

RELIGION - FAITH IN China –JULY 2010

4 UPDATES

Tony Blair Faith Foundation

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Today Peking University joins our Faith & Globalisation Initiative

Today Peking University has become the first Chinese University and the seventh in the world to partner with the Tony Blair Faith Foundation's Faith and Globalisation Initiative.

The Initiative is a global network of leading research universities committed to exploring the complex interrelationship of faith and globalisation. It aims to provide current and future leaders with the tools and analysis to understand the important role religion plays in the modern world.

The course at Peking University will offer students the opportunity to take part in a global discussion critically examining the role of faith, secularism and interfaith engagement in today's world.

Tony Blair spoke about the unique contribution Peking University can bring to this initiative: "I very much welcome the fresh outlook Peking University will offer with their world class teaching and research facilities and unique cultural perspective. In a country that is experiencing massive internal migrations and increasingly religious adherence, I welcome Peking University's groundbreaking efforts to address these issues by directly focusing on interfaith relations"

"This marks an important moment for Peking University as they demonstrate their eagerness to open up their University and forge links with their international counterparts. It is another example of China adapting to their place in a globalised world and a significant step forward for those trying to promote religious and cultural understanding in future leaders and policy makers."

The course means that Peking University will establish teaching links with leading research Universities spanning several continents. A quarter of the course will be taught alongside partner Universities including the National University of Singapore, Durham in the UK, Yale in the USA, Tecnológico de Monterrey in Mexico, McGill in Canada and the University of Western Australia.

In August Peking University students will strengthen some of these global links as a group of their students join with their counterparts in a faith and globalisation conference at the National University of Singapore to discuss their different perspectives on the question of the role of faith and globalisation. This will bring together students from the seven universities and is an opportunity for a genuine and in-depth exchange of ideas across different continents, faiths and nationalities.

Peking University will very quickly be taking the themes of the course beyond the University when alongside the Tony Blair Faith Foundation they will bring together policy makers, academics and business leaders for a co-sponsored discussion forum at the Beijing Forum 2010, under the general theme of “The Harmony of Civilisations and Prosperity for all – commitments and responsibilities for a better world”.

The Washington Post
Blog - On Faith

'Astonishing' growth of religion in China

By Tony Blair

My interest in China - her history, her people and her culture - began before I was British Prime Minister. During my time in office, I knew power was shifting East and sought to build strong relations with this fast moving new power.

Since then, I have got to know the country even better still. Today, I am a witness to a new revolution happening here; to the rapid modernization and the opening up of borders, culture and society both internally and externally. And whilst power is still shifting East, there is a fascination about what that means for China and for the rest of the world. I hope the new partnership my Faith Foundation is announcing with Peking University can, in some way, help to explain.

The Tony Blair Faith Foundation has been looking at the issues of faith and globalization for three years now. We've been working with some of the world's leading universities to define and debate these vital questions academically. We started at Yale University in the United States and now have a network of seven leading research institutes, stretching from Mexico to Australia.

I am delighted to be announcing in Beijing that Peking University is the newest member of this group. China's great wealth of academic, and other, talent is engaging and shaping our world as never before and Peking University holds an esteemed place in the international academic world. I believe the launch of this partnership signifies China's openness on many levels and willingness to reach out to other universities in a spirit of co-learning and enterprise and to contribute the best of its talent to an international consortium of academics and future leaders. The new course will focus on Western and Chinese doctrinal traditions -

looking at different faith traditions in different parts of the world, not just within the Chinese context. This is proof positive of China's outward-looking perspective. In the future the Peking University and Tony Blair Faith Foundation will co-sponsor a discussion event at the Beijing Forum 2010, under the general theme of "The Harmony of Civilisations and Prosperity for all - commitments and responsibilities for a better world."

One of the crucial questions for people of faith - and for those who are not - is how does interfaith dialogue impact on international policy-making? How does faith and dialogue motivate and influence decisions on a global scale?

Some in the West may find the idea of debating religion in China strange. They will cite, for example, that proselytising in public places in China remains forbidden. But few are aware that Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and Daoism are all officially recognized and almost one third of Chinese describing themselves as religious - an astonishing figure for an officially atheist country where religion was banned until three decades ago.

According to a 2006 survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, 31% of the Chinese public considers religion to be very or somewhat important in their lives, compared with only 11% who say religion is not at all important. When asked a somewhat different question in a 2005 Pew poll, an even greater percentage of the Chinese public (56%) considered religion to be very or somewhat important in their lives.

Indeed, the presence of more than 20 million Muslims, for example, places China among the top 20 countries in Muslim population size - almost equal to that of Saudi Arabia and nearly double that of all 27 European Union countries combined.

Cautious but clear liberalization of religious activity by China's government is starting to take place. The government is starting to realize the role religion can play in ordered, socially aware and successful capitalist enterprises. There is an increasing recognition that religion is a social good both in the sense of providing social cohesion and moral norms in a society troubled by massive economic migration and by healing the social impact of a rapidly developing capitalist economy. For example, as China urbanizes and millions of rural migrants experience the social and economic dislocation of travelling to new cities, Christianity can provide them with an instant, welcoming and familiar community.

I believe that as globalization pushes people together, understanding the role of faith becomes ever more important if we are to make the 21st Century a more peaceful and prosperous one for all the world's people than was the 20th Century. The new partnership between Peking University and my Faith Foundation gives us an opportunity to build the theory to make that practical experience of different faiths, cultures and ethnicities living together a reality globally, as it is in China.

* Tony Blair is Patron of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation: The Tony Blair Faith Foundation aims to promote respect and understanding about the world's major religions and show how

faith is a powerful force for good in the modern world:
<http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/>

NPR - National Public Radio, USA

China's Leaders Harness Folk Religion For Their Aims

by Louisa Lim

July 23, 2010

Listen to the Story: http://public.npr.org/anon.npr-mp3/npr/atc/2010/07/20100723_atc_13.mp3?dl=1

In China, folk religion has undergone a remarkable rebirth since the days of the Cultural Revolution four decades ago, when all religious worship was banned.

One example of a folk goddess that has gained an enormous following is Mazu, a sea deity believed to protect sailors and fishermen. Though she started as a local folk goddess, she has entered the Daoist and Buddhist pantheon, and is also known as Tianhou or Tinhau in Hong Kong.

Scholars say she has an estimated 160 million followers and 4,000 temples devoted solely to her in China.

The explosion of interest in this folk god reflects the results of a 2006 survey in China, which found that two-thirds of those who described themselves as religious were Buddhists, Daoists or worshippers of folk gods.

China's communist leaders once dismissed worship of deities such as Mazu as nothing more than superstition and banned it.

But far from mistrusting Mazu's millions of worshippers, China's atheist Communist Party is now encouraging them and overseeing massive events, such as the birthday celebration in early May this year at Mazu's birthplace, Meizhou Island in the southern Chinese province of Fujian.

*** The Birth And Growth Of Mazu Worship

Temples across the island participate in the celebration. On the night before Mazu's 1,050th birthday, the island's Mazu statues are getting spiffed up before the big day. In the Mazu temple in Wenxing village, an elderly woman carefully lowers garlands of red banknotes around the neck of a statue of Mazu.

Crowds of women clad in lucky red clothes kowtow to the altar, burning incense and murmuring appeals to Mazu's mercy.

Mazu was a real person; temple guardian Wei Yazhen tells her story.

"When Mazu was a little girl, her father and brothers went out fishing and got into trouble at sea. She dreamed she was carrying them to safety," Wei explains. "But then her mother woke her up and she dropped her father into the sea. Her father died, but she saved her two brothers."

There are many different versions of this story; in some, her father is saved and a brother dies. In any case, Mazu became known for her ability to predict stormy weather and protect fishermen. Her fame grew, even after her death.

In the 12th century, a Chinese emperor ordered a Mazu temple to be built after she was believed to have protected an official ship on a mission to Korea, and Mazu worship spread nationwide.

Cheng Jinhu is a doctor who helps organize celebrations in the island village.

"Mazu protects fishermen at sea from shipwrecks and helps the poor. Most of our village depends on fishing, and Mazu worship is growing stronger than in the past," Cheng says.

On the eve of Mazu's birthday, opera singers in elaborate silk costumes strut as their voices slip and slide along the scale, cutting through the hum of the crowd. They're performing local opera known as Putian in front of hand-painted backdrops in the village square.

It's a scene that could have taken place at any point in the past 500 years, were it not for electronic screens, displaying the opera lyrics.

In the changing room, 23-year-old Cheng Zhigui paints his face into a dramatic pink-and-white mask. He has been singing for a decade.

The fact that the entire village is watching doesn't faze him. In fact, the troupe isn't singing for mere mortals.

"We perform for Mazu," Cheng says. "We believe that she's watching us singing opera. The audience can also watch. But if there are no people here, she'll still be watching us."

*** Part Religious, Part Cultural, Part Political

Dawn breaks over smooth, windless seas on Mazu's birthday. In Wenxing, at 7 a.m., the entire village is up.

Worshippers carry the Mazu statue out of the village temple as a band plays folk instruments. A few children have been chosen to accompany the statue on its pilgrimage back to its mother temple elsewhere on the island. They're dressed in silk pajamas, their faces painted into traditional opera masks.

To shouts and fireworks, Mazu is hauled down the steps in front of temple and hefted into a truck, which drives her to the square in front of the main Mazu ancestral temple, where 10,000 people are gathered.

At one end of the square, Wenxing's Mazu takes pride of place, side by side with more than a dozen sister statues from each village's Mazu temple.

This year, old rites are being resurrected for the biggest ceremony in more than half a century, says Lin Jinbang, chairman of the island's main Mazu temple.

"We even have an honor guard of horses for the first time in more than six decades," he says. "Old people who've seen the ceremony before passed on the rituals. Otherwise, the next generation wouldn't know what to do."

Facing off at the other end of the square from the Mazu statues is a podium, where government officials from the Communist Party are seated. The ceremony is part political rally, part religious ceremony and part cultural event.

Even the island's top Communist Party official, the Meizhou party secretary, Zhuang Yonghui, admits to worshipping.

"Of course I believe in Mazu," he says, denying any contradiction with the communist creed of atheism. "Mazu's not a religion. It's a popular belief, so there's no contradiction with the Communist Party's stance on not believing in religion."

Women in elegant green robes dance in the square in perfectly timed unison. Such cultural performances are significant, since they are one factor that four years ago allowed the government to reclassify Mazu worship not as superstition — not even as religion — but as cultural heritage.

Last year, UNESCO, the U.N. agency that promotes preserving cultures, designated Mazu as "intangible cultural heritage of humanity."

Wang Hongguang, head of the Mazu Research Institute at Shanghai Institute for International Studies, explains that unlike Daoism and other religions, Mazu temples are not administered by monks. There is no organized mass or ritual that requires the spiritual leadership of a religious institution.

"The people who manage the temple are chosen by ordinary people," Wang says. "It's not like Christianity, where you have to go through a certain ceremony to become a believer. For Mazu, if you believe and attend activities, then you are a believer." By activities, he means occasional visits to the temple to light incense and make offerings, or the practice of keeping a Mazu shrine at home.

*** Mazu Worship Strengthening Cross-Strait Ties

Locals believe politics and economics are behind the government decision to classify Mazu worship as cultural heritage. These factors are embodied in the presence of Cheng Minshou, a beaming Taiwanese VIP guest wearing a gold sash and clutching a small golden statue of Mazu.

He says he traveled 14 hours to reach Meizhou Island "to bring a golden statue of Mazu from my hometown to participate in this ceremony."

Religious tourists like Cheng also bring investment to the island, and engender political ties across the Taiwan Strait.

"Taiwanese coming here on pilgrimage have really helped communication between mainland China and Taiwan," he agrees. "We've bought a small island near Macau, and we're building a Mazu temple there this year. It'll be finished by next year."

Mazu worship spread overseas as Chinese from coastal provinces migrated by sea, and they subsequently attributed their safe journeys to Mazu's protection.

After China's economic reforms began in 1979, Mazu worship spread further along trade routes, notes Lin Qitang, an expert on Mazu at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

"Businessmen from Fujian built Mazu temples wherever they went," Lin says. "Mazu temples were seen as offices where Fujian businessmen congregated. They also stored goods, traded and consulted each other there. So Mazu became a cohesive force."

Shared belief in Mazu was one of the forces bringing Taiwanese to the area, even when politics made that difficult. In 1987, when direct links were still forbidden, about 275 Taiwanese Mazu believers sailed across the Taiwan Strait to Meizhou on a pilgrimage, setting a trend in which religious believers have spearheaded contacts.

Mazu worship has served to build closer political and economic ties across the Taiwan Strait, strengthening China's eventual aim of reunification.

Lin, the Mazu expert, says that "Mazu fever in Taiwan brought business opportunities to the mainland. So the non-government interaction turned out to be government bilateral communication."

Recent figures show that in the past three months, 100,000 tourists have been to Meizhou, including 15 groups of Taiwanese every day.

*** Popular Religion A Tool For China's Leaders

After the government ceremony ends, a noisy daylong parade around the island begins. Mazu statues are carried in palanquins, accompanied by snapping firecrackers, pipe bands, whirling lion dancers and clashing cymbals.

As the parade passes, villagers clad in red hurry to tuck money into the statues. The children in the parade, like the Mazu statues, wear chains of banknotes round their necks.

As people get richer, money is one way in which Mazu worship is changing the social structure and the balance of power in the villages.

"Of course the temple chairman is more important than the village chief," says a villager surnamed Zheng. "Because the temple governs a larger area and makes decisions about temple fairs, which the village boss can't."

Women in costumes fashioned into multicolored boat costumes "row" past, swinging their oars and singing.

Religion is alive and well on Meizhou Island. What's more, it's reinvigorating both tradition and civil society.

And it is a sign of how far the Communist Party has moved. This atheist party is encouraging the worship of this ancient goddess toward its greater aims of building a harmonious society; and of moving closer to Taiwan — the island it thinks of as a renegade province.

That party members can openly worship could serve as a test-case for local deities in other places in China.

The Communist Party once regarded worshipping folk goddesses like Mazu as rank superstition. But now, she is a money-maker, co-opted and harnessed by local officials. Far from being banned, Mazu is being used by China's communist leaders for their own political and economic ends.

NPR - National Public Radio

In The Land Of Mao, A Rising Tide Of Christianity

by Louisa Lim

July 19, 2010

Listen to the Story: http://public.npr.org/anon.npr-mp3/npr/atc/2010/07/20100719_atc_05.mp3?dl=1

Official Chinese surveys now show that nearly one in three Chinese describe themselves as religious, an astonishing figure for an officially atheist country, where religion was banned until three decades ago.

The last 30 years of economic reform have seen an explosion of religious belief. China's government officially recognizes five religions: Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and Daoism. The biggest boom of all has been in Christianity, which the government has struggled to control.

One way it has tried to do that is by establishing government-sanctioned churches. In one such church in the east of the country, China's Protestant heartland, parishioners bow their heads as the pastor says grace. Hundreds are huddled around circular tables to eat lunch.

The official church is part of what's called the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the state-sanctioned Protestant organization. Three-Self refers to the strategy launched in the 1950s of removing foreign influences from Chinese churches — self-governance, self-support, self-propagation.

The church is marking husband-and-wife day, which is an annual celebration of faith and community. A thousand people each week from dozens of nearby villages pack into this church, situated about 300 miles from Shanghai.

Among them is Yao Hong, a 38-year-old woman in a maroon jacket who became a Christian almost two decades ago, seeking comfort after her husband at the time had an affair. She believes it's patriotic to be Christian.

"God is rising here in China," she says, gesturing around the cavernous church. "If you look at the U.S. or England, their gospel is very advanced. Their churches are rich, because God blesses them. So I pray for China."

In the past, she has left the village to work in Shanghai. She says her belief in Christ was a lifeline in the alien metropolis and her church acted as her family.

"Whether they know you or not, they treat you as a brother or sister," she says. "If you have troubles, they help out with money or material assistance or spiritual aid."

As China urbanizes and millions of rural migrants experience the social and economic dislocation of traveling to new cities, Christianity can provide them with an instant community.

Many believers sitting on the hard wooden benches of the village church are older. They tell stories of the rewards of faith and how prayer cured illnesses and ended beatings from husbands.

Pastor Ni is in charge of this church. (NPR agreed to withhold his full name to protect his identity.) He says there is total religious freedom in China, and he characterizes relations between state and the church as extremely good.

"The government never interferes with our internal affairs," he says. "There are no orders, no coercion. That doesn't exist and we get on well."

In this part of the country, every small village has at least one church, and each shows signs of being carefully tended. One has a door curtain made from a patchwork of rice sacks; another, a hand-sewn altar curtain, complete with a white appliqued cross.

Local ministers say that about 10 percent of the population in this part of China is Protestant, but all believe that the real figure may be much higher.

*** Gray Areas Governing Religion

No one knows exactly how many Christians there are among China's population of 1.3 billion. There are an estimated 21 million members of the government-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic movement, but nobody knows how many Protestants worship in unregistered house churches.

Some recent surveys have calculated there could be as many as 100 million Chinese Protestants. That would mean that China has more Christians than Communist Party members, which now number 75 million.

About 30 miles from Pastor Ni's church in a dusty country town, a group of women from another state-sanctioned congregation pray ahead of a public performance they have planned for the day. China's constitution protects freedom of religion, but proselytizing in public places is forbidden. However, the gray areas are growing ever greater, and these women are exploiting those blurred lines.

The women chat and laugh as they carefully apply their makeup. They're wearing traditional pink silk pajamas for the first act, with thick red down jackets on top. They set up on a noisy street, and their show opens with a folk dance. A woman dressed as an old man whips a woman in a donkey costume.

A crowd quickly gathers, mostly elderly people, bringing their own wooden stools with them.

The next skit hits the audience with Christian messages. Two women dressed up as husband and wife wear traditional big-head papier mache masks that engulf their entire heads. They argue, come to blows and ultimately are brought back together by finding God.

The troupe's show goes on for two hours. They sing traditional opera, adding Christian messages. They perform classical dances, swirling pink and white fans in unison. They even don black sequined jerseys and long black boots to groove to pop songs.

Wang Meizhen, the troupe's unofficial leader, says its members "use traditional art to bring in the non-believers."

"It's difficult for them to walk away. Then we include Christian messages. We want to bring them to God," says Wang, who converted to Christianity 10 years ago.

*** 'Boss Christians' And 'China's Jerusalem'

Not far off on a windswept hillside, an elderly caretaker gives a tour of an enormous, newly built church, complete with its own baptism pool. It's an example of how informal networks of rich urban Christians are helping the spread of rural Protestantism.

The church was built with funding donated by Christians from the coastal city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang province, about 500 miles away.

Wenzhou is known as "China's Jerusalem." It has more than 1,000 churches, and at least 12 percent of the population is Christian. It's also one of the richest cities in China, where private business is booming. These two factors form a recent trend: the Christian entrepreneur or — as they're called in Wenzhou — the "boss Christian."

The biggest of all the boss Christians is a man named Zheng Shengtao.

For him, finding riches was intertwined with finding God. His start in life was humble: delivering goods on a three-wheeled bike. Back then, private business was still banned, and in 1983 his attempts to make money landed him in jail.

"I stayed in prison for 69 days," Zheng says. "There was a charge of speculation and profiteering. I hadn't thought about Jesus much before. But I started to think about him all day long. It wasn't that I believed in him. I just prayed he would get me out as soon as possible."

The experience convinced him to become a devout Christian.

Despite his rocky start as an entrepreneur, Zheng flourished after private business became acceptable.

Now, he is a member of the provincial Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, an advisory body to the government, and director of the Wenzhou General Chamber of Commerce. He has been ranked by Forbes magazine as the 395th richest man in China, with assets estimated at more than \$400 million.

His consortium is called the Shenli Group, a name which translates literally as "God's power." It encompasses mining projects, real estate development and machinery.

Zheng believes that making money is literally doing God's work.

"We have to be the salt of the earth. We don't bribe officials to make money or make fake products or harm the customers' interests or evade tax. We don't think the wealth belongs to us. We're just like bank clerks. It's God who gives you the career and the wealth and asks you to manage them," he says.

Boss Christians like Zheng are literally invested in the current political system. So they are tolerated — welcomed even — in this part of China. But the fact that the economic elite are pouring resources into religious activism could be unsettling for China's atheist leaders.

*** Churches That Follow God, Not Government

One example is an unofficial church in an unmarked building in Wenzhou's suburbs where a steady stream of imported cars drops off worshipers for a prayer meeting on a weekday night.

"The state was trying to control us," says one worshiper, who asked not to be named, "so we set up our own church not to follow the government, but to follow the God of the Bible."

As the prayer meeting begins, a woman at the front of the room starts crying and praying into a microphone. Hundreds of people are kneeling on mats on the floor, wailing and rocking, tears dropping down their cheeks.

This is the new face of Christianity in China: the up-and-coming urban middle classes. Material needs met, they are now seeking spiritual comfort.

It's clearly a charismatic gathering, even though Christianity in China is supposed to be non-denominational. It's also technically illegal, since the prayer leader isn't approved by the state-sanctioned church and the church is unregistered.

Although leaders of some larger unofficial churches have been harassed and persecuted, the authorities largely turn a blind eye, unwilling — or perhaps unable — to deal with this explosion of faith.

Now, there is public discussion about whether these gatherings should be legitimized. Recently the state-run media has been running pieces featuring these "house churches," raising expectations they may be recognized.

Thomas Banchoff, director of Georgetown's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, has held discussions with officials from China's State Administration for Religious Affairs, or SARA.

"I understand there are quite a few different perspectives within China among the leadership about whether to accommodate these groups, whether to set strict limits and how to proceed," he says.

Officials from SARA refused repeated requests for interviews for this story.

*** Faithful Continue To Push Boundaries

Their powers to govern religion do, however, seem to be waning. That seems clear in a rural village in eastern China, where young people are openly trying to gain converts in defiance of the laws prohibiting proselytizing in public places.

They claim not to be aware of such laws. A crowd of villagers is listening, perched on tractors and low benches, their feet swimming in a sea of mud.

In a fiery sermon, one young missionary makes oblique references to rampant materialism, corruption and the immense wealth gap between rich and poor. It's a message that hits home in this hardscrabble part of China.

"In China, a lot of so-called atheists treat money as their God," storms the young man who is preaching to the gathered crowd. "But only in God's truth can you find real freedom."

China's Christians are pushing back the boundaries, and the authorities don't seem to know how to respond. Recent reports say some leaders of larger unofficial churches are harassed and persecuted and their congregations are prevented from meeting in their previous places of worship.

But in this rural part of China, these young missionaries are operating without hindrance.

After their performance, they climb into a trailer pulled by a tractor, which will take them to their next destination. They are intent on saving souls, one village at a time.

China's youth once trundled across the countryside spreading communism. Now, they're spreading God's word.

NPR - National Public Radio, USA

Chinese Turn To Religion To Fill A Spiritual Vacuum

by Louisa Lim

July 18, 2010

Alongside China's astonishing economic boom, an almost unnoticed religious boom has quietly been taking place.

In the country's first major survey on religious beliefs, conducted in 2006, 31.4 percent of about 4,500 people questioned described themselves as religious. That amounts to more than 300 million religious believers, an astonishing number in an officially atheist country, and three times higher than the last official estimate, which had largely remained unchanged for years.

The collapse of the communist ideology created a void that has left many Chinese staring into a spiritual vacuum, looking for a value system to counterbalance the rampant materialism that seems to govern life in China.

"Chinese people don't know what to believe in anymore," says Liu Zhongyu, a professor at East China Normal University in Shanghai, who conducted the survey. "And since the political atmosphere has relaxed, they turn to religion for comfort."

One young evangelical Christian missionary travels from rural village to village in the Protestant heartland in eastern China to proselytize. She attributed her own conversion to the overwhelming pressures of China's education system.

"In high school, I felt very depressed," said the bright-eyed young woman, who gave her name as Nicole. "I felt people had no direction, and I felt life was dry and boring. I felt the pressure of school was very high. God helped me and liberated me."

Although proselytizing is still illegal in China today, she and a group of friends are openly preaching in villages, without official interference. China has come a long way from the dark days of the Cultural Revolution, which ended in 1976, when all religious practice was banned, and monks and clergy were sent to prison or to perform hard labor.

Creating A 'Harmonious Society'

Since 2006, the position of China's government has been that religion can be a force for good toward the ultimate aim of creating a "harmonious society."

"What is important is that the work should be done on a legal basis," Ye Xiaowen, the official then in charge of religious affairs, told state-run Xinhua news agency in July 2006, in his first interview in a decade.

Ye, seen as a hardliner, was replaced by his deputy Wang Zuo'an in September 2009. The State Administration for Religious Affairs refused to comment for this series, and turned down repeated requests for interviews over an extended period of time.

China has a long history of peasant rebellions fueled by religious belief, and observers say the Communist government still views religion with caution, seeing it as a social issue and political issue which could affect social stability.

"It doesn't matter to the Chinese government whether you are a farmers' union, a Boy Scout troop, the Red Cross or the Catholic Church," says Sister Janet Carroll, a nun who has been active in China for decades. "If you gather people together, have authorities in place, financial means and some sort of organizational control over groups of people, the Chinese government wants to not only know about it, but also have a say about how it all functions."

To that end, after the communist revolution in 1949, the government recognized five official religions: Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Daoism and Islam. For each of them, associations were set up to supervise and monitor religious practice.

China adopted the religious policy of the Soviet Union, with a few adaptations, says the Rev. Michel Marcil, director of the U.S. Catholic China Bureau. "They had no idea of what a religious policy was," he says.

A group of young Christians preaches on the streets in a rural Chinese village. China's constitution protects freedom of religion, but prohibits proselytizing in public places.

But Marcil says conversations with Chinese religious affairs officials last year have led him to believe there could be policy changes.

"They said, 'We are now trying to find something which would be much more adapted to China and its present situation than what we took from Russia back in 1949,'" he says.

Spread Of Religion Beyond Government Control

Across China, religious belief has blossomed and flourished — far outpacing the government's framework to control it — with a profusion of charismatic movements and a revival in traditional Chinese religions. Two-thirds of those who described themselves as religious in the 2006 survey said they were Buddhists, Taoists or worshippers of folk gods such as the Dragon King or the God of Fortune.

Another popular goddess is Mazu, who is believed to protect sailors. Although she is included in the Daoist and Buddhist pantheons, she — and many other indigenous popular gods — fall outside China's five official religions. However, the worship of Mazu recently has been reclassified as "cultural heritage" rather than religious practice, making it acceptable even for Communist Party members.

Academics say that model is being used elsewhere in China for other indigenous folk religions.

There are also government attempts to support traditional Chinese practices such as ancestor worship, by changing the public holidays. In 2009, the government declared the Qingming Festival — the traditional day for sweeping graves — a public holiday for the first time, allowing much larger numbers of people to sweep their ancestral graves.

"Now the government supports us," says Shao Longshan, his cheeks still tear-stained after bowing deeply in front of the grave of his late wife, Zhu Jiefen at a cemetery on the outskirts of Shanghai, at the Qingming Festival in early April this year. "Not only does this let the people who are alive remember those who have gone, but [it allows us to] keep the Chinese traditions and culture."

The Chinese government has also given extra support to Buddhism in what scholars say is an attempt to counterbalance the explosion of Christian faith.

Faith Growing Among The Young

Another recent development is that increasing numbers of younger people are practicing religion. The 2006 survey showed 62 percent of religious believers are 39 and under.

This trend was evident at an unregistered meeting of Christians worshipping in a charismatic underground prayer meeting in the coastal city of Wenzhou, known as "China's Jerusalem." Many of the devout were young and obviously well-off. Such underground Christians have recently received surprisingly sympathetic coverage in the state-run media, raising hopes that their meetings may be legitimized.

One scholar, Liu Peng, from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences told the Global Times that "a huge gap" exists between the government's position on religion and Christians' needs.

"House churches also operate on a smaller scale, which means people's spiritual needs can be met more easily and they elect their own pastors. ... It's rather like the economic changes. When state-owned enterprises couldn't meet the public's needs, private businesses naturally appeared," he told the newspaper.

That link between belief and wealth is also apparent in the emergence of "boss Christians," or Christian entrepreneurs, in Wenzhou. Academics say they are helping the rapid spread of

Christianity in China by building churches elsewhere to spread the "Wenzhou brand" of Christianity.

There has already been a significant relaxation of the government's religious policies over the past decade. New regulations passed in 2005 allow religious groups to send members overseas for study and to publish religious literature, among other things.

For Catholics, this has led to many clergy being able to study in the U.S. and elsewhere. They are struggling with both the theory and practice of reconciling communities who have been divided for decades: the state-sanctioned church and underground communities loyal to the Holy See.

The economic boom also is having unforeseen consequences for China's Muslims, in particular its female imams, who report difficulty recruiting new imam candidates, due to the paltry salaries. China is the only place in the world that has a tradition of independent female mosques, with their own ahong, or imams, to lead prayers and teach the Quran to women. But older female ahong report that the economic opportunities offered elsewhere mean that few women are drawn to the profession.

Beijing Rethinking Its Stance?

On a wide range of religious issues, there's clearly pressure for change in China from the grassroots, and some observers have noticed a new responsiveness from the top down.

"This is not simply something from below, but it's being met from above in constructive ways as well," says Tom Banchoff, director of Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs.

His organization holds annual meetings with Chinese religious affairs officials. He says this new attitude is evidenced by "the fact there are centers for religious studies arising at universities around China with public support, the fact that there's now a discourse about the positive role that religion can play in Chinese society."

This does represent a change in attitude, but at the same time, many accounts are emerging from within China of leaders of larger unsanctioned religious groups being subject to official harassment and persecution, sometimes ending up in detention and even jail.

China's Communist leaders are, it appears, still struggling with how to deal with this unruly religious boom, and their cautious steps forward sometimes end up being counterbalanced by reflexive crackdowns at a local level

end