

## Like the Romans, the Chinese are threatened by the real Christmas



Despite the fact that China produces over half of the world's Christmas decorations, the arrival of the Christ-child remains deeply unwelcome in the offices of the Chinese Communist party (CPC). Since Mao Zedong died in 1976, two things have grown exponentially: the economy and religion – and specifically Christianity. Not only is China now the largest economy in the world, it is set to become the most Christian country within the next couple of decades. How ironic: an officially communist country makes for the most effective capitalists, and an officially atheistic country makes for the largest number of believers.

Yet while the Chinese government has been delighted with its world-beating economic performance, it has little idea how to deal with the unexpected and unwanted rise of religion. Indeed, it scares the bejeezus out of it – not least because there are now more Chinese Christians (around 100 million) than there are members of the CPC (85 million). For just as the secular Christmas of Rudolf and elf-suits and present-buying is all the rage throughout China's bustling shopping malls, so too – beyond the malls – is the Christmas of the Jesus-child who grew up to be such a threat to the stability of the state that the Romans executed him. And it cannot have passed the attention of the control freaks in the Chinese politburo that a significant proportion of Hong Kong's Occupy protesters were Christians and inspired by their faith.

It is not the religion bit per se that the atheistic Communist party minds so much, it is the fact that religious people acknowledge a different source of authority and are thus, potentially, a threat to the

state. This, of course, was Herod's problem too – and why he sent his soldiers to try and murder the child born in royal David's city. Indeed, when Christians say that Jesus is lord and king, they are making a political statement: Caesar is not. It's a question of ultimate loyalty. No wonder the Chinese authorities are worried. Underground churches, beyond official sanction and often meeting semi-secretly in people's homes, are rapidly expanding throughout the country. The Catholic church is sort-of allowed, just as long as its adherents do not express loyalty to the pope, who again represents an alternative authority. If Christianity didn't have powerful friends abroad, who knows how the Chinese would treat it.

Consider the approach taken by the CPC to the rise of Falun Gong. This benign quasi-religion emerged in the 1990s and is based on a number of meditative spiritual and breathing exercises. It is most commonly recognised as a group of elderly men and women slowly swirling their arms about in the park. In 1999 the CPC decided that Falun Gong was a "heretical organisation" and proceeded to eliminate it, committing widespread human rights abuses in the process. Thousands of Falun Gong practitioners have died in Chinese police custody. The use of torture and forced labour have been widely reported. The Falun Gong leadership has been exiled.

Yet compared to the gentle cultivation of mindfulness that is Falun Gong, Christianity is an aggressive ballsy religion that has long historical form in picking fights and toppling dictatorships. It is therefore unsurprising that Christmas is a time of particular tension. On Christmas Eve, university students held anti-Christmas rallies with banners that read: "Chinese should not celebrate foreign festivals." This, however, is just the seasonal tinsel of Chinese repression. For the ongoing work of year-round officialdom involves the corralling of the religious instinct into official "patriotic" churches. Church buildings are frequently not given planning permission and are demolished if built without government approval. Crosses are often physically removed from the tops of church buildings.

Historically, it was the rapid increase of opium imports in the 19th century that brought Christian missionaries to China. The communists managed eventually to eradicate opium. And now many would like to do the same with Christianity. But not because, as a fellow communist once famously surmised, religion is an opiate. In fact, quite the opposite. They fear religion as a stimulant. And here, at least, the Chinese understand Christianity better than Marx.

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