

# FROM IDEOLOGICAL MARXISM TO MODERATE PRAGMATISM

(| Religious Policy in China at the Turn of the Century

by Peter Tze Ming NG<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a widespread growth of religious movements in China. In the White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in China issued in October 1997, the Chinese government stated that »According to incomplete statistics, there are over one hundred million followers of various religious faiths, more than 85,000 sites for religious activities, some 300,000 clergy (religious professionals), and over 3,000 religious organizations throughout China. In addition, there are 74 religious schools or colleges run by these organizations for training clerical (religious) personnel.«<sup>2</sup> The White paper also estimated that there are eighteen million Muslims, four million Catholics and ten million Protestants, in addition to the two largest religions in China which are Buddhism and Daoism. These government figures which include only officially registered believers would normally be regarded as very conservative and the more accurate estimates would range from two to five times the official figures.<sup>3</sup> Then at this current turn of the century, there came the Chinese government's condemnation of Falungong as an illegal cult and the flight of Karmapa Lama to India, among other tightening measures imposed on religions in China. Widespread concerns and strong resentments were expressed from the international community. Was it »a golden age« or »a horrible year« for the religions in China?

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<sup>2</sup> See *White Paper – Freedom of Religious Belief in China*, from <http://www.china-embassy.org/Press/wpreligi.htm>. The statement was restated by Ye Xiaowen, the Director of the State Bureau of Religious Affairs during his interview by the editor of *The Outlook* in 1999. See »The Religious Situation and Religious Policy in China: An Interview with Ye Xiaowen, the Director of State Bureau of Religious Affairs« (Chinese) in Liao Wang (*The Outlook*), Vol. 21, 1999, pp. 18–22.

<sup>3</sup> For example, »ICRF Report: Religious Freedom in China« estimates to as high as five times the official number. For details, see <http://www.religiousfreedom.com/wrpt/Chinarpt.htm>.



The Chinese Communist government has long been approaching religion from an ideological perspective, by adopting the classical Marxist view which holds that religion is the opium of the people. The official religious policy since the 1950s has been that of suppressing and eliminating all religions completely and forever. After thirty years of repression of religions in the country, however, the Chinese government began to admit her wrong assumptions and began to shift her position from the ideological Marxism to moderate pragmatism.<sup>4</sup>

There have been a number of documents and statements issued by the government in the past 20 years since the adoption of Deng Xiao-ping's open door policy in 1979. Yet, scholars kept saying that since China was basically holding firm the Marxist classical view on Religion and claimed to be atheist, the government's position had not changed much over the past fifty years.<sup>5</sup> However, if one studies closely the situations in China in the past twenty years, this trend of development – from ideological Marxism to moderate pragmatism – can be obviously seen. The present paper is an attempt to study the Chinese documents on religious policy and follow closely the discussions among Chinese scholars, especially those from the Chinese Academies of Social Sciences in Beijing and Shanghai, so as to review some significant points for our scholars' attention and discussion.

### *1. Religious Policy in China Since the Open Door Policy*

Since Deng Xiao-ping's open door policy started in 1979, China has been undergoing drastic changes in various spheres including the religious sphere. ›Liberate thought‹ and ›Seeking truth from facts‹ became the two guiding principles also for the new policy on religion. The most definitive statement of the new religious policy was the ›Document 19‹ which was issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on March 31, 1982. The document was entitled: ›Concerning the Basic Viewpoints and Policy on the Religious Questions during the Socialist Period in China‹.<sup>6</sup>

The document made clear that the government admitted wrongs in the past and that she was now learning from history and beginning to deal with religion from a more practical point of view. Though it referred again to Zhou Enlai's former notion of the ›five characteristics‹ of religion, namely that religion was ›mass-based‹, ›long-lasting‹, ›complex‹, ›(ethnic) nationalistic‹, and ›(global) international‹, the affirmation was made out of a

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese government has taken a more pragmatic approach to religion since the 1980s and tolerated religious activities in China as long as they were under the proper control of the government. That is what is meant here by ›moderate pragmatism‹. See esp. the contents of Document 19 which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example Jonathan CHAO, *Chinese Communist Policy Toward Christianity*, Taiwan: China Evangelical Seminary Press, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> See the Chinese text, in: *Religious Work in the New Period: Selected Documents*, ed. by THE COMPREHENSIVE RESEARCH GROUP OF THE DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH OFFICE OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE POLICY, LAWS AND REGULATIONS DEPARTMENT OF THE RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS BUREAU OF THE STATE COUNCIL, Beijing 1995, pp. 53–73.



comparatively deeper understanding that religion would never be eliminated by any coercive means. Religion would, according to the new understanding, survive and grow briskly under socialism. Consequently, the government had to adopt a more pragmatic approach to religion, and learned to manage and develop control mechanisms whereby religion could be made to serve modern socialism in China. »The basic starting point and ultimate goal for dealing with religious questions is to unite all religious believers and non-believers, and to focus their will and strengthen them on the common goal of building a strong socialist nation«.<sup>7</sup>

In the meantime, Chinese scholars working under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing and Shanghai, began to do serious research on religion and address directly religious issues in the socialist period of China. The most outstanding book entitled *Zhonghuo Shehui zhuyi shijidi Zongjiao wenti (Religious Questions During the Socialist Period in China)* was published in 1987 and was edited by Luo Zhufeng, the Director of the Institute for Research on Religion of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.<sup>8</sup> The book was significant because it was a response to the designation of religion as one of the twelve key topics for study in the Sixth Five Years Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China. The study was an attempt to give a comprehensive theoretical presentation of the origin and purpose of the religious policy of the Chinese Communist Party during the socialist period in China. Though the book followed closely the Marxist tradition, it approached religion from the more concrete, contemporary situation of religion in China. As Bishop Ting remarked, the book was »the least dogmatic, the most perceptive in its explanation of the party's policy on religion, and the most convincing in its arguments«.<sup>9</sup> The book attempted to address the following questions in the actual life of China:

1. Why does religion continue to exist in a socialist society where the exploiting classes have already been eliminated?
2. Why have the number of religious believers in China increased in recent years?
3. What effects does religion have on social life and on the building of the four modernizations in China?
4. How can religion and the socialist society exist in harmony?
5. What should be the proper policy on religion of the party and the government?<sup>10</sup>

The book concluded with three significant points worth noting here.

a. Though the authors followed closely the theoretical analysis of Marx, Engels and Lenin, they reckoned that those classical theories were based on their observation of Christianity in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century whereas the situation of religion in

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> The book was translated by Donald E. MACINNIS / Zheng XIAN / Luo ZHUFENG (ed.), *Religion under Socialism in China*, New York 1991.

<sup>9</sup> See K.H. TING, »Foreword« in the English translation of Luo ZHUFENG (ed.), *Religion under Socialism in China*, translated by Donald E. MACINNIS / Zheng XIAN, New York 1991, p. XIII.

<sup>10</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 7.



contemporary China was quite different. Hence, they gave a critical yet balanced critique of the classical view which held that religion was an opium of the people and would be eliminated in a socialist society. Contrary to the classical view, the authors affirmed the long-term persistence of religion in the socialist society of China.<sup>11</sup>

b. The authors acknowledged the positive roles of religious ethics in producing ›good citizens‹ for the socialist society in China. In its concluding remarks, it was stated that ›Today many religious moral teachings, such as ›do not steal‹, ›do not commit adultery‹, ›do not covet‹, and ›do not lie‹, keep believers in bounds and provide real help in maintaining social stability and order.‹<sup>12</sup> Hence, the place of religion was affirmed and religion was now seen as providing help to promote social stability and unity in the socialist society of China.

c. The authors also suggested a new concept of ›mutual accommodation‹ and explored the possibility in which religion could live in harmony with the socialist society. ›The main question now is how to deal properly with religion, to unite all religious believers with one purpose: to promote and to achieve the building of the four modernizations and the unity of the motherland.‹<sup>13</sup>

In short, having affirmed the government's policy stated in Document 19, Chinese scholars went a step further to construct a theoretical framework for the revision of the Marxist classical view and to propose a more positive approach to religion in China, by suggesting that religion can help to produce ›good citizens‹, to promote social stability and unity and to contribute to the building of the four modernizations and a strong socialist nation in China. Indeed, the religious situation in China had changed greatly since the issuance of Document 19 and the publication of Lu Zhufeng's book. Under the new policy of freedom of religious beliefs, churches, temples and monasteries were re-opened, public worships were allowed. People in China could enjoy the freedom to visit religious places and attend worships as they wished. No one would refute the fact that all religious traditions in China, including Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Buddhism, Daoism and Islam, were blossoming in China since the 1980s. The growth was so enormous that it has been described by scholars as ›Religious Fever‹ or ›Christianity Fever‹ in China.<sup>14</sup> Even the popular and folk religions which the Chinese government described as mere folk beliefs and superstitions and hence were excluded in their official definition of religion, were blossoming and flourishing throughout the country. Plus the revival of Qigong which could not be classified as either a religion or superstition, but was so revived in China that it was suggested by some scholars to be a form of ›religious surrogate‹ for the people of China.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, ch. 1, pp. 7–14.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p. 150.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Cheng MING-CHUN, *May's Christianity Fever: Contagion and Constraint of a Religious Movement in China*, a Ph.D. thesis at the University of Hong Kong, 1996. Cheng accounts the situation of Christianity Fever in China as a result of the relative tolerance of the Chinese government, the availability of resources for growth and the thirst for spiritual satisfaction of the people.

<sup>15</sup> Qigong is a traditional Chinese exercise for physical fitness and for healing, but since the Chinese government has been suppressing religions and eliminating all forms of superstitions in China, the revival of Qigong in the 1980s was



The booming was so widespread that it became a threat to the power and control of the Chinese government who was then forced to adopt stricter measures to ensure the stability of the society. The White Paper of 1997 reported that the government was so much alarmed by the widespread building of unregistered churches, temples, tombs and mosques, plus the growing numbers of unregistered priests and unauthorized teachers and believers throughout the country that the government was forced to take serious measures of repression upon religions and illegal cults during the past years.<sup>16</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, the government began to adopt a double-hand approach to religions in China. On the one hand, more tolerance and recognition were given to the officially registered religions, especially to those activities run by the three-self patriotic associations of the various religions so far their activities were under the proper control of the government. On the other hand, however, strict measures and control were exercised upon those unregistered religious activities especially those conducted by the underground house churches. There had been a special concern of the government officials at the highest level to uphold national unity and social stability in the country, and to safeguard religious activities from any interference by foreign countries, hence »the problem of foreign infiltration« which was explicitly expressed in the letter of Chen Yun on April 4, 1990.<sup>17</sup> As one can see clearly, the official statements issued in 1990–91 came with obviously stricter measures than those in the »Document 19« of 1982.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Jiang Zemin's Three Sentences & More Recent Comments

Despite the attempts to control religious activities in China, the government's overall policy on religion was still positive and moving towards a more open attitude to religion. This was clear when President Jiang Zemin made his speech at the Working Congress of the National Front on November 7, 1993 and stated his »Three Sentences in carrying out religious work well«.<sup>19</sup> Jiang made clear that the emphasis of the religious policy would be expressed in three important sentences:

- a. the persistent implementation of the Party's policy on religion comprehensively and correctly;
- b. the strengthening of the control of religious affairs in accordance with the law, and
- c. to guide positively into the mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society.<sup>20</sup>

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interpreted by some scholars as a significant form of »religious surrogate«. See, for example, Donald E MACINNIS, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice*, New York, 1989, pp. 120f.

<sup>16</sup> As reported by the International Coalition for Religious Freedom, in: »ICRF Report: Religious Freedom in China«, see <http://www.religiousfreedom.com/wrpt/Chinarpt.htm>, updated May 3, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> See the Chinese text, in: *Religious Work in the New Period: Selected Documents*, p. 177.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 178–228.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 249–255.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.* p. 253.



It was for the first time that the policy of the mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society was heard directly out of the mouth of the top Chinese officials. This was a very significant move as religion was gradually given more recognition in the socialist society of China – from the old days of repression and elimination by the government to the recent years of being tolerated and even accepted as a persistent entity if it could be adapted to the socialist society. Jiang stated explicitly the party leaders' position that »Respecting and safeguarding the freedom of religious belief is a fundamental policy which the party and nation have upheld for a long time. We communists are atheists who do not believe in religion, but we do uphold the policy of freedom of religious belief. We want to unite the believers and the non-believers. We want to unite the broad masses of religious believers despite their different religious beliefs, to give full play to their positive role and turn them into a positive force for the building of modern Chinese socialism.«<sup>21</sup> Thus, despite the former worries »on the problem of foreign infiltration« in 1990, the party leaders were still taking a positive and forward-looking attitude towards religions in China.

Again, the government was playing a double-hand policy on religion. On the one hand, the government had already put aside the Marxist ideology on religion by not forcing believers to give up their religious beliefs. As it was said, »adaptation ... does not require citizens to give up religious beliefs, nor does it require any religion to change its basic doctrines.« Hence, the government control over religious beliefs was much relaxed. However, on the other hand, the government was demanding religions to »conduct their activities within the sphere prescribed by law and adapt to social and cultural progress.«<sup>22</sup> Jiang made it clear that positively getting religion and socialist society to adapt to one another principally implied »patriotism«. Thus he remarked:

- a. that religious believers must abide by the laws, regulations and policies of the socialist country;
- b. religious activities must adhere to and render service to the higher interests of the country; religious leaders must teach their followers to love their country and obey the law, to promote what is good and to serve the society.

The demand for »patriotism« may seem somewhat contradictory to religious freedom which was given to religions in China. It was, nevertheless, a clear stance of the form of moderate pragmatism the Chinese government was enforcing in her religious policy. For in order that religion could be tolerated in the socialist society of China, religious believers would have to obey the Chinese law, to love and to serve the country as they should.

Jiang's statement was later followed closely by Ye Xiaowen in an article (the party circular) entitled, »On the Importance of Sincerely Implementing the »Three Sentences« when Carrying Out Religious Work«.<sup>23</sup> Ye stressed that »the three sentences« demonstrated

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> The article first appeared in Chinese in: *Renmin Ribao*, March 14, 1996. An English summary can be found in: *China Study Journal*, vol. 11, No. 2, August 1996, pp. 10–14.



clearly the Party's policy on religion. »If one understands the ›three sentences‹ as a whole, this is to understand and grasp the essence of the Party's religious policy in the new situation, which is to uphold the principle of seeking truth from facts in religious work, uphold the dialectic method and uphold the reflections of the main principles and direction«. <sup>24</sup> Besides the need to guide positively into the mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society, Ye also admitted that there was an urgent need to bring all religious activities within the scope of laws and regulations. »It is necessary to establish and perfect a system of laws and regulations in the area of religion and the machinery for supervising their implementation«. <sup>25</sup> Hence, the Chinese government began to construct religious laws.

On January 31, 1994, the State Council promulgated two administrative regulations on religious activities. <sup>26</sup> »The Provision on the Administration of Religious Activities of Foreigners Within the Territory of the People's Republic of China« categorically stipulated that China respected the freedom in religious belief of foreigners within the territory, and protected friendly contacts and cultural and academic exchanges of aliens with Chinese religious circles. While guaranteeing the right of foreigners to take part in religious activities, the regulation stipulated that such activities must be carried out within officially recognized places. <sup>27</sup> The second regulation, entitled »The Provision on the Administration of Meeting Places of Religious Activities«, stated that all meeting places of religious activities must be registered with the authorities according to the rules formulated by the State Bureau of Religious Affairs. This was already a requirement under local regulations in some provinces and has been government policy for many years. It would mean in effect that religious activities conducted in unregistered places were considered illegal and those involved might be detained and punished. <sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, Chinese scholars were given much freedom to discuss and re-evaluate the religious situations and religious policy in China. For instance, there were several significant articles in the *1996 Annual of Religious Studies in China*, a publication by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. There was one article written by Tai Hong San and entitled: »Opening a New Phase of Religious Studies«. <sup>29</sup> Besides affirming the work and progress made by the government since Document 19 and Jiang's statement in 1993, Tai also reported on the rapid growth of interests in religious studies among Chinese scholars in the past fifteen years. The more significant indicators were the re-opening of the Institute of World Religion under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1982, with at present more than 30 researchers actively working in it. There have also been nearly 40 research units established in the past 15 years, including the departments of Religious Studies in the various universities in China, and the setting up of

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> See the Chinese text in: *Religious Work in the New Period: Selected Documents*, pp. 273–277.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 273f.

<sup>28</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 275–277.

<sup>29</sup> See Cao ZHONG-JIAN (ed.), *1996 Annual of Religious Studies in China*, the Chinese Academy of Social Science, Beijing, pp. 43–57.



the research institutes of Religious Studies within the government departments such as the State Bureau of Religious Affairs, plus those others run by the various religious groups.<sup>30</sup> Tai pointed also to the fact that there has been an emergence of vast publications on religious studies, estimated about 180 scholarly books, 70 translation works, 15 dictionaries and over a thousand articles published in the past 15 years in China.<sup>31</sup> These were great signs of the relaxation of the government's control over scholarly discussions on religious questions, the adoption of an open approach and the exercise of liberation of thought on religious matters in China.

Further to these, a new version of Jiang's ›Three Sentences‹ was spelt out by some central officials of the Chinese Communist Party in early 1999. The amended statements were made as follows:

1. to further improve the Party's policy on Religion persistently and comprehensively;
2. to strengthen the building of religious law and institutions and control religious affairs in accordance with the law; and
3. to guide positively into the mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society.<sup>32</sup>

When we compare Jiang's speech in 1993 with the amended version of 1999, we discover some very important and illuminating changes between the two statements which are shown in the following table (To be more exact, the original Chinese version is provided below):

Jiang's Speech in 1993	His Speech repeated in 1999
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the persistent implementation of the Party's policy on religion comprehensively and correctly;</li> <li>2. the strengthening of the control of religious affairs in accordance with the law, and</li> <li>3. to guide positively into the mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. to further improve the Party's policy on Religion persistently and comprehensively;</li> <li>2. to strengthen the building of religious law and institutions and control religious affairs in accordance with the law; and</li> <li>3. to guide positively into the mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society.</li> </ol>

The following changes are obvious:

- a. The words, ›persistent implementation‹ and ›correctly‹ which carried stronger connotations in the speech of 1993, were dismissed in the latter speech. They were replaced

<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> See Zhong GUOFA, ›An Attempt on the Creative Meanings of ›Guiding Positively the Mutual Adaptation of Religion and Socialist Society‹‹ (Chinese) in: *Dangdai Zongjiao yanjiu*, No. 2, 1998, pp. 10–16, 32.



by more sensible words, »to further improve the Party's policy on religion«. In the speech of 1993, it was stated »the persistent implementation of the Party's policy on religion comprehensively and correctly«, whereas in the speech of 1999 the statement became: »to further improve the Party's policy on Religion persistently and comprehensively«. Hence, the tone was much softer and this showed that the government was more willing to improve her policy on religion and adapt herself to new situations in China;

b. The second sentence stated in 1993 was: »the strengthening of the control of religious affairs in accordance with the law«, but then in 1999, it became: »to strengthen the building of religious law and institutions and control religious affairs in accordance with the law«. So now, it was not the control which was to be strengthened, it was rather the making of religious law and institutions which needed to be strengthened.

c. Moreover, it was further stressed that religious activities were now to be kept under the law and in accordance with the law. This could be a better way to improve the Party's policy on Religion.

### *3. Falungong – Posting of New Challenges*

Shortly after the re-statement of Jiang's »Three Sentences«, the Chinese government encountered a great shock and a real test of her openness regarding her policy on religion. The gathering of ten thousand members of Falungong in front of Zhongnanhai (the Beijing residence of the Chinese government leadership) on April 25, 1999 was a real threat and challenge to the government authorities.

The Falungong sect (also known as Falun Dafa) has been booming in China in the past decade. It was a combination of Buddhist and Daoist thoughts and focused its practices on the improvement of health and morality through the traditional Chinese breathing exercises (Qigong). Its leader, Li Hongzhi claimed to have 100 million members worldwide with 80 million members inside China.<sup>33</sup> The Chinese government did not take any measures against this widespread movement until the incident of April 25. The surrounding of Zhongnanhai was meant to be a protest against the arrests of several Falungong members by the Security Council. Yet it was so highly organized that the Chinese government was shocked and considered it a real threat to the political and social order and stability of the state, perhaps the biggest one since the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989. Since then, the government began to take severe measures to crack down on the movement.

On July 22, 1999, the Chinese government issued an edict to ban Falungong on the ground that it was not properly registered with the authorities and that it seriously damaged social stability, promulgated superstitions and fallacies and deceived people. The government also issued a circular prohibiting civil servants and employees of state-owned enterprises from practicing Falungong. Shortly after the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

<sup>33</sup> According to the government statistics, there were only about 2.1 millions practitioners under the name of Falun Dafa Research Society in China.



of the People's Republic of China, the Standing Committee of National People's Congress passed a bill to condemn Falungong as an illegal cult.<sup>34</sup> An international warrant was issued against Li Hongzhi, the founder of the cult who was still living abroad. This showed that the government was really worried. On December 26, 1999, it was reported that four communist cadres who were also Falungong leaders were arrested and sentenced to prison.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that Falungong could grow so fast and widespread in the past decade signified that the Chinese government had been relaxing much on her religious policy, perhaps since the issuance of Document 19. The peasants in the rural areas had been given back their land-ownership and those citizens in the urban areas were much relaxed from the control of the units to which they belonged. Hence, Chinese people were now enjoying more freedom than before in religious belief and thought, in meeting at public places and in joining any social or religious group they wished. It could not have happened any other time in China or anywhere else in the world that a tiny religious sect could recruit so many followers in just a decade. Falungong must have been enjoying much freedom in the past years or it could not be so popular and widespread. The movement, however, has revealed serious fundamental problems in the Chinese government's conception of religion.

Firstly, the movement has revealed an important fact that religion/religious beliefs are part of human needs, at least they are part of the needs of the people of China. Even though the Chinese government had been suppressing religion for the past few decades, Chinese people were found turning to all kinds of religions and religious activities once the freedom of religious beliefs was relaxed. Even while the Communist party members were restrained from having any religious beliefs, many cadres were found seeking other forms of expression or ›religious surrogates‹ such as ›Qigong‹ or ›Falungong‹.<sup>36</sup> It is interesting to know that since the relaxation of the government policy, there were thousands of temples renovated or rebuilt in China and the agents involved were the lineage and village leaders as well as the retired cadres.<sup>37</sup> Ye Xiaowen has several times reminded young cadres ›to learn, to study and learn seriously from real situations‹.<sup>38</sup> The religious situations in China would have indeed pushed the Chinese government and officials to take the situations seriously and to accept the reality of the religious needs of the Chinese people. The rapid growth of Qigong since the 1980s and the emergence of Falungong in the 1990s were simply tiny parts of the whole picture. The religious needs of the Chinese people were

<sup>34</sup> See *Renmin Ribao*, October 27, 1999.

<sup>35</sup> See *Renmin Ribao*, December 26, 1999.

<sup>36</sup> As Qigong and Falungong were neither religion nor superstition from the governments point of view (at least in the 1980s and before), they were the best ›religious surrogates‹ for the Chinese people, especially the cadres, to turn to.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, a recent report by TANG CHEE-BENG, *Social Change and Religious Traditions in Yongchun, Fujian*, a paper presented at the conference on ›Religion and Chinese Society – The Transformation of a Field and Its Implications for the Study of Chinese Culture‹, held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, May 29–June 2, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, YE's ›Preface‹ in a recent book, Zongjiao WENTI / Ganbu DUBEN, *Religious Questions – A Text for the Cadres*, Beijing 2000, pp. 1–9.



greatly manifested and widely seen among the various religious traditions and popular religions in China.

Secondly, the Chinese government seemed to have had learnt from history in the issuance of Document 19 in 1982. She has already admitted the long-lasting nature of religion and that religion could not be suppressed or eliminated by any coercive forces. But in condemning Falungong as an illegal cult the Chinese government was regressing to its old practice – trying to eliminate Falungong with coercive forces, though this time in a more cautious way than before. The Falungong movement has indeed posted a real challenge to the Chinese government, to see whether she had really learnt the lesson from history and hence reformed drastically her policy on religion.

Thirdly, concerning the Chinese government it has long been taken for granted that ›by Religion, it means the five officially recognized religions in China – namely Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Daoism and Islam‹. She has in the past years overlooked the significance of folk and popular religious beliefs which were prevailing and had already become an integral part of the life of the majority of Chinese people. The Chinese folk religions (or so-called Chinese popular religions) are often referred to as ›worshipping the gods‹ (»Baishen«). Such beliefs and practices have been kept by all the Chinese people, even the overseas Chinese and throughout the centuries.<sup>39</sup> The open door policy had given much impetus for growth of all religious traditions – including the five officially recognized religions as well as these popular religious beliefs in China such as the worship of Yuhuang Dadi, Tianhou and Mazu (The Jade Emperor, the Queen of Heaven and the Protector of Seafarers). The Chinese official scholars might have already noticed the revival and widespread of these popular religious beliefs in China that a delegation of scholars from the State Bureau of Religious Affairs and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing came to visit the Department of Religion at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in April, 1998.<sup>40</sup> The delegation was surprised to find out that ›Chinese Popular Religions‹ was among the courses offered by the Chinese University of Hong Kong and one of the crucial questions raised during the discussion was: »What is Religion?«. The delegation admitted that the Marxist classical definition of religion was out-dated and they were now finding ways to break through the old ideological boundary and look for a new definition of religion, to accommodate those religious beliefs and customs which were so popular in China. The delegates also admitted that if they broadened the definition of religion so as to appropriate the religious situations in China, then they would have to face another big problem in China, namely: that the majority of Chinese people would so be classified as ›religious believers‹ and the number of religious believers then become far too great for the present Bureau of Religious Affairs to handle. The case of Falungong could well remind the official scholars that their urgent task was not merely the search for a new

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. the more recent discussion in *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, ed. by Lynn PAN, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, pp. 80–82.

<sup>40</sup> The delegation was led by Lu Dajie, a well-known scholar and researcher from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, the People's Republic of China.



definition of religion, but also to seek more practical ways of dealing with new religious movements in China. Simply condemning the Falungong sects as ›illegal cults‹ would by no means help solve the underlying, deep-rooted problems in China. The Chinese government has to consider seriously the meaning of ›religion‹, the complexity and plurality of ›new religious movements‹, or even of ›New Age Movements‹, to understand closely such worldwide phenomena which have been growing so rapidly in recent years all over the world, including China.

Fourthly, the confrontation was a real test of the limits of government policy on religion. While the Chinese government was gradually turning to adopt an open attitude to religion, the Falungong members were pushing her beyond the limits of what she was ready to offer at this stage. Although the White Paper on ›Fifty Years of Progress in China's Human Rights‹ published in February 2000 still guarantees religious freedom of the people when it says: »The Chinese constitution clearly states that citizens enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession, of demonstration and of religious beliefs. Freedom of the person and personal dignity, and the residences of citizens are inviolable«<sup>41</sup>, yet when Falungong members were demanding their religious rights – the right to believe and the right to express their beliefs, the Chinese government did not recognize that these were part of their human rights. It was unfortunate that the requests of Falungong members were rejected and the movement was condemned as illegal. The condemnation of Falungong was based on what the cult might do or claimed to be doing. Their leader, Li Hongzhi, was accused of fabricating heretical ideas and exercising some form of control which was threatening to people's lives and social stability. And Falungong's deeds were said to be illegal without any justification by court cases. This was not a fair treatment to any religious cult. It became clear that so far, the government policy on religion was, strictly speaking, a form of ›religious tolerance‹ rather than truly ›religious freedom‹ in the modern sense.<sup>42</sup> In condemning Falungong as illegal cult, the Chinese government was found to be too conservative in their understanding of religion and was lacking other flexible means to deal with proper religious sects in modern society. While the Chinese government has kept demanding her citizens to obey the Chinese constitutions and laws, it should be time for the government to realize her own duty to set up laws and regulations so as to safeguard the rights of the citizens and guide them to be free from any government interference if they act according to the constitution. Though the Chinese government was willing to relax her policy on religion, she was feeling insecure especially when the political and social stability was threatened. It is prime time for the government to think seriously on more rational and sensible ways which will ensure her pragmatic policy on religion in China.

<sup>41</sup> See [http://www.china-embassy.org/Human Rights Issue/rights50.htm](http://www.china-embassy.org/Human%20Rights/Issue/rights50.htm), p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> It should also be noted that religious freedom in China applies only to what the government defined as religion, i.e. the five officially recognized religions in China, while others were condemned to be superstitions or illegal cults. This being the case applied to Falungong and other condemned cults.



#### 4. Concluding Remarks

The issue of religious policy will definitely be among the top issues on the agenda for the Chinese government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the new policy on religion will certainly become a significant component of the modernization of China and of the building of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Though the Communist government insisted not to change their Marxist view on religion, they had already put the ideology aside in order to deal with religious matters in a more pragmatic way. Since the issuance of Document 19, the government had given up the idea of eliminating religion completely in China. The long-lasting nature of religion was affirmed and religion was now given a more positive status in the society, co-existing with socialism. Religion could contribute to the society by producing morally good citizens, by serving to promote unity and stability in the socialist society of China. Hence, the idea of mutual adjustment between religion and socialist society was adopted and the government began to learn more practical ways to administer and control religions in China. The religious situations in China in the past 50 years had indeed pushed the Chinese government to accept the move from ideological Marxism to moderate pragmatism.

Besides the Falungong movement, there were also the flight of Karmapa Lama, one of the three most important leaders of Tibetan Buddhism, to India and the rapid growth of other Qigong groups in China,<sup>43</sup> which have all brought new challenges to her policy of moderate pragmatism in the past years. Although setbacks occurred during the past year which revealed serious problems in her new policy and showed that the Chinese government was not ready to cope with such rapidly changing religious situations, one indisputable fact was clear that since China had already started the more open policy on religion, it would be doubly difficult for her to turn back again. There have been widespread blossomings in all religious traditions in China including the Chinese popular and folk religions. There have been great developments among the academics, in the various Chinese academies of social sciences, in the various universities in China, in the research institutes and the various seminaries in China. Even the Chinese official scholars have been constructing new formulations in the revision of Marxist classical theory to accommodate the new religious situations in China.<sup>44</sup> In order to carry on with her pragmatism and adopt a more open policy on religion, the Chinese government needs to continue with the following three trends of development: (a) to attempt serious studies and acquire proper understandings on religious matters; (b) to work on mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society; and (c) to construct religious laws in China.

<sup>43</sup> Besides Falungong, the government has estimated over 50 million citizens who were practicing Qigong in China. They belong to about 2000 Qigong groups from about 70 schools of Qigong in China.

<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Tai Hong SAN's »Opening a New Phase of Religious Studies« and Lu DAJIE's »What is Religion?« in: *The 1996 Annual of Religious Studies in China*, published by: THE INSTITUTE OF WORLD RELIGION, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 1998.



(a) Firstly, Ye's call »to learn, to study and to learn seriously from real situations« is an important reminder for both Chinese officials and Chinese scholars. The awakened concern and growing interests among Chinese officials and scholars on the study of religion would continue to be a significant and essential move for a proper understanding of religion in China. Religion, indeed, should be seen not merely as a historical or social phenomenon in China, it should also be reckoned as a human and cultural phenomenon which signifies one of the basic needs of the people of China. Moreover, Chinese officials and scholars should make a greater effort to study and understand modern phenomena such as »New Age Movements« and »New Religious Movements« so that they can adopt better ways to deal with modern religious and/or quasi-religious movements in China.

(b) Secondly, »mutual accommodation« should work on both sides. Bishop Ting once said: »To put forward this task of mutual accommodation requires, on the one hand, that all religions, in so far as their own beliefs permit, step up their efforts to eliminate those things which are not compatible with socialism; on the other hand, it requires that non-believers resolutely get rid of leftist influences, clean out remnant old ideas of wiping out religion, and enforce the policy to provide the essentials needed for all religions to carry on their religious affairs better.«<sup>45</sup> Hence, the Chinese government needs to make a greater effort, not only to guide religion to its accommodation of the socialist society in China, but also to adopt a more flexible, rational and open approach to the treatment of religions, including Chinese popular religions and the new religious movements in China.

(c) Thirdly, there is the making of religious laws in China. The construction of religious laws is a significant move in the development of the religious policy of China. It signifies one important step taken by the Chinese government that she not only affirms the persistence of religion in the socialist society of China by giving it a legal status under Chinese socialism, but also begins to adapt herself to the religious situations in China by learning proper ways to administer and manage religious matters in China. At the conference in Beijing in January 1996, Ismail Amat, a State Councillor disclosed that for the next five and fifteen years, China »will build up a relatively complete set of legal framework and supervision mechanism over religious work«. At the 15th National Congress of the CPC held in 1997, the Chinese officials stressed the continuance of the reform of the legal system and »exercising the rule of law« as a basic state policy. In March 1999, the Second Session of the Ninth NPC included »exercising the rule of law and building a socialist country governed according to law« as an urgent task for the government.<sup>46</sup> By making »exercising the rule of law and building a country governed according to law« a basic goal of the reform of the legal system building, this is indeed a big step towards the building of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

<sup>45</sup> See K.H. TING, »Foreword«, in the English translation of Luo ZHUFENG (ed.) op. cit., p. XII.

<sup>46</sup> It was then echoed by the editor of an official magazine, *The Religious Cultures in the World*, claiming that »the Religious Law has to be completed very soon and religion will have to be administered according to law«. See *The Religious Cultures in the World*, vol. 17, 1999, no. 1, p. 1. There is another article entitled: »Religious Law in China: is What We All Are Anticipating«, in the same issue, p. 22.



China has been changing in the past 20 years and she was indeed moving progressively towards the modernization of religious policy in China. It is not an easy job for China to learn to adapt herself to the religious situations in China, perhaps far more difficult than for religion to accommodate herself to the socialist society in China. However, the trend is clear that in the past twenty years socialism and religion in China have been moving closer to one another. It is hoped that in the continual progress of religious policy of 21<sup>st</sup> century China, religion will eventually enjoy full respect and legal protection in China, and with religion and socialism working together in mutual accommodation and in greater harmony, a new form of socialism with Chinese characteristics will eventually emerge.

*Summary:* The religious policy of China has seen a continual progress in the last 20 years. This is made clear by a study of the various official documents issued on the subject during this period. Although officially still Marxist, and thereby atheist, the government has begun to adopt a more pragmatic policy, leaving greater freedom to registered religious movements. The result has been a widespread blossoming of religious movements and churches. That this has been too much of a challenge for the Chinese government is demonstrated by the persecution of members of Falungong among others. Nevertheless, an increasing awareness of the situation and a parallel growth of religious studies at the academies leave room for hope that socialism and religion will be able to coexist in China's future.

*Zusammenfassung:* Die Religionspolitik in China unterzieht sich seit 20 Jahren einem stetigen Wandel. Dies wird ersichtlich durch einen Überblick der entsprechenden offiziellen Dokumente aus diesem Zeitraum. Obwohl offiziell immer noch marxistisch, und dadurch atheistisch, hat die chinesische Regierung begonnen eine pragmatischere Einstellung einzunehmen, welche registrierten religiösen Bewegungen mehr Freiheit lässt. Seither beobachtet man eine gewaltige Zunahme an Kirchen und religiösen Bewegungen. Dass dies für die chinesische Regierung eine Überforderung darstellt, wird deutlich an der Verfolgung u.a. der Falun Gong Bewegung. Ein zunehmendes Verständnis für die Situation und das Wachstum religionswissenschaftlicher Studien an den Universitäten lassen jedoch hoffen, dass in Chinas Zukunft Sozialismus und Religion nebeneinander existieren werden können.

*Sumario:* La política religiosa de China se encuentra desde 20 años en un permanente proceso de cambio. Esto se desprende de un rápido estudio de los correspondientes documentos oficiales de dicho periodo. Aunque el gobierno chino es oficialmente todavía marxista y por ello atea, ha comenzado a defender una postura más pragmática que deja mayor libertad a los movimientos religiosos registrados oficialmente. Desde entonces se observa un gran aumento de las iglesias y los movimientos religiosos. Que ello crea también problemas, para los que el gobierno chino todavía no está preparado, se desprende de la persecución del movimiento de Falun Gong. La comprensión creciente de la situación religiosa y el aumento de los estudios de ciencias de la religión en la universidades permiten abrigar la esperanza de que en el futuro de China el socialismo y la religión puedan coexistir.