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# The Historical Foundations of Religious Restrictions in Contemporary China

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**Abstract:** The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) abolished its total ban on religious activities in 1982. However, the distrust that the CCP feels for religions remains obvious today, and the religious restrictions in contemporary China remain tight. Conventional wisdom tells us that the official atheist ideology of Marxism-Leninism is the main reason behind the CCP's distrust for, and restriction of, religion. However, taking a historical institutionalist perspective, this paper argues that the religious restrictions in contemporary China are in fact rooted in the fierce political struggles of the country's two major revolutions in the first half of the twentieth century. Without the support of religious groups, the Nationalist Republicans would have found it difficult to survive and succeed in overthrowing the Qing Dynasty during the Chinese Republican Revolution in the first decade of the twentieth century. Likewise, without cooperating with a wide range of religious groups, the CCP would have struggled to defeat the Nationalist regime and the Japanese invaders in the Chinese Communist Revolution between 1920s and 1940s. Thanks to the collaborations and struggles with various religious groups during the two revolutions which lead to its eventual ascent to power, the CCP thoroughly understands the organisational strength and mobilising capability embedded within religious groups. The tight restrictions on religious affairs in contemporary China is therefore likely to stem from the CCP's worry that prospective competitors could mobilise religious groups to challenge its rule through launching, supporting, or sponsoring collective actions.

**Keywords:** religious restrictions; historical institutionalism; the Chinese Republican Revolution; the Chinese Communist Revolution; state-religion relations

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In March 1982, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officially abandoned its decade-long total ban on religion by issuing an official document titled *The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period* (Morrison 1984). In this document, the CCP, China's sole governing party, outlines its essential political line on religious affairs, stating:

Those who think that with the establishment of the Socialist system and with a certain degree of economic and cultural progress, religion will die out within a short period are not being realistic. Those who expect to rely on administrative decrees or other coercive measures to wipe out religious thinking and practices with one blow are even further from the basic viewpoint Marxism takes toward the religious question. They are entirely wrong and will do no small harm.

Following this document, restrictions on religious activities were relaxed in China, and many parts of the country have since witnessed various levels of 'religious revival' (Lai 2003). However, three and a half decades later, religious groups are still stuck in an ambiguous relationship with the CCP. Even though religious freedom has been restored as a constitutional right for the Chinese citizens, religious restrictions are still visibly tight under the CCP's rule. While the CCP has invited religious groups and their members to take part in official projects such as 'constructing the socialist

new countryside' and 'constructing a socialist harmonious society', it only grants limited space to religious activities and still heavily regulates religious affairs.

Why, then, is the CCP so suspicious of religious groups even after it openly acknowledges and appreciates the constructive perspectives of religions? Conventional wisdom has it that the tight religious restrictions in contemporary China are due to the fact that the country is ruled by a Communist Party which holds atheistic Marxism-Leninism as its official political line. Yet, while the official ideology of a regime often plays an important role in shaping its attitudes and policies towards religion, it is certainly not the only factor that matters. If official ideology was the singular driving factor behind policy, it would be hard to reconcile the tightness of religious restrictions with the fact that owners of gigantic private enterprises are accepted as members of the CCP. Instead, as Kung (2006) points out, religion is much more a political than an ideological issue in contemporary China. Following this line of thought, the current religious restriction in China is far from a brand-new invention. After all, many political challenges in contemporary China, including but not limited to collective violence, regional separatism, and ethnic conflicts, are not rare throughout the country's long history.

This paper argues that religious restrictions in contemporary China have their roots in the past, especially in the bitter revolutions through which the CCP emerged as a consequence of China's transition into a modern state. To illustrate this thesis, in the rest of this paper I will first describe how the CCP is reluctant to further loosen its religious restrictions, explaining how ambiguous religious policy in China becomes a source of the CCP's discretionary power over religious affairs and leads to the various restrictions on religious freedom in China today. I will then discuss the roles of religious groups in the Chinese Republican and Communist Revolutions, respectively. These two major revolutions dominated China's history in the first half of the twentieth century, and they paved way for the CCP's ascent to power. The engagements that the CCP had with religious groups during these two revolutions, I argue, to a large extent made and shaped the Party's attitudes and policies towards religious groups in contemporary China.

## 1. Religious Restrictions in Contemporary China and Their Roots in the Past

Since the CCP loosened its control over religious affairs in the early 1980s, many parts of China have witnessed a rapid wave of religious revival (Tao 2012). In comparison to what happened during the high tide of Communist zeal between the 1960s and 1970s, religious believers and groups in today's China are much less likely to be portrayed as evil agents of 'Western Imperialists' or dangerous enemies of the state (Chan 2005). Religious freedom is clearly stated as a fundamental civil right in China's current constitution<sup>1</sup>. The country's religious legislative work is progressing substantially (Ying 2006; Tong 2010). Various religious associations have been restored on the national and local level (Ashiwa and Wank 2006). Numerous temples, churches and mosques have been built or redecorated in towns and villages (Overmyer 2003; Dean 2003; Madsen 2003; Hillman 2004). The next-generation religious leaders are trained in Buddhist academies, Daoist schools, Christian seminaries, and Islamic institutes (Birnbaum 2003, p. 440; Dean 2009, pp. 193–94; Bays 2003). Interesting and insightful religious research is conducted by universities and academic institutes (Yang 2004; Lam 2004), many of which are sponsored by the state. And perhaps more impressively, the CCP, which projects itself as an atheist political organisation, even openly invites the religious communities to take part in flagship social projects such as 'constructing a socialist harmonious society'<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See Article 36 of the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, which states that 'Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities.'

<sup>2</sup> See official documents such as *Zhong gong zhong yang guan yu gou jian she hui zhu yi he xie she hui ruo gan zhong da wen ti de jue ding* (*The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Decision on Several Important Issues regarding Constructing the Socialist Harmonious Society*) and *Gou jian she hui zhu yi he xie she hui de gang ling xing wen jian* (*A Programmatic Document on Constructing the Socialist Harmonious Society*), both issued in October 2006.

However, it would be naive to simply imagine that the relationship between religious groups and the CCP is a rosy one. In fact, religious belief is still under tight control in contemporary China (Potter 2003), and religion remains a politically sensitive topic (Yao 2007). China's legal and administrative institution is accused of being designed to regulate religious activities rather than to facilitate religious freedom (Leung 2005). State-owned resources, public funding, and social spaces are granted exclusively to a handful of 'official' religious groups (Yang 2007), and even these groups do not have much bargaining power and are not allowed to challenge the state authority (Kung 2010). Many other religious groups are labelled as 'unofficial' or 'unregistered' and thus have to remain 'underground' (Marshall and Shea 1998; Wenger 2004), and they are under increased state pressure (Xu 1997). Some religious groups have faced crack downs, being labelled as 'evil cults' (Tong 2009; Thornton 2010). More severe religious conflicts and even break outs of violence have occurred in many parts of the country (Chung et al. 2006; Kung 2006).

The awkward status of religious groups in contemporary China could not have persisted for so long without that ambiguity being deeply embedded in the country's religious policy. For example, while both China's constitution and the country's *Regulation on Religious Affairs* clearly state that 'the state protects normal religious activities', there is no clear and generally accepted list of the religious activities that are 'normal', nor is there any official catalogue that explicitly lists the groups which are considered to be practicing 'normal religious activities'. As a result, apart from a limited number of officially-permitted and a few officially-banned religious groups, the vast majority of religious groups in contemporary China have to function in a 'grey market', where the CCP acquiesces in the existence of these religious groups but could take action against them whenever it wishes (Yang 2006). Therefore, as (Morrison 1984, p. 254) points out, 'the implementation of religious policy within China may vary from public statements made for international consumption' and 'may also vary at the local level'.

The ambiguity in China's religious policy, be it a deliberate design or an unintended result, leaves the CCP considerable room to regulate and intervene in religious affairs. For the religious groups and believers in China, such ambiguity means that their rights are far from secured despite recent progress in the country's legislative work. In fact, calls for strengthening the CCP's 'leading' of religious affairs and 'guiding' of religious communities still emerge from time to time. Despite the general improvement of religious freedom in China during the past few decades, it is common for influential figures, sometimes even the top leadership, in the CCP to speak out about their concerns over the rapid religious revival in relatively direct language. For example, in his capacity as the Chairperson of the CCP's Central Advisory Commission, Chen Yun—a veteran leader of the Party—described religions as 'customary tactics that foreign class enemies adopt' to attract the youth and to overthrow the government in China (Chen 1996). Likewise, at the National Conference on the United Frontiers in 1993, Jiang Zemin, the then president of China and general secretary of the CCP, dubbed religion a 'breach' through which 'the foreign enemies intend to Occidentalise or separate China' (Jiang 1996). Zhu Rongji, the then premier, also said that 'religious affairs in western China have been constantly used by enemies for their subversive and secessionist activities' (Zhu 2003). In fact, in the policy documents issued by the CCP and the speech transcripts of China's top leaders in the last few decades, an obvious pattern is that positive comments on the constructive role that religious groups play in society are often followed by criticisms of the negative impacts that religions could have on society. Clearly, while the CCP understands the importance and power of religious groups and intends to make use of them for its own ends, it never extends full trust to these groups. That is to say, the loosening of religious restrictions in contemporary China is not without reservation.

What exactly does the CCP fear the current trend towards religious revival? Why do religious restrictions remain tight in China almost four decades after the CCP officially waved farewell to its radical past? The answer, I argue, lies in the long and bitter revolutions through which the CCP emerged from a marginal background position to eventually establishing itself as the ruling power. Much like other political parties in America (May 1973; Etheredge and Short 1983) and

Europe (Hall 1993; Hecló 2011), the CCP is well aware of, vitally concerned, and deeply influenced by its understanding of the ‘lessons from the past’, especially its ‘formative experience of guerrilla warfare and revolutionary mobilisation’ (Heilmann and Perry 2011). Senior Chinese officials, when discussing religious affairs, frequently comment on the lessons learned from history. For example, Peng (Li 1995, p. 18)), the then premier, stated that ‘religion had profound impacts on many aspects of social life in China in the past’ at the National Religious Work Conference in 1990. Likewise, in his speech at the National Religious Work Conference in 2001, Jiang Zemin urged his comrades to learn from the failure of five major anti-Buddhist persecutions in ancient China. It is thus hard to imagine that the CCP does not look at the Chinese Republican and Communist Revolutions when it makes or adjusts its religious policy (Jiang 2006, p. 375).

In these two sequential revolutions that fundamentally reshaped the political, social, and spiritual landscapes of an old civilisation, religious groups demonstrated their powerful capability to mobilise the masses and call for change. In fact, the long-standing imperial rule would not have collapsed so quickly without the resistance facilitated by religious groups during the Chinese Republican Revolution. Moreover, as a relatively weak rebellious force, the CCP could hardly have survived without forming a ‘united front’ with religious groups during the Chinese Communist Revolution. However, ironically, on both occasions, the honeymoon period which saw revolutionaries and religious practitioners working together ended tragically when the old regime was overthrown and the ruled became the ruler. In the eyes of the new master, who was fully aware of the power contained in religious groups thanks to its previous cooperation with them, religious groups were no longer close allies but rather dangerous enemies. Policies were thus made and implemented to restrict religious groups, and actions were then taken to pacify the rebelling potential of religious communities.

## 2. Religious Groups and the Chinese Republican Revolution

The CCP is not the first political party in modern China to recognise the strong mobilising capacity embedded within religious groups. Several decades before the rise of the CCP, the nationalist republicans in China had already achieved considerable success in working with religious groups to topple the rule of the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty. However, soon after seizing control of China’s ruling power, the nationalist republicans began to suppress all social and political groups that presented potential threats to their rule, including religious groups, faith-based secret societies, and the Communist Party. Both the coalitions that the Nationalists established with religious groups during the Chinese Republican Revolution and the suppression that the Nationalists imposed on religious groups after their success set precedents for the CCP’s relations with religious groups during the Chinese Communist Revolution and in contemporary China.

Religion-based rebellion has a long tradition in the Chinese history. The first major rebellion of such kind can be traced back to 184 AD, when the Yellow Turban Rebellion (*huang jin qi yi*) broke out. The name of this national-wide rebellion comes from the yellow turbans that the rebels wrapped around their heads as a symbol of their religious belief (Michaud 1958), and the rebellion was directed primarily by activists of *Tai Ping Dao*, one of the two major Daoist denominations of the time (Kohn 2000, p. 134). The Yellow Turban Rebellion lasted for about 22 years. It eventually led to the collapse of the Han, a dynasty which had existed for about four centuries. In fact, the Han Dynasty collapsed just two decades after the Yellow Turban Rebellion was cracked down (Levy 1956).

Following this early example, numerous rebellions by religious groups occurred throughout China’s history from the late second century onwards. Some of such rebellions, like the Red Turban Rebellion between 1151 and 1157, led to the collapse of powerful dynasties (Mote 1998; Seiwert 2003, p. 201). Others posed severe challenges to the existing order.

In fact, just a few decades before China’s nationalist republicans started their revolution against the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty, a rebellion mobilised through religious groups had already significantly destabilised the Manchu rule. The Taiping Rebellion, which broke out in December 1850, was launched by a heterodox Christian cult whose leader claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. After a

series of military victories over the Qing regime, the rebels built the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (*tai ping tian guo*), a theocracy that controlled the rich lower Yangtze region for more than a decade. Despite its eventual victory over the rebels, the Qing regime was significantly weakened by the rebellion. One of the richest regions in China was turned to ruins, and even modest estimates suggest that the total number of military and civilian casualties during the Taiping Rebellion was over 20 million (Michael and Zhang 1966; Fairbank 1992, pp. 206–9; Spence 1996).

The Taiping Rebellion was brutally suppressed, but its legacy did not die with the Heavenly Kingdom. Many nationalist republicans who also intended to overthrow the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty through armed uprisings were deeply inspired and influenced by the Taiping Rebellion. Among them, the most famous figure is Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of the Chinese Nationalist Party (*guo min dang/KMT*). In fact, historic evidence suggests that faith-based secret societies were the most important supporters and participants in many of Sun's military uprisings against the Qing regime (Wu 2006). In 1895, some two hundred members of a secret society joined Sun's first revolutionary group, the Revive China Society (*xing zhong hui*), just a few months after the organisation was established (Peng 1998). When the Revive China Society's plan of an armed uprising was leaked to the Qing regime, Zhu Guiquan, the leader of the aforementioned secret society, was executed in Guangzhou (Zhou 2001a). In 1900, thousands of secret society members were involved in Sun's Huizhou uprising, which is often regarded as the first effective armed uprising led by the republican revolutionaries (Zhou 2001b). In the subsequent years, Sun and his comrades successfully controlled several anti-Manchu secret societies in Hubei, Hunan, and Zhejiang. Many of these groups were transformed into effective and efficient revolutionary units (Peng 1998; Zhou 2001a).

While the republican nationalists were busy organising armed uprisings and assassinations in China's urban areas, many practitioners of indigenous religions in the countryside of northern China turned themselves into 'boxers'. These desperate peasants and members of the proletariat lost their means of livelihood due to disastrous floods, opium addiction, and the dumping of foreign products on Chinese markets. They blamed the western-oriented Christianity as the master architect of their misfortune. As a result, they organised themselves into the Righteous Harmony Society (*yi he tuan*), a loose federation consisting of numerous social groups, many of which derived from faith-based secret societies. The boxers believed that they were protected by invisible armour and assisted by troops of spiritual soldiers. They burned churches, attacked foreign missionaries and killed Chinese Christians. The Qing regime's failure to take control of the Boxer Rebellion eventually led to a large-scale invasion of China by eight foreign countries. The capital of China was occupied by foreign troops, the Qing court was forced to sign the *Boxer Protocol* with 11 foreign countries. The regime lost its control over major financial resources as it was required to pay 450 million taels of fine silver as indemnity. That was several times more than the government's annual tax revenue (Clements 1967; Fairbank 1992, pp. 230–32; Preston 2000).

It should be noted that while not all secret societies are religious groups, these two social categories have significant overlap in a Chinese historical context. On the one hand, many religious groups were regarded as heterodox by the state in the imperial era and thus were led to organise themselves into secret societies to better survive (Ma and Han 1992). On the other hand, many secret societies had religious origins (Hirayama 1912). Of the secret societies involved in the Chinese Republican Revolution, many can be traced back to popular religions in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and these religious doctrines and practices remained important to such societies throughout the Republican Era (Lu 2002). These societies are often well organised and well spread. Both sacred and secular instruction from the leaders were distributed through effective and efficient secret networks covering both urban and rural areas in many provinces (Pu 1994). In addition, many faith-based secret societies in the late Qing period harboured anti-Manchu attitudes (Zhou 2005). Such attitudes were shared with Sun's revolutionary ideology, and it thus allowed the republican nationalists to take control and make use of the organisational and personal resources of such faith-based secret societies. In fact, faith-based secret societies were probably the only effective social force that Sun and his comrades successfully

mobilised in their first few years of armed uprisings, during which the republican nationalists gained considerable financial and human support from these groups (Huang 2001; Zhou 2001a).

As a result, only a few decades after the fall of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and a few years after the dissolution of the Righteous Harmony Society, Sun and his comrades were able to successfully establish a regime that would go on to replace the Qing Dynasty. In the very city where the Taiping rebels set up their Heavenly Kingdom, Sun was sworn in as the first president of the Republic of China on the first day of 1912. Forty-two days later, the last Qing emperor signed his abdication. The capital of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom became the capital of the Republic of China.

The happy marriage between faith-based religious groups and the republican revolutionaries, however, did not last long. Given its appreciation of the non-trivial power and rich tradition of rebellion that pervaded faith-based secret societies, the KMT started to take action against the maverick religious groups soon after it became the ruling party of China. Actually, apart from a few groups that had close personal ties with senior leaders of the KMT and those which were institutionalised by the Nationalist regime, many religious groups were disbanded or repressed under the slogans of 'maintaining social order' and 'shaking off superstition' (Peng 1998; Guo 2005).

### 3. Religious Groups and the Rise of the CCP

The KMT regime's repression of religious groups is aptly described by a Chinese idiom: these policies were akin to "tearing down the bridge after crossing the river" (Cai 1987, p. 316). Such seemingly 'unjust' actions, however, were in fact quite rational. The KMT rule was constantly threatened and challenged by maverick religious groups, especially those controlled or influenced by the Communists. Much like the situation that the KMT faced in the Chinese Republican Revolution, the CCP was a rebellious force against the regime under which they were born and bourgeoned. And similar to the KMT, it is unlikely that the CCP could have survived and eventually overthrown the pre-existing regime without working closely with religious groups in the early stage of its development.

In line with their comrades in other parts of the world, the Communists in China proclaim themselves as atheists, putting them in stark contrast with the ideology of religious groups. They often label the Chinese indigenous religions as backward cultural legacies of the country's imperial past (Chen 2003) and frame western religions as a cultural invasion sent by the foreign powers (Wang 2009). All these negative attitudes towards religion, however, do not stop the CCP from recognising the active roles that religious groups can play in mobilising and facilitating violent resistances.

In one of Mao Zedong's earliest surviving papers written in 1926, the founding father of the current Chinese regime regarded members of religious groups and secret societies as important components of the lumpen-proletariat class, which was 'made up of peasants who have lost their land and handicraftsmen who cannot get work.' According to Mao, members of religious groups and secret societies 'lead the most precarious existence of all', and they were 'brave fighters but apt to be destructive.' Therefore, 'one of China's difficult problems is how to handle these people', because 'they can become a revolutionary force if given proper guidance' (Mao 1965). Mao held this view throughout the Chinese Communist Revolution. In another of his most important and influential articles written in 1940, he once again emphasised that 'in the field of political action communists may form an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal united front with some idealists and even religious people' (Mao 1965, p. 381).

Mao's call for winning over and working with religious groups was widely echoed by his comrades and followers. For instance, during China's war with Japan between 1937 and 1945, Liu Shaoqi, who later became the second most powerful man in Mao's regime, instructed the CCP's leader in western Shandong to 'gradually transform bandits, religious groups, and secret societies into anti-Japanese forces' (Chen 1996, p. 213). In addition, he also ordered the CCP troops in the vicinity of these organisations to maintain good discipline and to avoid interfering with their religious beliefs or insulting their leaders (Liu 1938, p. 50). Likewise, when his troops marched towards Tibet in 1950, Deng Xiaoping ordered the officers and soldiers to 'protect Buddhist temples and pay respects to the

Tibetan people's religious beliefs and customs'. It was these measures which allowed the CCP to win the trust of ordinary people and the religious personnel in Tibet during the early 1950s and eventually enabled a 'peaceful liberation' of the entire Tibetan region (Gong 1998).

The CCP's policy of working with and making use of religious groups and faith-based secret societies proved to be effective and efficient. Based on an in-depth research into the party's official documents and publications in the first half of the twentieth century, Kataoka (1974) found that the Communists worked extremely hard to win over faith-based secret societies in or near their revolutionary base areas. The CCP, which itself was in a rebelling position during the Chinese Communist Revolution, collected many 'archaic formations that were already in existence and slowly converted them'. As a reward for their efforts, these religious groups provided the CCP not only local knowledge but also brave and experienced warriors. Also, according to Kataoka, 'the Chinese Communist Movement draws on traditional human relationships and turns them to its account'. In other words, the Chinese Communists may be atheist, but 'the mediums' which they adopted to achieve their revolutionary goal were certainly not always atheist. Even Liu Shaoqi acknowledged that some religious groups and faith-based secret societies accepted the leadership of the CCP because they believed that Zhu De, the commander of the CCP-led Eighth Route Army, was the descendant of Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty (Liu 1938, p. 52). Agreeing with Kataoka, Yung-fa (Chen 1986, p. 488) also suggests that 'the CCP's need for new soldiers had forced them to treat secret societies as a source of troops in around 1940'. He goes on to claim that due to the party's superior mass mobilisation capability, strict military discipline and relatively reasonable tax policy, it was able to elicit political cooperation with religious groups and faith-based secret societies despite its atheist ideology. As mentioned by Chen (1986), an intelligence report dated June 1940 indicated that the CCP could claim control over about 43 per cent of the faith-based secret societies in Anhui. This report, produced by the KMT agents, also indicated that the CCP had absorbed a great number of the religious believers into its peasant associations.

Furthermore, winning over religious groups was crucial to the CCP's survival and success in certain areas. For instance, according to Deng Zihui, the political commissar of the Fourth Division of the CCP-led New Fourth Army, his troops would not have achieved victory in northern Jiangsu without cooperating with the local Green Gang (*qing bang*) (Deng 1945, p. 14), which was a secret society with roots in China's traditional sectarian religions (Overmyer 1976, pp. 113–29; Ma and Han 1992). In addition to forming coalitions with religious groups, the CCP sometimes opted to directly convert religious groups into its own combat units. Take the religious group named Way of Previous Heavens (*xian tian dao*/WPH) as an example. After the CCP cadres successfully infiltrated this religious group, they gradually isolated the uncooperative higher leaders of the WPH from their followers, while skilfully keeping the middle and lower echelons of the WPH leadership on their side. By doing so, the CCP was able to channel the energy of the religious rank-and-file, reinterpreting the WPH's teaching as a call to resist against the suppression of the evil KMT reactionaries and Japanese invaders. As a result, the WPH organised two large-scale uprisings in Japanese-occupied regions in 1943 and 1945 respectively, posing considerable challenges to the Japanese troops and the puppet government in Hebei and Jiangsu (Shao 1997, pp. 376–80; Mitani 2002). Each of these uprisings involved about 100 thousand participants, and as a result the CCP was eventually able to establish its own local authorities under a religious cover (Bao 1980). Similarly, the CCP branch in southwest Fujian successfully formed a united front with Lin Ximing, a megalomaniac who dressed himself in operatic costume and proclaimed himself as the implementer of the 'Mandate of Heaven' (*tian ming*). As soon as the alliance was formed, the CCP began to mobilise Liu and his followers to fight against the ruling KMT regime, and eventually transformed these religious practitioners into revolutionaries (Chen 1979, p. 31).

In addition to working with and making use of religious groups, the leaders of the CCP also learned much from religious groups which had successfully become rebel powers in the past. The knowledge of how religious groups successfully mobilised their followers in rebellions was often directly applied to advance the CCP's own revolutionary agenda. For example, the 'three rules of

discipline and eight points for attention', the essential military doctrine that made the Communist army a powerful force, was largely taken from the Taiping Rebels by Mao Zedong in late 1920s. Indeed, as [Kataoka \(1974\)](#) argues, 'the strength of Chinese communism as a peasant movement rests on a refinement of some decisively pre-modern traits of China's peasantry'.

#### 4. The CCP's Struggle with Religious Groups in the Revolutionary Era

Aside from lessons learned from China's ancient history and its witnessing of what happened during the Chinese Republican Revolution, the CCP's attitudes and policies towards religious groups have also been deeply influenced and profoundly shaped by its experience in the Chinese Communist Revolution. In fact, the CCP's suspicion of religious groups is not only built on its experience of working with and making use of these groups to overthrow the KMT regime, but also directly developed from its struggle with these groups during the Chinese Communist Revolution.

The CCP's attempts to win over and create untied fronts with religious groups and faith-based secret societies were not always successful. Instead, during the long and bitter Chinese Communist Revolution, the CCP and its peripheral organisations were constantly under severe attacks from some religious groups and faith-based secret societies that worked closely with the KMT regime and/or the Japanese invaders. Actually, in some areas, these religious groups and faith-based secret societies were the most brutal enemies of the CCP. For example, during the massacre in Shanghai which started on the twelfth of April 1927, thousands of Communists and their supporters were captured and killed by the KMT regime with the assistance of the Green Gang. This political purge was so cruel that Du Yuesheng, the principal ringleader of the Green Gang in Shanghai, decided to flee to the British-colonised Hong Kong before the CCP's troops occupied the city in 1949, even though he had long departed from the KMT regime and was explicitly invited to join the new regime, who promised to pardon all his previous crimes ([Zhu 2008](#)).

For the CCP, persuading religious groups and faith-based secret societies to camp on the anti-KMT side was an extremely difficult task ([Chen 1979](#)). During China's war with Japan in 1930s and 1940s, while some religious groups and faith-based secret societies cooperated with the CCP, many others collaborated with the Japanese invaders and were even reorganised into armed forces that fought against the Communist troops. It was also not uncommon for religious groups which were working closely with the CCP to ultimately betray them ([Liang 2002](#)). In other words, although 'no country boasts a more enduring or more colourful history of rebellion and revolution than China' and such protests have been directly encouraged by 'central elements in Chinese political culture' ([Perry 2002](#)), the CCP was not always able to mobilise and take advantage of the social capital embedded in religious groups and faith-based secret societies during the Communist Revolution in China. In some areas, such as the rural counties to the north of River Huai, the Communists had to overcome tremendous obstacles before they could convert the bandits and underground religious sects into revolutionary forces ([Perry 1980](#)). In other areas, such as the industrialised urban areas of Shanghai, the Communists were never able to break through the embedded traditions of secret religious sects among the workers. Therefore, they never succeeded in integrating workers with different backgrounds into to a homogeneous social class with the same interests, the same goals, and the same leadership ([Perry 1995](#)).

Given the difficulties faced when dealing with religious groups and faith-based secret societies, the CCP has long been cognisant of the unreliable and wild potentials of religious groups. Therefore, even during China's war with Japan in 1930s and 1940s, a period when the CCP disparately needed allies and made 'building the United Front (with other groups and powers)' its first policy priority, the Communists never relaxed their vigilance against religious groups and faith-based secret societies. According to ([Chen 1986](#), p. 493):

As mass mobilisation gained headway, the Communists tightened their control over the secret societies in various ways, including mandatory registration, if a wartime stipulation in Huaipai can be taken as typical; there the public security bureau of the Kiangsu-Anhwui



border area required all religious groups and secret societies to register their history, organisation, goals, regulations, sphere of activities, sources of finance, membership list, and resumes of their leaders.

Acknowledging many distinctive governance methods of the current Chinese regime are shaped by the CCP's revolutionary past (Heilmann and Perry 2011), it is not surprising that the Party maintains its tight restriction on religious affairs many decades after the victory of the Chinese Communist Revolution. Indeed, as Liang (2002) astutely elucidates,

Solving the problem of faith-based secret society had an important and profound impact on the CCP. This allowed the Party to carry out the work of establishing revolutionary base areas and hence greatly supported its battles against the Japanese invaders. Furthermore, such a process accumulated necessary experiences for the CCP to handle similar situations and problems in future.

As a political party that accumulated substantial experience during the long and brutal revolution through which it emerged, the CCP is deeply influenced by, and good at, learning from its own past (Heilmann and Perry 2011). The encounters that the CCP had with religious groups and faith-based secret societies during the Chinese Communist Revolution made the Party fully aware of the power and potential that religious groups have in launching and mobilising social movements. Therefore, as the KMT had done before, the CCP tightly restricted religious affairs after it became the ruling party of China in 1949. In March 1950, less than half a year after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, a senior CCP official explicitly urged some religious groups to 'cut down their links with foreign powers' at a national conference (Li 1992). More significantly, many religious groups and faith-based secret societies became targets of brutal campaigns to suppress counterrevolutionaries during 1950 and 1953, not due to any particular ideological motivation but rather because they 'could be seen as an ongoing source of social organisation and competition to the Party-state' (Strauss 2002).

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

It is widely recognised that the religious restrictions have been significantly relaxed in China since the early 1980s. However, tight control over religious activities and organisations remains in place due to the ambiguities in China's religious policy. Aiming to develop a better understanding of the reasons underlying this paradox, this article revisits and reviews the roles that religious groups played in the two major revolutions which shaped the current political landscape in China, focusing specifically on the CCP's collaborations and struggles with religious groups on its way to ruling China. Based on the analyses of the historical foundation of religious restriction in contemporary China, this article suggests that the CCP's current suspicion of religious groups is more a realist than an ideological concern.

The current Chinese regime, like authoritarian regimes around the world, may be displeased by the growing popularity of religious belief at the expense of official ideology in some parts of the country, but what they really fear is the great organisational power and mobilisation capability embedded in such groups. Therefore, in a ploy to prevent history from repeating itself, the CCP is doing its utmost to maintain tight restrictions on religion and to prevent religious groups from launching, supporting, or sponsoring collective actions that could challenge its rule. As a result, despite the CCP's significant shifts in economic and foreign policy since the end of 1970s, religious restrictions in China are likely to remain rigorous as long as the CCP maintains their monopoly over political power.

Still, it is noteworthy that the CCP has already realised that religious groups can support as well as challenge the existing political order. In (Jiang 2006, p. 376) speech at the National Religious Work Conference in 2001, for example, the then top leader of the CCP clearly pointed out that religious groups were used 'to strengthen the political power by the ruler' as well as 'to call for resistance by the oppressed ruled' throughout Chinese history. Jiang's view has been widely echoed by many senior officials in the regime's religious affairs bureaucracy, including the former and current heads of China's State Administration for Religious Affairs, Ye Xiaowen and Wang Zuoan (Ye 2002; Wang 2010). In fact,

the phrase ‘working with religious groups’, which can be found in many historical documents that the CCP issued during the revolutionary era, is still frequently mentioned in China’s official discourse today, and the CCP is taking proactive actions to make religious groups cooperative and controllable. As made clear in a *People’s Daily* editorial, the regime is ‘trying hard to cultivate a group of young knowledgeable religious personages who advocate the leadership of the CCP, support the socialist system, and love the country as well as its religion’ (Zhang 2005). This was echoed by Wang Zuoan’s talk to some young and middle-aged religious believers at an official forum<sup>3</sup>.

Though without official acknowledgment, burgeoning religious groups have already emerged as powerful social forces in contemporary China. Religious groups are reported to be playing important roles in enriching local people’s cultural life (Dean 2003), providing public goods and services (Tsai 2007), mediating conflicts (Tao 2015), and strengthening commercialised economy and inspiring entrepreneurship in China’s cities, towns, and countryside (Cao 2010). This is true to an even greater extent at the grassroots level. Therefore, although it is understandable that the CCP is seriously concerned by the rapid religious revival in today’s China and remains defiant in its high level of control over religious affairs, such a fossilised policy is hardly an ideal solution even from the CCP’s own perspective. Tight religious restriction not only requires significant input of resources but also limits the constructive potentials of religious groups. As a result, the CCP may need to spend even more resources to maintain its ruling power. Perhaps the best way to avoid a repeat of history is to take an alternative path. For the CCP, this means adopting more flexible religious policies. If the CCP really wants to avoid the fate of its predecessors, it may need to grant more space to religious groups rather than continuing the application of pressure through restrictive policies.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Strengthening the Cultivation and Education of Religious Personages*, which is given by Wang Zuoan on the Second Young and Middle-aged Religious Personages’ Discussion Forum on 18 August 2010. The transcript is accessible at <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1027/12484392.html>.

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