

The Dilemma of Implementation: the State and Religion in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1990

Xiaoxuan Wang
Ph.D. Candidate in Chinese History
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations
Harvard University

Following the victory of the 1949 Communist revolution there was a systematic attack of religion. The Communists repression of religion seemed to have profoundly secularized society until the unexpected resurgence of religious life in the Reform period, which called into question the capacity of the government in subduing religion. This study attempts to answer the question why the government failed to effectively keep religion under control in the long run. It surveys religious life in Ruian county in southern Zhejiang during the People's Republic. It primarily looks at the ways religious policies were adapted and responded to at the local level. I argue that the reason for the government's inability to bring religious activities under control in the long run was the lack of effective administrative institutions and more importantly, the less than full support of cadres at the grass-roots level. The mutually reinforcing interactions between the inconsistent commands of suppressive and tolerant religious policies and the instability and indeterminacy of discourses and categories pertaining to religious policies had two consequences – first, to confuse local cadres who therefore vacillated between brutal crackdown and no interference, and second, to leave room for cadres to manipulate the commands from their superiors, especially for those cadres who were themselves involved in religious activities in one way or another. Even today the implementation of religious policies lacks the support of local cadres despite significant moves by the government to reconcile its relations with religious communities.