‘We Have Freedom of Religion!’ Understanding Chinese Marxist Approaches to Human Rights

Roland Boer: Renmin University of China, Beijing

The history of the Communist Party of China is the history of its struggle for human rights on behalf of Chinese people (Sun 2014, 56).

Abstract: This presentation begins with three experiences: an immediate response by Chinese people to external criticism concerning religious freedom; attending a Protestant worship service in Beijing; and being duped into visiting an unregistered house church. These experiences will set up a discussion of religion and religious freedom in China, based on an approach of having large ears and a small mouth. The discussion includes the multi-religious reality of Chinese society, the development of autonomous and sovereign groups keen to avoid outside interference (with a focus on the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Church and its Christian communist founder, Wu Yaozong), and the emphasis on religion in China contributing to socialism with Chinese characteristics. All of this leads to a final discussion of a distinct Chinese Marxist approach to human rights, which is not only sophisticated and highly developed but also offers other dimensions to the European tradition.

Let me begin with three experiences. Earlier this year (2018), I was visiting Yunnan University and its schools of philosophy and Marxism. The topic of our seminar was Marxism and religion in the twenty-first century, which led to a long and in-depth discussion. At one point, I said that some foreign commentators suggest that China does not observe ‘freedom of religion’.

‘But we have freedom of religion!’ was the instinctive reply. Their faces said it all, from looks of incredulity that anyone could think such a thing, to dismay concerning the ignorance of Chinese conditions, to laughter.
The second experience is actually one born of many repetitions. Close by where I work in Beijing is a large church, built by the local government. On occasion, I attend one of the morning worship services – in Chinese. The liturgy is formal, the sermon scholarly, detailed and carefully prepared, and vestments are worn by the clergy. The service is always full to overflowing, keeping in mind that the church building holds about 500 worshippers at any one time. Repeat this situation five or six times on a Sunday and you have about 3000 worshippers each week. The ministerial staff number almost 20. The church in question is part of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Church (TSPM), the largest Protestant organisation in the world, officially recognised and supported by the Chinese state.

Third experience, for which we need to return to Kunming. At one of the universities I was scheduled to give a talk, but the evening before I was visited by a man who claimed to be a Christian. He told me that the plans had changed: instead, we would meet in someone’s home for a discussion. The following evening I was picked up, driven elsewhere and then taken inside a residential building. I was led into a largish room with a cross on one wall and a lectern. Immediately, I asked, ‘Is this a house church (jiating jiaohui)?’ Indeed it was. ‘You realise that it is not only illegal to run a house church, but that it is highly illegal, if not dangerous, for a foreigner to visit a house church’. My host smiled uncomfortably. Clearly, I had been tricked by the man the night before.

Three experiences (which could be multiplied): the exclamation concerning freedom of religion, worshipping in a large Three-Self Patriotic Movement church, and being duped into visiting a house church, or what should technically be called an ‘unregistered church’. The following uses the initial opposition between the TSPM church and the unregistered church to frame my analysis, triangulated with the exclamation concerning freedom of religion.
Between Legal and Illegal: The Revised Regulation on Religion and the
White Paper

As an initial step, let me consider a number of documents, especially the revised
*Regulation on Religious Affairs* (2017b), which came into effect in February, 2018, and the
comprehensive white paper, *China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of
Religious Belief* (2018b), which followed soon after in April. While these documents revise
earlier legislation (State Council 2005), they carry forward the principles outlined in the
constitution of 1982 (see further below). The texts of both document are notably positive,
stressing ‘the goal of protecting citizens’ freedom of religious belief, maintaining religious
and social harmony and regulating the management of religious affairs’ (State Council
2017a). But the core of the approach is found in article 3 of the new regulation: ‘protecting
the legal, stopping the illegal, containing the extreme, resisting infiltration, and combating
crimes’ (State Council 2017b; see also State Council 2018c, 2016). Some exegesis is needed,
with an eye on my experiences.

Protecting the legal (*baohu hefa*): obviously, the boundary between the TSPM and
unregistered churches is one of legality and illegality. The TSPM is the organisation of
officially recognized Protestant Churches by the Chinese government (along with the
China Christian Council). Apart from the obvious point that ‘legal’ also refers to the whole
framework of rule of law (as in any country), ‘protecting’ gives the phrase a proactive
sense. Thus, the government at all levels is meant to protect and support (with funds for
religious buildings, for example) all legal religious activity.

Stopping the illegal (*zhishifeifa*): the unregistered churches are illegal. Although
their history may be traced back to missionary incursions in the nineteenth century, they
arose in their current form during the Cultural Revolution, when all official religious
activity was banned. Religious structures were reinstated in 1979, but unregistered
churches have continued and grown. Through a complex and diverse history, some of them have become somewhat anti-communist, which is curious in light of the history of Christian communism in relation to analogous groups (Boer 2018b). Since they are less regulated and attempt to operate under the radar, they can be subject to foreign interventions, as more conservative international Christian bodies see them as an avenue for irritating the Chinese government. At the same time, the situation is quite complicated, with a good deal of movement between registered and unregistered churches and their leadership (Vala 2009). Without the type of agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese government, there has been a renewed effort to channel people from unregistered churches into TSPM churches. This process takes place formally, with the closing down of unregistered meeting places, and informally, through personal communication and through the work of ministers in TSPM.

Containing the extreme (ezhi jiduan): the focus is not merely on terrorism in Xinjiang and Tibet (Boer In press), but also intolerance among other religious groups. Evangelical Christians, who tend to be found in unregistered churches, are mostly at fault on this matter. In the new regulation and the white paper, key terms relating to these concerns appear: religious harmony (zongjiao henu and rongqi), social harmony (shehui hexie), stability or steadiness (wending) and security (anquan) – although each term is difficult to translate.

Resisting infiltration (diyu shentou): no religious organization should be influenced or controlled by an outside body. This consistent policy relates to sovereignty and anti-colonialism, on which I elaborate below.

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1 Internally, the more evangelical Protestantism of the unregistered churches tends towards conservative social and political mores. Externally, their position outside the law has also fostered in some cases anti-government sentiments.

2 The recently (2018) signed agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese government draws together the officially recognised and unregistered branches of the Roman Catholic Church.

3 On wending and its evolution into a dynamic and plural view with the reform and opening up, see Ding (2012, 130-34).
Combatting crimes (daji fanzui): if ‘illegal’ includes sins of omission, ‘crime’

designates sins of commission.

In sum, the regulation and white paper continue former policies (already found in
the 1982 constitution), while strengthening the boundary between legal and illegal,
focusing clearly on dealing with what are called the three evils of separatism, extremism
and terrorism, and reasserting sovereignty as being free from foreign interference.
However, they should not be seen in isolation, for they are part of significant push to
ensure that the laws in place – the socialist rule of law – are actually enforced consistently
and comprehensively. In the last five or six years, it has noticeably become impossible to
pay lip service to the law and then operate on its borders or outside it. The most
comprehensive anti-corruption campaign since Mao Zedong is only the negative
dimension of this development, for it entails a more important positive campaign to
reshape moral values at the intersection between traditional cultural values and core
socialist values. The regulations on religion are part of this much wider process.

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement Church

In light of these developments, this section considers in a little more detail the
nature of the church I am free to attend in Haidian. It functions as a case study, even
though there are many other potential case studies. These include Islam in China,
especially among the Hui and Uyghur minorities, or Buddhism, which is the only religion
to have become thoroughly Chinese, or the Roman Catholic branch of Christianity,
particularly in light of the recent agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese
government that moves to unify the two Roman Catholic churches in China. Since I have
written elsewhere of Islam and Buddhism (in relation to Xinjiang and Tibet) and since the

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4 Article 36 states: ‘Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief... The state protects legitimate religious activities. No one may use religion to carry out counter-revolutionary activities or activities that disrupt public order, harm the health of citizens or obstruct the educational systems of the state. No religious affairs may be dominated by any foreign country’. At the same time, the famous ‘Document 9’, or ‘Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question During Our Country’s Socialist Period’, appeared, offering the theoretical and policy basis for the constitution (State Council 1982).
pope stresses that the Roman Catholic church does not provide ‘an ideological surrogate for Western ideologies’ (Faggioli 2018). I focus on the TSPM – not least because Protestantism is most at fault as such an ideological surrogate.

The TSPM was established in 1951, working closely with the government – especially Zhou Enlai – after the liberation. Today, the TSPM has about 38 million members, 24 theological colleges, which train in the vicinity of 2000 students per year. But if we consider the meaning of ‘three-self’, we will see its emphasis: self-government, self-support and self-propagation (zizhi, ziyang, zichuan). Thus, it was to be an autonomous and sovereign church, free from foreign interference. Why such an emphasis? Protestantism has a dubious history indeed in China, being connected closely with European colonialism in the nineteenth century and the Opium Wars, as well as the internal rupture of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (Kilcourse 2016). Continued efforts by some foreign evangelical Protestant missionaries today certainly does not help. Protestantism was thus equated with foreign interference and humiliation. At the same time, there were many Protestants in China, so the question was how they might be represented. The answer was to establish a church that is free of foreign influence and interference. Hence, self-government, self-support and self-propagation. Obviously, the revised religious regulation of 2017 and the white paper continue this long-held emphasis.

A word is needed here on one of its key founders, Wu Yaozong (1893–1979), not least because his work and influence begin to trouble the distinction between religion and state that is a common framework for much scholarship. Wu was one of a number of unique theologians and church leaders of the earlier twentieth century, developing a distinctly Chinese form of Christian communism. In a number of influential works (Wu

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5 The best work on TPSM remains Wickeri’s careful study (1988). Needless to say, it has generated some misdirected international controversy, of which Tee (2012, 73-118) provides a useful summary. The successor of Wu Yaozong as chair of the movement was Ding Guangxun, or K. H. Ting (Wickeri 2007).

6 The white paper estimates a total of 200 million adherents to all the religions in China, a significant increase but not outside normal patterns of population growth (State Council 2018b).

7 I summarise here some earlier material (Boer and Chin 2016).
1934, 1947, 1948, 1949), he sought to deploy Marxist and theological approaches to core issues. The result was an emphasis on the revolutionary dimension of Christianity, with its communistic life, economic justice, equality and social wellbeing. But this is not a feel-good proposal, for it involves a ‘revolutionary love’ and hatred of sin. To overcome oppression and exploitation requires class struggle and liberation, after which true reconciliation is possible.

Wu does not ignore the negative dimensions of Christianity, especially the tradition from which he came. Thus, it can be a religion of ‘personal spiritual stimulation’, one that is idealistic, emotional, individualistic and anesthetising, all too easily providing the ‘enslaving toxicants of imperialism’ (Wu 1949, 228). Yet, Christianity also advocates ‘freedom, equality and democracy in the purest form’. It ‘should be progressive and revolutionary, which truly embodies the spirit of Jesus’. And its mission today is ‘to transform society where people are treated as slaves and tools into one where the dignity of man is fully upheld’ (Wu 1949, 17).

Does this mean that Marxism and Christianity are one and the same? For Wu, they approach the same goal from different paths. Materialist communism may do so on the basis of the analysis of capitalism and the need for class struggle and revolution, but Christian communism does so from the core doctrines of Christianity and the practice of prayer. In short (and from a distinct Chinese approach to contradictions (Mao 1937; Ma 2012)), he writes that ‘they can complement each other’ (Wu 1948, 98). And yet, he observes: ‘I can accept 99% of Marxism-Leninism, but when it comes to the question of whether there is a God or not, I keep my own counsel’ (quoted in Cao 2011, 139).

A number of conclusions before moving on: to begin with, sovereignty is absolutely crucial. The 2017 religious regulation’s principle of ‘resisting infiltration’ is a foundational feature of TSPM. But we need to be careful about the meaning of sovereignty in such a context: it arises from the anti-colonial movement of the nineteenth century and continues to unfold today (witness the Belt and Road Initiative as the latest development). Thus, sovereignty means resisting and being free from outside interference. As the local
church in Haidian puts it: ‘Love your country and love your Church; Glorify God and serve the people’ is the motto and ultimate goal.

Second and in light of Wu Yaozong’s Christian communism, it should be no surprise that TSPM is part of the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This particular emphasis appears regularly in statements from the government’s religious affairs department. While I am quite comfortable with the practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics, so much so that China today cannot be imagined without it, we may also see the phrase as an emphasis on the common good. How are religions involved? Through constructive rather than destructive activities.

Needless to say, some accuse the TSPM (and its sister organisation, the China Christian Council) of ‘selling out’, of compromising with the devil, which is none other than ‘evil communism’. The same has been said of the recent Vatican-China agreement. Or to put this in terms of the contrast between unregistered churches and the TSPM, some of the former see the TPSM as a ‘fake’ church, heretical even, while the unregistered churches represent the ‘true’ tradition. An old trope indeed in Christianity. By contrast, the TSPM with its numerical weight and government approval, often sees itself as a moderating force, tempering the extremes of the myriad temptations of the unregistered churches and guiding those influenced to a more developed sense of religious faith.

In this light, it is worth noting that the TSPM is highly confessional, as one would expect from Wu Yaozong’s emphasis on prayer, belief and the Bible. The church upholds the central creeds of the Christian tradition, careful study of the Bible and nurturing of the Christian faith. Or as the website of my local church puts it: ‘Our first vision is “WE” – in close fellowship with God, every brother and sister who is inspired by the Holy Spirit, can take part in the ministry of the church, serving our Heavenly Father as one Body. Our second vision is “Care” – in prayer, encouragement, love and commitment, we would like to focus on what our society needs by our pastoral work’.

Finally, this brief account of the TSPM also begins to make it clear that a simple opposition between religion and the state does not work in a Chinese context. I am a little
guilty of fostering such an impression with my initial experiences between a TSPM church and an unregistered church. While this opposition may be a default position for those who have been steeped in the Euro-American tradition (Yang 2005; Bautista and Lim 2009; Madsen 2010, 2011), based as it is on a distinction between state and (bourgeois-civil) society, it does not really work in a Chinese context (Li 2008; Boer 2018a). The reason is that state and society – including religion – are so thoroughly enmeshed that it is difficult to speak of a separation at all.

Two Traditions of Human Rights

Thus far I have focussed on the implications of the initial experiential opposition, between the officially recognised TSPM (as one case study) and the unregistered churches, although I also began to break down the opposition. But I have not yet dealt directly with the exclamation, ‘we have freedom of religion!’ Apart from the obvious point that such freedom has a responsibility to the laws of the land (as with any country), it also raises the question of human rights – a somewhat contentious matter within and without China.

Instead of falling into the trap of tit-for-tat exchanges (State Council 2018a; Human Rights Watch 2018; Amnesty International 2018), or indeed seeing the mantra of ‘human rights’ as yet another tool of Euro-American imperialism, it is better to examine the deeper issues. To begin with, we need to distinguish between false and rooted universals. A false universal neglects or forgets its specific origin and context, asserting that it is absolute and singular. By contrast, a rooted universal, or contextualised commonality, always remembers its specific context, for only in this way can the history, promises and limitations of the universal be kept in mind. This means that universals can and do arise in different contexts and cultures, and that they may apply with different emphases to all peoples.8 This distinction – between false and rooted universals – is particularly pertinent to human rights.

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8 Thus, as Sun points out (2014, 132-35), the idea of ‘rooted universals’ moves past the facile distinction between relative and absolute (Foot 2000, 155-57). It also seeks to take provide a stronger philosophical basis to the idea of ‘conceptual gaps’ (Pan 2012a).
For the rooted universal of the Euro-American tradition, religious freedom is seen as one of the fundamental human rights – along with other civil and political rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, equality before the law, the right to a fair trial, and so on. This tradition has often been asserted as universal, independent of its context, so much so that many assume it defines ‘human rights’ as such. Yet, let us consider briefly the history of this tradition and its context. The modern meaning of ‘right’ (Latin *ius*) began to appear in the European twelfth century. It meant a natural innate force or power that leads human beings to act rightly. In other words, it was a ‘natural’ force arising from the innate power of reason. Closely connected was another term, *dominium*, which designated the mastery exercised by a rational and free-willing individual. The outcome: a right can work only if one has power or mastery to enact it (Tierney 1997). These meanings did not arise in a vacuum, for they were part of the rediscovery and application of ancient Roman law by the ‘lawyer popes’ of the eleventh century (Gianaris 1996, 20; Miéville 2006, 95-97). Central to this rediscovery was the idea of private property, which the Romans called *dominium*. Why *dominium*? It entailed in the first instance mastery – by a master or *dominus* – over a slave, who was seen as a thing and therefore property, but then came to apply to all private property (Wolff 1951, 67; Patterson 1982, 32; Graeber 2011, 201). The outcome is that the European development of human rights saw such rights as private property, over which one has mastery. This would later develop into the idea that one could have mastery over one’s individual speech, political expression, religious belief and so on. The history of the term and its exercise is clearly important for understanding its later emphases, a history that was intimately connected with the development of private property and thereby slavery, so much so that the Dutch lawyer Hugo Grotius (Grotius 1625, I.1.5) – who was responsible for a major step developing the European tradition of human rights – argued that a human right is the power over ourselves or power over others, such as slaves. This he called liberty. The risk for such a tradition, with its specific concerns, is to fall into the trap of a false universal (aided by the era of colonialism).9

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9 A number of analyses of China are vitiated by this assumption (Foot 2000; Chan 2006; He 2006).
Thus, civil and political rights are seen as inalienable, absolute property that is prior to and
determinative of contexts, cultures and sovereign states.10

The Chinese (and Marxist) approach to human rights is somewhat different.11 To
begin with, while the European tradition emphasises the inalienable civil and political
rights of individuals and downplays the role of sovereign governments, a Chinese
approach to human rights stresses the foundational role of sovereignty (Zhang 2012, 89-
90).12 This point relates not merely to the fact that individual states need to ratify and
enact the international treaties, especially from the United Nations, but to the more
important fact that a colonised country cannot exercise any rights whatsoever. In a
Chinese situation, the struggle against colonialism – the time of ‘humiliation’ – is usually
put in terms of the three mountains: imperialism, feudal relics, and bureaucratic
capitalism. Only when these three were overcome, with liberation in 1949, could
sovereignty begin to be exercised and rights enacted.13 The clearest statement is

10 Two strains may be identified here, not without some tension. The first sees sovereignty from the
perspective of European states, which were (after Westphalia), keen on the idea among themselves but
disregarded it with colonial expansion. Later, they came to deploy the latter tendency – post Second World
War and in light of anti-colonialism – internally with more recent European integration. This outcome has
seen both significant tensions internally and an ideological reformulation, in which the ‘normative’ claims of
civil and political rights determine sovereignty as ‘responsible governance’ (Pan 2012c, 22-24). The second
strain focuses on what is seen as the liberative dimension of inalienable human rights in opposition to the
‘despotism’ of the state. This perspective is embodied in Thomas Paine’s The Rights of Man (1791), for whom
any suggestion that rights are granted, by a charter or otherwise, is a perversion of the very idea of rights. In
such a narrative, one distinguishes between natural and legal rights, with Paine coming down irrevocably on
the side of the former. Here the specific history of Europe and North America plays a significant role, with
freedom from ‘despotism’ being a ‘founding myth’ of the United States. As the American Declaration of
Independence (1776), written by slaveholders, puts it: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men
are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights’. The paradox is
that the declaration is itself one of sovereignty.

11 Like Marxism, the terminology of human rights derives from European developments, but it has been
‘sinified’ [zhongguochua], or transformed in light of Chinese traditions and concepts.

12 Indeed, sovereignty itself is a right, as the Chinese word zhuquan, indicates. Quan is the key, also found in
the term for human rights, renquan. Literally, zhuquan means one is a master of one’s power or authority.

13 This position is simply assumed in Chinese debates (Luo and Song 2012), needing to be argued only when
engaging with external debates.
contained in the Five Principles of Coexistence from the 1950s, formulated by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. China has adhered to these principles ever since. There are two implications: first, is sovereignty determinative of human rights? The answer is no: sovereignty is an inescapable basis, ‘but human rights are the most essential and at the highest level’ (Sun 2014, 121). Second, this approach to sovereignty arises from the anti-colonial struggle, rather than the ‘Westphalian’ definition of sovereignty (contra Gottwald and Duggan 2012, 42). In light of this history, one may understand the resolute emphasis on avoiding and resisting foreign interference at all levels – as the revised religious regulation and white paper, and indeed the history of the TSPM, make clear. They both embody this foundational feature of human rights in China.

The second feature of this rooted universal is the core right to economic wellbeing for all (shengcun quan), which includes the rights to development and work. Obviously, this core differs from the Euro-American’s tradition of civil and political rights. The emphasis is a distinct product of Chinese Marxism, a point frequently ignored or downplayed by scholars (Bell 2000, 49-105; Angle 2002, 200-4; Chan 2006; Freeman and

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14 Or as Deng Xiaoping’s speech in 1990 put it, ‘China will never allow other countries to interfere in its internal affairs’ (Deng 1990a, 1990b). For this principle, he coined (from renge) the term guoge meaning the national character or dignity of a state (Deng 1989a, 321-22; 1989b, 331). This approach is manifested most with China-Africa cooperation, especially since they share a history of anti-colonial struggles.

15 Pan (2012b, 4) misses this point, asserting that sovereignty and independence take precedence in all situations, while Gottwald and Duggan (2012) stress ‘pragmatism’, without seeing the philosophical underlay.

16 The best work on this core feature, as well as the development of Chinese Marxist approaches to human rights, is that by Sun Pinghua (2014). Weatherley (1999, 121-24) is occasionally useful, while Angle (2002, 240-49) inexplicably deals with the right to economic wellbeing as an afterthought.

17 This emphasis on economic and social rights are not seen as a ‘second generation’ of human rights, with civil and political rights as the ‘first generation’ (Vasak 1977), for the idea of these generations indicates the Euro-American tradition.
It has its more immediate origin in the Jiangxi-Fujian Soviet of the early 1930s, with its capital in Ruijin. Here developed what may be called the ‘Ruijin ethos’: focus first on the people’s need for food, shelter, clothing and security; only when these are secured will they become communists. In the longer tradition, the Confucian ethos also plays a role, particularly in terms of the desire for at least a xiaokang society, meaning that one is moderately well-off, healthy, and peaceful. Thus, the basic and driving human right in China remains the right to economic wellbeing. We can see this in the consistent focus of minority nationalities policy, on the long-term poverty alleviation program (Kun 2016), the Belt and Road Initiative, and also with the long-term emphasis on economic improvement in the trouble spots of Tibet and Xinjiang. This particular emphasis has indeed become a rooted universal, acknowledged and ratified by others – although not by the United States – in terms of the United Nations’ International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1976). Article 11(1) is relevant here, which mentions that state parties ‘recognize the rights of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing, and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions’ (see also ASEAN 2012).

The question remains as to how the right to economic wellbeing relates to religion. The first part of an answer is in terms individual and collective. While the Euro-American tradition, with its distinct history, emphasises individual mastery as the basis of rights, if not of society and politics as such, a Chinese approach emphasises not merely the collective (as is at times asserted) but recognises a complex interplay between both

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18 By contrast, Chinese scholars are increasingly clear that Marxism has become an important part of Chinese culture and tradition, which undergo constant development (Wan 2013). This emphasis back to the important 1936 ‘Stalin constitution’ of the Soviet Union (Weatherley 1999, 97-98).

19 Deng Xiaoping (in 1979) was the first to pick up and develop the idea of xiaokang, drawing on a tradition that goes back to the Book of Rites and Book of Songs but was redeveloped at the intersections of Confucian and Marxist thought and practice (Perry 2008, 41-42; Wong 1998). It has now become a core feature of government policy (Xi 2014, 38; Li 2017).
individual and collective. Indeed, more often than not the individual is constituted through the collective. To put it in slightly different terms, an important feature of human rights discussions in China is the consistent emphasis on the common good and harmony (Luo and Song 2012). We have already seen this emphasis in the 2017 regulation and the white paper, but it also appears consistently in policy emphasis on cooperation and the desire for multi-faith and social harmony. The TSPM statement that I quoted earlier, from the local church in Haidian, concurs: ‘we would like to focus on what our society needs by our pastoral work’.

Yet the lurking question remains as to whether freedom of religious belief is sidelined, either absorbed into a larger cultural and social reality, or as a secondary right, along with other civil and political rights. The question of ‘absorption’ is less of a problem, since the Eurocentric notion of ‘religion’ – the neologism zongjiao was itself borrowed from Japanese – as a separate sphere of human activity runs into its limits in a Chinese situation (Yu 2005; Fan 2011). The question of the secondary nature of civil and political rights is a little more difficult, since there has been a tendency, especially with Deng Xiaoping, to suggest that these rights could happen after the core right had been achieved. Of course, it opened up China to criticisms in the new wave of geopolitical struggle after 1989, especially when the Euro-American tradition asserted even more strongly that such rights were applicable to all irrespective of context and tradition (and thereby falling into the trap of a false universal). Since then, there has been careful debate and research into the relations between sovereignty, the right to economic wellbeing, and civil and political

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20 A good example of this interplay may actually be found in the first statement of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood’. The second sentence is often ignored, but it comes from the influence of P.C. Chang (Zhang Pengchun), who was vice-chair of the Commission on Human Rights. It is well documented that Chang proposed the term ‘conscience’, which is drawn from the Confucian term ren. Indeed, Chang explained that a better translation of ren is ‘two-person mindedness’. Obviously, this is a collective emphasis that balances the individual dimensions of the first half of the statement. Chinese involvement in central UN statements and documents continues today (Lu 2018).
rights (Sun 2014). The emphasis may best be captured in the image of a tree: at the roots is anti-colonial sovereignty, the trunk is the right to economic wellbeing, and the leaves and fruit include civil and political rights, as well as environmental and cultural rights. Thus, it should not surprise us that Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, chancellor of the Vatican’s Academy of Social Sciences, could observe:

Right now, those who are best implementing the social doctrine of the Church are the Chinese ... They seek the common good, subordinating things to the general good ... The dignity of the person is defended ... Liberal thought has liquidated the concept of the common good, not even wanting to take it into account, asserting that it is an empty idea, without any interest. By contrast, the Chinese focus on work and the common good’ (quoted in Álvarez 2018).

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to provide some philosophical and historical depth to the experiences with which I began – in two very different churches and with the exclamation, ‘we have freedom of religion!’ The analysis has moved through the revised regulation on religion from 2017 and the subsequent white paper, some detail on the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Church and one of its founders, Wu Yaozong, to the exploration of distinct rooted universals in relation to human rights. In doing so, I have sought to emphasise a Chinese Marxist approach, especially in terms of the dialectical transformation of Chinese traditions in light of Marxism, and vice versa.

But a question may linger: is all this mere wordplay for the reality that freedom of religion and human rights are not really observed in China? In other words, do the Chinese people hanker after the ‘freedoms’ enjoyed by those living in countries around the North Atlantic, as well as others influenced by ‘Western’ culture? To answer these questions, it is best to consider some global surveys, the first being the World Values Survey, carried out every few years since the 1990s. Let me use the survey from 2007, which included specific questions on human rights. In a careful analysis of the figures from this
survey,²³ Freeman and Geeraerts (2012, 101-9) identify the following pertinent results: overall, 24 percent indicated ‘a lot of respect’ in China for human rights, while a further 40.5 percent said there is ‘some respect’. If age is brought into play, 48.5 percent of those in the 15-29 age bracket stated that human rights are respected, compared with 37.6 percent above the age of 50. Concerning educational levels, 50 percent of those with formal education believe human rights are supported, while the percentage of those who strongly feel the opposite is the case was consistent – at all levels of education – at 3 percent. Clearly, a trend is evident, in which younger people and those with higher educational levels view the current situation in China more positively. The same applies to professional occupation, with 54.2 percent of those in more professional roles seeing human rights positively in China.

Obviously, such results belie the image of a restless population itching for Euro-American style rights and politics. Freeman and Geeraerts (2012, 111) conclude: ‘when European leaders speak to an audience in Chinese universities, as they often do, and argue that China must improve its human rights, roughly 65 per cent of their listeners are likely to think they are talking nonsense since they believe that their human rights are respected ... When politicians denounce what they believe to be the terrible human rights record of China, their views will find agreement from about 3 per cent of all Chinese, since this is the percentage that believes there is no respect at all for human rights’.

Underlying these statistics is a significant trust in government and public institutions (with state and society uniquely enmeshed, as pointed out earlier). The World Values Survey also indicates that 60.9 percent of Chinese respondents prefer their own government to deal with matters such as human rights.²² Other surveys concur. For example, the annual ‘Edelman Trust Barometer’ (2018), finds that among the ‘informed’ Chinese public trust in government is 89 percent, while among the general population it is

²³ The date may be found at www.worldvaluessurvey.org.
²² Further, 71.3 percent valued stability, 78.8 percent held that maintaining traditions and customs are very important, and 65.8 per cent recognised stressed the value of a stable and secure living environment (Ding 2012, 130).
84 percent. And the monthly Ipsos survey, called 'What Worries the World',\(^{23}\) shows that around 90 percent on average are confident that China is heading in the right direction.\(^{24}\) In both surveys, China leads all other countries in the world, with an important alignment of government policies and public opinion.

In light of all this, it would seem that the claim, ‘we have freedom of religion’, is not an empty one, for it gives voice to a distinct approach to human rights in a Chinese context.

**Bibliography**


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\(^{23}\) One may download the reports from www.ipsos.com/en.

\(^{24}\) To provide two examples, in July 2017 the confidence stood at 87 percent, while in September 2018 it was 92 percent (Ipsos 2017, 4; 2018, 4). By comparison, of Australians surveyed, the comparative figures are only 43 percent and 41 percent.


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