

China gets religion

IAN JOHNSON

This article is partly adapted from a review of the following books: *The Religious Question in Modern China*, by Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, University of Chicago Press; *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*, by Fenggang Yang, Oxford University Press; *God Is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China*, by Liao Yiwu, HarperOne; and *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*, by Lian Xi, Yale University Press.

This autumn, China has been marking the 100th anniversary of the collapse of its last imperial dynasty, the Qing, with a series of grand celebrations. The government has released an epic film showing how the revolution of 1911 prepared the way for the Communists' takeover in 1949. It's also just opened a museum about the uprising in the Yangtze metropolis of Wuhan where the revolution started. And the National Library in Beijing is hosting an exhibition with the not-so-subtle title "Awakening of the East."

These celebrations have focused on the political implications of the Qing's fall, but the 1911 revolution was a major change in a less obvious realm: the spiritual. This might seem obscure, of interest perhaps only to specialists in religious studies. In fact, China's religious upheaval around 1911 is central to its last 100 years of tumult, helping to explain the fanatical totalitarianism that gripped the country and now its bare-knuckled capitalism.

Chinese are often described as pragmatic people with little interest in faith. The prominent Chinese intellectual Hu Shih (1891-1962) declared that "China is a country without religion." In fact, this was how early-20th-century Chinese intellectuals wished to see their nation as free from what they presumed to be the backward and superstitious beliefs of their ancestors.

Yet for millennia, China was held together by its spiritual life, a shared system of ritual and belief that helped unite a country divided by harsh geography and mutually incomprehensible dialects. Every Chinese village had shrines to local deities and every home had altars to the ancestors, a pattern repeated across the vast land, whose rivers and mountains were also deified.

Time was ordered by the unity of the sacred and the temporal: The calendar started when winter was on the wane with rituals and festivals meant to mirror the slowly awakening earth. Belief was based on moral equilibrium (you reap what you sow), as well as a world of spirits mirroring and interacting with the world of humans.

Overlying this ancient system of belief were the formal religions of Daoism and Buddhism, which both took hold in China roughly 2,000 years ago.

By the end of the 19th century, it was

estimated that China had 1 million temples, or one for roughly every 400 people. It was a country centered on a religious-political order held together by the emperor, who spent much of his time carrying out rituals at imperial temples to make sure that his empire was at one with the heavens.

The end of this system began with a series of reforms promulgated in 1898 by the government of the Dowager Empress. Temples were to be converted into schools in fact a widely circulated slogan was "destroy temples to build schools," setting in place the fundamental claim of subsequent eras: that religion was antithetical to modernization.

Although short-lived, the measures gained traction after the 1911 revolution. For many Chinese thinkers at that time, the only conclusion troubling as it was that China's ancient system of values could not offer a way to counter the West's military and industrial might. At first, most Chinese resisted this conclusion but by the early 20th century it became inevitable: Instead of trying to impose Chinese values on foreigners, the elite now would emulate foreign cultures.

Today, we can see this in the style of Chinese cities, the clothes Chinese wear, their hairstyles, many of their manners and customs, and of course their economic and political systems all of them, including communism, versions of Western prototypes, even if they have been modified for Chinese circumstances.

Western religion, especially Christianity, came to be considered by many to be the norm of acceptable religious practice. That norm called for an identifiable clergy organized in a hierarchical institution and a clear doctrine expressed in a well-defined corpus of sacred texts features typical of world religions but not of China's indigenous belief systems.

For many years, however, even Christianity had a hard time in China since many Chinese condemned it as an imperialist foreign import.

China was in the midst of what many scholars believe to be the most sustained attack on religion in history. Even before the Communist takeover in 1949, half of the country's 1 million temples had been converted to other uses or destroyed. Over the next 30 years virtually all of the rest were wiped out; by 1982, when religious life was permitted to resume after the ouster of radical Maoists, China had just a few score temples, churches, and mosques still in usable condition in a country that now had 1 billion people.

During this long period of destruction, the state offered a succession of substitutes. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek launched the "New Life" movement to inject Boy Scout(a) "sounding ideals of doing good and of course opposing traditional religion. When the Communists took over, they offered the totalitarian Mao cult. None of these endured, leaving contemporary China without a core spiritual belief.

The Chinese now live in a nation without an

accepted code of moral obligations. During the past few months, Chinese have been hearing about cases of passersby who have not helped people in need. In one case, a young girl was run over by a minivan twice before someone pulled her out of the street (she later died in a hospital).

In another case, an old man fell in a market near his home and no one picked him up; he suffocated from a nosebleed while a crowd of people including many vegetable sellers who knew him personally stood by and watched.

Selfishness might be universal but it's particularly pronounced in today's Chinese society. Traditional religions promoted ideas of helping the poor and weak. The lack of such influences has left China a harsh place.

Now, after three decades of prosperity the first significant period of stability in 150 years Chinese have quietly but forcefully initiated a religious revival. Hundreds of thousands of places of worship have reopened or been rebuilt, often from scratch, many of them not registered with the authorities. China now has the world's largest Bible-printing plant, while thousands of new priests, nuns and imams of various faiths are being trained every year.

It's no exaggeration to say that China is in the grip of a religious revival analogous to America's Great Awakening in the 19th century (which also took place during a time of great social upheaval). By some measures, more Chinese (60 to 80 million) go to church every Sunday than all the congregations of Western Europe put together, while China is now the world's biggest Buddhist nation. Meanwhile, indigenous belief systems, such as folk religion or redemptive societies like Yiguandao, are making a comeback.

Much religious activity is still suppressed. Unregistered churches are regularly closed (especially the well-known, and technically illegal, Shouwang Christian church in Beijing), while in the sensitive ethnic regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, Buddhism and Islam are tightly monitored, with violations of human rights that rightly gain much international attention. And of course any group that the government feels is a threat (most spectacularly the Falun Gong movement of the 1990s) is persecuted.

Still, religion is growing breathtakingly fast. Unregistered "house churches," once quasi-underground groups, sometimes approach the scale of American mega-churches. I went to an Easter service in Beijing this year that filled an auditorium. The pastor outlined his sermon with a PowerPoint presentation while a dancing choir kept people's eyes riveted on stage.

Daoism, China's only indigenous religion, is also growing fast, with thousands of temples once labeled "superstitious" now reopening. Overall, official figures show a tripling of Daoist places of worship over the past 15 years.

All of this is happening despite tight government controls. The Chinese state recognizes only five religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam and Christianity, which for

official purposes is treated as two groups: Catholicism and Protestantism. All have centralized governing bodies with headquarters in Beijing and staffed by officials loyal to the Communist Party. The Party appoints top religious leaders and bans non-approved sects like Falun Gong.

This system was designed to monitor a handful of believers. When Party pragmatists took control of China after the Cultural Revolution, they assumed that reopening temples was a minor gesture of reconciliation to elderly believers who soon would die out in the orthodox Communist view of the world, religion belongs to an obsolescent period of history that will fade away as material prosperity and rationality gradually take hold.

But this secular vision never materialized and despite, or perhaps because of, the stunning economic growth of the past 30 years, millions of people are more dissatisfied than ever. Many have turned to religion. The Party has responded by maintaining the old system of control, but in practice it has slowly had to adopt a more laissez-faire attitude, allowing a huge gray market of religious activities: house churches, underground Catholic priests, folk religious leaders, and "masters" of Confucianism or the form of deep breathing called qigong.

The Communist Party knows that this opening is risky but feels it has no choice. Part of its strategy is pragmatic: Banning gray-market religious activity would be costly and most of it is harmless. But more positively, some in government now see religion as a potential ally in building an ideology based on more than greed.

In 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao endorsed religious charities and acknowledged their help in solving social problems. The government has also sponsored international conferences on Buddhism and Daoism.

This makes current government policy more in line with that of the old Qing dynasty. The government decides what is orthodox and what is heterodox and, with some important exceptions, largely supports activities that are not hostile. Indeed, in many ways, it is a generous patron of religion, helping to arrange for bank loans to temples or paying outright for new church construction.

Some speculate that the government still views religion in Marxist terms as an opiate of the masses the twist is that instead of eradicating the drug, the Party hopes to use it to keep people diverted from politics.

While that may be true, it's also clear from the writings of some government leaders that they see religion as helping to hold together a country undergoing large-scale urbanization, with roughly 10 million people a year moving from the countryside to the cities. This social dislocation is being eased by temples, mosques and churches, which provide social services and a local community of believers to help people cope with the hardships and isolation of

urban life.

Even when religious life has been restored, the government maintains a heavy hand. For centuries, Chinese rulers have sought to define religion and ban heterodox faiths. Now the modern authoritarian state is worried about the growth of groups that operate outside its control, and its fears are not unfounded.

Faith is giving rise to more social and political activism, fostering the growth of NGO that are resisting government control over life. Some argue that religion will democratize China. This may be wishful thinking, since in some ways, religion can be a pietistic escape in a country where politics is out of bounds. But religion is also creating rudimentary forms of civil society.

In countries like Communist-era Poland and East Germany, religious civil society helped undermine authoritarianism. A similar process albeit a slower one, as one would expect in a continent-sized country is going on in China.

In my experience, China's faith-based civil society is often more robust and influential than the few beleaguered environmental or legal NGOs that attract so much Western attention. This is especially the case in the countryside, where folk religion temples an amalgam of Daoism, Buddhism, and age-old ideas of divine retribution and fate are run by committees that can rival in influence the local Communist Party. The government's problem in countering these trends is its lack of moral authority. It can enforce the appointment of bishops or Tibetan lamas and try to claim the moral high ground by talking about quasi-religious concepts such as a "harmonious society" the slogan of the outgoing administration. Yet they are avowedly atheist. For believers, this makes the government's efforts to guide religious life hollow.

Adding to the strains on China's neo-Qing form of religious control are the country's connections with global religious life. New Age pilgrims visit China seeking martial arts masters and Buddhist lamas, while evangelical missionaries are reentering China for the first time in two generations, convinced that China is the final piece of the puzzle needed for Christianity's global triumph. Meanwhile, Chinese folk religion and Buddhism are helping to strengthen ties to Taiwan and Southeast Asia, while Islam is a point of contention and a bond with the Muslim world.

The state is caught between lethargic self-satisfaction and a paralyzing fear of unrest, and it seems unlikely that it will be able to modernize China's antiquated system of religious oversight. After a century of bitter experience, religion remains at the core of China's transformation.

IAN JOHNSON WRITES FROM BEIJING AND BERLIN ON RELIGION AND SOCIETY. HIS MOST RECENT BOOK IS A MOSQUE IN MUNICH: NAZIS, THE CIA AND THE RISE OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN THE WEST. © THE NEW YORK TIMES. NEW YORK TIMES SYNDICATE.

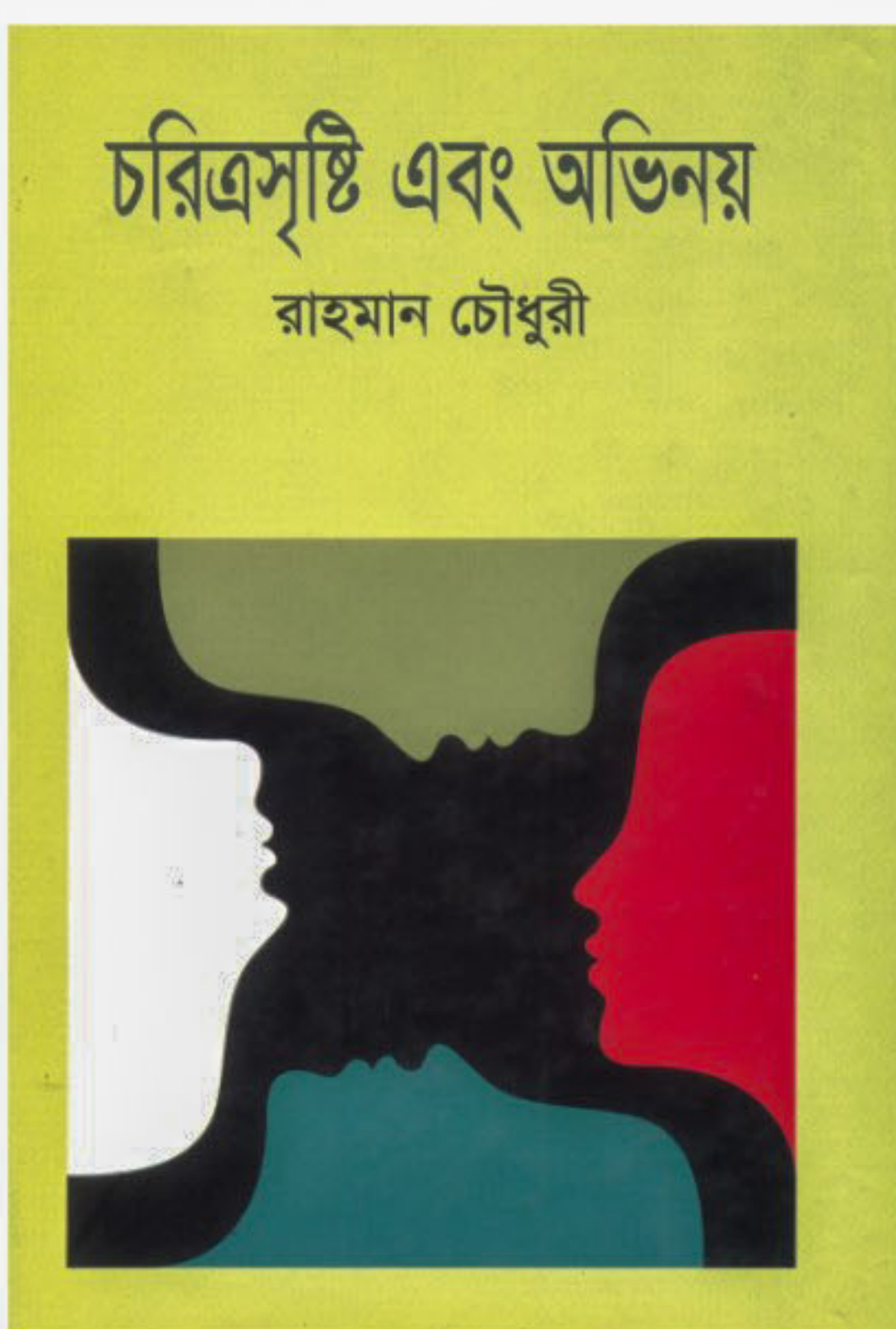
The world is a stage *Alamgir Khan appreciates a book on acting*

Raahman Chowdhury is a foremost playwright and theatre critic in Bangladesh. He has written several plays, including *Mohabidroh O Samrat Bahadur Shah* and *Kriranak*, published by Bangla Academy. His Ph.D thesis *Rajnoitik Natyachinta O Swadhinota Poroborti Bangladesh Mancho-Natok* has also been published by Bangla Academy and this thesis created a stir for revealing some bitter truths about theatre practices in Bangladesh. His recent book is *Choritro Sristi O Obhinay* (Portrait of a Character and Acting) published by Jatiya Sahitya Prakash in 2011. Noted theatre personality Mamunur Rashid has written the preface of this book and his praise for Chowdhury's efforts is overwhelming.

This can be called a complete book on acting, encyclopedic in nature and story type in form. The writer has described the history of acting from the time of Thespis in 6th century BC Greece to modern times. Acting in the Bengali theatre has covers 56 pages out of 350 in his book. Other chapters are not divided according to country or continental category, but those have followed the history of acting style and theory. Throughout the book, great actors of the world are mentioned and discussed, though in a few words. Discussions are not about the personal lives of actors, but their styles of acting. The major theme of the book that takes forward this story of acting is the ever-existing debate: acting from the heart or mind.

The basic question in acting is whether the personality of the actor would be lost in the character s/he portrays or s/he would remain aloof in respect of emotion from the character portrayed in the drama. Proponents of either of these two styles have earned great fame in their lives. Many famous actors have made a mix of heart and mind in their acting, different people mixing these two in different proportions. And tens of thousands of actors are lost from human memory because they could not reach a point where their performance could be called art. When does acting become an art and an actor an artiste is a question the answer to which is sought in this book.

The creation of a character is the factor that draws the line of distinction between when acting becomes an art and when it does not. According to



Choritro Sristi O Obhinay
Raahman Chowdhury
Jatiya Sahitya Prakash

the author, one needs brains to do this. To be able to act naturally, to act in theatre as one acts in the real world is not enough to make oneself an artist. If it were so, a dog or a horse in a cinema could have been called a good actor, which it is not. Acting by middle class boys and girls in television dramas that portray middle class lives is not worthier than that. The problem does not lie so much with the players as with the dramatists and producers who cannot think of anything beyond the boundaries of their lives.

This work on acting also tells a lot about different isms in the history of art such as romanticism, naturalism, realism, etc. The history

of acting has been divided into a broad category -- of drama to see and drama to hear. In ancient Greece and for many years in Europe, theatre was to be enjoyed through listening and so it was mainly dialogue-based. Mime turned theatre into an art that has to be enjoyed by watching. Afterwards, dialogue again reestablished itself in the western theatre. Modern theatre places equal emphasis on the actor's dialogues and gestures. The ancient Indian theatre was vision-based. Therefore, it was called *drishya-kabya*. Afterwards, when Bengali *jatra* and theatre emerged, absorbing the influence of the west, it became a thing for listening. The author has, therefore, called the period of Bengali theatre *srutikabyer kal*, a period of recitation, in his discussion. This is a very valuable chapter because it has discussed almost all great players with their different acting styles in the Bengali theatre up to Rabindranath Tagore, Rabindranath not as a poet but as the greatest actor from 1891 to 1901 of that period.

The next chapter is on the realistic acting method of Stanislavsky. The last chapter deals with the Brechtian method of acting that calls for deep knowledge and acute political awareness of an actor.

Raahman Chowdhury strongly opposes the way acting is taught here in Bangladesh. In most cases, learners are taught to use their body and emotion and little of their intelligence; and they are hardly persuaded to earn knowledge. Here, the way Bharat's Natyashastra is mentioned by theatre teachers who themselves have either not studied it or not found anything worthy from it is ridiculous, according to the author.

Mamunur Rashid writes in the preface that today's busy actors in Bangladesh are running after easy success in the market-oriented economy and are averse to reading books for earning knowledge. He says such a book working on so large a canvass of acting has not been written in either of the two Bengals. In his view this is a book worthy of study by players as well as playwrights, directors and teachers of dramatics. He suggests it should be studied in the drama departments of universities in the country.

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Return of the mermaid

Mahbub Husain Khan relives old fairy tales

Hans Christian Andersen was born on 2 April 1805 at Odense near Copenhagen, Denmark, and died on 4 August 1875 in Copenhagen. He was a unique master of fairy tales whose stores are famous throughout the world. He is also the author of a number of plays, novels, poems, travel books and several autobiographies. He is considered to be the master of the art of fairy tales, whose works rank with the traditional stories in universal popularity. It is not only that his countrymen deify him, as much as it is that the outside world does. Sunanda Kabir has brought out the Bangla version for the young as also for older readers in Bangladesh, a translation of some of the famous stories of Hans Andersen. Though many of the readers may have read the stories in English and are capable of appreciating the English version, Sunanda Kabir's translations of the stories bring forth a new taste in literary accomplishment and allow readers in Bangladesh the opportunity of appreciating the stories as if they if they were taking place in Bangladesh in some fairy tale era. The stories will fascinate the young with their lore-content and the older readers will find allegorical allusions in these stories, which was the original intention of Hans Andersen.

Sunanda Kabir's free-flowing language and the delightful pictures that adorn the stories are pleasing, literary-wise and visual-wise. Fairy tales are after all for the young and picturisation of the stories add to their imagination and appreciation. One look forward to more translations by Sunanda Kabir of epic tales told by well-known writers in English.



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Translated from The Little Mermaid and Other Stories,
Hans Christian Andersen
Publisher Madhubonti Kabir

MAHBUH HUSAIN KHAN, A FORMER CIVIL SERVANT, WRITES FICTION AND IS A CRITIC.