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BA in Journalism and Asian Studies from the University of Florida, MA in Sinology  
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### PROJECT

## China's New Civil Religion: A New Pillar or a New Challenge for Neo-Authoritarian Rule?

The Chinese Communist Party maintains control over society through hard-edged policies, such as a burgeoning police state and legalistic harassment of opponents. But, increasingly, it seeks to use more subtle means, such as positioning itself as a defender of the so-called traditional faiths in China: Buddhism, Taoism, and folk beliefs. This is an especially attractive idea for many Chinese, given the spiritual vacuum that they ascribe to decades of fast economic growth. The state's response is to refurbish temples and reassert control over grassroots religious associations that once operated autonomously, but increasingly are under state control.

My research seeks to answer two sets of questions. One is how the Chinese Communist Party will rule China in the coming decades. To date, the Chinese state has proven adept at filling the role of a "development dictatorship." But other than claiming credit for China's growing economic and military power, it has offered few positive visions for China. Can faith and religion fill such a role, or does the state risk creating civil society-like independent centers of power, such as existed in parts of Eastern Europe during the Cold War? More broadly, is this strategy viable? The other questions relate to how grassroots Chinese religious associations themselves respond to the state's overture. Do they welcome state support or does it risk tainting their spiritual supports? If they resist, do they risk government harassment?

The outcome of my project will be a 100,000-word monograph based on ten years of ethnographic fieldwork among working-class religious associations, as well as comparisons with other authoritarian states with similar strategies, such as Russia and Myanmar.

### Recommended Reading

Johnson, Ian. *Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China*. New York: Pantheon, 2004.

–. *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao*. New York: Pantheon, 2017.

–. *Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.