

FREEMAN REPORT



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QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“The Impeccable incident is certainly a troubling indicator that China, particularly in the South China Sea, is behaving in an aggressive, troublesome manner and they’re not willing to abide by acceptable standards of behavior,” **Navy Admiral Timothy Keating**, U.S. Pacific commander, speaking before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 19. The Pentagon reported that on March 7, the U.S. naval ship *Impeccable*, an unarmed survey ship, was “harassed” by “aggressive” Chinese ships in the South China Sea. China has not denied the action but said the *Impeccable* was operating illegally within its special economic zone. While the United States says its ship was in international waters, China claims in entirety the highly disputed South China Sea.

Source: Reuters, March 19, 2009

The *Freeman Report* provides an open forum for individual opinions and commentaries on China. All opinions expressed in the feature essay of the report are those of the author.

Feature Article

RELIGIOUS TRENDS IN CHINA AND THEIR
SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Fenggang Yang

On Easter Sunday 30 years ago (April 8, 1979), a Christian church in the coastal city of Ningbo in Zhejiang was opened for a worship service. That marked the end of the 13-year ban on religion in China. One after another, churches, temples, and mosques that were closed down at the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 were reopened for religious activities.

The reopening of the Ningbo church also marked the beginning of a new era of religious revival. From the 1980s to the 1990s, religions sanctioned by the government steadily revived. Entering the twenty-first century, we see many types of religions thriving. Hundreds of millions of people assert adherence to Buddhism. Daoism-based folk religions have large masses of practitioners. Islam, practiced by 10 of China’s ethnic minorities, has begun to attract converts among the Han people. Tibetan Buddhism is also drawing new converts among Han Chinese in China’s eastern metropolises. Meanwhile, Christianity has been the fastest-growing religion.

The religious diversity in China is greater than many people realize. The central government recognizes only five major religions—Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism—so long as they are under the “patriotic” association of that religion. But underground or unregistered Christian “house churches” and Buddhist “private temples” are common throughout the country. Some local governments have also legalized certain minor religions, including Orthodox Christianity, in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang, Mazu in the southeastern province of Fujian, and Huangdaxian in the southern provinces of Zhejiang and Guangdong. Some ethnic minorities have retained or reclaimed their traditional religions, such as Dongba among the Naxi people in Yunnan and Buluotuo among the Zhuang in Guangxi. Various “new” religions originated in China or abroad, including Yiguan-dao, Mormonism, the Unification church, and Baha’i, which are officially banned, are nonetheless spreading. I have even run into a Jewish rabbi in a provincial capital in eastern China who had attracted Chinese inquirers and aspired to convert millions of Chinese to Judaism.

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In spite of the continuous increase of various religions, the Chinese authorities have maintained a rigid religious policy with a strong preference for atheism at its base. The tenets of this policy were crafted around 1958 when the economic collectivization was completed and central planning enacted. Its fundamental goal was to reduce religion, including eliminating denominations and limiting the number of religious venues. The transition toward a market economy has brought profound social changes to China, however, crippling the effectiveness of the religious policy.

For example, China's once seemingly omnipotent *danwei* (work unit) has weakened its functions of social and political control. The emerging market is exciting and perilous, accompanied by widespread moral corruption, which prompts many individuals to seek a theodicy, or a religious worldview, to put the seemingly chaotic universe into order and seek religious solace. Religion fills the spiritual and social space created by the market economy. Meanwhile, in the increasingly globalized world, international pressures for human rights have significantly tempered the implementation of repressive measures by the control apparatus.

Recently, instead of equally repressing all religions, the regime has taken cautious measures to promote Buddhism, Daoism, folk/popular religions, and Confucianism, in part to counter the rapid increase of Christianity. The China Religious Culture Communication Association (CRCCA), working in the shadow of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), has organized the World Buddhist Forum in 2006, the second one in March 2009, and the International Daodejing Forum in 2007. Yet, neither SARA nor CRCCA has announced any plan to organize or grant permission for similar forums for Christianity or Islam. Equal treatment for legalized religions—a basic concept of the rule of law—does not seem to exist in the minds of Chinese officials. Not surprisingly, many Buddhist and Daoist leaders and believers are not hesitant to sing praises about “the best time of religious freedom in Chinese history.”

As noted above, and despite the application of greater restrictions to its growth, Christianity has been the fastest-rising religion. At the founding of the People's Republic of China 60 years ago, there were less than 3 million Catholics and less than 1 million Protestants in China. After the Cultural Revolution, Catholics remained about 3 million and Protestants increased to about 3 million. According to the published reports of the Chinese government in the mid-1990s, Catholics increased to 4 million

IN THE NEWS

Johannesburg—On March 23, South Africa denied a visa to the Dalai Lama to attend a world peace conference scheduled ahead of the 2010 World Cup. Like the 2008 Beijing Olympics, South Africa views the coming World Cup as a kind of coming-out party and thus keeps the games from being overshadowed by politics. The act has generated sharp criticism from other conference participants, including Nobel peace laureates Desmond Tutu, Frederik De Klerk, and Nelson Mandela, and has led to the postponement of the conference. Many believe that South Africa appears to have chosen commerce over principle, as the country depends heavily on Chinese markets for buying its rich natural resources.

Beijing—The annual meeting of China's National People's Congress (NPC) was held on March 5 to 13. The global financial crisis dominated the nine-day session, with Chinese leaders choosing to use an aggressive fiscal policy to address the economic downturn. China's budget deficit will reach a record high of approximately \$140 billion in 2009. In his annual government work report to the NPC, Premier Wen Jiabao predicted that China's economy would grow at eight percent this year, but he also noted that China's economy would face many challenges.

and Protestants to more than 10 million. Today, estimates vary widely, ranging from 50 million to 130 million Protestants and around 12 million Catholics.

Why Christianity? I have argued that the increasingly globalized market economy under political repression is the most important contextual factor for the large-scale conversion to Christianity in China. For many ordinary Chinese, the foreign origin of Christianity is no longer a problem, as the ideological orthodoxy of Marxism-Leninism is also of foreign origin. Instead of perceiving Christianity as traditional, conservative, or restrictive, many Chinese associate Christianity with the wealthy and democratic West and view Christianity as progressive, liberating, modern, and universal. Some observers point to the breakdown of the healthcare system as an important reason for the conversion toward charismatic Christianity, for such Christian beliefs highlight spiritual healing. But it cannot explain why Christianity has grown

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faster than other religions that also offer spiritual healing. A more important factor is that Christianity provides a new form of group belonging. Within the Christian community that congregates weekly, people express love and care to one another and support individuals in crisis, which often keep people in the group even if the physical healing does not happen. For converts, Christianity is a faith that provides peace, certainty, and liberation amid bewildering market forces and a stifling political atmosphere. Without altering the social structures embedded in the market economy, the official favoritism toward some religions against Christianity is unlikely to alter the trends.

The Chinese authorities worry about a Christianity-instigated “color revolution” conspired by the Western powers. However, the Chinese Christians that I have interviewed are mostly evangelical, and like their counterparts in the United States, are stereotypically apolitical. They want to live a spiritual life for themselves and are fully occupied by saving individual souls, as long as they are left alone to practice their religion. A small but significant number of Christian lawyers have appeared stubbornly contentious in defending the rights of the marginalized people—unemployed factory workers, farmers who lost their farms and houses to the developers backed by corrupt officials, Falungong followers, and so forth. However, it is evident that they have been working within the existing legal framework instead of joining forces for political opposition to the regime. The Christian churches and groups may become a significant part of the emerging civil society but probably only in the Tocquevillean sense of “moral associations.”

Fenggang Yang is associate professor of sociology and director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University.

To send your comments on the feature essay, please e-mail FreemanChair@csis.org.

TRIVIA QUESTION

How many delegates were eligible to participate in the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress in March?

TRIVIA ANSWER

According to the official number, 2,987 delegates were eligible to participate in the second plenary session of the 11th National People’s Congress.

Source: Organization of the National People’s Congress, www.npc.gov.cn/english.

PUBLICATIONS

- *Critical Questions: A “G-2” Summit? Barack Obama and Hu Jintao on the Sidelines of the G-20*, CSIS, March 25, 2009

By **Charles W. Freeman III**, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies

President Barack Obama and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao will meet in London on April 2 on the sidelines of the G-20 meeting. This will be the first meeting between the two leaders, and it highlights the importance of both the United States and China, and of their relationship, in the context of efforts to resolve the global economic crisis. The author answers several key questions on the upcoming meeting. (**Click here for PDF version of the article**)

- “Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate,” in *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and Cooperation in the Developing World*, edited by **Carola McGiffert**, CSIS, March 2009

By **Bonnie S. Glaser**, Senior Associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, and **Melissa E. Murphy**, Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS

While Western scholars have discussed China’s soft power ambitions at length, few commentators have investigated Chinese thinking on soft power. The authors argue there is an ongoing debate in China regarding soft power, and China lacks a comprehensive soft power strategy. While China may eventually look to spread socialist values worldwide, the authors believe that it currently prefers to avoid any confrontation with the West. (**Click here for PDF version of the article.**)

- *Smart Power in U.S.-China Relations: A Report of the CSIS Commission on China*, cochaired by **William S. Cohen** and **Maurice R. Greenberg**; directed by **Carola McGiffert**, CSIS, March 2009

Charles W. Freeman III, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, is a commissioner; **Bonnie S. Glaser**, Senior Associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, and **Melissa E. Murphy**, Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, contributed to the report. (**Click here for PDF version of the article.**)

Publications from the Freeman Chair 2008/2009*

*Please visit our Web site to access archived publications dating back to 2002.

2009

March

- *Critical Questions: A “G-2” Summit? Barack Obama and Hu Jintao on the Sidelines of the G-20*, CSIS, March 25, 2009. By **Charles W. Freeman III**, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies
- “Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate,” in *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and Cooperation in the Developing World*, ed. **Carola McGiffert**, CSIS, March 2009. By **Bonnie S. Glaser**, Senior Associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, and **Melissa E. Murphy**, Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS
- *Smart Power in U.S.-China Relations: A Report of the CSIS Commission on China*, cochaired by **William S. Cohen** and **Maurice R. Greenberg**; directed by **Carola McGiffert**, CSIS, March 2009. **Charles W. Freeman III**, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, is a commissioner; **Bonnie S. Glaser**, Senior Associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, and **Melissa E. Murphy**, Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, contributed to the report.

February

- “Wang Jiarui’s New Year’s Visit to Pyongyang and China’s New Approach to North Korea,” *China Brief*, volume 9 issue 4, Jamestown Foundation, February 20, 2009. By **Bonnie S. Glaser**, Senior Associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, and **Scott Snyder**, Director of the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, Asia Foundation
- “Sino-U.S. Relations: Next 30 Years Will Require Closer Cooperation and Coordination,” *Oriental Morning Post* (in Chinese), February 2, 2009. By **Melissa E. Murphy**, Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS.

January

- “Commentary: Chasing the Currency Dragon,” CSIS, January 28, 2009. By **Charles W. Freeman III**, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS
- “U.S.-China Relations: Ties Solid for Transition, but Challenges Lurk,” *Comparative Connections*, Pacific Forum CSIS, January 2009. By **Bonnie S. Glaser**, Senior Associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS
- “What Hu Jintao Should Expect: Predictions about Obama Administration Policy toward Taiwan,” *PacNet*, no. 1, Pacific Forum CSIS, January 5, 2009. By **Bonnie S. Glaser**, Senior Associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS

2008

October

- *Crafting U.S. Economic Strategy toward Asia: Lessons Learned from 30 Years of Experience*, CSIS Asia Economic Task Force Report, CSIS, October 2008. By **Charles W. Freeman III**, Chairholder, CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies, and **Matthew Goodman**, Managing Director, Stonebridge International

September

- *China’s Rise: Challenges and Opportunities*, Peterson Institute for International Economics/CSIS, September 2008. By **C. Fred Bergsten**, Director, Peterson Institute for International Economics, **Charles W. Freeman III**, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, **Nicholas R. Lardy**, Senior Fellow, Peterson Institute for International Economics, and **Derek J. Mitchell**, Senior Fellow for Asia, International Security Program, CSIS

Conferences and Events

■ *March 12: A Luncheon Honoring H.E. Yang Jiechi, China's Minister of Foreign Affairs*

CSIS and the U.S.-China Business Council hosted a luncheon for **H.E. Yang Jiechi**, China's minister of foreign affairs. Minister Yang discussed a host of security and economic issues in the context of bilateral relations.

■ *March 11: China's Soft Power in the Developing World*

CSIS scholars presented findings from their latest publication, *China's Soft Power and Implications for the United States: Cooperation and Competition in the Developing World*. **Bonnie S. Glaser**, senior associate, Freeman Chair of China Studies, and **Melissa E. Murphy**, fellow, Freeman Chair of China Studies, discussed their chapter in the publication entitled, "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate."

■ *March 6: A Conversation on U.S.-China Relations*

CSIS hosted a conversation on U.S.-China relations between **Dr. Wang Jisi**, dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, and **Ambassador John D. Negroponte**, vice chairman of McLarty Associates. The discussion was moderated by **Bonnie S. Glaser**, senior associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS.

■ *March 4: U.S.-China Smart Power Commission Report Rollout*

In the summer of 2008, CSIS president and CEO **John J. Hamre** asked **William Cohen** and **Maurice (Hank) Greenberg** to chair the U.S.-China Smart Power Commission, designed to apply the successful framework developed by the CSIS Commission on Smart Power to the U.S.-China relationship. The bipartisan commission includes national leaders from the government, private sector, nongovernmental organizations, and academia. The commission released a concrete set of policy recommendations for both the Obama administration and the 111th Congress on how the United States can work with China to bring to bear their respective soft power to promote the global public good, while simultaneously ensuring the protection of U.S. interests.

If you would like to be added to the *Freeman Report* listserv, please e-mail FreemanChair@csis.org or visit <http://www.csis.org/china/>.

FREEMAN FACTS

Chinese Defense Spending

1. On March 4, China announced that its annual defense spending will officially increase by 14.9 percent to \$70 billion in 2009.
2. The budget increase is slightly less than previous years. In 2008, the military budget rose by 17.6 percent, and in 2007 it rose by 17.8 percent, the largest increase in a decade.
3. The increase marks the 19th double-digit increase in defense spending in two decades.
4. China's defense spending equals 1.4 percent of its GDP. U.S. defense spending is about 4 percent of GDP.
5. This year, defense spending accounts for 6.3 percent of China's overall budget, a slight decrease over last year.

Source: Associated Press, Xinhua

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FREEMAN CHAIR IN CHINA STUDIES

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Melissa Murphy, Fellow
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