

Fulbright - Hays

Religious Revival, the Local State, and the Transition from State-Socialism

Religion is political, and politics, even in highly centralized states, is local. My dissertation project assesses how regimes in transition have attempted to regulate growing religiosity at the local level and how religious groups in turn shape local politics. I am currently in the first stages of field research in Russia, and I am applying to the Fulbright-Hays for support of the China-side of my comparative study.

Introduction & Overview of Project

In both China and Russia, the transition from state-socialism has been accompanied by a growth in popular religiosity.¹ Deep-rooted indigenous religious activities, such as shamanism, goddess worship, and syncretic sects have resurfaced alongside more conventional forms of religious expression. Some suggest that this multifaceted religious revival is extensive, with estimates of thousands of churches and temples being built and restored each year. Official statistics suggest that China now has over 200 million “believers” and the second largest evangelical population in the world.² Two-thirds of the Russian population, moreover, now identify with a religious confession – a higher rate of belief than in Germany and the Netherlands.³

This resurgence of religiosity has not gone unnoticed by the Chinese and Russian states. Both Beijing and Moscow have taken considerable efforts to regulate religious activities. In China’s case, the central state has attempted to create a more structured environment for

¹ Several recent studies have remarked on the revival of religious practices in Asia and Eastern Europe. For example, Yang (2004a; 2004b); Fan (2003); Overmyer (2003); Potter (2003); Filatov (2002); Leung (2002); Kipnis (2001); Lambert (2001); Lai (2001); Chao (1999); Ownby (1999); Tu (1999); Jing (1996); Shahar and Weller (1996); Rubinstein (1995); Chan and Hunter (1994); Seymour and Wehrli (1994); Dean (1993); Wang (1993); Harrell (1988); Anagnost (1987).

² Official statistics on religion in China are often unreliable. State documents estimate the number around 100 million religious adherents (in 1997) to 200 million religious adherents (in 2002); external estimates suggest this number is closer to 200 million and rapidly growing; see Dean (1997); Ye (2002); Kindopp (2004).

³ Kaariainen (1998).

religious expression by establishing a legal framework outlining acceptable religions and setting parameters on religious activities. These religious policies are then implemented and enforced by local governments and bureaucracies. However, as a consequence of enterprising local elites, central policies on religion have been interpreted in diverse ways. In some instances, Chinese local elites have renamed places of worship as cultural relics and museums, and collected admissions fees.⁴ Thus, while central authorities have set the guidelines for religious expression, local elites decide whether religious practices in their region meet these guidelines.⁵ More specifically, it is at the local level where public officials and religious communities interact with each other, and define in the process what they each want and whether cooperation or conflict best meet these concerns.

This research project is not a study of theology or belief systems, but rather an attempt to identify the conditions under which local elites support, tolerate, or suppress – politicize or depoliticize – religious groups within their locales, and just as importantly, how religious communities use local governments to protect and promote their interests and values. My project follows the research tradition of “state-society relations;” however, I seek to advance this scholarship by exploring the relations between religious groups and the local state, and how these groups influence each other in a time of economic and political transition. This shift in focus is important because the literature on state-society relations has remained largely secular in ignoring the growing religiosity in China and in privileging economic actors over cultural ones.⁶ One key concern of my project will be identifying the various points of contact between religious groups and the local state, or what Jose Casanova calls the “deprivatization” of religion, where religion abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public

⁴ See, Chau (2005); Yang, M. (2004a; 2004b).

⁵ Seymour and Wehrli (1994).

⁶ See especially, Baum and Shevchenko (1999).

sphere.⁷ A second question of inquiry will be examining regional variation in the relationships between religious groups and the local state. A final area of concern will be exploring what the relationship between Church and State suggests about the changing boundaries between public and private, cultural and political arenas of cooperation and contestation across China.

Working Hypotheses

My research in China explores four dimensions under which local governments and religious groups establish mutually beneficial relationships in order to meet their respective needs: i) religious competition, ii) economic resources, iii) political competition, and iv) cultural capital. At first blush, it may seem counterintuitive for religious groups to establish close ties or court the local state, because they answer to a higher calling and the Chinese state has historically had a tradition of suppression. However, within the context of the transition where religious freedoms are still in flux, religious groups act like interest groups and seek to align themselves with the powerful and resourceful. At the extreme, this speaks to religious groups capturing the state; but more commonly this is expressed as a collaboration that generates a mutually beneficial relationship.

China's religious reforms initiated in 1982 additionally fostered a close relationship between the local "church and state." For instance, the hierarchy of religions created by Beijing encourages religious groups to compete among themselves for a place in the local pecking order.⁸ At the same time religious groups are struggling to align themselves with the local state, they are also competing with one another for followers. Thus, religious groups compete on a

⁷ Casanova (1994: 65-6).

⁸ The Party Central Committee issued *Document 19* outlining the general philosophy of state-religious relations for the reform period. *Document 19* defines legitimate religious activity as involving one of the five major religions: Buddhism, Daoism (Taoism), Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Groups operating outside of these five religions are deemed illegal.

horizontal playing field with each other for “souls.” I hypothesize that the first point of contact between the local state and religious groups is fueled by religious competition.

Hypothesis 1 – Religious Competition. *In areas of diverse religiosity, religious groups court the local state to secure certain advantages, such as ease in the registration process or the ability to shut out the “religious competition,” and in return they may mobilize support for a candidate or local government policy.*

A second point of contact between religious groups and the local state is shaped by economic resources. The transition from state-socialism has severely altered the political landscape “from one centrally organized, rigidly bounded, and hysterically concerned with impenetrable boundaries to one in which territorial, ideological, and issue boundaries are attenuated, unclear and confusing.”⁹ For local and regional governments this has meant greater autonomy from Beijing; however, this independence is not without costs. Local governments are now more financially responsible for providing the numerous public goods and services to their communities that citizens have come to expect from years of living in a socialist state. However, given the limited taxing capacity of local government, low levels of bureaucratic development, and high levels of corruption, the local state is often severely constrained in its ability to provide these services.¹⁰ Where religious groups are willing and able to fill in the gap, (for example, by repairing roads, supporting local charities, or providing tourist revenue), they are tolerated and even courted by local public officials. One such mutually beneficial relationship can be identified in Fujian, where entrepreneurial officials developed a “Mazu Goddess Tour,” charging pilgrims \$2,400 (USD) to pay homage to the goddess’ main temple in Meizhou.¹¹ Thus, by treating religions as economic resources, the local state is able to expand room for religiosity.

This leads to the hypothesis:

⁹ Jowitt (1992: 307).

¹⁰ There are many systematic discussions on the abuses of power, corruption, and the weakening of legitimacy in China. See, for example, Oi (1989); Levy (1995); Perry (1999); Zheng (1999); Perry & Selden (2003).

¹¹ Lyons (2000).

Hypothesis 2 – Economic Resources. *Religious groups are supported or tolerated by the local state when they provide public goods for the community and extra revenue for the local state.*

A third point of contact between religious groups and the local state is propelled by political competition. I assume that locally elected officials are rational decision-makers, who need local support to remain in power – whether because of voters or because “higher ups” in the administrative hierarchy value local stability. The choice of local elites to support or suppress religious groups may be influenced by political competition and political accountability in village elections. In areas where there is strong political competition and high accountability, local politicians have powerful incentives to reach out to a diverse body of constituents in order to expand coalitions of support; whereas in areas of low political competition and high corruption, local politicians have fewer incentives to reach out to a diverse body of constituents and may use their power to seek personal financial benefits from religious groups.¹² Thus, I hypothesize:

Hypotheses 3 – Political Competition. *Village elections, especially when they are competitive, may encourage local elites to be more supportive of religious communities in order to expand their vote share than in regions insulated from electoral pressures.*

We must additionally consider how the interactions between religious groups and the local state are influenced by the cultural role of religious groups. There is some evidence that post-communist regimes, like their predecessors, are drawing on religious and cultural capital to strengthen national identity and promote regime legitimacy. In China, there is an increasing trend of central leaders paying homage to the Confucius Temple and the mythical Yellow Emperor to build domestic support.¹³ This turn to culture is not surprising in a context where Marxist ideologies have lost support and the current regime is seeking alternative ways to build

¹² See Wilkinson (2004) for a similar argument on the role of ethnic diversity in elections in India.

¹³ Christensen (1996) argues that since the CCP is no longer communist it must be even more culturally Chinese.

legitimacy. In this sense, religion and other cultural symbols have become instruments of the central state for maximizing regime support and minimizing political challenges. I plan to determine whether this relationship of drawing on cultural capital is repeating itself on a local level; that is, are local states supportive of religious groups that are considered culturally authentic or integral parts of the state, and are local religious groups leading the movement for realignment with the state?

Hypothesis 4 – Cultural Capital. *The local state is more supportive of religious organizations that are considered as “culturally authentic” or “native religions” rather than “foreign religions.”*

Methodology

No single research strategy can sort out the many factors shaping China's regulation of religion and the bargaining that goes on between local governments and religious communities. Interviews will serve as a key data-generating resource for my research. To empirically test the hypotheses of my project I will interview elected officials and candidates to explore how political elites perceive the role of religious groups in their locale. In particular, I will inquire about religious groups that fail the local registration process, and religious groups that fall on the margins of acceptable religious behavior. Through interviews with local elites, I additionally hope to uncover projects in which the local state works closely with religious groups, such as the funding of orphanages and/or the elevation of poverty campaigns. To supplement my interviews with local officials, I plan to conduct interviews at the provincial branches of Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) and the United Front Work Department (UFWD) with the goal of exploring how agents of the state regulate and perceive the role of religious groups within their province.¹⁴

It is equally as important to examine the regulation of religion from the perspective of

¹⁴ These institutions are responsible for registering and monitoring religious groups at the local level.

religious groups themselves. I will conduct focused discussions with religious practitioners and interviews with local religious leader to explore how grassroots religious organizations perceive their role and goals, and examine how the local state shapes religious activities. To ensure standardization across interviews and cases I will ask a sequence of “standardized, open-ended” questions.¹⁵

I plan to supplement my interviews with several additional sources, including local newspapers, gazetteers, yearbooks and encyclopedias. Local newspapers will provide an important resource for identifying religious groups that have fallen under suspicion of the local state and religious groups that have established a mutually beneficial relationship with the state. To help track the treatment of religious and cultural groups over time, local gazetteers (*difang zhi*) will provide a valuable reference. Gazetteers are generally published by provincial and city-municipalities governments, but they are also published by villages and individual temples. Village-level gazetteers that I have examined at the Harvard-Yenching Library contain detailed information of a variety of subjects, including the historical treatment of religious and folk traditions.¹⁶ Within gazetteers I will look for data on the changing relationship between religious groups and the local government. Finally, I plan to gather data from provincial yearbooks (*nianjian*) and encyclopedias (*baike quanshu*) on the economic resources religious groups may provide to the local state, including tax revenues generated by religious groups, subsidies given to religious organizations by the state, tourism packages, and ticket sales to religious sites.¹⁷ To evaluate these textual sources, I will use the qualitative data-analysis program *NUD*IST* to

¹⁵ See Patton (1990) on the “standardized, open-ended” approach to interviewing.

¹⁶ *Fujian difang zhi – wenhua gailun*. Fujian: Fujian Shifan daxue (1994).

¹⁷ See for example, *Fujian tongji nianji*, *Fujian Statistical Yearbook* (2003), which provides data on tourist revenue from different Mazu temples across Fujian.

uncover the changing relationship between the local state and religious groups.¹⁸

Research Venues

The field research for my comparative project will take a total of twenty months. I plan to use the Fulbright-Hays Fellowship to conduct the second ten months of field research in China. My research in China will begin during the fall 2006 when I will investigate the same core questions that I am currently addressing in Russia. I will divide my time between villages in Fujian and Jilin, which have scheduled elections for the fall and spring, 2006-07.

The diversity of Fujian makes it an ideal case for exploring the intersection of religion and the local state. Administratively, Fujian consists of nine prefectures and municipalities; it is home to over 48 ethnic groups, and it is historically known as a center of religious pluralism in China.¹⁹ Religious practices in Fujian draw from all five major religions, and there are also flourishing cultural and folk traditions, such as the Mazu Goddess cult. Each spring the state-sponsored Mazu Cultural Festival attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims to celebrate the goddess' birth. I plan on attending the festival as a participant observer. Moreover, Fujian has been at the leading edge of economic reforms in China; it has been designated a special economic zone, and has been a pacesetter in implementing village elections. All of these characteristics make this area a place of unusual political variation. I will conduct my research through affiliation with Xiamen University, which is a sister institution to Cornell University.

Jilin provides a second important comparison. As a home to over 44 ethnic groups, Jilin has experienced an equally diverse religious and cultural revival, but has adopted a gradual approach to economic development. Additionally, Lishu County in Jilin has developed a method of open

¹⁸ Scolari QSR NUD*IST 4 (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Software, 1997). NUD*IST is a multi-functional software system for the development, support, and management of qualitative data analysis.

¹⁹ See, for example, Watson (1985); Boltz (1986); Dean (1993); Rubinstein (1995).

and competitive elections (*haixuan*) that has become a model across Fujian. The open and competitive elections in Jilin make it an excellent case for my study because elections operate like an open primary, where every voter can nominate candidates, and candidates are often permitted to campaign across the county. To assist with my research, Professor Wang Caibo from Jilin University has offered institutional affiliation and support.

Preparatory Work Completed

I recognize my dissertation project is ambitious; however, I have prepared for this project in several stages. The first stage of preparatory work has involved studying the transition from state-socialism at Cornell and Harvard University as well as teaching an undergraduate seminar on the topic of religion and politics during the fall, 2004 at Cornell University. I advanced to candidacy in May 2005 and I am currently engaged in the Russian-side of my dissertation research in Moscow, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Kazan. I will complete my field research in Russia in June 2006 and will briefly return to Cornell University to synthesize my Russian research notes and present my findings at the American Political Science Association's Fall conference. Additionally, to help ensure a smooth transition to field research in China, I plan to enroll in an intensive Chinese language program during the summer 2006 to reinvigorate my language skills.

Implications of Research Project

My dissertation places religion in the context of political change and begins to address the impact of religion on the political future of China and Russia. This shift from a purely political or economic understanding of regime change to one that recognizes the cultural dimensions of this process is important for two reasons. First, scholarship on the transition from state-socialism tends to focus on the political-economic dynamics of the transition, thereby ignoring cultural dimensions. In this sense, the literature on transitions has remained secular. By ignoring the

intersection of culture and politics during this period of political flux, we leave ourselves ill-prepared to explain how religious groups are influenced by the course of political change and how, in turn, such groups shape the course of politics. This is critical, not just because liberalization and religiosity have moved in tandem, but also because the separation of Church and State has been widely understood to be central to the success of the democratic project.

The study of religion and culture in China can finally have a direct bearing on questions of major importance for comparative social sciences and area studies. It is an open question whether the current religious revival is a re-awakening of long suppressed religious traditions from the pre-communist era; whether these rituals are modern "inventions;"²⁰ or whether they are a blending of pre-communist folk traditions, communist practices and modern popular culture. It is further unclear whether religious communities are providing competing centers of authority to the current regime; or whether they are providing resources for the moral reconstruction of the regime. Finally, questions such as, to what degree have religious groups adapted to, resisted or rebelled against the regulations of the state remain largely ignored in post-communist comparative context.

Without the benefit of field research, it is difficult to speculate on answers to these important questions; nevertheless, the fruits of this research project will position us to not only better understand how different regimes in transition are dealing with growing religiosity within their borders, but also to shed light on the origins of this revival and address how religious groups are shaping politics in a period of fundamental change.

²⁰ Hobsbawn & Ranger (1990).