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## A REPORT ON THE "INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC CONFERENCE ON RELIGION" BEIJING, APRIL 6-10, 1992

This conference was considered especially important by organizers from the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), for whom it was a Regional Conference, as well as by local organizers. IAHR organizers were especially pleased to be holding a conference for the first time in China, the second time in Asia (as an IAHR International Congress was held in Tokyo in 1958). The IAHR aims to be a truly international organization and has been very supportive in recent years of the PRC's nascent discipline of Religious Studies. In this report, I would like to introduce the conference's organizers and participants, its academic content, and its overall nature.

### ORGANIZERS AND PARTICIPANTS

The Chinese organizers were from the Institute of World Religions (IWR), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the Chinese Association of Religious Studies (CARS), Beijing. Most foreign scholars have known of IWR's existence for some time, but this is probably not true of CARS. IWR was founded in 1964, but has been much more active since the late 1970's. According to an introductory brochure, since that time it has accepted 40 students into its M.A. and Ph.D. programs; and it has helped to establish the first faculty in religious studies at a Chinese university (Beijing University, Philosophy Department). CARS, founded in 1988, is not a research institute in Beijing but an academic association for scholars all over China. According to its constitution:

The association is a nationwide nonofficial academic organization of researchers on religions. Guided by the Principles of Integrating Theory with Practice and Letting a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend, the association will play an active role in arranging academic exchanges and activities both at home and abroad, so as to develop and promote religious studies, thus contributing to the cultural undertakings in China.

Organizers from IWR and CARS were even more concerned than IAHR organizers about the success of the conference. Despite recent progress, the discipline of Religious Studies is not yet secure and totally beyond suspicion in the PRC. This international conference played an important legitimation function for local organizers and scholars. As the title they gave to the conference indicates, they wanted to stress its "international" and "academic" nature. Foreign scholars were aware of these factors and tried to avoid making any impolitic remarks, although there were in fact quite frank discussions (especially outside of formal sessions) about the religious situation in China, including problems of researching religion in China.

Formal participants in the conference included 26 foreign scholars and 18 local scholars. The foreign scholars were from Europe and U.K. (11), North America (8), Japan and Korea (6), and Israel (1). Local scholars were mostly from IWR and other units of the Academy of Social Sciences, yet a few were from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (2) and Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (2). Most participants, including local scholars, were not experts in native Chinese religions, a fact which is explained by the conference's two themes: "Foreign Religions and Chinese Culture" and "Religion and Modernization."

As the number of participants was small for an international conference, sessions, even plenary sessions, were conducive to lively discussions between participants. Each day began with two plenary sessions, after which participants divided into two groups for several more sessions connected with the two themes. All participants, including local scholars, lived together in Beijing's Exhibition Center Hotel and had all their meals together, which provided excellent opportunities for discussions outside of formal sessions. There was one day during the conference when foreign scholars were invited (not all went) to visit the Great Wall, Beijing's Lama Temple (Yong He Gong), and the Beijing Master Kong Temple (Kongzi Miao). There was also some help provided to arrange other travel to religious monuments in China during and after the week of the conference.

### ACADEMIC CONTENT

For me the most fascinating aspect of the conference was the enthusiasm with which the local scholars addressed methodological issues. For them, the names (and the seminal ideas connected to them) of Weber, Tillich, Bultmann, Berger, and Wittgenstein, to give a few examples, are relatively new. A whole world (Beyond Marx) has opened in recent years for their exploration. If one had to think of a single figure who is now greatly influencing Chinese social scientists, it would be Weber rather than Marx. In Taiwan, the decade of the 1980's was the time when "Weber was hot" (*Wei Bo re*); in the PRC, this same trend is now underway. Although foreign scholars may have felt that local scholars still had a long way to go methodologically, the latter approached certain issues with marked insight. One reason for this is that these scholars have had a deeply existential interest in certain issues, such as that of "religion and modernization." They have been strongly motivated to seek answers to key questions raised by themselves and foreign scholars: Why has religion *not* disappeared with modernization? Does religion stand in a dialectical relation to modernization, as argued in a paper by Hubert Seiwert (University of Hannover), stimulated by modern problems to grow in certain ways while at the same time always subject to the forces of secularization? Or, quoting the title of a paper by Joachim Matthes (University of Erlangen-Nurnberg): "Is Secularization a Global Process?" Why is religion, even in the PRC's "socialist society," an enduring source of moral values, as secular values increasingly

fail to serve society's moral needs (as considered by Luo Weihong, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, and Zhuo Xinping, IWR, in their papers)?

As for questions which produced the most controversy and debate among participants, there was, first, disagreement over the "religious" status of the Confucian tradition. But this was not simply disagreement between foreign and local scholars. Several local scholars, mostly younger ones, were the most outspoken proponents of defining "religion" in a way that would include Confucianism. Secondly there was much fruitful discussion on the suitability of Western concepts ("religion," "Secularization," "Protestant ethic," etc.) for understanding Chinese religions, in response, for example to a paper on this topic by Jordan Paper (York University, Canada). Thirdly, there were several heated discussions about why religion, and especially Christianity, has experienced such growth in the PRC in recent years, with a paper by Alan Hunter (University of Leeds) presenting a long list of sociological explanations for recent Chinese "conversions" to Protestant groups.

Of course, in addition to addressing methodological issues and conceptual problems of religion and modernity, conference participants also presented the results of a rich variety of historical research. Topics included sinification of Pure Land Buddhism (Allen Andrews, University of Vermont), Taoism during the 1911 revolution period (Chen Yao-ting, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences), the liturgical structures of ancient Beijing (Kristofer Schipper, Collège de France), Quanzhen Taoism (Wang Ka, IWR), Manichaeism in China (Luther Martin, University of Vermont), Hsi Wang Mu (Masako Mori, Keio University), the Early encounter of Neo-Confucians and Christians (Sung-hae Kim, Sogong University), and so forth.

### OVERALL EXPERIENCE

On the basis of personal observations and a certain amount of informal "interviews" of participants, both local and foreign, I believe all participants were satisfied with their overall experience of the conference. The main reason for this was perhaps that it was planned and operated extremely well. Materials were available when needed, sessions started and ended on time, contacts with other participants were well facilitated, etc. The IAHR gets some of the credit for this, but more of it goes to the diligent staff of the Chinese Association for Religious Studies. Another reason was the enthusiasm and hospitality of the local scholars, whose thirst for new ways of understanding religion was already mentioned. One shortcoming of the conference, in fact, was that we did not hear the views of certain Chinese scholars more often during formal sessions. These were scholars who had less adequate English conversation skills than others. Although oral interpreters were available, the heat of discussion often precluded their performing their task. This is perhaps a problem for future "bilingual" conference organizers to try to solve. In addition, as this was my first IAHR meeting, I must add that IAHR members are themselves an extremely

congenial and stimulating group of scholars. With these two enthusiastic groups together, there existed an environment very conducive to the exchange of ideas and information, the pursuit of new friendships and the discussion of future work.

Finally, the results of the conference will be shared, as there are plans to publish the conference proceedings in Chinese and English. The Institute of World Religions will publish Chinese papers and Chinese abstracts of English appears in its journal, *Study of World Religions*. The IAHR plans to publish English papers in a volume of conference proceedings within a few years.



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