

Fulbright - iiE

FULBRIGHT IIE – Statement of Proposed Research
Political Science – China
Religion and the Local State in Transition

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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 Program to carry out the China-side of my comparative study.

Overview of Project. In both China and Russia, the transition from state-socialism has been accompanied by a growth in popular religiosity. Deep-rooted 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.

The 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 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 museums and then collected admissions fees.¹ Thus, while central authorities have set the guidelines for religious expression, it is up to local elites to decide whether religious practices in their region are operating within the boundaries of the law.²

My dissertation project compares how local states, especially village governments, are coping with the new religious and cultural realities they face. This 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 their local governments to protect and promote their interests and values. One key concern will be identifying the various points of contact between religious groups and the local state. A second focus will be exploring what the growing relationship between Church and State suggests about the changing boundaries between public and private, cultural and political arenas of cooperation and contestation.

Working Hypotheses. My research explores three dimensions under which local governments and religious groups establish mutually beneficial relationships in order to meet their respective needs.³ I hypothesize that the first point of contact is fueled by *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 may mobilize support for a candidate or local government policy. At first blush, it may seem counterintuitive for

¹ See, Chau, A.Y. "The Politics of Legitimation and the Revival of Popular Religion in Shaanbei." *Modern China* 31 (2005); Yang, M. "Goddess across the Taiwan Straits" *Public Culture* 16.2 (2004).

² Seymour, J.D., and E. Wehrli. "Religion in China." *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 26.3 (1994).

³ My research follows the theoretical framework of state-society relations laid out by R. Baum & A. Shevchenko in, *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

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religious groups to court the local state, because they answer to a higher calling and the state had a historical 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.

A second point of contact between religious groups and the local state is driven by *economic resources* – I hypothesize that *religious groups are supported or tolerated by the local state when they provide public goods and/or extra revenue for local governments*. One such mutually beneficial relationship can be identified in Fujian, where entrepreneurial officials developed a “Mazu Goddess Tour,” charging pilgrims \$2,400 to pay homage to the Mazu mother temple in Meizhou.

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 in village elections—a relatively recent political development in some localities. Thus, I hypothesize that *village elections, especially when they are competitive, may encourage local elites to expand their vote share by reaching out to religious communities*.

Research Strategy & Venues. I will evaluate these hypotheses using a two-part study of villages in Fujian and Jilin. Within each village, I will conduct interviews with elected officials and candidates to explore how political elites perceive the points of contact with religious groups. Interviews with cultural leaders will provide an additional “bottom-up” perspective of how these groups seek to influence local politics and uncover additional points of contact. I will supplement these interviews with available data on the financial contributions of religious groups to public works projects, such as road improvements, that are traditionally funded by the local state.

My research in China will begin during the Fall 2006, investigating 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 spring and fall. The diversity of Fujian makes it an ideal case for exploring the intersection of religion and the local state. Historically known as a center of religious pluralism, Fujian is home to flourishing folk traditions, such as the Mazu cult. Moreover, Fujian is a place of unusual political variation, given its position at the leading edge of economic reforms in China and its pacesetter in implementing village elections. I plan to conduct my research through affiliation with Xiamen University, which is a sister institution to Cornell University.

Jilin provides a second important comparison, with an equally diverse religious and cultural revival, but a gradual approach to economic development. Additionally, Lishu County in Jilin has developed a method of open and competitive elections (*haixuan*) that operates like an open primary, where every voter has the right to nominate candidates, and candidates are often permitted to campaign across the county. The open and competitive elections in Jilin make it an excellent case for my study. To assist with my research, Professor Wang Caibo from Jilin University has offered institutional affiliation and support.

Name: _____ Field of Study: History Country: P.R. China

Describe your study or research plans and your reasons for wishing to undertake them in the country of your choice. Outline a plan that realistically can be completed in one academic year abroad. Graduating seniors, applicants in the creative or performing arts, and applicants for teaching awards are not expected to formulate detailed research projects. Graduating seniors should describe the study programs they wish to follow in terms as specific as possible.

PROJECT TITLE: A Natural Place for Nationalism: The Wanglang Nature Reserve and the

Emergence of the Giant Panda as a National Treasure

National parks and nature reserves are established to reflect and protect the image of national greatness. From the monumentalism of the Grand Canyon in the United States to the symbolic stature of Mt. Fuji in Japan, nations have sought out representation in the natural grandeur of their territory. In the People's Republic of China, tens of reserves have been created around such a unique natural treasure, the giant panda. To devote such nationalistic fervor to an animate and elusive object, however, creates a completely different relationship between the nature park and the nationalistic sentiment that it espouses. Instead of majesty, it evokes mystery. Yet the giant panda has been just as effective as the magnificent features of the western United States or the prominent peaks of Japan in espousing nationalistic sentiment and creating a bridge between nature and nation. For my dissertation, I intend to examine the historical relationship between conservation in the People's Republic of China and the twentieth-century emergence of the giant panda as a national symbol. The status of the giant panda as a national icon has forged a strong link between the designation of "natural" space for preservation and scientific study at the local level and broader national agendas. My study will explore this relationship through a focused examination of the impetus for and impact of the creation of the giant panda protection reserve, the Wanglang Nature Reserve in Pingwu county, Sichuan. The purpose of my focused study is two-fold: first, I aim to understand how efforts to protect the giant panda affected the local people and landscape in the vicinity of the reserve; second, I will explore how the transformation of the giant panda into a national symbol for the PRC linked the districts in the panda protection reserves and local scientific research on the panda to the national political context.

My study of the relationship between the giant panda and reserve establishment draws on some of the insights that scholars of environmental history have recently offered in their studies of governmental efforts to nationalize natural wonders in western Countries. Ethan Carr, Richard West Sellars, and Mark Spence specifically examine these links between natural splendor and nationalistic pride during the late-nineteenth century United States (Carr, 1998; Sellars, 1997; Spence, 1996). Although my project also focus on the preservation of unique nature, a striking difference between the case of nature parks of the western United States and those established for the giant panda is the issue of display. National symbols must be observed to be effective, but sightings cannot be guaranteed in the panda protection reserves. The giant panda has most frequently been placed on display in zoos--outside of its natural context. Moreover, geographically speaking, live giant pandas were first displayed outside the national context--in foreign zoos. The emergence of this animal as a national symbol is undeniably the product of a combination of foreign and domestic interest. The creation of the Wanglang giant panda protection reserve in 1963 occurred the same year that the Beijing Zoo oversaw the first successful birth of a giant panda in captivity. The convergence of these events reflects a significant shift in the outlook of the Chinese government toward a more active claim over the giant panda, its origins, and its progeny. This shift is also significant because it marks the first time that the popularity of the giant panda began to have an impact on the giant panda's home range and the people who live in its vicinity.

The Wanglang reserve, established in 1963, is one of China's oldest giant panda reserves. This reserve provides an excellent local site through which to examine the entire history of the establishment of giant panda reserves and the ways in which the reserve efforts reflected the shifting political and social contexts of the People's Republic of China. I will conduct a focused study on the local history of the region of the Wanglang Reserve for the periods preceding and during the existence of the reserve with special attention to the perspectives of both the state and local residents. In order to assess the degree to which my investigations into the social and political history of the Wanglang Nature Reserve are more broadly applicable in the People's Republic, I will also conduct a simple comparative research in two other giant panda protection reserves in Sichuan. First, I will look at a smaller, newer reserve, the Wawu Shan Nature Reserve, founded in 1993 in Hongya county. Second, I will examine the larger, more well-known national park, the Wolong Reserve, established in 1975 in Wenchuan county (*Zhongguo ziran baohu chu minglu*, 1998). The government of the People's Republic of China designated the smaller Wawu Shan area as a reserve under historical conditions that were completely different from those which surrounded the establishment of the Wanglang reserve thirty years earlier. I will employ the famous national panda reservation park, the Wolong reserve, as a site to measure the impact of other defining factors including the hierarchical level of the reserve (provincial or national), founding date, international participation, reserve size, ethnic diversity, and population density, on the history of the local area this research will be supplemented by the extensive work that both foreign and Chinese scientists have conducted in and on the Wolong giant panda reserve (Hu and Schaller, 1985; Taylor,

If you have a preference for schools abroad, list here. Also attach copies of any acceptances you have received from institutions or individuals.

1. Peking University, Dr. _____
- 2.

1988). Previous scientific studies by foreign scientists have demonstrated that foreign scientific studies were conducted without a sensitivity to the historical context that encompassed the giant panda research project (Schaller, 1993). My project is not a scientific study of the giant panda, but rather is an examination of the significance of the giant panda in integrating a remote region into the broader social and political context of the People's Republic of China. In this way, my work builds on a long legacy of local studies in Chinese historical literature which attempt to assess how governmental policy actually affected real people and their local environments (Pomeranz, 1993; Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, 1991; Duara, 1988; Chan, Madsen and Unger, 1984; Perry, 1980; Hinton, 1966).

My study of these giant panda reserves will incorporate research at both provincial-level and county-level archives as well as at the nature reserves and national research centers. I will spend an initial two months at the Sichuan Provincial Archives in Chengdu. The Sichuan Provincial Archives hold three collections particularly relevant to my research. The first, the Economic Archives, contain collections on settlement, natural disasters, and agriculture prior to the establishment of the reserves. These will be critical in laying out the status of the region before government officials and scientists contemplated transforming this area into a park. The second, the Chengdu Public Works Archives, also hold valuable geographic surveys, forestry, agriculture, and water control data which will give me a good sense of the relationship between the population and land use over the course of the nature reserve history. Finally, I will also gather sources on government, peasant, and land use issues from the holdings in the Contemporary Archives in Chengdu.

The next stage of my research will focus on the reserves and the counties that contain them. The Pingwu County Archives offer detailed sources on census data, villages, finances, and infrastructure. I plan to spend four months of my tenure in China investigating the history of this area in the county archives as well as conducting personal interviews with local people and local officials regarding their perceptions of the development of the area. The Wanglang reserve was recently opened to the public; park administrators are soliciting eco-tourism as a new stage in the reserve's history. The accessibility of the park has therefore greatly increased. I also plan to spend a month in Wawu Shan reserve area and at the Hongya County Archives where I will examine census, financial, and local area data comparable to the collections housed in the Pingwu County Archives. In addition to these sources, the Hongya archives also house collections regarding agriculture and photographs of the area, which will be useful for examining the change in the landscape over time. I plan to spend an additional month at the national panda preserve of Wolong in order to retrieve information pertinent to my findings in Wanglang and Wawu Shan that do not exist in presently completed work on the Wolong National Reserve.

The director of panda research in the Department of Life Science at Peking University, Dr. Zhu Xiaojian, has been extremely helpful with my research. She will provide direct contact with other researchers doing projects in various parts of Sichuan and has offered to assist me with materials and historical inquiries regarding the history of the scientific study of the giant panda in the PRC. I have also been in working contact with Mabel Lam, coordinator of the giant panda exhibit at the San Diego Zoo. She has coordinated a number of research exchanges between the San Diego Zoo and the Wolong reserve and has been extremely supportive of my project. Her assistance will facilitate my introduction to the managers of the Wolong reserve. James Harkness, director of the Beijing office of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has offered his assistance in my research. The WWF have done extensive surveys of all nature reserves in China and is conducting cooperative management programs with local governments. My research will also be assisted by Dr. Li Shaoming, Department of Anthropology at Sichuan University, whose work I became familiar with during his visit to the United States. He will be able to guide my work on local populations in the reserves. In December, I will meet Dr. Yang Chifeng, Director of the Institute of Environmental Science at Beijing Normal University, and Dr. Xu Rumei, Dean of College of Life Sciences at Beijing Normal University. They were both active in building reputably the strongest Environmental Science department in China and can assist me in investigating the history and impact of reserve policy. Finally, I will investigate the National Library in Beijing and institutional collections on panda research in order to access information on studies based from research institutions in the national capital.

I will advance to candidacy in January 2001 and will spend Spring 2001 continuing my preliminary research in the archive collections at UC Berkeley, the Hoover Institute, the Harvard-Yenching Library, and the Library of Congress. When I return from ten months of research and archival work in the People's Republic of China, I will synthesize my findings and complete my dissertation under the guidance of my advisors, Professor Joseph W. Esherick and Professor Paul G. Pickowicz at the University of California, San Diego. A grant from the Fulbright Program would greatly facilitate the completion of this project.

Name: _____ Field of Study: History Country: P.R. China

This statement should be a narrative giving a picture of yourself as an individual. It should deal with your personal history, family background, influences on your intellectual development, the educational and cultural opportunities (or lack of them) to which you have been exposed, and the ways in which these experiences have affected you. Also include your special interests and abilities, career plans, and life goals, etc. It should not be a recording of facts already listed on the application or an elaboration of your statement of proposed study. Please limit to the space provided.

I had never been to Taiwan before, but as I walked through the streets of Taipei for the first time, it felt familiar. It was partially reminiscent of Hong Kong, and in some ways similar to the People's Republic of China, but not exactly like either of them. I felt more comfortable and more at home in Taiwan than I had felt just months earlier in the land of my ancestors, Estonia. Three days after I graduated from University of California at Berkeley with a double major in History and Asian Studies, I accompanied my grandmother to Estonia. We went to visit long-lost relatives and take a pilgrimage from the old farmhouse, to the cemetery, to my grandfather's university. My grandmother was born in Canada, but at eighty-three years old could still speak her parents turn-of-the-century version of the language. My aunt and I depended on her to get around. While in Estonia, I had been mistaken for a local, someone had stopped me on the street and asked for directions in Estonian. I was forced to apologetically respond in English that I was a visitor. Five feet, nine inches tall, with light hair, I was a conspicuous foreigner in Taiwan. No one thought to ask me for directions, yet, unlike in Estonia, in Taiwan, I could read the signs and speak the language.

Surprised by my sense of ease in Taiwan, I had reflected on the novelty of my first experience in Europe. Estonia was filled with people who looked like me. It struck me as odd. Culturally diverse public education in California had made ethnic diversity a more comfortable context for me. I felt like I finally understood what the People's Republic of China must have been like for my Chinese American classmates during our first days in China as foreign college students. For them, they were staring into a world that was supposed to tell them about themselves, yet they felt like strangers. At least, that was how I felt in Estonia. The atmosphere of the city was not unlike that of Tianjin, China just two years earlier. Both countries were still testing the waters outside of socialism. China had better prepared me culturally for Taiwan than it did for the another former socialist nation.

I went to the People's Republic of China to study Mandarin for thirteen months (1993-4) as part of my undergraduate program. In addition to taking language classes in China, I traveled to most of China's provinces including Tibet, volunteered at a local orphanage in Tianjin, and taught English at a night-school on the Tianjin University campus. I completed my year with the spring term at Peking University in Beijing and became familiar with another city. I went to Taiwan after graduating from Berkeley to pursue my study of Mandarin at the Inter-University Program, formerly the Stanford Center, located at National Taiwan University in Taipei. My study and experience there heightened my understanding of the complexity of the local culture and its interactive relationship with the geographical surroundings. I unexpectedly loved the island. Its religious culture is rich and its political culture, dynamic, if not dangerous. Intrigued, I stayed in Taiwan for a second year. Wanting to know it better, I went to work as a reporter for the *China News*, an English language newspaper. As a reporter I worked on a variety of projects including news, business, education, and feature articles, including a special supplement on Earth Day 1997. After conducting interviews in both Chinese and in English with people from both the Chinese and foreign communities in Taiwan, the importance of the natural environment to everyone in a society, whether they realized it or not, became extremely clear to me. While working at the newspaper, I was accepted to graduate school in the Department of History at U. C. San Diego where I am presently working with my two advisors: Professor Joseph W. Esherick and Professor Paul G. Pickowicz.

My interest in present-day China, in its many definitions, drove my desire to study Modern Chinese History at the graduate level. I chose to pursue the discipline of history in graduate school because I see the field of history as a medium through which I can examine the interaction between sociological, political, and economic forces in society. I became particularly interested in the topic of environmental history while writing a research paper entitled, "Cultivating the Nation in the Nursery. State Afforestation in Republican China, (1911-1937)," and decided to pursue this interest in my minor field, the History of Science and the Environment. I presented this paper at the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) annual meeting and a similar one at a workshop on Environment and History at the Huntington Library in Pasadena, California in March 2000. With the encouragement of my panel chair at the AAS meeting, I have submitted that article for publication in *Environmental History*. Last year, my third year, I held a Council on East Asian Studies fellowship, which enabled me to continue my study of Japanese. During that year, I pursued my interest in the historical study of nature and science in China with another research paper, "Positioning the Panda in Socialist Science: The 'Bear Cat's Evolution as a National Treasure,'" which I will be presenting at the History of Science Society annual meeting in November 2000. My professor submitted this paper to the presently in-session departmental contest for best research paper. My dissertation topic has unfolded from this research project. This spring I have received a pre-dissertation fellowship from the Dean of Graduate Studies to conduct preliminary research on this topic and take related coursework on inter-campus exchange at U.C. Berkeley. I am looking forward to returning to China to conduct my dissertation research.