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## Afterword: On Global Nation-States and Rooted Universalisms

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How far can wings of belief carry us? What kinds of new social and moral systems evolve out of transnational religious movements? The recent literature on globalisation has shown only little interest in religion, in spite of the cutting-edge global role of beliefs like evangelical Christianity. The literature has attended even less to the movement of non-Western traditions. We do, however, have numerous alternative models of how global ideas in general spread: they can seep through the cracks within and between systems of control based in nation-states; they can flow through mobile cosmopolitans with a global sense of belonging; they can reside in diasporas centered around the idea of a common homeland; they can exist in the institutions of transnational villages; and so on.<sup>1</sup>

These various images of global culture are not mutually exclusive, of course, and none of them alone captures the full complexity of the possibilities. Here I want to explore briefly just two dialectical relationships that characterise some of the features of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Donald M. Nonini and Aihwa Ong, 'Chinese Transnationalism as an Alternative Modernity,' in Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (eds.) *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 3-33; Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia, 1992); Arjun Appadurai, 'Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology,' in Richard G. Fox (ed.) *Recapturing*

the transnational Chinese religions discussed in the essays collected here. The first is the relationship between global culture and the continuing institutional power of the nation-state. The second is the counterintuitive combination of universalising beliefs with a strong sense of rootedness in specific places or ethnicities.

### **Nation-States and Global Culture**

The recent waves of globalisation, and of academic attention to it, have led some to see a general decline in the power of the nation-state as it had developed since the seventeenth century. Two books, for example, appeared under the title *The End of the Nation-State* during the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup> Challenges to national sovereignty come from global rule-makers like the IMF or the World Court, from international financiers like the currency speculators who helped bring on the recent financial crisis in Southeast Asia, from legal and illegal population movements, from multinational human rights NGOs, from the speed and intensity of global information flows, and much more.<sup>3</sup>

These trends have affected China and Taiwan as much as any parts of the world, from WTO membership requirements to the international environmental movement. Both places have also experienced large population movements, both internally and abroad, which are a primary focus of these essays. Nonini and Ong have written in particular

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*Anthropology* (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1991) pp. 191-210; Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation-State: The Rise of Regional Economies* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Jean-Marie Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

about how these movements challenge older state-based systems of social control. They write of the 'wildness, danger, and unpredictability' that transnational mobility gives Chinese people in the face of government pressures to discipline them.<sup>4</sup> They also recognize that this position may encourage a longing for some sense of 'home,' a longing that religion can help to fill.

Nonini and Ong's language of wildness and danger may not resonate closely with the self-image of the fervent Christians and Buddhists described here, but it does capture the sense of transnationality that most of these migrants share, as well as some of the mobility in their ideas. As different as charitable Buddhists, evangelical Christians, and health-conscious Falun Gong followers are, the movements described in these essays show some remarkable similarities that grow out of migrants' shared transnational experiences. None of these religious movements, for example, grew up around political issues. Even Falun Gong's extensive current politics have developed primarily as a reaction to political pressure from the PRC government, and do not form any part of their core spiritual message. Adapting to the unique situation of each nation-state is less important to these groups than their universal religious message. In a sense, their concern with global issues outweighs their concern with any particular local politics.

Each of the movements these essays describe also fits with the Enlightenment understanding of religion itself as something joined out of personal commitment,

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<sup>3</sup> For a relatively nuanced discussion of these pressures, see Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Nonini and Ong, 'Chinese transnationalism as an alternative modernity,' p. 19.

characterised by large-scale institutional organization and focused on a textual tradition.<sup>5</sup> This understanding of religion globalised out of the West through many carriers, ranging from Christian missionaries to the legal scholars who helped design twentieth-century Asian constitutions. It is quite a different understanding from an earlier Chinese tradition that recognized popular acts of worship (*bai*), where belief was less central, there were few institutional links beyond the local temple, and no core texts.<sup>6</sup>

For people who left a China that defined much of their worship as 'feudal superstition' and not religion, these new movements help give them a new global legitimacy. In some cases, the movements seem to have borrowed specific techniques that were common in Christianity first. We can thus now find Buddhist substitutes for Gideon Bibles in hotel rooms. In these essays, we see something similar in Compassion Relief's use of video and television, and the use of witnessing in all three groups, where meetings often center on tales of self-improvement through joining the group.

In spite of the obvious global trends in each of these movements--universalising beliefs, Christian influences, spread through transnational population movement--these essays do not show the decline of the nation-state. In some ways Laliberté's essay shows the dynamic of globalisation and the state most clearly, although it is the only one that does not focus on migrants. Compassion Relief's actions in the PRC make sense only within the context of Taiwan's anomalous position within the world system of nation-

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<sup>5</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> The modern religious movements are closer to the earlier Chinese term 'teachings' (*jiao*), which included Buddhism and Daoism as well as secular teachings.

states and of the continuing power of the Chinese state. The impossibility of reducing the relationship between Taiwan and China into any standard form of nation-states reminds us that the system has always been a sort of fiction. Part of the reason for strong Taiwanese government support for Compassion Relief's global efforts, regardless of which political party is in power, is the movement's role as mediator in international relationships where formal diplomacy is impossible. At the same time, however, Compassion Relief could not function at all in China without the active cooperation of local governments and at least the passive blessing of the central government.

Compassion Relief also shows the need to adapt to local states even in its home country. The story of its two hospitals in Taiwan grows out of the movement's ability to lobby the state. As Huang has described in other work, their first hospital required creating personal ties to the island's highest leaders during the period of authoritarian rule, while the second required a very different kind of adaptation to a newly democratic polity.<sup>7</sup> Falun Gong's experience in China is an even more powerful reminder of the power states can continue to wield over religious movements, as the massive repression of followers has reduced the group to a small (but intensely dedicated) shadow of its former existence.

Nation-states also shape religious groups through the legal arrangements that make space for them (or deny space to them, in some cases). China's law banning 'heretical cults' (*xiejiao*) was a direct tool for the repression of Falun Gong, but every country has

laws that shape the form of social organizations, including religious groups. In Taiwan, for example, a legal distinction between foundations and membership organizations means that Compassion Relief must exist as two different structural entities--one that controls the volunteer activities and another that runs most of their financial functions. Details of the law also shape how they can act in other countries, as in the prohibition in Japan that prevents Compassion Relief volunteers from having direct contact with the people they are helping. Christians undergo even stronger adjustments in China, where they must either join state-sponsored churches or operate underground. In each of the essays we can see an interplay of nation-state and global movement, but no clear evidence for the decline of the state.

The religious movements that these essays describe do, however, imply the growth of something like a global civil society, although it is limited in scope. All of the movements discussed fit the standard definition of civil associations as intermediate social organizations--beyond the personalistic ties of family and neighborhood but also separate from the state--based on voluntary affiliations. All are also 'civil' in the sense of recognizing the rights of others to differ and basing their behavior on general concepts of morality. While these religious groups rarely have political agendas, the politicisation of Falun Gong shows their potential to mobilize their social ties for political purposes in the right context. Religious groups tend to be ignored in most discussions of civil society, but these essays imply that religion may in fact be an important civil actor.

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<sup>7</sup> Chien-yu Julia Huang, 'Recapturing Charisma: Emotion and Rationalization in a Globalizing Buddhist Movement from Taiwan,' Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University,

In spite of this, each of the groups limits its political potential by setting up strong boundaries that can be difficult to cross. When male Chinese evangelical Christians or Compassion Relief followers refuse to drink alcohol, for example, they greatly restrict the scope of their interaction with the broader Chinese community. All the groups discussed here create behavioral markers that emphasise the boundaries that separate them from others. Nyiri's findings among Chinese evangelical Christians in Europe are especially significant here. He shows that Chinese Christian communities tend to dissolve boundaries of class and place of origin within the group, but that followers are not active in any other kinds of social organizations beyond the church. The other essays do not address this directly, but they do seem to suggest that the same may also be true for Falun Gong and Compassion Relief. The wings of belief do create new forms of transnational community, but apparently at the expense of other kinds of social connection.

### **A Rooted Universalism**

The vast majority of the Chinese migrants who become Christians, Compassion Relief followers, or Falun Gong practitioners joined these movements only after they left China and Taiwan. This is true even though all three sets of spiritual practices existed in their home countries. More educated migrants from urban areas, especially in China, tended not to engage in much religious practice at all before they left home. A small number, mostly from Taiwan, had experimented with different forms of Buddhism; many others took part in widespread popular worship of temple deities. Working class



migrants, mostly discussed in Nyiri's paper on Europe, would also have been most familiar with temple-based worship.

The universal claims of Christianity, Compassion Relief, or Falun Gong were thus relatively new for most of these migrants. They had begun either with insistently secular universals like science or Communism, or with a Chinese popular tradition of worship whose deities acted primarily within a local context only. The experience of transnational migration itself appears to have encouraged people, at least the people in these essays, to look toward more universal spiritual claims.

It is tempting to see this is an example of the well-known pattern where people in marginal social positions turn to new religions as an alternate form of social organization and a form of spiritual solace. In fact, however, few of the people in these essays fit that pattern. The followers of Falun Gong and Compassion Relief that Ownby and Huang describe tend to be highly educated and economically successful. They seem themselves more as secure cosmopolitans than marginalized foreigners. Even the Christian restaurant workers and petty traders that Nyiri describes appear secure in their self-image as transnational villagers. Social or economic marginality appears far less significant here than the broader sense of transnational belonging, where beliefs that claim to be true for all people in all places begin to appear far more compelling than a temple deity tied to a village of origin.

Given that all three groups are so strongly universal in orientation, it is surprising that all also strongly affirm their specific ethnic roots. The vast majority of Falun Gong followers in North America, in spite of the ethnically mixed images they like to put

forward, are ethnic Chinese, and the group is built around a uniquely Chinese view of the working of the universe through the flow of spiritual energy (*qi*). Compassion Relief followers around the world are also almost entirely Chinese, even though their charity work extends to all peoples. More than that, Compassion Relief also actively relies on an image of their base temple in the town of Hualian, Taiwan, as 'home' to all the followers (very few of whom actually come from Hualian). Even the Christians tend to see a uniquely Chinese movement, where the mission of spreading of the gospel has moved in particular to the Chinese. The Jehovah's Witnesses provide the one exception to this pattern. They insist on a true cosmopolitanism that crosscuts all ethnicities. It is no coincidence that they are also the only movement that has not been very successful at attracting or maintaining a large following.

All of these movements exist in China and Taiwan, but migrants join primarily only after they leave probably because transnational experience makes ideas that claim universal validity more appealing to them. At the same time, immersing themselves in a foreign environment may also encourage them to construct ideas of 'home,' as in Compassion Relief, or attract them to ideas that affirm their Chinese ethnicity, as in Falun Gong or their version of evangelical Christianity. There is no contradiction between these ideas of universalism and rootedness--both capture salient aspect of the transnational experience.

In fact, the simultaneous appeal of universality and roots probably stems from the experience of modernity itself, of which transnational population movement is just an aspect. Modernity has long encouraged feelings of homelessness, both literally and as a

state of mind where the old anchors of accepted values and stable communities have been lifted.<sup>8</sup> People react to that partly by celebrating the new openness, and partly by searching for lost values and for imagined homes.<sup>9</sup> In their very different ways, evangelical Christianity, Falun Gong, and Compassion Relief offer their adherents both sides of this modern dialectic.

### **Broader Contexts**

These essays explore new ground, and like any foray into new territory, they raise questions that only further research can answer. Above all, they suggest the importance at looking at the broader contexts of Chinese and Taiwanese transnationalism, and particularly at the alternatives to the movements discussed here. Each of these religions claims millions of followers, but each nevertheless accounts for only minorities of the population, both at home and within migrant communities. Are there thriving alternatives to these religions? Are there alternatives that do not embrace the kinds of dialectics I have briefly discussed? Traditional place of origin associations, for example, emphasise ethnicity and home, but without a universalising ideology. How are we to understand the many people who do not join these transnational religious movements?

These cases also encourage further thought about the role of gender, although it is not a central topic for any of the authors. The majority of adherents are women in each of

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

<sup>9</sup> See the essays collected in Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson, eds., *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

these cases. Why? Is there something in the experience of women migrants that attracts them differentially to this kind of religion? How does this pattern compare to what they left in China and Taiwan, where women also perform most of the everyday tasks of worship in the popular tradition, but men tend to dominate larger rituals?

Finally, all of these groups will have to address the issue of the second generation, where the motivations that drove the original migrants will no longer be as pressing, and where linguistic and cultural change may pose new kinds of problems. Empirically, of course, it is still far too soon to know, but the results we eventually give us a clearer idea about how much of the appeal of these particular groups relates to the specific transnational experience of the migrants, and how much instead relates to the broader experiences of living under late capitalism.