A STAR IN THE EAST
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Preface

A Star in the East is a product of our collaboration during the last two years at Baylor University. In 2014, we published a paper on the Christian conversion of the highly educated Chinese, based on very good survey data of religion in China and the field experiences of this book’s junior author (Xiuhua). We share our findings here in chapter 4. After the paper’s completion, we soon began working with Xiuhua’s field experiences to learn more about Christianity among Chinese villagers, which we detail in chapter 5. One thing led to another and soon we were having a great deal of fun working on this book.

Although we did not begin working together until recently, the origins of this book began more than a decade ago. I (Rodney) became involved with China in 2004 when a Chinese translation of my book Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion was published. In the years that followed, The Rise of Christianity, The Future of Religion, and The Victory of Reason were translated and published in China. This year, The Triumph of Christianity will be published in Chinese and so will A Rodney Stark Reader—a collection selected, translated, and edited by Dedong Wei and Zhifeng Zhong, two prominent Chinese scholars. Meanwhile, in 2008 Peking University in Beijing appointed me honorary professor of sociology. Despite many gracious invitations to visit, I have never been
in China. But then, I have never been in ancient Rome, the Crusader kingdoms, or most of the other places I have written about during my career.

My research efforts related to China began in 2007 after a huge survey of religion was conducted in China by Horizon Ltd. With the support of the John Templeton Foundation, the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University oversaw the purchase, translation, and dissemination of the data to Western scholars. Unfortunately, after these remarkable data became available, nothing much happened. I did design a small study to provide a basis for correcting the survey’s data on Christian membership for nonresponse bias and for the unwillingness of some respondents to admit they were Christians to a stranger who came to interview them—as is explained in chapter 1. Beyond that, I expected many others would use the data, but no one ever did. I thought it was a terrible waste.

In 2013, Xiuhua (or “Stella” as she is known to me and to her American friends) e-mailed me from Beijing about coming to America to get a PhD. She enclosed a fine paper that was soon accepted and published by the Interdisciplinary Journal for Religious Research. I urged her to come, of course.

I (Xiuhua) began to be interested in the rise of Christianity in China during the summer of 2008 when I became involved in a small project to examine Christianity and the provision of public goods in rural China, conducted by my professors Fengtian Zheng and Rongping Ruan at the Renmin University of China. During the survey, I was very surprised to discover that there were so many Christians in China. This was confirmed as I took part in several other field surveys across different regions in China. Our research group devoted
a good deal of study to Dr. Stark’s theoretical work, and it served as the basis for much discussion because it was so consistent with what we were finding. For example, conversion does take place through social networks and the traditional Chinese religions are in conflict with modernization. It also became clear to us that far larger surveys were needed in order to understand the rise of Christianity in China.

As I completed my master’s degree, my supervisor, Fengtian Zheng, suggested that I go to Baylor University and work with Dr. Stark. As he put it, that way I could “get some true knowledge back to China.” So I contacted Dr. Stark asking if I could continue my research under his guidance. He recommended me to the Baylor Sociology of Religion program and funded me generously.

For me, this book is only the beginning, not the end of my research on Christianity in China. Through my graduate studies and through working closely with Dr. Stark, I have gained the ability to see many more questions about religious life in China and fruitful ways to approach them. I have begun to explore the role of gender in conversions to Christianity in China.

It is our hope that this collaborative effort will shed new light on the rapid expansion of Chinese Christianity. Using reliable data, we challenge previous theories about religion in China and shed new light on those groups converting to Christianity. A Star in the East: The Rise of Christianity in China explores how and why this religion is growing at such a rapid rate and also speculates on its future growth. After all, if the religion keeps growing at its current pace, in a decade there will be more Christians in China than in any other country in the world.
THE NEW RELIGIOUS AWAKENING IN CHINA

Through much of the twentieth century, it was widely believed among Western intellectuals that the Chinese were immune to religion—an immunity that long preceded the Communist rise to power.¹ When, in 1934, Edgar Snow quipped that “in Russia, religion is the opium of the people, but in China, opium is the religion of the people,” many academic and media “experts” chuckled in agreement and dismissed the several million Chinese claimed as converts by Christian missionaries as nothing but “rice Christians”—cynical souls who had frequented the missions for the benefits they provided.² According to Harvard’s John K. Fairbank, by the 1940s it had “become evident that few Chinese people were likely to become Christians and that the missionaries’ long-continued effort, if measured in numbers of converts, had failed.”³ His Columbia colleague, Morton Fried, was of similar mind: “All information considered, China seems unlikely ever to see Christianity accepted by a significant segment of the population.”⁴

In 1949 the Chinese Communist Party came to power and soon expelled all Western missionaries. Then, in 1966 came the Cultural Revolution, which banned religion. All temples, pagodas, shrines, mosques, and churches were destroyed or
converted to secular uses. It was widely agreed that China soon would be a model of the fully secularized, postreligious society.

But it wasn’t to be. Instead, faith in a coming postreligious China was revealed as the opium of Western intellectuals. In the past thirty years, after several decades of severe repression, religion has been springing up everywhere in China. Tens of thousands of temples have been reopened or rebuilt. Millions more have returned to Buddhism, and once again huge numbers of Chinese are pursuing their traditional folk religions and worshipping at their ancestral shrines. As Daniel Overmyer described it, “wherever local conditions permit, religious activities come bubbling to the surface, festivals to the gods are held, traditional funerals and burial rituals are restored, destroyed images and shrines are replaced, priests appear to perform rituals, and congregations meet to worship.”

Meanwhile, tens of millions of Chinese have embraced Christianity—thousands more convert every day and more than forty new churches open every week (not counting new underground congregations). If this trend were to hold for even another decade, there would be more Christians in China than in any other nation in the world.

Some of this Chinese religious activity could be called a revival—the return of participation in the folk religion, for example. But the rapid expansion of Christianity is something new in Chinese history. Thus, it may be more appropriate to call what is going on in China today a religious “awakening.”

Unfortunately, most discussions of the religious developments in China have not been based on reliable statistics, properly interpreted. This has encouraged a good deal of nonsense. Some experts say there are 16 million Chinese
Christians, while others put their number at 200 million. Or, all the textbooks on comparative religion, and most discussions of religion in China, include Taoism as a major faith. Unfortunately, for many scholars a religion consists of a set of writings, rather than an activity engaged in by people; the best data available suggest that there are virtually no Taoists in China.

One purpose of this book is to use reliable statistics to impose discipline on the subject of religion in China. Two surveys provide the statistical heart of this first chapter.

The first, conducted in 2001 by the Research Center for Contemporary China, Peking University, is based on one thousand interviews and was released as part of the World Values Surveys. The sample was selected from a large “master sample” created for another survey in 1998. Persons under age eighteen and older than sixty-five were excluded. The data were gathered by face-to-face interviews with 1,000 Chinese. These data are freely available to anyone.

The second survey was conducted in 2007 by Horizon Ltd., China’s largest and most respected polling firm. It consists of a national multistage probability sample of mainland China. Respondents were sixteen or older and had lived at their current residence for at least three months prior to the survey. The data were collected by face-to-face interviews with 7,021 Chinese conducted by Horizon’s regular staff of interviewers. The data were made available to the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

The remainder of this chapter draws upon these surveys to portray the religious landscape of China in broad strokes as a background for what is to come.
THE DECLINE IN “IRRELIGION”

Not so long ago everyone in China was well advised to claim they had no religion, and because government practices are still somewhat antireligious, many religious Chinese continue to conceal their faith, especially to strangers such as survey interviewers. Of even greater importance, most Chinese who currently deny they are religious do so because they have such an odd understanding of what it means to have a religion. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of Chinese honestly tell survey interviewers that they are not religious, even though they also acknowledge that they engage in a whole host of activities that any Western observer would define as religious. For example, the 2007 Horizon survey found that 72 percent of those who said they had no religion had, during the past year, “venerated ancestral spirits by their graves.” Ten percent of these same respondents said they believed in the God in Heaven (the Jade Emperor) and 2 percent even said they believed in Jesus. In fact, 22 percent of Chinese who say they believe in Buddhism also say they do not have any religious beliefs. Consider, too, that the folk religion blends elements of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism with ancestor worship, belief in the Jade Emperor and many other traditional gods, and belief in ghosts and demons. It is housed in a huge number of temples, most of them having been recently rebuilt or restored, where crowds gather to pray and to place offerings of food and incense before images of various gods. But most Chinese seem to believe that this not is a religion! Hence, although the folk religion quite obviously is practiced by thousands of the respondents to the 2007 survey, only 4 out of 7,021 Chinese gave it as their religion, with most of the others involved in folk religion saying they had no religion.
Or, consider the case of Confucianism. Many Chinese officials and academics are adamant that Confucianism is merely a philosophy and definitely not a religion—a claim that has been ratified by many Western scholars. However, when Anna Xiao Dong Sun visited a number of temples in China, she observed many visitors earnestly praying to statues of Confucius for a variety of blessings and benefits. Even so, most of these “worshipers” probably would have said they had no religion, as seems to be reflected in the fact that only 12 of 7,021 Chinese in the 2007 survey identified Confucianism as their religion.

It seems that most Chinese define *religion* as belonging to an organized religious group, rather than consisting of practices, such as praying in temples, or of belief. Hence, some Chinese say that they believe in Jesus Christ while denying that they are Christians, as will be seen later in this book.

Keeping this peculiar definition of religion in mind, there was an immense decline in irreligiousness between the 2001 and the 2007 surveys. The percent who gave their religion as “none” fell from 93 percent down to 77.1. It seems implausible that a change of such great magnitude reflects conversions. Rather, it seems to reflect an increased willingness of Chinese to admit to having a religion. Nevertheless, in light of the above discussion it seems unlikely that even most of the huge majority who said they had no religion in 2007 were actually irreligious.

**Practicing Folk Religion**

The most basic form of Chinese folk religion involves ancestral spirits. Traditionally, Chinese venerate the spirits of their ancestors each year on grave sweeping day or during the
Qingming Festival, held on the 104th day after the winter solstice—usually around April 5. On that day, observant Chinese gather at the graves of their ancestors, sweep and clean the tombs, make offerings of flowers, food, and drink, and pray to the spirits of the departed. For many, the holiday takes the form of a family celebration and there often is dancing, kite flying, and fireworks.

The Qingming Festival was discouraged during Mao Zedong’s rule but was reinstated as a national holiday in 2008. In the 2007 survey, 72 percent of the respondents said they had “venerated ancestral spirits by their graves” during the past year. Of these, three-fourths had done so only during the Qingming Festival—the rest had done so more often (1 percent did it weekly). Keep in mind that although Westerners would define this as a religious event, most Chinese do not. In fact, 36 percent of Chinese Christians venerated their ancestor’s graves. It should be acknowledged that Matteo Ricci (1552–1619), the extraordinary Jesuit scholar who missionized in
China, held that veneration of the ancestors was not religious and therefore he permitted his converts to continue doing so. The Vatican later denounced this view, but reversed itself in 1939.

Besides venerating ancestors at their graves, 12.1 percent of the Chinese keep ancestral tablets in their homes, slightly more than the 11.4 percent who display a portrait or statue of Chairman Mao. In addition, 18.2 percent of the Chinese surveyed in 2007 reported that they had a portrait or statue of various gods in their home, such as the God of Wealth, God of the Kitchen, or the Earth God.

Thus, it can be said that the traditional Chinese folk religion “has revived with great force . . . [and] is practiced by hundreds of millions of people,” even if few Chinese regard it as religion. Indeed, hardly anyone in China admits to membership in what all the comparative religion textbooks present as major Chinese faiths: the 2007 survey found 0.6 percent were Taoists, 0.2 percent were Confucianists, and the same tiny percentage were classified as Others. Then there is Buddhism.

**The Buddhist Revival**

Buddhism came to China from India in about the first century AD and changed dramatically. As described by Buddha and based on his “discovery” that the world is mere appearance, lacking all point or purpose, nirvana is a state of nonbeing that affords an individual with release from the cycle of rebirths. In contrast, the Buddhism that succeeded in China conceived of nirvana as a heavenly place, a physical paradise known as the *Pure Land* where the virtuous go after death. Moreover, to attain nirvana it is not necessary to lead a life of ascetic meditation; the Pure Land can be reached by ordinary people.
through faith and devotion alone. Hence, the popular Chinese Buddhism came to be known as Pure Land Buddhism. However, after having achieved great success in attracting the masses of Chinese, Buddhism was all but destroyed in 845 when the government seized all Buddhist land, emptied the temple treasuries, destroyed more than 40,000 temples, and forced 265,000 monks and nuns to return to lay life. It was a blow from which Chinese Buddhism never recovered, living on primarily within the expansive embrace of the folk religion whose temples include statues of Buddha and Confucius along with hundreds of traditional gods. Then, in 1966, Buddhism was prohibited along with all religions.

Thus, it seems of great significance that while the 2001 survey found that only 2.1 percent of Chinese said they were Buddhists, 18.1 percent said so only six years later and 11.6 percent said they had recently worshipped in a Buddhist temple. Here, too, the explanation cannot be a huge wave of conversions but is rather a dramatic change in the willingness of Buddhists to come into the open, greatly encouraged no doubt by the government’s legitimation of Buddhism as reflected in its sponsorship of a World Buddhist Forum in 2006. Since then it has been far safer and less socially stigmatized to admit to being a Buddhist, as this is not regarded as a “foreign” faith in the same way that Islam and Christianity are seen as from “outside.” In any event, Buddhism very likely is the largest of the faiths most Chinese regard as religions.

ISLAM

Both surveys report that Muslims make up fewer than 0.5 percent of the Chinese, which seems quite accurate despite the
fact that official figures from the 2000 census reported that Muslims make up about 2 percent of the Chinese. The discrepancy is due to the fact that most Chinese Muslims live in border areas, including Inner Mongolia and Tibet, which are counted by the census but not included in the surveys. Geographical concentration remote from central China enabled the Islamic communities to sustain themselves during the most intense recent periods of government persecution of religions. But conflict with the government persists because Muslims are often seen as foreigners, a judgment that is reinforced by marked ethnic contrasts—many Muslim communities do not speak Chinese. In response, Muslim communities frequently protest against their conditions; in March 2014 a group of knife-wielding Muslim terrorists attacked commuters awaiting their train in a station in Yunnan Province. At least 33 people were murdered and nearly 150 were wounded. Chinese press accounts revealed that there had been several hundred Muslim attacks on Chinese residents in Xinjiang Province in the past year. Worse yet, terrorist attacks by angry Muslim nationalists seem to be accelerating and becoming more lethal.

The Rise of Christianity

It turns out that the Chinese Christians of 1949—those ridiculed in the West as rice Christians—were so “insincere” that they endured decades of bloody repression during which their numbers grew! And as official repression has slacked off, Christianity has been growing at an astonishing rate in China. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of disagreement over just how astonishing the growth has been: Are there