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Religion in China

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While playing with our son Julian at a small park in our "home" city of Xiamen one January day, my wife Lisa and I met an American couple in their late 30s and their child who had come to the balmy south from their home in Beijing. Larry was a professional photographer and a painter, and his wife Marilyn had been a teacher of English as a Second Language on a California campus. They had a 9-year-old son, Max, and no plans to return to California or to move anywhere else, for that matter.

Max was being educated at home, his mother acting as teacher. Max looked unhappy. His father was painting, hoping to sell some of his work in Hong Kong soon, and his mother was teaching English at a Beijing college, receiving grant money from her California school. They claimed to have sold their California home and nearly all of their belongings. Larry had quit his lucrative job and here they were—an American family in China. China had its own problems, they admitted, but at least in China you didn't have to worry about having your child abducted from a shopping mall. This remark caused Lisa and me to look again at the apparently lonely 9-year-old in the California Angels baseball cap.

As we shared with them our motivations for living a third year in China and offered some reflections on various places we had traveled, we came to discuss some distinctions between life in the south and life in the north. One of the aspects of our lush Fujian Province that had struck the California couple as being strikingly different from life in dry, dusty Beijing and some other northern cities was the obvious prominence of Buddhism in the south. They had visited several temples in the Fujian cities of Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Fuzhou, and they were startled to see the number of people who came to the temples and worshipped openly. They were not sure whether to ascribe this to a traditionally stronger Buddhism in the south, a less stringent political control in the south, or some combination of the two. Whatever the causes, the temples of the north are typically almost devoid of worshippers, and there are far fewer Chinese who visit the northern temples as tourists or apparent tourists. They simply stay away.

Without question, the temples of the north generally suffered more devastating damage during the most violent years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) than did the temples in the south, and many of the northern temples remain gutted, even if their façades have been renovated in the past several years. Nevertheless, it would be a serious mistake to assume that a great many of the southern temples somehow escaped the ravages of the late 1960s. They did not.

Temple renovation in China is widespread and just one manifestation of the building and reparation boom that has turned much of the nation into a vast construction site. I recall the extensive repairs underway on the Lichee Garden Temple in Fuzhou, next to Fuzhou University, when we arrived there to teach in 1984. The temple was in many ways typical. A large monastery, it housed more than 100 monks and had a large library of valuable texts. It had stood on this ground for more than 1,000 years.

During the Cultural Revolution, this temple was battered by Red Guards, swept out, and then converted into a transistor radio factory. On its grounds was constructed a scrap iron salvage

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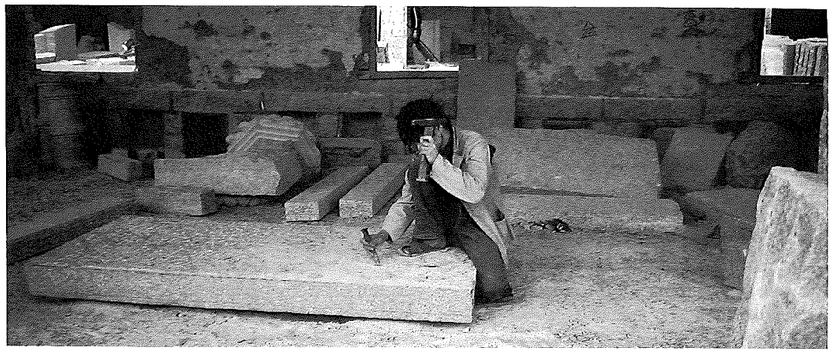

LICHEE GARDEN TEMPLE/GEOFFREY KAIN

yard, distinguished by its nondescript gray brick chimney rising above the red temple walls and churning thick black smoke over the swarms of bicyclists moving slowly along Industrial Road. The monks from this temple, and from several other smaller temples in and around the city, fled to the enormous monastery atop Drum Mountain several miles outside of the city. They remained there for 10 years before returning (at least some of them) to their old home, now a decrepit shell.

Lichee Garden Temple

Since 1979 the government and many Overseas Chinese have appropriated an enormous amount of money, materials, and skilled labor for the refurbishing of temples like this one. Skilled stonecutters (some as young as 14 or 15) and carpenters repair ruined statuary, elaborate doors and beams, and whatever else is in need of work.

Repairs were in full swing when we entered the Lichee Garden Temple. New statues were being molded in clay over large wood and straw frames, some of them as tall as 20 feet. New roof beams and decorative corner posts were being cut and planed and carved, and the smell of freshly sawed pine permeated the grounds. Walls were being whitewashed and ceiling beams painted brilliant red, green, yellow, and blue in intricately detailed patterns. The temple had received a large bronze incense burner from a wealthy Overseas Chinese from Burma, while another wealthier Overseas Chinese Buddhist from Thailand had presented a large white jade reclining Buddha. White jade is most precious. This priceless Buddha had become the pride of the temple, and a new pavilion was being constructed just to house it.

Shortly after the white jade reclining Buddha had arrived, Lisa and Julian and I strolled over to the temple to have a look at it. The pavilion was still under construction and we had to yell to the laborers on the roof so that they wouldn't shower us with debris, evidence of which lay all about the base of the building. The pavilion itself was made entirely of concrete, though the roof was made to look as if it were covered with slate tiles, and the columns painted red so they might pass for traditional red-painted wooden pillars. Here and there, concrete was formed to look like bamboo. The jade Buddha was held in an upstairs room and was still in its shipping crate. The cover and front panel were pried off so that the curious might have an early peek. The jade was startlingly beautiful, but the Buddha wore a very loud yellow synthetic cape and had bright red lips and fingernails.

The temple was not only under repair, but was expanding, and the monks who once had to flee to safety now had enough influence to insist that the scrap iron facility be torn down because it stood on ground under control of the temple. The monks also managed to have another building demolished so that they could build a gate on the other side of their circular pond, facing south as it should to absorb the best possible energies.

As work progressed, the temple attracted an increasing number of visitors. Eventually, the monks began charging admission (10 fen, or about the equivalent of three American pennies) and opened a small shop near the center of the

temple next to the drum tower, selling everything from handmade black cloth monk shoes, porcelain figurines, incense, and prayer beads to orange soda, sea shells, and flour-coated peanuts. Pasted on the wall not far from the entry to the souvenir shop was a poster of a Red Army officer, saluting a distant flag.

Despite all the renovation and increased tourism, the temple was a peaceful place. Monks, some very old and some as young as 12, moved slowly about the grounds or quietly tended to chores such as sweeping a set of stone stairs or tending the altars. A couple of expansive gardens contained a profusion of flowers and other plants, healthy and well cared for.

There was always a commingling at the temples of the quiet, slow-moving monks themselves, a large number of Chinese tourists who seemed unfamiliar with and amused by the sacred world (judging from their accents and their facial features, many of these visitors were from the north), and the smaller number of Chinese who came to worship. The worshippers will unabashedly drop to their knees in a crowd, hold up a cluster of smoking joss sticks, and kowtow before a statue of a holy figure. Some enter the temples with commitment; many enter with perhaps a shade of embarrassment and guilt, after paying a small fee.

The Communist Party continues to discourage religious worship in all forms, of course, and to propagate atheism. That the government is responsible for repairing many churches and temples is consistent with its professed practice of allowing religious freedom, but the burst of repair work is also without question part of the government's overall effort to promote tourism and to give itself a face-lift by offering this most obvious show of its new openness and increased tolerance. China thirsts after foreign capital, which it badly needs to fuel its modernization (to which everything is subordinated) and, until the recent atrocities in Beijing, the central government has exhibited some surprising (though generally superficial) leniency in order to stimulate increased tourism and foreign investment.

Memories and Fears

Religious belief itself is not in accord with the principles of communism, and most fear that such a political failing may well be cause for suffering one day—not only for themselves, but for their families, as well. The purges following the "Hundred Flowers Movement" of the late 1950s (calling for free and open criticism of the Party, then fiercely retaliating against the critics) and the outrageous violence of the Cultural Revolution remain very fresh and bitter memories in the collective Chinese consciousness.

During our two and a half years in the south of China, we met a number of "underground" (that is, not officially registered) Christians, many of whom automatically assumed that because we were Westerners we were Christians, and then made it a point to inform us in confidence, with signs of both elation and hesitation, that they were Christian also. The admissions made to me were always private and unsolicited.

Christianity is the "Foreigners' Religion." Buddhism is generally regarded as the superstition of the peasants and the uneducated workers, and is a vestige of "feudal society." The Party holds that much work remains to be done to fully educate these people and liberate them from the bondage of the fanciful and absurd. Human progress—that is, material progress—is retarded, says the Party, by those who stubbornly cling to outmoded ideas and illusions.

There are Christian churches in China, but not many. The first I came across was in an especially old street in Fuzhou (the 2,400-year-old capital city of Fujian Province). It is a small brick structure with a characteristic steeple, stereotypical gothic windows, and a Latin inscription over the main entrance. I was startled when I saw it because it looked so strangely out of place . . . like a mosque in a Midwest town. Right in the middle of the usual squalor of food stalls, endless leantos, a street swarming with people on foot and bicycle, there it stood, nearly engulfed in the profusion of the city so that you could conceivably overlook it in the midst of all this busy detail. I wanted to go in and have a look, but it stood behind a locked black iron gate. No hours posted. No one I talked to was willing or able to get any information about when it might be open for services or otherwise. Every time I passed it, it was locked.

We heard of another Christian church in the city, just which denomination no one was certain. We made arrangements to go to the Christmas service, Christmas Eve 1984. One acquaintance of ours said, "Oh, you would like to go to church. I know of a church and I have met its director. I will ask him when the service is and inform him that you are coming." We were not especially comfortable with the formality, but we had no idea where the place was—and that year in Fuzhou, a city of about two million souls, we were the sum of the foreign population (the city having "reopened to the outside world" in 1982), so in situations like this we were dependent upon the efforts of our Chinese hosts.

This man booked a university car for us, had told us the service would be at 7:30 P.M., and planned to accompany us. By mid-afternoon on Christmas Eve, however, he decided that he would not come with us; he felt that he was stepping in where only our assigned guide/interpreter should tread and told us that he had better retreat before he stirred up any animosity. Something had apparently been said to him. "I'll leave instructions with the driver and see whether or not your interpreter is available to accompany you."

When the time came, our interpreter, Yan Li, appeared to guide us to the church. We told him that as long as the driver knew where to go, it wasn't necessary for him to come along. He claimed that the driver probably didn't know exactly where the church was, but that *he* knew every square inch of the city, his hometown. So we walked together to the car garage, met our driver, and rolled off to church.

Somewhere in the heart of the teeming city, we turned into a narrow lane or alleyway and pulled up in front of a doorway that looked like it might lead anywhere but into a church. Yan Li hopped out, ran to the door, opened it and entered. After a couple of minutes he returned, claiming that the service was over. Sorry. "But it's only 7:15. When did it start?" "Five o'clock." "Are you sure this is the right church?" "Of course this is the right church. The other man was just confused about the time." "Is there another church?" "Not that I know of." We sighed, rolled our eyes, and headed toward home.

Several days later we met the fellow who had made the arrangements, and he asked whether we had enjoyed the Christmas service. We explained what had happened and he was astonished, certain that we had gone to the wrong place. We left it at that.

The Churches of China

Not all Christian churches in China are so elusive, however. After our initially frustrating close encounters in Fuzhou, we found our way into a number of churches in various cities. In Guangzhou (Canton) in 1986 we visited the large almost cathedral-size Catholic church famed throughout the country. This church has a striking light-colored stone facade, a lofty spire, a large rose window, and a number of stained glass windows—or what used to be stained glass windows but are now clear glass windows since the stained glass was all smashed or shot out during the Cultural Revolution. Only small fragments of colored glass remain in a couple of the windows. The pews had apparently all been destroyed and had been replaced by rickety benches. We could see where the lights had once hung from the ceiling, but they were gone too. The altar area was cleaned out and the altar itself was nothing more than a large table with a white linen cloth draped over it. There were a few people here and there, praying.

We came upon a very attractive dark brick church in Shanghai in 1987 and decided to have a look inside since the iron gate was unlocked. A few passersby stopped and stared as we entered the church. We were met by the Chinese pastor who gave us a brief and muted tour, pointing out what had been repaired, what was currently undergoing repair, and what was still in need of repair. His church, too, had been almost completely destroyed by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. The pointed arches which capped the ends of pews had been knocked off and burned. The altar, the colored windows, and the statuary had all been smashed. The entire interior of the church had been ruined. Now there was a beautiful new wood floor; the pews had not been replaced, but the ends had been sanded and varnished to conceal the damage; the colored glass had been replaced with clear. The altar was still under construction, and there was a series of new lights hanging on long chains from the ceiling. The pastor briefly mentioned the fear and sadness he experienced when the church was sacked and expressed his firm hope that it would not happen again.

Another apparent sign of religious resurgence in China is the surprising appearance of a host of

new missionaries. A number of religious organizations, primarily fundamentalist and almost exclusively American, are sending groups or "teams" to China to work as teachers (since missionaries as missionaries are forbidden). There is a surprising number of these teams throughout the country.

At first I wondered how an authority that propagates atheism could turn around and invite groups of a dozen or more evangelical Christians to enter the universities and high schools to teach. I realized before long that the government is fully aware that the groups are Christian, but contracting with groups like these simplifies the hiring process. The department heads at the schools don't have to weary themselves with as many screening processes or have to carry on as many correspondences with independent instructors coming to China to teach. By contracting with a group, the Chinese get a package of hard-working, well-behaved native English-speaking models willing to work for relatively low wages.

Although the missionaries/teachers are forbidden to proselytize, they do incorporate some biblical material into their courses. But, since English competence is deemed necessary for national modernization and because the authorities clearly feel that the impact of this relative handful of religious teachers is negated by the political instruction and social coercion that every student is subjected to, no one bothers to interfere with their teaching methods.

The new missionaries do manage to convert some of the students. Most of the converts remain discreet about their religious conversion, but there are always some who make no attempt to conceal their new faith. One example should suffice. I recall in particular one very likable young man who had befriended several of the Christian foreign students at Xiamen University, had embraced the Christian faith, and had become an advocate of many Western ideas, Western styles (he had his hair curled and liked to wear bell bottoms, T- shirts with messages printed in English, and dark glasses) and, less vociferously, Christianity. We were concerned about him.

In my class one day he had given a presentation on Western manners and English customs, then extended his discussion to conclude with some forceful remarks about how wise the Chinese would be to adopt more Western ideas and practices—like true freedom of religion, democratic elections, and more student freedom in determining what courses to take, and what instructor to have for a particular course. This appeal was offered with innocent exuberance, but it came at a bad time—during the student protests in Beijing and Shanghai in early 1987 calling for many of the same things. Students at Xiamen University, as at other universities, had been warned not to organize any protests, and openly expressing views sympathetic with those espoused by the protesters could result in expulsion from the university and a political labeling which would prove troublesome for a lifetime.

By the time of his classroom oration, he was beginning to attend the church services provided by a group of foreign students. On a couple of occasions when I met him he was carrying a Bible. He was a diligent student, well liked by his classmates. Although he did not speak openly to groups of Chinese about his conversion, it was well known that he was a Christian. Intervention finally came in June, during the strongest wave of "anti-bourgeois" activity in the south, during the "Campaign Against Bourgeois Liberalism" of 1987.

As he passed down a staircase one morning, a Party official at the university called him into his office. The official explained to him briefly and simply that while he was free to worship as a Christian if he chose, the Chinese Christian church and the foreign Christian church were to remain separate. No Chinese student would be allowed to attend church services on campus with foreign friends and, further, Chinese students were no longer being allowed to visit the foreign Christian students in their dormitory rooms without first registering their names in a guest book left with a receptionist at the entrance.

The message was clear, and its implications—though powerful then—have become much more poignant to me now, following the brutal assault on dissidents in Beijing. Those who know China are aware that there is a rigid distinction between what the foreigners may think and do and what the Chinese citizens will be allowed to say and do. Nominal freedom has proven to be desirable and even profitable, to a point. But no people, I think, are so often and so vividly reminded of the disparity between the nominal and the actual as are the Chinese. □

China's Great Leap Backward

by Diane D. Pikcunas

China is a fascinating country, and many remnants of the age-old Chinese civilization still remain despite 40 years of Communist control. I visited this land in December 1988, six months before the Tiananmen Square massacre.

As I walked along the streets of Beijing and Shanghai, I noticed the many shops—ranging from noodle stands to bicycle parts shops to camera stores—lining the streets with entrepreneurs busily selling their wares. Deng Xiaoping's "Four Modernizations," aimed at improving agriculture, industry, the military, and science and technology, had clearly helped propel the Chinese people toward a market economy.

The taste of economic freedom, however, whetted the Chinese appetite for political freedom—the right to speak out against individuals and programs hampering China's development. In 1988 the central bureaucracy began limiting the market incentives, with resulting backlogs, shortages of raw materials, unemployment, and inflation. The link between economic and political freedom was becoming clear.

New Economic Policy

The shift in China's economic policy is a major turning point in the country's recent history.

When Mao Zedong's troops conquered China in 1949, he set about to build a Marxist-Leninist society. One of his first priorities was to eliminate all opposition. Chinese by the thousands were arrested, subjected to public trials, jailed, and some were executed. Businessmen and large landowners were particular targets for persecution. The government took over businesses and land, and abolished the right of private ownership.

Mao aimed to transform China into an industrial nation overnight, despite the human costs. In the "Great Leap Forward," begun in 1958, he pushed for rapid development, and encouraged Chinese citizens to make steel in backyard furnaces. After a few years, it became clear that this policy was a failure, and China's industrial production fell. Mao's agricultural communes also failed to increase output. The centralized economy helped Mao gain absolute control over the populace, but brought disaster to the Chinese people and crippled the nation's economy.

Mao's death in 1976 led to a struggle for succession that brought Deng Xiaoping to power. Though a Marxist-Leninist, Deng witnessed the failures of Mao's centralized economy and saw the need for economic revitalization. Even Lenin had recognized the failure of War Communism (1918-1921) and initiated some market incentives in his New Economic Policy of 1921-1928. Deng tried a similar approach, introducing some market incentives as part of his Four Modernizations, which were designed to make China a great economic power by the early 21st century.

Mao's Great Leap Forward proved a disaster for China, and Deng now envisioned a Great Leap Outward. While Mao had shut out foreign influences, Deng opened China's doors to cooperation with capitalist nations, welcoming joint ventures and foreign investment. Tourism was

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