

15th Annual Shorenstein Journalism Award Keynote Speech by Ian Johnson: Religion after Mao

*Transcript
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IAN JOHNSON: It is really an honor to be here and to address everyone, and to talk about this project that I've been working on since about 2010. Just as a quick introduction, the pictures behind you are pictures that are rotating up on the screen about religious life in China. There are different images from different faiths. Some of them I will refer to occasionally, but they're not directly linked to everything I'm saying at the moment. So don't try to read some deeper meaning into them. That's not me, for example, in China.

I started this project formally in 2010. But I got really interested in it in 1984 when I went to China for the first time as a student. And I came from a fairly religious family and wondered, when I got to China, what the religious life of Chinese people was like. I had, of course, read the *Dao De Jing* by Lao-zi and Confucius' *Analects* and some Buddhist *Sutras*. But I wondered what was going on in the country at that point in 1984.

I was a student at Peking University and I rode my steel framed flying pigeon bicycle to White Cloud Temple. Which is like an hour ride. It's about as long as it takes nowadays to go in a cab, from Bayta to Baiyun Guan because of the traffic. So you weren't that much worse off back then, although there are subways.

Yes, so I went there with a couple of friends. And we looked around the temple. And it hadn't been very badly damaged in the Cultural Revolution. It was a beautiful-- structures were still there. But it was fairly empty. And it felt that nothing was really alive. That this seemed like one of these typical places of worship that you might find in a communist country. Almost a relic of a sociological phenomenon that was no longer alive. Almost like a museum. There were some Daoist priests, I recall, but there were basically no worshippers. And it seemed like just a tourist site, that the occasional foreigner went to on their tour of China.

And when I left the next year, in 1985, it wasn't too much different. After I looked around Beijing and other places-- religious life was not very vibrant. And I went back thinking that religious life maybe had been kind of exterminated by the communists.

As I began to look at the issue and learn more about it in the 1990s, and so on, I realized that this was a mistake. That actually what I had seen in 1984 was not only a result of say, 30 years of radical policies by Mao. But a century of doubt-- self-doubt by Chinese people toward their own culture.

Starting in the 19th century with the series of humiliations-- defeats-- at the hands of foreigners, Chinese looked around the world and saw that the west was carving up many parts of the world. And they thought they were next. And they thought it wasn't just a question of needing a new emperor, or a new dynasty, but that the whole system really had to be radically changed, and even thrown out. And as the problems and the humiliations piled up, more and more radical ideas took hold.

Even though in the late 19th century-- the famous reformer Kang Youwei in 1898-- he proposed converting temples into schools. The idea that China had too many temples, it had too much of this stuff from the past. And what they really needed was education. They needed science, progress, modernity. And this had to be done by chucking out all of the things that were holding China back.

You can also see this in personal biographies of people like, the revolutionary Sun Yat-sen. Who as a young man in Guangdong Province went to the local temple. And in a symbolic act took a big club and smashed the statues on the altar. You know you just need to get rid of all of this mumbo jumbo, this superstitious stuff that's holding China back.

So as the 20th century progressed in the 20s and 30s traditional Chinese religion-- and here I can mean what we're talking about today would be Buddhism, Daoism, and what's loosely called folk religion-- was seen as a social problem. Akin to gambling, prostitution, opium, foot binding, all of this dross of the past that needed to be jettisoned, if China was to take off and move toward the future.

I think this predates the communists. And there are some really, really rough figures that help give an idea about this. Around the time of Kang Youwei's proposal in 1898 to convert temples to schools, there were roughly-- the

French sinologist Vincent Gothard estimates about one million sizeable temples that could be counted in China. By the middle of the 20th century he and others estimate that about half of these temples had been destroyed or converted to other use. And even today if you go to big Chinese cities, often the most prestigious schools are on the sites of former temples. And so the idea that temples were superfluous. And not only that, but they were holding China back.

You know this wasn't entirely unique to China. Other countries also went through this when the Ottoman Empire collapsed. The new Turkish state limited the role of Islam, converted some mosques to museums even. You had similar radical secularizing movements in the Middle East. For example, in Syria-- the Ba'ath party, Iraq also-- they wanted to limit Islam because they saw it as sort of a backward religion. Holding back their countries from modernizing.

I think, maybe, because of the depth of the crisis in China it just went on perhaps longer, and was just more radical. So when the communists took power in 1949 they were following on the efforts of other people including the Republic of China, Chiang Kai-shek the new life movement-- these all had the idea that religion was a problem.

Not all religions-- Chinese modernizers saw that Western countries had religions. And there is this idea that maybe Christianity wasn't so bad. Chiang Kai-shek himself, at least nominally, converted to Christianity. Many of the reformers or revolutionaries of the time had a Christian background. But it was the traditional Chinese faiths that were seen as the problem.

And introduced into China in the 20th century was this paradigm that up until recently you still had-- that some religions were OK. They were legitimate. Because they could be defined or reconfigured along Christian norms. And the rest of it was superstitious. And so by 1949 when the communists took power, five religions sort of coalesced out of the wreckage of the old system. You had Buddhism, Daoism, Islam-- and then in China for administrative purposes, Christianity is divided into two-- Protestantism and Catholicism. So these are the five religious groups that exist even today in China.

But the vast majority of religious life in China didn't fit neatly into a Buddhist or Daoist paradigm. It was this broad amorphous idea that overlaid so much of society in China. Better thought of as Chinese religion simply. And this would include what a lot of people today might call popular religion, or folk religion. And this was seen as superstitious.

And even up until the 1990s and the early 2000s you still had government efforts against superstitious religious activities. People who were doing fortune telling, and things like that, were rounded up and often taken off the streets.

So this is the background. And obviously under Mao the most radical policies were followed. So by the end of his life in 1976, almost all religious life-- at least public religious life-- was eliminated or at least closed down. There were no real functioning places of worship left. This changed in the early 1980s, when the government issued an important document which allowed religious life to resume. Some of the temples and churches and mosques could reopen. Clergy was trained again. Seminaries and so on, were opened.

But the people running China at the time, by and large, saw this. And you can see it in the language of the document, as a kind of a sop to society. That we've gone through all these famines and political campaigns over 30 years. We need to sort of give something back to society. We can give you a little bit of religious life. It's something for the old people who still believe in religion. And it will die out naturally.

They said we're not going to try to eliminate it forcibly as Mao did. But we're going to try to let it just die out. It will die out. Socialism will come along and we'll move into communism. And then naturally people will not believe in religion anymore. This, of course, didn't happen and religious life increased dramatically throughout the 80s and 90s, and up until now.

I began to get a sense of that when I went back to China in 1994 as a correspondent. There was a big mass spiritual movement at the time that people sometimes called Qigong fever. I don't know if you're familiar with Qigong. Many of you probably are.

But for those who aren't, Qigong is a kind of physical cultivation practice. You can think of it as analogous to yoga in the Indian tradition. Something you do physically but it has a kind of a spiritual element to it as well. And it can even be a religious element. And for some people Qigong was just an exercise routine that they did in the park. But for many people it had some kind of a spiritual or even a religious meaning.

So if you went to China in the 1980s and especially the 90s, you went to parks, there were hundreds of thousands of people, millions of people who were doing all kinds of crazy looking things like assaulting trees, hugging them, bouncing up and down, meditating sometimes. Doing things that looked a little bit like Tai chi but a little different perhaps.

These great Qigong masters rose up who began to teach people all of these techniques. Many of them drawing on old ideas. And increasingly as the 90s went on they began to issue moral tracts-- booklets-- that went along with the practice. It wasn't just that they were teaching you some kind of meditation technique, but also how to live a good life. How to live a proper life. How to live a moral life.

The most organized of these groups, the most militant of them, was Falun Gong which got into a confrontation with the government in 1999. And was then banned. And with it went-- almost all the Qigong groups got shut down around that time. A couple of the Qigong masters got arrested. Most of them just sort of vanished and went away. And a lot of Qigong seemed like it was gone.

But this is of course-- I can't prove this but-- certainly it's noticeable that after that you had a couple of things happening into the 2000s into our century. There was, I would say, a loosening of control over at least traditional religious life, but maybe across the board over religious life. More churches, mosques, and especially temples began to be constructed.

Some people hypothesize, in China, it makes some sense that the government realized that-- if this kind of spirituality had to come out somewhere, it's better that it comes out under the five official religions, than under this amorphous gray area movement like Qigong.

So as the 2000s progressed you saw more and more of the physical infrastructure of religion in China being rebuilt. To the point that-- and I think at the same time-- you had this growing angst and anxiety in Chinese society. That as China had been going through decades of economic reform-- we think of reform as something maybe easy or something that's not so painful-- but the reforms in China were really traumatic.

There were tens of millions of people who lost their factory jobs, the safe work that they had, especially in China's Northeast. You had people being dislocated. Farmers had great opportunities of course in this time. People went to the coast and found factory jobs. And the standard of living rose. And for many people, it was great. But it was also unsettling.

Traditional family structures were upended. People moved into these enormous expanding urban centers, that were anonymous and alienating for many people. With no family structure, no structure from village life. So people began to turn, partly at least, to religion and spiritual practices to give their lives a center of gravity. I think one of the most effective groups in this regard are the Protestant Churches. Which they missionize-- they go out and recruit young people who come into the big cities. And give them some kind of a ready-made community. But we see it also with other practices as well. Buddhism has imitated some of this structure as well. Daoism to a lesser degree. And then, at the same time, the government began to-- and this is quite significant and something that hadn't happened before-- it began to no longer consider most of this vast majority of Chinese traditional practice-- this folk religion, or popular religion-- it no longer considered it to be superstitious.

And this word, superstition, in describing these groups has almost died out. You really don't see that in newspapers anymore. You don't hear about fortunetellers being rolled up off the streets anymore like you did regularly in the 1990s, when I was working as a correspondent.

And on the contrary, the government has come up with what you could think of as an ingenious underhanded or sly kind of reform. There's some talk a few years ago that there might be a sixth religion, so Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, and a new religion-- folk religion.

But I think they decided this was too complicated. That this would open a can of worms. If you allowed a 6th religion then what about a seventh and eighth. And why couldn't the Hindus have their own group, or the Jews, or the Zoroastrians, or the Baha'i, or whatever. People would start applying and it would get out of control. So they kept with the five groups. But they just sort of redefined all of this stuff as traditional, cultural practice. traditional culture. So in my book I go to one temple and there are people with incense. And they're kowtowing before a statue. And I say to the local party official, who's sort of overseeing this, I said, when did this religious life resume? And I used the Chinese word for religion, this sort of sensitive word, [Inaudible] And he said, religion? This is not religion. This is just our traditional Chinese culture.

And this is something I heard constantly, [Inaudible] It's just Chinese traditional culture. And it's not religion. So of course you can call it what you want. If you want to call it culture, it's culture. And not only that, the government didn't just tolerate it as culture. The government began actively supporting some of this. It adopted a term from UNESCO, the United Nations Education Science Cultural Organization, based in Paris. UNESCO has these lists-- it has a list of tangible cultural things, like the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, or whatever. In China for about 20 or 30 years has had a fetish. We've got to have the most on this list because we're the longest continuous civilization. We must have the most cultural things on this list. Then UNESCO, some decades ago, came up with this term intangible cultural heritage, so music, dance, cuisine, these kind of things. And China has jumped onto this bandwagon as well.

So starting in the 2010s roughly, early 2010s, governments across the board-- national, provincial, city, district, county-- began designating groups as intangible cultural heritage. And there was almost an arms race on who could have the most intangible cultural heritage in their community. This is because, also, government officials were no longer just being judged on economic growth-- or the lack of protest, stability-- they were also being judged on promoting culture. So they began to seek out groups like this.

So you have roughly 10,000 groups across China that are now called intangible cultural heritage. And not all of this has a religious dimension. Some of this is just cuisine, or music, or dance. But some of the dance and the music is religiously based. And another one of the groups, in my book that I look at-- I look at five different groups in this book, there are five strands going through. One of them is a group of, what the government considers, to be folk musicians in Xinjiang province. They are musicians. And they do travel abroad on government stipends to go play music for people in concert halls. I took them to Germany once, for example. But they also are actually, in real life, back in the county, they are Daoist priests. And part of their priestly function is to play music. Maybe just like Bach played music. Bach wasn't a priest but it has a very strong religious dimension. They do mainly funerals, and temple fairs. They perform there. They do rituals there. And they're part of the whole thing. Now from the government's point of view, they're just a music group. But many groups are like that.

Another group that I look at are pilgrimage associations. These are groups of people who gather together to either go on pilgrimages or to help pilgrims. Some of these groups hand out food and drink, like tea or steamed buns, and things like that, to pilgrims as they ascend holy mountains. Other people perform on the holy mountains. They do martial arts and-- actually I'll just fast forward slightly here - like that.

This is at the [Inaudible] temple fair outside of Beijing. [Inaudible] is a famous holy mountain on the Western outskirts of Beijing. It has a historic pilgrimage there. The entire temple was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution down to the foundation stones. But it was rebuilt afterwards. And groups like this were declared.

The performing groups like this particular group is a national level, intangible cultural heritage group. The entire pilgrimage up the hill is an intangible cultural heritage. So they give money to help subsidize the whole 15 days worth of events.

And some people may say, well, this could be just a martial arts kind of carnival, right? Sometimes it's not always clear the division between commerce and religion in any culture, but also in China. But these groups, especially at [Inaudible], they-- oh, I have a pointer-- they go up to this temple, up there, in the left hand corner. And they first perform for the goddess. They light incense, they kowtow. They have a special-- each group has their own special oral prayer that they say-- this a secret thing that they say-- and then they perform for the goddess. So these guys do their stick fighting routine for the goddess. And then they come down here, to this area here, and perform for the public.

But when you go there-- and actually the [Inaudible] temple fair is on, right now. And when I go back to Beijing on Wednesday-- I'm going up on Friday, because it'll still be on to see it-- and these groups, this is also [Inaudible], they get government support. Because I think the government sees these groups as providing some kind of center of gravity in people's lives.

This searching for meaning in life, for values that are stronger than, just to get rich is glorious, and just economic growth. This is something that consumes Chinese people. It's a big debate in society about what does our-- what does China stand for? What are our shared values as a community?

People talk about this endlessly on social media. These are topics of discussion that are not really fully-- they're not really censored. Well they may be censored to some degree, but there's a fairly open debate and discussion about these issues. And I think the government sees that groups like this can provide some kind of moral framework for some people in society. Even if I go back here, for example, this is an unregistered church in Beijing. Sometimes these churches are called underground churches, or house churches.

These terms, I think, are slightly out of date because many of them are big. And this is just a small corner of the church on these services. There are hundreds of people who go. They have five services every Sunday. They are not house churches. They're not meeting in people's homes. In fact they bought a floor of an office building. And they're not underground because the government, the public security bureau, is not so inept that they don't know that this is going on.

In fact the group that I write about, it's very similar to this group. It's in Chengdu however. They have a policy of radical openness. If you join the church you have to give your real name, your telephone number, and you have to-- when you go to church-- you have to sign in. And on Monday when the local police officer comes by, they give him a list and say, here, these people attended church. And they video it. And the video is kept in a video library which is open to the public. So if you're a plain-clothed informant, missed church service on Sunday, you can always go and see what the sermon was. He's not preaching the overthrow of the Communist Party.

So the government though, I think, is not entirely happy with this religious revival. I think they see some groups, the so-called traditional groups of Buddhism, Daoism, and these folk practices, as being somewhat acceptable-- or being acceptable. And they see Christianity and Islam as being more problematic because of their overseas ties. And I think this is a real red line for pretty much anything in China. Whether it's an NGO or a religious group, if you get foreign money you're going to have problems. Some foreign aid, expertise, training or anything like that.

So these kind of churches often do not want foreign aid. Overseas Christians are often eager-- sometimes people even tell me, can I smuggle bibles into China? -- and I say, no. You don't need to smuggle bibles into China. There are plenty of bibles in China. You can buy bibles all over the place in China. And there's plenty of money in China. All of this stuff is self-generating.

These groups, for example, they are self-financing, self-organizing. They don't rely on foreign money or even really government money. They get a little bit of these groups get a little bit of government subsidy but it's not that important in their life.

So I think this is really increased under Xi Jinping, who has recognized that there is this problem. And has, to some degree, cloaked himself in the mantle of the supporter of Chinese traditional values and practices. And you can see this in propaganda campaigns around China. Some of the language that's used, especially the imagery, it draws on some of these older ideas.

And this is not of course a return. Nothing can return to where it was before. This is a recreation of spiritual life, I think. Going forward we will probably see more religious life-- an increase in religious life in China. But potentially also more tensions, because I think the government's-- in some ways it's trying to make use of groups like this. It thinks that it can instrumentalize them for its use, to show that it's a supporter of culture and traditional values. But historically if you look around the world these efforts to use religion for political ends sometimes backfire.

We tend to think of China as being-- that it will always be a very authoritarian state with very, very strong central government control. But 20, 30 years from now it's hard to say how China could develop. It could be that there's a weaker state. And some of these groups that are privileged could morph into more of an official religion. There could be more tensions with Christians. There's no inter-religious dialogue in China. These groups exist siloed from each other.

And, I think, also, maybe a broader issue is that all of these groups, no matter what they are, Buddhists, Daoists, folk religion, Christian or Muslim, religion brings with it the idea of higher values. A value that's higher than any government's program, or even a constitution, or something like that. I think these ideas in China, traditionally in many of these groups, call it heaven-- the idea of heaven and justice, some sort of also righteousness. And this is something that is a potential source of alternative values for a nascent civil society that could develop in China in the future.

Anyway, I know we have a lot we want to do, discussion and questions from you. So I'll stop here. Thanks very much for your time and we can continue.