Religious Organizations and Welfare Policy
In Taiwan and China

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The charitable activities of the Tzu Chi (慈濟) Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation in the Republic of China (ROC) draw our attention to a phenomenon seldom explored by political scientists: the reliance on religious organizations to supplement the shortcoming of modern states in the provision of social welfare. Although the analytical framework for this article originates from discussions about the East Asian welfare model, this article shall limit its comparative scope to Buddhist institutions in the Chinese cultural area. At issue is whether authorities of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are starting to consider the reliance on religious organizations for the provision of social welfare services as an acceptable way to meet the pressing needs of the population in a context where existing welfare regimes are unraveling.

The current levels of development experienced in coastal China bear many similarities with the experience of Taiwan three decades ago, when the government started to rely on Buddhist organizations for the provision of social welfare services. This reliance, however, never led to any serious challenges to the government on the island. Can the Chinese government draw from the Taiwanese experience useful lessons for its own policy? In order to answer this question, this short article will briefly sketch the achievements of the policy pursued by the Kuomintang (KMT) government as it tried to include religious organizations in the provision of health care and emergency relief to victims of natural disasters, and the response of these organizations to these policies. Although local realities may bear similarities with past and present Taiwanese situations, thus suggesting the relevance of replicating to some parts of China the ROC experience, this article argues that the issues faced by the PRC authorities are likely to prevent them, for now, from including the participation of Buddhist institutions in the provision of welfare.

Religious institutions and welfare in Taiwan

The provision by religious organizations of social services, such as health care and assistance to the poor, represents a contemporary practice in many societies where limited fiscal resources prevent them from meeting the growing need of their populations. This strategy, when employed in countries with limited resources, often present major risks for secular states: analysts studying Islamic fundamentalism and Hindu revivalism have argued that the religious militancy challenging state institutions draws its strength from the networks they use in their offerings of social services. This relationship, however, need not be automatic: the ROC government has implemented for decades a social policy relying partly on religious organizations for the provision of welfare services without incurring the emergence of a serious threat from them.

Since the 1950s, the KMT has applied to Taiwan the features of a ‘developmental statist’ model of economic policy stressing state regulation of the political economy that restricted its social welfare provision to
constituencies that were useful to the regime. This limited welfare state, characterized by little social expenditures and an incomplete social security net, gradually expanded as a result of pressures from society in the last three decades. Despite the acceleration of democratization in the 1990s, however, some shortcomings remain. Although the government set up in 1995 a National Health Insurance system providing basic services to 95% of the population, the state-financed medical institutions cannot always reach out to the most destitute citizens, who live in remote regions, or those who are afflicted with intractable conditions.

To address the limitations of its social welfare policy, the KMT has attempted to rely over the years on the resources of religious institutions. Earlier attempts met with mixed results, but over the years, the ruling party has nurtured ties with Protestant, Catholic and Buddhist institutions that would later prove very helpful. Christian organizations of various denominations, often helped by sister churches in North America, have significantly contributed to education and social work for many decades. As the economy took off in the 1960s, other religious institutions more closely related to the Chinese religious tradition, such as Yiguandao (一貫道), took up social work as part of their religious duties. The most visible of these traditions today is the movement of ‘Buddhism in this world,’ [renjian fojiao 人間佛教] which emphasizes charity and the provision of relief to the needy as a path to enlightenment. Clerics identified with that movement have set up new institutions such as the Fokuangshan (佛光山) Monastic Order and the Tzu Chi Foundation, which have become, after their founding in 1966, major actors in the provision of health care, emergency relief, and assistance to the poor in parts of the island that were previously not well-served by the government. By the mid-1990s, religious leaders from the eleven denominations recognized by the state have expressed in official circles the view that the provision of social welfare represents an integral part of their faith. Government officials, for their part, recognized the contribution of religious institutions in the provision of welfare and clearly integrated it in their policy.

Although the government in the past appealed to, and now rely on, cooperation from religious organizations for the provision of social welfare, this policy has not translated into a significant increase in the political clout of religious institutions, nor into a challenge to state’s legitimacy. The government in Taiwan did face some resistance to its policies from religious organizations during the last three decades of its rule, but this opposition never represented a challenge to the secular nature of the state itself. The Presbyterian Church did criticize the government for human-rights abuses in the 1970s, but it never challenged the legitimacy of the secular institutions and never nurtured the ambition to substitute a religious authority to that of the government. One of the exceptions to that rule, the New Testament Church, represented a small minority that never seriously challenged the regime. More recently, even though Venerable Hsing Yun (星雲), the Fokuangshan monastic order’s founder, approved the candidacy of the lay Buddhist Chen Li-an (陳盧安) for the ROC presidency in 1996, this behavior cannot be construed as a challenge to the secular state: Hsing Yun, as a member of the Overseas Chinese Commission, served in a state institution. These developments, which contrast with political phenomenon observed in other Asian societies influenced by Islamic or Indic traditions, lead one to inquire whether Chinese local authorities in the Southern coastal region, from where Taiwan’s religious tradition originates, could borrow from the Taiwanese experience and include Buddhist institutions in their policies for welfare provision without incurring any political risks.

The dilemma of welfare reforms and religious revival in China

Two well-known similarities between Taiwan and the coastal provinces make plausible such a proposition. First, most inhabitants of Taiwan and the province of Fujian share the same customs and languages. Second, coastal provinces from Jiangsu to Guangdong are going through a phase of social and political development...
comparable to what Taiwan experienced in the 1970s, and the gap between the richest of them and Taiwan is narrowing. In addition, one characteristic of the state regulation of religion shared by governments in Beijing and Taipei over the last five decades make it conceivable for the leadership of the PRC to contemplate experimenting with policies that were tried before in the ROC on Taiwan. The Chinese Communist Party and, until 1987, the KMT, have both granted a monopoly of representation to organizations acting as the official representative of Buddhism for the whole polity: the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) in the PRC, and the Buddhist Association of the ROC (BAROC) in Taiwan. Through this institutional means, both ruling parties could closely monitor the activities undertaken by clerical and lay Buddhists and prevent the constitution of an oppositional force.

The needs that Buddhist institutions could help the Chinese governments address at the central, provincial and local levels are considerable. The decline of the state-owned enterprises’ fortunes has eroded the foundations of urban welfare systems. Meanwhile, governments in the cities, conscious of the public sector employees’ resistance to further threats to their welfare entitlements must either stop enterprise reform at enormous costs, or continue these reforms and find ways to meet the welfare needs that will arise as a result. Further to compounding the problem, the one-child policy has undermined the reliance on the family as a traditional alternative to state-sponsored welfare provision. Authorities recognize that the state alone cannot satisfy growing welfare needs and must rely on private initiatives. Religious institutions, whose commitment to charitable activities and contribution to social welfare is often an integral part of their theology, could appear well suited for that role. Chinese Buddhist institutions in particular are not nurturing controversial foreign relations, have acquired a long experience in welfare provision and, through their temples, possess an important institutional structure. What, then, stands in the way of PRC governments from using, especially in many areas of coastal China, the human and material resources of Buddhist institutions to address the lacunae of their welfare policies, a strategy which was tried successfully before by the KMT on Taiwan?

For the moment, institutional interests and considerations of a political nature forbids the authorities from contemplating such a solution. Although the Chinese government does recognize the contribution of religious organizations to the spiritual life of the people, this recognition remains bound within two sets of institutional constraints. First, the Communist Party’s view of religion remains unchanged since 1949. The party recognizes to individuals the right to practice and preach their own religions, but the People’s Republic constitution also proclaims the right to an atheist education. The state and the party bureaucracy closely regulate religious affairs, even in regions where the authorities could have the incentives to show more flexibility. In the province of Fujian, for instance, officials of the Bureau for Religious Affairs, who work for the Division of Propaganda, adopts a virulent antireligious line despite the fact that the province receives Overseas Chinese and Taiwanese investments.

Second, the legacy of two decades of economic reforms has generated significant discrepancies across different sectors of society. Conflicts of interests oppose workers in the public sector to those of the joint and private sectors; employees of state enterprises with job security to those who face the consequences of restructuring; and finally, workers in the formal sectors to those in the informal sector. Regional inequalities as well as discrepancies between the cities and the countryside have also increased, and a considerable rural exodus imposes to large cities the fiscal burden of looking after people who are not included in any scheme of social welfare. Studies on pension reform demonstrate that these social shifts increase the competition between various departments and agencies of the central government. In the effort to respond to societal demands, the creation or transformation of government agencies put at risk the ability of older ones to manage large budgets and exercise influence. In that context, independent religious organizations represent a complication that could only divert scarce fiscal resources.
In addition to these institutional constraints, four sets of political considerations are likely to raise serious concerns to the authorities in Beijing. First, members of the Communist Party are mindful of previous attempts by heterodox religious organizations to destabilize the authority of previous regimes in China. Many of these religious movements have undermined, if not overthrown, previous dynasties, and often emerge in times of rapid social change when the country faces external pressure. The current government, which engineers changes in its economic policies that have considerable impact on society, cannot fail to be aware of the dangerous potential offered by the current transformations, which parallel precedent processes. The official historiography in China does not fail to note that two of these major upheavals, the Taiping rebellion and the Boxer uprising, shook the Qing dynasty during times of considerable social and economic change.

Second, party cadres witness challenges to ruling parties, in other countries, by political parties that have built their militant base out of the social and cultural work provided by affiliated religious institutions. The arrival to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India, for instance, signaled the success of years of social work by sister-organizations committed to the ‘Hindu-ization’ of the country. The Islamic revolution in Iran, and the popularity of Islamist movements in other polities have partly grown out of the patient grass-root work of religious movements in the provision of education and other forms of social welfare targeted to the poor. Although China does not face any comparable threat, these events suffice to show leaders of the Communist party that even established organizations associated with a strong secular legacy can prove vulnerable to the demands of political parties committed to a religious ideal.

Third, despite their efforts to regulate the activities of religious institutions, the authorities are now witnessing the emergence of heterodox movements such as the Falungong in the margins of the established religions. Many of these movements, affiliated to the Qigong tradition, draw their adherents by their promise of improving their health according to various spiritual practices and calisthenics. This form of enticement cannot fail to cause major concern to government and party officials: the ‘offer’ of instant healing by these movements meet a ‘demand’ that the state fails to meet. This concern is only amplified by the realization that educated people, party cadres and officials in the military join such movements, in ways that are reminiscent of the Communist party’s own strategy of infiltrating the organizations that it would later seek to control.

Finally, one important characteristic shared for the last four decades by the leadership of the two official organizations cannot give comfort to the leadership in Beijing. The leaders of BAC and BAROC share the same views about secular rulers and the same conservative views about the appropriate role of Buddhists in society. Since its founding in 1953, the conservative monk Yuan Ying (圓瑛) led BAC in Beijing, while his disciples headed BAROC in Taipei after 1960. BAROC’s influence in Taiwan, however, has diminished significantly, as the ‘humanistic Buddhist’ approach of Tai Hsu (太虛), a reformist monk who opposed in the beginning of the 20th century the views of Yuan Ying, receives the support of a majority of devotees in Taiwan. In other words, leaders in Beijing have reasons to believe that were they to remove restrictions on the ability of Buddhist organizations to undertake social welfare, they would face, as a result, institutions escaping their control. Scattered evidence suggest that in remote regions of China, this kind of development is already unfolding. Some local temples in Shanghai, Guangdong province and as far inland as the province of Hubei, are undertaking social welfare work in ways strikingly similar to the Tzu Chi Foundation and the Fokuangshan monastic order.

It is important to note that the present attitude of the central government is unlike traditional Chinese statecraft. C.K. Yang has noted that in traditional China, the state has often used religious institutions to perform activities of all kind that, in the end, bolstered its legitimacy. With respect to Buddhist institutions in particular, Jacques Gernet and Kenneth Ch’en have demonstrated the extent to which previous governments have relied on...
them to provide welfare to destitute people." In his study on modern Buddhism, Holmes Welch has demonstrated that during the first half of the century lay people and clerics were able to undertake social work in China. In that respect, the KMT has pursued this tradition quite successfully in Taiwan during the last three decades.

NOTES:

1. Standard definitions of social welfare include social insurance for pensions and health care, public housing and personal social services and assistance for the needy. This discussion of religious organizations as providers of social welfare uses a narrower definition limited to health care and personal services and assistance for the poor, victims of natural disasters and other groups of people deprived of traditional sources of help.

2. Although this discussion will draw examples primarily from Buddhist organizations, this does not mean that the other traditions were not involved: only the availability of data used by this researcher in his previous works has determined this arbitrary choice.


6. In 1969, the provincial government proposed to issue a regulation called "Procedure for Handling of Funds Raised by the Public Work and Charity Undertakings of Temples in Taiwan [Taiwan Sheng Simiao Jizi Banli Gongyi Cishan Shiye Banfa 台灣省寺廟集資辦公益慈善事業辦法]." Under its provisions, the government ordered temples to give 20% of the revenue raised by the sale of religious paraphernalia to charity organizations. The law required local governments to supervise the administration of temple finances, thus implicitly questioning the honesty of the clergy. Representatives of the BAROC criticized the law as insulting to both Buddhist and Taoist clergy and claimed that they lacked the resources to provide for charities. Convinced by these arguments, representatives of the central government instructed provincial authorities to abandon the law. For the particulars of the law, see Shi Miaoran (釋妙然), Minguo Fojiao Dashinianji 民國佛教大事年紀 [Annals of Buddhism in the Republic] (Taipei: Haichaoyin Zazhishe 海潮音雜誌社, 1995), 419. For the reaction of the BAROC to the law proposal, see Faguang 法光 [Dharma Light Monthly], "Zhongguo Fojiaohui Zai Xianjin Jiaojie suo Banyan de Jiaose [On the Role Played by the BAROC in the Current Religious Milieu]," (May 1996), 4.


12. For an excellent summary of this issue, see Stevan Harrell and Elizabeth J. Perry, "Syncretic Sects in Chinese Society," Modern China 8 no. 3 (July 1982), 283-303.


15. The Falungong literature is available in several languages in the website set up by adherents at the following URL: www.falundafa.com. The case of the Chinese government is also available at the following site: www.chinadaily.com.cn/falun/


19. These temples are the Jing’an temple in Shanghai, the Wuzu temple in Hubei Province and the Shaoguan temple in Guangdong province.

