Governing Religion: Time, Space and Body in Rural China, 1961–1965

by

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Abstract

This article examines the brief religious resurgence in rural China from 1961 to 1965. Drawing on newly collected archives from Wuyuan County in Jiangxi Province, I argue that this resurgence—and its subsequent suppression—cannot be explained without understanding the post-Great Leap Forward (GLF) shift that increasingly reframed religion as an issue of labor and production rather than of ideological deviation. This shift reshaped the state's governance strategies by focusing specifically on the monopolization of time, a technique inherited from the GLF, and the reorganization of religious space and objects. Political education, though time-consuming, was not perceived by the state as wasteful. Instead, this education produced visible obedience that displaced religious practice, through which the state continually reproduced its authority. By shifting attention from an ideological struggle to the state's reorganization of time, space, and religious materiality, this article offers a new perspective on the governance of religion in rural socialist China. It also resonates with scholarly debates on socialist secularization, demonstrating how secularization unfolded in a socialist context not through the elimination of religion, buthrough the state's penetration into both the personal and public dimensions of religious life.

In the immediate wake of the tragic Great Leap Forward (GLF, 1958–1961),[1] rural China witnessed a short-lived yet intense resurgence of "religion"[2] that remains understudied. This fervor, beginning as early as 1961 and peaking between 1962 and 1963, was characterized by a feverish reconstruction of temples, crowded pilgrimages, and a flourishing ritual economy. This wave faded rapidly by 1964 and 1965. What is striking, however, is not simply the rise and decline of this religious resurgence, but the shift in how the state interpreted religion—what counted as religion and how it should be governed—relative to the pre-GLF period. Yet, surprisingly, this conceptual transformation has received little attention.

Previous scholarship—spanning from early observations from outside of China[3] to oral

[1] Scholarly estimates of famine mortality during the entire GLF ranges from 15 to 55 million. See Peng Xizhe, "Demographic consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China's provinces," *Population and Development Review* 13, no. 4 (1987): 639–70, https://doi.org/10.2307/1973026.; Cao Shuji, *Da jihuang: 1959–1961 nian de Zhongguo renkou* [The Great Famine: China's Population from 1959–1961] (Shidai guoji chuban youxian gongsi, 2005); and Yang Jisheng, *Mubei: Zhongguo Liushi Niandai Da Jihuang Jishi* [Tombstone: A True Account of China's Great Famine in the 1960s] (Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 2008).

[2] For categorization of religion in China, see C. K. Yang's *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (University of California Press, 1961). During the PRC era, "religion" (*zongjiao* 宗教) and "superstition" (*mixin* 迷信) are often interchangeable, referring broadly to any non-materialistic ideas.

[3] Richard C. Bush, *Religion in Communist China* (Abingdon Press, 1970); Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao* (Harvard University Press, 1972).

histories after the 1980s[4] and recent work on government and church archives[5]—has largely

[4] Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford University Press, 1996); Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (University of California Press, 2001); Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford University Press, 2005); and Stephen Jones, *Daoist Priests of the Li Family: Ritual Life in Village China* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).

[5] On Christianity, see Xiaoxuan Wang. *Maoism and Grassroots Religion: The Communist Revolution and the Reinvention of Religious Life in China* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Xiaoxuan Wang, "Solving the 'Religious Problem': The Great Leap Forward of 'Religious Work' and Protestant Communities in Pingyang, Wenzhou in 1958." *Twentieth-Century China* 49, no. 1 (2024): 66–85. https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2024.a917212; John Craig William Keating, *A Protestant Church in Communist China: Moore Memorial Church Shanghai, 1949–1989* (Lexington Books, 2012); Christie Chui-Shan Chow and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Covert and Overt Activism: Christianity in 1950s Coastal China," *Frontiers of History in China* 11, no. 4 (2016): 579–99, https://doi.org/10.3868/s020-005-016-0034-9.

On Buddhism, see Nan Ouyang, "Buddhism Revamped for Socialism: The Monastic Economy on Mount Jiuhua from 1949 to 1966," *Modern China* 50, no. 4 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700423121838; Gregory Adam Scott, *Building the Buddhist Revival: Reconstructing Monasteries in Modern China* (Oxford University Press, 2020)); Xue Yu, *Zhongguo Fojiao de shehuizhuyi gaizao* [The Socialist Transformation of Chinese Buddhism] (Xianggang zhongwen daxue chubanshe, 2015).

On folk beliefs, Steve A. Smith, "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of 'Superstitious' Rumors in the People's Republic of China, 1961–1965," *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 2 (2006): 405–27, https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.2.405; Steve A. Smith, "Local Cadres Confront the Supernatural: The Politics of Holy Water (Shenshui) in the PRC, 1949–1966," *The China Quarterly* 188 (2006): 999–1022, https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574100600052X; Steve A. Smith, "Fear and Rumour in the People's Republic of China in the 1950s," *Cultural and Social History* 5, no. 3 (2008): 269–88, https://doi.org/10.2752/147800408X331399.

While providing rich empirical data, Li Ruojian conflates peasant resistance with folk religion, inadvertently replicating the state's discursive logic. See Li Ruojian, "Minjian zongjiao de wange: 1950 niandai chu de 'shui fengbo'" [An Elegy for Folk Religion: A Study of Various 'Water Incidents' in Nineteen Fifties], *Ershiyi shiji* 121 (2010): 112–22,

focused on the vitality and resilience of religious communities. However, this bottom-up perspective tends to treat religion as a fixed social entity whose persistence is measured primarily against state repression. What remains under-theorized is that religion is not a static, pre-given object. Instead, it is a category continually described, defined, and problematized through administrative procedures. This failure to examine how the state actively constructed "religion" is particularly critical for the post-GLF period, a moment marked by an undeclared yet remarkable shift in the state's thinking about and governance of religion.

To address this gap, I adopt an opposite approach to the previous archive-based scholarship. The nature of state archives often constitutes the epistemological limitation which this scholarship seeks to transcend. By reading "against the grain," such studies seek out resistant subaltern subjects. In this article, however, I treat the archives' inability to capture the agency of grassroots not as a defect but as its central mechanism. By "reading along the archival grain,"[6] I trace how religion is conceived within state's governmental discourse. Instead of depicting the religious resurgence itself, this article asks a set of new questions: How did the state conceptualize religion during the post-GLF religious resurgence, and what forms of

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https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/21c/media/articles/c121-200903090.pdf; Li Ruojian, "Zhongguo nongcun de fanpan yu minjian zongjiao (1957–1965)" [Rural China's Rebellion and Folk Religion, 1957–1965], *Ershiyi shiji* 138 (2013): 47–65, https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/21c/media/articles/c138-201209053.pdf; Li Ruojian, *Xushi zhijian: 20 shiji 50 niandai zhongguo dalu yaoyan yanjiu* [Between the Virtual and the Real: A Study of Rumors in Mainland China in the 1950s] (Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011).

[6] Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (2002): 87–109, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435632.

governance took shape through this process of reconceptualization?

Drawing on newly collected archives from Wuyuan 婺源 County Archives in Jiangxi 江西 Province,[7] I argue that, after the GLF, the party-state and its local cadres frequently framed religion as an economic drain, moving beyond its prior classification as an ideological heterodoxy or a remnant of "feudal superstition." Governance moved away from ideological purification of a socialist atheistic state, toward the predominant concern of "waste" (*langfei* 浪費) for labor power (*laodongli* 勞動力), money, and material resources and the economic optimization of the collective. In this context, "waste" functions as an administrative concept designating the misallocation of labor power and resources away from material production and economic contribution. Any religious activities—such as rituals, donations, construction of sites, or mass participation in temple fairs—were deemed wasteful and targeted for suppression. The party-state sought to curtail religious activity by reorganizing the conditions that made it possible, including the distribution of time and the availability of ritual spaces and material items. These techniques—monopolizing collective time and restricting the material conditions of religious life—had unintentionally suppressed religion during the GLF; but were consciously systematized by the state into its governance toolkit after the GLF.

Crucially, this article reconceptualizes political education—a technique the state deployed extensively against religious communities—not primarily as a tool for thought reform, but as

[7] Due to the dispersed and scarce nature of religious archives during the 1950s and 60s, previous scholarship often used materials across multiple regions, which risks obscuring significant variations in local policy implementation and political environment. By focusing primarily on materials from Jiangxi Province, this article aims to maintain greater analytical consistency.

a technology of temporal control and authority reproduction. This reframing addresses the central paradox of political education: Why did the post-GLF state, obsessed with the maximization of labor power, devote such extensive time to political education, a technique that appeared to undermine its own economic rationale? I argue that this seemingly counterproductive waste served two functions. First, monopolizing time deprived religious personnel and ordinary believers of planning for and participating in religious activities. Second, political education generated visible performances of compliance—public declarations of renouncing faith, self-criticism, displays of socialist enthusiasm—thereby enabling the state to continually reproduce its authority. This logic helps explain why the state did not characterize the apparent "waste" of political education as a cost, but as a productive technique of governance.

While the Wuyuan County Archives cannot claim national statistical representativeness, they offer a rare micro-historical window into the dynamics between religion, state power, and rural society. Empirically, this article explores an understudied juncture in the history of Chinese religion—one that has remained largely neglected due to the restricted accessibility of archival and ethnographic materials. Methodologically, it shifts attention from the endurance of religion to the administrative processes through which religion was produced, classified, and made governable. Theoretically, it contributes to the study of religion in socialist China by reframing state governance not as a mere ideological purge but as a secularizing project centered on the management of labor, temporality, and material resources. In doing so, it situates the Chinese case within broader discussions of secularism in

socialist regimes,[8] highlighting modes of secularization that diverge markedly from Western trajectories characterized by a public-private dichotomy.[9]

[8] Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (University of California Press, 2007); Pamela Ballinger and Kristen Ghodsee, "Socialist Secularism: Religion, Modernity, and Muslim Women's Emancipation in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, 1945–1991." *Aspasia* 5, no. 1 (2011): 6–27. https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2011.050103; Sonja Luehrmann, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (Indiana University Press, 2011).

[9] For critiques of secularization as a universal trajectory and the public-private dichotomy as a Western-centric framework, see José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (University of Chicago Press, 1994); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003); and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

The Religious Revival After the GLF

Why did religion resurge so quickly after the GLF? Most grassroots cadres reporting upward attributed this to "hostile forces" using the "temporary difficulties brought by several consecutive years of severe natural disasters" to "rear their heads." Many believers who had "automatically abandoned" their faith during the GLF also experienced a "revival of religious concepts."[10] However, behind the reports, local cadres were grappling with a fundamental contradiction between dogmatic ideology and governmental practice. The editing marks on a township-level document reveal this struggle:

[10] "Yanshanxian renmin weiyuanhui guanyu Gexianshan miaohui mixin huodong de guanli gongzuo zongjie baogao" [Summary Report by the Yanshan County People's Committee on the Management of Superstitious Activities at the Gexian Mountain Temple Fair], November 27, 1963, file 1964c-1023-088-001, Wuyuan County Archives (hereafter WCA); "Yuganxian renwei guanyu zongjiao qingkuang de diaocha baogao" [Investigation Report by the Yugan County People's Committee on the Religious Situation], July 31, 1963, file 1963c-1023-080-047, WCA.

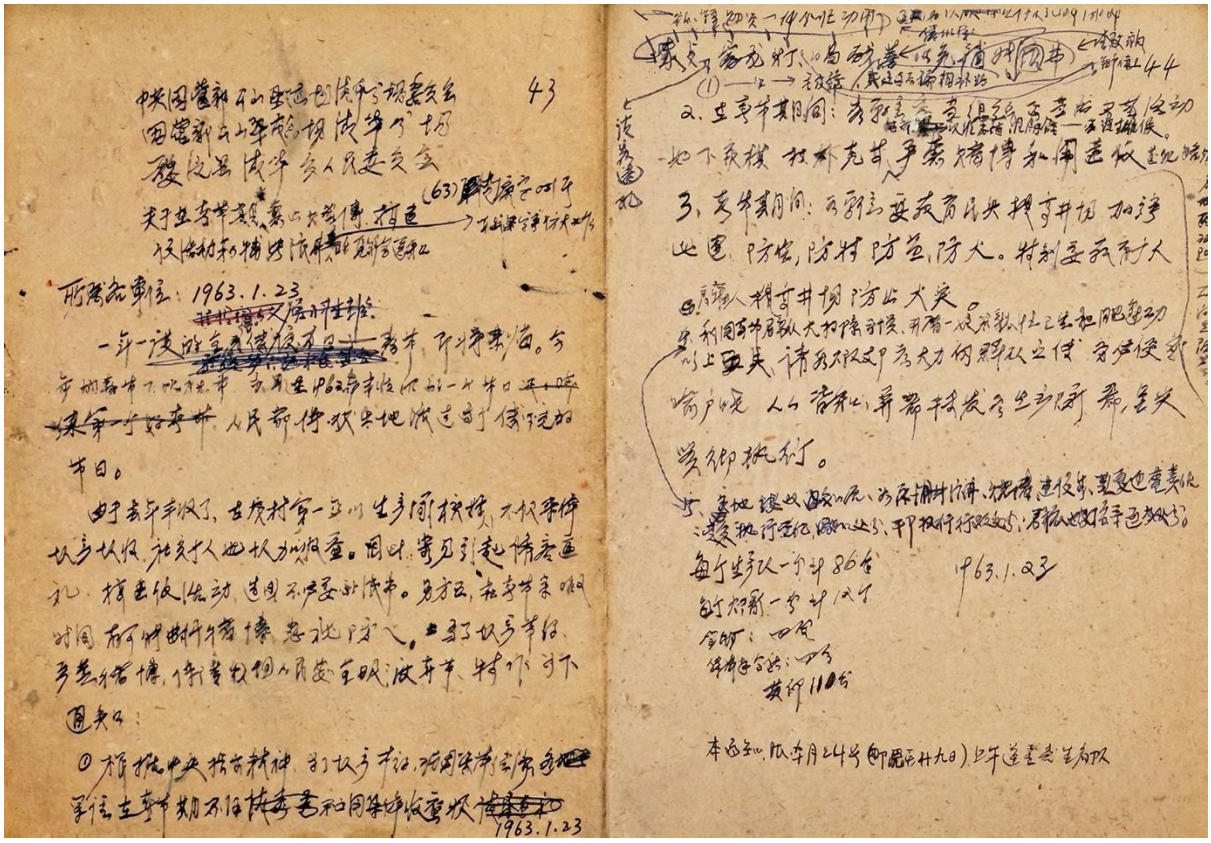


Figure 1: Original Document of the 1963 Spring Festival Notice. Modification marks made by the document's author. WCA, file 1963y-2003-005-043.[11]

The Spring Festival this year [1963, author's note] is not like that of past years. It is the first festival after the 1962 bountiful harvest ~~and the first good Spring Festival since 1958~~ [crossed out in the archive]. People all expect to happily spend this traditional festival. Because of last year's good harvest, it will likely cause feasting and gifting and superstitious activities, creating unnecessary waste. ... In accordance with the spirit of the central government's instructions on saving money and maintaining a clean environment, ~~all personnel of the institution are not allowed to feast or gift during the Spring Festival.~~

[11] "Zhonggong Zhanggongshan kenzhichang Qinghua fenchang weiyuanhui, Wuyuanxian Qinghua xiang renmin weiyuanhui guanyu zai Chunjie qijian jinzhi dubo, gao mixin huodong he puzhang langfei yiji fanghuo gongzuo de lianhe tongzhi" [Joint Notice of the CCP Zhanggongshan Reclamation Farm Qinghua Branch Committee and the Wuyuan County Qinghua Township People's Committee on Prohibiting Gambling, Superstitious Activities, Extravagance, and Fire Prevention during the Spring Festival], January 23, 1963, file 1963y-2003-005-043, WCA.

[crossed out in the archive] Collective funds and materials are strictly forbidden from being used for feasting, gifting, dragon dances, opera, or preferential subsidies, etc.

The first deletion reflects the official intent to avoid mentioning the suffering of the GLF. The second deletion, while banning collective entertainment, tacitly permits freedom for individual-level activities. Though Wuyuan, the county of origin for this archive, fared much better during the GLF than many other places in China, it still experienced extremely bitter years, particularly in 1961. Although there was no significant rise in the death toll, according to statistics from the local public security department, the number of births halved in 1961 and 1962.[12] In a horrifying case, a hungry person, having run out of food, ate his neighbor's child.[13] While the archives cannot tell us why people turned to religion after the GLF, they do reveal that the state's reasoning that strict management of religion was unhelpful, as it neither supported the people's bodily survival nor alleviated their suffering.[14] It was in this contradictory situation that a relatively relaxed environment compared to the GLF period came into existence.

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[12] Wuyuanxian Gong'an Zhi Bianzuan Zu, ed., *Wuyuanxian gong'an zhi* [Wuyuan County Public Security Gazetteer] (Wuyuanxian gong'an zhi bianzuan zu, 1987), 57.

[13] "Guanyu Wuyuanxian Jiangwan gongshe Dajiecun cansha ertong yi'an de diaocha baogao" [Investigation Report on the Case of Child Killing in Dajie Village, Jiangwan Commune, Wuyuan County], April 2, 1961, file 1961y-1001-020-001, WCA.

[14] For the relationship between state violence, unresolved memory, and religious resurgence, see Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Manduhai Buyandelger, *Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory, and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia* (University of Chicago Press, 2013); Monica Black, *A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder Doctors, and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII* (Metropolitan Books, 2020).

This resurgence was first manifested through a feverish restoration of religious sites. In Ningdu 寧都 County alone, four new temples were built and 12 were rebuilt starting in 1962, with donations for just three reaching over 5,000 yuan. Similarly, Yongxiu 永修 County and Anfu 安福 County repaired eight temples and built three in 1962, with some raising over 1,800 yuan.[15] This massive scale of construction and funding represented only the reported portion; the unreported number is difficult to estimate. This effort mobilized widespread participation, drawing in not only religious personnel but also ordinary commune members, grassroots cadres, and political pariahs, like "five-category elements"[16] (*wulei fenzi* 五類分子). Many people were "volunteering as unpaid laborers."[17] The number of

[15] In contrast, the recovery of Christianity spaces was slower, possibly due to its ties to "Western Imperialism" (*Xifang diguo zhuyi* 西方帝國主義). Many venues that had been "appropriated" (*nuoyong* 挪用) during the GLF had not yet been returned, and their activities consequently trended toward moving underground. The occupation of Christianity spaces often appeared in the form of "voluntary donations," but some local archives also admitted the donations were not voluntary, using words like "*nuoyong*" to describe it. See "Shangraoshi renwei bangongshi," file 1963c-1023-080-041, WCA.

[16] "Five-categories elements" was an unofficial term used from the early days of the PRC until the end of the Cultural Revolution (1976) to refer to those whose political identities were designated by the CCP as landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, rightists, etc. The "Five-categories" and their family members were subjected to unequal treatment for approximately thirty years.

[17] "Qu dangwei tongzhanbu guanyu Ningduxian fojiaojie dangqian dongtai de diaocha baogao" [District Party Committee United Front Work Department Investigation Report on the Current Dynamics of Buddhist Circles in Ningdu County], August 15, 1963, file 1963c-1004-006-017, WCA; "Jiangxisheng renmin weiyuanhui zongjiao shiwuchu dui dangqian Fojiao huodong he mixin huodong wenti de baogao" [Jiangxi Provincial People's Committee Religious Affairs Office Report on the Problem of Current Buddhist Activities and Superstitious Activities], April 8, 1963, file 1963c-1023-080-001, WCA; "Shangraoshi renwei bangongshi guanyu kaizhan zongjiao diaocha gongzuo de qingkuang baogao" [Shangrao City People's Committee Office Report About Developing Religious

religious personnel (mainly Buddhist and Daoist priests) who had renounced their vows during the GLF and were now returning to the religious life gradually increased. Those previously consolidated in large temples and monasteries for centralized management also demanded to be dispersed to their original religious sites. In some locales, the ranks of new believers who chose to reside in temples nearly doubled in a single year.[18]

The restoration of religious sites was accompanied by gatherings of believers and a rise in religious activities. Cases of religious practitioners using methods like healing and preaching and attracting dozens of followers were too numerous to count. Mass pilgrimages far exceeded the pre-GLF period in both scale and influence. In 1962, the temple fair at Gexian Mountain 葛仙山 lasted for several months, with pilgrims arriving from multiple counties and even neighboring provinces. Total revenue from sales of incense sticks reached over 30,000 yuan. In the same year, the temple fair at Shiren Temple 石人殿 attracted over 30,000 devotees, with proceeds of nearly 8,000 yuan.[19] The expansion of rituals into the household, such as door-to-door chanting (*shanghu nianjing* 上戶念經) became common, leading to an inflation in ritual economics. For example, the price for chanting in Ningdu County rose from 2.5 yuan to 4.5 yuan per day.[20] These surging crowds and flourishing ritual economies demonstrated the strong return of religion to rural China. Compared to the pre-GLF era, archives showed a marked decline in accusations of "religious rumors" or

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Investigation Work], August 27, 1963, file 1963c-1023-080-041, WCA.

[18] "Qu dangwei tongzhanbu," file 1963c-1004-006-017, WCA.

[19] "Jiangxisheng renmin weiyuanhui," file 1963c-1023-080-001, WCA.

[20] "Qu dangwei tongzhanbu," file 1963c-1004-006-017, WCA.

"superstition,"[21] reflecting that ideological vigilance was no longer the state's main preoccupation regarding religion after the GLF.

[21] Regarding the pre-GLF religious outbreak, Li Ruojian and S. A. Smith both view 1953 and 1957 as two high tides. In the archives from Wuyuan, I did not see a significant religious high tide in 1953, but 1957 was particularly notable. Li and Smith respectively argue that the 1957 high tide may be related to factors like the tightening and loosening of the political environment, disease, and famine. (See Li, "Minjian Zongjiao de Wange"; Smith, "Local Cadres Confront the Supernatural.")

However, the archives from Wuyuan point clearly to the "intercalary eighth month" (*run bayue* 閏八月) calendrical phenomenon. Almost all records of religious incidents emphasize that religion (or superstition, rumors) etc. were related to the "intercalary eighth month," which is traditionally considered an inauspicious phenomenon in China. Few studies have examined the "intercalary eighth month," see Zhang Ruilong and Huang Yinong, "Tianli Jiao qiyi yu Run Bayue buxiang zhi shuo xitan" [An Analysis of the Tianli Sect Uprising and the Theory of the Inauspicious Intercalary Eighth Month], *Lishi yanjiu*, no. 1 (2013): 84–99, doi:CNKI:SUN:LSYJ.0.2013-01-010.; Guo Kangsong, "Dui Run Bayue zhi nian ziran zaihai he zhanluan de lishi kaocha" [Historical Investigation of Natural Disasters in Years with an Intercalary Eighth Month], no. 5 (1995): 72–6, https://doi.org/10.19898/j.cnki.42-1704/c.1995.05.017.

The State's Gaze: Religion as Economic Waste

In 1963, the party-state launched the "Socialist Education Movement" (*Shehuizhuyi Jiaoyu Yundong* 社會主義教育運動) (SEM), also known as the "Four Cleanups Movement" (*Siqing Yundong* 四清運動). Seeking survival during the GLF, the rural grassroots gave rise to spontaneous economic forces.[22] High-level leadership condemned these trends as "capitalism running rampant," characterizing them as an ideological struggle between socialism and the capitalism that, in their view, severely eroded the collective economy. To safeguard the rural public ownership economy and consolidate socialist ideology, the SEM directed its spearhead at grassroots cadres and all activities seen as "sprouts of capitalism."[23]

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[22] For social history of rural China during this period, see Zhang Letian, *Gaobie lixiang: Renmin gongshe zhidu yanjiu* [Farewell to Ideals: A Study of the People's Commune System] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1998), 69–106; Huaiyin Li, *Village China Under Socialism and Reform: A Micro-History, 1948–2008* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 171–77; Gregory A. Ruf, *Cadres and Kin: Making a Socialist Village in West China, 1921–1991* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 109–10; Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 78–82; Helen F. Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution* (Yale University Press, 1989), 190–204.

[23] For studies of SEM, see Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: Volume 3: The Coming of the Cataclysm 1961–1966* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 274–83; Gao Hua, "Da jihuang yu siqing yundong de qiyuan" [The Great Famine and the Origins of the Four Cleanups Movement], *Ershiyi shiji*, no. 60 (2000): 56–68, https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/21c/media/articles/c060-200005008.pdf; Wang Yuqiang, "Siqing yundong dongyuan moshi de zhengzhi shehuixue fenxi" [A Political Sociology Analysis of the Mobilization Model of the Four Cleanups Movement], *Shixue yuekan*, no. 6 (2006): 46–52, doi:CNKI:SUN:SXYK.0.2006-06-009; Zheng Qian, "Shehuizhuyi jiaoyu yundong de guocheng yu tizhi xing fenxi" [A Process and Systemic Analysis of the Socialist Education Movement],

Investigation groups went out to investigate the grassroots corruption. However, much to their surprise, they also uncovered a widespread religious resurgence in the countryside.

The investigation into economic misconduct influenced the lens through which the religious resurgence was examined. Exceptionally sensitive to party cadres and local brigades amassing wealth through religion, the state generated an extreme aversion towards "superstitious merchandise." Such aversion stemmed less from religion's "superstitious" nature than from the perception that these activities were "wastefully unproductive" and involved "taking the capitalist road."[24] During the post-GLF period, religion no longer threatened the state by making people believe in it; its predominant threat turned into making people run away from working for the state. While religion/superstition remained ideologically heterodox, the state's concern about the actual labor power and resources religion extracted from the collective system greatly increased. This moment marked a significant shift in the state's evaluation of religion, from concerns about ideological heterodoxy toward a calculus of labor power, time, and material resources.

The Economy of Religion

In the post-GLF religious revival, the state rediscovered religion as an economic problem that led to resource depletion and production waste. For some, "running a religion" (*kai zongjiao* 開宗教) had become an important source of income. This trend originated not only from the populace but also unfolded at times with the help of the state's grassroots organizations. For

Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu, no. 2 (2006): 3–12, doi:CNKI:SUN:ZGDS.0.2006-02-001.

[24] Chau, *Miraculous Response*, 47.

example, a 1962 archive details how a party secretary personally burned down a temple's idol and confiscated all the ritual implements to stop the masses from worshipping at a self-built temple. He announced: "We have burned the idol...If you want to worship a deity in the future, come to the temple in our commune."[25] Official commentary labeled this incident as a "leftist" case for destroying religion. However, it very likely missed the crucial point. This was not simply an extreme manifestation of ideology but rather a religious economic competition.[26]

In the archives from 1962 to 1964, the amassing of wealth through religion became a major concern for the state, and the involvement of the collective was particularly notable. One commune took over 6,900 yuan from rural resettlement funds to renovate temples and idols and prepared "holy water" (*shenshui* 神水) and "immortality elixirs" (*xiandan* 仙丹) to profit from temple fairs. The net profit from these fairs sometimes reached over 6,000 yuan in 1962. Witnessing its success, several surrounding production teams followed suit, building six integrated shops that housed guests and sold food, incense, and candles in competition for profits.[27] Furthermore, channeling resources from collective to religion was common.

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[25] "Guanyu dangqian zongjiao gongzuo," file 1962c-1004-003-004, WCA.

[26] For studies on the economic dimensions of Chinese religion, see Fenggang Yang, "The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China," *The Sociological Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2006): 93–122, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2006.00039.x; David A. Palmer, "Gift and Market in the Chinese Religious Economy," *Religion* 41, no. 4 (2011): 569–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2011.616703; Chau, *Miraculous Response*; Mayfair Yang, *Re-enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China* (Duke University Press, 2020).

[27] "Jiangxisheng renmin weiyuanhui," file 1963c-1023-080-001, WCA.

Brigades supported monks in repairing temples and bore all the costs, and some communes allocated grain or assigned laborers to work for the temple, thereby allowing the monks to be freed from farmwork and conduct chanting for the brigade.[28]

In all religious activities, temple fairs became the focus of state attention because they incurred the highest costs.[29] Following the high tide of the 1962 temple fairs, an economic model centered around religion resumed near sacred sites like Gexian Mountain. Surrounding villages were filled with anticipation for the 1963 fairs. Some repaired beds and accumulated firewood, while others went up the mountain to rush the production of wooden boards, benches, and oil drums, and renovated and redecorated the temples.[30] The situation at Shiren Temple was similar. A portion of the temple fair profits was even distributed to the communes down the mountain, demonstrating a cooperative relationship between the two.[31] The archives before the GLF rarely include incidents of temple fairs. However, this does not suggest that temple fairs did not exist. Rather, it indicates that temple fairs became newly

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[28] "Guanyu dangqian zongjiao gongzuo," file 1962c-1004-003-004, WCA.

[29] In China, temple fairs were never merely religious rituals but composite public gatherings incorporating religion, trade, social, and entertainment functions. For studies on temple fairs, see C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*; Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400–1900* (University of California Press, 2000); Zhao Shiyu, *Kuanghuan yu richang: Ming Qing shiqi de miaohui yu minjian wenhua* [Carnival and Everyday Life: Temple Fairs and Folk Culture during the Ming–Qing Period] (Sanlian shudian, 2002); and Vincent Goossaert, "Resident Specialists and Temple Managers in Late Imperial China," *Min-su ch'ü-yi* 153 (2006): 25–68, https://doi.org/10.30157/JCRTF.200609.0002.

[30] "Yanshanxian renmin weiyuanhui," file 1964c-1023-088-001, WCA.

[31] "Shangraoshi renwei bangongshi," file 1963c-1023-080-041, WCA.

problematized after the GLF, as the state's concern over religion increasingly extended beyond ideological heterodoxy to encompass its economic grounds.

Beyond the temple fairs, religious personnel actively engaged in the ritual economy. An incomplete survey counted 169 incidents of chanting activities across merely 23 communes in March 1963 alone.[32] Religious practitioners were adept at using healing to seek profit. According to the reports, some declared themselves "god's envoys," making money through exorcism rituals, while others acted as spirit mediums, speaking in a throaty voice to tell fortunes and cure diseases.[33] State investigators further accused religious practitioners of "intentionally created anxiety" in some occasions: A monk in Shangrao 上饒 "fabricated rumors" based on livestock pestilence and illnesses, claiming that they were caused by the "Lord of the Soil" (*Shegong Pusa* 社公菩薩) being exposed to the sun and rain day and night. He successfully raised over a hundred yuan to build a shelter for the "Lord of the Soil."[34] The archives reveal that the party-state viewed religious activity as a competition among local society, religious personnel, and the state itself—a contest over economic resources and labor power.

In the post-GLF archives regarding religious governance, human body was reduced to an unprecedented degree to a mere container of labor power within the state's calculations. In the archives before the GLF, complaints about religious activities occupying production time

[32] "Qu dangwei tongzhanbu," file 1963c-1004-006-017, WCA.

[33] "Jiangxisheng renmin weiyuanhui," file 1962c-1004-003-005, WCA.

[34] "Shangraoshi renwei bangongshi," file 1963c-1023-080-041, WCA.

were common, but the narrative at that time still revolved around the person's political affiliation ("reactionary") and ideological state ("superstitious"). By contrast, a nearly obsessive economic calculation became the mainstream discourse in the post-GLF archives. When evaluating the impact of the religious resurgence, reports were no longer satisfied with simply counting the number of people engaging in religious activities. Instead, they precisely calculated how much "labor power"[35] was involved, using it as the most important indicator to assess the degree of severity.

For instance, some archives state that a Christian practitioner gathered over 80 people "(60% of whom were 'labor power')" for worship during the busy season of early rice transplanting and drought resistance. Likewise, a devout believer gathered 50 or 60 "labor power" for

[35] The term "labor power" carries a specific connotation in this archival record, reflecting the state's inclination to evaluate social groups based on their productive capacity. Under the People's Commune system, labor power was formally classified via "work assessment standards" (*pinggong dingji* 評工記分) into categories such as "full labor power" (*quan laoli* 全勞力), "half labor power" (*ban laoli* 半勞力), and "auxiliary labor power" (*fuzhu laoli* 輔助勞力) based on age, gender, health. The term "labor power" is used here to differentiate productive members among the participants in religious activities; the "60%" likely refers to the proportion of "full labor power" within the group.

For studies on the quantification and distribution system of labor power in rural China from the 1950s to the 1980s, see Arunabh Ghosh, "Work Points in the People's Republic of China, 1950s to the 1980s," *Isis* 116, no. 1 (2025): 146–57, https://doi.org/10.1086/734001; Zhang Jianghua, "Gongfenzhi xia de laodong jili yu jiti xingdong de xiaolü" [Labor Incentives and the Efficiency of Collective Action under the Work Point System], *Shehuixue yanjiu* 5 (2007): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.19934/j.cnki.shxyj.2007.05.001; and Xin Yi, *Nongcun Renmin Nongcun renmin gongshe fenpei zhidu yanjiu* [A Study of the Distributi r System of the Rural People's Commune] (Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2005).

collective prayer at her home during the spring plowing production campaign.[36] Similarly, three recreational sect members "organized over 30 'labor power' in one night" to build a temple, during which one bricklayer fell to his death."[37] Yet the archives rarely specify how "labor power" was calculated—whether the figures cited reflect a simple headcount of participants or a weighted conversion in which partial laborers (women, the elderly, children) were folded into a standardized unit of "full labor power." The demographic breakdowns occasionally appear in the archives, such as "old women accounting for fifty percent, able-bodied adults forty percent, children ten percent," or the detailed age and gender composition of believers.[38] This suggests that investigators were at least sometimes attentive to the quality, not just the quantity, of labor lost to religious activities.

The degree of waste of people participating in religion was evaluated through a quantifiable calculation of labor power based on the number of people, "work hours" (*gongshi* 工時), and quality of labor. This discursive shift from "person" to "labor power" signifies a migration of the struggle. The threat of religion was highly "corporealized," and this corporealization simultaneously entailed the "economization" of the human body. This calculation logic was not directed solely at religion but permeated the state's governance of all forms of "wasteful" behavior. Gambling and opera performances, for instance, were equally abhorrent due to their resource consumption. Archives record that all opera troupes in Leping 樂平 County consumed tens of thousands of yuan and work hours, and over ten thousand kilograms of

[36] "Yuganxian renwei guanyu zongjiao," file 1963c-1023-080-047, WCA.

[37] "Qu dangwei tongzhanbu," file 1963c-1004-006-017, WCA.

[38] "Qu dangwei tongzhanbu," file 1963c-1004-006-017, WCA.

grain. The reports also criticized routine gambling for leading to a general decrease in labor attendance and low efficiency.[39]

Escaping the State

The party-state also saw religion as a competitor for labor. Religious sites seemed to hold a strong attraction for peasants seeking to escape the collective economic system. In Ningdu County, over 40 individuals who had renounced their vows years ago returned to the temples, stating directly, "Life on the mountain is better, and there is more freedom." Even former local cadres sought this escape. A Buddhist nun who had previously served as a County People's Congress representative and commune accountant, was demoted after the disbandment of the commune's livestock farm. She then went back up the mountain to be a nun again.[40] The direct reason religion was able to remain outside the collective system was the remote location of many religious sites—what the archives called "deep mountains and remote houses" (*shenshan piwu* 深山僻屋).[41] This spatial placement hindered them from

[39] "Jiangxisheng renmin weiyuanhui," file 1962c-1004-003-005, WCA; "Sheng renmin weiyuanhui bangongting 'guanyu mou xie diqu puzhang langfei, juzhong dubo he mixin huodong qingkuang de baogao'" [Provincial People's Committee General Office "Report on the Situation of Extravagance and Waste, Mass Gambling, and Superstitious Activities in Certain Areas"], January 14, 1963, file 1963y-1023-093-029, WCA.

[40] "Jiangxisheng shangrao zhuanyuan gongshu mishu shi guanyu zongjiao gongzuo zuotanhui de qingkuang he jinhou zongjiao gongzuo yijian de daogao" [Jiangxi Province Shangrao Prefectural Commissioner's Office Secretariat Report About the Religious Work Symposium and Opinions on Future Religious Work], March 21, 1963, file 1963c-1023-080-023, WCA.

[41] "Yanshanxian renmin weiyuanhui guanyu jiaoyu, zhizhi qunzhong chaobai gexianshan mixin huodong de gongzuo anpai baogao" [Yanshan County People's Committee Report on the Work Arrangement for Educating and Stopping the Masses from Worshipping Gexian Mountain

easy integration into the collective system.[42] Though there had been directives to incorporate religious sites into the collective system before the GLF, the archives suggest that the effect was far from ideal. According to statistics from Shangrao, in 1963, most temples' economy operated outside the commune by the temple or adherents, where the commune and production teams could not intervene.[43]

The living conditions of temples appeared to be superior to those of most production teams. For instance, five believers on a mountain temple in Xingguo produced over 3,450 kg[44] of grain. After the mobilization of commune cadres, they sold over 1,450 kg but still kept an average of over 400 kg per person, far exceeding the grain rations of the production teams. Since many temples were self-sufficient and not subject to unified procurement quotas, they were even able to sell off the excess grain.[45] State reports criticized the religious personnel for their significantly reduced enthusiasm in farmwork since the religious resurgence and the rapid increase in incense revenue. The early rice yield of a temple plummeted from 3,000 kg in 1960 to 1,700 kg in 1962, with an estimated yield of 1,400 kg for 1963. More strikingly,

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Superstitious Activities], June 27, 1963, file 1963c-1023-080-020, WCA.

[42] This may be another reason for the relative silence of Christianity after the GLF, in addition to its connection to Western countries. Since Christian sites were often located in or near town seats, they were vulnerable towards the incorporation of the collective system. This also helps explain why, after the GLF, Christianity often went underground due to the inability to reclaim occupied activity sites.

[43] "Yanshanxian renmin weiyuanhui," file 1963c-1023-080-020, WCA; "Qu dangwei tongzhanbu," file 1963c-1004-006-017, WCA.

[44] The archives originally used "catty" as the units, with one catty equal to 0.5 kg. To facilitate understanding, this article has converted it to kilograms.

[45] "Guanyu dangqian zongjiao gongzuo," file 1962c-1004-003-004, WCA.

the labor attendance points for a monk in Dacheng Temple 大乘寺 dropped from 2,400 in 1961 to 2,000 in 1962, and the points were pre-calculated to be 660 for 1963.[46] This relative flexibility and economic advantages over collective production attracted many people to seek refuge in temples, leading the state to define religion as a competitor for labor power. Furthermore, this trend violated the state's plan for reforming religious personnel—using labor to make them self-reliant and escape their "parasitic lives" —a phrase used in state documents to describe personnel like religious practitioners and capitalists who lived off donations or benefits rather than productive labor.

Even more concerning to the state, religious sites had become a refuge for political pariahs like "five-category elements" seeking to evade both labor reform and political education. The frequent use of temples as sanctuaries led the state to single out Buddhism in particular, accusing it of "accepting people indiscriminately, regardless of their background or circumstances. Their membership composition is extremely complex."[47] Archival documents highlighted the scale of the issue. Fengding Mountain 峯頂山 housed 36 "five-category elements," whom state investigators suspected of "engaging in sabotage disguised as religion."[48] Three other temples housed 24 children of landlords, 20 members of "reactionary societies" (*fandong huidaomen* 反動會道門) including two leaders, and two landlords, two "rich peasants" (*funong* 富農), and one expelled teacher. In Xingguo County, 21 of the 73

[46] "Qu dangwei tongzhanbu," file 1963c-1004-006-017, WCA.

[47] "Shangraoshi renwei bangongshi," file 1963c-1023-080-041, WCA.

[48] "Yanshanxian renmin weiyuanhui," file 1963c-1023-080-020, WCA.

residents in temples were identified as previously banned "reactionary society" members.[49]

These political pariahs found in temples a space for survival relatively free from strict state surveillance and bodily persecution. The state was deeply displeased by this phenomenon, believing that these individuals were evading the political education they deserved. Thus, the state displaced its anger onto religion, reflecting its intolerance for the dismantling of its disciplinary and punitive mechanisms. What remains unclear is whether these individuals were genuine political pariahs or were labeled as such by investigating officials to enable the exercise of arbitrary power. Yet this ambiguity, I argue, is not a contradiction but two sides of the same coin.

Making Religion Legible

The state's gaze did more than register these phenomena—the act of looking was itself a way to make legible objects of state governance. This classificatory project rested on a set of questions that proved impossible to resolve: Who is a true believer? Who is a member of a reactionary society? And who is a "five-category element"? These questions represent a persistent epistemological difficulty in the party-state's governance of religion. Crucially, however, this difficulty was not an inherited problem the state failed to solve. It was a condition the state itself constructed. By sustaining a vague discourse of classification while claiming its validity, the state created the very conditions under which it could exercise excessive power over religious activities and participants.

In the post-GLF governance of religion, the state implemented a strict classification of

[49] "Guanyu dangqian zongjiao gongzuo," file 1962c-1004-003-004, WCA; "Jiangxisheng renmin weiyuanhui," file 1962c-1004-003-005, WCA; "Shangraoshi renwei bangongshi," file 1963c-1023-080-041, WCA.

religious personnel to manage the various groups that had resided in religious sites. The reports from Shangrao City and its subordinate Yanshan 鉛山 County proclaimed their goal of "distinguishing true believers and religious personnel from the political pariahs"—including members of reactionary societies and "five-category elements." They devised different approaches for different types of people: For non-believers, vagrants, and "feudal superstitious practitioners," the reports directed that they be "categorically not permitted to reside in temples" and were to be "mobilized to return where they had come from." For reactionary society members and "five-category elements" who had infiltrated religious communities, the reports ordered them to be "thoroughly cleared out" and "forced down the mountain to participate in labor." Those "with no record of sabotage" were to be "sent back to their place of origin to be handed over to the masses for supervised labor," while those who had engaged in "spreading rumors or sabotage" were to be "promptly dealt with according to the law."[50]

Yet in practice, this classification proved extraordinarily difficult to carry out, as manifested in the 1963 religious investigation. It has an ambitious and comprehensive survey plan: The investigators were tasked with compiling the distribution of temples and clergy, ascertaining the political attitudes of believers and religious personnel, and differentiating legal from illegal religious activities and "religion" from "feudal superstition."[51] However, none of the

[50] "Qu Dangwei Tongzhanbu," file 1963c-1004-006-017, WCA; "Guanyu Dangqian Zongjiao Gongzuo," file 1962c-1004-003-004, WCA; "Yanshanxian Renmin Weiyuanhui Guanyu Jiaoyu," file 1963c-1023-080-020, WCA.

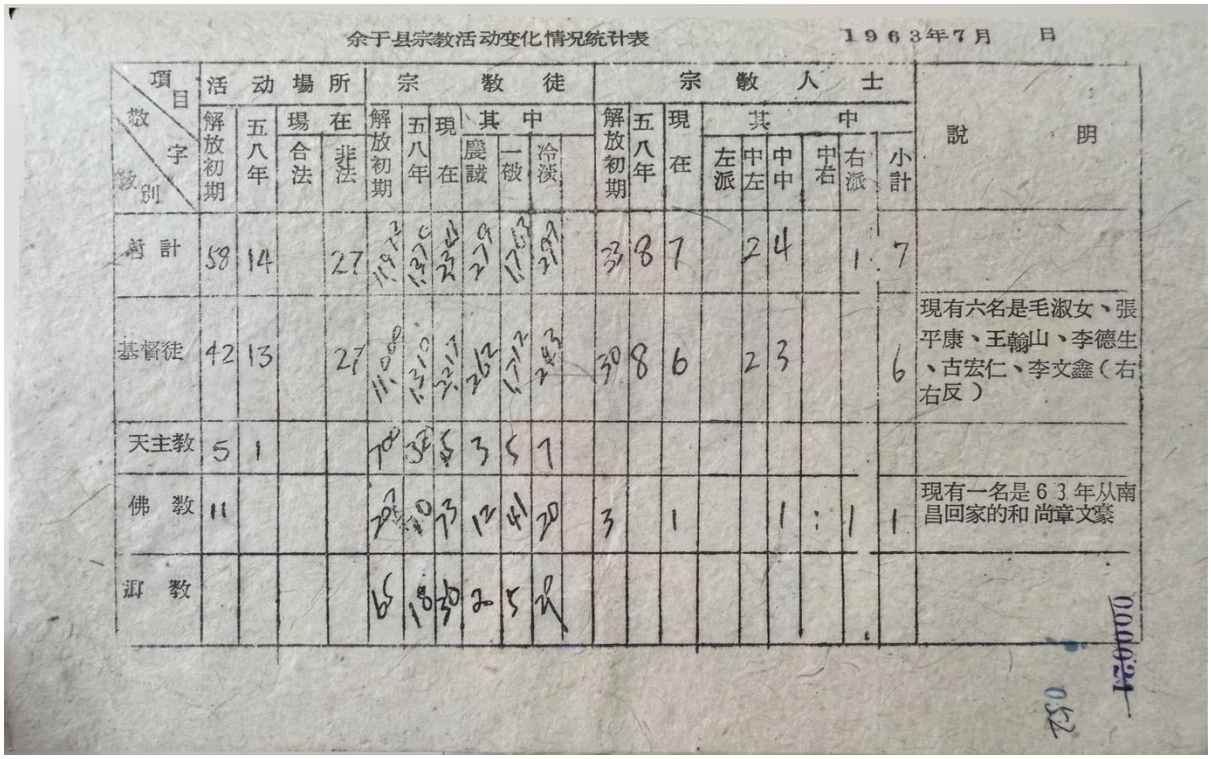
[51] "Jiangxisheng Shangrao Zhuanyuan," file 1963c-1023-080-023, WCA; "Guanyu Wo Sheng Yijiu Liusan Nian Zongjiao Gongzuo Anpai Yijian" [Opinions on the Arrangement of Our Province's Religious Work for 1963], March 29, 1963, file 1963c-1004-006-012, WCA.

archival documents on religious identification contain clear standards for discernment, nor any detailed reports regarding discerning religious identities. The results of the religious investigation proved disappointing. While acknowledging the investigation groups' enthusiasm and sense of responsibility, the city-level officials criticized them for being "relatively crude and not thorough enough" and their capabilities were found to be "very poor." Documents note that many of the investigators had only "a shallow knowledge of religion," often "unable to even distinguish one religion from another." Even brigade cadres familiar with local conditions were not much more capable in this regard.[52]

The failure of the first investigation prompted the provincial government to re-issue a survey in the second half of 1963, requiring local governments to correct the problem that "some areas did not follow the investigation items from our office's plan on March." They formulated three survey forms and required local governments to fill them out to correct issues of inconsistent items and incorrect numbers in the previous survey.[53] Yet a closer look at these forms reveals that the fundamental problem remained unaddressed: they specified categories to be recorded—number of believers, personnel, political attitudes, legality of sites—but offered no criteria for how these crucial judgements were actually to be made. This constant absence, in my reading, is not a gap in the archival record but a manifestation of the state's inability to establish standards.

[52] "Shangraoshi Renwei Bangongshi," file 1963c-1023-080-041, WCA.

[53] "Jiangxisheng Renmin Weiyuanhui Zongjiao Shiwuchu Han" [Jiangxi Provincial People's Committee Religious Affairs Office Letter], November 14, 1963, file 1963c-1004-006-025, WCA.



余干县宗教活动变化情况统计表　　1963年7月　日

项目 / 数字 / 数别	活动场所 解放初期	活动场所 五八年	活动场所 现在 合法	活动场所 现在 非法	宗教徒 解放初期	宗教徒 五八年	宗教徒 现在	宗教徒 其中 屡教	宗教徒 其中 一般	宗教徒 其中 冷淡	宗教人士 解放初期	宗教人士 五八年	宗教人士 现在	宗教人士 其中 左派	宗教人士 其中 中左	宗教人士 其中 中中	宗教人士 其中 中右	宗教人士 其中 右派	宗教人士 其中 小计	说明
合计	58	14		27							3	8	7		2	4		1	7	
基督徒	42	13		27							3	8	6		2	3			6	现有六名是毛淑女、张平康、王翰山、李德生、古宏仁、李文鑫（右右反）
天主教	5	1																		
佛教	11												1			1		1	1	现有一名是63年从南昌回家的和尚章文寨
道教																				

Figure 2: The statistical report submitted by Yugan 余干 County in accordance with the second provincial religious survey in 1963. WCA, file 1963c-1023-080-047.[54]

This persistent failure of classification does not, however, indicate a failure of the state. The state upheld the effectiveness of this approach—for example, Shangrao City forwarded the investigation report submitted by Yugan County as a city-wide positive example to all its districts for reference and study[55]—transforming the epistemological failure into a success in the sense of realizing its power. Drawing on Veena Das's concept of the "margins of the state,"[56] I understand religion in post-GLF China as precisely such a margin. As one

[54] "Yuganxian renwei guanyu zongjiao," file 1963c-1023-080-047, WCA.

[55] "Yuganxian renwei guanyu zongjiao," file 1963c-1023-080-047, WCA.

[56] Veena Das, "The Signature of the State: The Paradox of Illegibility." In *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, ed. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (School of American Research Press, 2004), 234; Das and Deborah Poole, "State and Its Margins: Comparative Ethnographies," in *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, 3–34.

contributor to the same volume observes, the operation of state power in its "margins" depends on "the pervasive uncertainty of the law everywhere and to the arbitrariness of the authority that seeks to make law certain."[57] The effect of religious identification was thus not to make religion legible; rather, it was in the very process of "creating legibility" that the state was able to exercise its power over people's bodies.

The illegibility of the religious identification process helped the state evade direct blame, allowing the critique of its policies to become a problem of local agents' capability or improper task deployment. Yet it also provided those agents with a pretext to evade responsibility, engage in selective enforcement, and exercise arbitrary power. The state's sporadic criticism of its local agents, within this mechanism, was tantamount to a "flat denial"[58] of responsibility for its abuses of power. This is what Das calls the "magic of the state": power that operates not through clarity and order, but through the productive tension between legibility and illegibility.[59] This condition of suspended judgment was itself an instrument of control—one that operated alongside more direct strategies of governance.

[57] Talal Asad, "Where Are the Margins of the State?" in *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, 287.

[58] Ann Anagnost, "Chili Pepper Politics," in *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Duke University Press, 1997), 146.

[59] Das, "The Signature of the State," 226.

The State's Strategies: "Etatization" of Time and Space

During the time after the GLF, the state did not overtly display its intention of suppressing religion. The principle of "tight on the inside, loose on the outside" (*nei jin wai song* 内緊外鬆) frequently appeared as the guideline for religious work. "Loose on the outside" meant avoiding open conflict and creating an atmosphere of "religious freedom." For example, when Yugan County attempted to issue a report on "outlawing superstitious practitioners," the Provincial People's Committee not only blocked this report but also circulated its opinion regarding the unsuitability of issuing such reports to relevant authorities across the whole province.[60] "Tight on the inside" meant that the state's control over religion did not relax; instead, it shifted from overt ideological attacks to more subtle means. Drawing on and expanding Katheirne Verdery's concept of "etatization"[61] of time, I examine how the state monopolization of time, space, and material objects become effective instruments of religious governance during the post-GLF period.

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[60] "Zhuanshu guanyu qudi mixin zhiyezhe huodong, bubi chu bugao de fuhan" [Official Reply Regarding the Banning of Superstitious Practitioners' Activities, Stating No Need to Issue a Public Notice], November 18, 1963, file 1963c-1023-080-053, WCA. It must be noted that a significant gap frequently existed between provincial policy and local practice. This allowed local cadres to utilize state directives, often concerning the economic imperative of the period, as a pretext to suppress specific religious communities, frequently violating the provincial government's "loose on the outside" policy. For a fuller discussion, see fn. 71.

[61] Katherine Verdery, "The 'Etatization' of Time in Ceausescu's Romania," in *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 39–57.

The "Etatization" of Time

The "etatization" of time is first used to describe the temporal deadlock in late socialist Romania. Pushed by an extreme socialist logic, it manifested through mandatory agricultural production quotas, which occupied household production time, and limited, unpredictable public services leading to endless queuing. As Verdery notes, though the social construction of time must be seen as a political process, the passage of time possesses an irreducible duration.[62] Therefore, the state, through specific methods of "marking time," sought to restrict the body's deployment and detach it from the possibility of other uses. This logic was just as nakedly apparent in China during the GLF. Yet, I argue, it did not disappear after the GLF; rather, it was—consciously or not—carried forward into the post-GLF governance of religion.

After the GLF, the Chinese state's control of time was two-pronged. The first strategy sought to regulate the "rhythm" of religious activities. Recognizing that events like temple fairs and pilgrimages followed a predictable temporality, the state shifted focus from post-hoc suppression to pre-emptive intervention. Archives show that local cadres were required to patrol intersections leading to religious sites for "anti-superstition" propaganda, persuading and turning back worshippers. Communes were also required to pre-educate members before temple fairs to prevent their attendance.[63]

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[62] Verdery, "The 'Etatization' of Time in Ceausescu's Romania," 39–41.

[63] "Yanshanxian renmin weiyuanhui," file 1964c-1023-088-001, WCA; "Yanshanxian renmin weiyuanhui," file 1963c-1023-080-020, WCA.

The second strategy was more covert, targeting time itself rather than religion directly. Religious practices, like any form of social spontaneity, require time to plan and act on. This core insight—that the extreme monopolizing of time is the most effective means of dissolving all social spontaneity—reflects, I argue, a crucial governance legacy from the GLF, where the state first acquired knowledge concerning the connection between popular initiative and temporal control. To understand how this legacy shaped post-GLF religious governance, we must first examine how temporal control operated during the GLF itself and what it meant for human agency.

As in Ceausescu's Romania, the extreme preoccupation with time in the GLF had its proclaimed goal, be it "increasing production," "industrialization," or "improving population quality." But it did not produce more goods, and was undoubtedly a failure in terms of production. However, it was successful in producing the populace's obedience to the state by making people unable to control their time, thus destroying the possibility of grassroots initiative. Studies of rural social history describe the communalizing of life during the GLF period as a militarized production system which occupied most of people's time. All laborers were subjected to arbitrary commands that transferred hundreds of millions to water conservation sites, industrial campaigns, and backyard steel furnaces, leaving even women, children, and the elderly to dig the ground at midnight.[64]

[64] For the social history during the GLF, see Gao Wangling, "'Dayuejin' shiqi de nongmin xingwei" [Peasant Behavior during the "Great Leap Forward"], *Modern China Studies*, no. 2 (2006), https://www.modernchinastudies.org/cn/issues/past-issues/92-mcs-2006-issue-2/964-2012-01-05-15-35-10.html; Huaiyin Li, *Village China Under Socialism and Reform*, 85–7. Regarding the gendered experience of before and after the GLF, see Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women*

People also lost the ability to plan time because unscheduled compulsory labor tasks and political gatherings would disrupt all plans. The miniscule amount of time outside production was also not freely controlled by the people themselves. Instead, it was filled with endless mass rallies and conferences. As a peasant recollected: "We had at least 200 days of meetings in a year. Everything was like a dream. I couldn't remember at the time, let alone recall now, what they said in the meetings."[65] People felt their bodies were arbitrarily pushed around by the state, forced to create a history not of their choosing, and repeatedly facing the failure of self-realization. This experience, as Verdery notes, was the ultimate experience of powerlessness, since people were prevented from experiencing themselves as effective.[66]

Religious personnel also experienced this dual occupation of time—they were required to engage in agricultural production, and outside of production, they were placed in endless socialist education forums. For example, the "Socialist Education Forum for Buddhist

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and China's Collective Past (University of California Press, 2011); Jacob Eyferth, "Women's Work and the Politics of Homespun in Socialist China, 1949–1980," *International Review of Social History* 57, (2012): 365–91, doi:10.1017/S0020859012000521.

[65] Ruf, *Cadres and Kin*, 102–5.

[66] Verdery, "The 'Etatization' of Time in Ceausescu's Romania," 45.

The passive analysis in Verdery's article aims to reveal the power logic of this temporal politics, not to claim it was a fully realized empirical reality. It does not contradict the exploration of popular agency. In fact, just as Gao Wangling revealed the "counter-behavior" (*fan xingwei* 反行為) of peasants during the collectivization period, Verdery herself also noted that Romanians used their spare time to obtain extra income through the "informal economy." These behaviors all show that the populace always possessed rich strategies of coping, negotiation, and resistance within the cracks of power. See Gao Wangling, *Zhongguo nongmin fanxingwei yanjiu (1950–1980)* [A Study of Chinese Peasant Counter-Behavior (1950–1980)] (Xianggang zhongwen daxue chubanshe, 2013).

Personnel" in Shangrao in late June 1958 lasted 36 days. The forums for Catholic and Christian personnel that same year lasted 60 days. These activities mainly targeted urban religious personnel. For rural religious practitioners, the government sent work groups down to the commune to deploy the education work. It was reported that at least half of the rural religious practitioners had undergone such extended education sessions. Some communes had held such education forums even before the work groups arrived.[67]

The procedure for these forums was highly consistent: exposing political errors, educating through persuasion, forcing the accused to bow their heads and admit fault, cultivating recognition of socialist achievements through activities like visiting factories, and finally, requiring representatives to submit guarantees or applications to quit religion and take up jobs in industry or agriculture.[68] The ideological impact of these educational forums is difficult to determine, but it is undeniable that they consumed a significant amount of time, which prevented religious life from proceeding at a normal pace. As Welch summarized, the religious personnel during the GLF had less and less time for chanting, rites, and the doctrines, and spent more and more time on labor and political study.[69]

These lengthy socialist education forums targeting religious personnel only appeared in the

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[67] "Shangrao zhuanqu fojiaojie renshi shehuizhuyi jiaoyu zuotanhui qingkuang baogao" [Shangrao Prefecture Buddhist Circle Personnel Socialist Education Forum Situation Report], 1958, file 1958c-1023-063-007, WCA; "Guanyu zongjiao gongzuo de baogao" [Report on Religious Work], February 15, 1959, file 1959c-1023-066-004, WCA.

[68] "Shangrao zhuanqu fojiaojie," file 1958c-1023-063-007, WCA; "Guanyu zongjiao gongzuo," file 1959c-1023-066-004, WCA.

[69] Welch, *Buddhism under Mao*, 115.

first two years of the GLF, and then completely disappeared from the archives after 1959. This is likely because the forums simultaneously served the functions of thought reform and integrating religious personnel and sites into the People's Commune system. As envisioned in the archives, the forums aimed to use communalization and socialist education to "forcefully disperse religion," accelerating the self-reform of religious personnel and reorganizing them into the communes. This system allowed both the control of their religious activities and the "voluntary" dedication of their property to the commune.[70] This integration process was likely completed after 1958, incorporating religion into the communes. Thus, during the remainder of the GLF, religious personnel, now within the commune system, received labor and socialist education together with the commune members and no longer appeared as a special category.

The subsequent post-GLF investigation in Shangrao, which revealed that most religious sites had not participated in collective accounting, exposes the complexity of this presumed success.[71] The possible reasons are two-fold. First, religious sites may have participated in collective accounting for a period during the GLF but later disassociated, much as the collective system began to disintegrate during the late GLF. Second, grassroots cadres may have compromised with religious groups through the whole communalization process, as

[70] "Jiangxisheng Shangrao Zhuanyuan Gongshu Bangongshi Guanyu Jieshou Tianzhu Jidujiaohui Fangchan he Chuli Youpai Fenzi Chen Huimin Qingkuang de Baogao de Pifu" [Jiangxi Province Shangrao Prefectural Commissioner's Office Reply to the Report on Receiving Catholic/Christian Church Property and Handling the Situation of Rightist Chen Huimin], 1958, file 1958c-1023-098-003, WCA; "Guanyu Zongjiao Gongzuo de Baogao," file 1959c-1023-066-004, WCA.

[71] For the full analysis of the investigation in Shangrao, see "Escaping the State" section.

reflected in Ouyang Nan's study of Mount Jiuhua, where the monks reached a compromise with the communes underneath, thus preserving some sort of economic independence.[72]

The "etatization" of time penetrated religion during the GLF, causing both the populace and religious personnel to lose time and energy to the extremely intensive and prolonged labor and political study. They also entered a state of disempowerment, unable to make long-term plans for religious activities due to irregular interruptions. These two factors jointly silenced religion during the GLF. However, like the Romanian case studied by Verdery, there is no direct evidence to prove that the occupation of time to strip society of its religious spontaneity was an intentional arrangement rather than an unintended consequence of policy implementation.[73] In fact, the archives from the GLF period not only contain no records of the state suppressing religious activities but also records of religious activities almost completely disappeared. This is unlikely to be a result of a lack of records. It is more probable that religious activities—if not completely disappearing from the state's view—were too scarce to be worthy of documentation.

After the GLF, however, the state seemed to have learned to transform this experience of time "etatization" into a routine governance technique. A provincial-level report in 1962 proposed

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[72] Ouyang, "Buddhism Revamped for Socialism," 506.

[73] While Xiaoxuan Wang's work shares a consensus with this article regarding the contradiction between the mode of production and the pace of life of religious communities during the GLF, it further suggests that the GLF might be used as a pretext for local cadres to crush religious communities, with which they had long-standing tensions. The archives used in this paper do not sufficiently support this more advanced argument, which may also be due to differences in circumstances in varied regions. See Wang, "Solving the 'Religious Problem'."

that the local governments should "strategically organize some mass agricultural production or other activities" during temple activities and festivals to control or reduce pilgrimages, which harmed production and wasted money.[74] Similarly, a county government in 1963 emphasized education forums for representative religious figures "could be a bit longer." It also proposed "regular education" for ordinary believers.[75] Although such explicit and frank expressions are not prevalent in the archives, their emergence suggests that the state was beginning to intentionally integrate this knowledge.

The full-scale rollout of the SEM in 1964 signaled the return of long-duration centralized education forums, which were more systematic than during the GLF period. Archives show that Yanshan County conducted a "Three Isms Education" (*Sange zhuyi jiaoyu* 三個主義教育) session of education forums for religious personnel. The first study session lasted over a month, from June 7 to July 9, with 44 religious people participating. Its process was strictly designed, spending 9 days on international situations, 10 days on domestic situations and class struggle education, and 13 days on anti-imperialism, patriotism, obeying the law, and religious policy education. It adopted forms such as listening to reports, reading policy documents, group discussions, and organizing study forums.[76] This systematic example was

[74] "Guanyu dangqian zongjiao gongzuo," file 1962c-1004-003-004, WCA.

[75] "Qu dangwei tongzhanbu," file 1963c-1004-006-017, WCA.

[76] "Yanshanxian renmin weiyuanhui guanyu zai zongjiaojie renshi zhong juban aiguozhuyi guojizhuyi he shehuizhuyi jiaoyu xuexihui de zongjie baogao" [Yanshan County People's Committee Summary Report on Holding the Patriotic, Internationalist, and Socialist Education Study Session for Religious Circle Personnel], July 15, 1964, file 1964c-1023-088-008, WCA.

then forwarded by the superior government as a model for all other areas in Shangrao.[77] In addition to centralized education, regular education also continued unabated. This form of education was widespread throughout the province and likely intensified over time. A religious work plan in 1965 required that all 2,000 or so religious practitioners in the province undergo one round of socialist education, including "one to three months of centralized education," "two or three half-days per week of regular education," and a catch-all measure to incorporate dispersed religious personnel into universal socialist education in their local communes.[78]

Controlling Religious Space and Objects

Just as the state "etatized" time, it also brought religious space under its control—appropriating the independent economic functions of religious sites into the communes' collective administrative and accounting system. The state adopted a comprehensive economic co-optation and labor reform policy, shattering the original independent economy of religious sites. All production teams were required to participate in the local People's Commune. To this end, the archives proposed two specific management models. Temples relatively close to production teams were to join the unified accounting and distribution.

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[77] "Zhuanshu pizhuuan zhuanfa Yanshanxian renmin weiyuanhui guanyu zai zongjiaojie renshi zhong juban aiguozhuyi guojizhuyi he shehuizhuyi jiaoyu xuexihui de zongjie baogao" [Prefectural Office's Endorsement and Forwarding of the Yanshan County People's Committee's Summary Report on Holding the Patriotic, Internationalist, and Socialist Education Study Session for Religious Circle Personnel], August 14, 1964, file 1964c-1023-088-007, WCA.

[78] "Jiangxisheng renmin weiyuanhui zongjiao shiwuchu 1965 nian zongjiao gongzuo jihua" [Jiangxi Provincial People's Committee Religious Affairs Office 1965 Religious Work Plan], April 2, 1965, file 1965c-1004-005-046, WCA.

Religious personnel received equal pay for equal work, with "appropriate consideration" to their lifestyle. Temples too remote for unified management implemented a system of contracting for work and output (*baogong baochan* 包工包產) from the production team. Regardless of the model, the production team was required to strengthen leadership over the religious sites and personnel.[79] The temples' advantages in production and distribution disappeared, causing this space, which had once been a "refuge" from the state, to lose its basis for attracting laborers. The agenda of spatial "etatization" caused the bodies of religious personnel to no longer serve rituals or spiritual cultivation, but instead to be identified with the masses of the production teams and redefined as calculable "labor power." Since they had to rely on their own work points to feed themselves, the state hoped that this would allow religious personnel to return to the agenda of freeing themselves from a "parasitic life" and transforming into self-sufficient socialist laborers.

Following the strengthening of the time and space strategies, religious incidents recorded in the archives gradually diminished in late 1963. The decline was further accelerated by the state's control of objects, such as "superstitious goods" like portraits of Door Gods (*Menshen* 門神) and Kitchen Gods (*Zaoshen* 灶神), as well as tin joss paper and other sacrifice items. During the GLF, paper mills that produced sacrifice items were converted to producing daily necessities, and only resumed religious production around 1962.[80] To restrict the post-GLF religious resurgence, the state implemented a complex policy starting in 1964 which once

[79] "Guanyu dangqian zongjiao gongzuo," file 1962c-1004-003-004, WCA.

[80] Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 151.

again restricted the production of these religious objects: "strict management, limited production and sales, differential treatment, and accommodating special needs."[81] Compared to regulating religious thoughts, controlling objects appears to have been a much more legible path of discipline, having the effect of "pulling the firewood from under the cauldron." The archives reflect this successful suppression. In 1962, the high tide of post-GLF religion was reached; the number of participants had shrunk significantly by 1963, and it was nearly halved again by 1964.[82] Following the full-scale rollout of the SEM in 1964, the state successfully suppressed the post-GLF religious resurgence through temporal and spatial competition, ideological reform, and cutting off material supplies, causing religion in rural society to fall silent once again.

[81] "Jiangxisheng wenhuaju guanyu zhizhi yinshua xiaoshou Menshen Zaoshen deng fengjian mixinpin de tongzhi" [Jiangxi Provincial Bureau of Culture Notice on Stopping the Printing and Sale of Superstitious Goods such as Door Gods and Kitchen Gods], December 20, 1965, file 1965c-1041-018-001, WCA; "Zhuanfa zhongyang gongshang xingzheng guanliju deng jiuge bumen, guanyu tange guanli shenxiang, xibo deng mixin fenhuapin de lianhe tongzhi" [Forwarding the Joint Notice of the Central Administration for Industry and Commerce and Nine Other Departments Regarding the Strict Management of Superstitious Incinerator Goods such as Divine Incense and Tin Foil], January 27, 1965, file 1965c-1041-020-050, WCA.

[82] "Yanshanxian renmin weiyuanhui," file 1964c-1023-088-001, WCA; "Zongjiao gongzuo dongtai" [Religious Work Developments], July 9, 1964, file 1964c-1023-088-023, WCA.

Waste as the Production of Obedience

The post-GLF archives reveal a stark contradiction. While the state treated labor power as the most precious collective resource—calculating bodies with unprecedented precision—it simultaneously devoted enormous amounts of time to political education that removed these very bodies from production. To answer this puzzle, I approach political education during the post-GLF period from a different angle: as a technology for producing visible compliance and reproducing state authority instead of primarily as a mechanism of thought reform. Whether political education genuinely transformed belief is a question the archives cannot resolve. Moreover, as Stephen Kotkin has shown in the Soviet context, the constant performing of ideological language tends to blur subjectivity and self-awareness, and between sincerity and cynicism, making it impossible to tell genuine compliance from strategic performance.[83]

Rather than pursuing this question of sincerity, I ask instead what the state itself see and confirm people's transformation: what scripts it staged, and what visible acts it took as valid evidence that a subject had been remade. As Verdery notes, socialist states establish authority not through the accumulation of profit but through the symbolic appropriation and display of productive capacity.[84] Political education in post-GLF China operated by a similar logic—its

[83] Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (University of California Press, 1995), 225-37.

[84] Verdery, "The 'Etatization' of Time in Ceausescu's Romania," 47–9.

value lay not in improving labor power but in the rituals of confession and renewal through which state authority was continuously confirmed. Yet what counted as confirmation of this authority was never self-evident. As Robert Lifton has shown, this process followed a predictable "death–rebirth" script: the destruction of the individual's self-identity, the public confession of past errors, and the staged emergence of a remade self.[85] The following case of a Christian fishing team illustrates how this script was enacted, observed, and claimed as proof of the state's redemptive power.[86]

Performing State Salvation

This fishing team was almost entirely Christian. Since they were active on the water long-term, their religious activities had dodged one political movement after another, which helped them to preserve their religious autonomy. When the work group arrived in 1964, it found that not a single household in the team displayed a portrait of Mao Zedong or posted new couplets. Every family hung a portrait of Jesus, flanked by religious couplets: "Jesus laid down his life for me, washing away my sins" and "Obey God, love others as oneself, Jesus is patient and peaceful." Even their calendars were printed with images of Jesus. In the eyes of the working group, this dense, everyday landscape of religion presented an ideal site for

[85] Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and The Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China* (UNC Press Books, 1961), 66–85; for recent research on brainwashing, see Rebecca Lemov, *The Instability of Truth: Brainwashing, Mind Control, and Hyper-Persuasion* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2025).

[86] "Guanyu zai jiaotu juju diqu kaizhan zongjiao gongzuo de qingkuang huibao" [Situation Report on Developing Religious Work in Areas Densely Populated by Believers], May 5, 1964, file 1964c-1023-088-028, WCA.

staging a drama of state redemption—salvaging believers from the "deceit of religion."

As soon as the education work group entered and stationed itself in the fishing team, the Christians immediately expressed obedience. One believer stated: "The Communist Party means what it says. I will definitely act according to the government's instructions. If the government says to believe, I'll believe; if it says not to, I won't." Some adopted a discursive fusion, claiming that Jesus "is just like the Communist Party and Chairman Mao, they both do good deeds," and "Jesus was born a carpenter—also a proletarian—making him conform to the Communist Party's class policy." These confessions of obedience before the political education were dismissed by the working group, who saw the declarations as a sign of "lacking confidence, being ideologically confused, and having many misgivings toward the state religious policy." Searching for signs of insincere transformation, the working group found what it was looking for in the statements of some Christians: Some believers, afraid that believing religion was breaking the law, hurried to declare: "I am illiterate. I don't understand current events. People said believing in Christianity was fun, so I just came along." Some young people, afraid it would affect their future, couldn't sleep for several nights and approached a work group cadre to explain: "My family registered me as a Christian; I didn't know about it at all."

Concluding that the Christians had not yet undergone genuine ideological transformation, the working team designed a nine-day, three-stage reform process. They guided the Christians to "speak bitterness" (*suku* 訴苦)—publicly telling their past sufferings before the socialist regime, recasting personal misfortune as class suffering and religious deception, and attributing all happiness to the Communist Party and socialism. At one forum, a Christian

recounted his family history emotively: “My family were hired laborers for three generations, living a life worse than beasts of burden, without food or warmth, and always dodging the draft. My parents fell ill with no treatment; I had to helplessly watch them lie in bed and die... In the past, who pitied me? After liberation, thanks to Chairman Mao and the Communist Party, not only has my life greatly improved, but I have also become a master of my own house. Speaking of this empty thing, Jesus, you can’t even see him. In the past when I suffered, he didn’t save me. Now I believe in him, and my dead pigs and dead chickens are all my losses. Why doesn’t he protect me?” Many audience shed tears hearing of his past bitterness, beamed with joy hearing of today’s sweetness, and felt ashamed when they heard how he had been deceived by Jesus.

After nine days of political education, the working team reported this moment of “rebirth” in triumphant terms: Believers tore down portraits of Jesus, hung up images of Chairman Mao, burned their religious books, and signed a patriotic pact. For the working team, these acts marked the successful emergence of “new people,” proof that class consciousness had been elevated and that religious faith had been replaced by loyalty to the socialist state. They optimistically wrote at the end of the report: “Class education is effective as soon as it is grasped. The believing masses have long been deeply poisoned by religion, their consciousness is low, and they cannot distinguish between their enemies and friends. But as long as we patiently, meticulously, and repeatedly enlighten and educate them, they will surely awaken from the anesthesia of religion.” This detailed report captures precisely what the state could see and confirm during a political education: the visible enactment of a scripted transformation.

The working group's dismissal of the Christians' initial compliance—and its acceptance of the compliance produced through education—reveals a crucial distinction: what the state sought was not obedience *per se*, but obedience produced through the correct script. Before undergoing political education, people could only passively expose their problems but were forbidden from confessing proactively; after receiving education, however, voluntary confession became the very proof that the state successfully transform the problematic ideology. The difference between these two confessional modes lies that, the former expresses the Christians' own agency, whereas the latter represents a "passive subjectivity,"[87] one that was prescribed from above yet appeared to erupt spontaneously from below.

Through this "passive subjectivity," the Christians in the fishing team reflexively placed themselves as subjects in need of state-directed redemption, clearing the ground for the ideological intervention. Their latter performance of transformation was co-opted into evidence of the correctness and effectiveness of the state by the working team. The more actively they admitted their mistakes, the more they proved the effectiveness of the education. Their pre-education obedience, however, operated through a different mechanism: people ceased to be passive subjects and became agents in their own right, one that was able to make self-transformation without state-directed redemption. This challenged the state's monopoly over the transformation of bodies, thereby undermining the premise that only the party-state could save its people from "the disguise of religion," while people themselves could never redeem their own souls. It produced a contradictory relationship between the state and the

[87] Anagnost, "Chili Pepper Politics," 147.

believers, interwoven with both "fear and intimacy."[88]

This power dynamic explains why the working team saw the initial compliance of Christians as insincere and unacceptable. It also underpinned the continual reenactment of political education of religious personnel after the GLF, acting as a cycle in which self-exposure and confession became opportunities to reaffirm state legitimacy and believers' obedience. This resonance among the Christian fishing team may not be coincidental: both political education and Christian practice share a confessional structure in which testimony of past suffering and present transformation serves as the currency of belonging. Political education, in this sense, mimicked and displaced Christian salvation with state salvation. This ironic structural intimacy may made the state's redemptive script more legible, or more unsettling, to these particular believers. The working group might also realize this mockery.

Taken together, it reveals the paradoxical complexity between political education and labor force calculation. Although education consumed vast amounts of time and seemingly violated the principles of labor efficiency, the state perceived it as a necessary "rite of passage"[89] for producing qualified bodies. Its effectiveness was not legible in the content of education itself but manifested in the obedience generated through the highly formalized script of death–rebirth—a script the state staged, monitored, and repeatedly reenacted. In this sense, the value of political education lay in its symbolic reproduction of state power rather than in the

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[88] Begoña Aretxaga, "Maddening States," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (2003): 406, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.061002.093414.

[89] Arnold Van Gennep. *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee. (University of Chicago Press, 1960).

improvement of labor or the transformation of belief.

Conclusion

The religious resurgence between 1961 and 1965 was ephemeral, yet that brevity rendered the state's conceptualization of religion and the operation of its power unusually visible. After the GLF, the state no longer primarily understood religion as ideological heterodoxy but redefined it as an economic object competing for labor power, money, and material resources. This shift not only reveals a transformation in governance priorities. It also demonstrates that religion was not a pre-existing social entity, but instead a governing object continually produced through administrative grammar. The arbitrariness that characterized religious identification in this period was not a temporary failure of the state apparatus but a structural feature of its power. By sustaining a discourse of classification whose criteria were never made legible, the state retained the flexibility to override constitutional provisions on "religious freedom" (*zongjiao ziyou* 宗教自由)—a logic of governance that, I argue, has persisted long after the period examined here.

State governance of religion in this period relied on regulating the circulations of bodies, time, and material objects among the populace, the state, and religion. Incorporating religious spaces into the collective system and controlling religious items restricted the material foundations of religion. Meanwhile, by monopolizing and allocating people's time to political education or labor and by managing temporal rhythms, the state prevented the populace and religious personnel from practicing religion. Such techniques unintentionally produced a religious decline during the GLF, while they became a routine and intentional device of state

governance in the post-GLF religious resurgence.

Why would a state extremely sensitive to labor power employ the seemingly wasteful techniques of political education and labor reform to govern religion? The analysis suggests that this project of producing qualified socialist bodies did not function through improving life conditions or enhancing productive efficiency. Instead, it functioned by generating obedience and reaffirming state authority. Through prolonged labor and political study, individuals constantly experienced their own inefficacy and were consequently constructed as bodies incapable of self-transformation. This condition of "lack" allowed the state to position itself as the sole source of meaning and redemption in reenacted cycles of salvation. In this sense, waste was thus not a byproduct of governance but a productive technique for generating authority and compliance.

Methodologically, this article critiques two classic approaches to the study of religion in this period: institutional histories and religious endurance or resistance under state repression. Both generally presuppose religion as a pre-existing entity. By contrast, this study does not aim primarily to uncover religious conditions *per se*. Instead, without denying the agency of religious practitioners, I explore how religion was perceived, documented, and actively generated through state governance.

This study also invites a reconsideration of the logic of religious governance in the Mao era and its contemporary afterlives. It was, for the most part, not a simple ideological purge but a secularizing project that operated by adjusting the circulation of time, bodies, and material objects. As Ballinger and Ghodsee's works on Bulgaria and Yugoslavia suggest, common

misunderstandings of "socialist secularism" arise from the Western-derived assumption that secularism involves a division between a secularized public sphere and a private realm of religious freedom. Socialist states often penetrate private lives, thus making people appear to embody an anti-religious program. Yet in practice, they work less through eliminating religion than through reorganizing their relations among the state, religion, and populace.[90] The Chinese materials examined here show the similar logic that religion was not simply banned but reshaped into a governable object through the reallocation of bodies, time, and materials. Future research that compares archives from other regions of China or situates the Chinese case within broader comparative socialist contexts, will further illuminate the relationship between religion and governance in socialist regimes.

[90] Ballinger and Ghodsee, "Socialist Secularism," 6–27.

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