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Looking for meaning

The government's increasing push against religion in China, including against (non-registered) Christianity, does not mean that religion and spirituality are retreating. On the contrary, Ian Johnson's groundbreaking book, "The souls of China" (2017), has done much to prove that the opposite is happening. More recently, in a two-part report published on 16 and 23 March 2021 entitled "Chinese young people seek to improve their futures", China Source explains that this trend can also be clearly observed among the younger generation.

Perhaps as a testimony of modern Chinese society's hollowness, this interest in spirituality can be seen in how much room social media gives to online horoscopes, fortune tellers and astrology. The followers of such 'services' have reached their millions and the numbers further increased in the crisis year 2020. Many young people are looking for security and are suffering from anxiety and depression. As such, they are unlikely to be convinced by the Communist Party's (CCP) efforts at instrumentalizing history in the run-up to its 100th anniversary. In Marxism, history serves a political purpose and the CCP is trying to create a sense of historical destiny (Neican, 20 April 2021). Even President Xi Jinping has been using religious terms like "miracle", "belief", "faith" and "soul", when urging the nation to study Party history (Bitter Winter, 7 April 2021). It would seem that the soil is fertile for the Christian message as a liberating answer to society's growing needs.

The Internet is a two-edged sword

Those publicizing China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang have been facing something of a public backlash. Together with the orchestrated (or at least fanned) online protests, which include such things as boycotting Western fashion brands, this all comes at a price and not without a certain risk. As has been stated before, it is much easier to fan nationalist feelings than to restrain them, when necessary. But the situation in Xinjiang has also led some Chinese netizens to ask questions about what might really be going on there: Surely there might be at least a grain of truth in all the international accusations (Human Rights Watch, 25 March 2021).

Some Chinese netizens have also not been buying into the official "Support Xinjiang cotton" campaign, according to the China Digital Times reporting on 25 March 2021. They have been asking why a commercial good instead of the people of Xinjiang should be supported. Although such voices tend to get squeezed out of social media discussions, not all criticism could be banned outright. Despite the fact that freedom of expression in Internet and social media is restricted and ever shrinking, netizens - including religious minorities like Christians - have still managed to make their voices heard. But as long as there is no way for these voices to organize themselves and pose a threat in the real world, the Communist Party seems to accept them as a price to be paid.

Ever more assertive?

A research article has been published in The China Quarterly in March 2020 entitled "Guns and Butter in China: How Chinese Citizens Respond to Military Spending". In this report (on page 248), researchers from the University of Hong Kong found that while respondents support military spending in theory, in practice this support decreases in the face of other political priorities. A surprisingly high percentage of respondents even showed strong anti-war sentiments: 69.7% stated that avoiding war should be the chief goal of Chinese foreign policy (Cambridge University Press, March 2020).

While the authors do not speculate about the reasons for this anti-war sentiment, it may reflect memories of what is known in Chinese history as the "hundred years of humiliation", a period between 1839 and 1949 where various foreign powers intervened and subjugated China or parts of it. The research seems to indicate that citizens prefer to have powerful armed forces for protecting the state and for warding off any outside intervention.

At a time when it is said that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) simply does not "get" democracy (The Diplomat, 25 March 2021), such comments can be dangerous and lead to misunderstandings. It is however perfectly possible that the CCP understands democracy well enough to realize that it is counterproductive to impose sanctions on members of the very organ (the European Parliament) which has the task of ratifying the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). The CAI is an agreement which aims to regulate foreign investment and help European companies compete better in the Chinese market. The CCP simply regards delivering a clear message to be a higher priority than coming to an agreement with the EU. Such priorities are bad news for Christians: Advocacy and all efforts to make the CCP understand that the Christian minority not only does not pose a threat, but is even a blessing to society, will have limited effect in an environment where ideology trumps all.

This point was also emphasized when State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi gave an address to the US Council of Foreign Affairs recently, saying that "democracy is not Coca-Cola" (Xinhua, 24 April 2021), meaning it may have different flavors around the world. However, what this statement seems not to be noting or rather to be willfully ignoring is that just like the soft drink, it is American soft power which is still influencing people all over the world, a power form China still is lacking. Whether the "Coke soft power" has been historically promoted with the state's help and thus "American democracy is a lot like Coke", is another question (SMCP, 26 April 2021).

The reality behind China's poverty eradication

As if to remind the reader that statistics are often just numbers and are not a perfect reflection of reality, China Daily (a newspaper owned by the Publicity Department of the Communist Party) published an article on 25 April 2021 about two villages in Luonan county in Shaanxi Province. While the county has been officially included in those being lifted out of poverty, it has also been reported that some of the poorer villagers and contract workers have simply been resettled in quickly erected, makeshift buildings with no water supply.

This highlights the problems caused by centrally-ordered policies, as Merics explained [paywall] on 29 April 2021. For one thing, the local authorities are confronted with political goals which they have to report as being successfully achieved at a certain point, despite lacking the financial means and staff capacity to actually implement the policies. The Luonan county example is a good illustration of this: On paper, the goal has been achieved; but in reality, the people are still living under dire circumstances. Secondly, the central government is well aware that it cannot trust all data coming in at face value, but it lacks the capacity to control everything. If statistics in general should often be treated with a grain of salt, for China the amount of salt needs to be quite considerable.

On another level, this also explains the varying implementation of the regulations on religion in China, although the emergency exit for local Christians or religious leaders (i.e. of having good personal relationship with local officials) has closed for good in recent years. There are even reports that some local authorities are overzealous in implementing the rules.

Improving "bio-quality"

In a comprehensive report published on 1 May 2021, The Diplomat pointed out that the question whether what is happening with China's Uighur minority should be called genocide or not, while important, should not be seen as the main question. Beyond the defining aspects of international law, the situation in Xinjiang has to be seen in a broader context, as the policy towards all ethnic minorities has changed. The goal, as explained by the report, is now: "to actively alter the thoughts and behaviors of what Chinese authorities perceive to be a 'backward', 'deviant' and innately 'dangerous' sub-section of its population by uplifting their 'bio-quality' (*suzhi,* 素质) and overseeing their rebirth as loyal, patriotic, and civilized Chinese citizens". This is to be achieved by "planting the seed of patriotism" through the education system.

It has to be kept in mind that China is home to 55 so-called "Minzu" or ethnic minorities. As of 2005, more than 71% of China's minority population lived within one of the over 1,300 autonomous districts. These cover 64% of Chinese territory but are home to less than 10% of the total population.

The long-term policy of granting autonomy has increasingly been replaced by the desire for a process of 'transformation' (or rather, assimilation): This entails a more interventionist role for the Communist Party (CCP) and involves actively remolding a minority's ideological, cultural and spiritual fabric into what President Xi calls the 'collective consciousness of the Chinese (Zhonghua 中华) nation'. As a result, these shifts in policy go well beyond Xinjiang and are part of a fundamental rethinking of how the CCP is seeking to manage ethnocultural diversity and its colonial possessions."

This can also be said for the policy towards religious minorities, as can be seen by the fact that "in 2018, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) and the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) were placed under the direct supervision of the party's increasingly powerful United Front Work Department (UFWD). At all levels of the administrative hierarchy, the UFWD has been strengthened at the expanse of state organs like the SEAC and SARA" (The Diplomat, 1 May 2021).

Eradicating the legal gray areas

In March 2021, the Communist Party (CCP) announced a new policy to rectify the situation whereby non-state approved (i.e. illegal) social organizations (ISOs) have continued to operate. A report by the Made in China Journal published on 29 April 2021 explains how the new policy is to work. It is worth noting that the policy is targeted at organizations that have registered in "Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and other countries and regions" as well.

For several years, the majority of civil society organizations have operated "illegally" in China; but although there was a duty to register, the risk of being banned rarely materialized, as long as one played according to the rules. Thus a large grey area developed, not unlike the situation with the registered and unregistered churches. With advent of the CCP's new policy, which has been signed off by an impressive 22 ministries and Central Communist Party entities, this has all changed. But instead of taking direct action against the more than eight million entities (according to conservative estimates), the policy consists of just "6 Must Nots":

1. Enterprises, public institutions, and social organizations must not have any connections to ISOs.
2. Party member cadres must not participate in ISO activities.
3. News media must not publicize or report on ISO activities.
4. Public service facilities and venues must not provide convenience for ISOs.
5. Internet companies must not provide convenience for ISOs' online activities.
6. Financial institutions must not provide convenience for ISO activities.

The plan is that ISOs will "gradually die off", as the gray area where they were once allowed to flourish is now due to vanish. It will be interesting to see how local authorities cope with this new policy as they had often co-opted civil society organizations to fulfil their targets. This is not an option anymore and it remains to be seen if the CCP (for instance, at county level) will be able to replace them. The Made in China report is worth quoting in length concerning this:

> "The call to reject, refuse to facilitate, and even turn in ISOs, and the promise of penalties for not doing so, could spell the beginning of the end of an important dynamic of contemporary Chinas civil society. Anthony Spires (2011: 12) once found that the state tolerates illegal grassroots social organizations as long as particular state agents can claim credit for any good work while avoiding blame for any problems'. Similarly, Timothy Hildebrandt (2013: E1889) found that in some fields and localities there is 'clear incentive for local governments to put aside concerns of registration status and work in coordination with unregistered social organizations'. But this would clearly contravene the new policy."

If this policy is strictly implemented, it has the potential to fundamentally alter Chinese civil society. And it is a good reminder that the Communist Party is not just targeting Christians and other religious groups, but is taking a much broader approach.