Ming and Early Ch'ing," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, 2 (1987); Cai Qinyu, and Li

by natural disasters and the Japanese invasion, but collapsed soon after 1949, as foreign missionaries were ejected, and the vast majority of Chinese groups closed in acquiescence to the claim that the new socialist state would need no such help caring for the needs of the people.<sup>28</sup>

The reemergence of the NGO sector in the 1980s raised the need for new regulation, at the same time shining a harsh light on deeper social issues. Private philanthropy reached a peak with the waves of donations in response to the disastrous earthquakes in Wenchuan (2008) and Ya'an (2013). But the decision to allow human and material aid from outside (especially from Japan or groups like the Taiwanese Tzu-chi Foundation) was received with some criticism, and the same openness of Internet discussion that fed the outpouring of private charity also highlighted two new sources of embarrassment: scandals involving the embezzlement of Red Cross donations (compounded by crass blogging by a young woman who claimed to be the mistress of one of the culprits), and the notorious cheapness of many of the country's new super-rich in the face of more long term problems of poverty and underdevelopment, a problem was publicly highlighted by none other than Bill Gates, as well as Chinese figures like action star Jet Li, who founded his own charitable foundation.<sup>29</sup>

By the new century, concern over private social initiatives spinning out of control prompted the passage of new regulations: the 2004 Foundation Management Law, and highly criticized Foreign NGO law of 2016.<sup>30</sup> Like its predecessors from the 1920s, China's new NGO law does not ban private

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Yuanfeng. "Shilun jindai Zhongguo shehui jiuji sixiang" [A Discussion of Social Relief Thinking in Modern China] *Dongfang luntan* 5 (2002); Zhe Ji, "Comrade Zhao Puchu: Bodhisattva under the red flag," in *Making Saints in Modern China*, ed. David Ownby, Vincent Goossaert, and Zhe Ji (New York: Oxford, 2017); Zeng Guilin, "Minguo shiqi cishan lifa zhong de minjian canyu – yi Shanghaio cishan tuanti lianhehui wei zhongxin kaocha" ["Civic participation in charity legislation of the Republic of China – an examination of the Shanghai Charities Association"]. *Xuexi yu tansuo* 197, 6 (2011).

28 Thomas David DuBois, "Before the NGO: Chinese charities in historical perspective." *Asian Studies Review* 39, 4 (2015).

29 In contrast, Internet tycoon Ma Yun recently announced his intention to direct his attention to philanthropy.

30 State Council. "Regulations for the Management of Foundations 基金会管理条例: Adopted March 8, 2004. Effective June 1, 2004." Accessed March 8, 2019. <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/laws-regulations/regulations-management-of-foundations>; National People's Congress Standing Committee. "Law of the People's Republic of China on Administration of Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organizations in the Mainland of China 中华人民共和国境外非政府组织境内活动管理法: Adopted April 28, 2016. Effective January 1, 2017." Accessed March 8, 2019. <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/laws-regulations/>

charities directly, but demands that organizations and charities register, a process that can be made easy or onerous. NGOs with religious or foreign ties were scrutinized especially harshly, as were those that emphasized sensitive domestic social problems. But just as with state-linked religion, the aim of regulation was less the destruction of social activism, than channeling it into a more controllable form. Again resembling religion, this was done by taking philanthropy out of private hands, and moving it towards larger, politically linked entities.

The rise of “corporate social responsibility” (*qiye shehui zeren*) provided the vehicle, giving the state a new partner in its social initiatives, at the same time addressing many of the new economic realities of the new century. From a purely practical standpoint, concentrating philanthropy in the corporate sector has many advantages. It leverages the management expertise and reach of the commercial sector, and makes corporations willing participants in key state initiatives in ecology, poverty alleviation and disaster relief, particularly at the local level.

Corporate philanthropy also reframes the biggest change in Chinese society – the selloff of state assets to a quickly expanding semi-private sector – in a moral light. This structural change began with the Asian financial crisis of 1998, and has accelerated over recent years, skewing Chinese economic growth towards clusters of artificially large, linked companies that have come to dominate strategic sectors such as food, real estate, energy and technology. These new companies are remarkably powerful, and many have at their command globally unmatched wealth and resources.<sup>31</sup> But this wave of consolidation has had a downside. Intended to be easier to regulate, large companies in fact spawned outsized problems. Scandals involving corruption, the abuse of concentrated wealth, forced evictions by real estate developers, exploitation of migrant workers, and egregious breaches of food, building and transport safety acutely irritated public sentiment, have provoked rare displays of dissent, in person and online.<sup>32</sup>

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law-of-peoples-republic-of-china-administration-of-activities-of-overseas.

31 On the consolidation of TVEs and SOEs, see Cheng Jin, *An Economic Analysis of the Rise and Decline of Chinese Township and Village Enterprises* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017).

32 On the topic of migrant workers, see the excellent reportage from Viola Zhou, and Zhuang Pinghui, “Migrant workers take to streets of Beijing to protest against forced evictions,” *South China Morning Post*, December 10, 2017. Accessed March 8, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2123714/migrant-workers->

Discussion of CSR began just as this major economic shift, and its attendant problems were taking off.<sup>33</sup> Late in 2002, Renmin University hosted a conference to discuss “labor relations and CSR against background of globalization.” Over the next year, Beijing in Shanghai hosted numerous meetings on themes such as “enterprise value and social responsibility.”<sup>34</sup> These early discussions of corporate social responsibility were heavily influenced by foreign businesses operating in China, and included participation by the Ford Foundation, the Harvard Business School and the British Embassy. By virtue of their national prominence and political connections, the first and most vocal domestic proponents tended to be the largest Chinese companies. One of the earliest to tie its public image to social philanthropy was the mega real estate developer Vanke, which released its first “green book on social responsibility” in 2005.<sup>35</sup> Other key players, especially the well-connected and officially-favored “dragon head” companies, quickly followed suit. The institutionalization of CSR as part of the business landscape was made final with its recognition in the new Company Law, which took effect on January 1, 2006.<sup>36</sup>

Writing in the official *People’s Daily* in the summer of 2007, Beijing-based economist Zou Dongtao explained two benefits of CSR.<sup>37</sup> The first is that it encourages a moral atmosphere within the companies themselves, leading both workers and management at all levels to behave responsibly. This latter argument would become especially timely later that year with the beginnings of the greatest scandal of recent years: the sale of melamine-laced milk and infant formula powder that killed six children and sickened hundreds of thousands nationwide.

The authors of the 2009 *Blue Book of Enterprise Citizenship* addressed the milk poisoning incident directly. Beginning with a litany of previous

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take-streets-beijing-protest-against; and the dossier available at <https://www.scmp.com/topics/migrant-workers-china>. Broader coverage is available at Radio Free Asia: <https://www.rfa.org>.

33 Li-Wen Lin, “Corporate Social Responsibility in China: Window Dressing or Structural Change?” *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 28, 1 (2010).

34 Jiang Zhenghua, You Dongtao, Wang Zaiwen, and Feng Mei, *Zhongguo qiye gongmin baogao shu* [China corporate citizens report 2009], 2009. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2009, 308.

35 *Wanke qiye shehui zeren lüpi shu* [Vanke CSR green book]. Text of annual reports are available from the company’s CSR webpage: <https://www.vanke.com/citizenship.aspx>.

36 Lin, “Corporate Social Responsibility in China,” 70.

37 Jiang, et al., *Zhongguo qiye gongmin baogao shu*, 2009, 6.

scandals: milk powder that was sold stripped of nutrients, and expired product that was resold with fake brand packaging, the article focused on Beijing-based Sanlu, the company that was most directly implicated in the melamine event. From a 1950s-era collective, Sanlu had grown since the 1980s as a politically favored enterprise and valued brand. Its downfall implicated both the company and those who had let its abuses go unchecked. In September of 2008, after the extent of the scandal had become widely known, Premier Wen Jiabao bluntly described the reason as two separate lapses: the combination of “lazy government oversight and a lack by some companies of professional morals and social ethics.” The problem of oversight addressed in a major reorganization of the dairy industry and series of new food safety laws. Engendering a sense of morality that would “course like blood through the body of the entrepreneur” was of course a much harder task.<sup>38</sup>

The second benefit is that since corporations enjoy legal rights and a growing presence in society, they have a proportionate responsibility to recognize and uphold the rights of others. Perhaps unwittingly echoing the tone of religious moral precepts, Zou lists six recipients of a company’s “ethical dealing” (*shan dai*): stockholders, workers, customers, the natural environment, business partners and society at large. Although not stated here, this sort of argument in defense of the rise of large corporate interests echoes the early defense of socialism as being not only more just, but also more efficient way to serve the public good. This similarity is no illusion, since the newly privatized companies often work very closely with local government, which supplies finance and access to markets and materials. In return, CSR activities actively support state initiatives such as tree planting, disaster relief, and poverty alleviation.

Although written in the language of management theory, both of these arguments echo earlier public morality campaigns, in the sense that the performance of socially responsible acts is expected to produce beneficial moral results, both for the actors themselves and for observers. The proponents are not naive. The writers of the 2009 report pointed out that Sanlu’s donation of 14 million *yuan* of milk to the victims of Wenchuan came at the very moment that it was working to cover the extent of the melamine poisoning in its own products. Rather, they envision a long-

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38 Jiang et al., *Zhongguo qiye gongmin baogao shu*, 2009, 288–99.

er road of educating management on the strategic value of honestly to a company. Promotion of socially responsible activities enhances brand identity, while CSR activities themselves build morale and a sense of common purpose. Channeling public philanthropy into CSR campaigns provides a powerful but controlled outlet for public sentiment, and is one way of presenting a major shift in China's economic foundations as a positive development.

### So again, where is the Chinese secular?

It should be obvious by now that this paper's understanding of the secular in China has very little to do with the absence or presence of religious organizations or symbolism. On the one hand, the tightly-controlled state-linked religion sector is in many ways thriving. On the other, freedom within the unofficial sphere ebbs and flows. Against the violent persecution of Falun Gong, house Christians or Xinjiang Muslims, we must also weigh the vast number of religious sites and practices that survive by figuratively flying below the radar, even as actual surveillance techniques grow ever more sophisticated. Much of this religious efflorescence is euphemized as cultural heritage or ethnic custom. The practice of reducing this extremely complex landscape to a checklist of key "religious freedom" indicators is not likely to produce any real insight.

In Taylor's description, state secularism is one very particular expression of ideological agnosticism in which the state cannot favor any one view in an organically diverse and intellectually free society.<sup>39</sup> The fiction of a strict separation of the religious from the secular is a by-product of how these lines are drawn. Like free expression, and other supposedly absolute rights, the actual content of what any one jurisdiction considers religion, and thus what areas are off-limits from political interference, are themselves evolving products of custom and precedent, a point made both by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and by Winnifred Sullivan.<sup>40</sup>

Further complicating China's case, even beyond the fact that the country does very overtly espouse an official guiding ideology, is the fact that its

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39 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

40 Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom*, 2015; Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

diversity is *not* organic. China's diversity is highly scripted and structured. Taking ethnicity policy as an example, China still hews to a Stalinist model, one that recognizes a fixed number of ethnicities, and includes the category of "ethnicity" as an objective and immutable marker of personal identification. There may be *plurality* of ethnicity or religion, but it exists within an externally imposed structure, one that leaves little space for personal interpretation.

But in a very different way, state secularism in China expresses very clearly an absolutely clear overriding ethic: the "civic religion" of illiberal utilitarianism.<sup>41</sup> High political figures raise functional arguments for allowing religion to exist: because outlawing it by fiat would be too disruptive, and because state-controlled religion may have socially redeeming values.<sup>42</sup> In this same vein, public morality is performed and praised because it produces socially desirable results: stability, unity, and economic growth. In each case, the state continues to take upon itself the paternal role of decider and engineer of social value. At its core, the Chinese secular remains precisely the recognition of this state-led illiberalism as the foundation of society.

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41 Jaclyn L. Neo, "Secularism without Liberalism: Religious Freedom and Secularism in a Non-Liberal State," *Michigan State Law Review*, 333 (2017).

42 See discussion of contemporary views presented in Chi Zhen, and Thomas DuBois, "Opiate of the Masses with Chinese Characteristics: recent Chinese scholarship on the meaning and future of religion," in *Religious Studies and Marxist Approaches to Religions in China*, ed. Lü Daji, and Gong Xuezheng, trans. Chi Zhen (Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2014).

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