

Religious Relations across the Taiwan Strait: Patterns, Alignments, and Political Effects

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Abstract: This study of Buddhist, Taoist, and Christian relations across the Taiwan Strait elicits three observations: (1) officials on both sides of the Strait are permitting increased cross-Strait religious interaction, but each side has different calculations for doing so; (2) each side uses religion as “soft power” to obtain its political objectives, but these low-key approaches are limited—for different reasons; and (3) even though cross-Strait religious ties are defined by the governments and religious organizations in Taiwan and China in cultural terms, they have significant political implications.

Religious relations across the Taiwan Strait are under-studied and under-reported. Yet cross-Strait religious interaction can have important consequences, such as social integration or pressures on both Beijing and Taipei for changed policies and practices. For Beijing, religious relationships are one of five key links on which Hu Jintao’s government has focused attention in an effort to build a harmonious society.¹ For Taipei, friendly cross-Strait religious relations help to achieve détente with China.

The study elicits three observations. The first is that officials on both sides of the Strait are permitting increased cross-Strait religious interaction, but each side has different calculations for doing so. From the Taiwan side, accommodation of increasing religious exchanges is instrumental to peace with China, and perhaps to inducing China’s political liberalization. In Beijing, officials use cross-Strait religious ties as a non-threatening means to draw Taiwan closer to unification.

The second observation is that each side of the Strait uses religion as “soft power” to obtain its political objectives, but these low-key approaches are limited. Taiwan’s approach is circumscribed because China in significant

¹ The other four are party-state, ethnic, class, and domestic-overseas compatriot relationships.

ways controls and manipulates cross-Strait religious exchanges. Some people of Taiwan find the call from China to honor their historical roots by connecting with religious sites in the “motherland” particularly compelling. This strategy, too, is limited, however, because of the intellectual and organizational growth that has been attained by many of Taiwan’s religious institutions.

The third observation is that even though cross-Strait religious ties are defined in cultural terms by both governments and religious organizations in Taiwan and China, they have significant potential political implications. Because Taiwan is a democracy, the government in Taipei cannot pry into its citizens’ private business, and therefore monitors only Chinese visitors who come to Taiwan for religious purposes. Taiwan has no knowledge of the number of visits made by its people to China that involve religious exchanges. In contrast, the government in Beijing guards against challenges that can arise from religions, and maintains vigilance about all religious interactions in both directions across the Strait. Governments and religious organizations on both sides of the Strait are aware of the increased religious interactions, but every player is mindful that religious organizations and exchanges can be the micro-foundation for political change.

The focus of this study is on Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity. Ninety-three percent of Taiwan’s religious population practices Buddhism and Taoism. Only 4.5 percent practices Christianity, but Christians have wielded substantial influence in Taiwan’s social development and political history. Only 2.5 percent of the religious population professes a religion other than Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity. The article discusses the ways in which cross-Strait religious relations are unfolding, and considers the political implications in regard to each of the three religions. The conclusion summarizes the systematic analysis of the patterns of interactions and their political connotations.

Buddhist Cross-Strait Ties

Influence from the Taiwan Side. Taiwan’s Master Hsin Tao has observed that, since Ma Ying-jeou has been president, cross-Strait Buddhist exchanges have increased,² as more and more people from Taiwan go to China for family visits and other reasons. There are five major Buddhist organizations in Taiwan, all well-organized with strong leadership and huge followings, some claiming millions of faithful.

Master Cheng Yen of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation began her organization in Hualien in 1966 by asking poor local farmers to set aside the equivalent of pennies a day to start a small fund for social service. Today, her foundation is internationally known not only for its

²The Ven. Dharma Master Hsin Tao, Master of the Ling Jiou Mountain Monastery, interviewed by Deborah Brown, Museum of World Religions, Taipei County, Taiwan, June 19, 2010.

assistance in natural disaster relief, but also for the globalized Buddhist Tzu Chi General Hospital.³ The Buddhist Tzu Chi Stem Cell Center and the Da Ai (Great Love) television channel, which broadcasts internationally, are centered in Taiwan. Tzu Chi also concentrates on charity, education, culture, bone marrow donation, environmental protection, and community service. It claims millions of participants in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and elsewhere in Asia.

Fo Guang Shan (Buddha's Light Mountain) is headquartered in Kaohsiung in Taiwan's largest Buddhist monastery. The Fo Guang Shan International Buddhist order, established by Master Hsing Yun in Kaohsiung in 1967, is noted for its dedication to education and for more than two hundred temples across Taiwan. The order established Fo Guang University in Yilan County, Nanhua University in Chiayi County, and community colleges in many areas of Taiwan.

Dharma Drum Mountain Cultural and Educational Foundation, founded in Taipei County in 1989, earned its reputation as an intellectual community. Its master, Sheng Yen (deceased 2009), went to Japan at the age of forty to earn a doctorate, with the goal of raising the stature of Buddhism and the quality of monasticism in Taiwan. He established the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies and Dharma Drum University to train first-class researchers. Dharma Drum Mountain additionally is known for its urban white-collar membership and its dedication to suicide prevention and Taiwan's green movement.

Chung Tai Zen Monastery, one of Taiwan's largest, was built in 1987 in Puli, Nantou County, by followers of Master Wei Chueh. It is the headquarters of the internationalized and diversified Chun Tai Shan monastic organization, which runs 108 meditation centers across Taiwan and internationally.⁴ In 1993, Wei Chueh founded the Chung Tai Buddhist Institute to train qualified teachers of the Dharma. The organization is recognized for its preservation and development of Buddhist art and culture, and for research and organization of Buddhist artifacts.

Finally, there is the Ling Jiou Mountain Buddhist Society. After arriving in Taiwan from Burma with Kuomintang (KMT) troops as an orphan at age thirteen, Hsin Tao spent a decade of solitary living before becoming a monk in the 1970s and founding this organization. He arrived one day on the Greenwich Village doorstep of Ralph Appelbaum, a designer of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, to request plans for a \$66 million interactive museum of world religions, which opened in Yungho in 2001.⁵ Reflecting his tolerance of all religions, including Tibetan Buddhism, Master Hsin Tao is the founder of the Global Family for Love and Peace.

³ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, interviews of administrators and disciples by Deborah Brown, Hualien, Taiwan, June 2003.

⁴ Government Information Office, *The Republic of China Year Book 2009*, p. 285.

⁵ Deborah A. Brown, "A Museum of Faith," *Taipei Review*, September 2002, pp. 36-43.

Thus, Taiwan's Buddhist leaders are self-assured. Most started from poor or modest backgrounds to built organizations with international presence, large memberships, and deep pockets. It is unlikely, therefore, that they would easily succumb to the manipulation of officials in Beijing, who might like to control their operations to acquire influence over their organizations' substantial financial resources as well as the island's people.

Taiwan's Buddhist leaders exercise modest influence in China. Although China's Buddhist leadership and lay counterparts do not travel officially to Taiwan for training, some visit unofficially for short-term instruction. Additionally, most Buddhist literature read across the Strait has been published in Taiwan, although more and more material is published in China by government-controlled firms. (Buddhist writings that address philosophical and spiritual outlooks are particularly subject to censorship.)

There are four major sacred Buddhist mountains in China: Mount Wutai in Shanxi; Mount Jiuhua in Anhui; Mount Putuo in Zhejiang; and Mount Er Mei in Sichuan. One might expect that the five leading Buddhist organizations in Taiwan—which account for over 60 percent of the revenue and expenditures of all Buddhist organizations on the island—would forge relationships across the Strait, or perhaps some sort of “strategic alliance” (similar to leading airlines in the aviation industry) with the four Buddhist mountain establishments in China. But no such strategic ties exist.

Tzu Chi has been prompt in its response to devastating natural disasters in China, but Cheng Yen remains universal, rather than Chinese, in her vision. She deliberately stays out of partisan politics. The Chun Tai Shan monastic organization, like Tzu Chi, responded to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Although Master Wei Chueh was born in Sichuan, he is forging ties with counterparts in this province, and is “Blue” (pro-KMT, and not adverse to eventual cross-Strait unification) in orientation, his mainland ventures do not appear politically motivated. Wei Chueh's activities in China reflect an affection for his birth place rather than a grand plan.⁶ However, he has been embroiled in Taiwan's politics. He endorsed Lien Chan in the 2004 presidential election and urged his followers to boycott the Chen Shui-bian administration's “peace referendum.” Protesters who believed that religious figures should be apolitical forced his temple to close until after the election. Yet, Chung Tai Monastery is traditional, mostly engaged in teaching and Dharma transmission. After earning his doctorate in Japan, Sheng Yen—born near Shanghai—left his footprints around the world. His visit to China was but one of the numerous episodes of his Dharma transmission. Like Tzu Chi, his Dharma Drum organization has remained remote from politics and global in outlook. Hsing Yun—born in Jiangsu—has been the most active Buddhist master in promoting exchanges across the Strait. He was involved in Taiwan's 1996 presidential election as part of the opposition within

⁶ Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, Director, Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, interview by authors, Taiwan, June 24, 2010.

the KMT to Lee Teng-hui⁷; called for government intervention in a way that would weed out heretical sects during the process of drafting (2001-2010) religious law⁸; and has attempted to position himself as the leader of Chinese Buddhists worldwide, in part by assuming prominence in China-sponsored World Buddhist Forums. Master Hsin Tao, however, carefully keeps his order inclusive, as his focus is on fostering tolerance for all religions and international understanding and peace.

Hence, Taiwan's big five Buddhist institutions have different constituencies, purposes, and activities, and differ in their political inclinations and interests in forging ties with China. Of the five, Tzu Chi is the most apolitical, while Hsing Yun of Fo Guang Shan is the most political. Regardless of their approaches to cross-Strait relations, there is no evidence of a desire among these five leaders to be pulled into China's Buddhist orbit in a way that could jeopardize the independence of their institutions.

Influence from the China Side: China has hosted two World Buddhist Forums. The first, co-sponsored by the government-controlled Buddhist Association of China and the China Religious Culture Communications Association, was held in Hangzhou and Zhoushan, Zhejiang, April 13-16, 2006. About one thousand Buddhist leaders and scholars from some thirty-five countries and territories attended. This was the first international religious conference held in China since the communists' accession to power in 1949.⁹ The Second World Buddhist Forum was held March 28-29, 2009, in Wuxi, Jiangsu, and March 31–April 1, 2009, in Taipei. Wuxi spent \$1.6 billion to build the Lingshan Buddhist Palace to host the event. Some 1,700 monks and scholars from fifty countries and territories attended the proceedings in China, of whom about a thousand traveled by charter flights to Taipei to conclude the forum by discussing eight sub-themes. The second forum also was organized by the Buddhist Association of China and the China Religious Culture Communications Association, but this time with the cooperation of Taiwan's Fo Guang Shan and the Hong Kong Buddhist Association.¹⁰

Although Taiwan's Buddhist leaders do not oppose making Buddhism more cohesive by engaging in intra-Buddhist dialogue, some object to China's

⁷ André Laliberté, "Buddhism for the Human Realm' and Taiwanese Democracy," in *Religious Organizations and Democratization: Case Studies from Contemporary Asia*, ed. Tun-jen Cheng and Deborah A. Brown (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), p. 57.

⁸ Jia-lin Chang, "State-Religion Relations and Legality: On the Making and Impacts of 'Taiwan's Religious Associations Law,'" paper presented at the National Chengchi University conference on civil societies in Taiwan and China, May 2010, pp. 7-9.

⁹ BBC News, "In Pictures: The World Buddhist Forum," April 13, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_pictures/4905920.stm.

¹⁰ "China Hosts World Buddhist Forum Sans Dalai Lama," Indo-Asian News Service, in *Canadian Content Forums*, March 27, 2009, <http://forums.canadiancontent.net/news/83011-china-hosts-world-buddhist-forum.html>.

wish to play the role of “big brother.” During the Cultural Revolution, the government in Beijing lost control of religionists through its harsh persecution of them. By holding the forums, it has tried to regain the guiding role. Chinese officials have used the forums to attempt to steer the course of Buddhist revival in China and to befriend Buddhists in Taiwan. It is unlikely, however, that the forums will be an effective united-front device because Taiwan’s leading five Buddhist organizations are broadly internationalized; the intellectual leadership of Buddhism is on the Taiwan side of the Strait; and Taiwan’s big five are well-endowed, well-developed organizationally, and internationally renowned. Joint sponsorship of the second forum reveals that both sides, at the very least, are on an equal footing.

Tibetan Buddhist Cross-Strait Ties

Influence from the Taiwan Side: Taiwan’s Tibetan Buddhists describe the World Buddhist Forums (which forbade the presence of the Dalai Lama) as attempts to convince the international arena that the government in Beijing is tolerant of religion. The Dalai Lama’s Taiwan representative maintains that officials in Beijing do not want China’s Buddhists to develop new networks and cohesive structures, as this could elevate their power. He argues instead that the central government intends for China’s Buddhists to remain weak; to ensure this, Beijing will continue to control the organizations to which all of China’s Buddhists are forced to belong.¹¹

Beijing casts the Dalai Lama as a failed Buddhist and as a “splittist,” so it is not surprising that Tibetans in Taiwan (estimated at thirty thousand in 2001¹²) view the PRC with disfavor. The Dalai Lama has made three visits to Taiwan, all prompting Beijing’s warnings of “serious consequences.” His first trip was his “enlightenment tour” in March 1997, during the presidency of Lee Teng-hui. One hope of the Tibetan Buddhist religious leader was to discuss “spiritual reforms” with the president (who once contemplated becoming a Christian minister). During this trip, just prior to Hong Kong’s retrocession, he said that he sought self-rule for Tibet rather than full independence from China.¹³ The Dalai Lama and Lee, both disparaged by current leaders in Beijing, remain old friends.¹⁴

¹¹ Dawa Tsering, Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Taipei Religious Foundation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, interview by Deborah Brown, Taipei, Taiwan, June 18, 2010.

¹² Staff and wire reports, “Dalai Lama Visit Tests Taiwan-China Relations,” *CNN.com/WORLD*, March 31, 2001, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/east/03/30/dalailama.taiwan.02/>.

¹³ Staff and wire reports, “Taiwan Silent on Expected Meetings with Dalai Lama,” *CNN interactive*, March 25, 1997, <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9703/25/china.tibet/index.html>.

¹⁴ “Dalai Lama to Meet Taiwan’s Separatist Former President,” *Manila Times*, August 28, 2009, <http://www.manilatimes.net/index.php/world/1074-dalai-lama-to-meet-taiwans-separatist-former-president>.

The Dalai Lama was welcomed at the Taipei airport by government officials when he visited for the second time in March 2001. He met with President Chen Shui-bian and former president, Lee, both of whom had tried to promote a separate identity for Taiwan during their presidencies. China analyst Willy Wo-Lap Lam observed that officials in Beijing regarded the 2001 visit as evidence of a global anti-China conspiracy among pro-independence movements in Taiwan and Tibet, the Falun Gong, and anti-China elements in the United States.¹⁵ Although presidents Lee and Chen welcomed the Dalai Lama to Taiwan, both had concerns about cross-strait religious ties, in general, as they feared that they could play into the hands of China's government.¹⁶

The third visit in 2009 received the eventual approval of the Ma administration, but came at the invitation of the mayor of Kaohsiung and six other Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) mayors and county chiefs from the area of southern Taiwan that had been devastated by *Morakot*, the worst typhoon to hit Taiwan in fifty years. In late 2008, Ma had insisted that the timing was not right for a visit by the Dalai Lama. Ma not only had overseen the commencement in 2008 of formerly forbidden direct cross-strait tourist flights, shipping, and mail services, but also had increased economic links and spoken of a peace treaty with China. But Ma was soon criticized for poor government response to *Morakot*, which struck August 8-9, 2009, killing over 650 people.¹⁷ To accommodate Taiwan's Buddhists while sheltering Taipei from political fallout, his DPP hosts and the Ma administration cast this third visit by the Dalai Lama as humanitarian. Although China blamed the third visit on the DPP, the Taiwan Affairs Office of China's State Council warned of negative consequences for cross-strait relations.¹⁸ (China had withdrawn from a summit with the European Union in late 2008, when French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, and other EU leaders said that they planned to meet with the religious leader.¹⁹) The Dalai Lama did not mention Tibet during his 2009 visit, but stressed, "We are not seeking separation for Taiwan, but the fate of Taiwan depends on the more than 20 million people. You are enjoying democracy and that you must preserve. I myself am totally dedicated to the promotion of democracy."²⁰ President Ma did not meet with him.

¹⁵ Staff and wire reports, "Dalai Lama Visit Tests Taiwan-China Relations."

¹⁶ Nan-Chou Su, Publisher and Director, *Wilderness*, interview by authors, Taipei, Taiwan, June 25, 2010.

¹⁷ Mark McDonald, "Dalai Lama Adds to Taiwan Leader's Troubles," *New York Times*, August 28, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/28/world/asia/28taiwan.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print.

¹⁸ Ralph Jennings, "Dalai Lama Tells Taiwan He's Dedicated to Democracy," Reuters, August 31, 2009, <http://phayul.com/news/tools/print.aspx?id=2541&t=0>.

¹⁹ McDonald, "Dalai Lama Adds to Taiwan Leader's Troubles."

²⁰ Staff and AFP, "Dalai Lama Visit Criticized by Some in Taiwan," *China Post*, August 30, 2009, <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/print/222596.htm>.

The government in Beijing does not support visits to Taiwan by the Dalai Lama, nor is there any indication that the current government in Taipei does. Yet, the circumstances surrounding the third visit reveal that such religious exchanges can be nearly impossible to stop by a non-supportive government, and can assume a life of their own, with potentially explosive political consequences if either government across the Strait handles the exchange heavy-handedly.

Influence from the China Side. Following the earthquake in April 2010, in Jiegu, Qinghai, a gateway to Himalayan Tibet, the Chinese government explicitly discriminated in its relief efforts. Though Buddhists, Christians, and others in Taiwan were permitted to provide relief and rebuilding assistance to the victims of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, they were prohibited from doing so following the Qinghai disaster²¹ that killed 2,039, injured more than 12,000, and caused over a hundred thousand to flee the region.²² Taiwan's Red Cross was the exception, but even it was permitted to go to only two places some eight hundred kilometers from Qinghai. This allowed authorities in Beijing to maintain control of information flow and to dominate humanitarian-related public relations.²³

To fully subjugate the Tibetans, Chinese authorities will have to re-educate the Tibetans to Han thinking and ways, subjugate them militarily, and control Tibet's economy. Yet, lessons from the Middle East re-teach that prolonged tough-fisted approaches provoke torrid resentment. Recent anonymous calls for a "Jasmine Revolution" in China have heightened government fear of coalescing circles of political opposition. Tibetans in Taiwan assert that this is a "great time in history," because regardless of where they reside internationally, Tibetans live like a family, with common goals and an affinity toward other groups that are fighting for rights and freedoms.²⁴ This explains why Tibetans often are present on the sidelines at Falun Gong demonstrations in Taiwan.²⁵ Taiwan's exiles insist that Tibetans at large want good relations with China's government, but that authorities in Beijing have no interest in formulating a solution that accommodates both sides, in part because of ethnic Han nationalism and the government's confidence that it can overpower the some six million Tibetans in China.²⁶ Despair, however, has led China's ethnic

²¹ Dawa Tsering interview, June 25, 2010.

²² CNN Wire Staff, "China Holds Day of Mourning for Quake Victims," *CNN.com*, April 19, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/04/19/china.quake.toll/index.html>.

²³ Dawa Tsering interview, June 25, 2010.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Chang Ching-hsi, Chair, Department of Economics, National Taiwan University, Ming Chu-cheng, Professor, Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University, and Chang Ching-hua, Professor, Department of Journalism, National Taiwan University, all leaders of the Falun Gong movement in Taiwan, interviewed by Deborah Brown, Taipei, Taiwan, June 15, 2010.

²⁶ Dawa Tsering interview, June 25, 2010.

groups to be less adverse in recent years to participating in “street politics,” contributing to tougher authoritarian controls in social management.

Taoist Cross-Strait Relations

Influence from the Taiwan Side. There are some 18,274 Taoist temples in Taiwan, compared to 4,006 Buddhist temples, although a slightly larger percentage of the population identifies itself as Buddhist.²⁷ There is no pure Taoism in Taiwan, as in China; rather, it is blended largely with folk religion practices.²⁸ Passed on through a lineage of patriarchs since its founding, the sixty-fourth and sixty-fifth patriarchs of the popular Tianshi Jiao (Zheng Yi Jiao) sect live in Taiwan, the former refusing to recognize the latter,²⁹ in competition to head this Taoist community. The tension is not based on political leanings, as neither leader is identified with Taiwan’s Blue or Green (pro-DPP, favoring Taiwan’s independence) camp,³⁰ albeit politicians of all persuasions appear at Taoist temples during campaigns, using them for political gatherings.³¹ Regardless of the dispute between contending sect leaders, there is no overarching structure of authority for all Taoists in Taiwan. Power within a temple comes from the payment of licensing fees to hold the post of chairman of the administration committee which heads it. Most temples house multiple deities, since Taiwan’s Taoism aims to be inclusive. In contrast, much of Taoism as practiced in China tends to be philosophical, focused on living wisely to conserve or increase life’s vitality and transcending the flesh to attain mystical absorption into the Tao itself.³²

The Draw of China for Taiwan’s Taoists. Like all religions, Taoism was vigorously attacked in China during the Cultural Revolution, yet also like most religions, it survived, although greatly weakened by forgotten rituals and the destruction of its temples and literature. Since the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987, there has been a burgeoning of cross-Strait Taoist interaction and considerable restoration of China’s temples, thanks especially to Taiwanese interest and money.³³

From the late 1980s through 2000, \$10 billion New Taiwan dollars flowed into China to help restore some one hundred Taoist and Buddhist temples. Most of this money poured into Fujian and Guangdong provinces,

²⁷ Ministry of the Interior, “Religions: Statistics, Government Figures,” 2005.

²⁸ Chi-te Hu, Professor, General Education Center, Ching Yun University, interview by authors, Taipei City-Dalongdong Baoan Temple, June 26, 2010.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions*, completely revised and updated edition of *The Religions of Man* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 207-209.

³³ Chi-te Hu interview.

owing to the historical ties of Taiwan's immigrants to these regions; Shanghai, to support the famous temple of the city god, Cheng Huang; Henan, to the temple in Luoyang's Longmen (Dragon Gate) caves, and to the Shaolin Temple; Beijing, to support the Baiyun Guan (White Cloud Temple); and Sichuan, to assist the Er Mei Mountain Temple. One reason that the Chinese government permitted temple restoration was its understanding of the economic benefit of tourist sites. Visiting Taiwanese religionists were given friendly treatment, especially with respect to obtaining visas, lodging, and permission to tour the "motherland."³⁴ Such trips have included those to help restore Meizhou Island, Fujian Province, as a center for Mazu worshipers.³⁵

The vast pantheon of deities in the Taoist-Buddhist-folk traditions includes Mazu, alleged to have lived on Meizhou Island during the Sung Dynasty. Legend has it that, at age sixteen, she received a talisman from a celestial being; thereafter, she was adept at protecting fishermen and seafarers. Mazu's popularity in Taiwan is signaled by four hundred temples that are dedicated to her, the annual, week-long Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage through central and southern Taiwan counties, and pilgrimages to Meizhou Island.³⁶ The island's thousand-year-old Heavenly Empress Palace-Meizhou Ancestral Temple, razed by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, reopened in June 1988, when the provincial government gave leave for Meizhou Island to become an economic region for tourism. In 1992, Taiwanese were permitted landing visas on the island, and the State Council designated Meizhou a national tourism-vacation region. By 2002, statistics from the Meizhou tourist bureau indicated that over 100,000 Taiwanese pilgrims were traveling annually to the island to see where Mazu once lived.³⁷ The sacred site of the now renovated temple has been expanded by a new 323 square-meter temple nearby to accommodate the large number of pilgrims.³⁸ The island boasts terminals for passenger ships bound especially to and from Taiwan. Chinese authorities actively promote trips to the home of Mazu as a means to draw people from Taiwan closer to the mainland culturally.

Taiwan's Taoists on Democracy. What effect will revived religious practice have on the social and political dynamics of China? Taiwanese Taoists maintain that if the Chinese have clothes, food, and a place to live, there is no need to declare or agitate for "rights."³⁹ Thus, Taiwan's Taoists are not inclined to become involved in China's humanitarian or democratization considerations.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Government Information Office, *The Republic of China Year Book 2009*, p. 288.

³⁷ "Taiwan Pilgrims Flock to Meizhou," *China Daily*, October 21, 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/46382.htm>.

³⁸ Mia Turner, "A Godless Society Looks for Meaning," *Timeasia*, September 27, 1999, <http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/99/0927/meizhou.html>.

³⁹ Chi-te Hu interview.

Taiwan's Taoists are also not a threat to China's government as officials in Beijing perceive evangelical Christians to be, because there is no comparable movement among Taoists. Unlike Christians and Buddhists, Taoists do not preach doctrine, and unlike Christians, they do not press for conversions. If the temples are thought to be beautiful and the deities responsive, Taiwan's Taoists maintain that money and believers will be plentiful. The gods in a temple must be regarded as powerful, however, otherwise the temple will lose ground⁴⁰; some of this power can be derived from the temple's relationship to the "mother temple" in China.

Influence from the China Side. On the China side of the Strait, as long as Taoist temples are restored and associated with miraculous deeds, they are likely to draw Taiwan's believers but not their political challenge. All Taoist temples are government-registered, while Christianity in China is practiced largely in unregistered house churches. Thus, state supervision of Taoism is easily enforced because the government controls significant temple funding. The government encourages restoration funding from abroad in order to generate tourism and local employment. But although Taoism is favored by the government over Christianity because it is an indigenous religion that is not linked to Western imperialism, the historical link of Taoism to internal revolts leads officials to keep a government representative at each temple to monitor all activities. In sum, the government promotes religious *buildings*, not the renewal and expansion of religions themselves.⁴¹ Indeed, a crowd of believers could signal people power. In the past, the Later Han, Tang, Sung, Yuan, and Qing dynasties all faced Taoist-inspired rebellions in the name of deities, which launched ring leaders depicting themselves as the reincarnation of exceptional figures in order to gain followers and leverage anti-government sentiment.

The reconstruction and building of attractive Taoist temples and a positive attitude toward cross-Strait Taoist relations, however, provide China's leverage over Taiwan for three reasons. First, Taoist temples in Taiwan are not organized hierarchically, so coordination among them is difficult. In contrast, counterparts in China are tightly reined in by religious affairs cadres. Second, of the three religions under consideration, Taoism is the only one that originated in China. All mother temples are on the mainland; other temples, whether in Taiwan or Southeast Asia, look to the mother temples as their historical antecedents. Third, Taoism in China leans toward Philosophical Taoism, whereas Taoism in Taiwan inclines toward Religious (Popular)

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. One example is that government cultural affairs and tourism bureaus have established "museums" in buildings that actually are functioning temples in order to display exhibits of folk religions, which they call "non-material cultural heritage." Richard Madsen, "Back to the Future: Pre-Modern Religious Policy in Post-Secular China," Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, October 26, 2009.

Taoism, which embraces soothsayers, psychics, shamans, and faith healers. Because of its longer and deeper understanding of Philosophical Taoism, China is in a better position to produce the literature that the Taoist community on each side of the Strait is apt to consume. Hence, in the case of Taoism, the China side of the Strait possess intellectual leadership, while in the case of Buddhism, Taiwan possesses intellectual and organizational edges over China.

Also, China's government-controlled temples hold sway over Taiwan's temples in a way that is not understood by most observers. A case in point is the mother temple of Xuantain Shangdi (Supreme God of Dark Heaven), located at Wu Dang Mountain in Hubei. Close to one hundred temples in Taiwan competed for the designation of first direct lineage from this temple. The single mother temple proclaimed the right to award the designation of the most important descendant temples. Eventually, the mainland authority awarded two titles to two leading Taiwan temples, one chosen as the first palace of the Supreme God of Dark Heaven on Taiwan, the other selected as its first residence. This compromise suggests the unwillingness of the mainland authority to offend either temple. The outcome also can be read as a Machiavellian strategy of divide and rule, to prevent the only anointed temple from declaring its independence. Another example is the Heavenly Empress Palace-Meizhou Ancestral Temple on Meizhou Island, also in a pivotal position. Again, around one hundred Taiwan temples of this lineage—including the top three temples in Tainan, Singang, and Beigang—jockeyed to be the leading descendant temple in Taiwan. Competitive indirect pilgrimages to Meizhou played out most vividly between 1987 and 2000, before direct cross-Strait links were established, posing a policy problem for Taiwan's government.⁴² Pilgrimages predated even 1987. Before cross-Strait links were established, large groups of pilgrims came by charter flights and were welcomed by a huge lineup of host-city officials. Now, pilgrims come in small groups and visits are no longer sensationally reported in the media. With direct cross-Strait transportation in place, visits to Meizhou and other places in China can be made within a few hours for multiple purposes, making it difficult for the government in Taipei to even be aware of, much less track, these religious exchanges.

A recent development is that many Chinese tourists, coming to Taiwan for sight-seeing, may participate in Taiwan Taoist temple activities. In April

⁴² Paul R. Katz, "Religion and the State in Post-war Taiwan," *China Quarterly*, Special Issues, New Series No. 3, *Religion in China Today* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 100-101. As Mayfair Mei-hui Yang notes, the DPP government was uncomfortable with the pilgrimages, but the more it tried to abort the "direct religious sea link," the more innovative the Mazu cult leaders became in connecting with the mother temple. See Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, "Goddess across the Taiwan Strait," in *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), chap. 12, especially pp. 327-332.

2010, more than two thousand people from about forty Mazu temples in China witnessed the commencement of the Goddess of the Sea 205-mile procession. Chinese authorities emphasize the revival of Mazu in China as an important element in its insistence that historically the people and culture of Taiwan came from China; thus linking Taiwan as part of China. In an interview with BBC, a representative of China's temples pointedly stressed that "the roots of Taiwan's Mazu beliefs lie in mainland China."⁴³

The reverse is not true. China's Taoists do not go to Taiwan for training, although the island's Taoists hope that this will happen eventually. Nor can Taiwan's Taoist masters perform rituals in China, because this would require residency which the government does not permit. In any event, there is little call for them to go to China because the government does not encourage religious development.⁴⁴

Another possible avenue for Taiwanese influence is publications, but here, too, the China side of the Strait seemingly holds an advantage. Although both sides of the Strait publish many Taoist materials, there is a significant difference in the type of research that is conducted in each place. As the mainland holds an intellectual advantage because of the existence of pure Philosophical Taoism in China, more Taoist publications are shipped from China to Taiwan than vice versa.⁴⁵

There is a difference in the intellectual approach to Taiwan's and China's Taoism. In Taiwan's Taoist tradition, an individual who is not a licensed Taoist practitioner can be hired to run a temple. And with the exception of the Total Perfection sect which came from northern China, adepts lead a normal existence, unlike Buddhist monks who cut ties to family life. An adept waits in his home to be hired to perform a ritual; meanwhile, he enjoys a worldly life. If he is perceived as powerful—reputation is spread by word of mouth—he can command large sums of money. Thus, there is competition of sorts over accumulated power and related techniques (e.g., thunder and rain may be interpreted as omens that signal strength and purification of an adept and his temple). The focus of the study of Taoism in Taiwan, as a result, is historical, religious, and cultural, rather than philosophical. Taoism is typically studied in philosophy departments in China, but in anthropology, religion, or history departments in Taiwan.

The first International Conference on Taoism, a cooperative cross-Strait undertaking, was launched in 1994 at Taiwan's National Chung-Cheng University. In 1996, some one hundred scholars met for three days in Beijing to discuss Taoism. Thereafter, smaller conferences were convened in Taipei in 2006, 2007, and 2010, all held in Taipei's Dalongdong Baoan Temple. There

⁴³ "Mazu Festival Spurts Cross-Strait Celebration, Taiwan Lures Mainland Devotees," *news.bbc.co.uk*, April 4, 2010, <http://www.whatsonxiamen.com/event1440.html>.

⁴⁴ Chi-te Hu interview.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

was a disparity in the conferences, however. In China, attendance was limited to scholars; in Taiwan, scholars attended, but many participants were Taoist practitioners of lower educational backgrounds.⁴⁶ One might argue, therefore, that China has a more scholarly approach to Taoism, whereas Taiwan has a more democratic one.

Christian Cross-Strait Relations

Catholic Influence from the Taiwan Side. Taiwan's 400,000 Catholics are only some 1.7 percent of Taiwan's religious population, but wield disproportionate influence because they run about half of the island's social service institutions.⁴⁷ The total membership of the church (one-third resides in Taipei) is split about fifty-fifty between supporters of the KMT and backers of the DPP.⁴⁸ However, because Archbishop John Hung Shan-Chuan of Taipei was born on the island and the church is now more outspoken on matters such as conditions for migrant workers and the environment, some observers suggest that the church, once viewed as Blue, may be taking on a Light Blue or even Greenish hue. Indeed, the Archbishop observes that Taiwan's religions do not contemplate cross-Strait unification because, in contrast to China, the people of Taiwan have enjoyed a half century of relative freedom.⁴⁹

All of the orthodox canon laws, bibles, and other sacred books that China's Catholics read are printed in Taiwan and Hong Kong.⁵⁰ Taiwan's professors of Catholic theology are invited not only to China's patriotic churches, but also to its unregistered churches. Taiwan's Jesuits spend much time in silent retreats with China's bishops, priests, and sisters. Additionally, they recruit apostolates through training camps run especially for college students. Since this is illegal, names of participants are withheld. Chinese officials are aware of these sessions, but because the training is not targeted against the government, authorities generally tolerate them. Illegal training of priests and nuns in formation occurs mostly in the countryside among young people. This is essential to keeping the Catholic faith alive in China, as the nation suffers from a shortage of priests, and the population at large, as well as of the church, is aging. Yet another channel of influence from Taiwan is that many priests whose families came from China to Taiwan with the Nationalists in the late 1940s return to visit relatives, leaving their imprints in various ways, including contributions to build churches.

Archbishop Hung communicates only with the head of the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China, not with China's individual

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ The Most Reverend John Hung Shan-Chuan, Archbishop of Taipei, interviewed by Deborah Brown, Taipei, Taiwan, June 14, 2010.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

bishops, and Taiwan's Catholic lay leaders have no direct contact with China's Catholics. Officially, there is no cross-strait relationship between the Catholic churches of Taiwan and China,⁵¹ moreover the unofficial relationship between them is at arm's length. In 2010, for instance, some three hundred seminarians from China studied in Rome, and another three hundred Chinese priests and nuns studied in Manila (despite their poor English). Few came to Taiwan for instruction, even though Taiwan could be a preferred destination for training because of shared language and culture. The Ministry of the Interior in Taiwan permits Jesuits to receive students from China; twelve applicants were accepted into the program for the fall of 2010. Most training of China's Catholic clergy, however, if done abroad, is centered in Italy, other areas of Europe, the United States, or the Philippines.

International attention to Taiwan's Catholic Church most often is narrowed to its fate if Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations were normalized. From the Chinese government's perspective, normalization of relations would require the Vatican's switching its diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, a change Pope Benedict XVI implied in his 2007 letter to China's Catholics.⁵² The Vatican State is Taiwan's longest enduring ally (since 1942), save Panama. It is the only state in Europe to officially recognize the island's government and the most influential of the twenty-three states to presently have formal diplomatic ties with Taipei. When the United Nations seated the People's Republic of China in 1971 and the Republic of China lost its UN membership, the Holy See began to assign a chargé d'affaires rather than appoint a head to its diplomatic mission in Taipei. Because representation of the Holy See in Taiwan has not been at the highest level possible for decades, the island's church maintains that removal of the apostolic nunciature from Taiwan would make little difference.⁵³

Catholic Influence from the China Side. Over the years, there has been speculation about imminent normalization of diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican. Francesco Sisci, Asia Editor of *La Stampa*, offers the following analysis.

Jiang Zemin's decision to normalize Sino-Vatican relations was derailed when Pope John Paul II canonized 120 martyrs who had died in China. The canonization took place on October 1, 2000, China's national day, which the government in Beijing viewed as a provocation. The government also was displeased that most of the martyrs had been killed during the

⁵¹ The Reverend Louis Gendron, S.J., Delegate for Higher Education and Research, and former vice president of Fu Jen University, interview by authors, June 25, 2010.

⁵² Pope Benedict XVI, "Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China," May 27, 2007, sec. 4, Willingness to Engage in Respectful and Constructive Dialogue.

⁵³ Archbishop John Hung Shan-Chuan interview.

anti-Christian Boxer Rebellion. (In 2000, the Chinese government asserted that the candidates for sainthood had been deserving of their deaths.) Officials in Beijing suspected that the selection of the new saints was influenced by clergy in Taiwan who feared Taiwan's isolation if normalization of Sino-Vatican relations were to occur. If the Holy See diplomatically recognized China and downgraded its relations with Taiwan, loss of this formal diplomatic relationship could have been construed by President Chen's political opposition as caused by the pro-independence agenda of his administration and the DPP.⁵⁴ Chen's successor, Ma Ying-jeou, has warmed relations with Beijing. But if Sino-Vatican relations were normalized, the political opposition to Ma could claim that his closer relations with China had led to Taiwan's further diplomatic isolation. This could damage the friendlier relations that have been developing under Presidents Ma and Hu. If Beijing must choose between better relations with Taipei or normalized relations with the Holy See, the former is a greater imperative strategically.⁵⁵

Ma Ying-jeou, baptized in the Catholic Church, does not practice Catholicism. He responded to Pope Benedict's 2011 World Day for Peace message by describing his own promotion of cross-Strait religious exchanges, noting that religious ties between the two sides have become closer. Indeed, since September 2010, two high-level religious delegations from China, including one led by the director of China's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), have visited Taiwan.⁵⁶

Protestant Influence from the Taiwan Side. The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT), whose members are about one-third of all Taiwan's Protestants, stands out among other Protestant denominations for its proactive stance regarding Taiwan's democracy. Presbyterians have concerned themselves with the under-classes of Taiwan and were advocates for those who were persecuted, most notably from the 1947 "2-28 Incident," through the long period of White Terror under KMT rule, until the lifting of martial law in 1987. Critics of the government were jailed, Bibles and hymn books were taken from Presbyterians and their *Taiwan Church News* was banned. This led the PCT to become an effective incubator for prodemocracy activism in the 1970s. Today Taiwan's 230,000 Presbyterians insist that since only under democracy can religionists effectively live out their faiths, it is vital for the PCT to visibly support human rights and fundamental Christian values.⁵⁷ Presbyterians claim

⁵⁴ Francesco Sisci, "Taiwan Issue Clouds Damascene Moment," *Asia Times Online*, <http://www.atimes.com/China/LF10Ad01.html>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ "Taiwan's President Replies to Pope's Peace Day Message," *Sunday Examiner* (Hong Kong), February 13, 2011, p. 3.

⁵⁷ The Reverend Lyim Hong-Tiong, Associate General Secretary, Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, interview by authors, June 25, 2010.

that they are able to do this because they do not look at China as a “market,” and refuse to compromise on basic Christian beliefs. Some charismatic Christians express disappointment, however, that Taiwan’s Presbyterian Church no longer is as outspoken about human rights and freedoms as formerly.

In general, Protestant churches in Taiwan are soft-spoken. Although none wants China’s Three-Self Patriotic organization to represent it in the international arena, only Taiwan’s Presbyterian Church has assiduously fought against it. This occurred in 1991, when Bishop K.H. Ting, then head of the China Christian Council (CCC), told the World Council of Churches (WCC) that when the CCC joined it, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (a founding member of the WCC) must come under the CCC’s membership.⁵⁸ The PCT refused, but reached an agreement that recognizes the CCC as a self-governing body. If the PCT seeks exchanges with the CCC, it must consult first with the WCC. Allegedly, this protocol was accepted by the Presbyterians in recognition of a partnership in mission. Although other Protestant churches in Taiwan have mutual projects with the CCC, Presbyterians do not, as the PCT never pursues them and the CCC never requests them.

In contrast to the Presbyterians, the leaderships of other denominations came with Chiang Kai-shek’s forces in the late 1940s when they arrived to establish their rule over Taiwan. The history of the Methodist Church in Taiwan places it at the other end of the Blue-Green spectrum from the Presbyterians. Chiang Kai-shek, Mme. Chiang Kai-shek, and Chiang Kai-shek’s son, Chiang Ching-kuo, all were Methodists. This led the Methodist Church in Taiwan to be deep Blue. At least five times, Three-Self Protestant leaders have been invited to Taiwan, and Methodists claim that most of Taiwan’s Christians favor such exchanges. The exceptions are the Presbyterians who are reticent about the visits, and the Catholics who want them, but the central government generally excludes direct contact with Taiwan’s Catholic Church.

Lutherans and Episcopalians share a conservative outlook regarding church interaction with government. Lutherans were greatly influenced by the Two-Kingdoms doctrine of Martin Luther, which means that individual Lutherans can be involved in politics, but the church as a whole should exclude itself from the political arena. Many Protestant denominations in Taiwan publicly hold this view.⁵⁹ Taiwan’s six thousand Episcopalians hug the neutral middle ground between Presbyterians and Methodists, their leadership claiming that the church never touches political issues in either Taiwan or China. Because Episcopalian theology is based on the Bible and reason, leadership

⁵⁸ The Reverend Hong-Chi Hu, Pastor, Director of the Research and Development Center, and Program Secretary of Ecumenical Relations, Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, interview by authors, June 25, 2010, Taipei, Taiwan.

⁵⁹ The Reverend William Y.W. Liao, Associate Professor of History and Theology and Acting President, China Evangelical Seminary, interview by Deborah Brown, Taipei, Taiwan, June 18, 2010.

Table 1. Political Leanings of Taiwan’s Major Christian Churches, 2011.

CHURCH	POLITICAL LEANING
Catholic,* Episcopal Presbyterian Baptist	Apolitical or Neutral Green Blue (northern Taiwan); Greener (southern Taiwan)
Methodist and Lutheran	Deep Blue
True Jesus, Local Church, other independent churches started in China**	Blue
Christian churches overall in Taiwan	Some Greening; majority, Neutral to deep Blue

* The Catholic Church was perceived in the past as Blue, but it has become less associated in the public mind with the government than previously.

** The True Jesus and Local Church claim that they are apolitical.

encourages members to draw their own conclusions. In contrast to the Presbyterians whose focus is on message, Episcopalians center their religious practice on liturgy and the central mystery of God, leading them to sidestep political controversies, which they maintain are not church business.⁶⁰ (Taiwan’s Episcopal Church belongs to Province VIII of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America.)

Even though a church may generally be Blue or Green, this does not mean that the church is for or against interacting with counterparts across the Taiwan Strait. Even Blue-leaning organizations are careful to avoid being misunderstood as promoting cross-Strait unification. Green-leaning churches show willingness to have contacts with Protestants in China in keeping with good-neighbor teachings; but this should not be misconstrued as abandonment of a desire for Taiwan’s independence. The Blue-Green dichotomy is complex. In one Methodist church, for instance, a deep Blue congregation meets during the day, and a Green congregation meets in the evening. They share the church structure and interact in church events, but worship separately.⁶¹

Table 1 shows the perceived political leanings of Taiwan’s Christian churches today. The table reflects public perceptions, which may or may not be reliable, but self-description by religious leaders is even more unreliable. The table shows political shadings and leanings, but does not provide a black and white picture. The Presbyterian Church, for example, has Blue voters as members, and the Methodist Church, Green ones.

Overall, contemporary Protestant leaders in Taiwan are more pragmatic than their predecessors, and the political stripes are not as clear-cut as

⁶⁰ The Right Reverend David Jung-Hsin Lai, Bishop, Taiwan Episcopal Church, interview by Deborah Brown, Taipei, Taiwan, June 15, 2010.

⁶¹ The Right Reverend Philip Tseng Chi-Hong, Bishop, Methodist Church in the Republic of China, interview by Deborah Brown, Taipei, Taiwan, June 18, 2010.

they once were. Over the years, Taiwan's churches have become more sensitive to identity shifts, which no longer are necessarily directly correlated to pro-unification and pro-independence stances.

Protestant Cross-Strait Comparative Advantage. Although more drive is seen among foreign Protestant evangelicals who proselytize in China,⁶² Taiwan's mainline churches play a discrete role. Protestants in Taiwan have a comparative cross-Strait advantage in publications, training, experience, programming, global networks, and financial resources. They provide support and supplies, such as money, literature, training, clothes, and food, the latter two especially to China's farmers.⁶³

Taiwan holds a "soft power" advantage over Protestants in China as well. Its churches enjoy freedom of religious practice and are not hindered by government harassment in their activities, including their international networking. This serves as an example to China's Protestants, undoubtedly raising the question among them why Taiwanese can pursue their faith unfettered while they cannot. An important element of this advantage is freedom of publication. China's Christians and missionaries who serve them trust the materials that are published in Taiwan and Hong Kong. When mainland Chinese read them, this spreads the Christian message and helps to link people in a cultural network. Protestant publishers in Taiwan believe that their publications are contributing to social education and new social thinking in China, most especially because the literature promotes shared love and mutual care, values of no priority to China's atheistic authorities. The publishers anticipate that, in the long run, their publications may even promote democracy in China, because publications can create a focal point for action. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, there are twenty major Christian publishing houses printing over ten thousand book titles. The government in Beijing permits some 70 percent of these to be shipped into China, as their subjects, such as family values and Christian arts, are perceived as non-threatening⁶⁴; yet even these noncontroversial books can inspire new social outlooks.

Protestant Influence from the China Side. China is particularly wary of cross-Strait Protestant ties for three reasons. First, Chinese leaders have long linked Protestants, like Catholics, to Western imperialism. Because they are

⁶² Hong Kong Christians are better at evangelizing than Taiwan's because of their training. Cheng-Tian Kuo, Professor, Department of Political Science, National Chungchi University, interview by authors, Taipei, Taiwan, June 23, 2010, and Joseph Tseng, General Secretary, Chinese Baptist Convention, Taiwan, interview by Deborah Brown, Taipei, June 17, 2010. Tseng maintains that seminarians in Taiwan spend too much time preparing for pastoral responsibilities and in the library, and not enough time learning to evangelize and in the field.

⁶³ Nan-Chou Su interview.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

very pluralistic in their denominations, it is difficult for officials in Beijing to monitor Protestants whom they have distrusted historically. There are many more unregistered Protestants than members of the state-sanctioned Protestant Three-Self churches, and they belong to large underground networks, spreading beyond the oversight of the government. In general, Protestants are less institutionalized than Catholics, therefore harder for an authoritarian government to control. Second, Protestant churches can be a conduit of liberty, equality, participation, majority rule, and other democratic concepts which could trigger a peaceful evolution away from the party-state. Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin launched strident offensives (e.g., the anti-spiritual pollution campaign of 1982) to keep such Western “decadence” out of China. Paranoia about the effects of Western-introduced Protestantism may have lessened under Hu Jintao, but the government in Beijing believes that, while Buddhists and Taoists can help to further consolidate the regime, Christians can transform it.⁶⁵ Third, permitting interactions between Taiwanese and other foreign Protestant organizations and their Chinese counterparts (especially unregistered house churches) would make it hard for the party-state to justify its restrictions on religionists in Tibet and Xinjiang. For these reasons, the government in Beijing monitors and restricts cross-Strait Christian activities.

Conclusion

There are three distinct patterns of religious ties across the Taiwan Strait for Buddhists, Taoists, and Christians, respectively. First is Taiwan’s private religious-sector-initiated cross-Strait Taoist interactions, to which Chinese governments (especially at the local level) responded attentively, recognizing potential financial benefits and political advantage. Taiwan’s Taoist temples are entrepreneurial, innovative, and free-floating. Like water, their members flow where they want and are not easily contained or managed. There are very low barriers for entrance into Taoist cross-Strait exchanges since the temples are analogous to small business enterprises.

In contrast, the second tie, Buddhist cross-Strait connections, are more official, formal, symmetric, and orderly. The Chinese government has orchestrated cross-Strait activities and interflow, but the responses from Taiwan’s Buddhist community have been measured, and mindful of their broad interests and international operations. Taiwan’s Buddhist community is dominated by five large organizations, accounting for over 60 percent of Buddhist revenue and expenditures on the island (analogous to leading corporations with high percentages of market share). They are well-developed organizationally, financially strong, internationally well-known, and marked by huge followings. These five organizations approach relations with China on a methodical

⁶⁵ Ibid.

basis. Cross-Strait relations may be important, but, with the possible exception of Fo Guang Shan, they do not dominate their worldwide strategies.

In between Taoists and Buddhists are the Christian organizations, the third pattern of ties. In Taiwan, the individual denominations are well-established, and each has its own doctrines and faithful. They are skill- and knowledge-intensive, and fulfill niches in the community (like mid-sized integrated circuit design companies, with relatively well-known brand names). If they venture into China, it is with a specific purpose—location- and project-specific—even in underground mission work. The pattern of cross-Strait Christian interaction is neither “anarchical” nor highly organized. There are officially planned visits from time to time, but also many underground activities in pursuit of mapped objectives.

The Chinese see Taoists ties as a good means for promoting cross-Strait unification. This is because Taiwan is a democracy and the government in Taipei has no way to monitor the private exchanges of individual believers, especially since the cross-Strait direct links have been implemented. However, although the government cannot intervene, some Taiwan officials may be wary of the pull effect of warming Taoist ties. On the China side, cross-Strait Taoist ties are amenable to the government’s policy of control over religion. These ties also have symbolic effect when Taoists travel to mother temples in China, and fulfill the government’s objective of promoting cross-Strait unification. When Taiwan’s temples compete among themselves for status as the legitimate descendents of a mother temple, this serves Beijing’s additional purpose of being in the position to confer favors, reminiscent of China’s former tributary system.

Buddhist links across the Strait at first blush also appear to give leverage to China, but actually this is not so. China has four centuries-old Buddhist mountains, a long Buddhist tradition, and has orchestrated two World Buddhist Forums. Taiwan’s leading Buddhist organizations participated in these gathering. However, Taiwan’s Buddhists pursue humanitarianism, and practice Engaged Buddhism, which incorporates vast social outreach and well-developed doctrine. The followings and contacts of Taiwan’s Buddhist organizations are not just regional, and by no means limited to China. Although Taiwan-based, these Buddhist organizations are global entities. By permitting the co-sponsorship of the 2009 forum, at the very least, Chinese officials acknowledged that Taiwan’s Buddhists have equal footing with counterparts in China.

Christian ties across the Strait do not seem to be leverage for either side. House churches in China and denominations in Taiwan do not have to listen to their respective government. The exception is the Three-Self churches in China, which are under the supervision of the state. Taiwan’s government must permit island Christians to venture into China as they wish. Taiwan churches seek relations beyond the Three-Self churches in order to assist the larger segment of China’s Christian community which is unregistered. By

working with house churches—and most of Taiwan’s Christian denominations do—Taiwan’s Christians show that Taiwan is willing to share its religious experiences and resources, and to extend help where needed. It is possible that by this interaction, China’s Christians are soul-searching as to why Taiwan’s Christians are free to live the Christian experience more fully than they. This speculation places “soft power” on the side of Taiwan’s Christians, at least for now, giving Taiwan a comparative advantage.

