



Chinese Tradition and Religion: The Growing Challenge and Opportunity for the Communist Party of China

Speaker: Poonam Surie

Chair: Ravi Bhoothalingam

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ICS Seminar Room

The seminar commenced with opening remarks from the Chair, Mr Ravi Bhoothalingam, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) who noted that religion in China influences and is influenced by the Communist Party. The speaker began by pointing out that China, with 650 million believers, houses a large religious population. The state recognises 8 national religions and around 9000 deputies of local people's congresses are believers. While the Party itself is self avowedly atheistic, it does not strictly enforce this since religious belief is permitted by China's constitution.

As such, China is home to numerous religions. These include Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Daoism and Confucianism as well as other heterodox religious groups. Nevertheless, the party-state has had occasion to crack down on religion over its history. For instance, in 1999 when the Falun Gong group mounted peaceful protests against the Party, they were subjected to a brutal crackdown. Their marginalisation lasts to this day with reports of extrajudicial killings and organ harvesting of Falun Gong followers. Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang are also facing prosecution. With other religions, however, the Party has a more multifaceted relationship. Confucianism and Buddhism were the main focus of the speaker.

The speaker expounded on the central role of Confucianism in China and its contemporary relevance. She noted that the Party aims at utilising traditional concepts of Confucianism that are deeply entrenched in the Chinese psyche in order to bolster the legitimacy of the regime. Xi's anti-corruption campaign, for instance has been likened to Confucian moral rectitude. The Party also draws a parallel between China's Belt and Road Initiative and Confucian values of familial solidarity, portraying the initiative as Xi reaching out to the neighborhood.

However, at the same time, the Party is wary of the allure of Confucianism. The speaker noted that Confucius' teachings have historically been used as a justification for upheaval against incumbent emperors. As such, the upswing in the popularity of Confucianism inspires apprehension in the Party, which deems it possible that it could achieve an undesirable degree of cohesion. For instance, Confucian schools are gaining popularity despite the fact that their

students eventually find it difficult to adjust to academic standards set by the government. There is also the concern that drawing parallels with Confucianism will backfire insofar as it provokes dissidents to label Xi's administration as, in fact, ruthlessly legalist in its conduct.

Buddhism has also been a source of concern for the Party on account of its handling of Tibet's demands for autonomy. In 2015, Buddhists accounted for 15 percent of China's population. Like Confucianism, Buddhism is simultaneously an asset and a liability for the Party. It has proven useful in providing social services and facilitating tourism, all the while being less threatening than foreign NGOs. The Party favors its spread insofar as it is a commodified version.

Moreover, China wishes to be seen as the Buddhist center of the world and reap the benefits of soft power in its dealings with its other predominantly Buddhist neighbours. The speaker noted that China's prospects are rather farfetched in this regard since China's brand of Buddhism differs from the Theravada brand of its neighbouring countries. Moreover, the unrest in Tibet has led to the mismanagement of Buddhist shrines and dismantling of monasteries that detract from the ability of the Party to project a healthy acceptance of Buddhism.

Nevertheless, the speaker noted that Buddhism is the party-state's preferred religion and is viewed as an instrument. In accordance with the Marxist canon, Buddhism, in its conventional state, was an elite ploy to divert lower classes from class consciousness. As such, the Party aims to transform conventional Buddhism into a "People's Buddhism" of sorts which is more amenable to Marxist ideology. According to the speaker, Buddhism in China is too big to be stamped out and the Party is aware of this. Instead, the religion will undergo modulation as the party-state renders it more palatable to its tastes. Religion will flourish "under the shadow of political control" and follow the trend of assuming Chinese characteristics.

Ultimately, the Chinese party-state perceives any broadly organised group to be a threat to its monopoly on authority. Religion in China will survive only to the extent that it augments the capacity of the Party to achieve its stated objectives. The speaker drew attention to the Party's leniency toward Daoism on the grounds that it is the only indigenous religion in China with a meagre following. While religion is not a complete anathema to the Party, it is tolerated only if it is largely innocuous. According to the speaker, the Party, in adherence to Marxist thought, views religion as an opiate of the masses and something to be subordinated to its endeavours.

About the Speaker

Poonam Surie is Adjunct fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies and was Visiting Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs and Research Associate at the Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. She has an MA degree in Economics from the Delhi School of Economics. Her professional experience covers teaching

at Delhi University and then subsequently teaching students in schools in Bhutan, New York and Beijing. She has freelanced for a number of newspapers, writing on contemporary issues. As a columnist for the Financial Express she had written a column 'NY Notes' in the mid 1990s on issues such as gender, art and culture. She has an abiding interest in Chinese studies and has written extensively on Chinese culture, religion and philosophy. She is the author of the books 'China: A Search for its Soul' (2009, Konark) and 'China: Confucius in the Shadows' (2015, Knowledge Word). She has presented academic papers at a number of national and International conferences including twice at the invitation of the Communications University of China, once at Beijing and once at Nanjing, respectively on Gender and Media; she presented a paper on Tagore at a conference at Peking University in October 2010, took part in the Lushan Writer's Workshop in September 2011 presenting a paper on 'Humans and Nature' and in a Conference on Confucius held in Beijing in September 2014 and at the Venice International University in Venice in 2015. She attended seminars in Beijing in 2015 and 2016 where she presented papers on Confucianism and contemporary culture and dialogue among civilizations.

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