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**Autor:** Hetmanczyk, Philipp

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Philipp Hetmanczyk

# Party Ideology and the Changing Role of Religion: From “United Front” to “Intangible Cultural Heritage”

**Abstract:** In recent years, religious policy in China has faced an increasingly dynamic panorama of religious actors. The implementation of particular policies has proven to be at times pragmatic, at times incoherent and arbitrary. This may be interpreted as an intentional strategy that allows for a certain flexibility arbitrarily to tolerate or to suppress religious activities. At the same time, it can just as well be a result of institutional incoherence and incompetence. As this incoherence has the potential of endangering the legitimacy of religious politics, authorities resort to ideology as a means to solve these contradictions by integrating religion as a growing social factor, while still leaving space for flexible and sometimes inconsistent administration. The present paper shows that religious policy is framed into two directions: on the one hand, the inherited United Front approach is modified by a gradual revaluation of religion. On the other hand, what used to be labeled “superstition” is transformed into a resource for propagating cultural nationalism and patriotism.

**Keywords:** religious policy, CCP, legitimacy, ideology

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## 1 Introduction

The relationship to religious traditions has always been a particularly sensible issue for the CCP. In Party ideology<sup>1</sup> the dismissal of religion as *false consciousness* and as a carrier of *feudal* or *backward forces* has itself a long

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1 There is a considerable amount of publications dealing with religion in China from a Marxist perspective, issued e.g. by departments of religious studies. Although these academic discussions and the Party discourse on religion are not completely separated, but rather often influence each other, in this paper I will focus only on Party *ideology* in a narrow sense. I consider statements by Party officials and the process of their reception and systematization.



tradition.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to this official depreciation of religion in the Party's discourse, there has been in recent years a dynamic development of the religious field in the People's Republic of China.

According to official Party discourse, religion is a problem of a society's superstructure and is essentially generated by *class struggle*.<sup>3</sup> The establishment of a "socialist society" since 1949 should thus have eliminated the causes of religion as a social and historical phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> However, religion persisted throughout the founding years of the PRC, and neither the Great Leap Forward nor the Cultural Revolution managed to wipe it out completely.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, religion has grown exponentially since the party's departure from the radical Maoist attempt at forcefully eradicating religion from Chinese society.<sup>6</sup> This is true not only for the five acknowledged "religions" (Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism), but also for folk religions, popular beliefs and practices, which lie beyond the administrative categories and structures of the Party-state designed to keep the religious field under tight control.<sup>7</sup> As the number of religious believers continues to increase, the PRC's religious policy

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<sup>2</sup> These arguments are well documented in MacInnis 1972 and 1989.

<sup>3</sup> MacInnis 1989: 10.

<sup>4</sup> The CCP was rather quick in developing new theories of *class struggle* to explain various problems in the sphere of both economy and politics. Thus, the so-called "remnant classes" in collaboration with "external forces" were found responsible for the "temporary economic difficulties" after the Great Leap Forward (Young 1986: 42). While *class struggle* apparently was considered a phenomenon persisting even under the conditions of a Socialist society, *Document 19* (on this document see below) denies the further existence of the "class root" of religion: "With the evolution of class society, the most profound social roots of the existence and development of religion lay in the following factors: the helplessness of the people in the face of the blind forces alienating and controlling them in this kind of society; the despair of the workers in the face of the enormous misery generated by the oppressive social system; and in the need of the oppressor classes to use religion as an opiate and as an important and vital means in its control of the masses. In Socialist society, the class root of the existence of religion was virtually lost following the elimination of the oppressive system and its oppressor class." At the same time, the CCP admits that "since class struggle continues to exist within certain limits [...] the long term influence of religion among a part of the people in a Socialist society cannot be avoided". Cited after MacInnis 1989: 10.

<sup>5</sup> Goossaert/Palmer 2011: 164–165.

<sup>6</sup> Certainly, statistics on religion in China have to be treated cautiously, but several case studies prove that there is a vivid resurgence of religious traditions. This applies especially to Buddhism and Protestantism which both have high growth rates. See Overmyer 2003.

<sup>7</sup> "Religion" here refers to Chinese *zongjiao* 宗教 as a technical term of religious administration. It refers to all kinds of religious administration and other forms of interaction of both State and Party with religious institutions. However, in the context of ideological discourses on religion, the term *zongjiao* is sometimes also used in a broader sense.



has to deal with religion as a social and political phenomenon of growing importance.<sup>8</sup> If the Party wants to avoid endangering its own position by antagonizing a considerable part of the people which it claims to represent, it has to take into due account the issue of religion.<sup>9</sup> The CCP has reacted to this challenge with a rather complex religious policy, creating an administrative apparatus that promulgates rules and regulations to standardize not only religious practices, but also the handling of religious affairs.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these changes in rules and regulations, religious practices in fact have often been treated differently according to local authorities' varying degrees of tolerance and their interests. As a matter of fact, the foundation of religious policies is the *freedom of religious belief* (*zongjiao xinyang ziyou* 宗教信仰自由) as guaranteed by the PRC's constitution. Actual policy, however, is formulated in numerous documents, regulations, and drafts promulgated by the government. Yet, no national law on religious affairs exists so far. This means that not only are these documents and regulations subject to interpretation, but that implementation varies also depending on the different levels of administration. The result is a tripartition of the religious field in what Yang Fenggang calls the "red, gray and black markets of religion".<sup>11</sup> While the *red market* refers to the five official religions, the *black market* is described as the field of banned religious activity, which is considered criminal and illegal and is prosecuted. The *gray market* is the largest of them, predominantly including religious organizations assigned to one of the five official religions. In spite of their illegality, these organizations, e.g. the Catholic underground church or Protestant house churches, are tolerated.<sup>12</sup> The gray market also

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**8** The religious field has been strongly influenced by religious policies and their underlying ideology. At the same time, the religious field in the PRC is certainly not a mere product of a top down policy. Rather, the manifold forms in which it develops independently of the official discourse suggest a certain autonomy.

**9** This statement is not to be misunderstood: the religious policy of the PRC is not integrative in the sense of a *catch all* approach. On the contrary, it is highly exclusive: Tibet, Xinjiang, Protestant house churches, the Catholic underground church, Falun Gong etc. just gesture at the biggest religious conflicts the Party faces by different policies of exclusionism, either in religious or ethnic terms. Yet, many adherents of Daoism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam do not consider themselves part in these conflicts. It is in view of these tensions that the Party probably has a vital interest to prevent further conflicts between religious actors and the Party state. State support for Chinese Buddhism might be a case in point. See Laliberté 2011a.

**10** For a detailed account on changes and adaptations in the PRC's contemporary religious politics, see the contributions in *China heute* 2011.

**11** Yang 2006.

**12** David Shak's study on Protestant house churches demonstrates the degree of flexibility in handling official regulations. See Shak 2011.



covers practices which do not specifically appear under the label “religion”, but which are rather categorized as “culture” or “tradition”. These latter phenomena primarily refer to the vivid resurgence of religious traditions previously labeled as “feudal superstition” by the Party. As André Laliberté puts it, the five official religions only mark the institutional limits of the PRC’s religious policy, but they do not cover the manifold and complex ways of political and religious relations and interactions.<sup>13</sup>

However, there is good reason to assume that the Party is only partially interested in solving this problem at an institutional level. So far, the CCP has not considered as political options such scenarios as the systematization of religious policy through an overall liberalization, an overall restriction, or a consequent implementation of the *rule of law*.<sup>14</sup> Rather, it is plausible that the Party has an interest in preserving this vague state of its religious policy. Thus, the inconsistency characterizing the institutionalized religious policies can be regarded as an intentional way of pragmatically handling the challenges imposed by the demand for forms of religious activity other than those provided by the *red market* of official religion. As long as religious groups are not considered a security risk, officials tend to tolerate them, even if doing so conflicts with specific regulations. This strategy also leaves space for the Party to deal with religious affairs according to demands in society, either to promote religious activities, or to suppress them if necessary – a situation which would be hard to maintain if people could claim religious rights on the basis of a national law. Finally, this institutional inconsistency also attaches special importance to Party ideology.

It has been claimed that, especially since the beginning of the 1980’s, pragmatic rather than ideological considerations have guided the CCP’s stance towards religion.<sup>15</sup> Yet, this should not lead one to underestimate the role of ideology. In fact, the CCP’s self-conception as based on Marxist principles has not changed. Neither has the CCP abandoned its claim of approaching religion from a Marxist perspective as the key to solving the problematic relationship between religion and the Party.<sup>16</sup> Analyzing the role of Party ideology in the context of religious policy is of particular interest in light of the problem of *legitimacy*.<sup>17</sup> According to Heike Holbig, regime legitimacy in contemporary

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<sup>13</sup> Laliberté 2011b.

<sup>14</sup> Although the Party proclaims the handling of religious affairs *according to law* (*yifa lüxing zongjiao shiwu* 依法履行宗教事务) as an important goal in developing China’s religious policy, presently valid regulations do not have the status of a law.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Ng 2000.

<sup>16</sup> For a recent discussion on the relevance of Marxist views on Religion in China see Lü/Gong 2014.

<sup>17</sup> I use *legitimacy* in the Weberian sense of means of sustaining rule. See Weber 1976 [1922]: 122.



China depends less on the assessment of the Party's program and principles than "its capacity and efficiency in solving real social problems."<sup>18</sup> However, "[t]his trend, [...], does not at all mean, as some have falsely argued, that the role of ideology has been fading [...]"<sup>19</sup> The importance of ideology does not consist in producing "true" and "honest believers" with "deep-rooted convictions",<sup>20</sup> but rather in supporting the regime's legitimacy by providing a communicational "proof" of its institutional capacity and its ability to deal effectively with challenges and changes. In view of the high degree of inconsistency and arbitrariness in the official handling of religious practice and actors, legitimacy for religious policy rests to a great extent on its ideological framing.

However, there is another factor the Party has to consider in designing its religious policy: there is an obvious tension between the growing field of religious practice and the Party's theoretical perspective on "religion". In principle, the Party still has not abandoned the conviction that religion is a historical phenomenon which will sooner or later disappear. The so-called *Document 19*, published in March 1982, remains to the present day the Party's most elaborate statement on the problem of religion. It outlines the CCP's position towards religion and the basic principles of its religious policy. The Document marked the Party's break with the revolutionary era of Mao Zedong, when the same goal of wiping-out religion was meant to be achieved through the iconoclastic storms of the Cultural Revolution. Accordingly, *Document 19* highlights this new position by stressing that a future without religion will not be achieved through violence. Instead,

[o]nly after the gradual development of the Socialist, economic, cultural, scientific and technological enterprise and of a Socialist civilization with its own material and spiritual values, will the type of society and level of awareness that gave rise to the existence of religion gradually disappear.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the CCP still upholds a utopian outlook on a Socialist future, in which religion will have disappeared from history. Religion is identified as an interim

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<sup>18</sup> Holbig 2009: 45.

<sup>19</sup> Holbig 2009: 45.

<sup>20</sup> Holbig 2009: 40.

<sup>21</sup> See MacInnis 1989: 25. Aware that the disappearance of religion might take a rather long time, party officials stress the so called "long term character" of religion. Accordingly, Jiang Zemin stated in 1993 that the decline of religion might take even longer than the decline of class and nation, thus prolonging the existence of religion even into the era of communism. Yet, the idea that religion *will* disappear is still crucial. See Wang 2010: 98–99.



in history. Still, the extraordinary growth-rates of religious activities gesture toward what appears to be quite the opposite of a historical decline.

One could thus say that the highly dynamic religious field challenges both the capacities of religious policy and the Party's ideological standpoint on religion, leaving two tasks for ideological construction and framing. On the one hand, religious policy has to react pragmatically to the changing demands provoked by the vibrant development of religions. On the other hand, religion also persists as an ideological problem implied in the Marxist critique of religion and atheist teleology of history. Ideology thus has to allow for some flexibility allowing it to accommodate religion as a social and political factor of increasing importance. At the same time, the Party has both to preserve its firm grip on religion and to prevent its essentially atheist stance on religion from corroding.

As it is unlikely that the Party will break with its own tradition of Marxism-Maoism any time soon, ideological modifications in the context of the CCP's communication on religion seem to be unavoidable. These modifications can be regarded as an attempt to cope with the dilemma of the Party's struggle with its own tradition and the fact of a thriving religious field. It may appear counterintuitive that the Party sticks to an ideological framework for legitimizing its religious policy, which itself is the very reason for the numerous challenges the Party faces in handling religion. It is, after all, the Party's foundation in Marxist ideology which sets the limits that appear to provoke the obvious tensions with current religious developments. At the same time, it would be a mistake to regard the political handling of religion as a direct expression of ideology. China's religious policy is in many regards more flexible, incoherent, and arbitrary than the ideological discourse suggests. Therefore, I see ideology not primarily as the principle guideline to direct religious policy. To me, it rather seems an attempt at dealing with the problem of a religious policy which finds itself between the demands of leaving room for the growth of religious communities and not trimming too much the Party's possibilities for controlling and restricting religion. The way the Party integrates the question of religion into its ideological framework is crucial for its ability to design its religious policy.

The present paper is interested in how the CCP modifies its strategies to deal with religion, and how it intends to reflect religion into its ideological framework. In what follows I will focus on two concepts: first, the largest portion of the paper will be dedicated to the Party's United Front approach (*tongyi zhanxian* 统一战线) – still the basic ideological and political framework for the Party's stance on religious questions. Second, I will analyze the establishment of the terminology of "Intangible Cultural Heritage", which allows for transforming



practices hitherto labeled “superstition” into a resource of cultural nationalism and patriotism.

## 2 Religion, the United Front approach and its variants

Two institutions play a dominant role in managing religious affairs in China: the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) and the United Front Department (UFD). Although these are different institutions, they operate interdependently. While the RAB promulgates the guidelines and regulations of current religious policy, the UFD establishes relationships with religious groups and leaders in order to implement the policies propagated by the RAB. Nonetheless, the UFD is nothing but a practical manifestation of a vastly ideological approach towards religion.

After the establishment of the PRC, there was consensus among Party theoreticians that getting rid of religion would not be an easy task. Particularly famous is the view of Li Wei-han (李维汉), who in 1954 stressed the complexity of religion and the importance of handling it correctly. This position was expressed in his fivefold concept of religion. First of all, religion was thought of as a *long-term phenomenon* (*changqixing* 长期性) and, by virtue of its frequent international entanglements, as a potential problem of *imperialism* (*guojixing* 国际性). Another view characterized religion as a problem of social groups, regarding it a *mass phenomenon* (*qunzhongxing* 群众性), but also as an important factor for the identity of China’s national minorities, which defines religion as a problem of *nationality* (*minzuxing* 民族性). In sum, this led to the statement that “religion” is a *complex* (*fuzaxing* 复杂性) problem. Accordingly, “religion” was to be treated carefully; a firm control would be better than forceful attempts at an overall ban on religion, which would force it underground.<sup>22</sup> The conceptual framework for integrating religion into the CCP ideology and for justifying a political management of religion beyond mere suppression was the so-called *United Front* approach.

When it was institutionalized during the first years of the PRC, the United Front was not new. It had previously been applied in different situations during the Republican period, when it was referred to for justifying the cooperation with the Nationalist Party (GMD) or with various religious groups during the war against Japan.<sup>23</sup> In spite of its long history, this approach remains valid to the

<sup>22</sup> Gong/Wang 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Goossaert/Palmer 2011: 144–146.



present day, although it has undergone various modifications. In the context of the PRC, the United Front appeared as a tool to bring religious groups and leaders under Party supervision. In a mixture of incorporation and infiltration of religious groups by trained personnel, religious institutions would be reshaped according to the political goals of the CCP, i.e. loyalty to the Party above all. This goal should be realized on the basis of a straight top-down approach of streamlining religious institutions. In order to achieve this, acknowledged religions were required to set up national institutions. As a result, the five religions are represented by so-called “patriotic organizations” which are responsible for implementing the directives of religious policy among their own members. They further are expected to represent religious believers in the United Front, a function mirrored by their leaders’ participation in the Political Consultative Conference.<sup>24</sup>

Being part of the United Front, religious people become “productive forces in building up socialism”:

Socialist construction in our country being a herculean task, we must rally all those that can be rallied in a united effort to build it into a powerful, great socialist state. [...]. The United Front has two allies, who are also present as regards the United Front in religious circles. The broad mass of working people among the believers are the first ally, forming the cornerstone of our United Front in religious circles. The sacred functionaries or professional religionists in religious circles and a portion of non-working people among the believers – chiefly the middle and upper reaches of the democratic patriotic elements – represent our second ally, and are the major objectives of our United Front work in religious circles.<sup>25</sup>

Although the early version of the United Front approach allowed for an overall critical position toward religion, it was still integrative in practice. In 1940 Mao Zedong said:

Communists may form an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal United Front for political action with certain idealists and even with “religious followers”, but we can never approve of their idealism or religious doctrines.<sup>26</sup>

The United Front approach was based on the idea that an integration of religion would be possible on a practical level only under the condition that religion was cleared of its *feudal* and *capitalist/imperialist* elements. The concept of the United Front thus was based (and is still based) on a differentiation of religion.

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<sup>24</sup> Daiber 2008.

<sup>25</sup> See “Doc. 38. Chang Chi-yi: Atheists and Theists Can Cooperate Politically and Travel the Road of Socialism (1958)”, Quoted in MacInnis 1972: 106.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in MacInnis 1972: 12.



On the one hand, the CCP acknowledges elements of religion which it regards as compatible with its progressive self-conception as a political force developing China into a socialist society. On the other, there are forms of religion which stand against the United Front. In this regard, the United Front approach can be seen as the continuation of the earlier project of modernizing Chinese religions by removing certain undesirable elements from it.

During the Republican era in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century religious policy was based on the introduction of two crucial concepts. The first one was a concept of “religion” which, as Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer formulated it, was modeled after a post-reformation “system of doctrine organized as a church separated from society.”<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, “religion” was first associated with Christianity and its apparently constitutive requisites like a holy scripture, a systematic theology, or an ecclesiastical institution with a clerical apparatus. This model of religion was introduced at a time in which China was already attempting to restructure and modernize both society and state. In this context, “religion” was seen as a potential source of civic development. This in turn led to a selective approach on the part of the authorities, which deliberately neglected to include in this newly formed model those believers and those traditions, which were considered as a deterrent to the modernizing process. Instead, such traditions were purposely dubbed as “superstitions” (*mixin* 迷信), a concept, which dated back to the Republican era. What fell under this category came to be considered as unscientific, irrational, and associated to the activities performed by “swindlers”, such as shamans, magicians, exorcists, *Feng Shui* practitioners, divination masters and physiognomy experts.<sup>28</sup> Thus, while “religion” came to function as the parameter to judge which groups, practices and beliefs should be considered as rational and orderly, “superstition” came to indicate those aspects of the Chinese religious field, which failed to qualify for the new model of “religion” and which should therefore be wiped out through education, reform, and administrative measures. A direct outcome of this state-led re-categorization of the religious field was the official acknowledgment of the five official “religions” – Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, Protestantism and Catholicism. These would have to be organized into representative institutions called Patriotic Organizations. Although this development has its roots in the Republican era, it was only accomplished after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. As previously mentioned, in addition to the five officially sanctioned religions, the official nomenclature provided the largely undefined realm of traditions, which ranged from local temple cults and Confucian rituals

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<sup>27</sup> Goossaert/Palmer 2011: 50.

<sup>28</sup> Nedostup 2009: 6–10.



(like ancestor worship) to traditional cosmology and which were all merged into the broad category of “superstition”.

With the establishment of these classifications during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such terms made their way into the CCP’s official rhetoric on religion, although their usage in the Marxist context was slightly different. According to the earliest Marxist critiques of religion in the CCP, Christianity was considered as closely tied to imperialism, Buddhism as the worship of false idols, and religious beliefs in general were regarded as perpetuating factors of “superstition”. Thus, the CCP’s approach to “religion” was more radical than the one featured by GMD authorities; in fact, it did not only entail a critique of “superstition”, but it equally implied a fundamental critique of “religion” itself. Both “superstition” and “religion” were deemed as backward. This attitude was directly related to the socialist conception of history introduced by Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), who was among the most influential historians of 20<sup>th</sup> century China. In his “Studies on ancient Chinese society”, Guo adopted the five stages model outlined by Marx in his “Introduction to the critique of political economy”, which ranges from *primitive communism*, *ancient slavery*, *feudalism*, *capitalism*, and *socialism*. When, in 1938, this conception of history became the official historiographical framework in the Soviet Union, Guo Moruo’s historical writings became the benchmark of historical analysis in China. When historiography came under control of the Party-state after 1949, Guo Moruo’s version of Chinese history eventually gained official approval.<sup>29</sup> In this new official framework the imperial period was identified with *feudalism*, whereas China’s capitalist phase came to be associated with the imperialist forces provoking its eventual downfall.

As a result, the terminology applied in the context of the United Front is fourfold. Fundamental is the “religion”/“superstition” divide, which continues the policy of the Republican era. During the Republic “religion” was separated from “superstition”, a category including mantic techniques, geomancy, spirit writing, or fortune telling. Additionally, CCP historiography provides the specific concept of “feudalism” and “imperialism” which it applies to what it identifies as “religion” and “superstition” respectively. “Feudal” developed into a general term referring to aspects of social life, which were considered unfit for the CCP’s vision of a modern China. In terms of religion, this specifically included Confucianism, which was strongly associated with the political system of the empire. Thus, the label “feudal” was used for practices such as the ancestors’ cult. Generally speaking, it applied to those religious practices and institutions, which were structured in analogy to imperial institutions, e.g. the so-called local

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<sup>29</sup> Dirlik 1985: 208.



religions of China and their veneration of local gods. These were imagined as a part of a celestial hierarchy extending from lower-level officials up to the Jade Emperor. This hierarchy clearly parallels the administrative organization of the empire and thus exemplifies a phenomenon which Stephan Feuchtwang termed the “imperial metaphor”.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the term “feudal” also refers to the aspect of land ownership, a problem that specifically affected Buddhist and Daoist monasteries and their former land holdings.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, the second term, “imperialism”, was primarily associated with the “West”. Notwithstanding the association of capitalism and modernity, the “West” from a historically advanced Socialist perspective was also considered “backwards”. Accordingly, Catholicism and Protestantism were seen as religions with ties to Europe or the United States, and therefore as potential loopholes for Western capitalist interference in China.

While separating “religion” and “superstition” is a goal of the PRC’s religious policy, the United Front deals specifically with purifying “religion” of backward elements: *feudal*, but also *capitalist* and *imperialist forces*. In other words, while the separation from “superstition” is an older task to make “religion” compatible with *modernity*, the United Front approach goes one step further, with the goal of making “religion” compatible with Socialism. Thus, the United Front approach appears as the attempt to reach a compromise between a general hostility against religion and a toleration of it. The United Front presents “religion” as a platform of feudalism and imperialism, while at the same time including “religion” in the revolutionary project of building up a socialist society through reform. However, although flexible, the United Front had its limits. In fact, it turned out to be too limitative for the adherents of radical Maoism, especially during the Cultural Revolution, when it was a common conviction that religion should be wiped out *tout court*. During this time the United Front approach was given up, and even the Patriotic Organizations and their administrators – the RAB and the UFD – were dubbed as “revisionists”. Consequently, the five characteristics of religion were changed to *reactionary* (*fandongxing* 反动性), *empty* (*xuweixing* 虚伪性), *deceitful* (*qipianxing* 欺骗性), *class-specific* (*jiejixing* 阶级性), and *backward* (*luohouxing* 落后性).<sup>32</sup>

In the long run, the abandoning of the United Front was an exception. With the radical shift towards the opening-up reforms in 1978, the CCP’s ideological stance towards religion and the institutional handling of religious affairs came, once more, under negotiation. *Document 19* reestablished the United Front and

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<sup>30</sup> Feuchtwang 2001.

<sup>31</sup> See MacInnis 1972: 162–163.

<sup>32</sup> Gentz 2012: 68.



its respective institutions on the political level. It also turned back to the fivefold character of religion. By stressing the latter's long-term quality, the question of how to adapt religion to the country's socialist framework became relevant again. This seemed necessary since the Cultural Revolution neither put a definitive end to religious activity nor did it succeed in completely stifling popular interest towards religion. Instead, a religious revival followed the opening up reforms, with the number of religious believers increasing rapidly. This development pushed the United Front to its limits. The crucial issue now was to find a way how the United Front, originally designed as an interim solution to integrate religion as a decreasing rudiment of history, could deal with the growing social significance of religion. Ever since, there were attempts of expanding the United Front approach by emphasizing the positive aspects of religion.

## 2.1 Opium, adaption and harmony

The time of the re-establishment of the United Front marks the beginning of an important debate, which went beyond the original ideological framework of the United Front. The debate was primarily academic in nature and was subsequently dubbed *Opium Debate* or *Opium War*. It all started with a conference in Kunming in the year 1979, during which the outline for future research on religion in China was heavily discussed. The conference was the first of its kind and stood to represent the resumption of scientific research on religion after the tumultuous decade of the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, it created the conditions for the establishment of two journals: the first one was *Studies in World Religions* (*Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究), published by the Academy of Social Science in Beijing, and the second was *Religion* (*Zongjiao* 宗教), published by the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Nanjing.<sup>33</sup>

Joachim Gentz has shown in a recent study that it was precisely these two journals which shaped the public discourse on religion during the Opium Debate.<sup>34</sup> This is interesting since the journals actually held very different perspectives. In fact, while *The Studies in World Religions* can be described as a government-leaning publication with a more conservative Marxist perspective, the Nanjing based journal *Religion* due to the theological profile of its home-institution has a more sympathetic position toward religion. One extremely important declaration in the debate was published in this latter journal. It called for a new interpretation of the Marxist theory of religion. Since the saying that

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<sup>33</sup> Gentz 2012. See also Yang 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Gentz 2012.



“Religion is the opium of the people” constituted the basis of the Marxist theory on religion, any re-interpretation of religion meant a new interpretation of the opium statement. Up to then, Marx’ statement was understood from a Leninist perspective comparing religion and its effect on the people to *opium*, thus hinting at its potential of confusing and befogging the human mind.<sup>35</sup> Contrary to this, the new interpretation stressed the “positive” function of opium as a painkiller, giving it a positive turn, by implying that people would be in need of opium, for at least as long as the economic base will produce hardships. This position brought about the option of a positive evaluation of religion on the long way to establishing communism. In the following years, this position was also adopted by some of the authors of the *Journal for the Studies in World Religions*.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, since approximately the end of the 80s, research on religion experienced a move towards a more differentiated perspective: if the term “opium” was applied at all, it was either with a reference to its twofold quality – of both a “clouding agent” and a “pain reliever” – or to emphasize that it could be understood in different ways.<sup>37</sup>

However, it took some time for this academic trend to become integrated into official Party discourse. *Document 19* still describes the connection between opium and religion as a means to justify class difference and exploitation.<sup>38</sup> Although the liberal position toward the opium statement had been well established in intellectual and political debates prior to 2003, the Leninist understanding of the dictum was not explicitly questioned in Party discourse even once. The first change occurred when the General Secretary of the CCP at the time, Jiang Zemin, acknowledged the “dual character” (*liangzhongxing* 两重性) of religion and listed among its positive factors social order and stability, philanthropy, and emotional and psychological stability of the masses.<sup>39</sup> In 2003, it was Ye Xiaowen, former head of the RAB, who declared that Lenin’s perspective on religion was correct in its own time, but that further adherence to it in the current era would be insufficient for the adequate development of the Marxist understanding of religion. This statement was published in the Party journal *Hongqi*.

Lenin applied the Marxist understanding of religion and associated it with the situation of the Russian Revolution back then, when he formulated the *Attitude of the Worker’s Party to Religion* [italics by P.H.]. Although the later Socialist nations basically implemented these

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<sup>35</sup> Lenin 1962: 405.

<sup>36</sup> Gentz 2012: 59–63.

<sup>37</sup> Gentz 2012: 64–65.

<sup>38</sup> See FN3.

<sup>39</sup> Goossaert/Palmer 2011: 327.



principles and gained precious experience, the mistakes in handling the religious question were also numerous since the Marxist perspective on religion could not be modernized, [...].<sup>40</sup>

In the following years, Ye further systematized this position. According to Ye, Lenin's understanding of Marx's opium view should be seen in the context of the October Revolution. Thus, with the change of the historical context and the realization of a Socialist state in China, the understanding of religion's dual character should become more important. Religion therefore should not only be seen as the clouding poison of the exploiting classes, but also as a positive force for the mobilization and wellbeing of the "religious masses".<sup>41</sup> This process of adopting and formulating new ways of interpreting Marx' opium metaphor advanced in three steps. First, religion was ascribed positive functions, such as contributing to individuals' psychological and emotional wellbeing. Second, Lenin's view on religion was downgraded as being insufficient; third, the reading of "opium" as a painkiller, associated with the positive functions of religion was finally acknowledged.

The Party had already acknowledged more positive functions to religion even prior to the rather late Opium Debate. In fact, such discussions were already taking place in the earliest United Front approach, which declared religious believers to be productive forces for building up Socialism in China. This is, to a certain degree, a first subtle but important modification of the CCP's ideological framework. In fact, the Opium Debate shows how certain aspects of the Party's ideological framework were left out in order to be able to adopt a more open stance toward the concept of "religion". The crucial difference is that whereas, in the context of the United Front, religion was considered a vehicle of backward and harmful forces, which could only contribute positively to the society's development after being purged by the political vanguard of the Socialist state, the new emphasis on the consolatory aspect of the opium metaphor made it possible to attribute to religion a positive dimension – as a political tool eventually opposing feudalism or imperialism. At the same time, this idea also served the purpose of legitimizing tight surveillance of religion on part of state institutions, all by leaving ample room for an increasing development of religious activities in society, even outside the immediate reach of state control.

However, the Opium Debate was not the only attempt to modify the United Front approach. During the 1990's, Jiang Zemin associated religion's positive potential with three other concepts. These were "the positive guidance"

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<sup>40</sup> Ye 2003: 13.

<sup>41</sup> Ye 2007: 18.



(*jiji yindao* 积极引导) (of the Party), the “administration of religious affairs according to law” (*yifa guanli zongjiao shiwu* 依法管理宗教事务), and the “freedom of religious belief” (*guanche zongjiao xinyang ziyou* 贯彻宗教信仰自由). This cooperative approach of emphasizing the guiding role of the Party in order to receive more reliability in the handling of religious affairs has been termed “mutual adaption” (*xiang shiying* 相适应). Just like in the case of the United Front concept, such aspects were not new in the Party’s communication on religion; in fact, as single phrases, they had previously appeared in the Party’s communicative repertoire. However, now these concepts were systematically correlated and eventually leading to the framework of a *Socialist Theory of Religion* promoted by the RAB and published in 2003. Here, the newly-established concept of the dual character of religion, drawing on the new interpretation of the opium maxim, also gained a foothold.<sup>42</sup>

This systematization yields a more complete picture of the integration of religion into the ideological framework of the CCP from the 1980s onwards. This process began with the return to the “five characteristics” putting special emphasis on religion as a “long term phenomenon”. In the course of this development, the opium dictum lost its original importance while the alleged process of “mutual adaption” gained recognition. According to this idea, under the guidance of the Party the negative aspects of religion would be filtered out by the “lawful administration of religious affairs”, while religion’s positive potential providing wellbeing and stability would unfold for the benefit of society. This process stands as the ideological precondition for what André Laliberté describes as the Party’s acceptance of “the intervention of religious institutions outside of the sphere of religious affairs in a strict sense.”<sup>43</sup>

The slogan of the *Harmonious Society* introduced during the Hu Jintao era underscored yet another positive potential of religion by a particular stress on religious groups as “agents” of charity and social work.<sup>44</sup>

## 2.2 Intangible cultural heritage

Having completed this brief overview of the development of the CCP’s ideological treatment of religion I will next focus on a terminological innovation that has become influential only recently. In what follows, I focus on the terms “popular beliefs” or “folk beliefs” (*minjian xinyang* 民间信仰) on the one hand, and

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<sup>42</sup> Ye 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Laliberté 2011b: 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ye 2007.



“Intangible Cultural Heritage” (*fei wuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物质文化遗产) on the other. “Intangible Cultural Heritage” is a label promoted by the UNESCO since 2003. The declared aim is to “maintain cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization.”<sup>45</sup> A part of its definition states:

Intangible Cultural Heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.<sup>46</sup>

The convention was ratified by China in 2004 and has been embraced by officials thereafter.<sup>47</sup> Since the creation of this label, several temples and temple festivals were recognized as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage”, which should be preserved and supported.<sup>48</sup> This applies, among others, to festivals and temples dedicated to Mazu and to the City God. However, current research discovered several other examples such as the Double Seven Festival (*qiqiao* 乞巧), which had previously been charged with promoting “superstition” in the 1930’s, but was then labeled as “Intangible Cultural Heritage” in 2006.<sup>49</sup> This is especially important, considering that local traditions were previously devaluated as “feudal superstition”. This also means that the terminology of “Intangible Cultural Heritage” transcends the established “religion”/“superstition” divide.

The interference of the categories of “religion” and “superstition” can be observed with yet another term. It was rather early that Chinese academic research on religion gave up the term “superstition”, speaking of “folk beliefs” or “popular beliefs” instead.<sup>50</sup> Recently, this term has become part of the administrative language leading to expressions such as “administrative measures for the registration of places of popular belief” like in *Hunan sheng minjian xinyang huodong changsuo dengji guanli banfa* 湖南省民间信仰活动场所登记管理办法, an official document issued in the province of Hunan in 2009.<sup>51</sup> It parallels the national “Measures for the registration and construction allowance for religious venues” (*zongjiao huodong changsuo sheli shenpi he dengji banfa* 宗教活动场所设立审批和登记办法), which lists the rules in place for assembly sites of the official religions such as Buddhist temples, churches, mosques etc.

<sup>45</sup> See UNESCO 2014: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00022#art2>

<sup>46</sup> See UNESCO 2014: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00022#art2>

<sup>47</sup> See Zhou 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Goossaert/Palmer 2011: 343.

<sup>49</sup> See Poon/Wong 2011. For further case studies see for example Liang 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Goossaert/Palmer 2011: 342–343; 346–347.

<sup>51</sup> See “Verwaltungsmaßnahmen zur Registrierung volksreligiöser Versammlungsstätten in der Provinz Hunan“, quoted in China heute 2011: 87.



In the document on “regulations for places for folk belief” the category of “superstition” is still present. It refers to practices like “exorcising demons” (*qubing gangui* 驱病赶鬼), “shamanistic healing sessions” (*tiaoshen fangyin* 跳神放阴), or “mass delusion” (*yaoyan huozhong* 妖言惑众).<sup>52</sup> The document further states that as long as they do not host “superstitious” practices, the temples with “historical and cultural value” can apply to be registered as “acknowledged sites for popular belief”. Although those temples do not fall under the category of “religion”, they are now set apart from “superstition”, a category to which they had belonged previously, even if tolerated by the authorities. Thus, “folk belief” can be understood as a third category set between “religion” and “superstition”. Upgrading these traditions from the level of “superstition” to “culture” these developments illustrate a tendency towards legal acknowledgment of activities vilified before.

Labels such as “folk beliefs” and “Intangible Cultural Heritage” offer new possibilities for recognizing religious practices, which thus become part of the so-called *gray market of religion*; furthermore, the designation of religious traditions as “cultural heritage” also opens up new options for ideological framing. Although there are numerous examples in which folk religion can be practiced under the official recognition of “popular belief” or “Intangible Cultural Heritage”, the respective practices at the same time are still clearly distinguished from the category of “religion”. This, on one side, creates a leeway for flexible handling and on the other side integrates the popular religion into the CCP’s ideological framework by turning it into a resource for cultural nationalism and patriotism. Through its inclusion into China’s “cultural heritage”, popular religion actually becomes part of the imaginary cultural China as defined by the CCP. The continuity implied by the term “cultural heritage” bridges the historiographical gap by which the CCP once banned popular beliefs and traditions, bringing them back into a shared realm of Chinese culture. This move connects the concept of “cultural heritage” with another strain of CCP ideology: It is obvious that the terminology of “cultural heritage” fits all too well into the CCP’s discourse on nationalism, patriotism, or Chinese identity,<sup>53</sup> a discourse which in recent years relied heavily on references to Confucian terminologies as well as classical culture and tradition. As Sébastien Billioud argues:

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<sup>52</sup> China heute 2011: 87.

<sup>53</sup> Caroline Bodolek puts it as follows: “This [the implementation of the 2003 Convention] is not only to show the world that China holds important cultural resources, but also to strengthen the notion of unity and national culture within its own society.” See Bodolek 2013: 261.



In certain domains, such as culture and education, a turning point nevertheless appears to have been reached whereby classical culture and popular traditions once again enjoy a place of honour or are being reinvented and students are encouraged to take an interest in them; the regime seems to have entered a new period of careful and critical reassessment of “traditional culture” in designating elements compatible with the socialist legacy.<sup>54</sup>

The appraisal of religious “culture” is not an entirely new tendency. After the opening-up reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping, “culture” became an important term in the academic and political discourse on religion. After the Cultural Revolution, to speak of “culture” was no longer a taboo, and in a general tendency of liberalizing the issue of religion, the term “culture” offered new options to approach religion. Studied as a cultural phenomenon, the “ideological incorrectness” of religion became a secondary issue.<sup>55</sup> This conclusion by Yang Fenggang might also apply to the outlined possibility of transforming “superstition” to “Intangible Cultural Heritage” – with the difference that, this time, “culture” is not restrained to the category of “religion”, but aims at its counterpart “superstition”.

### 3 Conclusion

Far more telling than the way in which religion is managed in China is the gradual integration of religion into the Party’s ideological constructions, a process which best exemplifies the relationship between the Party and China’s religious traditions. As a whole it appears to be a sensible indicator in regards to both the Party’s limits and flexibility in dealing with the issue of religion.

This paper started from the assumption that China’s religious policy has to deal with an increasingly dynamic field of religious activities, and that the regulations in place to administer it are at times pragmatic and at other times incoherent and arbitrary. While this is to some extent related to institutional incapacity, it also seems to be a purposely adopted strategy, on part of the authorities responsible for religious policies. In fact, by leaving a certain degree of vagueness, authorities are able to maneuver to their own advantage and either to tolerate or to suppress religious activity, according to the current political tide and the current positioning towards specific religious groups. Since, in the long run, institutional incoherence could lead to a legitimacy problem, with the religious field situated out of the control of the Party-state,

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<sup>54</sup> Billioud 2007: 64.

<sup>55</sup> Yang 2012: 54–56.



there are ideological attempts to cope with this problem. That is, ideology not understood as a guiding principle for the religious policy apparatus or for religious believers, but as a framework to integrate and harmonize incoherencies and deviations. Thus, the challenge is to create a framework which allows for sufficient space for the vibrant religious field to grow, while remaining within the limits of the CCP's claim to handle the religious question from a Marxist perspective.

As shown, the construction of such a framework was based on two distinct solutions. The first was to modify the United Front approach by a gradual emphasis on positive evaluations of religion. The second was the transformation of the term "superstition" into a resource to be tapped for cultural nationalism and patriotism. This article has attempted to show that the aim was to create a practical and ideological space able to integrate new forms of religious activity, while at the same time keeping firm control on the Party's right to define "religion" and its specific position in the Chinese-Marxist taxonomy.

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