

STATE FAITH AND RELIGIOUS FAITH IN TODAY'S CHINA

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Abstract

This essay analyses the meaning of “state faith” in present day China. This idea of state faith can have three meanings. First, it can mean the state's faith, or the faith of state. Second, it can mean the national faith, or the faith of the nationals. And third, it can mean the faith in the state, or the belief in the state. The essay then attempts to see whether ‘state faith’ in these three senses, does exist in the reality of China. It analyzes what characteristics they possess, and what relationships to ‘religious faith’ they have respectively.

FORWARD

In November, 2010, Shanghai Association for Philosophy and Social Sciences held its annual symposium at Fudan University. One of the sessions took as its theme ‘Chinese Faith/Chinese Experience’, and its coordinator, Prof Li Xiangping, assigned me such a topic----‘The Relationship of the State Faith to the Religious Faith’.

Some time before that symposium, in the presence of Prof. Li, I once criticized his concept of ‘State Faith’ as a ‘pseudo issue’ or false issue. To my surprise, however, he invited me to that symposium with such a theme and topic. Having his warmth, tolerance and persistence in mind, I felt I had to rethink this issue seriously. The conclusion of my rethinking is: this is not a ‘pseudo issue’, but really an important and serious reality which is emerging in China and before the world today, therefore, it is absolutely worth considering and discussing.

CONCEPT AND REALITY OF “STATE FAITH”

In fact, the Chinese phrase ‘state faith’ (Guojia Xinyang) is used very rarely, and its meaning is very ambiguous. Further more, people may even suppose that what it means does not exist, since they hear or see this phrase very rarely. Just for this reason, I once deemed what it refers to is a pseudo-issue or a false issue.

However, the rareness of a noun’s usage does not imply the non-existence of what it refers to. We know that the concept did not yet enter people’s consciousness, but we cannot say that it did absolutely not exist. For example, we cannot say that before the introduction or translation of the Western words ‘nationalism’ and ‘patriotism’ into Chinese language in the beginning of 20th century, Chinese people had no feelings or ethos of such kind. However, the appearance, use and clarification of the noun referring to a thing, has enabled people’s knowledge of that thing to emerge.

For the same reason, the fact that we rarely use the noun ‘state faith’ does not imply that the historical or social phenomenon it refers to does not exist in reality. However, it is still necessary for us to clarify its meaning.

ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT

The concept of ‘religious faith’, seems to have very clear meaning.¹ At least, for the common people.² Therefore, we only need to analyse or clarify the concept of ‘state faith’. And only after we have grasped its meaning, can we begin discussing its relationship to ‘religious faith’.

What then is the meaning of ‘state faith’? And does the socio-historical phenomenon which it refers to exist or not?

The concept ‘state faith’ can only have the three meanings: the first meaning is the state’s faith, or the faith of state; the second meaning is the national faith, or the faith of nationals; the third meaning is the faith in state, or the belief in state.

Now, let us see whether the socio-historical phenomena, which ‘state faith’ means in these three senses, do exist or not in the reality of

China. Then, let us see, if they exist, what characteristics they possess, and what relationships to ‘religious faith’ they have respectively.

STATE FAITH IN THE FIRST SENSE

The ‘state faith’ in the first sense, the state’s faith or the faith of state, does exist in today’s China, but exists only in a limited sense.

As every observer of China knows, the Constitution of People’s Republic of China (PRC), has continued to declare that the PRC is led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); and the Constitution of the CCP has continued to declare that its ‘guiding thought’ is Marxism and its ‘highest goal’ is to realize Communism. According to the numerous official documents since PRC was founded 60 years ago, the CCP’s ‘guiding thought’ or ‘highest goal’ has often been referred to as ‘faith’, that is to say, CCP has ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ in Marxism or Communism. So we can say that CCP, with its political power, has made its ‘faith’ - Marxism or Communism - become the ‘state’s faith’ of PRC.

This is true that there has been some ‘state faith’ in the last 60 years in the society of Mainland China.

Nevertheless, we can see that this is true only in a limited sense, when we take more facts into account. By ‘limited sense’, I mean that such a state faith is mainly found in the official rhetoric. While referring to the intellectual nature of Marxism and Communism, the ethos or morality or character of the Party members, the education or cultivation of the people, especially of the young people, and the ideals of the people or the future of the society, the CCP and its propaganda organs would often use such rhetoric as ‘Our faith is in Marxism-Leninism’ or ‘We believe in Communism’, as their custom of discourse. And such rhetoric has indeed been received or accepted by millions of common people, at least had been seen as official or formal faith, for nearly 30 years since 1949 in Mainland China.

Yet on the other hand, however, since the general disillusion (described as ‘loss of faith’ or ‘Sanxin Weiji’, meaning crisis of faith, trust and confidence in mass media those years) initiated by the disaster of ‘Cultural Revolution’ (1966-1976), and continuing through the growing

cynicism following the Tiananmen catastrophe (1989), such rhetoric began to decline, although it has not been formally abandoned by the authorities. Everybody living in today's China know the cause for this: nearly all the people, including Party members and Government officials, in an age of greed and social corruption, people no longer believe in such discourse, or do no longer consider it to have any real meaning. So, we can say more precisely that the 'state's faith' had once existed in some limited sense, but is now approaching its actual death.³

As for the relationship of 'state's faith' to religious faith, we can argue for the two points:

A. First we can consider the 'state faith' that is not really a religious faith, although it claims some quasi-religiosity.

Such a quasi-religious discourse cannot stand the test of theoretical analysis, because the founders and theorists of Marxism defined their intellectual movement as a kind of 'science' or a 'social scientific theory', and named it 'scientific socialism'. But science is founded upon reason rather than faith. As for Communism, in all its three possible meanings: 1. the doctrines that private property should be abandoned and equalitarianism should be realized; 2. a socio-political system in which Communist Party controls society and its resources; and 3. a kind of future society described and prophesied by some Marxist theoreticians, it is really not a 'faith' in strict sense, therefore is not a religious faith.

Yet one can also point out that such rhetoric and expressions do have some features which are close to a religious faith but which violate their principles. For example, supporters of this quasi-religious idea of the state tend to appeal to emotion more than to reason, forgetting that Marxism is more of a 'scientific theory' appealing to reason, rather than a 'sacred doctrine' demanding submission. They are more concerned with moral cultivation than theoretical argument, they put emphasis upon the demand for everybody's selflessness rather than the promise of 'distribution according to everybody's needs', they refer to the future condition more than to the present situation. Unlike the Communist Party of Soviet Union, the CCP has not boasted of having entered the communist stage, but only refers to communism as a distant ideal.

The above characteristics as well as others, such as the worship to the leader and the demand of common people's sacrifice for 'sacred'

ideal or principle, have indeed made this ‘state’s faith’ look like some religious faith. But according to the strict definition of religious faith in the academic study of religion, religious faith should be directed towards an Ultimate, or a mystery. For this reason a ‘state faith’ cannot be called a religious faith.

B. Second, we can consider the ‘state faith’ that took the nature of a ‘quasi-religion’ in order to play a powerful role of expelling other religious faiths. In the 30 years between 1949 and 1978, all kinds of religious faith in Mainland China had withered away and disappeared from society. The direct cause for that was the political control from above. But another important and obvious cause was that the ‘state’s faith’ grew more powerful in those years, resulting in an unprecedented scale of propaganda (e.g. all education from kindergarten to graduate school, all propagation from social institution to mass media), and resulted in campaigns of persecution (such as those from ‘Anti-Rightists’ to the ‘Anti-Right Trend’, from ‘Socialist Education’ to the ‘Cultural Revolution’). In 1950s, if you asked people in China what their faith was, a very small minority of them might still answer you that it was a religion. But in 1960s and 1970s, you would receive only one answer from nearly all the people: that it was Marxism (or Communism, or Marxism-Leninism, or Mao Zedong’s Thought). This was because the long-term propaganda had inculcated to all the people the ‘unique correctness’ of the Marxist answer on the one hand, and the ‘dangerousness’ of other answers.

The ‘state’s faith’ of this kind shall expel religious faith, just because it is not religious faith (it even includes atheism) and it tends to monopolize the intellectual discourse. And it can expel religious faith, simply because it is like a religious faith (it had made itself into some emotional, moralistic and sacralized thing), and has the nature of a quasi-religion. Therefore, when it is approaching its actual death, in other words, when the authority is gradually becoming more ‘de-ideologized’ and the intellectual world is actually becoming more ‘pluralized’, it is becoming more and more unable to displace religious faith. So, it is natural that the ideological resistance to religious faith has greatly decreased in today’s China.

STATE FAITH IN THE SECOND SENSE

The ‘state faith’ in the second sense, the national faith, or the faith of nationals, does not exist in today’s China, if it refers to a single or unitary faith. For the faith of Chinese people or of all the nationals of China today is very complex and diverse.

Firstly, contemporary Chinese people’s faiths can be divided into two types – religious faith and non-religious faith. Secondly, while the religious faith of nationals of PRC has become very complex and diversified, their non-religious faith is even more so.

A. Religious Faith

Besides so-called ‘Five major religions’, namely Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism, there are various folk religions and new religions.

Among Buddhists, there still exist traditional sects in some sense, especially the Tibetan Buddhism in contrast with the Chinese Buddhism, and the Theravada Buddhism in Yunnan Province in Southwest China. And there has appeared a very striking trend of secularization of Chinese Buddhism, including commercialization and politicalization, and relating competition and strife among sects or Shan-men.

Taoism has still influence on Chinese intellectuals through its life philosophy, but its believers are a very small minority of religious people. However, there exist two major traditional sects among them---Ch’uan-chen (or Quan-zhen) Taoism and Cheng-I (or Zheng-yi) Taoism.

Traditionally speaking, ten minority ethnic groups in China are Muslims. Nowadays, however, Islam is much more active than before in converting Han people who are the overwhelming majority and mostly atheists. It is also worth noting that many members of these ten groups are becoming more and more secularized, and some of their members have been converted to Christianity.

In Protestantism, while so-called ‘Three-Self Church’ has been steadily growing, so-called ‘house churches’ have experienced a very surprising growth. Although Christian faith has had no place in the official mass media, it has been exerting influence upon scores of million of con-

temporary Chinese. In a very striking contrast to the ‘state’s faith’ and its ‘propaganda project’ which consumes billions of state funds, Christian faith has been winning more people, especially poor people and young people, even though it has found very little expression in mass media owing to the state’s censorship. On the other hand, we should notice that so-called ‘house churches’, because of their illegal status remain in a relatively closed and isolated situation, are very likely to develop in very diversified forms.

In Catholicism, while so-called ‘Patriotic’ or ‘legal’ church has been slowly growing for the last thirty years, the so-called ‘underground church’ has never disappeared. It remains under pressure from the state. Some of the leadership in the official Catholic churches, just as that in official Protestant churches, are standing in opposition to ‘pious’ believers in the illegal churches. Therefore, what we have seen in Christian faith in today’s China is also a very complicated and diverse.

In the last thirty years, many folk beliefs have been rapidly recovered, and some new religious movements have been seeking to gain ground. The former includes the worships of Guandi and of Wenchang which are quite popular but remain unorganized, and the worship of Mazu and relating temples and rites which are well-organized and powerful at the local level. The latter refers to some variant forms of traditional religions and some new religions coming from abroad, such as Mormonism, Bahai Faith, Moonism and some sects or cults originated in Christianity and Hinduism and other traditions. Nearly all the new religious movements are underground or are closely watched by the police, and they are looked down upon by many people and officials as being Xie Jiao (vicious cults). So, we do not know exactly how they are getting on. But we know that in contrast with them, the Chinese traditional folk beliefs are treated with greater tolerance and even support, and are therefore becoming more open and prosperous.

B. Non-religious Faith

Firstly, we can find some faiths are confused with religious faith, such as ‘state’s faith’ mentioned above (Marxist or Communist faith) and Confucian faith. Although we have found that the ‘state’s faith’ is nearing

its actual death, there are still some individuals (especially some senior Party members) who still keep such a faith. Likewise while most of Confucian scholars deny that Confucianism is a religion, some still see it as a religion, and their influence are getting stronger.⁴ It is very ironic that some famous Confucian scholars who once refuted any ideas of Confucianism as being a religion, nowadays are petitioning for its religious status under the state and even for its establishment as the sole 'state religion'! Such an appeal violates basic academic or rational principles. However, although some scholars are enthusiastic in promoting it as a religion, the common people have not shared their enthusiasm. On the other hand, because that it is lifting its emotional elements above its rational elements, and it is evoking among some people much more passion rather than reflection, we can classify it as a kind of faith, namely, quasi-religious faith.

Secondly, besides the above-mentioned two quasi-religious faiths, contemporary Chinese have also numerous varieties of beliefs and superstitions, such as fortune-telling, astrology, Ba Zi, Feng Shui and so on. For their lack of overt collective activities and institutional organization, they cannot be classified as religions. We'd better call them as some kind of folk faiths or beliefs. Furthermore, if we take in account the tendency for many Chinese people to become enchanted with the pursuit of wealth, power, rank, fame, eroticism and pleasure, and call these values a form of faith, we would have more reason to say that there exists no 'state faith' in the sense of national faith or faith of all nationals. What are appearing before us are indeed countless varieties of individual beliefs.

Of course, since the 'state faith' in the second sense does not really exist at all, we need not consider its characteristics and its relationship to religious faith.⁵

STATE FAITH IN THE THIRD SENSE

The 'state faith' in the third sense, is the faith in the state or the belief in the state, and does really exist in today' China, even though the phrase or the name is used rarely.

Statism and similar phenomena has had a long history and has

been extremely powerful in China.⁶ There has been some kind of faith or belief in the state among the Chinese people since antiquity. From Chin Dynasty (221BC-206BC) and Western Han Dynasty (206BC-8AD) up to now, especially during the establishment of the unitary national regime, some form of powerful state machinery has been in place.⁷ Furthermore, as such a power has no limitation upon itself, it is very likely to sacralise itself or to be deified in the mind of common people. In fact, for centuries in China, all the imperial courts were called ‘Tianque (Heavenly Palace)’, all the emperors called themselves ‘Tianzi (the Son of the Heaven)’, and all the subjects called emperors as ‘Shengshang (the Holy Above)’, and this was true to any dynasties and empires ever existed in this country. While in the West, Christians refused to worship Roman Emperors as Lords even at the expense of their lives, Chinese Buddhists accepted the fact that ‘the religious cause cannot stand without reliance on the state lords’, though they once advocated the Buddhist principle that ‘Monks should not pay reverence to the kings’ when Buddhism entered China. In sum, as social organizations were too weak⁸ and the state became the supreme and sole and overwhelming power in this world, it is natural that there emerged the state worship, or the faith in state, among the Chinese who shared the common weakness of human nature – the tendency to look up to power. This is almost the inevitable in such a historical situation.

The ‘faith in state’ was strengthened to an unprecedented degree after 1949. The social, civil, and political organizations, which had been hidden and weak, became utterly open and stronger with the decline of Manchurian Qing Empire and the foundation of Republic of China (1912). But these were transformed into the different organs of the CCP and the Government under the leadership of the Party, and became bureaucratized into the Party’s branches (e.g. ‘Union of Workers’, ‘Federation of Youth’, ‘Federation of Women’, and ‘Association of Writers and Artists’, ‘Communist League of Youth’, etc.). Or they became broken or disbanded (e.g. former tribal or patriarchal and grassroots’ religious organizations) from 1949, Even non-state enterprises and businesses were taken over by the state since 1956, and people over China had lost all social or horizontal organization or association. As a result they were organized directly, individually and respectively, through a single pyramid-like organization

unified from the top leadership down through the lowest leadership.⁹ All the leaders at all the levels of this organization are appointed by the above, except that the few top leaders are appointed by themselves and through distribution of offices. So-called ‘Danwei’ (Unit) that everybody belonged to, then, was no more than a particle or a cell of this unprecedented, huge and rigid organization. Every individual was isolated like individual sand grains with no interconnection, to face up to a cloudless blue sky - hoping for rain to fall, but only being scorched by the sun!

Therefore, at that time, a Chinese who came across any difficulties or problems would say that he/she should ‘Qu zhao Zuzhi’ (go to the organization), or would say ‘Zuzhishang hui jie jue de’ (the organization’s leadership can resolve it, ‘shang’ means ‘above’)! Then the Chinese used to say ‘Yao yikao Zuzhi’ (they should rely on the organization) or ‘Yao xiangxin Zuzhi’ (they should believe in the organization)! ‘Zuzhi’ did not imply the ‘unit’ to which you belonged and which included your colleagues, but the leadership of the ‘unit’, namely, the Party’s organization of it, from above.

Why does the ‘Party’s organization’ have such unimaginably great power? That is because that the Party controls all the powers and all the resources of the state – not only of state’s organs or institutions of legislation, judiciary and administration, but also of the whole country, whole society and whole people. So, ‘the organization’ represents the state (and even the society and the people). Of course, when the resolution of an individual’s problem was beyond the jurisdiction of the unit’s Party organization, he/she would often say: ‘I believe in the Party and the State (to solve the matter)’ or ‘the Party and the State will one day make a just conclusion’, as his/her final or ultimate comfort. The phrase ‘the Party and the State’ mentioned here seems to have some abstract implications, but it actually refers to the national or top leadership of the Party and the State which has the greatest power and authority. A Chinese psychological fact that has never been fully explained is the phrase ‘Leader(s) of the Party and the State’ which all the Chinese mass media has been repeating many times a day for sixty years. It imparts to all nationals a basic social reality – the Party’s *leaders* master the state, and as the state’s power is incomparably great, their own power is incomparably great. Analysing in this perspective, so-called ‘personal worship’ of Mao Zedong in nearly

30 years since 1949 is but a form of worship of state's power (or, more directly, worship of the state), a distorted form of the 'faith in state.

With the existence of the faith in state (not in name, but in reality), we can explain, to some degree, why many Chinese people (especially at the grassroots) still worship Mao who brought to China so many terrible disasters.¹⁰ Because in the eyes of the people who cannot understand rationally the relationships of the personage to the party and state and have no faith in the transcendental (God), Mao is considered omnipotent for he masters the power of the state, he is the state. This state is so huge and has so many organs of such enormous strength that it seems to be able to do anything at its will and to be the greatest power which the common Chinese can see around them on the earth. If power can become an object of faith through the use of various symbols, then, it is natural that Mao would have been made into such a symbol, as he had been the power of the state and deified for nearly 30 years.

And to the same degree, this faith in state can be used to explain the continuing nationalism and its connection with the deification of Mao many years after his death. For the Chinese nationalism has been actually penetrated, dominated and distorted by the statism.¹¹ That is to say, the 'faith in state' expressed in the form of 'personal worship of the leader' during the former 30 years of PRC, found expression in a form of unreasonable nationalism during the latter 30 years. Only this veiled faith in state, combined with control of the press, ignorance of the West and institutional hindrance, is able to account for the fact that many Chinese, while not being able to afford the expense of their children's schooling, family medical care or even their own housing, still agree with the Government plans to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on Beijing Olympic Games and Shanghai World Expo, as they are events which can bestow glory to the state!

One of the characteristics of this 'faith in state' is that it has taken 'patriotism' as most popular and main expression in modern China. During the former 30 years of PRC, while the state faith in the first sense or the 'communist faith' occupied a higher position in the Party's propaganda than patriotism,¹² the phrase 'Ai Guo' (love the state) was often used immediately following the phrase 'Ai Dang' (love the Party), and the slogan 'Love of the motherland' was also found everywhere. Further-

more, the principle that ‘state is above the collective, the collective is above individual’ was propagated as basic part of communist morality. From 1980s on, with the decline of ‘communist faith’ in the official propaganda, ‘patriotism’ has been raised to the top. And we should know that the Chinese word ‘Aiguo Zhuyi’ translated from patriotism has literally lost any sense of ‘patria’ or country – fellows as object of love, leaving instead the sense of ‘Guo’ (meaning State) as the only object. In this way, the word ‘patriotism’ has readily become the properly expressive symbol of the faith in state.

Actually, the ‘faith in state’ is just one of the ‘non-religious faiths or beliefs mentioned above in Section 4. Judging from the perspective of religious philosophy, these various ‘non-religious faiths’ can be called ‘quasi-religions’ or ‘pseudo-religions’, which mistake for the Ultimate those various kinds of the non-ultimate, human doctrines or isms, wealth, power, rankings, fames, etc. As the worldly state itself is not Ultimate and is not God, the faith in state is nothing more than a worship of some human power.

Therefore, the ‘state faith’ in the third sense, the ‘faith in state’, has the same relationship to religious faith with that of any other quasi-religion and pseudo-religion to religious faith. That is to say, firstly, it is in opposition to and competition with the religious faith, as it is not religious faith but concerns ideas of value; secondly, it is not in full competition with religious faith (especially in the country where atheists or people with no faith form a majority), as it is some kind of quasi-religious or pseudo-religious faith.

Just for this reason, we can see that many religious people are also patriots in today’s China, in other words or in terms of this paper, they have also the ‘state faith’ in the third sense.

Of course, what we are here referring to is just a social appearance, namely, a superficial phenomenon existing among masses who are more occupied with earning their livelihood than considering such concepts or relationships.

Of the essence, true religious faith should relativise all the worldly things and affairs, including the state. Therefore, true religious believers could have different concepts or ideas of the state, but should not absolutize it as an object of faith; instead, they should treat the state with reason.

After all, the living memory of humankind tells us that the ‘faith in state’ or statism has brought to the world enormous catastrophes in the last century; and clear reason tells us that the ‘faith in state’ distorts human nature and reverses the order for the state and the people, transforming the state, the tool for the purpose of people’s happiness, into the goal at the expense of people’s happiness.

The significance of discussing this topic is to remind us of the existence of this danger.

Endnotes

¹According to the two definitions of religion in ‘A dictionary of Religion’, the meaning of ‘religious faith’ is ‘the faith in the ultimate’ or ‘the belief in mysterious superhuman power’. (He Guanghu, ‘religion’, in Ren Jiyu ed. *A Dictionary of Religion*, Shanghai Dictionary Press, 2009.)

²Common Chinese people understand religion as ‘faith or belief in God or gods’. This understanding is very close to the meaning mentioned above.

³In contemporary China, the authority is still making efforts to maintain the official or dominant status of Marxism as its ideology. However, while the Central Department of Propaganda of CCP, the State Ministry of Education and the United Front Department of CCP have been spending hundreds of millions CNY to implement the ‘Project of Reconstruction and Propagation of Marxism’, the term ‘communism’ and related phrases (such as ‘communist faith’) have been used less and less in reality at the same time.

⁴Recently, in Confucius’ hometown Qufu, Shandong Province, the reconstruction of a Christian church was stopped, owing to the government’s response to the Confucian scholars’ petition that the ‘holy place of Confucianism’ should be protected from invasion of foreign religion.

⁵We can even see such a strange belief as ‘Li Yu-chen Belief or Worship’ (Li is a pop singer who was elected as ‘super-girl’ by millions of fans years ago).

⁶I have given a particular description and analysis of Chinese statism in my essay ‘The Dragon and the Dove’ (in ‘Logos and Pneuma’, forthcoming issue, Hong Kong).

⁷Much stronger is the experience or feeling of the Chinese than that of the Western people. Because in the Western civilization emerged after the fall of Roman Empire, state’s power was limited by church’s power; furthermore, owing to their faith in God who is above all the sovereigns and states, people is less likely to absolutize state and make it an object of faith.

⁸In the words of W, in the oriental autocracy, no matter how much wealth the property holders have, they ‘are not able to, through organization and activity

based on their property, exert any influence on the state power, and therefore form a threat to the autocratic regime'. (*Oriental Autocracy*, China Social Sciences Press, p.8, 1989)

⁹The then popular expressions of this are 'the whole country is a single round of chess match' and 'exercising unified leadership of the Party'.

¹⁰Cf. Li Xiangping, 'An Economical Analysis of the Faith in Mao Zedong', (in Wang Yan ed., *Teahouse for Sociologists*, No. 2, 2011, Shandong People's Publishing House).

¹¹See He Guanghu, 'The Dragon and the Dove: Natio-Statism and Catholic-Protestant Christianity in China Today', in *Logos and Pneuma*, Hong Kong, forthcoming.

¹²In fact, Marxism should oppose 'the faith in state', for it argued that state was only some tool and would disappear in the future; and Marxist communism advocated the elimination of state: Workers have no motherland! Communism aims at 'free development of every person' as well as of humankind. (K. Marx and F. Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, Chapter 2.)