Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies

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Preface

‘(Jesus) got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm. The men were amazed, and said, “What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?”’

Matthew 8:26-27; New American Standard Bible

Dense smog and cloud constantly hovered over Beijing all year long. But on 3 September 2015, the seventieth anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Liberation Army, a ‘military-parade blue sky’ (yuebinglan 閱兵藍) was all over Beijing. Even though it lasted for only one day, the whole world was amazed:

What kind of a State is this, that even the winds and the smog obey Her?

Cheng-tian Kuo

The above comparison illustrates a new pattern of religion-state relations called religious nationalism in China and its impact on those in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. It is no longer the state versus religion, but hybrid mixtures of religion and nationalism in these three Chinese societies.

On a hot summer day in June 2015, I received a mysterious long-distance phone call from the Chinese government in Beijing. The official asked me whether I would be available to attend a conference in early September. I thought the conference would be the long-overdue National Religious Conference which had been held once every ten years. So I immediately said OK. Then, the officials whispered a sentence to conclude our short communication: ‘There will be a military parade!’ I cheerfully replied: ‘That’s great! I have never been invited to a military parade before.’ But why would the Chinese government hold a military parade in September, not on 1 October – National Independence Day – like they had always done? I wondered. It must be because of the National Religious Conference for which I have been invited, I naively thought. In the following two months, I did not receive any concrete confirmation about this secretive invitation until one week before my scheduled flight. One official solemnly gave me very detailed instructions about the security measures I should follow once I arrived in Beijing, because ‘the entire city will be under martial rule.’

I arrived in Beijing three days earlier so that I could do some interviews with my academic friends and give a talk at the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA). On the day of my arrival, the sky was packed with dense smog as usual, but the street traffic was unusually light due to the
martial rule. All the shops were closed, including the beverage vending machines in the massive subway system. Governmental officials received last-minute orders to strictly limit their use of official cars during the week and to promptly leave town in the early afternoon of 2 September; otherwise, they would have to stay one long night in their office. My talk at the SARA was first postponed, then, canceled at the last minute. The entire central government in Beijing was almost shut down and ordered to do nothing else except to accommodate the military parade.

At five o’clock in the morning on 3 September, some other guests and I went through the waterproof security checks at the secluded hotel, boarded the designated buses to the parade platform, and waited for other distinguished guests to arrive. The sky began to reveal a golden light and crystal blue with only a few traces of white cloud. Everyone in the audience started to praise the blue sky as if they had the luck to see the aurora of the North Pole. Not for long, though. The next morning when I opened the curtains at my hotel, the sky was packed with dense smog and acid drizzle again; so was the next day and the next. On my airplane back to Taipei, I jotted down the verses from Matthew above and applied them to the ‘miracle’ of the military-parade blue. After all, the military parade was not just a secular ceremony but also a sacred religious ritual for the Chinese Communist Party-State in search of political-religious legitimacy. It is a religious ritual of the state religion, which I call ‘Chinese Patriotism’.

This book discusses the origin, development, content, and implications of religion-state relations in contemporary Chinese societies, i.e. mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. On the one hand, state policies toward religions in these societies are deciphered and their implications for religious freedom are evaluated. On the other hand, Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Islam, and folk religions are respectively analyzed in terms of their theological, organizational, and political responses to the nationalist modernity projects of these states. What is new in this book on religion and nationalism in Chinese societies is that the Chinese state has strengthened its control over religion to an unprecedented level. In particular, the Chinese state has almost completed its construction of a state religion called Chinese Patriotism. But at the same time, what is also new is the emergence of democratic civil religions in these Chinese societies, which directly challenge the Chinese state religion and may significantly transform their religion-state relations for better or for worse.

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