



# Religion as an object of state power: The People's Republic of China and its domestic religious geopolitics after 1978



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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the Chinese Party-State's 'anxiety' about spirituality from a domestic religious geopolitical perspective, and provides an analysis of its effectiveness in using sovereignty and governmentality to govern, regulate, control, promote and repress religious activities following the Reform Era after 1978. After introducing how the People's Republic of China's (PRC) regulates religious affairs, this paper examines how the PRC uses spatial and discursive strategies to suppress unwanted religious practices. The article then examines a case study of the PRC's repression of the religious movement, the Falun Gong (FLG). This study not only incorporates spatial and spiritual dimensions into the theoretical discussion of governmentality and sovereignty, it also illustrates how these two dynamic forms of state power are interwoven to influence and mold individuals' lives and thoughts in the modern state of the PRC.

## 1. Introduction

I understand the state's use of geopolitical practices to regulate religious activities as a form of domestic religious geopolitics. The following introduction will show three elements of religious policy in the People's Republic of China as dominated by the Chinese Communist Party (the Party-State): the detailed regulation of religious activities, the repression of unauthorized religious groups, and the influence of spirituality in general. In this regard, I consider Foucault's (1991, 1998 [1976], 2003, 2007, 2008) discussions of the powers of sovereignty and governmentality and how these can help us to understand how Chinese religiosity becomes an object of, and is regulated by, the Chinese Party-State's flexible and responsive domestic religious geopolitics.

Ancient China had a highly diverse and prosperous religious culture before religions were faced with complete eradication by the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) regime during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1979. Following the economic reform of 1979, religious activities have been permitted, but only under strict regulation. Despite restrictions, the Chinese General Social Survey (2003, 2011) shows an increase in religious belief from 6.1% in 2003 to 13.4% in 2011 (cited in Ruan & Zheng, 2015, p. 38). Chau's edited book (2010) documents the revitalization of diverse religious practices during this time in the People's Republic of China (PRC). These include an increase in practices such as ancestor worship, sutra chanting, issuing morality books and a

rising number of people attending churches and Buddhist temples. Numerous studies reveal the revival of churches, Buddhist monasteries and Daoist temples (Borchert, 2005; Epstein & Peng, 1998; Fan, 2012; Lang, Chan, & Ragvald, 2005; Ma & Li, 2015; Shepherd, 2016). Several temple construction projects are organized and financed by local governments for the purposes of developing tourism, conserving cultural heritage and boosting the religious economy (Chan & Lang, 2015; Shepherd, 2016). Palmer (2007) explores the notable increase in *qigong* practice, or breathing exercises with gentle physical movements, during the 1980s and 1990s in the PRC (Palmer, 2007). Yang (2012) interpreted this *qigong* 'boom' as satisfying a religious 'demand' at a time of when there was a shortage of religious 'supply'. At the later stage of the *qigong* boom, Master Li Hongzhi established the Falun Gong (FLG) in 1992, when he introduced five sets of physical exercises thought to activate the energy around and through the body. By 1999, it was estimated that the FLG had between 2 and 80 million followers in China (the lower end of the estimate comes from CCP government sources, cited in Tong (2002, p. 636) and the higher end by FLG sources, as cited in Penny (2012, p. 7)). At this time in China, FLG followers came from all regions, across all classes, and even included high-level officials of the Chinese Communist Party (Perry, 2001: 170f).

Around the 1980s, scholars also documented the emergence of an anti-*qigong* wave among Chinese psychiatrists and scientists (Chen, 2003; Palmer, 2007). Medical professionals began to diagnose '*qigong*

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deviation' psychosis (Chen, 2003, p. 77f.), or 'qigong psychotic reaction', also described as a 'culture-bound syndrome' (Palmer, 2007, p. 159). From 1995 onwards, Chinese scientists criticized *qigong* as pseudo-science, superstition and as a cult (ibid: 171). Some FLG followers responded to these criticisms by engaging in activism (Palmer, 2003). On the 23rd of April 1999, FLG followers protested in front of an academic institution in Tianjin against scientist Zuoxiu He's (1999) article, 'I Do Not Approve of Teenagers Practicing Qigong'. Forty-five followers were arrested (Palmer, 2007, p. 267). In the hope of rescuing those imprisoned, FLG followers decided to take their action to a higher level: they went to the central Party compound, Zhongnanhai, in Beijing on 25 April 1999. Their presence resulted in a dramatic counterattack. Less than a month later, on 20 July 1999, the Chinese Communist Party banned the Falun Gong movement. According to Chan (2013, p. 2), in less than a week, CCP authorities apprehended more than 5000 followers, ransacked their homes, and put hundreds in jail; some were given prison sentences of two to eighteen years, whereas others were placed in detention centers. More than 36,000 followers were detained in 1999. FLG communities remain active worldwide today, and as of yet have not been banned by any other government except the PRC. In addition to the FLG, the government of the PRC has continually suppressed other non-authorized spiritual groups since 1978. At least fourteen spiritual groups have been banned as 'evil cults' since 1978 (Ministry of Public Security, 2001; Yang, 2012, p. 102f.). In comparison to the PRC, no religious groups have been banned following the lifting of Martial Law in 1978 in Taiwan, a country with the same ethnicity and language as the PRC. The PRC's authority to brand, ban and suppress religious movements or groups as 'evil cults' turns religion into an object of the Chinese Party-State's sovereign power.

The different developments in national politics and religious policies between the PRC and Taiwan deeply influence the spiritual life of their respective populations. Apart from two redundant temple laws, no special state regulations were adopted to govern religious affairs following the beginning of democratization in Taiwan in 1987. By contrast, the PRC utilizes various finely detailed administrative frameworks and spatial strategies to regulate religious institutions, personnel, activities, spaces, publications and even re-incarnation. According to a worldwide survey of religiosity, only 16.8% of the 2300 respondents in the PRC believe in the existence of gods/God, while 71.7% do not. By contrast, 89.3% of the 1238 respondents in Taiwan believe in gods/God (Institute for Comparative Survey Research, 2015, p. 351). Another survey shows that China has the highest ratio of atheists in the world (WIN-Gallup International, 2012, p. 3). In contrast to the *laissez-faire* model in Taiwan, the PRC government's religious policies have immense consequences, not only for religious activities, but also for the spirituality of its population: in general, the Chinese in the PRC consider themselves significantly less religious than the rest of the world.

In terms of Foucault's discussion of sovereignty, the 'anxious' CCP strives to suppress single individuals, groups or movements that question and challenge the Party's legitimacy and sovereignty in the State. Some well-known examples of this for Western readers include the crackdown on pro-democracy movements in Tiananmen Square in 1989, the detention of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo until his death in 2017, and the PRC's 'networked authoritarianism' (MacKinnon, 2012, p. 32) which carries out censorship and surveillance, represses dissident expression and spreads pro-government commentary online. The FLG's ability to organize mass protests and its attractiveness to different social groups in different regions represent a threat to the CCP's sovereign position within the PRC (Cheung, 2004; Liu, 2000; Madsen, 2000; Thomas, 2001; Xiao, 2011; Ying, 2006). To suppress and eliminate non-conforming religious activities and followers, the Party-State also exercises sovereign power through diverse techniques, including using criminal law, establishing new anti-cult regulations and institutions, such as the 610 Office, and deploying administrative detention powers. In terms of Foucault's analysis of

governmentality, the Chinese Party-State has attempted to guarantee and 'regulate' citizens' spiritual welfare following the economic reform of 1979. The PRC government continually promulgates various administrative regulations to manage religious activities not only within religious sites, but also in urban areas and villages. The Party-State's 'evil cult' discursive projects negatively characterize the FLG in mass media and educational institutions. Thereby citizens in the PRC receive official messages which instruct them to avoid superstition, stay rational, and only join government-authorized religious institutions. The Party-State's depictions of the FLG as a dangerous, 'evil' and unwanted element in society justify the CCP's various techniques of sovereignty and governmentality of building a harmonious socialist society (Cooke, 2011, p. 126).

Before analyzing the discursive practices used by the PRC that classifies the FLG as an 'evil cult', this article first provides an overview of the Chinese government's domestic religious geopolitical and regulatory framework. As access to sensitive data relating to the FLG within China is difficult to acquire, the data I have consulted includes: state legal documents; internally circulated governmental documents published by NGOs; school websites; Chinese academic books; news published by the media outside of China; FLG websites; and the U.S. Congressional Executive Commission on China's Political Prisoner Database. This paper neglects the variations, dynamics and pragmatism of religious policies implemented and practiced at regional and local levels in the PRC, which are discussed in other studies (Huang, 2014; Leung, 2005; Ma & Li, 2015; Ying, 2006, p. 354; Ying, Yuan & Liu, 2016). How the PRC organizes religious affairs within the official religious institutions and how it manages relationships with other international religious groups is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, my findings only provide a partial, yet stimulating, discussion of the Party-State's domestic religious geopolitics.

## 2. Strategies of domestic religious geopolitics: governmentality and sovereignty

This paper contributes to current understandings in political geography in three ways: 1) how religion becomes an object of state power in terms of domestic religious geopolitics in the PRC; 2) how 'evil cult' discourses can become a dynamic frontier between the Party-State and Chinese religiosity; 3) how Foucault's discussion of sovereignty and governmentality can be helpful in understanding the Chinese Party-State's domestic religious geopolitics as both harmful and productive. This responds to Ó Tuathail and Dalby's (1998) plea that geopolitics should not only concern itself with international space, which is its traditional focus, but examine a broad range of social and cultural practices, from the knowledge of officials to the everyday 'constructions of identity, security and danger' (p. 5) and the creation of 'the right disposition of things' (p. 7) within society through diverse techniques. In this vein, Sturm (2013) has developed the concept of religious geopolitics as 'secular geopolitical discourse and action [...] that nevertheless can be seen to employ political-theological vocabularies, symbols and action' (p. 135). Examples of this approach are Wallace's (2006) analysis of the Christian geopolitical worldview by the Bush administration; Sidorov's (2006) exploration of how Russian geopolitical discourse is legitimized by the Russian Orthodox Church; Dijkink's (2006) focus on the holy land, holy war and millennialism in Christianity and Islam; and studies that examine various aspects of the War on Terror (Glassman, 2007; Gregory, 2007; Katz, 2007) and the 'othering' of Islam/Muslims (Watts, 2007). Sturm (2013) and the aforementioned studies examine how mainly Western states (that have roots in Christianity) and European states use theological concepts to deal with secular issues. Focusing on both discourse and practice, this paper presents how an atheist Party-State manages sacredness through deploying diverse judicial, administrative, spatial and discursive strategies (see also Bernstein, 2013; Mahmood, 2015).

To date, religious geopolitics has mainly been studied in and

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