



When opium can be benign

BEIJING, DONGLU AND HONGLIUTAN

China's Communist Party, reconsidering Marx's words, is starting to wonder whether there might not be a use for religion after all

"DEVELOP the dragon spirit; establish a dragon culture," urge large green characters at the high school in Hongliutan, a poor village at the foot of a range of bleak loess hills. Though dragon can be a synonym for China, it is a god known as the Black Dragon that is being invoked here. Without funds from the Black Dragon's hillside temple, in a gully behind the village, the school would not exist. Nor, most likely, would the adjacent primary school and the irrigation system that brings water from the nearby Wuding River to the village's maize and cabbage fields.

Many local governments in rural China are mired in debt. Recent central government efforts to keep peasants happy by abolishing centuries-old taxes have not made life any easier for these bureaucracies. With their revenues cut, rural authorities have found it ever more difficult to scrape together money for health care and education. So they are only too happy to allow others to share the burden of providing these services—even the Black Dragon,

whose soo-year-old temple was demolished by Maoist radicals during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Now officials in Yulin, the prefecture to which Hongliutan belongs, give the temple their blessing.

The revival of the Black Dragon Temple's fortunes is part of a resurgence of religious or quasi-religious activity across China that notwithstanding occasional crackdowns—is transforming the social and political landscape of many parts of the countryside. Religion is also attracting many people in the cities, where the party's atheist ideology has traditionally held stronger sway.

The resurgence encompasses ancient folk religions and ancestor worship, along with the organised religions of Buddhism, Taoism, Islam (among ethnic minorities) and, most strikingly, given its foreign origins and relatively short history in China, Christianity. In the face of this onslaught, the party is beginning to rethink its approach to religion. It now acknowledges that it may even have its uses.

In Hongliutan the party appears in retreat. It is not the party secretary Zhang Tieniu who holds sway. Mr Zhang was the youngest party chief in the prefecture when he was appointed last year at the age of 32. But in a culture that reveres age, some villagers refer to him dismissively as a "lad". The man in charge in Hongliutan is 64-year-old Wang Kehua. Mr Wang happens to belong to the village's main clan. He is also the village's elected chief (a post which in most villages is subordinate to that of party secretary). More to the point, he controls the temple and its money.

It was Mr Wang's idea to rebuild the temple in 1986, a decade after Mao's death. Mr Wang, who had become one of the village's wealthiest men by wheeling and dealing elsewhere, donated some of his own money and organised villagers to add theirs. It was a promising venture. Historically, the Black Dragon Temple had a reputation extending far beyond the village. The dragon was renowned in the parched semi-desert of the north of Shaanxi Province, 600 kilometres (370 miles) west of Beijing, as a bringer of rain. If the temple was rebuilt, people would come, pray to the dragon—and spend money.

Mr Wang does not, however, speak of commercial motives. In the bare concrete-walled room he calls his office, he describes how, one after the other, the half-dozen villagers who had destroyed the temple in the 1960s fell victim to the »

vengeful dragon in subsequent years. The man who had broken off the head of the Black Dragon's effigy (the god is worshipped in a human-looking form, as shown in the picture on the preceding page) had his head blown off when a factory boiler exploded. Another bled to death after accidentally chopping his foot with an axe. One was crushed by a donkey cart. Their offspring also suffered ill fate. These events, says Mr Wang, convinced him of the power of the dragon and of the importance of reviving its worship.

The temple has no clergy. Visitors are mainly drawn by their belief in the dragon's power to tell the future. Many want to know whether business ventures or marriages will succeed. Mr Wang asked the Black Dragon whether the divinity approved his appointment as temple chief. It did. The dragon's responses are given in the form of obscurely worded classical poems written on pieces of paper issued by a 70-year-old villager, Chen Yushan, clad in his blue padded Mao suit. Mr Chen offers his interpretation of what these poems mean. An entrepreneur who is told his business will be successful, and who then enjoys financial success, is quite likely to make a big donation to the temple.

Turning a blind eye

Officially, the party regards folk religion as superstition, the public practice of which is illegal. But in many rural areas officials now bend the rules. In Yulin prefecture, with 34m people, there are 106 officially registered places of worship and many more that are not officially sanctioned. Most are not part of the five mainstream religions (China regards the two Christian traditions, Catholicism and Protestantism, as separate) that the party recognises. But Yulin has allowed the Black Dragon Temple to affiliate itself with the government-sponsored Taoist Association. This gives it a cloak of legitimacy. So too does an arboretum that Mr Wang has planted with temple funds (at the dragon's request, he says, but it also helps him show officials how the village is contributing to government efforts to stop the desert encroaching).

Local officials themselves benefit from the greater tolerance. For all the party's dictatorial ways, government officers are often fearful of triggering unrest by enforcing unpopular policies that are not all that vital to the party's interests (hence the increasingly patchy implementation of population control). Demonstrations in an official's jurisdiction can do far more damage to his career than turning a blind eye to popular religion—so long as such activity does not directly challenge the party.

There are also more tangible rewards. In his book "Miraculous Response", Adam Yuet Chau of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London says that temples applying for official registration typi-

The permitted five
Religion in China*

| Religion | Adherents m | Clergy '000 | Places of worship |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Buddhism | 100 | 200 | 20,000 |
| Islam | 20 | 40 | 30,000 |
| Taoism | na | 25 | 1,500 |
| Protestantism | 16 | 18 | 55,000 |
| Catholicism | 5 | 4 | 4,600 |

Sources: *China Daily*; Chinese Foreign Ministry; 1997 government White Paper

*Latest available official estimates

cally have to treat local officials to banquets. Officials, he adds, support temples that pay them respect and tribute. They also gain financially from taxes levied on merchants who do business at temple fairs. Policemen invited to maintain order at these occasions are paid with cash, good food and liquor.

In the view of local officials, Mr Chau argues, temples play the same kind of role as commercial enterprises. They generate prosperity for the local economy and income for the local government. This is especially true of the Black Dragon Temple, which says it attracts 200,000 people to its ten-day summer fair (the Black Dragon himself, villagers say, has also shown up in the form of an unusually shaped cloud).

Evidence of China's religious revival can be seen throughout the countryside in the form of lavish new temples, halls for ancestor worship, churches and mosques (except in the far western province of Xinjiang, where the government worries that Islam is intertwined with ethnic separatism and keeps tighter rein). Officially there are more than 100 million religious believers in China (see table), or about 10% of the population. But experts say the real number is very much higher.

This does not mean that China has embraced religious freedom. Some religions—Tibetan Buddhism, Islam as practised in Xinjiang, Catholicism and "house church" Protestantism, which involves informal gatherings of believers outside registered churches—are still subject to tight controls because of the party's fears that their followers might have an anti-government bent. A seven-year-old crackdown on Falun Gong, a quasi-Buddhist sect that flourished in the 1990s, is still being pursued with ruthless intensity. Many Falun Gong practitioners, as well as lesser numbers of followers of other faiths who refuse to accept state attempts to regulate their religions, are imprisoned in labour camps.

Within the party, however, debate is growing about whether it should take a different approach to religion. This does not mean being more liberal towards what it regards as anti-government activities. But it could mean toning down the party's atheist rhetoric and showing stronger sup-

port for faiths that have deep historical roots among the ethnic Han majority. The party is acutely aware that its own ideology holds little attraction for most ordinary people. Given that many are drawn to other beliefs, it might do better to try to win over public opinion by actively supporting these beliefs rather than grudgingly tolerating them or cracking down.

Pan Yue, then a senior official dealing with economic reforms and now deputy director of the State Environmental Protection Administration, argued in an article published in 2001 that the party's traditional view of religion was wrong. Marx, he said, did not mean to imply that religion was a bad thing when he referred to it as the opium of the people. Religion, he said, could just as easily exist in socialist societies as it does in capitalist ones. He also singled out Buddhism and Taoism for having helped to bolster social stability through successive Chinese dynasties. Stability being of paramount concern to the party today, Mr Pan's message was clear.

In praise of harmony

His article angered party conservatives at the time: the party's official stance is that religion will die out under socialism. But more recently the party itself has begun to put a more positive spin on the role of religion. Last April China organised a meeting of Buddhist leaders from around the world in the coastal province of Zhejiang (it did not, however, invite the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader). The event was given considerable prominence in the official media. The theme, "A harmonious world begins in the mind", echoed the party's recent propaganda drive concerning the need for a "harmonious society". It implied just what Mr Pan had suggested—that the opium Marx was talking about should be seen as a benign spiritual salve. In October the party's Central Committee issued a document on how to build a harmonious society, arguing that religion could play a "positive role".

The party's change of tone coincides with its recent efforts to revive traditional culture as a way of giving China, in its state of rapid economic and social flux, a bit more cohesion. The term "harmonious society", which in recent months has become a party mantra, sounds in Chinese (*hexie shehui*) like an allusion to classical notions of social order in which people do not challenge their role in life and treat each other kindly. It is, in effect, a rejection of the Marxist notion of class struggle.

Officials are now encouraging a revival of the study of Confucianism, a philosophy condemned by Mao as "feudal" and which can be quasi-religious. Since 2004 China has sponsored dozens of "Confucius Institutes" around the world, including America and Europe, to promote the study of Chinese language and culture.

In the countryside the revival of traditional values has needed little encouragement. Clan shrines, where ancestors are worshipped, have sprung up in many rural areas, particularly in prosperous coastal and southern regions. The revival of clan identity (in many villages a substantial minority, if not a majority, of inhabitants have the same surname, which they trace back to a common ancestor) has had a profound impact on village politics. Those elected as village leader often owe much of their authority to a senior position in the clan hierarchy. Control of the ancestral shrine confers enormous power. It is often clan chiefs, rather than party officials, who mediate disputes. The shrine will lend money for business ventures—so long as the recipient has the right name.

Where Christianity is a feminist issue

Ironically, the growth of clan power has helped to fuel the growth of Christianity in some parts of the countryside. In a village in the eastern province of Shandong, the wife of a former party secretary was a Protestant who attended prayer meetings with her female friends. Their religious enthusiasm was apparently fuelled by the subordinate role of women in the clan. A married woman is expected to revere only her husband's ancestors but is excluded from his clan hierarchy. The fast growing house-church communities often disapprove of ancestor worship, thus attracting women who feel fettered by clan strictures.

The parlous state of China's health-care system has also given a powerful boost to religion. Falun Gong owed much of its success in the 1990s to claims that it could heal without the need for medicine (cash-strapped state-run hospitals usually sell medicines to patients at inflated prices in order to boost their revenues). In the village of Donglu in Hebei Province, about 140km south of Beijing, Catholic nuns have set up a three-storey clinic where they offer ophthalmic, dental and pediatric services for what they say is a fifth of the price of government-run clinics or private ones run for profit. A picture of Jesus is pasted to the wall in the operating theatre.

An apparition of Mary is said to have occurred in Donglu in 1900 when local Catholics were fighting off an assault by members of the fanatical Boxer cult trying to destroy their church. This has made the village a site of great devotion for Catholics. Every May for the past decade, the police have cordoned off Donglu to prevent thousands of Catholic pilgrims making their way to the village to celebrate the feast of Mary. Many of the pilgrims are

loyal to an underground church which claims closer ties with Rome than the state-approved Catholic church. Yet for all Donglu's sensitivity, the local government appears content to let Catholics run the hospital, which is a key public service.

Chinese officials are even urging religious organisations to learn from Hong Kong, where religious groups run many schools and hospitals. In late November, Ye Xiaowen, the head of the State Administration of Religious Affairs which oversees the five officially recognised religions, said that religious groups had helped reinforce social stability in the former British colony with their contribution to public services. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who visited China in October, wrote afterwards in the Times that there was now a sense in China that civil society needed religion, with its motivated volunteers. During his trip he remarked on an "astonishing and quite unpredictable explosion" in Christian numbers in China in recent years.

The party still mouths its alarmist rhetoric about what it says are foreign efforts to use religion as a means of undermining the party's grip on power. Yet the appointment of Pope Benedict XVI, following the death in 2005 of John Paul II who was seen by China as a more die-hard anti-communist, has encouraged tentative efforts by China to restore the ties with the Vatican that were severed in 1951.

Last month the Vatican decided to appoint a commission to handle Chinese relations. But progress has been far from smooth. On November 30th, much to the Vatican's annoyance, China's state-backed Catholic church appointed a bishop without the Vatican's prior approval for the third time that year. Since 2000 China had done so only with the Vatican's tacit assent. In August, however, China released a

bishop loyal to the underground church, An Shuxin, who had been arrested a decade earlier after leading celebrations of the feast of Mary in Donglu.

An even more tentative rapprochement is under way with the Dalai Lama. Since 2002, China has held five rounds of talks with his representatives, most recently last February. But China retains profound fears that the Dalai Lama's real intention is to separate Tibet, and adjoining areas, from China (see page 42). Notwithstanding the government's suspicions, Tibetan Buddhism has acquired a certain chic in Chinese cities in recent years, with some urbanites regarding it as spiritually more pure than Chinese-style Buddhism, which has strong links to the government.

Within its own ranks, the party knows that some members practise religion even though this is against the party's rules. Falun Gong claimed many adherents among party members in the 1990s. In the countryside, party secretaries routinely take part in religious ceremonies. Mr Wang at the Black Dragon is not a party member, but in other villages in the region temple chiefs double up as village party bosses. If the party is still trying to keep its members atheist, it is fighting a losing battle.

One result of allowing religion to play a bigger role in providing education could be that the party finds its efforts to inculcate its ideology among the nation's youth becoming ever more frustrated. In Hongliutan, the temple-sponsored middle school attracts many boarders from the town—a reversal of the normal flow of village pupils to the towns. Thanks to the temple's sponsorship, the middle school's fees are half of what they would be at a government school, teachers say. With this sort of discount, the popularity and influence of the Black Dragon, and other such spiritual beasts, seems certain to spread. •



Worshipping behind a shield of incense

Correction: An article on farmers' suicides in India ("The great unravelling", January 20th) described Vidarbha's cotton farmers as "mostly illiterate". But according to an inquiry by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, only about a fifth of those committing suicide in Maharashtra state were illiterate. We apologise.