



Article

Buddhism in China: A Precarious Rebirth

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Two “God and Government” episodes on the rebirth of religion in China

Patrick James’ 2011 book [*Religion, Identity, and Global Governance*](#) asks one of the most enduring questions about religion: the question of whether or not it contributes to political extremism. Karl Marx famously declared religion the “opium of the people,” and this line of thinking inspired Communist governments in the twentieth century to actively reduce the influence of religious institutions—at times subtly, and at others aggressively. To this day, among religious scholars and the general public, this question inspires vigorous debate. However, there is one area where the importance of religion and spirituality cannot be denied: music.

Sacred Music and the Chinese Lute

As part of Interfaith Radio’s reporting on religion in China, Maureen Fiedler interviewed award-winning musician Wu Man about the spiritual history of a 2,000-year-old instrument called the pipa. The pipa (sometimes referred to as the Chinese lute) is featured in many examples of Chinese Buddhist art and iconography. The pipa musician depicted below, for instance, is shown in paradise. At least two Chinese Buddhist deities are traditionally depicted playing the instrument: Miàoyīntiān (Goddess of Wonderful Sounds) and Chíguó

Tiānwáng (Heavenly King Who Holds the Country).



This Tang Dynasty-era painting includes a pipa player (lower left). Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Modern-day pipa musician. Source: Hoàng Tiến Việt via Pexels.

In her interview with Fiedler, Wu Man recalls the legend of Buddha wielding the music of the pipa to condemn immoral individuals. The legend she relates evokes music's ability to stir the soul; her memories of music in religious spaces, furthermore, testifies to how enduring spiritual music is, even in anti-religious environments. She also shares a meditative composition she recalls hearing while visiting a Buddhist temple as a child during China's Cultural Revolution.

[Listen to the music and interview](#)

China's Cultural Revolution

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Mao Zedong and his allies sought to root out traditional Chinese culture and religion as part of their agenda for communist development. This included the destruction of Buddhist monasteries, the demolition of the Confucian temple of Qufu, and the detainment (or killing) of religious figures. In the decades after the Cultural Revolution, the government reduced its hostility toward religious expression, although state atheism remained the official policy. China today has one of the largest atheist populations in the world.

Religion Makes a Careful Return to Chinese Life

It's a turbulent time for religion in China. Many religious minorities feel like they are under attack But, at the same time, China is undergoing a religious revival. Young Chinese are rediscovering the religions of their grandparents—and discovering some new ones as well. Tourists and worshippers are flocking to newly-renovated temples, and the officially atheist communist government—which once destroyed temples and jailed religious leaders—is promoting (and sometimes even funding) this religious resurgence.

—Maureen Fiedler, host of the God and Government podcast.

As Ruth Morris reports in the *God and Government* episode “China: An Atheist Country, Embracing Buddhism,” Buddhist organizations are carefully making their way back into Chinese society. Furthermore, the Chinese government is subtly embracing this resurgence. Buddhist charities play an important role in serving China’s poor amid rising inequality. Also, newly renovated Buddhist temples have become a popular tourist attraction. For these reasons, the government has shown an openness in recent years to cooperate with Buddhist organizations in measured ways. Nonetheless, the relationship between China’s formerly condemned religious traditions and the government is a tenuous one. The government still reserves the right to determine which religious practices and traditions are permissible. This means that a significant number of religious and spiritual citizens in the People’s Republic of China find their beliefs to be at odds with the interests of the government.

[Listen to the podcast](#)

Aside from *God and Government*’s examination of religion in China, other projects under the Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion in International Affairs have also explored resurgences of religion and spirituality in postcommunist contexts. To learn about the environmental implications of religious revival in China, consider reading “[What Is the Path to Ecological Civilization](#).” Also, [another episode](#) of Interfaith Radio’s *God and Government* podcast explores the growing power of the Russian Orthodox Church.