Nourishing the Spirit: Social Change and Spiritual Development in China Today

On February 12 and 13, 2001 a diverse group of scholars gathered at the University of San Francisco to explore the tumultuous changes in China today and the human crises generated by these upheavals. The colloquium was convened by Dr. Xiaoxin Wu, director of the Ricci Institute. Its goal was a cross-disciplinary examination of the impact of social modernization on the struggle for life meaning in China today.

Colloquium participants were united not by similar academic perspective but by shared interest in the spiritual development of people in China. Discussions were structured to take special advantage of the diverse disciplines and cross-cultural heritages of the invited members. Eight China-born scholars joined nine colleagues from North America. Of these participants, six are social scientists, seven are theologians or religion scholars, and four are educators whose scholarly interest focuses on China.

In his keynote address, Dr. Richard P. Madsen, professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego, describes moral situations that confront four segments of contemporary Chinese society. Dr. Fenggang Yang, department of sociology at the University of Southern Maine, identifies spiritual aspirations of three distinct generations in China. Dr. Lizhu Fan, department of sociology at Fudan University in Shanghai, reports on research among workers in the newly industrialized city of Shenzhen. Dr. Diane Obenchain, Caspersen School of Graduate Studies at Drew University, examines the recent development of academic programs of Religious Studies in China. Dr. Zongkun Liu, visiting scholar at the Graduate Theological Union/Berkeley, reflects on Protestant Christianity's presence in China today.

Dr. Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and Dr. James D. Whitehead, distinguished fellows of the EDS-Stewart Chair for Chinese-Western Cultural History at the USF Ricci Institute, chaired the colloquium sessions and subsequently prepared abridged versions of the papers.

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Social Change and Spiritual Development in China Today

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China has been proceeding through a wrenching new phase in its modernization process. While many important legacies of the socialist era endure, the state does not loom as large in Chinese people’s lives as it once did. Looming ever larger are the exciting new opportunities and terrifying new pressures of a global market economy and the models of aspiration conveyed by a global popular culture. These processes of globalization affect most people in China, at least indirectly, but they affect them in very different ways. The intersection of these forces produces a crazy-quilt pattern of diverse moral situations. Each situation is characterized by a set of different constraints and different possibilities for emancipation. Individuals within each situation face different kinds of spiritual challenges. Underneath these patterns, we can distinguish four principal situations.

1. Moral Implosion of the Traditional Family and Community

In traditional societies at their best, practices of family and community incarnate a transcendent meaning and value. In rural China today modernization tends to suck the meaning out of these structures. At the same time, the spirit of skepticism attendant upon modernization makes people doubtful, even cynical, about the deeper values embedded in the customary life of village and family. The advent of market reforms has made life freer for many rural people, but it has increased the pressures on others, especially women. How do women—and, for that matter, men—make sense of the constraints of traditional family arrangements, when they no longer believe such arrangements to be an inevitable part of the natural cosmic order?

Sometimes they resist, invoking the vaguely formulated rights of the new Chinese marriage law. But there is little support for such resistance. Sometimes they seek to run away, an option more possible now that rural people have the right to travel beyond the village to engage in commercial activities. But the pattern of rural migration since the 1980s has been for husbands to venture to the cities to find work and for wives to remain in the villages to tend to farming and household matters. For those women left behind, the situation can seem almost hopeless. (The suicide rate among Chinese rural women is reportedly the highest in the world.) Feeling trapped, some women respond by resigning themselves to the situation as ‘bad fate’. But there is also the possibility of struggle for personal empowerment. Currently this struggle is often lonely, physically demanding, and even emotionally embarrassing. The ultimate solution would entail a change in familial institutions in China to meet modern standards of gender justice.

2. Formation of Migrant Labor Communities

Perhaps two hundred million rural people have left such dilemmas behind, at least partially, by seeking work in the cities. This vast relocation has led to the formation of migrant labor communities in which people are suspended between loss of the past and hope for a new identity. Members of this ‘floating population’ are protected by few enforceable laws, leaving them subject to exploitative treatment from bosses and arbitrary treatment from the police. Yet they can enjoy a measure of freedom—sometimes more effective freedom than they would have experienced in their home communities.

Their horizons of aspiration are wider than those who never left the village. But their horizons are not projected forward, toward a deeper embrace of the urban world, but backward, in the hope that they can return someday to their rural homes, a little richer and wiser, able to enjoy the good traditional values of the countryside without having to endure the harshness of rural life. But there is something unrealistic about this hope, often sketched through the rosy lens of nostalgia that masks the unpleasant features of village life that pushed the migrant to leave in the first place.

The spiritual challenge in this situation is to maintain a moral connection to a home community one has left behind. (There is no real option of forging a moral...
connection with the city because its permanent residents are hostile to the rural migrants and the legal system—backed by the household registry system—reinforces these attitudes.) But to serve the migrant community well, this connection must re-appropriate the old rural values and re-affirm familial bonds of responsibility in a new way, without leaning on the crutch of nostalgia. Ultimate solutions to this dilemma will depend not only on the struggles of individuals to achieve a spiritual balance but on structural changes that protect the basic rights of migrants, give them a legitimate space within the city, and offer the public support necessary for them to forge a new way of life.

3. Intensifying Control over Labor

Global modernization produces systems that increasingly gain control over the 'life-world' of peoples, particularly their interpersonal communication and moral solidarity. A consequence that especially affects the poorest and most vulnerable members of society is the perfection of external methods to control their behavior. Thus for one kind of rural migrant, the balance of new found freedom with newly imposed constraint is ripped almost exclusively toward constraint. Such are the laborers—often young rural women—who work under contract in the export-oriented factories in the special economic zones, like Shenzhen. These workers are commonly paid wages significantly below the official minimum of 280rmb (approximately $35) per month and regularly work twelve hour days, seven days a week. When they find a job, the factory manager often confiscates their identity papers so that they cannot freely look for other employment. They live in cramped dorms provided by the factory, with the cost of food and lodging deducted from their pay. Most of their remaining income is sent back to the village to help parents and spouses pay off debts. Most eventually hope to return to their rural homes.

These women tend to view the world in terms of better and worse factories in the city and networks of relatives and village friends back home. Seemingly absent from their practical consciousness is any connection with their fellow workers. Perhaps fearful of labor solidarity, the bosses discourage social ties among workers, and their draining work schedule leaves little free time anyway.

Unlike the more entrepreneurial migrants described above, these contract workers seem to make no effort to construct a positive new identity that would bridge the village experience with the urban experience. Their horizon is almost totally projected back from the city toward their village and family. Their best hope for the future is to pay back enough of their families' debts (often the result of globalization pressures reaching deep into the Chinese countryside) to be able to return to the village with honor. The spiritual challenge posed by this situation is mainly to keep any hope alive, in a setting so dominated by the raw demands of physical and mental survival.

4. Creation of the Enterprising Self

Even as factors of globalized production shrink the world of these contract workers, these factors vastly expand the imagination and spirit of educated city dwellers, especially the university-educated young. An environment of newly available and well-paying jobs shapes their moral situation. Theirs is a world peopled with individual selves and structured into a confusing but exciting variety of paths toward personal fulfillment.

The possibility of choosing one's own job is experienced as both thrilling and frightening. The emotional tone engendered is one of ambivalent anxiety. The anxiety comes from not knowing whether one will be up to the incessant competition. At the same time, a tremendous sense of exhilaration accompanies the rapid explosion of horizons in the emergent urban free enterprise sector. While belief in anything like an authentic Marxism has long since collapsed, Marx now becomes the prophet of the social Darwinist neo-liberalism that is the dominant ideology of the global market economy. So Karl Marx is quoted: "Life is an ocean. Only those with a strong will can reach the other side." Many Chinese people, especially successful urbanites, now seem to accept this dictum as true.

The spiritual challenge for people in this moral situation is to develop an inner moral compass, one that can enable them to set priorities and regulate desires, and to find meaning when they find themselves unable to live up to artificially induced expectations.

(Please turn to page 8 for the conclusion of Madsen's address.)
Three Approaches to Spiritual Values

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To assess the moral/spiritual development of Chinese young and middle adults today, it is helpful to distinguish three generations. In the center are persons approximately 35-50 years old, “the Pan Xiao generation.” The younger cohort has been labeled the 1970 generation, signifying the decade of their birth. The third grouping we can call the 1949 generation for they were born before or during that fateful time for China.

The Pan Xiao Generation

In 1980, a letter from "Pan Xiao" was published in the China Youth magazine. "What is the purpose of life? Should I live for myself or for other people?" These questions, raised at a turning point in contemporary Chinese history, immediately evoked heated discussion about renshengguan (philosophy of life). Hundreds of thousands of young people engaged in local forums, small group debates, and personal conversations about the questions raised in the original statement and subsequently published letters.

The Pan Xiao discussion was quickly followed by the ‘fever of existentialism’ in which the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre was prominent; the ‘fever of humanism’ which challenged reductionist materialism; the ‘pillar of fire’ discussion which debated the respective roles of money, fame, and self-realization in human flourishing; and the ‘fever of Freudian psychoanalysis’ which opened a public discussion of sex. The intellectual ferment and rival enthusiasms of the 1980s profoundly affected all those who participated. Many members of this generation were—and still are—spiritual seekers.

The 1970 Generation

This younger generation has come of age in the years of economic market experimentation. Without suffering the hardships of the Cultural Revolution and lacking the revolutionary idealism that characterized their parents, these young adults seem to be ‘naturally’ realistic, materialistic, and individualistic. In the late 1990s some emerged as writers of popular fiction. These writers as well as their critics commonly describe this generation as self-indulgent, interested in bars, rock and roll, and sex. They display little concern for noble ideals or sacred subjects. If the life of the Pan Xiao generation is unbearably heavy, the life of the 70s generation seems unbearably light.

The 1949 Generation

This designation includes people who were born before and during the founding years of the People’s Republic of China. If staunch Marxist-Maoists are still to be found in China, they are likely to be members of this generation who came of age during the inspirational heyday of the Communist party. These people tend to be sympathetic toward tradition, whether their allegiance is to the Chinese communist tradition or a more ancient Chinese tradition.

A representative of this generation is Yu Qiuyu. Born in 1946, Yu was president of the Shanghai College of Drama. In the 1990s he embarked on a ‘bitter journey of culture’ (wenhua kulü) and published a series of prose essays affirming the values of Chinese traditional culture. Yu Qiuyu’s beautifully written essays became very popular, appealing to people’s emotions if not their rationality. The more reasoned articulation of traditional culture and its modern significance comes from neo-Confucian scholars, such as Tu Wei-ming at Harvard University (himself born in 1940). But the appeal of neo-Confucianism among the young and middle-aged people in mainland China remains limited.

China is vast and changing fast; thus any generalization risks being one-sided and already out-of-date. Nevertheless, I believe that various religions and spiritual movements will revive and flourish in China in the coming years. The older generation of revolutionaries is aging and retiring from the social stage. The Pan Xiao generation continues to be filled with spiritual seekers, and the 1970 and younger generations are generally open to new ideas and interested in novel experiences. As governmental control over spiritual affairs continues to relax, the religious market place in China becomes more lively and diverse. This is a great era for religious enterprises and spiritual entrepreneurs.
Popular Religion in Shenzhen

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My research explores the ways in which Chinese people are responding to the challenge of a spiritual crisis that finds its roots in current economic reforms. In order to understand the emerging patterns of religious belief in modern Chinese society, I met with nearly two hundred urban migrants in the developing industrial city of Shenzhen and subsequently interviewed fifty-six adults who belonged to various sects of popular religion.

My goal has been to examine how and why these modern city-dwellers are attracted to the so-called 'new religions' that flourish at this time throughout China. Let me make it clear at the outset that the religious understandings and practices studied here are not superstitious or anti-intellectual. They represent instead the beliefs embraced by ordinary people attempting to find meaning as their lives are caught up in significant transitions.

Workers migrated to this city, many from China's rural interior, with a clear purpose: to make money in order to have a better life. Most of the people I interviewed had no religious identity before coming to Shenzhen. But as this generation of economic migrants found their way in the city, they adjusted their spiritual orientation from 'temporary atheism' to active belief in some religious group. As economic freedom has been accompanied by a gradual decrease in political control over religion, individuals feel they have more choice in regard to their beliefs. This increasing opportunity for personal choice contributes to the growth of new religious movements in China.

Among those I interviewed, religious belief was usually understood as a factor in the private sector; this decision was their personal business. People mention that religion provided them both emotional support and practical assistance in meeting life's crises. Most reported that their introduction to religion came not from exposure to institutional representatives (monks or ministers or official sites of religious activities) but from reading materials, to which they turned especially when they faced problems in their personal lives.

While religious identity is seen as a personal matter, its influence goes beyond the scope of private life. From my investigation, I found that many believers pour their religious enthusiasm and faithfulness into public life. And religion is often being seen as social in a normative sense: believers are convinced that greater involvement in religion among China's people will result in less crime.

Religion as an institution remains highly regulated by the Chinese government. Five religions are officially recognized (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and both Catholic and Protestant Christianity), with other groups and movements deemed illegal. However, this official policy does not stop people from joining 'unrecognized' movements. In Shenzhen, for example, several new religious groups have been formed under the designation of 'gong'. Avoiding the still foreign-sounding term 'religion', these movements—which include Yuanjigong, Tiandijiao, Xianggong, Zhonggong (and Falungong until recent events drew negative attention to its activities)—are more acceptable to both ordinary Chinese people and to the party officials charged with regulating religious activities.

In China today, successive waves of social change have brought questions of life's meaning and of personal significance to the fore. In this context, popular belief has become an important support to personal spiritual life. Currently the new religious movements in China derive their legitimacy from this popular religiosity. These movements are likely to continue as major spiritual resources in the lives of ordinary Chinese people.
Nourishing the Spirit in China Today
Diane Obenchain
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It has been a profound honor for me to teach in the field of the comparative history of religions at Peking University since 1988. The need—for me to experience healing of the individual, family, and the larger social whole, b) to give meaning to life, c) to cultivate care and concern for others along with a sense of conscience, d) to bring fairness to economic practice, and e) to bring political safeguards that allow for, encourage, and protect these processes.

In the United States, we generally understand these processes as linked with 'freedom of religion'. Some of us know, or think we know, what this phrase means in the West. But in China this term carries very different connotations. For most Chinese leaders, 'freedom of religion' signifies something akin to chaos.

The Western concept religion does not have an indigenous Chinese equivalent. In China, the term used to translate 'religion' (zongjiao) is associated with a certain set of practices, practices whose history extends back to the earliest Chinese culture for which we have historical and archeological evidence. As a result, in the minds of most Chinese—whether leaders or ordinary people—'religion' signifies ritualistic, sacrificial worship of superstitious power(s) that in time usually leads people to rebel against the leaders currently in power.

Among most Chinese, then, 'religion' has been understood as quite different from the 'cultivation of the human person' urged by Kongzi. Confucian self-cultivation yields a quality known as ren (benevolence, kindheartedness, humaneness), on the basis of which proper leadership is exercised—whether in family life, the province level, or the state. For centuries the Chinese have associated cultivation (xu) of one's person (shen) with the 'moral human nature' (daode xing), not with 'spirit' understood as separate from human nature. Accordingly Chinese have linked cultivation of the human person with what in the West is called 'ethics' rather than 'religion'.

Many thoughtful people in China today recognize that some Western societies, particularly those with thriving economies, ground the political dimension of life on an ethical foundation, a foundation that is itself understood as an expression of religion. What if religion and ethics are not necessarily at odds? What if ethical cultivation of the human person is the basis of political leadership, in the West as well as in China? Then China's current leadership—both intellectual and political—would be compelled to re-evaluate the deeply entrenched dichotomy between 'religion' and 'ethics'.

Just such a profound re-evaluation is taking place in China today. This rethinking is a key factor in the establishment of Religious Studies departments in a number of carefully chosen universities in China. Faculty members in these departments undertake research into the cultural and intellectual reality of religion, especially the Western phenomenon of religion that is so closely linked with ethics. Chinese political leaders, eager to find more effective means to restore ethical order and harmony in contemporary Chinese society now awash with capitalist passion and greed for material goods, generally support this research effort. But no matter what Chinese scholars learn about Western religion and its expression in ethics, the political leadership will seek to keep religion in China under its control.

In my view, the situation in China today invites a deeper cross-cultural exploration of the interrelated and mutually influential dynamics of human well-being, moral cultivation, nourishment of the spirit, ethics, and the law. For this exploration, we will need new approaches—strategies that exhibit less cultural bias and more emphasis on rational, ethical, individual, and social/communal responsibility than the Western term 'religion' offers.
The Three-Self (Protestant) Church and Chinese Christians Who do not go to Church

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A visitor to China today may be surprised to see that churches in big cities are crowded with people of various backgrounds. They might be more surprised to learn that there are many others in China who identify themselves as Christians, but do not go to church. The latter may have an even more profound impact on the development of Christianity and on the intellectual and spiritual life of the Chinese society than the churchgoers have.

The social changes brought by the rise and fall of communism in China have been remarkable. Thus today Christianity does not revive in a virgin land, nor in the Confucian society that China used to be, but in a post-communist world in which communism is dead but the communist party is still alive. Christianity—indeed all religions in China today—must deal with the challenge of this communist heritage, particularly its foundational tenets of atheism and materialism. In some places, the Christian response to this challenge is coming not from inside the church but from outside the church.

The Chinese Three-Self Church

The three-self movement of the Chinese Protestant church, based on “self-management, self-support, and self-propagation,” dates from the early 1950s. According to the original proposal of the ‘three-self’ movement, at least two goals should be achieved: 1) the leadership of formerly Protestant churches in China by Chinese pastors rather than overseas directors, and 2) the construction of a Chinese Christian theology. In fact, however, the three-self church has thus far achieved only the first goal. Although some efforts have been made in the construction of a Chinese theology—by mingling certain Chinese cultural ideas and even some modern concepts with the Gospel message—this project remains far from meeting the intellectual and spiritual needs of many Chinese Christians.

Chinese Christians Who Do Not Go to Church

The most remarkable development of Christianity in China today may be the presence of a Christian theology in higher education and academic research. Since the late 1980s, a group of mainland Christian scholars has been trying to resume Christian higher education and theological studies in public universities (there have been no private or Christian-affiliated colleges on the mainland since the 1950s). Some church leaders call these Christian scholars “cultural Christians.”

Their work has included the foundation of a number of institutes for Christian studies. For example, Peking University opened a Department of Religious Studies in September 1996, the first department of this kind since 1949. Several universities in other parts of China followed suit. Over the last decade, hundreds of students in religious studies and theology at the undergraduate and graduate levels have enrolled in these schools. At the same time, several translation projects of Christian classics are in process, and more publications are expected in the near future.

As Christian books become more available, the attitude of young people towards religion, especially towards Christianity, is changing. Not only are Christian theology and spirituality recognized as the religious heritage of Western tradition, they are also taken to be beneficial to the development of Chinese culture and the spiritual life of the Chinese people. Chinese attitudes have also changed with regard to the relationship of religion and science, of religious values and morality, and the importance of spirituality. It may be too soon to evaluate the practice of these Chinese Christians who have developed Chinese Christianity outside the church, but the socio-psychological changes they have brought to Chinese society have already shown the significance of their contribution.

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Conclusion

One of the defining moments of modern consciousness is the recognition that the social and religious order is a human construction for which humans ultimately have to take responsibility. But the capacity to exercise this responsibility remains elusive. The recognition of the social construction of beliefs and morals can lead to a profound cynicism, a view that sees our most cherished ideals simply as masks for special interests or emanations of power. Unmasking these social fictions does not necessarily fulfill the promise of inducing human beings to rebel against such constraints. Indeed the evidence of social history is that human beings rebel against oppression not when illusions are replaced by transparent truths, but when meaningful traditions define right and wrong, justice and injustice, good and evil. And religious traditions, above all, have been able to speak truth to power, to invoke meanings that transcend and thus make demands on human beings, even the most powerful among them.

Despite all of the forces that often seem arrayed against the project of bringing spiritual meaning and moral order to the modern world, human beings can re-appropriate and transform the meanings they inherit. Through such re-appropriations—and sometimes through painful struggle with the core meanings that define self, social order, and the divine—human beings can alter the course of personal and social history. Facing such a challenge in a globalizing world requires cross-cultural solidarity and dialogue. Listening to the voices of people in China who are struggling with this challenge may in a small way help us begin such dialogue and deepen our solidarity.

This address is based on research material reported in the forthcoming book, Popular China, edited by Perry Link, Paul Pickowicz, and Richard Madsen.

For the full text of Madsen’s address, consult the Center for the Pacific Rim web-site:

http://www.pacificrim.usfca.edu/research/pacrimreport/pacrimreport19.html