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CHINA: The marketisation of religious sites

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In July 2012, reports surfaced that the managers of a major Buddhist sanctuary on the coast of eastern China's Zhejiang Province were preparing to list the site on the Shanghai stock market to raise capital. In recent years, the state managers of other Buddhist sites in China have either placed those sites on the stock market or are planning to do so. Thus far, the opposition to these efforts has been made on moral grounds. These arguments mask fundamental social and institutional factors that created this problem. One of the intermediary factors is the limited number of religious sites available in China. The fundamental factor, however, is the inability of religious groups to control religious resources. In other words, this is an issue of property rights. In order to prevent greater social discontent, the state must address the issue of religious shortage adequately, which involves taking the first step to allow religious groups to assume genuine control over religious sites.

The lack of property rights for religious communities is a major obstacle to the realisation of genuine religious freedom in China. According to Chinese law - in particular the State Council's 2004 Regulations on Religious Affairs - only the government, notably the religious affairs agencies at every administrative level, can approve the establishment of religious sites. Only after the sites are registered can management committees be created to operate those sites. The membership of such management committees is most likely to have been already vetted and approved before they were formed.

But even once such hurdles have been overcome - or in the absence of such permissions - religious communities' control over religious sites remains precarious.

Sacred mountain IPO

On 3 July, China Daily, the largest English-language newspaper in China, reported that the management committee of Putuo Mountain (Putuoshan in Chinese) in China's eastern Zhejiang province had announced that the "Putuo Mountain Tourism Development Co., Ltd.", a subsidiary company of the committee, would be listed on the Chinese stock market in order to raise funds to further develop the well-known tourist site. According to China Daily, the tourist site's management committee expected to raise approximately 750 million Yuan (680 million Norwegian Kroner, 90 million Euros or 120 million US Dollars) through the stock market listing.

Putuo Mountain is an island with beautiful beaches, green hills, and tree-lined roads. It is under the jurisdiction of Zhejiang Province's Zhoushan Prefecture, which is located on China's east coast, within several hours' driving and ferrying from Shanghai.

But Putuo Mountain's fame has little to do with its natural scenery. Its claim to fame is based largely on the fact that it is one of four sacred Buddhist mountains in China. Approaching the island, visible from afar is the 33-metre statue of Guanyin, the goddess of mercy, a popular deity for Buddhist adherents in south-eastern China and Taiwan. Buddhist monks and nuns reportedly make up approximately one-third of the island's population of 3,000.

Putuo Mountain is not the first sacred Buddhist mountain - or indeed Chinese tourist site with religious ties - that may be listed on the stock market. The three other sacred mountains are also now listed or planned to be listed.

According to China's Global Times, a popular tabloid newspaper affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party's People's Daily, Emei Mountain in the south-western province of Sichuan was successfully listed on the Shenzhen Stock Exchange in 1997. Managers of Wutai Mountain in the northern province of Shanxi announced in 2011 that they planned to list the famous Buddhist site. Meanwhile, the managers of Jiuhua Mountain in Anhui Province, located north of Shanghai, are reportedly launching a third attempt to list the Buddhist site after failed attempts in 2004 and 2009.

Moral indignation

Managers of these sites have argued that listing them on the stock market would benefit everyone by obtaining the funds necessary for site maintenance and upgrades. Moreover, they promised that religious operations would not be affected. According to China Daily, Mao Jiantao, deputy director of the Putuo Mountain's management committee, stated: "The IPO [initial public offering] will

not affect normal religious operations, and will help perfect the infrastructure to ensure tourists visiting the mountain will be able to enjoy better services." However, many are not impressed by such statements.

Although the first reports about the plan to list Putuo Mountain on the local stock market appeared in July, the general issue of such possible listings has been ongoing and the government appears to have been monitoring the situation closely. On 6 June, Xinhua News Agency, the most authoritative Chinese central government news agency, reported that Liu Wei, a mid-level official in the central government's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), remarked at a Shanghai meeting that SARA is opposed to efforts by local governments to list religious sites on the stock market.

"Listing the temples on the stock exchanges harms the legal rights and damages the image of the religious community. It also harms the feelings of the believers," Xinhua quoted Liu as saying. "Developing the economy should have its limits and should not cross the moral lines."

Opposition

On 20 July, according to a report on the website of the Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television corporation, Master Xuecheng, a vice president of the state-approved Buddhist Association of China, stated that plans to list Buddhist sites on the stock market seriously damage the image of Buddhism. He also took the opportunity to urge that all Buddhist temples and sites should be open to the public free of charge.

Even non-religious persons have joined the opposition, among them Ye Tan, a well-known business commentator in Shanghai. On 4 July, she wrote on her blog, which has received nearly 100 million visits since May 2006, that experiences outside China indicate that cultural assets, including religious venues, should not be governed by for-profit motives. According to Ye, any suggestion that listing the religious sites on the stock market is meant to protect religion is a lie and masks the desire of state officials to profit from things they do not own. She described such listings as "a disgrace to China's religious and philanthropic sectors, and a disgrace to the stock market". As of 16 August, the blog posting received over 45,000 views.

The planned listing of Buddhist sites on the stock market has provoked widespread interest in the subject. As of 24 August, over 2,000 comments about the issue have been posted on Weibo, one of China's popular microblogs. Most have opposed the plans. One author wrote that there is a fundamental incompatibility between religion and the stock market. Another wrote that even in Western capitalist countries, one has never heard of religious sites being listed on the stock market.

Weakness of religious interests

Overwhelming opposition to the plan appears not to have derailed or even slowed the efforts to list the Buddhist sites on the stock market. The long-standing planning has continued. Setbacks have not removed the idea completely from the minds of the state managers.

In addition, the government's expressed opposition to the plans at this time should be examined in light of the larger political context. The Communist Party of China (CPC) is due to hold its national congress to select its new top leaders soon. The party-state is therefore interested in avoiding issues that fuel popular discontent. One means to control the atmosphere is to clamp down on potential troublemakers and trouble spots. Another is to show that the state is on the side of popular opinion. This may be the reason for SARA's comments in June, and the stated opposition is in keeping with the populist agenda of the outgoing Hu Jintao/Wen Jiabao administration.

But SARA's grandstanding and the fact that the Buddhist sites' management committees, which are run by the local governments, have not backed down reveals SARA's institutional weakness. As a sub-cabinet level government agency with no power of enforcement and little resources, SARA must rely on other members of the state bureaucracy for political, policy and fiscal support. This is especially the case with SARA at the sub-national levels. It is no coincidence that in many localities, religious affairs are operated out of the local public security, or police, bureaus.

SARA's expressed opposition is also weak, given that the SARA official who made the comments was a mid-ranking deputy department chief who was speaking at an unnamed conference in Shanghai. It is therefore of little surprise that local governments have in general ignored the opposition. Moreover, the bureaucratic reality is such that SARA's policies will be difficult to be implemented at the local levels because, as mentioned, SARA officials and agencies at the sub-national levels are heavily dependent on the support of the local party-states.

Little voice

Similarly, religious groups have little voice on issues that concern their interests due to their low political status. It is telling that Mao Jiantao, the aforementioned deputy director of Putuo Mountain's management committee, stated that it is "totally unnecessary" to consult the Buddhist authorities in Putuo Mountain about the plan to list the site on the stock market.

The religious groups' lack of voice on matters concerning their interests has forced them to accept the status quo, mainly because they have no alternative means to support their religious activities.

Professor Fenggang Yang, an expert on religion in China at Purdue University in the United States, wrote in his 2011 book, "Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule", that many of the challenges facing religious groups in China have to do with the country's "chronic shortage of supply" of religion.

According to Yang, despite the spiritual awakening in China over the last 30 years, which resulted in rapid increases in the number of religious adherents, the increase in the number of legal religious venues has not kept pace. According to Yang, in 2009 the ratio of religious venues to religious adherents in China was 1 to 10,000. In comparison, in 2010 the ratio in Taiwan was 1 to 1,350. Already in 1997, the United States achieved a ratio of 1 to 857.

The shortage of legitimate religious sites means that all Chinese religious believers are forced to accept the status quo. The alternatives, such as the Protestant house churches, are highly risky and, as is the case for Buddhist and Daoist practitioners, few. Most religious believers have little choice but to continue to visit the legitimate religious sites even though they may oppose certain practices by their managers, as in the case of the Buddhist sites. It is small wonder that religious venues in China are always overflowing with people.

In economic and political terms, this means that Chinese religious believers possess neither the "voice" option nor the "exit" option. They are essentially doing the best they can within the parameters set by government managers. But as a result, religious believers are unlikely to obtain all they would like to receive in their spiritual quest.

State control of religious sites

The fundamental problem is clearly an institutional one. In other words, the controversy over the plans to list the Buddhist sites on the stock market is a direct consequence of the party-state's policies and practices.

First, as mentioned earlier, religious interests are not well-respected by the party-state. This is reflected by SARA's institutional weakness and the fact that local government officials do not feel compelled to consult religious leaders before taking actions that will impact religious interests.

Second, like most resources in China, religious assets are under government control. And even those religious assets not under government control in practice are perceived by government officials to be state properties to be dealt with whenever and however the state wishes.

In December 2005, Catholics in and around Tianjin protested at the local government's failure to return religious property seized during the communist period, AsiaNews reported at the time. They also protested at a violent attack on priests and others who protested against the refusal to return the property.

In the case of the Buddhist sites mentioned in this analysis, religious leaders have little say in those assets because they are preserved and managed not as religious sites but as cultural/tourist sites. As a consequence, they are managed not by religious believers but by government officials. For example, senior local CPC and government officials, who do not have religious affiliations, constitute Putuo Mountain's management committee. Similarly, according to Human Rights Watch, Tibetan Buddhist lamaseries are now operated by non-Tibetan Buddhist officials.

Although Protestant Christian churches are for the most part managed by church leaders, local government officials remain undeterred and have taken actions to "seize" control of church properties by whatever means. According to China Aid, a US-based advocacy group for China's Protestant Christian house churches, in June the management committee of a legally-registered Protestant Church in Jinan, the capital of Shandong Province, was forcibly removed so as to allow the local government to demolish the church to be used eventually for commercial purposes.

Unregistered religious properties, which are mostly associated with unregistered religious groups such as Protestant house churches and are therefore illegal, have no protection. The government can take action against them at any time. After members of Beijing's Shouwang Protestant Church bought an apartment for it to use to meet in 2009, government pressure on the seller prevented it from moving in.

It appears that only those religious leaders with strong political resources, such as the chief abbot of Henan Province's Shaolin Buddhist Temple, have been able to withstand the efforts of local state officials to control religious resources.

Existing state practices clearly violate the party-state's own regulations. According to the 1994 State Council's "Measures for the Registration of Places for Religious Activities", the management committees of religious venues should be constituted by "citizens who profess religious beliefs". Yet, as indicated in this analysis, religious sites in China are often managed by non-religious state officials.

In other words, the fundamental issue of control over religious sites involves the question of who - religious groups or government officials - should be the legitimate "owners" of religious sites. Although the state legally owns all lands in China, the question of property rights is still relevant because the recent controversy involving the IPO listing for the Buddhist sites concerns who and which groups can decide how religious properties ought to be managed. And Chinese experts have adopted the perspective of property rights in their analyses of the recent controversy.

Why no say?

Zhang Zhipeng, an economist affiliated with the Nanjing Army Command College and the Centre for Religious and Cultural Studies at Lanzhou University, wrote in July 2012 that the recent controversy is a consequence of unclear property rights. Zhang argued that a solution to the problem is to define clearly which parts of a cultural/tourist site belong to the religious authorities and which parts to the local government. He maintained that a clarification of property rights would better preserve the religious integrity of those sites.

But Zhang's proposal does not address the even more basic question: why do religious authorities have no say over the management of any cultural site that derives its value primarily from its religious affiliation?

That the Buddhist authorities can make no claims to the Buddhist sites is detrimental for several reasons. For the Buddhist community, the lack of property rights means that it can derive little to no financial benefit from the stock market listing, if it happens. Even more fundamental, as mentioned above, the lack of property rights means that the Buddhists are barred from making decisions about properties that derive their value from being sacred Buddhist sites.

In this respect, listing the Buddhist sites on the stock market will most likely result in more non-Buddhist interests - i.e. shareholders - making decisions about them, which may further reduce the sites' religious integrity. Should that happen, the consequence may be that those sites will become increasingly less Buddhist, resulting in fewer Buddhist pilgrims to those sites, ultimately exacerbating the current shortage of Buddhist sites.

The Chinese state has long used the economic resources at its disposal to control religious groups (see F18News 16 August 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=831>). It therefore stands to reason that local state officials are unwilling to relinquish control over religious sites, which also offer potentially lucrative profits for the local governments and their officials.

Displeasure

Although it is uncertain how long the state can sustain its current practices without causing major social disturbances, the recent controversy concerning the planned listing of the Buddhist sites on the stock market suggests that ordinary people are beginning to voice their displeasure. In order to prevent greater discontent, the state needs to address the issue of the control of religious venues in a satisfactory manner, which means that it needs to allow religious leaders to exercise greater power over religious sites.

This measure, if implemented, would naturally advance religious freedom in China. In this manner, the promotion of religious freedom would be good not only for religious communities and individual believers; it would also be good for the state. (END)

For analyses of other aspects of religious freedom in China, see <<http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=3>>

A printer-friendly map of China is available from <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=China>>

Magda Hornemann, contributed this comment to Forum 18 News Service. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

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