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Duran, Angelica, Huang, Yuhan

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Epilogue

Soul Searching in Contemporary Chinese Literature and Society

Fenggang Yang

Abstract

In "Soul Searching in Contemporary Chinese Literature and Society" Fenggang Yang presents a brief overview of religion in China's recent past and contemporary situation. Based on his own life experiences in rural China and his education in China and the U.S., Yang discusses the status and history of religion during the Cultural Revolution, the 1980s and 1990s, and more recent developments of the interest in and the revival of religion in China. Yang's description includes attention to the role of writers such as Xingjian Gao and Mo Yan as prime examples in whose works religion plays a significant role.

To discuss the question of soul searching in Chinese literature and society, I will start with a brief biography situated in Chinese history. As the sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote, "the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. This is its task and its promise" (6). Through a biographical account of the changes since the Cultural Revolution, I offer a personal observation of the quiet spiritual revolution that is like wildfire sweeping a vast land and a sociologist's reflection on the failure of Chinese literature to capture the spirit of the era yet its great potential to do so. This account includes a description of my rural upbringing, not all that distinct from Mo Yan's; my witnessing of the events in China in the late 1980s before moving to the U.S.; my experience of the freedoms my children have enjoyed in being raised in the U.S.; and my ongoing effort to bridge China and the U.S. through scholarship and scholarly networks.

My main point is that Chinese souls have been caged by traditionalism, modernism, Marxist-Leninist-Maoist atheism, and totalitarianism, and so are the souls of Chinese novelists. Although China is undergoing dramatic social changes and great spiritual awakening, producing great Chinese literature has been hampered. Yet, in or through literature, with Mo Yan's work as a key example, we

have seen some souls slip out of the cage and wander, a bit in the dark but wander nonetheless: the oppressed souls of the class enemies of materialism, existentialism, and humanism; the lost souls of the youth (the Red Guards in the dim mist); and the "wanderer" of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature Laureate Xingjian Gao, in France now, on his way to Soul Mountain.

I was in college from 1978 to 1982, the second cohort after the universities were reopened after the Cultural Revolution. In fact, when I was in high school, I did not know there was such a thing called university. My first English sentence learned in high school was "Long live Chairman Mao!" But Mao died later that year, and our English class stopped right there. From elementary school to high school, we spent a lot of time learning to do farming, factory work, or military exercises instead of reading and writing. Growing up in a rural village in Hebei in northern China, I tried various ways to find books to read and would boast that I read all the books available in my village and the school. But the only available books I could find were Chairman Mao's *The Little Red Book*, a revolutionary novel called 小兵张嘎 (Little Soldier Zhang Ga) (Xu), and some novels of the socialist rural life by Ran Hao (浩然), such as the 1972 novel 艳阳天 (Bright Sunny Sky) and Nikolai Ostrovsky's Soviet novel 钢铁是怎样炼成的 (*How the Steel was Tempered*). We did not even have textbooks every semester, and the ones we did occasionally get, including textbooks of mathematics and biology, had a citation of Chairman Mao's words at the start of each lesson. As a matter of fact, I still remember what Mao said about farming: the eight characters constitution: 土肥水种密保管工 (eight factors from soil to labor).

During those childhood years, the best time was perhaps on a summer night sitting under the sky, fanning away mosquitoes, and hearing some senior villager holding a long tobacco pipe telling ghost stories. Ghost stories were the closest thing we had to religion back then. During the Cultural Revolution, religion was banned. There was not a single church, temple, or mosque open for religious services for Chinese in the whole country. All of the publications available to school students were cleansed of the so-called feudalistic superstitions and capitalist poisonous weeds. While religion was wiped out of society, ghosts, spirits, and gods were exorcised out of the literature, movies, mass media, and publications. Decades later, when I saw my U.S.-born children enjoying *Harry Potter* novels and films, I was happy and envious because when I was a child this was impossible for me to experience. My childhood was much too dry, boring, and lacking intellectual stimulation. There was no music either, other than revolutionary songs and operas. At school, if there was anything we learned about religion, it was the Marxist adage that religion is the opium of the people and that only oppressed and weak people would resort to superstitious beliefs. In the rural community in northern China where I grew up religion was not part of village life. Other than the few ghost stories told by elders, I can only recall one single occasion seeing some Daoist ritualists performing at a funeral. Upon hearing ghost stories or seeing a ritual, people, at least my peers, would simply

laugh it off. We were taught at school that we must establish a "scientific" outlook on life, and it was believed that only science and technology and Mao Zedong's thought would make society progress toward the future beautiful communist society.

Upon entering university, I frequented the library and read almost all the Chinese classic novels I could borrow. While moving to read Western classic novels translated to Chinese, however, suddenly the novels and short stories by contemporary Chinese writers became interesting to me. One of the most fascinating was Ping Li's (礼平) 1981 novella 晚霞消失的时候 (When the Sunset Cloud Disappears), which portrays the protagonist, a Red Guard, as a man who struggles with notions of science and Marxist dialectic materialism for many years. Fortunately, he runs into a Buddhist monk on the holy mountain of Taishan and engages in a long, enlightening conversation along the way hiking up to the top of the mountain. This novella instantly became politically controversial but popular among university students because of its departure from ideological orthodoxy. It also stirred heated debates among readers about science and religion. Religious clergy, once ridiculed and driven out of public sight, might hold some enlightening truths to the questions with which many young people were struggling. This idea itself was subversive at that time but stimulated truth-seekers to begin their search in religion as well as in other realms.

In 1991 the celebrated novelist Chengzhi Zhang (张承志), once a Maoist Red Guard himself, published the book 心灵史 (History of the Soul), which features his embrace of his rediscovered Islamic identity. Meanwhile, Xingjian Gao, until recently the best-known Chinese writer in the West and winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature, had also written novels in the late 1980s and early 1990s exploring spiritual themes in his novels such as 灵山 (*Soul Mountain*) and 一个人的圣经 (*One Man's Bible*). His characters were obviously spiritual seekers, but they commonly ended up hopelessly wandering without finding a spiritual home but finding a lot of sex. Indeed, throughout the 1980s and 1990s many Chinese intellectuals, novelists, poets, artists, and scholars have explored spiritual issues and sought religious answers. There have been some good articles published in China and the West on these issues, including Qiaomei Li's (李俏梅) "论中国当代作家的'宗教热'" ("On the 'Religious Fever' among Contemporary Writers of China"), Michelle Yeh's "The 'Cult of Poetry' in Contemporary China," and Rongan Cai's (蔡桑安) "宗教热: 灵魂的痛楚——对近年来美术创作流向的一种考察" ("Religious Fever: Pains of Souls—A Thought about a Trend of Art Creation in Recent Years") (see also Yang, "Between Secularist"). Clearly there was an enthusiastic search for spirituality and religion by Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s.

Following the Cultural Revolution, in society at large all kinds of religions have been revived and are thriving in China. In 1987 I joined the faculty of Religious Studies at the People's University of China before coming to the U.S. in 1989. In the Introduction to the Study of Religion course I taught for a semester, to my surprise

about 120 students of various departments were enrolled. Besides the curious and enthusiastic students, I also found devout believers at tourist or religious sites wherever I went. Through a series of fortuitous opportunities or by Divine Providence as one might say, I arrived at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. in January 1989 and began my PhD in the sociology of religion. On 4 June of that summer, the Chinese communist authorities sent tanks into Tiananmen Square and crushed the democracy movement. After that, many Chinese students and scholars studying in the U.S. began to flock to Christian churches. Later I found the same change had happened within Mainland China. I have been drawn into this unprecedented cultural and social phenomenon of mass conversion to Christianity in the history of China and Chinese America and have conducted a number of empirical studies of it. Since 2000, I have been traveling to China every year to conduct research on Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Confucians, and others. In my recent book *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*, I summarize my empirical studies and theoretical development. My theories of the red, black, and gray markets of religion and the shortage in the economy of religion have caused me notoriety in China and elsewhere in the world.

By now it has become clear to me that 1989 is a watershed year in Chinese history in regard to the spiritual search and religious change. After the democracy movement was crushed, for example, a young couple who were Peking University professors quit and became Daoist-like hermits in the mountains, some college graduates became Buddhist monks, and many more college students, professors, and young professionals converted to Christianity. Of course, even more people dived into the ocean of market economy and became devoted to materialism, consumerism, and capitalism, which may be taken as substitutes of religion (see, e.g., Yang, "Lost in the Market"). The rise of Christianity is especially interesting and may bring profound changes in Chinese society and may also have long-term impact on other parts of the world.

In the 1980s Christianity spread fast in rural areas, and in the 1990s there was the rise of the so-called "cultural Christians" on university campuses by people who were attracted by the culture of Christianity, including its literature, philosophy, theology, arts, and history. Then, the market transition brought the phenomenon of Christian entrepreneurs, especially those in Wenzhou and other coastal regions. Further, in the twenty-first century there have been active Christian lawyers defending civil and human rights for marginalized people, artists creating paintings and sculptures with Christian themes, and Christian journalists taking positions in the mass media and press. Meanwhile, in China's emerging civil society Christian charity organizations have been active in providing social services, and Christian house churches in metropolises have challenged the Party-State to adapt and adjust. The Party-State tries hard to hold on to an outdated atheist ideology and suppress religion. Since 2005, in many metropolises some Christian house churches have formed

large congregations and rented halls in office buildings for Sunday worship services. Many of the house-church members are university-educated young professionals. The Party-State has pressured these young professionals to join Party-State-controlled "patriotic" religious associations, but most of the house churches have refused to comply. Then, the Party-State began to crack down on the large congregations of house churches. For example, since the Easter of 2011, the Shouwang Church (守望教会) in Beijing has been evicted from its rental place and prohibited from entering the property it purchased. Also, its leaders have been under house arrest. However, every Sunday morning there has been a group of church members trying to gather at a square for an outdoor worship service. Every Sunday one to three dozen people would be rounded up and taken to the police station. The confrontation continues at the time of this volume's publication.

In brief, all kinds of religions are surviving and thriving in China. There has been a great awakening with various spiritual movements. In Europe and the U.S., dramatic social changes have generated some great novels that are both reflective of the era and inspirational in some eternally relevant spiritual dimensions. However, so far I have not seen an outpouring of Chinese novels like those in the modern West and I wonder why. I think it is because Chinese souls are in cages. There is the cage of modernism, the cage of Marxist-Maoist atheism, the cage of totalitarianism, and the cage of traditionalism. Chinese souls were caged especially during the Cultural Revolution. The forming of the modernist cage can be traced back to the May Fourth and New Cultural Movements about a century ago. These two cages are still in place today. In or through literature, we have seen some souls slip out of the cage and wander in the dark, as noted. Of particular interest here is the fact that Mo Yan's prolific novels have vividly portrayed some beleaguered souls as a result of the social and political struggles. Of equal interest is the fact that he has rarely mentioned any religious believer. What will emancipate the souls in bondage? Will the thriving religions in China emancipate the souls or enforce the cages? We have seen only a few glimpses of the searching souls in literature, but sociologists have observed and study the quiet spiritual revolution that is sweeping the vast lands of China like wildfire.

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Author's profile

Fenggang Yang teaches sociology at Purdue University. In addition to numerous articles in English and Chinese, his single-authored book publications in English include *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (1999) and *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (2012), and his recent edited volumes include *Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern China and Beyond* (with Joseph Tamney, 2011) and *Social Scientific Studies of Religion in China: Methodology, Theories, and Findings* (with Graeme Lang, 2011).