In 1999 the Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History at the Center for the Pacific Rim, University of San Francisco, inaugurated an ongoing cross-disciplinary initiative—“Nourishing the Spirit: Social Change and Spiritual Development in China Today.” Complementing the Ricci Institute’s continuing support of research on the historical interactions of China with Christianity, this new initiative explores the contemporary resources that Chinese people find to support their spiritual search in this time of profound personal and social dislocation.

Sociologist Fan Lizhu of Fudan University in Shanghai, a Fellow of the Ricci Institute’s EDS-Stewart Chair, has studied the shape of this spiritual hunger and the sources of spiritual nourishment in contemporary Shenzhen. Through a series of in-depth interviews she examined the resurgence of spiritual beliefs and practices among the commercial workers and small business owners who make up this city’s emerging middle-class.

Two Distinguished Fellows of the Ricci Institute’s EDS-Stewart Chair—historian of religion James D. Whitehead and social psychologist Evelyn Eaton Whitehead—are working closely with Dr. Fan in the work of analysis and interpretation of her research. They offer here an overview of the initial findings of this joint effort.

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Spiritual Needs, Spiritual Nourishment in Shenzhen

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The city of Shenzhen, an hour's train ride from Hong Kong, was not long ago a sleepy fishing village. In 1979 as part of his program of Reform and Opening, Deng Xiaoping declared this village and a vast track of surrounding territory as a special economic zone. With generous tax incentives in place for foreign investment, the city has exploded into a rough-edged metropolis of seven million, of whom several million are temporary workers or 'floating residents' who work various jobs without the benefits of legal residency.

First-time visitors are often bewildered by the pace and energy of Shenzhen. But what appears to many foreigners as lawlessness and disorder, appeals to workers here as opportunity. Ian Buruma captures these contrasts: “The atmosphere is young and brash. A raw, even primitive, vitality—life reduced to food, sex and money flows through these new streets like a muddy river.” But, Baruma continues, “For many young Chinese that is precisely its attraction. To be relieved of the burdens of home, history, and tradition is a form of liberation. Opportunities await at the frontiers of the wild south—opportunities to make money, but also to carve out a modicum of personal freedom.”

In many ways the city of Shenzhen is unique in China: more than 90% of its inhabitants were born elsewhere; the average age of current residents is less than thirty years. Social and psychological forces here differ dramatically from those that still prevail in the interior regions where most Chinese live. The speed of change in Shenzhen has outpaced even the rapidly modernizing urban metropolises along China's eastern coast.

But while this free economic zone is not typical of China today, it may hold significant clues to this country's future. With the dynamics of globalization cast here in such sharp relief, Shenzhen presents a compelling site for examining the impact of social change on spiritual consciousness.

The Shekou Incident

In January of 1988 two Chinese political representatives arrived in the Shekou district of the burgeoning new free economic zone of Shenzhen. Sponsored by the Communist League, they came to lecture an assembly of young workers, all recent migrants to Shenzhen from towns and villages throughout China. Their instruction carried a familiar message: the revolutionary ideals of party and state must continue to guide the Chinese worker. The lecture was routine, but the response it generated was not.

In the midst of the instruction, a young worker arose in protest. In tone and terms that were startlingly direct, he challenged their message as empty propaganda, words that no longer carried weight in Shenzhen. “We have come to Shenzhen to make money,” he boldly asserted. Here workers do not need to depend on the state-controlled work unit (danwei 单位) for their jobs. Here workers are able to find employment on their own; fired from a factory one day, a laborer can easily find work by the next. In this exploding economic arena, he announced, party ideals and government directives are irrelevant. And the gathered workers cheered his audacious announcement.

Reports of this act of public defiance—the ‘Shekou Incident’—spread quickly. The workers in this economic free zone were embarked on a new adventure. The laissez-faire atmosphere of Shenzhen's economic frontier offered job options that released them from dependence on the all-providing, all-controlling institution of the danwei.

Opportunities for individual choice quickly expanded beyond the economic realm. With the wider range of options came an increased awareness of personal responsibility. Where to live, what lifestyle to pursue, what values to adopt—now these decisions had to be made on one's own. Among these industrial migrants—no longer embedded in the values of family and
village life, no longer limited by the directives of the work unit—a taste of personal responsibility developed into an appetite for personal freedom. And, in ways that contradicted predictions of both Marxist orthodoxy and western secularization theory, this expanding economic freedom released spiritual hungers as well.

**The Spiritual Search in Shenzhen**

The metropolis of Shenzhen boasts new and refurbished worship sites of each of the five religions officially recognized by Chinese law—Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestant and Catholic Christianity. And while accurate numbers are difficult to determine, membership in these registered religious groups is on the rise here as well as elsewhere throughout mainland China. But our research reveals another dynamic of Chinese modernization. Confronted by new questions of meaning and purpose, these respondents did not turn to the now-approved religious institutions of Buddhism or Christianity. Instead they gave very personal expression to their spiritual search, in the age-old idiom of China’s common spiritual heritage.

This tradition, often dismissed by scholars as ‘folk religion’ or ‘popular belief’, has long been overlooked and undervalued. Even as the Chinese government softened its view of the legally recognized institutional religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, the customary beliefs and practices of ordinary Chinese were still considered ‘feudal superstition’ and—as such—without legal status. This lack of government recognition and control that makes these spiritual practices attractive to many in Shenzhen.

**China’s Common Spiritual Heritage**

Scholars today are cautious about using the abstract term ‘religion’ to describe China’s spiritual heritage. The translated term *(zongjiao 宗教)*, first introduced in China only in the 1890s, is essentially a western concept grafted onto Chinese experience. In both English and Chinese, the word continues to imply elements that are foreign to Chinese sensibilities: a sharp dichotomy between sacred and secular, formal and exclusive group membership, the central role of a distinct group of professionally trained leaders, heightened concern for orthodoxy in belief and practice.

Responding to these western connotations, many early observers insisted that China had no religion. Later scholars both in China and the west distinguished sharply between the multiple ‘superstitious’ beliefs adhered to by the masses and the ‘great traditions’ of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Researchers today speak more appreciatively of the spiritual significance of China’s local traditions. Recently Daniel Overmyer reviewed over fifty books on Chinese popular religion written since 1990 by Chinese scholars. In nearly all these works a surprisingly positive tone has replaced the more conventional view of local practices and beliefs as mere superstition. He concludes, “What we see here is not only a new direction in scholarship, but also a great and historic culture finally trying to recognize and come to terms with the religious traditions of the great majority of its people.”

We have adopted the phrase ‘common spiritual heritage’ to characterize these cultural resources. This spiritual heritage is centered in the family and pivots on a recognition of the vital energy of *(qi 氣)* animating all reality. Its beliefs and practices, as Overmyer explains, are rooted in a particular vision: “the world itself is a sacred place of power and mystery and...to human beings belongs the important task of cooperating with this power and making it operative in society.” And, in a significant departure from the religious sensitivity of the west, “what we call the sacred and profane are here blended together.”

In China, this common spiritual heritage exists symbiotically with the more institutionalized traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. John Lagerwey helps clarify what is for the western observer a mystifying relationship: “While the intellectual observer—or even the local participant—may be able to distinguish Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, or mediumistic features of local religion, in local society these are all aspects of the larger whole... Local society seems always and everywhere to contain all four ritual traditions.”

“Instead they gave very personal expression to their spiritual search, in the age-old idiom of China’s common spiritual heritage.”
The common spiritual tradition has developed with no need to create its own distinct rituals, elaborate doctrines, or full-time professional leaders such as monks or priests. As the occasion arises, Chinese will borrow beliefs and ceremonies originally developed within the 'great traditions', adopting these to suit local conditions. And when the religious texts or rituals associated with Taoism or Confucianism or Buddhism “enter the gravitational field of (local) religion, their meanings are changed to fit what the people need.”

The people in Shenzhen today vividly illustrate this interpenetration of traditions, as they prepare home altars incorporating Taoist symbols and adapt Buddhist ceremonies for use in their communal devotions. But rather than simply a nostalgic return to familiar practices of the past, the modern residents are undertaking a personal re-appropriation of these spiritual resources. In their beliefs and practices today, the cultural heritage of Chinese spirituality is being both actively and selectively embraced.

Social Change and Personal Responsibility

Among Dr. Fan’s respondents, economic opportunities provoked changes in consciousness. Unprecedented experiences of individual choice generated new awareness of personal responsibility.

But while this link between economic transformation and spiritual opportunity was new to the people of Shenzhen, it has been a recurrent pattern in China’s history. In her instructive analysis of the moral handbooks of 17th century China, historian Cynthia Brokaw observes that these immensely popular works served “as guidelines for proper (and profitable) behavior during a time of high mobility, shifting values and uncertain beliefs.” Brokaw further elaborates the impact of economic upheavals of that time, citing “the extraordinary moral pressures their expanded sense of human control created for the individual. If the belief that a man could create his own moral and material fate gave the individual a power and a freedom he had not possessed before, it imposed as well a crushing responsibility.”

For many whom Dr. Fan interviewed, heightened awareness of personal responsibility raised questions they experienced as entirely new: Is there a plot or purpose that guides my life? Does my experience have larger significance or meaning? In an effort to make sense of the new direction of their lives, her respondents found support in deeply traditional notions of ‘destiny’ (mingyun 命運) and ‘coincidence’ (yuanfen 缘分).

Fate: Fixed and Flexible

Mr. Zhou worked as a teacher before moving to Shenzhen. Initially he found only menial jobs available. Three years later he had saved enough to start his own small printing business, producing mailing envelopes, deposit slips and receipt books. The business grew rapidly, in pace with Shenzhen’s expanding economy. To his surprise, Mr. Zhou found himself suddenly wealthy, able to purchase a new home and even a private automobile.

Mr. Zhou recalls years of poverty and struggle during which he was untroubled by larger questions of meaning or purpose. Only recently has he begun to wonder about his life: Why me? Why has this good fortune been his, while others—equally hardworking—continues to struggle with little success? Now for the first time, Mr. Zhou reports, he must confront the question of his own destiny: perhaps some unrecognized power or unseen force favors him, guiding his fate. If so, what responsibility is his? What must he do to respond to this good fortune?

Mrs. Wang was born in Tianjin just prior to the Cultural Revolution. Neither her family upbringing nor her formal education exposed her to religious beliefs or practices. As an adult, after a series of crises and setbacks, Mrs. Wang took a job at an accounting firm in Shenzhen. She was frequently promoted and soon reached a senior position with a very good salary. This financial success prompted questions similar to Mr. Zhou’s. Why has her life turned out this way? What is the purpose of making money? What does life ask of her now?
The Chinese term *mingyun* describes fate as both fixed and flexible. Fixed: one’s destiny originates beyond the individual in the ‘command (*ming*) of heaven’. Yet flexible: it is also shaped by the particular ‘movements (*yun*)’ of an individual’s life. Each person’s journey is shaped by genetic inheritance and family background that lie outside personal control. And yet within this fixed pattern, Chinese wisdom recognizes that all is not simply ‘given’. It is the life-long discipline of self-cultivation that prepares one to embrace the opportunities that arise in and alter the course of a life. Echoing this insight, a respondent remarked, “in Shenzhen I have learned that we must grasp our fate.”

Prior to their arrival in Shenzhen, many respondents had inhabited a world circumscribed by the *danwei*. This work unit not only determined their current salary, housing and health care, but kept possession of the personal files without which job change, travel, and further education were not possible. Such an environment co-opted all questioning. There was neither need nor opportunity to wonder about personal destiny. Options were limited; fate seemed fully fixed. But in this new urban setting, with its freedom and despite its chaos, these workers cross the threshold of a new level of consciousness. Questions of meaning and purpose provoke wonder about personal responsibility and determination to cultivate their lives. In the midst of social and economic dislocation, they begin to grasp their fate.

Fate fixed and flexible has been an honored and constant theme throughout Chinese history. The influential ancient Confucian text, *Doctrine of the Mean*, made a sharp distinction between the mature person who ‘lives peacefully and at ease, awaiting his fate’, and the immature individual who ‘follows dangerous courses and hopes for good luck’. The great Confucian philosopher Mencius likewise invoked this call to ‘await one’s fate’, but also emphasized the continual self-cultivation that would allow a person actively to ‘establish his fate’. Mencius added that while pursuing one’s destiny it was wise to avoid tempting fate by standing next to a wall about to collapse.

**Fateful Coincidence**

In every life, apparently chance events give distinct direction to one’s fate—meeting the person one later marries, or losing a job only to find a better position. Reflecting on their experiences in Shenzhen, Dr. Fan’s respondents referred often to such fateful coincidences (*yuanfen*), those unplanned occurrences that decisively influenced the eventual shape of their lives.

Mrs. Wang’s early dream to study abroad was dashed when her belongings—including her money, visa and airplane ticket—were stolen. This chance event forced a change in plans; now without funds, she risked moving to Shenzhen where she had heard jobs were plentiful. And in Shenzhen fate has favored her. In retrospect, Mrs. Wang now sees this event as more than mere chance. The earlier apparent misfortune became a positive turning point in her life.

Mr. Zhou notes the intervention of a similar event: the abrupt failure of a youthful romance motivated him to leave his home village. Mysteriously, this early loss contributed to his present good fortune. Surely, Mr. Zhou insists, more than chance was involved in this experience of *yuanfen*.

While destiny (*mingyun*) has its deepest roots in the Confucian understanding of ‘heaven’s will’ (*tianming*), coincidence (*yuanfen*) is more intimately linked to the Buddhist worldview. Buddhist understandings of *karma* describe a moral universe in which apparently chance events are the residue of moral actions in the past. In such a world there are no chance events.

These traditional notions of destiny and coincidence helped Dr. Fan’s respondents, all persons with little previous religious experience, enter into a deeper reflection on their lives. Rooted in Chinese daily life and ordinary consciousness, these familiar resources served as thresholds to a richer spiritual appreciation.

**Cross-cultural Differences**

Western consciousness carries the conviction that adults are masters of their fate. Unexpected events and mysterious coincidences challenge this cultural bias. For westerners, this challenge can evoke a spiritual response of receptivity—"In the realm of spirit, as in much of the rest of their life in Shenzhen, personal choice has become standard..."
greater openness to dimensions of life that lie beyond autonomous personal control.

But Shenzhen residents responded differently. Long accustomed to a dependence on their families and the government, they now reported a heightened sense of personal agency. As they became more sensitive to the dynamics of personal destiny, these urban migrants assumed greater responsibility for the direction of their own lives.

**Spiritual Practices in Shenzhen**

In modern Shenzhen, as has been typical throughout much of China’s history, most people do not join an established religious group or identify with the doctrines of a single sect or master. Dr. Fan’s respondents gave personal reasons to explain why. Some suspected that the officially registered religions remain too close to the state, too susceptible to party control. Having only recently escaped the all-encompassing control of the danwei, they resist affiliating with another institution that seems to depend on government approval. As one respondent asserted, “What I believe is nobody’s business but my own.”

But most offered another perspective to explain their eclectic approach. In the realm of spirit, as in much of the rest of their life in Shenzhen, personal choice has become the standard. Shenzhen offers many options for belief and practice. Bookstores abound with titles providing alternative life perspective and moral advice. A steady stream of Buddhist and Christian television and Internet programming arrives from Taiwan, Korea, and North America. Local and international religious entrepreneurs promote programs for health and healing and peace of mind, even as state propaganda urges a return to now-discredited communist ideals and values. And images and icons of western popular culture flood the local media. Confronted by this vast array of possibilities, Shenzhen residents need to—and want to—find for themselves the sources of spiritual nourishment that are appropriate for their own circumstance and temperament.

**Personal Practices**

Ms. Shi is a news commentator at a local television station in Shenzhen. Growing up in a revolutionary family, she had no direct experience of religious practice. Now in her apartment in one of the modern housing complexes that surround the city, she has set up a small altar. A statue of Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess widely venerated among Chinese, stands prominently here. Ms. Shi places fresh fruit on the altar for a time, and then offers this as a gift to friends. Her sense is that this fruit now carries with it special power that will promote healing and a peaceful heart. While Ms. Shi insists that she is not a Buddhist, she finds the prayerful reading of Buddhist texts to be especially consoling.

Ms. Shi admits to being embarrassed sometimes when she reflects on these activities, since they include behaviors she herself earlier identified as superstition. And she is reluctant to let her broadcasting colleagues know of her practices, since many are communist party members. But she embraces these activities as significant in her life and necessary for her spiritual well-being.

In Shenzhen, some people’s practice involves simply the regular repetition of prayer formulas. Others seek deeper understanding by reading texts or commentaries on religious classics (Taoist tales, Buddhist sutras, the Christian bible) or morally up-lifting contemporary books.

Several respondents listed personal honesty as a chosen spiritual practice. In Shenzhen the dynamics of unfettered capitalism generate momentum for graft and greed. For some here, a new sensitivity to traditional themes of moral reciprocity (baoying 保 义) prompts different behavior. That the universe is essentially moral, that both good actions and bad have enduring significance, that personal rectitude contributes to improving the world—these convictions support a more exacting commitment to fairness and honesty in their business dealings.

**Communal Practices**

While most resist formal identification with any particular religious institutions, many...
Shenzhen respondents assemble regularly with fellow searchers. These gatherings function as a loosely organized network, more than a formally constituted membership group. Vegetarian restaurants are frequent settings for these gatherings.

One example: a small storefront restaurant nestled in a downtown high-rise building comfortably accommodates perhaps thirty people at its several round tables. Open to the general public, the restaurant welcomes passers-by along with more regular customers. A video screen at one end of the room continuously displays a series of calming nature scenes, interspersed with brief readings and recitations from inspirational texts. A small altar occupies one corner, and many patrons stop on their way in or out of the shop to offer a gesture of respect.

The restaurant was not established by a religious organization and exists without benefit of outside investment. The owner, a lay man with no formal religious training or membership, indicates that operating this restaurant is part of his own spiritual practice. He regularly purchases spiritual books, which he makes available freely to frequent patrons and casual customers alike.

Several of Dr. Fan's respondents gather here regularly to share a vegetarian meal and to discuss details of their lives and insights from their spiritual reading. Occasionally one of the regular participants will bring along a newcomer. The motives for these gatherings seem to include a need for mutual support and encouragement—both in life's daily struggles and in spiritual practice, a hunger to experience the sense of transcendence that comes from the fellowship and the rituals that are frequently part of the group's gathering, and a desire to improve the world by spreading information about spiritual awareness to others.

Social Practices

The loose network associated with this restaurant has adopted a Buddhist ritual as part of their wider social concern. Annually they undertake a symbolic ‘freeing of animals’ (fangsheng 放生) to express and cultivate mercy and compassion in the world. A monk from the nearby registered monastery is hired to read the appropriate sutras and to guide the ritual activities releasing the birds and small turtles from cages. But the ordinary people are clearly the initiators and the hosts of this gathering.

These respondents often remarked on their heightened concern for the plight of suffering people. Working in Shenzhen had brought them increased material comfort and financial security. Now, in accord with their new spiritual awareness, they make generous donations to support people throughout China and even elsewhere whose lives are disrupted by major disasters—drought, earthquakes, floods. But there is little discussion of issues of social justice or action for social change.

Many factors—personal and political—help explain this apparent absence of a ‘prophetic’ response to injustice among these spiritually sensitive persons. Dr. Fan points to China’s cultural memory: through the centuries the moral dilemma for most Chinese has not been ‘how should I be just’ or ‘how can I make the world more just’. Instead they faced the challenge: ‘how shall I live and find peace in this unjust world’.

For many, this question has been resolved in part by looking beyond the present injustice. In traditional Chinese understanding, experiencing injustice and poverty came as one’s fate. But this understanding is not always fatalistic, since a person can influence fate through moral actions. Present behavior has impact beyond the present: through self-cultivation one can alter the current situation and positively affect the future. Thus personal honesty and compassion toward others become the route to social change.

Conclusion

The metropolis of Shenzhen, as we have said, is not a typical Chinese city. Most residents, having left behind the network of extended family, live without the economic and emotional safety-net these relationships provide. They work outside the traditional structures that still shape the labor of most people in China. Urban life confronts them with new decisions, about work and leisure, about values and goals. But while it is not

“Shifting the boundaries of an economy alters the horizon of the spirit.”
typical, the Shenzhen experience may well be predictive.

Evidence in Shenzhen shows that a political initiative meant primarily as an economic reform does not easily stay within these bounds. Shifting the boundaries of an economy alters the horizon of the spirit. Opening a society to new styles of work also exposes it to new questions of meaning and purpose.

To deal with these concerns, respondents in Shenzhen turn not to state-recognized religious institutions, but to resources within their common cultural heritage. They embrace these traditional resources not as revival or regression, but as a means of moving forward. Rather than simply repeating past patterns, they select particular beliefs and practices that resonate with present experience. And in an authentic spiritual response, they adapt these themes to their current circumstances.

Observers both Chinese and western have assumed that this common spiritual heritage would not survive the dislocations of globalization. But in this highly secular city, China’s spiritual tradition is being reaffirmed in the lives of modern Chinese. The view from Shenzhen suggests that knowledge and respect of this deep current in Chinese culture will be essential to understanding social change and spiritual development in China’s future. The spiritual practices in Shenzhen may also hold clues to the continuing inculturation of Christianity in China.  

ENDNOTES
3. Ibid., p.125.
8. The Doctrine of the Mean, XIV:4.

This paper expands an earlier discussion that appeared in the America magazine, September 1, 2003, the Jesuit weekly journal of news and ideas.

我命在我不在天

“My destiny is within me not in heaven.”
Ge Hong, 4th century Taoist author

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