



# Pacific Rim Report

NUMBER 24 APRIL • 2002

## CENTER for the PACIFIC RIM

THE CENTER FOR THE PACIFIC RIM PROMOTES understanding, communication, and cooperation among the cultures and economies of the Pacific Rim and provides leadership in strengthening the position of the San Francisco Bay Area as a pre-eminent American gateway to the Pacific. It fulfills its mission through interdisciplinary academic programs, research, print and online publications, scholarly exchanges, conferences, and other outreach activities.

THE RICCI INSTITUTE IS part of the Center for the Pacific Rim. It is a leading interdisciplinary research center that promotes, in the spirit of Matteo Ricci, the encounter of Chinese culture and Christian faith by conducting research projects, organizing conferences and producing scholarly publications. With its 80,000-volume Chinese Library and *The Ricci 21st Century Roundtable*, the Institute offers premier resources in the study of Christianity in China.

## “Nourishing the Spirit: Social Change and Spiritual Development in China Today”

**China's current pace of development** brings opportunity and disruption to every level of society. These challenges have stirred China's soul.

Today many in China actively affirm the spiritual dimensions of their own lives. A new generation of urban workers, moving beyond the basic struggle for economic survival, confronts deeper questions of personal meaning. Intellectuals and artists alike seek to strengthen their culture's moral sensitivities. And people at many levels of society turn avidly to books and internet sites exploring the previously disparaged wisdom traditions of classical China and Christianity, as well as new religious movements.

The Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History of the Center for the Pacific Rim at the University of San Francisco has hosted a range of scholarly conversations to examine these dynamics of spiritual development in China today. Under the leadership of Dr. Xiaoxin Wu, Director of the Ricci Institute, the goal has been to engage Christian and non-Christian scholars in dialogue on these complex issues. In 1999 an initial panel of scholars considered the status of religious studies programs at three major Chinese universities and the influence of these programs in the lives of faculty and students. A seminar in 2000, co-sponsored by the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, brought together Bay-

area scholars interested in the path of spiritual pursuit among young Chinese intellectuals; a concurrent exhibit of the work of two Chinese artists illustrated contemporary dimensions of traditional religious themes. In 2001 twenty Chinese and American resource persons representing both academic disciplines and religious institutions gathered for an interdisciplinary colloquium. Its intent was (a) to provide a cross-disciplinary perspective on contemporary spiritual development among both rural and urban Chinese and (b) to establish a network of colleagues in support of further collaborative research.

On February 25, 2002 the lively interest that has characterized this series was again evident at USF's Lone Mountain campus. A diverse audience of over sixty persons joined four EDS-Stewart Fellows of the Ricci Institute in an extended conversation, moderated by Center for the Pacific Rim Kiriya Fellow Marsha Vande Berg. Their common interest: exploring the resources that Chinese people find to support their spiritual search, in this time of profound personal and social dislocation.



WE GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE the EDS-Stewart Chair for Chinese-Western Cultural History at the USF Ricci Institute for funding this issue of *Pacific Rim Report* and partial sponsorship of this roundtable discussion.

**Marsha Vande Berg set out two interrelated questions to begin the discussion:** *What are the spiritual hungers experienced and expressed in China today? Where do the Chinese people seek and find spiritual nourishment?*

**Peter Ng:** According to an official 1997 report from the Chinese Government, membership in the five officially recognized religious bodies stands at 100 million. This number includes 18 million Muslims, 4 million Roman Catholics, and 10 million Protestants, along with the much larger membership identified with Buddhism and Daoism. Most knowledgeable observers regard these figures as very conservative; the more accurate estimates range from two to five times the official numbers. For example, the government numbers omit the extensive network of family-based and other unregistered prayer communities that flourish in China today; reputable scholars suggest an additional 30 to 40 million Chinese Christians should be counted here.

Recently a delegation of scholars from the State Bureau of Religious Affairs and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences visited my Department of Religion at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. They were surprised to find a course on Chinese popular beliefs listed in our curriculum. A long discussion followed, examining whether such traditional practices should count as religion in China today. In the end, the delegation acknowledged that if 'religious membership' were broadened to encompass those who embrace Chinese popular beliefs, almost 95% of the current Chinese population would be included. And this would overwhelm the capacity of the present Bureau of Religious Affairs to oversee and regulate Chinese religious life.<sup>1</sup>

So the spiritual quest of the Chinese people is by no means confined to Christian spirituality. As Dr. Fan's work vividly demonstrates, we must bear in mind that Chinese people are drawing spiritual resources from many traditions and across a range of disciplines, including Qigong and Falungong. As a Christian and a scholar, I am attentive to the broad scope of the religious and spiritual development of the Chinese people. But in my later remarks I will focus on the attitudes of Chinese scholars toward Christianity today.

**Lizhu Fan:** Let me introduce the new city of Shenzhen. In 1979 Deng Xiaoping designated this small agricultural center, located about a one hour train ride north of Hong Kong, as a Special Economic Zone. During the 1980s more than a million Chinese from rural villages flooded into the area, seeking work in the factories and sweat shops that had sprung up overnight. By the 1990s more highly-educated Chinese had started to arrive in large numbers: some ready to fill the better paying managerial jobs becoming available; others eager to try their luck in small businesses of their own. Serious abuses, of course, were evident from the start: poor working conditions, ecological degradation, local corruption, and graft. Yet Chinese workers continue to arrive in great numbers, transforming this sleepy town into a metropolis of over four million by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I arrived in Shenzhen in 1998, to investigate the impact of rapid industrialization on the lives of these recent urban migrants. After initial contact with more than two hundred newly arrived residents, I conducted lengthy interviews with fifty-six persons—both men and women. A number of these research discussions blossomed into continuing relationships. As a result, over the nine months I lived in Shenzhen I was able to stay in conversation and often participate in religious activities with those I had interviewed.

In these conversations, people would acknowledge the problems and turmoil that came with living and working in Shenzhen. But they were much more eager to talk about a new-found freedom. Here, for the first time in their lives, they could choose their own jobs. Their livelihood was no longer chained to the *danwei*, the local work unit that had previously exercised near total control over employment as well as many other aspects of daily life in their home village. In Shenzhen people live in a 'free market' for jobs and salaries. For many I interviewed, this utterly novel experience of employment freedom was linked to a growing awareness of deeper levels of personal decision-making now available to them. And with their expanded consciousness came a new range of spiritual questions.

Mr. Zhou is an example. Five years ago he moved to Shenzhen to start his own small business; now he has met with success well beyond his earliest

#### **The Panelists**

*Lizhu Fan*

*Peter Tze Ming Ng*

*Evelyn Eaton Whitehead*

*James D. Whitehead*

#### **The Moderator**

*Marsha Vande Berg*

hopes. Only recently, he acknowledges, has he begun to wonder about the meaning and purpose of his life. Living in his village, he had never entertained such questions. There, any decision about his life would be determined by his family or by the government. Now, in the giddy freedom of Shenzhen, he found he was not able simply to enjoy his new wealth. He was beset with new questions: why was he so successful, when others around him were not. Was there some power favoring his life, some unknown force guiding his choices? Did his success indicate a new purpose or goal for his life? In a life seemingly dedicated to making money, spiritual concerns were emerging.

This scenario was repeated often among the people I interviewed. For some, like Mr. Zhou, unanticipated success precipitated the questioning. For others, a serious illness or personal crisis in love or work was the trigger. Still others sought out spiritual insight or religious practice in a desire to introduce order and calm into lives now immersed in urban chaos. For these people, economic opportunity and the lure of financial success did not extinguish their spiritual search but instead ignited it. This paradox gradually became the focus of my research.

**James Whitehead:** For my part, I have been intrigued by the connections between 'basic needs' and 'spiritual needs' among Dr. Fan's respondents. Social observers are showing renewed interest in these interrelated human hungers. Basic needs refer to the primal requirements of the human species: food, clothing, shelter, safety. These needs are a matter of survival. Through welfare programs and other strategies of social assistance, modern governments attempt to assure these needs are met even for those unable to secure these essential goods on their own.

Spiritual needs arise in another domain of human life. They express the hungers that move us beyond basic survival toward full human flourishing. Preeminent here are the quest for meaning and purpose in life, and for the freedom needed to pursue this search. The new residents of Shenzhen found that economic well-being was not enough. As their initial hopes for a better-paying job and a higher standard of living were met, life questions of a different kind emerged. And it was to traditional Chinese spiritual resources that they turned for sustenance.

Marxist theory suggests that spiritual needs are a projection of unmet basic needs. Religion functions only as compensation, distracting attention from the struggle for a more just distribution of material resources. When the material needs of a human population are met, this illusory distraction will no longer be needed and religion will disappear. This pessimistic judgment of the future of religion was shared by most interpretations of modern society that grew out of the Enlightenment. As recently as the 1950s, the juggernaut of secularization—with its promise of a scientific understanding of all reality—seemed to be erasing the last traces of religion. Now at the beginning of a new millennium, religions and religiousness are on the increase. Something like 'de-secularization' is taking place, for better and for worse.

Dr. Fan's findings indicate not only that economic advancement does not do away with spiritual needs; it appears to create the conditions for people to name deep hungers of which they were previously unaware.

**Evelyn Eaton Whitehead:** The spiritual search that Dr. Ng and Dr. Fan report occurs against the backdrop of China's rich and complicated recent history. It may help to recall the incredible journey of the Chinese spirit over the past century. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, the lives of most Chinese were constrained by grinding poverty. For the millions of rural peasants, daunting challenges of daily subsistence crowded out all other concerns. The urban intelligentsia, attracted by the technological and political progress of the West, still seethed with resentment against foreign military and economic intrusion. For most Chinese, the moral requirement was to 'learn to eat bitterness'.

With Mao's victory came the Marxist vision of hope. The popular imagination was awakened, as idealism swept the country. After 1949, present suffering had moral purpose; this was the price to be paid for a future transformed. Current deprivation and personal sacrifice could be embraced with honor, understood now as one's patriotic duty, and ultimately as one's spiritual stake in the future.

But unchecked, this idealism led to the extremes of the Cultural Revolution. Intellectuals were selected out for particular abuse, but most Chinese felt betrayed



**Lizhu Fan** (Ph.D., Chinese University of Hong Kong) is associate professor in the Sociology Department of Fudan University in Shanghai. In the roundtable discussion, Dr. Fan provided compelling evidence from her research on the spiritual hungers experienced by migrants from rural China to Shenzhen, the special economic zone near Hong Kong.





**Evelyn Eaton Whitehead** (Ph.D., University of Chicago) is a social and developmental psychologist investigating the interplay of culture and personality. She and James Whitehead have been involved since 1999 in the Ricci Institute's initiative on Social Change and Religious Development in China. Her roundtable contribution offered insights gained in collaboration with Dr. Fan in an analysis of contemporary Chinese religiosity.

and consequently lost hope in the still-dominant political vision of communism. Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening brought hints of increasing personal freedom along side improved material conditions of life. But the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square gave the lie to the prospect of a gradual lessening of party control. Throughout the 1990s, revelations of widespread corruption among party and government officials eroded any remaining idealism. As access to consumer goods and other economic improvements spread to wider segments of the population, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' was replaced by 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics'. People could seek satisfaction through 'consumerism with a Chinese face'. As Chinese scholar Jiwei Ci laments, "in hedonism, a spiritually exhausted people found a pursuit in which the spirit did not have to participate."<sup>2</sup> But, as Dr. Fan's work shows, hedonism soon reveals its limits. Consumerism offers only fragile refuge; the human spirit hungers for more.

**Marsha Vande Berg:** *Dr. Ng, I am interested in what you have learned about the appeal of Christianity for Chinese scholars today.*

**Peter Ng:** In preparing for today's discussion, I sent out a brief survey to fifteen mainland Chinese scholars with whom I have been working closely over the past several years. I asked for their comments on one simple question: "What do you think would make Christianity appealing to Chinese scholars today?" And I offered this list of possibilities from which to choose their response:

- a. Christian Theology: Concept of an all-powerful, omnipresent, and all-loving God;
- b. Christian Community: Opportunity to participate in a welcoming and supportive local church, especially when they feel lonely and depressed;
- c. Christian Gospel: Biblical message of the life of Jesus, especially his example of self-giving love for all people;
- d. Christian Ethics and Social Services: Moral teachings of Christianity and the witness of Christian service to those in need.

It was significant to me that none of these colleagues identified Christian Theology or Christian Community. We might have anticipated that many Chinese scholars who had lost their faith in commu-

nism would turn to Christianity as an alternative. There are Chinese scholars in the United States who have done so, but not many in China itself. Mainland Chinese who study Christian theology most often approach it as one among many of the philosophical systems that have influenced western culture. And as such, it seems to offer them little in terms of a personal spiritual search.

Similarly, involvement in Christian community life holds little attraction for scholars in China. Here again, some Chinese scholars have been touched by the hospitality and support they experienced from Christian communities during their studies in Hong Kong or the U.S. But their experience with Christian groups in China itself is very different.

On the other hand, it is the life and teaching of Jesus, along with the ethical message and service witness of Christianity, that hold relevance for China today. And the appeal is in the potential contribution of these aspects of the Christian heritage to the renewal of Chinese culture and society. Many scholars recognize Jesus's message of universal love as a significant antidote to the poisonous climate of hate that China experienced during the Cultural Revolution. Other Christian values—such as the equality of all people as children of God and the witness of self-sacrifice in the love of neighbor—are seen as relevant in the revitalization of China's deep tradition of moral sensitivity.

**James Whitehead:** Let me offer another example of Chinese interest in elements of the Christian worldview. Over the past five years Evelyn Whitehead and I have lectured annually at several Chinese universities on themes of philosophy and ethics. Graduate students in our courses have shown a special interest in the Christian view of the human person as both 'blessed and broken'. The Christian understanding of human brokenness—embracing both the moral failings of individuals and the endemic, enduring evil that pervades human society—seemed to captivate many of them. We were intrigued that as theology in the West has become less focused on the discussion of sin, many intellectuals in China are becoming more attentive to this religious concept. The notion of original sin has prompted thoughtful discussion in



Chinese academic journals and energetic discussion in our own classes.

Many Chinese intellectuals, I believe, have recognized that the deep optimism of their Confucian heritage cannot account for the enduring violence and destructiveness in human society. The many horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—certainly in China but throughout the world—call out for some reckoning. Some Chinese colleagues sense that the Christian appreciation of sin may provide a means of coming to terms with the inherent brokenness of the world.

As we spoke with these students and professors, we began to see more clearly the intricate links among sin, grieving, and forgiveness. Perhaps one can acknowledge wrongdoing, whether personal sin or a nation's moral failures, only to the extent that these wrongs can be forgiven. And perhaps only if forgiveness is possible can the healing exercise of social grieving truly begin.

**Marsha Vande Berg:** *Dr. Fan, tell us more about the spiritual response of the people in Shenzhen.*

**Lizhu Fan:** People in Shenzhen are returning to their ancient cultural heritage. They are aware that the government continues to exercise control over the five officially sanctioned religions here. But these officials are not able to control the more informal practices rooted in Chinese cultural traditions. So rather than joining a Christian church or committing themselves to a Buddhist master or temple, for example, newcomers to Shenzhen develop other strategies on the spiritual search.

The people I met in Shenzhen recognized themselves as on a very personal search for spiritual meaning. They were eager to speak about activities and practices newly significant in their lives. For example, they described a loose network of people who gather with some regularity at a vegetarian restaurant owned by a Buddhist laywoman. Here they can meet with other persons on the spiritual journey. Part of the space in the restaurant is dedicated to a small bookstore featuring a wide array of spiritually-oriented titles; a bulletin board lists activities in which people may be interested—a lecture in the area; a ritual gathering planned for the future; an ecological project inviting volunteers. Sometimes the

restaurant owner will invite a local monk or a visiting international author to make a brief presentation open to the public. More often the discussion develops informally, as customers linger after their meal to share concerns and speak about their spiritual practices.

Discussion often centers on traditional Chinese themes—*mingyun*, *yuanfen*, *fengshui*. People share their experience with the practices of meditation and physical exercise and prayer. Their interest is seldom in the historical development or orthodox understanding of these themes. Instead they speak of the impact of these spiritual insights and ritual activities in their own lives.

The deep heritage of Chinese Buddhism serves as the background here, both in the restaurant owner's self-description and in the appeal to the Buddhist theme of *yuanfen*. But the Buddhism here is neither orthodox doctrine mediated through a temple master nor disciplined practice overseen by an officially designated guru. It is rather the popular expression of Buddhism's centuries-old spiritual heritage, now thoroughly woven into the fabric of Chinese culture.

**Peter Ng:** Let me offer a comment to affirm Dr. Fan's findings. For Chinese people, 'religion' is not an abstract, metaphysical speculation. Their spiritual questions arise around the practical issues in life: How do I live a long and healthy life? Can I find a way to live beyond suffering and desire? How can I find blessings and peace? The cultural traditions of Daoism, Buddhism, and most of the popular religions in China deal with these practical issues. To my thinking, this is another reason why certain elements of the Christian Bible—such as the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the Psalms—are so appealing to Chinese people.

**Evelyn Eaton Whitehead:** To most westerners 'religion' suggests a separate social institution with formal leadership, identified membership, standardized doctrines and rituals. As Dr. Ng noted earlier, religion in this sense has had little place in Chinese history—past or present. But local traditions of spiritual belief and ritual practice have nourished the Chinese people for centuries. One of the most significant findings in Dr. Fan's research has been the extent to which



**Peter Tze Ming Ng** (Ph.D., University of London Institute of Education) is professor in the Department of Religion of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society at Chung Chi College. Reflecting his experience in the development of the academic discipline of religious studies in Chinese universities, Dr. Ng described the religious and spiritual quest of Chinese scholars today.

the urbanized Chinese in Shenzhen adopt and adapt elements of these traditional ritual practices as part of a newly-intentional spiritual search.

In the 1960s sociologist C.K. Yang introduced the term **diffused religion** to show how ritual practices and beliefs in traditional Chinese villages differed from the highly organized 'institutional religions' that characterize the West.<sup>3</sup> In our collaboration with Dr. Fan, we are using the term **diffuse religiousness** to highlight the personal choices and communal activities through which these traditional spiritual resources are reclaimed and renewed by contemporary Chinese people.

In ways that challenge many taken-for-granted western interpretations of modernity, the heritage of traditional belief and practice remains relevant to the Chinese spirit today. When Shenzhen residents describe the practices they have taken up in their search for meaning and healing in their lives, often they admit to previously seeing these very practices as superstition (*mixin*). When they lived in the village, they had looked down on their relatives who practiced meditation or set up altars at home. Now they found themselves returning to these same behaviors!

This modern embrace of traditional religious practices confounds many observers. Western sociological theory has long predicted that urbanization brings with it a loss of spiritual sensitivity, that citizens in modern industrial societies have little need for religion. From this perspective, the reinstatement in modern Shenzhen of these practices, borrowed from China's rural traditions, must be interpreted as mere regression. Under the pressure of life in the big city, these people would be seen as retreating into the solace of the familiar—if superstitious—practices of their past. A closer look suggests something quite different is happening.

**James Whitehead:** The Pulitzer Prize winning author Frances Fitzgerald has just published a book about a very similar phenomenon in Vietnam. Returning to this country after nearly thirty years, she has observed the refurbishing of temples and a renewed interest in spiritual rituals. An earlier socialist regime had severely curtailed these practices, but

in recent years, she writes, "there has been an astonishing revival of traditional social and religious practices throughout the country."

In Vietnam, as in Shenzhen, this spiritual renewal has accompanied the development of the market economy. Instead of signaling the demise of traditional religiousness, economic opportunity seems to have quickened the impulse of spiritual renewal. And Fitzgerald judges, "In Vietnam the revival of rites does not mean a return to the past...People may go to pagodas to pray for good health or fortune, but they also go to health clinics and learn business skills."

Her concluding judgment parallels what Dr. Fan has found in her own research: "The Vietnamese are going back to tradition and forward at the same time. More precisely, they are reclaiming and refashioning their traditions in order to move on."<sup>4</sup>

**Marsha Vande Berg:** *Let me ask now for any final remarks you may have on this intriguing set of issues.*

**Lizhu Fan:** For me, the most significant finding is that the deep religiousness of Chinese traditional culture is very much alive. Today in Shenzhen, economic opportunity coexists with a new and exciting spiritual awakening.

A moral freedom in this city—unimaginable in earlier days and places in China—generates not only significant abuses, but also a resurgence of interest in China's cultural heritage of religiousness. Residents of Shenzhen today enjoy a freedom that is not only economic, but spiritual. The western religious imagination might expect these now-urbanized Chinese to embrace an organized religion by formally affiliating with a Buddhist temple or Christian church. But most of the spiritually sensitive people I met are returning consciously—even self-consciously—to practices that are part of China's deep tradition, practices to which Chinese people over the centuries have turned in their search for deeper meaning and a peaceful way to live in the world. Whether Shenzhen is a signpost to China's future, both economically and spiritually, remains to be seen. But my research at least raises questions and, perhaps, even generates hope.



**James D. Whitehead**  
(Ph.D., Harvard University)  
is a theologian and historian of religion. He and Evelyn Whitehead travel annually to China to honor teaching commitments at universities in Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou. In the roundtable discussion, he examined the spiritual consciousness of Chinese university students engaged in the study of religion.

**Evelyn Eaton Whitehead:** I want to close with a caution. For the people in Shenzhen, a dominant feature of life is the exhilaration of personal choice. Dr. Fan's respondents wanted to make clear that their new moral convictions and ritual practices, too, arose from personal decision. Spirituality, they would often insist, was for them a personal matter. Personal—because their decisions were not limited by the social pressures exerted by family and village life. Personal—because their choices were not coerced by government control or political orthodoxy.

At first hearing, this discussion echoes the contemporary U.S. debate concerning spirituality and religion. In both Shenzhen and San Francisco, for example, many people today will say "I'm spiritual, but I don't belong to any religion." But to understand the significance of 'personal spirituality' for the people of Shenzhen, we must avoid incorporating their experiences too quickly into the U.S. discussion.

In America, the religion/spirituality distinction is situated within the more pervasive western dichotomy of public/private life. To offer the Shenzhen experience as an example of 'private spirituality' masks critical cultural differences. The spiritual individuality of Dr. Fan's Shenzhen respondents is not the individualism most familiar in America. In Shenzhen, the 'personalized' quality of spirituality is less a private adventure of the interior life and more a heightened awareness of personal responsibility.

Interpreting the experience of the people of Shenzhen as 'just like us' may be initially helpful, to the extent that it opens us to greater understanding and empathy. But ultimately this too-quick identification proves constraining. The supposed similarities shield us from confusion, but easily blind us to seeing what is genuinely different in the Chinese experience of spirituality.

**Peter Ng:** Let me return to the question of Christianity in China. We need to bear in mind that for most Chinese people who are interested in Christianity, Chinese culture and Christianity are by no means mutually exclusive. Chinese people embrace Christianity because it works. Christianity does no harm. In fact, it contributes to—it supplements—their lives. Chinese scholars, too, welcome

Christianity as one of the many supplements they can take from western cultures. And in the Chinese view, there are many supplements to choose from—especially if we consider the rich religious and spiritual resources of Asia. Christianity is just one of the many options available to them.

As outsiders hoping to help fill up the spiritual vacuum in China, Christians should come as true disciples of Jesus. We should come to China to serve, and not to be served. We come to offer one option or 'spiritual supplement' to help nourish the Chinese spirit. But we need to bear in mind that Christianity is but one among the many options for Chinese humanity today. Certainly, the Christian faith can make us unique, hence our unique contribution to China; but it is by no means to divide us from, or to be a weapon for us to use against, other non-Christian religions of China.

**James Whitehead:** Peter Ng has suggested that the Chinese look to supplement their spiritual diet with nourishment from other cultures and societies. Ever practical, the Chinese are willing to add to their spiritual practices anything that will help. Dr. Ng reflects, with much realism, that Christianity may in the future serve this role as supplement to Chinese religiousness.

The example of Buddhism in China may serve as a precedent here. Long recognized as indigenous to China, Buddhism was originally an import from India. In Chinese culture, Buddhism has always served this supplementary function. From the institutional resources of Buddhism, the classical tradition of China has drawn an impressive range of rituals and doctrines that serve a useful purpose for Chinese. Over time these practices, rituals and prayers have become more and more Chinese. Now they are a central part of the diffused religiousness that continues to nourish the Chinese soul.

In this light, a useful task for Christianity may be to explore, with greater flexibility and imagination, the ways in which our cherished values and spiritual insights may be offered freely to the Chinese people, to help nourish their spirit in this season of momentous social change.



**Marsha Vande Berg** (Ph.D., Vanderbilt University) is an award-winning journalist, columnist, and editorial specialist. A Center for the Pacific Rim board member, she currently serves as consultant to international business and foundations. Widely traveled in both Europe and Asia, she brings strong expertise to issues of contemporary China.

### Marsha Vande Berg offered this final word

Our world is increasingly pluralistic when it comes to religion and yet singular when it comes to faith and spirituality. This is the message I take away from our dialogue. When we hunger for spiritual meaning, we turn to religion. Or do we? Sometimes, we may find we search for nourishment in spirituality instead of—or in addition to—religion.

Our discussion today has heightened my appreciation of China's recent religious development. Economic reforms that started in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping began to loosen the party's iron grip on personal freedoms, including the practice of religion. Changes have been glacial and are not yet complete. Still, they continue to inspire a growing interest in religious practice, coinciding with the opening up of China's economic space.

This evolution also displays a dark side. An example is the central government's characterization of the Falungong as a cult and its brutal repression of practitioners the authorities say violate China's anti-cult laws. The irony, of course, is that Falungong is one of many practices that manage to attract adherents right and left. The difference between Falungong and the others, however, is Falungong's intensity in what seems to be a blatant effort to call attention to its own repression by state authorities.

Still, the popularity of Falungong and other Gong-related practices reflects the resources they provide for simply living one's life. These resources resonate with aspects of folk practices that have flourished off and on over the course of Chinese history. These religious practices can be carried out alone or in small groups.

They do not depend on government approval for their existence—as do the five registered religions in China. As such, they are also instructive from another perspective, namely their ability to be a catalyst for the further opening of personal freedoms in China as well. And if that can happen, it will nourish the individual spirit of many and the collective spirit of the nation. ■

### ENDNOTES

1. Peter TM Ng. "From Ideological Marxism to Moderate Pragmatism—Religious Policy in China at the Turn of the Century," pp. 405-422. In Lau Chung Ming, ed. *China Review 2000*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000.
2. Jiwei Ci. *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 11.
3. C.K Yang. *Religion in Chinese Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962; see especially Chapter XII.
4. Frances Fitzgerald. *Vietnam: Spirits of the Earth*. New York: Little, Brown, 2001. All quotations here are from her article "Silk Robes, Cell Phones," which appeared in the January 2002 issue of the *Smithsonian Magazine*, pp. 84-92.



GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT is due to Courtney Conley, whose accurate notes of the roundtable discussion provided the framework for the text in this issue of *Pacific Rim Report*.



For other issues of *Pacific Rim Currents*,  
please visit our website at:  
<http://www.pacificrim.usfca.edu/research/pacrimreport/>



## CENTER for the PACIFIC RIM and Its RICCI INSTITUTE

USF CENTER FOR THE  
PACIFIC RIM © 2002

University of San Francisco  
2130 Fulton Street  
San Francisco, CA  
94117-1080

CENTER FOR THE PACIFIC RIM  
415 422-6357  
FAX 415 422-5933  
[www.pacificrim.usfca.edu](http://www.pacificrim.usfca.edu)

RICCI INSTITUTE  
415 422-6401  
FAX 415 422-2591  
[www.usfca.edu/ricci](http://www.usfca.edu/ricci)

