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CHINA: Religious books' tortuous route to the shelves

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Perhaps surprisingly, China's book lovers have ready access in the many bookshops in the country's cities to publications about religion. While very little – if any - tackles any connection between religion and contemporary Chinese society and polity, various publications discuss the history, doctrine and practices of the five approved faiths - Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism - Forum 18 News Service has found. While state censorship persists, books promoting a particular faith and offering adherents texts to help their religious practice are difficult to find in general bookshops – though some innovative publishers have been able to get round official controls. Instead, religious believers have to seek out bookshops of the five state-approved faiths, whose own publications cannot be sold in general bookshops as they lack official publication data. Private bookshops – such as those run by individual Protestants – can only stock devotional material that has slipped through the official net.

Book lovers find no shortage of outlets on the streets of contemporary China's urban centres, even if bookshops must jostle for space with restaurants, coffee shops and retail outlets which range from small boutiques to large department stores. Reflecting a culture that has traditionally placed a high premium on scholarship, the love of books is an unquestioned trait of the Chinese people. The large number of bookshops testifies to the continuity of that cultural tradition.

Yet, it is also a symbol of a new China that is no longer characterised by Maoist dogmatism, but instead is increasingly open to the competition of ideas from both within and outside the country. Maoist and other socialist ideological tracts occupy an ever-decreasing stock in most bookshops. Shelves are instead dominated by books on a wide range of topics - from university entrance examinations and government employment applications, business management, learning foreign languages and applying to foreign educational institutions, to translations of Western classics and contemporary know-how books.

Among the diverse subjects represented on the shelves is religion. This is undoubtedly surprising to some given the communist regime's historical ideological antagonism toward religion. Yet it is also in keeping with the public acknowledgment in recent years by Chinese leaders, notably former president Jiang Zemin, that religion is likely to remain a part of Chinese society and therefore the communist party and the government must make every effort to facilitate the "mutual accommodation" of religion and the ruling party. This means that while religion must be tolerated, it must be managed or controlled so that it will not become a vehicle for any social and political movement against the regime. It is therefore little wonder that the literature on religion stocked by Chinese bookshops addresses very little, if at all, any connection between religion and contemporary Chinese society and polity.

Two major bookshops in Shanghai and Beijing, both recently visited by Forum 18 News Service, symbolise the changes. The Shanghai Bookmall (Shanghai Shucheng) and the Wangfujing Bookshop in Beijing are both part of the large state publishing and news conglomerate, the New China corporation (Xinhua). According to their respective official introductions, the building of the Shanghai Bookmall was funded by the Shanghai municipal government and went into operation in December 1998. The Wangfujing Bookshop, on the other hand, has a history dating back to 1949, but its current structure was built in 2000. Each shop is several tens of thousands of square meters (yards) in size.

Both bookshops contain sections on religion. The Shanghai Bookmall places religious literature under the broader heading of philosophy, in a smaller section labelled religion (zongjiao). On the other hand, the Wangfujing Bookshop stocks these books under the category of religion, separate from the philosophy section.

Regardless of the section headings under which literature on religion is shelved, the contents of the books on offer are broadly similar. Most treat religion in historical, doctrinal and artistic contexts, largely from an academic approach. A typical example is a book entitled *Elementary Buddhism: History and Doctrine* (Fojiao Rumen: Lishi yu Jiaoyi), published by the People's University. Another is a book entitled *History of Islam* (Islan Jiaoshi), published by the Ningxia Autonomous Region's People's Press (Ningxia Renmin Chubanshe). There are also more theoretical books on religion as a whole, such as one entitled *Religion and Science* (Zongjiao yu Kexue), published by the Commercial Press (Shangwu Chubanshe), which one leading Chinese scholar on religion told Forum 18 is the most prestigious publisher, at least among academics, in China today.

Perusing the sections on religion in these and other bookshops, it is clear that most of the titles address either Buddhism or Daoism. Fewer titles cover Christianity, which is further divided between Catholicism (Tianzhujiao) and Protestantism (Jidujiao). Even

sparser are titles on Islam.

Although the state controls and censors publications on religion, those intent on meeting the demand for books presented from the standpoint of a particular faith are increasingly finding creative ways to bypass or work through official channels - mainly through the right connections.

As Forum 18 found last year, Bibles are unavailable for sale in general bookshops (see F18News 24 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=636), but compilations of biblical stories can be found. For example, a book published by the People's Press of Jiangxi Province entitled Stories of the Bible (Shengjing de Gushi) contains both Chinese and English texts. Another book bearing the same title but with no English text is published by the Teachers' University of Guangxi Province.

As the earlier Forum 18 analysis indicated, publishing biblical stories instead of the whole Bible appears to be a way to circumvent the monopoly of the state-approved China Christian Council (CCC) on the printing of Bibles and other related study guides and devotional texts. In this regard, it is not only all but impossible to discover in general bookshops any religious texts published by the CCC, Forum 18 also did not find books published by the other four state-sponsored religious organisations, namely the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, the Chinese Buddhist Association, the Chinese Islam Association, and the Chinese Daoist Association.

Even more interestingly, readers wanting to learn about the policies and practices of the communist party and the government in dealing with religion face considerable difficulty locating publications that address these issues. Forum 18 was able to find one or two titles in the Shanghai Bookmall that deal specifically with the government's policies and practices on what it calls "cults" (xiejiao). It was also able to locate in the Shanghai Bookmall some party and government handbooks that consider these issues. However, Forum 18 was unable to find any in the Wangfujing Bookshop.

There may be several reasons for the dearth of publications on these subjects in these popular bookshops.

First, inasmuch as religion is undergoing a revival in contemporary China, it still faces considerable competition as the Chinese people are facing numerous challenges in a dynamic economy. Young people are very concerned about gaining entry into universities and colleges as a means toward future prosperity and prestige. For example, June is traditionally the nation-wide university entrance examination month. During that month, the subject of the examinations dominates all the news headlines. In the meantime, socio-economic issues - such as skyrocketing housing prices, the need for healthcare and education reforms, and the increasing income gap - occupy the minds of ordinary people.

The general preoccupation with these concerns is reflected in the fact that most bookshop customers tend to frequent sections dealing with subjects such as university examinations, employment applications and business management. In contrast, significantly fewer linger in the sections on religion. In this general climate, it is little wonder that even fewer people are interested in the government's policies on religion and "cults", and hence bookshops have little incentive to stock these publications in significant quantities.

In addition, it is clear that the Chinese people are generally uninterested in rhetorical policy areas - such as religion and minorities - which are within the purview of the United Front Department (Tongzhanbu) of the communist party. This reflects a collective lack of interest in and/or fear of becoming involved in politics. Translate this into the small universe of bookshops, it means that considerably fewer people are found perusing government publications. For example, Forum 18 found a large section on the second floor of the Shanghai Bookmall devoted to party histories and government handbooks. Yet almost no-one - except Forum 18 - was examining the publications.

A third probable factor is that the government views policies on religious affairs and their implementation as highly sensitive. Therefore, much of the literature on these subjects is produced by the publishing houses affiliated with the relevant government agencies, most notably the Religion and Culture Press (Zongjiao Wenhua Chubanshe) of the State Administration on Religious Affairs (SARA) and the Ministry of Public Security's Mass Press (Qunzhong Chubanshe). Many of these agencies' publications are meant for "internal circulation only" (neibu faxing) and therefore are understandably accessible only through their own circulation outlets. Not everyone, particularly foreigners, is able to access these publications.

In Beijing, Forum 18 is aware of a small bookshop on a side street near the city centre carrying only works produced by the Mass Press. The bookshop apparently holds a wealth of publications relating to public security. However, when a foreigner attempted to purchase some of these publications, the shopkeepers reportedly stated that the foreigner would not be permitted to buy anything in the bookshop.

Indeed, even publications not deemed "internal" also have limited circulation. Forum 18 found a 2005 publication compiled by the faculty of the Public Security University of the Ministry of Public Security that deals with the treatment of "cults" in Hong Kong. Although the book was not labelled "internal circulation only", Forum 18 was unable to locate it in commercial outlets in either Beijing or Shanghai.

Aside from publications produced by SARA and the Ministry of Public Security, it remains difficult to assess whether the lack in general commercial outlets of religious texts that are instructional, both for groups and for individual study, reflects some form of state censorship or self-censorship on the part of the bookshops. Even in Taiwan, where religious freedom is unquestioned, sections on religion in general bookshops do not seem to carry these types of religious texts. Thus, the decision not to carry these publications in China's general bookshops may simply be a consequence of the profit motive – though the rapid sale of Bible stories and other overtly "devotional" books whenever they are available may belie this.

Of course, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility of state control in the decision-making process. For example, the 25 December 2001 State Council Regulations on Publication Administration include a list of distribution prohibitions. Among publications banned from being distributed are: "those which incite national hatred or discrimination, undermine the solidarity of the nations, or infringe upon national customs and habits" (Article 26(4)); "those which propagate evil cults or superstition" (Article 26(5)); and "those which disturb public order or destroy public stability" (Article 26(6)). Given the communist regime's tendency to apply these restrictions to religious groups that it perceives to represent threats to its interests, it should surprise no-one if religious instructional texts or any "questionable" religious texts are barred from general circulation.

Overtly "devotional" or doctrinal religious books and texts are generally limited to outlets owned by the five "Patriotic" faiths. Thus, these state-approved religious groups serve as important distributional outlets for religious texts that are sought after by individual believers. The religious texts stocked in the general bookshops Forum 18 has visited are clearly neither intended to promote any religion nor to offer religious adherents texts which are important in ordinary religious practices. These latter forms of publications, however, can be easily found in bookshops operated by the state-approved religious groups – at least in larger cities.

When Forum 18 visited the Three-Self Patriotic Movement/China Christian Council bookshop in Shanghai, and the Chinese Buddhist Association bookshop and a Patriotic Catholic Church bookshop in Beijing, in all three places individuals seem unhindered in having access to the great majority, if not all, contemporary religious texts. Even so, what is unclear is whether bulk quantities can be obtained from these outlets and what is the required identification that must be produced in order to purchase large quantities of these publications. This is important, as many have already reported about the difficulty that unregistered religious groups, especially Protestant house churches, encounter in obtaining religious texts through the state-approved religious bookshops.

Critically, books produced by the approved faiths do not have ISBN numbers, which are required before printers can produce any books for the commercial market. Such books are therefore technically for internal circulation at registered church and temple outlets only, thus preventing them from reaching the general book trade.

However, the state-approved religious groups are not necessarily unhappy about this. They have tremendous incentives to monopolise the distribution of religious texts. One obvious incentive is that the sale of religious texts represents a major source of income for these groups, which have very limited alternative sources of funding.

One relatively new phenomenon is the growth of private Protestant Christian bookshops (usually owned by house-church members). Reportedly, as many as 50 or 60 have opened in major cities. These stock (often in very cramped surroundings) as many of the legal titles relating to Christianity with ISBN numbers the owners can find. Most of these books have small print-runs of anything up to 10,000 copies. Catalogues seen by Forum 18 suggest about 400 titles are now published legally relating to the Christian faith - many academic but some more "religious" or "devotional". This is a drop in the ocean for a constituency of perhaps 50 million Protestants compared to what is available in Chinese in Taiwan or Hong Kong. That these shops are multiplying suggests there is a large commercial market which could open up if censorship controls were ever loosened.

What conclusions can be drawn? On the one hand, it is encouraging that general publications about religion seem to be widely available to ordinary readers – at least in larger cities. On the other, the fact that the distribution of religious texts that are vital to regular religious practices is constrained should concern those wanting to see religious freedom flourish in China. Religious believers can only seek out those that have slipped through the net into the general publishing trade or go to the limited outlets controlled by the state-approved religions.

It is important to recognise that the impediments to religious freedom in China may not always be state-driven. A rapidly modernising society that emphasises material wealth must be taken into account. In addition, the powers of the state-approved religious groups vis-à-vis the state must be recognised. These organisations are not simply puppets in the hands of the state: they have their own interests and those interests can directly affect whether genuine religious freedom will indeed flourish.

For analyses of other aspects of religious freedom in China, see <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=3>

For an analysis of religious freedom in Xinjiang, see <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=72>

A printer-friendly map of China is available from
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

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