

The Intimacy of Faith

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Just a few decades ago, life in China was based in villages, where people found meaning in raucous communal ceremonies of loud music, billowing pots of incense and colourful performances to please, cajole, or criticise their gods. Some of that old-style religion still exists, but faith in China is increasingly quiet, personal, contemplative and most of all, private. It is still full of joy and exuberance, but also where individuals struggle to find meaning in the big, post-capitalist cities that now dominate Chinese life.

Through the years she spent living in Shanghai—China's largest and most cosmopolitan city—Liz Hingley has lifted a curtain on a world that for many, is hard to penetrate. Her images bring to light a China far from the village life of years past: a place of high-rises and globalized commerce, of new ways of living and new beliefs, of new technologies and a convergence among faiths and cultures—in short, a microcosm of China's future.

Just a few decades ago, this landscape would have been hard to imagine. Up until the 1990s, about eighty percent of the Chinese population lived in villages and cities like Shanghai were the exception. As China's economic boom created jobs for people in coastal areas, millions began to move to these boomtowns, many for short stays, but increasingly, for the long haul. Since the early 90s the pace has picked up, with scores of cities in China's interior growing rapidly as well. As villages are emptied out, a majority of the Chinese population has moved to urban areas, helping to change ways of life and ways of thinking about their place in the universe.

Today, people are less defined by their community than by their personal concerns, making faith more of an expression of individualism. Freed from being defined by where they were born, China's new urbanites have created new identities and discovered for themselves what they truly believe.

For many Chinese, a world of possibilities for how to shape one's religion, faith, and belief system is now opening. This new potential has helped boost non-traditional religions in China—in particular Christianity—now China's fastest-growing faith, in part because it seems better able to find a foothold in the country's new megacities.

That's not to say community doesn't matter. For many, city life is confusing. People are bewildered by a social space where they no longer know their neighbours and where traditional values count for little—money seems to be all that matters. Religions help take the edge off the harshness of cities like Shanghai. In churches, temples, or mosques, city dwellers find ready-made communities of like-minded people—a support group for a society in need of guideposts.

In this new world, people choose their own gurus, many of them not affiliated with any of the officially sanctioned religions. Well-off urban Chinese go on fasting cures with Tibetan

Rinpoches or learn to meditate in pitch-black caves; they dabble in the occult, or rediscover traditional martial arts—which often have a strong spiritual component. They mix and experiment—in short, they behave like people in many other countries, including the West, where traditional faiths are bending, melding, and merging into one another.

Driving some of these changes is technology. Smartphones and tablets are ubiquitous in China, as are social media platforms that supercharge the pace of change. This allows people to bypass established religious organisations and form communities around sages and holy people. Believers meet up occasionally for ceremonies but mainly stay in daily touch through messages, videos, and articles that explain how, when and where to worship. Not surprisingly, this type of life is more inward-focused, where people face their belief on their own. These are often personal moments of contemplation, love, laughter, or alienation. Some of this takes place in the skyscrapers and apartment blocks that define modern Chinese cities, but also in the pockets of the past that still dot Chinese cities: a traditional New Year's dinner, the persistence of burning paper houses, cars, and money for the dead, or a rambunctious music group announcing a wedding, birth, or funeral.

Because greater metropolitan areas like Shanghai are so diverse, foreigners make up a portion of the cultural landscape. As a great trading nation, China is home to millions of non-Chinese who bring in new, 'exotic' faiths. Though not legally allowed to follow these foreign belief systems, many Chinese people experiment with Baha'i, Russian Orthodox Christianity, or emulate western fascination with Tibetan Buddhism.

Buddhism is broadening in other ways, too. With money to spend, Chinese are travelling abroad and discovering that Southeast and South Asian Buddhism is different from theirs, yet can enrich their religious lives. It is not uncommon to see Thai Buddhist shrines in China.

Cultural convergence is a key part of this new religious world. Religions aren't all melding into one faith, but the overlaps are striking. In the past, most Chinese experienced one small part of one faith—maybe a local god or a regional variation of Taoism or Buddhism; now people are confronted with many faiths living cheek to jowl.

In China, the gods aren't just omnipresent, the state is too. Police crackdowns on believers or the demolition of places of worship in different parts of the country still occur. And yet the state's role is broader than simply its desire to enforce control; it seeks to be a player, too. And so deified revolutionary leaders are exhibited in museums and gargantuan public art projects meant to extol mythic heroes are seen in parks across the country. Even traditional medicine has a spiritual component that the state doesn't downplay. Recent new laws on Chinese medicine have given formal sanction to the master-disciple relationship, one that often includes reverence and near-worship of one's teacher.

Faith in China may be vulnerable, yet its unwavering importance—especially in alienating megacities—is beyond doubt. Its very presence in people's hearts makes it impossible to eradicate. More than economics or politics, it is these moments that are the new

heart of China.