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Zhe Ji

## **Non-institutional Religious Re-composition among the Chinese Youth<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:**

*This article seeks answers to the perplexing phenomenon: the increasing widespread youth religiosity in contemporary China. How is it possible for young people to acquire such religiosity in a society where the state vigorously opposes religion through its policy and practice? Using data from my own and others' field observation and investigations, I show that in the past two decades, religious representations and practices have filtered to the Chinese through a variety of secular and non-institutional forms in the widening social and cultural space. These new reformulations of the religious traditions in turn have provided the youth with a wealth of symbolic framework from which they can select according to their personal needs. To some extent, the strict state control of the religious institutions contributes ironically to the thriving growth of the individual, non-institutional and sectarian forms of the religiosity among the youth in contemporary China.*

**Key words:** *China, youth, modernity, religious re-composition, tradition*

*L'auteur cherche des réponses à un phénomène troublant : la religiosité croissante et répandue des jeunes de la Chine contemporaine. Comment est-il possible pour ces jeunes d'acquérir une telle religiosité dans une société où l'Etat s'oppose vigoureusement à la religion dans ses politiques et ses pratiques ? En utilisant des données propres et issues du champ d'observation et d'investigation d'autres chercheurs, l'auteur montre que pendant les deux dernières décennies les représentations et pratiques religieuses se sont infiltrées parmi les Chinois à travers une grande variété de formes séculières et non-institutionnelles des traditions religieuses ont, à leur tour, fourni aux jeunes une richesse de références symboliques, parmi lesquelles ils peuvent effectuer une sélection selon leurs besoins personnels. Dans une certaine mesure, le contrôle étatique strict des institutions religieuses contribue ironiquement à la croissance vigoureuse de formes individuelles, non-institutionnelles et sectaires de religiosité parmi les jeunes de la Chine contemporaine.*

**Mots-clés :** *Chine, jeunesse, modernité, re-composition religieuse, tradition*

## Introduction

One of the most remarkable phenomena in contemporary China is the growing interest in religion among the young people, who grew up in a communist regime and were inoculated with atheism. But so far, the studies on the phenomenon are mostly concentrated on an etiological diagnosis: why the youth are so interested in religion?<sup>2</sup> Certainly, this is always an important question to be answered. However, in my opinion, before asking "why," it is necessary to ask at first "how": *how is it possible* that the young people become interested in religion in a country where the political power consistently enforces anti-religious policies? As everyone knows, the Chinese government makes unremitting efforts to stigmatize religion, to exclude religion from public life, and to isolate religion from the youth by means of policy, of law, and of education. For example, even today, in the official school textbooks, we can scarcely find any trace of the Confucian, the Taoist and the Buddhist classics that constitute the main foundation of traditional Chinese culture. What the youth learn at school are only some arbitrary negative judgments about religion. Given such restrictions, *how* can religious ideas and practices reach the youth?

To answer the question of "how", one possible assumption is that the young people's religious interests were spurred by the restoration of the institutionalized religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, etc.) and the return of the communal religions or organized popular cults (the cult of the lineage, the cults of the local divinities, etc.) in recent years. Yes, it is possible, but only to a certain degree. We should recognize that all kinds of religions have developed fast in China since the country embarked on the policy of "reform and opening up". Many monasteries and churches have been renovated and reopened; the number of the clerical staff and the converts keeps increasing.<sup>3</sup> The popular cults and familial rituals reappear in the villages (Dean, 2003). In comparison with Mao's era, these reactions to the suppression of religion over the past twenty years have been very impressive to the observers. However, although the constraints on religious life are a little relaxed today in China, the government's policy to restrain and isolate religion remains unchanged. Today, just as twenty years ago, the popular cults are officially forbidden; the activities organized by the religious institutions are confined to the walls of monasteries or churches; the religious are not allowed to appear on radio or television unless the Chinese Communist Party needs them to express their support to its policy; the publications of the religious organizations are subject to approval of the government; most of them are not allowed to be sold outside the religious sites. Therefore, generally speaking, as before, there is not much possibility for the youth to get to know the religious ideas and practices directly and firstly from the religious institutions.

Another assumption is that the family plays a decisive role in the transmission of religious knowledge and belief to the youth. Yes, it is true in some cases. But we almost can be sure that the influence of the family on children in regard to religion has been to a large extent weakened, even though, as with the other aspects of Chinese

contemporary religion, we lack the systematic research and general data on this issue. In fact, at least in the urban areas, most of the Chinese families have lost their function as the units of cult after the years of totalitarianism founded on the ideology of anti-religion. The memorial tablets of ancestors have disappeared from the house because ancestral worship is considered as superstition. The parents today who have received their education during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) can't teach their children much about traditional religious belief, because they themselves don't know much about it. Besides, China's modernization movement also changes family relationships. In particular, the autonomous individualism promotes a spiritual independence of the youth from the older generation. According to a survey I conducted in 1994 at a Buddhist monastery, only 5 interviewees among 115 young persons who were gathered there for a summer camp of Chan (Zen) thought that their initial interests in the Buddhism was due to their family's influence.

Now we get back to the question: *how* can a young person in today's China, particularly in the cities -- who has little chance to participate in the ritual of the cult, gets injected with dogmatic critiques of religion at school, and has almost never been a witness of any religious events in the public sphere -- get in touch with religion? In my opinion, to find out the key to answering this question relating to modern religiosity, it's necessary to distill the meaningful facts from the scene of the social and cultural transformation rather than only observe directly the matters in the religious field (Hervieu-Léger, 1993: 147-162). As we know, despite the state's efforts of secularization, the cultural and social life of Chinese is deeply influenced by their traditional religions and beliefs. So once the people have a relative freedom in cultural and social life, some religious signs and representations may naturally appear and circulate in the secular cultural and social spaces without the intervention of the religious authorities. In recent years, although the religious institutions and their activities are still strictly controlled by the government, the things concerned with religion appear very frequently at the cultural level. For instance, in the films, in the TV movies and in the popular literatures, there are often the charismatic figures of the Buddhists and Taoist monks; the doctrines of Buddhism, of Taoism, and of Confucianism are expressed by the words and the behaviors of the heroes. The temples, the monasteries and the churches that are often situated in the magnificent sites become naturally the privileged destinations of tourism. The religious talismans such as the bracelets and necklaces which are engraved with Buddhist signs, the little statuettes of Bodhisattva in jade, the crosses and the prayer beads, are so loved by the youth as an object of fashion even though they don't have a religious faith. Furthermore, when the country begins to be economically open to the world, it can't get rid of all the religious elements in the foreign cultural or material products and information that it receives. So western astrology becomes an important content of the popular magazines and Internet sites. Christmas and Thanksgiving Day are more and more popular among the urban youth along with other western festivals such as Halloween, April Fool's Day and Saint Valentine's Day... In fact, the religious manifestations in the various cultural and social spaces may affect considerably the

young people's attitude towards the religion. The present text will attempt to illustrate how the religion is re-composed among the Chinese youth in such a non-institutionalized manner. I would like, in this respect, to present at first some sociologically significant facts<sup>4</sup>.

### **The rewritten sacred texts: a new access to the religious classics**

It is not easy for a non-Christian to find a Bible in China where the sale and the distribution of the Bible are forbidden outside the churches. Nevertheless, it doesn't mean that all the Chinese living in continental China are ignorant of the Bible. In fact, all kinds of publications about the "Bible stories and biblical characters" are available in libraries and bookshops. Such books are sold very well. One of these "Bible Stories" even disseminated for a million copies (Li and Liu, 2000: 23).

The case of the Bible is not exceptional. Since the end of 1980s, a lot of religious classic texts were edited, annotated, translated from the classic written language (*wenyan*) into the current spoken language (*baihua*), or rewritten. The cause of this rearrangement of the classics is complex, but its effect on the diffusion of religious information is obvious. Firstly, through this treatment, the sacred text becomes an object of historic study and a material of literature. The distribution of the religious texts is separated from the religious apparatus and becomes a cultural activity realized by the market. So, these reproductions of religious texts are not any more considered as "religious publications" subjected to severe control. Secondly, after a century of anti-traditionalist and anti-religious movements, Chinese culture met with a profound mutation. For the youth of today, it is relatively difficult to read the classics because of their antique expression and style. In this context, although the reinterpretation and the edition of the religious texts in simplified Chinese characters may have an effect of desacralization, they insure a great facility of access to the classics<sup>5</sup>.

For example, according to a survey I made in 1994 at a university in Shanghai, about one hundred students who were interested in Buddhism indicated in all more than sixty titles of books on Buddhism that they had read. But in these sixty books, only six were the originals of Buddhist classics. Moreover, these six texts were mentioned by only 20 persons. In other words, most of the students had read only popular adaptations of Buddhism (Ji et al., 1995, 1996).

Among these indicated books, it was a particular rewriting of the history of the Chan-Buddhism that was the most favorite of the readers. It appeared in the form of comic stripes: *Chan shuo* (Words of Chan) of Tsai Chih-chung. By means of humorous cartoon drawings and of simple notes, this small book explains the complicated history and thoughts of the Chan in lively pictures and language.

The comic strips of Tsai are not confined to the subject of Buddhism. He published a "Series of comic strips of the Chinese traditional classics". Some volumes of this series are based on Confucian classics such as *The Grate learning (Daxue)*, *The Analects (Lunyu)*, *The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)*, and *Mencius (Mengzi)*, and Taoist classics such as *Daodejing* or *Zhuangzi*, and even the adaptations of the tales

about spirits and devils. All these works are very accessible and so become very popular among the young people. Just between 1988 and 1991, these comics sold 7.6 million copies in Mainland China (Sun and He, 1993: chapter 5). According to Sun and He (1993), when some researchers conducted a study on the reading interests of youth, the young readers responded to their questions in this way: "The Confucian classics were very far from me. I had even some disgust for them. But I eventually was able to understand these difficult discourses. It began with the comic strips of M. Tsai from Taiwan"; "I was attracted by *Laozi shuo* (Words of Laozi) of Mr. Tsai after a glance at this book. The classic of the *Daodejing* is not any more an esoteric text for me. It became a tangible thought." Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that the comic strips played an important role in the reactivation of the interest of the young Chinese for the traditional religious texts.

### **Return of the Chan: from a cultural fervor to a religious reconstruction**

Another interesting phenomenon, which is correlated with the rearrangement of the religious resources, is the "fervor of the Chan", which appeared since the end of 1980s among the young Chinese intellectuals. According to incomplete statistics, the articles published about Chan-Buddhism during the last two decades are at least 12 times as many as that between 1949 and 1980; the titles of books dealing specifically with the Chan, 300 times. In these last twenty years, all sorts of publications on the religions have increased quickly, but the quantitative growth of the studies on Chan is particularly remarkable (Huang, 2002; Wang, 1995).

"Chan" refers to one of the most important branches of Chinese Buddhism. This term is in reality used sometimes as a synonym of "Buddhism" in China. But in the 1980s, the revival of the Chan had nothing to do with the Buddhism as a practiced religion. In fact, it was part of the cultural phenomenon called the "fervor of traditional culture" that succeeded the "fervor of Western thought". The rediscovery of Chinese traditional culture was actually a result of the attempt of Chinese intellectuals to rehabilitate the broken tradition and to define an appropriate Chinese identity in the process of globalization. In the opinion of some researchers (Gao et al., 1996: 130), the fervor of Chan was initiated by the Chinese translation of *The Tao of Physics* of Fritjof Capra (1975; first Chinese version: 1984). Some texts and ideas of D.T. Suzuki about Chan quoted by the author of this book interested the university students and the young intellectuals of the time. Regardless of the actual influence of this book, the contribution of the works of Suzuki to the return of the Chan in China is indisputable. From the middle of the 1980s, his works, whose original purpose was to propagate Chan (Zen) in the West, are successively translated and published in China. The readers rediscover the fact that the Chan is a part of the Chinese tradition. They also learn that the Chan is relatively popular in Japan and in Western countries which are the models of modernization for China. So on the one hand, the Chan can be of use as a resource for Chinese intellectuals to reconstruct their special cultural identity; on the other hand, it seems that this reference to the tradition is not in contradiction

with their desire for modernity.

Thereby, from the beginning, the interest of Chinese intellectuals in the Chan is anchored on a historic and cultural reconstruction rather than a religious reconstruction. The Chan is considered as an object of historic, philosophic and linguistic studies. Many writings come into the world to analyze the relations between the Chan, the literature and the art. The Chan is redefined as something more or less independent of Buddhism. It reappears as a sort of "culture", "philosophy" or "lifestyle" rather than a religion. Nevertheless, the religious eradication of the Chan is not without any advantage for its reintegration in the social sphere. In fact, it is due to the ambiguity of its definition that the Chan may be accepted again in a society where the religion is conceived as a negative matter. For instance, a student association whose name contains the term "Chan" is authorized by the university, while it is officially forbidden to form a group containing the word "Buddhist".

But after all, it is impossible to separate completely the "Chanology" (*Chanxue*) that is the Chan studies, the Chan contemplation (*Chanding*) as a technique of "salvation", and the Chan school (*Chanxue*) as a branch of Chinese Buddhism. Consequently, the return of the Chan arouses indirectly the interest of the youth in Buddhism. Certain Chinese Buddhist elites became aware of this novelty. At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, by considering the fervor of the Chan as an opportunity to revive Chinese Buddhism, they pointed out that "the Chan is the only bridge susceptible to connecting Buddhism and modern society" (Chen, 1996: 5). To satisfy the actual needs of the youth, they reinterpreted the Chan tradition and invented new methods to attract them (Ji, 2005). Certain temples published periodicals on the Chan. They held conferences to which the university students were invited. The "Chan summer camps" were organized for the young people. With these efforts, the participation of the youth in Chan-Buddhist practice increased strongly. In this way, the fervor of the Chan, which is originally a secular cultural phenomenon, finally created a dynamic of the re-composition of Chinese Buddhism.

### ***Qigong*: bodily technique of therapy or sectarianism supported by the government**

The influence of the return of the Chan is relatively limited to the young elites who possess certain cultural capital. But another phenomenon that relates to the religious involves all walks of the Chinese during the last twenty years. It presents itself as a kind of "gymnastic": *qigong*.

We can translate *qi* as "breath", and *gong* as "effort". In an extremely simplified way, we can say that *qigong* is a collection of skills aiming at controlling one's spirit, breath and behavior to achieve a state of physical and mental well-being. At the level of bodily technique, we can find the origin of *qigong* in the *yangshengshu* (art to maintain life) that has a history of more than two thousand years. However, *qigong* is also a new thing. In the past twenty years, the *qigong* evolved at first from a kind of professional medical skill to a method of therapy of the masses. And then it was

transformed into a vehicle of religious symbols and values, and even became an avatar of popular sectarianism (Palmer, 2003).

At the end of 1970s, *qigong* became a popular practice that we could see everywhere in public gardens and at squares. Little by little, appear more and more "great masters" of *qigong* who create numerous new lineages. Many magic or religious notions and practices are also resumed by *qigong*. For example, some of the followers believe that their *qigong* masters have "exceptional functions" (*teyi gongneng*): the capacity to prognosticate, to induce a motion by the thought. The water or the tea in which a *qigong* master exuded his energy is called "information water" (*xinxi shui*) or "information tea" (*xinxi cha*). These are regarded as cure-alls. Furthermore, many schools of *qigong* try to make themselves credible by borrowing the Taoist or Buddhist symbols and terms. In this manner, they tend to take advantage of the legitimacy capital of the traditional religions. Certain masters invent the legends to form their charisma. Others promise their followers a paranormal power and even salvation... In brief, *qigong* embodies the religious representation, the divinatory discourses, the magic practices and the sectarian organizations into its therapeutic knowledge and psychosomatic exercises.

In this way, sometimes the *qigong* may be used for forming a sect. Millions of Chinese adhere to the various organizations of *qigong*. A lot of them believe in the supernatural power of their master and consider their practice of *qigong* as a way of salvation. On the other hand, some lineages of *qigong* declare that their techniques are inspired by Buddhism or Taoism. They are favorable to these religions. To a certain extent, *qigong* thus introduces its followers to traditional religion.

A lot of young persons practice *qigong* in China. There are associations of the students of *qigong* in many universities, including the most prestigious. One student of a university of traditional medicine described to me in 1995 the scene that he saw every morning on the campus where he lived: "Behind each big tree, there is a person who exercises the *qigong*". According to the survey I conducted in 1994 at a Buddhist monastery that I mentioned, nearly 70 % of more than one hundred young persons who were interested in Buddhism have had the experience of *qigong*. Some of them recognized that it was *qigong* that had aroused their interest in Buddhism.

Another very interesting phenomenon in the evolution of *qigong* is the powerful support of the Chinese government for it. Indeed, some leading cadres of the communist party contributed to the birth of the modern *qigong*. Many of the old leaders of the party always believed that *qigong* may allow them to have long life. But more important, the Chinese government considered, in the years 80's-90's, *qigong* as a special "scientific" means for the modernization of the country. The abstract reformulation of the *qigong* in materialist terms and the concrete character of alleged physical effects convinced a lot of people that *qigong* is scientific. Certain politicians and scientists actively supported the "research" on *qigong* to improve the level of public health. It was also considered as a question of leading China to the first rank in the field of "somatic science" with its "traditional heritage". Some people even had the ambition to exploit the "exceptional function" of the *qigong* masters for military



purpose. That's why the organizations of *qigong* were allowed to expand and to carry on their activities in public places. The government even organized the "scientific study" of *qigong* and protected it against the critics. All these form a sharp contrast with the policies towards traditional religions and the popular cults. As a social fact, *qigong* reveals not only the complexity of the Chinese religious phenomenon, but also the complexity of the relations between the religion and the Chinese state<sup>6</sup>.

### **Spirit of plate: a game of divination in schoolyards**

Since the 1990s, in the big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Nanjing, the "game" of the "spirit of plate" (*diexian*) has been very popular in the universities and high schools. In fact, this game is a kind of collective practice for invoking a spirit with a small plate. Normally, the invoked spirit is the being of a deceased. It is supposed to know not only the past, but also the future of each participant in the scene.<sup>7</sup>

Here is how the game works. In the evening or at night, find a quiet room. There should be several persons including at least one girl. Take one small plate, turn it over and mark a red arrow from its center to its edge. Find a big piece of white paper; draw at the center of the paper a *yinyangyu* (the symbol of *yin* and *yang*) of the same size as the plate, so the plate can cover it. Sometime, they may also draw a *bagua* (the Eight Diagrams) around the *yinyangyu*. Then, write the possible answers to the questions that the participants would like to raise to the spirit: for example, "yes" and "no", "good" and "bad", the names of twelve *shengxiao*<sup>8</sup>, the names of four seasons, certain surnames, the numbers 0-9, etc. When everything is ready, all the participants put their index finger on the plate, then pray at the same time: "Please come, spirit of plate. Please come to talk with us". If the plate begins moving, it means that a spirit presents. You can then communicate with it as with a person. You can ask it the questions about the past to test its credibility before asking for information about the future. To answer the question, the plate moves, turns and stops "automatically", thus the arrow on the plate indicates one or several signs written on the paper beforehand. It is the person oneself who interprets the answer and guesses the exact meaning of the indication of the spirit. To finish, all the participants should ask in common the spirit to go back. For example, they say: "spirit of plate, thank you for informing us of all that. Please leave". If the plate returns to the center of the paper and does not move any more, it means that the spirit was well dismissed.

Actually, in the game of the spirit of plate, it is not simply the "spirit" which is invoked, but also the Chinese traditional vision of cosmos. It is impossible to understand the complex implications of this game without resorting to the traditional cosmology. We ask the spirit to foresee the future, because according to the popular belief, a person after his death becomes a being capable of knowing everything in time. The contact between the living and the dead is possible, but must be achieved by some rituals. The *yinyangyu* and the *bagua* are drawn on the paper because they are the symbols of the order of the cosmos in the Taoist and Chinese popular beliefs. They may have a particular power to link this world and the beyond. It would be

better to proceed to the invocation at night, because the beings of the world of the death do not like the light. According to Chinese classification, as the feminine, the earth, and the shadow, the being of the death belongs to the category of *yin*. The *yin* opposes the category of *yang* that is the principle of the male, the sky, the light, etc. That is why there should be at least one girl for the invocation; otherwise, the atmosphere penetrated by pure *yang* will prevent the spirit from appearing. Moreover, during the invocation, nobody is allowed to have on him a rosary or talismans that could frighten the spirit. If the spirit is not indeed dismissed (the sign is that the plate does not return to the center of the paper), the participants of the invocation risk to be possessed or to be struck by misfortune... In brief, all the symbols, the discourses, the rules and the prohibitions in the invocation refer to certain traditional beliefs.

Besides the spirit of plate, the students also enjoy invoking the "spirit of pen", the "spirit of chopsticks", and the "spirit of coin" so called according to the materiel of the medium. As with the invocations of spirits, some other forms of divination based on astrology, on the interpretation of the blood type or on the *shengxiao*, are also in vogue now in schools. In universities' Internet forums, we can find a quantity of messages that concern the invocation of the spirit of plate. It seems that the youth are still heirs of the traditional cosmology even though with a probabilistic attitude. According to an inquiry completed in 1998 in Beijing (Li and Liu, 2000: 122, 125), among the youth from 16 to 35 years old, 7.1 % believe in the existence of ghosts and gods (*guishen*); 23.1 % think that it is possible. At the same time, 22.3 % of them believe in "fate" (*mingyun*), and 34.5 % believe in it to a certain extent. As we know, the *guishen* and the *mingyun* are just two fundamental categories of Chinese popular belief.

However, although the vision of cosmos that is incarnated in the invocation of the spirit of plate is traditional, the manner of practicing this invocation contains something new. Unlike the traditional invocation, in this "game" of the young people there is no role of the professional diviner. So there is no authority legitimized by the tradition or by the supernatural capacity that interprets the result of the divination. Each one can play the part of the magician with his/her friends at home. The authenticity of the cosmological order is not an imposition. In fact, it is validated only by the subjective understanding of the individual experience and by the exchange of witnesses. Besides, the technique of the invocation is not secret any more. It is spread orally between friends or by Internet. This new practice of the divination corresponds indeed to certain characteristics of the life of the youth: it reflects their increasing uncertainties, their individual autonomous tendency, as well as the organization of their social interactions in small group. Furthermore, the invocation of a spirit is considered as a "game". Naturally, by saying that it is about a game, the young people try to not worry their professors and their parents. But it is true that the invocation of the spirit of plate may be amusing. Quite as other games, the practice of the invocation is both easy and intense, both relaxed and serious. Everybody can participate in it if he/she wants. But all the participants must observe the rules of game, anyone who offends them risks to be punished. It is necessary to play conscientiously,

but the result is not very important. Very often, the students do the divination just for a more or less mysterious experience of enjoyment, of fear, of anxiety and of solidarity<sup>9</sup>.

In China, the temples of the popular cults were almost all destroyed in the urban areas; the service of the divination is officially illegal as an activity of the “feudal superstitions” (*fengjian mixin*). But through a small game, the traditional vision of cosmos is well revived in the new conditions. Although the official media and the school authorities see in the invocation of the spirit of plate a “superstitious” demonstration, they can only criticize it as “absurd”. After all, how can we forbid a simple students’ game?

### **Christmas: festival of the individual and consumption of modern elite**

Hundreds of young persons press about each other in front of the gate of a Catholic church encircled by policemen. Though it is impossible to enter the church, these young persons do not leave. Finally, the mass ends and the door is open to let people inside the church go out. Then “bang”! The door is closed as soon as the last person crosses the threshold. With the fascination of those who have witnessed the mass, the young people who waited outside turn to those who have just gone out, they ask them: what took place inside?

It was a real scene in Beijing, at the Christmas Eve of 2001 (Bobin, 2001). These last years, a crowd of young people goes to the churches for the mass of December 24th. According to an inquiry realized in a church at the Chinese capital in 1997 (Li and Liu, 2000: 22, 228), numerous students of 39 universities and a lot of middle school students were present at the mass of Christmas. Generally, some big churches of Beijing receive thousands of visitors in the evening of December 24th, the greater part of these visitors are not Christian. Sometimes, they have to queue for several hours before going into the church (Li and Liu, 2000: 162-174).

For the urban Chinese youth, the mass is only one activity among the others where to spend their Christmas. They send cards, exchange presents, and organize parties. However, their recent passion for Christmas can’t be explained by belief. According to a survey done by [www.sina.com.cn](http://www.sina.com.cn) -- one of the most important Chinese online media – at Christmas in 2002, 63.89% among the 18 112 persons who answered the inquiry thought that the festival of Christmas was “only an occasion to relax”; 17.85% thought that this festival was “a fashion.”<sup>10</sup> In my opinion, it is rather about the rising individualism of the youth on the one hand, and the culture of consumption that develops in China in the context of the globalization on the other hand.

First of all, it is necessary to underline the difference between Christmas and the traditional or political festivals and holidays in China. The Chinese traditional festivals function in principle for strengthening familial unity and for consolidating community integration, such as the *Chunjie*<sup>11</sup>, the *Qingming*<sup>12</sup> and the *Zhongqiujie*<sup>13</sup>. The political holidays aim at staging the power of the regime and its dominant ideology; for example, the May Day and the National Day. In contrast with these two

types of festivals, Christmas is not a festival that we “have to” celebrate in China. Doubtless, Christmas is a kind of festival very familial and obligatory in the West. But after its importation in China, it has become a festival for the youth to enjoy themselves, because there is no authority and custom which define how the celebration should proceed. The youth may go out to dance, to eat Western-style food, to take a cafe with their lover, to spend all night in the cinema, or to visit a church. In one word, the decision belongs to the individual. Freed from the familial, political or scholastic frame, the young Chinese find there an occasion to celebrate a festival in their own way.

Besides, Christmas is also a festivity of consumption for the young city-dwellers and the new young elites of the middle class in China. The commercial promotions always prelude the celebration of Christmas. From the middle of December, almost all the shop windows are newly decorated; there are Christmas trees everywhere; Santa Clauses appear in front of the shops to attract the attention of the passers-by... All these efforts are not in vain. The young people buy the presents and go to the restaurant to order from the Christmas menu. They are free to spend their money during these days, because Christmas has become a symbol of “western modern civilization”. Indeed, for many Chinese young persons, the “western” is still synonymous with “modern”. So in China, the consumption of Christmas is more or less considered as an expression of the modern sensibility, a demonstration of the superior taste and a confirmation of the identity of elite. They believe that Christmas is a universal festival of the modern world.

Although for the Chinese, Christmas is essentially a secular festival, its influence on the relation between them and Christianity is not trivial. As a foreign religion, Christianity remains relatively distant from the life of the Chinese. Moreover, for some historic and political reasons,<sup>14</sup> Christianity is sometimes more controlled by the Chinese government than the other religions. In this context, Christmas is almost the only occasion for Christianity to appear as such in the public space. Without Christmas, the Christian symbols would not reach the school and the shops; the knowledge concerning Christianity could not interest the media, and there would not be so many young persons who go to mass. Certainly, most of the youth visit the churches at Christmas because of a simple curiosity. However, it allows them to have a first meeting with the Christianity that the young Chinese had ignored for a long time.

## **Conclusion**

Within limited pages, I tried to draw in broad outline some non-institutional ways in which the religious representations and practices may reach the youth in contemporary China. It is evident that the analysis of each case should be deepened, and some topics have not been highlighted. But for the moment, it is enough to help us to reflect on the complex logic of the religious reconstruction in post-Maoist China.

In principle, it is through the control of the religious institutions that the Chinese

government tries to regulate the religious life of its people. Only five institutionalized religions - Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism - are recognized by the government as legal. All the other religious beliefs and popular cults are considered as "feudal superstitions" to be demolished. For the five institutional religions, their organizations are subjected to the surveillance of the government at the levels both national and local. At the same time, as I have mentioned, to restrain the development of religion, the political power tries its best to limit the publicization of religious activities, and to prevent the dissemination of religious ideas. Therefore, on the one hand, the legal religious practices of the Chinese are essentially limited to the frame of the five institutional religions; on the other hand, these five religions are strictly isolated from the public space. Nevertheless, since the "reform and opening up," with the development of the market economy and the relative liberalization of the society except in the political field, the economic, cultural and social activities of the Chinese become much more enriched and diversified. So it is henceforth possible that we find the religious symptoms of "high modernity" (Hervieu-Léger, 1993: 243-245) in China: the explosion of "the religious" outside of the religious institutions by means of varied secular, cultural and social activities. As we have seen, religious classics return once again into the horizon of the Chinese as an object of literature, of art, or of scientific studies; the religious or magic cosmology may be expressed in the bodily practices or in the games; the interest in religion may be encouraged by commerce, the desire to have "modern" life and the rising expectation about individual autonomy... Thus, religion (in a broad sense) manifests itself in a surreptitious way and exercises a considerable influence on the mentality and the behavior of today's Chinese. The return of the religion in a diffused, non-institutional and secularized manner is not a consequence of the restoration of the institutionalized religions. On the contrary, it is the former that creates a dynamic of this restoration. Essentially, if there is a religious revival in contemporary China, it is not due to the favor of the "religious freedom policies" of the government, but rather because of the loss of efficiency of the government's policies to regulate the people's religious life. That is to say, the institutional religions are still in the hands of the government, but the government can't get rid of all the new religious manifestations in the secular life space. To some degree, it is just the absolute control of the institutional religions exercised by the government that favors ironically the flourish of an individual and sectarian religiosity.

In this context, the religious or para-religious signs, discourses and knowledge diffused in the social and cultural spaces constitute a stock of symbolic references available to the youth. Without direct intervention of the religious institutions, the selection, the usage and the interpretation of these references are left to the individual according to his own desire, habits and expectations, or simply to his occasional pleasure. Here the religious symbolism, the religious practice, the religious identity and the religious institution may be separable from each other. Thus, it is possible that the young people use the religious symbolism and participate in religious activities without belief; and it is also possible that the youth people's religious interests were

spurred in an indirect way by some non-religious motives.

In brief, the religious reconstruction in China is not a simple return to the past. It is rather an experimental process, in which the religion detours the state's control by inventing its new cultural and social expressions based on the possibilities created by the current modernization of the country. That's why certain characteristics of modernity, such as secularization, individualization and globalization, which are normally the dissolvent factors for the religion, may become paradoxically constructive factors for the resurgence of religion in actual Chinese society. So the research on the religious condition of the Chinese youth should not limit itself to the recognized institutionalized religions, or to people's search for meaning with explicit faith. Only by widening our research horizon and by revising our image of Chinese religion can we discover and understand the new religious facts in contemporary China.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is written based on my paper in Chinese: "Dangdai zhongguo qingnian de zongjiao shenghuo tiaojian, jianlun zhongguo zongjiao de fei zhiduxing chongjian" [The Religious condition of Chinese youth: a study on the non-institutional religious reconstruction in contemporary China], in *Xuanzang foxue yanjiu* [Hsuan Chuang Buddhist Study], (2005) 2: 217-235.

<sup>2</sup> Very often, the studies on the religious condition of the youth in contemporary China resort to a simplified functionalism that explicates the phenomenon by the theory of compensator, or sum up ambiguously the reasons of the religious revival in question as the "impact of market economy", the "growing contacts with the western culture", etc.

<sup>3</sup> For an official point of view of these aspects in English, cf. Ye (2001), general director of the "Bureau of Religious Affairs under the State Council" of China.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, the following observations will not be limited to "religion" in terms of its strict meaning (if its strict meaning exists). What we will bring to light involves the facts of the religion, of the magic, of the superstition, of the spirituality, of the sect, etc. Indeed, a description of the exact religious observance based on a "perfect" definition of the Chinese religion is not the purpose of this text. I think the most important at the moment is to widen our research view so as to discover the new facts.

<sup>5</sup> In the perspective of "longue durée", this rewriting of the religious texts may be considered as a characteristic of the "secularisation". But precisely this practice of secularisation may contribute to the re-mobilization of the Chinese religious memory in actual "conjuncture" without clashing with the official ideology. For these facts, as for other observations in the present work, it is necessary to contextualise them when we try to understand their sociological meaning.

<sup>6</sup> For a deep analysis of the *qigong*, and in particular of its modern history, of its complex relation with the Chinese government, Cf. Palmer (2005). In April 1999, the *Falungong* movement, which is a sect under the name of *qigong*, organized a demonstration in front of the Chinese central government in Beijing. This demonstration touched off a cruel repression that influenced also the other organizations of *qigong*. The honeymoon between the *qigong* and the state so came to an end. For the Chinese government's policies and practices on *Falungong* and other *qigong* after this event, cf. Chen (2003).

<sup>7</sup> There are few studies that concern the invocation of the spirit of plate. For a study in psychological perspective on this subject in Taiwan, cf. Soong (1996; 2001). My analysis is essentially based on the interviews with some Chinese students from Beijing in 2003.

<sup>8</sup> 12 symbolic animals associated with 12-year cycle used to denote the year of a person's birth in Chinese tradition.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, the game and the religious rite have some very interesting common features. Cf. Huizinga (1986); Wunenburger (1977).

<sup>10</sup> This inquiry is a part of a special investigation about Christmas and the Chinese urban youth, cf. <http://cul.sina.com.cn/view/xmas/index.html>. There are a series of reports on this issue at the same site in which we may find certain very interesting information.

<sup>11</sup> The Spring Festival as the beginning of a Chinese new year that a Chinese should pass with his/her family, his/her relatives and the local community.

<sup>12</sup> The festival for worshipping at ancestral graves.

<sup>13</sup> The Mid-autumn Festival for the family reunion and for enjoying a full moon.

<sup>14</sup> For example, to the Chinese Communist Party, the Christian missionary work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is considered as a part of the imperialist aggression, the close links between the Chinese Christian and foreign Christian organizations risk to provoke the insubordination to the Chinese government; without speaking, the Vatican does not recognize communist China till today.

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