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**Travel Report – Research into Buddhism in China**

I’d like to begin by wholeheartedly thanking the donors of this grant for giving me the opportunity to visit Hainan and gather information that will be relevant to both my extended essay and, eventually, my dissertation. By June, the heat in southern China has reached the mid-thirties. China’s southernmost province, Hainan, is no exception, with little relief provided by the proximity of the sea. I had been dreading the prospect of constant rain or even a typhoon, for which it was the season, but after a few days of relentless heat I’d come to appreciate the daily hour or so of rain that did come reliably. Formerly considered an undeveloped backwater, the province is now wealthy, largely thanks to tourism. The interior is forested and mountainous, with the cities mainly on the coasts. It is both the smallest province in China and the largest island under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (Taiwan is larger but is not controlled by the Party, though it is likewise claimed as an island province.)

In my first year I had studied the Jesuit missionaries who in 1552 began travelling to China with the remarkable aim of converting the Empire using a top-down approach – that is, by converting high officials and even the emperor himself they hoped to make China a Christian country. Of course, this strikes modern observers as obviously unattainable. The fact that China’s Christians today comprise only around 2.5% of the population demonstrates the Jesuits’ limited success (though they did convert a small number of very powerful high officials).

However, the reasons for this failure are not all intuitive. Some were to be expected; for instance, Christian monotheism was not understood to allow the ubiquitous Chinese practice of ancestor worship. Wealthy people would often keep concubines in the interests of having a male heir – the Jesuits insisted that converts could not do so. But there was a deeper and perhaps more important obstacle which has a great deal to do with Buddhism, and which I hoped to find some evidence for by interviewing Chinese visitors to Nanshan Park, a large complex of Buddhist temples and statues located on the southern shore of the island.

What I hoped to find out was this: how did those who considered themselves Buddhists think of their commitment to Buddhism as a religious doctrine? and what was the religious worldview of those who did not call themselves Buddhists but were still performing religious observances in the various temples and shrines.
To someone like me, who was mainly exposed to Abrahamic religions growing up, these questions might seem strange – particularly the second one, since it is quite rare to find people from one Abrahamic religion taking part in the practices of another, even when (which is perfectly ordinary) visiting a religious site that isn’t built for one’s own religion. Some more historical background will be helpful here. The deeper reason I mentioned for the reluctance of many people in China to adopt Christianity at the time of the Jesuit missions is this: Chinese religion has, generally speaking, for most of its history been far less sectarian and exclusive than in Europe, with anything like a religious war, which occur throughout European history, being very rare in the history of China. The Jesuit missionary Giulio Aleni was asked exasperatedly by a Chinese follower he had successfully converted, ‘Master, why could you not be a bit more tolerant?’ This was in response to the missionaries’ insistence that, among other things, converts must not attend popular religious festivals, an important social function.

Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism – China’s oldest religions – have borrowed from one another a great deal during its history. While devotees of one might have spoken of another with scorn or ridicule at times, there was no denying the great influence the three had had on one another. This openness has persisted down to the present day, though China became less religious on the whole during after the Communist Party came to power in 1949: it is not uncommon at religious events (like a funeral) for ordinary people to seek out the services of, for example, a Confucian and a Daoist priest in succession.

So I was hoping to find evidence for this state of affairs in the present day. Of course, my studies should have led me to expect that at least some people would corroborate what I’d learned. I did not expect it to be so completely borne out, however. One other thing that I should have expected, though it surprised me at the time, was that many people simply didn’t want to talk to me. I imagine this is because, even if Buddhism in particular is not supressed, religion in general is a politically sensitive topic in China, with Islam and some spiritual groups being the target for the most state persecution. Earlier that year, in Beijing, I had conducted interviews to gather information for an essay on Chinese linguistics; on this considerably less emotive topic respondents were almost universally willing to talk. Nonetheless, those that did provided some fascinating information.

The park was built recently; this shouldn’t be particularly surprising as Buddhism is very much a live religion. As I said before, it was blisteringly hot, but the crowds were still large. A group of three women who had been prostrating themselves in succession in front of a series of statues of Buddhist deities brought up the fact when talking to me that China has three main religions (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) and said that they believed in all three, but emphatically denied that they were fofiaotu 佛教徒, the word commonly used to mean ‘a follower of Buddhism’. When I asked them which of the three they most believed, they said Buddhism.
Another person I interviewed again said that she was not a Buddhist but that she believed in Buddhism. When I asked about the particular religious observance she’d been making, she said that it was meant to bring health.

One man I spoke to was particularly keen to discuss the nature of Chinese religion. Again, he had been bowing in front of a shrine. When I asked him if he was a fojiaotu 佛教徒 he considered it for a moment before saying that he wasn’t, but that he considered himself a fojiaoxin 佛教信. This word defies easy translation, but I would tentatively give its meaning as ‘believer in Buddhism’ (the tu of fojiaotu means ‘follower’ whereas the xin of fojiaoxin means ‘to believe’). This got to the heart of what I was trying to find out – one could be a believer but not necessarily a follower of a religion. He also said that of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, he believed most in Buddhism. While he certainly seemed to know a fair amount about Chinese religion he wasn’t a religious scholar, but we were still able to discuss the differences between religion historically in China and in Europe, during which he reiterated that Chinese religion had tended to be less sectarian in the past.

Virtually all the people I spoke to said variations of the above (though not necessarily that they most strongly identified with Buddhism). However, even those who wouldn’t speak to me, in at least a couple of cases, helped to build the picture I’ve laid out above. I might see someone bowing in front of a statue or burning incense, and when I asked them if they considered themselves a Buddhist, they would smirk and shake their head, or seem to find it a strange question, and quickly walk away. I overheard one man laughingly say to his wife as he walked away, ‘He asked me if I was a Buddhist.’ The fact that he found the question strange shows that engagement with Buddhism in China is not necessarily analogous to Western ideas of religious practice. (Of course this is not to suggest that there are not people who do consider themselves Buddhists, to the exclusion of other religions, in China – there are many tens of millions who do, according to census data, not to mention a large clergy. Likewise there are millions of practicing Christians and Muslims in China today.)

This was of great value to me in learning more about Chinese religion and China in general, not to mention a good opportunity to practise my spoken Chinese while conducting interviews. The subject of religion touches on many others, such as history and philosophy, and directly concerns my extended essay, which will concern China’s engagement with foreign nations – this engagement was often viewed in terms of religion. I hope to write my dissertation on a topic which will allow me to explore the philosophical notion of ‘truth’ in Chinese history – naturally, religion is very relevant to this notion. Finally, I was very glad to have the opportunity to see another part of China wherever it might have been, but in particular to have a few days break from the very busy capital in a much greener space. For all of this I’d once again sincerely like to thank the donors of this extremely generous grant.