

“Be a civilized citizen!” Corporate social responsibility and the new Chinese secular

“Be a civilized citizen, don’t cross against the red light!”

The automated announcement blaring from the curbside gate at first surprised, and then wildly amused the two women, who spent the next few minutes laughing and waving hands and bags over the infrared sensor to provoke the recorded response. Nearby, another woman, significantly older and visibly impoverished, sat on the ground, just below a sign calling for a “civilized society” to care for the elderly. If she did notice the irony, she certainly didn’t seem to care.

Over the two decades that I have been studying religion in mainland China, the country’s religion policy has lurched through a series of campaigns: brief but intense purges of “cults,” a low murmur of official discontent against Western “cultural pollution,” and finite bursts of enthusiasm for resurrections of Confucianism and Marxism. Even the new state religion law¹ took pains to constrain their physical presence, lavishly restored religious sites have prospered, at least materially. For most of the country’s religious actors, the real challenge is maintaining relevance in the face of the physical and social marginalization of religion from public life. In contrast, official campaigns to inculcate civic values have been deeply rooted and pervasive, and visually ubiquitous. In cities and countryside, it is rare to go for long without seeing propaganda extolling “core socialist values” or the image of the animated campaign mascot Meng Wa, her name itself a play on the Xi Jinping-era slogan “China Dream.”

By this description, China’s religion sounds rather like culture, while its political ideology might sound like religion. But China has long confounded the vocabulary of religious and secular, to the point that it seems reasonable to dismiss the language altogether. This paper aims to do something different: to leave behind the usual focus on the presence of absence of religion to examine afresh whether an understanding of what we might call the “new Chinese secular” might shed light on some key social transformations.

It does so in four parts: First, it expands the definition of the secular in terms advanced by Charles Taylor, as the relation of a society to ideological diversity. Second, it examines the grounding of the Chinese social and political system, and thus of the Chinese secular order in moral performance. Third, it shows that the Chinese secular neither tolerates religion without political condition, nor does it purge it from the public sphere, but rather defines confessional religion as subject to the state-

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation"
Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

centered moral order. Finally, it shows how the recent rise of corporate philanthropy illustrates the political tendency to co-opt independent social initiative through subject organizations.

Where is the Chinese Secular?

Secularism is a western concept, that much is obvious. Even in a Western context, it is much debated, and hardly universally loved. As with ideas like religious freedom, secularism is historically and culturally specific to Western societies, and can vary significantly even within modern democracies. Contrasting the two foundational cases of the United States and France, Charles Taylor notes how American secularism originally sought equality among Christian denominations, and developed into its present meaning that government should refrain from interference in individual expression. French secularism, in contrast, grew out of resistance to the political dominance of the Catholic Church. Far from encouraging religious expression, this iteration aims to purge displays of religion from the public sphere. In both cases, secularism is many things: a set of laws, but more deeply, an iconic statement about the nature of the social contract, often expressed in a simplified, idealized, and in Taylor's phrase, "fetishized" understanding of the principles involved. In both cases, very specific confessional and sectarian concerns developed into a far broader statement on how a liberal society responds not merely to religion, but more broadly to ideological diversity.²

An absolute definition of secularism grows more elusive when trying to understand how comparable ideals developed in a place like China, one of the world's oldest, richest and most populous civilizations, but one that the Western study of religion often seems determined to relegate to the status of perpetual "case study." This disciplinary disconnect should not surprise us. The conceptual vocabulary of religious studies (including such basic ideas as faith, belief and "religion" itself) is often a poor match to China, and by extension to much of East Asia. Studies of Chinese religion often feel marginal to religious studies theory, while many scholars of the vast corpus of Chinese scriptural and philosophical texts insist, not without justification, that the linguistic and cultural uniqueness of this tradition makes China essentially a world to itself.

At the same time, western understandings of religion have become very influential in China itself. As is well known, the Chinese term for "religion" (*zongjiao*) is a neologism of recent vintage, having into common use only in the late nineteenth century.³ Other terms, such as the one used for the Christian God, date back to the sixteenth century encounter with the Jesuits. But regardless of their origins, these ideas have taken root and developed meaning within Asian languages and conceptual systems. Late nineteenth century Japanese jurists and scholars (even the nativist

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation" Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

folklorist Yanagita Kunio was not immune), adopted and adapted this new language of religion, and were followed by generations of actors who used them in their own way and for their own ends.⁴ The first Japanese constitution in 1889 included a clause protecting the right to “religious belief,” a phrase that has since appeared in numerous Chinese codes and constitutions, including those of the People’s Republic (e.g., Art. 86 of the 1954 constitution).⁵ Until recently, China had a State Administration of Religious Affairs (in 2016 this office was incorporated into a larger body), and a set of Religious Affairs Regulations, which were revised in 2018. Every province, city and township reserves a formulaic space for “religion” when portraying itself to the outside world.

Although the newness of terminology for “religion” is well known, its “secular” counterpart is in fact much older. *Shisu* 世俗, the most commonly used contemporary translation, is composed of two characters meaning worldly and customary, and appears in classical Chinese texts with the meaning of “common.” This was the meaning implied when the Confucian disciple Mencius (372-289 BCE) said that he could not enjoy the music of the ancient kings, but only the *shisu* music of the present day, or again when he spoke of the *shisu* understanding of an idea, meaning that of the common man on the street.⁶ The neologism for religion, in contrast, is composed of two characters meaning sect (*zong*) and a teaching (*jiao*), linguistically signifying the *separateness* of the religious realm by defining it around confessional or monastic structures, neither of which enjoy the sort of prominence in Chinese religion as they do in the Christian tradition. It is not surprising, then, that this term for religion was brought to prominence in the context of treaties meant to protect people who identified as religious, specifically Christian missionaries.⁷ In terms of historical etymology, *secular* is the world, *religion* is a realm that is conceptually, and newly distinct from it.

The poor fit of such terminology to real religious life in China has complicated attempts to conceptually or legally divide the “religious” from the “secular,” and are in part responsible for a long history of Western misperceptions. Voltaire claimed that China’s enlightened and rational high civilization was free of religion, while the lower classes reveled in ritualistic Buddhism, the “highest pitch of superstition” that was “tolerated in China for the life of the vulgar, a coarse sort of food proper for their stomachs.”⁸ As Catholic mission spread in China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Church became bitterly divided over the question of whether Chinese ritual activities, specifically the funeral offerings demanded by Confucian propriety and Chinese law, were properly *religious*, and thus idolatrous. This same debate was revived in the twentieth century as the Vatican formed its response to the ritual requirements of Japanese fascism, deciding in the 1936 papal letter *Pluries* [Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation" Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

Instantanque that public veneration for the war dead was a civic, rather than a religious activity.⁹ It came to see political ceremony quite differently just a few years later, when the newly-founded People's Republic turned violently against Catholic missionaries. In this setting, Chinese political ritual was again portrayed as replacing religion, especially the political ceremony that accompanied what was often referred to as the "cult" of Mao Zedong.¹⁰

So where does this leave the Chinese secular? Since religion is itself a fraught concept, defining secularism as the mere absence of religion is obviously of limited explanatory value. Yet as we shall see, elements of secularization theory, especially Taylor's work on secularity in the civic lives of Western societies, do resonate with recent social and political transformations in China.

The moral public

Even by contemporary standards, Chinese smartphone users (colorfully known as the "head down tribe" *ditouzu*) are uniquely addicted to their smartphones, and to officially-promoted social media platforms like WeChat (*weixin*), which have become truly indispensable, not only for communication, but also for daily commercial transactions. Those who do look up from their phones will find public spaces filled with messaging, product advertising most obviously, but also didactic campaigns promoting China's traditional morality, "harmonious society," "core socialist values," and the "China dream." Each in slightly different terms, these campaigns all revolve around the basic idea of service to the state, family and society. (For a visual selection of these images, see [here](#)) They include admonitions to respect the elderly, to be honest in commercial dealings, and polite in public. Message boards in parks and along sidewalks praise the contributions of moral exemplars, living and dead (including a revival of interest in the iconic Cultural Revolution-era propaganda figure Lei Feng), who have served society through deeds large and small. Admonitions to public obedience and good citizenship are often written in terms of individual morality and personal "quality," (*suzhi*) a vague term that has of late attracted the attention of anthropologists, but is itself hardly new.¹¹

In fact, despite their technological ubiquity, very little of the basic substance of these campaigns is new. Six centuries before the People's Republic, the first Ming emperor, aiming to restore Chinese culture after an extended period of Mongol rule initiated an ambitious program of social education, consisting of traveling morality lectures, posted writings, and criminal penalties for such wicked activity as neglecting an aged parent. The national education and New Life Movements of the early twentieth century capped another restorationist trend that had been

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation" Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

brewing among intellectuals as a remedy to the country's rapid political decline. Like the early-Ming transformation, campaigns like Chiang Kai-shek's New Life Movement were at their core moral movements, ones that sought to rebuild Chinese society around a new individual, refashioned by the rules of decorum, etiquette, and civic values. In its early years, the Communist regime communicated the ground rules of the new society through public spectacle, both destructive events like the "struggle sessions" that aimed to break down the structure and loyalties of the old society, and constitutive ones, like the mass rallies that mobilized schools, work units and villages around the idea of membership in a new China and a new socialist world.

For all of their differences, what all of these historical movements shared in common was the ideographic domination of public space. Whether it was the arches and shrines erected in memory of deified moral exemplars during the imperial era, or the increasingly ambitious public education campaigns of the twentieth century, what was being policed was visible public display, rather than interior belief or morality.¹² It could of course be argued that the two were inseparable: that the foundation of Chinese ritual (*li*) is the expectation that rote *external* performance, for example of rituals of gratitude towards Heaven, is the root of *internal* ethical transformation. Certainly, a breach of mores need not have been performed in public view to be perceived as a civic concern: ritual norms such as rites to placate ancestors served the common good by maintaining cosmic order and preventing the trespass of harmful forces. But the didactic recreation of social values permeated even private ritual. In both ritual and political (think of the staged trials and show confessions of the Maoist era) settings, correct public performance often trumped belief, sincerity or good intentions.

By Taylor's description, the core of western secularism is the relationship of the public to confessional religion, here as a proxy for ideological diversity writ large.¹³ In contrast, the Chinese secular is defined less by the absence or presence of religion, than by the active promotion of ideology through a public code of decorum. One part of this is the weak role of confessional religion itself.

Confessional subjects

If moral performance was the core of the public, where then was its boundary? Ironically, not at the church gate. When John Lagerwey called imperial China a "religious state," he was speaking of political realities—the preeminence of the imperial institution over monastic structures, and the axial position of the emperor in a ritual cosmology that connected Heaven and Earth—rather than confessional ones.¹⁴ Even as Buddhist and Daoist clergy jockeyed for favor within the corridors of power, there was

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation"
Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

very little in the past thousand years of Chinese history to suggest any struggle between the principles of political and religious authority. To avoid the trap of cultural determinism, we should remember that as much as in Europe, these norms arose from historical contingency. In China, the question of clerical autonomy was settled definitively by moments like the late ninth century purge of Buddhism from the realm of political power. Rulers like the first Ming emperor were happy to reinscribe this precedent as the imperial institution continued to evolve. Yet things looked very different in nearby Korea, where monastic Buddhism came to a peaceful and lasting accommodation with the early Choson dynasty, and in Japan, where conflict with armed Buddhist and Christian militants extended across a prolonged period of political instability in the late sixteenth century, ending in a confrontation that violently subordinated clerical to state power for the next three hundred years.

Since at least the fourteenth century, the Chinese imperial institution sat atop monastic structures and religious communities, their ordination and their property, serving as both patron and watchdog. The benefits of this relationship were not entirely one-sided. Daoist and Buddhist ritual did play an important role in court life, while some rulers, such as the Qing Yongzheng emperor, were known for their friendships with learned monks.¹⁵ Yet while a strong dynasty could afford to be magnanimous to law-abiding religious structures, transgressions could provoke a swift response. Tibetan monasteries that had been politically allied to the deposed Mongol dynasty lost rights and property during the Ming. Catholic missionaries of the seventeenth century had been able to gain as many as three hundred thousand converts before their public infighting and flouting of ritual conventions convinced exasperated Qing emperors to expel them from the country. Even worse than political intrigue was dark magic. Popular teachings (especially those identified in sources as the “White Lotus” Teaching) were persecuted without mercy. In addition to stylized charges of holding nighttime orgies and stirring up the people with predictions of a coming apocalypse, political powers feared these groups precisely because they believed their baleful magic to potentially be real.¹⁶

But in the big picture, such instances of political suppression were the exceptions that proved the rule. Formally, the policy of the territorially expansive Qing dynasty resembled the “legal pluralism” of the Ottoman Empire, that granted mediated subject identity to internal minorities who, like Russian Jews or Hellenic Christians, combined ethnic with confessional identity.¹⁷ This was quite unlike the Han majority, few of whom embraced anything like an exclusive religious affiliation, especially for China’s two identifiable “-isms,” Buddhism and Daoism.¹⁸ Most people freely mixed religious traditions, regarding clergy, deities and

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation"
Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

temples as resources. Structured ritual life was based on clan or locality, rather than religious identification in any manner resembling the Western tradition of confessional affiliation. Distinct ethnic communities were quite different. Until the gradual institution of direct administration during the early 1700s, many of the distinct ethnicities within China's boundaries (especially during the territorially expansive Qing) lived under community self-rule, encountering the Chinese state through the mediation of chieftains or princes.

Religious structures often played a key role in the political lives of these ethno-religious communities. In Tibetan and Mongolian areas, Buddhist monasteries were a pseudo aristocracy, and enjoyed the legal right to collect tax and labor from farmers and herdsmen. Chinese Muslims lived in a variety of settings, often in close proximity to Han neighbors, while maintaining a separate communalized identity that left them as perennial outsiders ("familiar strangers," as historian Jonathan Lipman has called them), meaning that a breakdown of trust could result in violent, and collective recriminations against even well established communities.¹⁹ Two very different uprisings of the nineteenth century (grouped together as "Muslim rebellions") resulted nearly twenty million deaths. Near the capital, the breakdown of public order during the Boxer Uprising provided the opportunity for violent recriminations between Han and Muslim villages.²⁰

The policy of treating ethno-religious minorities as distinct internal communities continued into the twentieth century and beyond. Ethnic classifications were formalized in the early years of the People's Republic, a time that actual treatment of religion was highly inconsistent. Numerous Buddhist monasteries, including those in Tibet and Mongolia, were sacked and looted. Muslim clerics were beaten, humiliated and forced to break dietary restrictions by consuming pork. In 2017, the world came to know the scale of abuses against the Uighur population of Xinjiang, including the secret detention of as many as half a million in "re-education camps." The reasons including fears of ethnic separatism in a place that is historically non-Han, must remain unspoken. Instead, policing of Xinjiang is justified in the name of rooting out radical Islam.²¹

But like other forms of religious persecution, it is important to remember that such religious brutality has come in waves. There have also been periods of greater tolerance, and many places did go to significant lengths to visibly accommodate a select set of officially approved cultural differences, especially in areas that were administratively designated as ethnic autonomous regions. Looking specifically at diet, state planners in the 1950s accommodated local Muslims in places like Harbin by subsidizing the price of beef to keep parity with pork, and local

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation" Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

governments still keep strategic reserves of halal meat in order to stabilize prices in minority areas.²² Even under the People's Communes, Muslims were often allowed to maintain a separate halal diet, including maintaining a separate slaughtering grounds, and keeping dairy cattle for their own milk consumption.²³

Chinese Christians, particularly those who had been in contact with missionary institutions, presented a more difficult case. While Muslims could be fit into the neat parameters of Stalinist ethnic classification, Christians were often characterized as a minority of choice, people who had voluntarily turned their back on their own culture. They also made for easy scapegoats. The timing of the first major anti-Catholic political movement as part of the 1951 Suppress the Counterrevolutionaries Campaign, suggests that the ill-treatment of Chinese Christians during the early years of the PRC had less to do with real suspicion, than with their usefulness in establishing the authority of the new regime.²⁴

Aiming to preemptively curate what would constitute religion in the reform era, the official rehabilitation of religion since the 1980s combined control of religions under the state administration with alternating indifference to and persecution of those outside it. On the one hand, the five state-linked religions enjoyed protection and even patronage. During the 1990s, even as the full force of the state was being mobilized against groups like Falungong (a topic that has been written about extensively elsewhere²⁵), the temples, religious sites, schools and seminaries of the five state-linked religions were being rebuilt or refurbished, often in lavish fashion and at state expense. In return, these religions would operate under political leadership and submit fully to the state. The other side of this policy, the part that is reflected in the violent repression of underground Christian congregations and Xinjiang Muslims, is only one face of what some have called China's "comprehensive war on religion."²⁶ Nor is it universal. Even as clear repression takes place against certain groups, much of the Chinese landscape remains dotted with temples, religious iconography, and a strongly traditional ritual component in activities such as rural funerals. We can debate the real freedom of this unofficial religious sector, but its existence is fairly easy to confirm.

Policy tangibly shapes how state-linked religions express themselves theologically. Although China's religion law allows proselytization within the premises of designated sites, content is monitored against the deliberately soft parameter of "state security." The result is often a watering of theology, and emphasis instead on generalizable expressions of community, social service and morality, of the sort that characterizes interfaith dialogue. To those who hear only of religious persecution, it will come as a surprise to learn that churches in China are often packed for

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation"
Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

Sunday and weekday services, which are held in well-maintained buildings that are adorned with Biblical quotations about love and justice. But writings and sermons themselves play down the more potentially contentious aspects of the Gospel: such as the call to evangelize the non-believer, or the idea that the single road to Heaven lies through Christ. The point here is that state-linked religions are as compelled as anyone to treat the public space as one of active moral performance, even within the walls of the church. Just as Chinese law bans expressions of religion or proselytization outside of designated religious sites (i.e., the secular public), so too does the performance of religion in the officially-designated religious sphere (the religious public, or to use terms literally, the *religious secular*) demand a theological reformulation that subjects difference to the themes of morality and social unity, and above these still: subjection of religious structures to state and the Communist Party.

Charity begins at work: The rise of China's corporate citizens

Political ambivalence to the activities of private institutional actors, notably NGOs and charities, far predates the current regime. Imperial China had its own well established charitable tradition, which was deeply affected by the arrival of mission institutions in the late nineteenth century. Much of the change was organizational. Native charities had tended to be small, personal networks. Inspired by the larger and well-funded mission hospitals, soup kitchens and orphanages, Chinese activists of the twentieth century established a new generation of hybrid charities, including a Chinese branch of the Red Cross, and a native adaptation called the Red Swastika Society. As this new charity sector grew, the government of the Chinese Republic enacted the first of a series of laws that aimed to police its finances and foreign connections.²⁷ The private charitable sector continued to expand in response to the Japanese invasion, but collapsed soon after 1949, as foreign missionaries were ejected, and the vast majority of Chinese groups closed in acquiescence to the claim that the new socialist state would need no such help caring for the needs of the people.²⁸

The reemergence of the NGO sector in the 1980s raised the need for new regulation, at the same time shining a harsh light on deeper social issues. Private philanthropy reached a peak with a wave of donations in response to the disastrous earthquakes in Wenchuan (2008) and Ya'an (2013). But the decision to allow human and material aid from outside (especially from Japan or groups like the Taiwanese Tzu-chi Foundation) was received with some criticism, and the same openness of Internet discussion that fed the outpouring of private charity also highlighted two new sources of embarrassment: scandals involving the embezzlement of Red Cross donations (compounded by crass blogging by a young woman who claimed to be the mistress of one of the culprits), and the notorious

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation" Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

cheapness of many of the country's new super-rich in the face of more long term problems of poverty and underdevelopment, a problem was publically highlighted by none other than Bill Gates, as well as Chinese figures like action star Jet Li, who founded his own charitable foundation.²⁹

By the new century, concern over private social initiatives spinning out of control prompted the passage of new regulations: the 2004 Foundation Management Law, and highly criticized Foreign NGO law of 2016.³⁰ Like its predecessors from the 1920s, the NGO law does not ban private charities directly, but demands that NGOs and charities register, a process that can be made easy or onerous. NGOs with religious or foreign ties were scrutinized especially harshly, as were those that emphasized domestic problems. But just as with state-linked religion, NGO regulation did not aim to ban charitable giving outright, but rather to channel it into a more controllable form. This was done by taking philanthropy out of private hands, and moving it towards larger, political entities.

The rise of “corporate social responsibility” (*qiye shehui zeren*) provided a solution, giving the state a new partner in its social initiatives, and addressing many of the new economic realities of the new century. From a purely practical standpoint, concentrating philanthropy in the corporate sector has many advantages. It leverages the management expertise and reach of the commercial sector, and makes corporations willing participants in key state initiatives in ecology, poverty alleviation and disaster relief, particularly at the local level.

Corporate philanthropy also reframes the biggest change in Chinese society—the selloff of state assets to a quickly expanding semi-private sector—in a moral light. This structural change began with the Asian financial crisis of 1998, and has accelerated over recent years, skewing Chinese economic growth towards the artificially large companies that have come to dominate strategic sectors such as food, real estate, energy and technology. These new companies are remarkably powerful, and many have at their command globally unmatched wealth and resources.³¹ But this wave of consolidation had a downside. Intended to be easier to regulate, large companies in fact spawned outsized problems. Scandals involving corruption, the abuse of concentrated wealth, forced evictions by real estate developers, exploitation of migrant workers, and egregious breaches of food, building and transport safety acutely irritated public sentiment, have provoked rare displays of dissent, in person and online.³²

Discussion of CSR began just as this major economic shift, and its attendant problems were taking off.³³ Late in 2002, Renmin University hosted a conference to discuss “labor relations and CSR against

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation" Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

background of globalization.” Over the next year, Beijing in Shanghai hosted meetings on themes such as “enterprise value and social responsibility”³⁴ These early discussions of corporate social responsibility were heavily influenced by foreign businesses operating in China, and included participation by Ford, the Harvard Business School and the British Embassy. By virtue of their national prominence and political connections, the first and most vocal domestic proponents tended to be the largest Chinese companies. One of the first to tie its public image to social philanthropy was the mega real estate developer Vanke, which released its first “green book on social responsibility” in 2005. Other key players, especially the well-connected and officially-favored “dragon head” companies, quickly followed suit.³⁵ The institutionalization of CSR as part of the business landscape was made final with its recognition in the new Company Law, which took effect on January 1, 2006.³⁶

Writing in the official *People’s Daily* in the summer of 2007, Beijing-based economist Zou Dongtao explained two benefits of CSR.³⁷ The first is that it encourages a moral atmosphere within the companies themselves, leading both workers and management at all levels to behave responsibly. This latter argument would become especially timely later that year with the beginnings of the greatest scandal of recent years: the sale of poison milk and infant formula powder that had been laced with industrial chemical melamine to mimic higher protein count. The result killed six children and sickened hundreds of thousands nationwide.

The authors of the 2009 *Blue Book of Enterprise Citizenship* addressed the milk poisoning incident directly. Beginning with a litany of previous scandals: milk powder that was sold stripped of nutrients, and expired product that was resold with fake brand packaging, the article focused on Beijing-based Sanlu, the company that was most directly implicated in the event. From a 1950s-era collective, Sanlu had grown since the 1980s as a politically favored enterprise and valued brand. Its downfall implicated both the company and those who had let its abuses go unchecked. In September of 2008, after the extent of the scandal had become widely known, Premier Wen Jiabao bluntly described the reason as two separate lapses: the combination of “lazy government oversight and a lack by some companies of professional morals and social ethics.” The problem of oversight addressed in a major reorganization of the dairy industry and series of new food safety laws. Engendering a sense of morality that would “course like blood through the body of the entrepreneur” was of course a much harder task.³⁸

The second benefit is that since corporations enjoy legal rights and a growing presence in society, they have a proportionate responsibility to recognize and uphold the rights of others. Perhaps unwittingly echoing the

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation"
Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

tone of religious moral precepts, Zou lists six recipients of a company's "ethical dealing" (*shan dai*): stockholders, workers, customers, the natural environment, business partners and society at large. Although not stated here, this sort of argument is also a defense of the rise of large corporate interests themselves, echoes the early defense of socialism as being not only more just, but also more efficient way to serve the public good. This similarity is no illusion, since the newly privatized companies often work very closely with local government, which supplies finance and access to markets and materials. In return, company CSR activities actively support state initiatives such as tree planting, disaster relief, and poverty alleviation.

Although written in the language of management theory, both of these arguments echo earlier public morality campaigns, in the sense that the performance of socially responsible acts is expected to produce beneficial moral results, both for the actors themselves and for the observers. The proponents are not naive. The 2009 report pointed out that Sanlu donated 14 million *yuan* of milk products to the victims of Wenchuan at the very moment that it was working to cover the extent of the melamine poisoning. Rather, they envision a longer road of educating management on the strategic value of honesty to a company. Promotion of socially responsible activities, enhances brand identity, while CSR activities themselves build morale and a sense of common purpose. Channeling public philanthropy into CSR campaigns provides a powerful but controlled outlet for public sentiment, and is one way of presenting a major shift in China's economic foundations as a positive development.

So again, where is the Chinese Secular?

It should be obvious by now that this paper's understanding of the secular in China has very little to do with the absence or presence of religious organizations or symbolism. On the one hand, the tightly-controlled official religion sector is in many ways thriving. On the other, freedom within the unofficial sphere ebbs and flows. Against the violent persecution of Falungong, house Christians or Xinjiang Muslims, we must also weigh the vast number of religious sites and practices that survive by figuratively flying below the radar, even as actual surveillance techniques grow ever more sophisticated. Much of this religious efflorescence is euphemized as cultural heritage or ethnic custom. Reducing this extremely complex landscape to a checklist of key "religious freedom" indicators is not likely to produce any real insight.

In Taylor's description, state secularism is essentially ideological agnosticism, a "response of the democratic state to diversity," and a declaration that the state cannot take a position that favors any one view in an organically diverse and intellectually free society.³⁹ But looking even

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation" Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

beyond the fact that China does very overtly espouse an official guiding ideology (beyond socialism, paramount leaders will each seek to make their contribution to the evolving corpus of “thought”) is the fact that China’s diversity is *not* organic. Taking ethnicity policy as an example, China’s diversity is highly scripted and structured. Still hewing to a Stalinist model, China recognizes a fixed number of ethnicities, and includes the category of “ethnicity” as an objective and immutable marker of personal identification. There may be *plurality* of ethnicity or religion, but it is a created one, with little space for personal interpretation.

In a very different way, state secularism in China expresses very clearly an absolutely clear overriding ethic: the “civic religion” of illiberal utilitarianism.⁴⁰ High political figures raise functional arguments for allowing religion to exist, because outlawing it by fiat would be too disruptive, and because state-controlled religion may have socially redeeming values.⁴¹ In this same vein, public morality is performed and praised because it produces socially desirable results: stability, unity, and economic growth. In each case, the state continues to take upon itself the paternal role of decider and engineer of social value. At its core, the Chinese secular remains precisely the recognition of this state-led illiberalism as the foundation of society.

¹ The Religious Affairs Regulations were promulgated in 2004 and revised in 2017. Translation and comparison available at:

https://www.academia.edu/28414977/Chinas_Religion_Law_2005_vs._2016

² Charles Taylor. “The Meaning of Secularism” *The Hedgehog Review*. Fall 2010: 23-34. *A Secular Age*, Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2007.

³ Chinese pronunciations given here. The common use of Chinese characters by

⁴ Charles Taylor. “The Meaning of Secularism” *The Hedgehog Review*. Fall 2010: 23-34. *A Secular Age*, Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2007.

⁵ Chinese pronunciations given here. The common use of Chinese characters by Japan and (at the time) Korea made these terms natural cognates across East Asia.

⁶ On the changing definition of religion in Asian contexts, see Peter van der Veer. *The Modern Spirit of Asia. The Secular and the Spiritual in India and China* (Princeton, 2013); Thomas DuBois, ed. *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁷ 1889 Constitution of the Empire of Japan, Article 28 “Japanese subjects shall, within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects, enjoy freedom of religious belief.” The American-modeled Japanese constitution of 1947 (Art. 20) rephrases this to emphasize the right of religious affiliation.

⁸ These two quotes come from *Mencius*, *Liang Hui Wang xia*, 8, and *Lilou xia* 58, respectively. A keyword search for the term on ctext.org will reveal many similar usages from other ancient texts.

-
- ⁷ Here we see echoes of Elizabeth Shakman Hurd's characterization of religion legislation as being predisposed to recognize the interests of *self-defined* religious communities. *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- ⁸ Voltaire, *Essay on Universal History: The Manners and Spirit of Nations* London: J. Nourse, 1759. Book 1, pg. 27.
- ⁹ DuBois, Thomas David. 2017. *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ¹⁰ For one of many examples of this sort of reductionism, see "China and the Korean War loom over Trump and Kim" *Washington Post*, June 11, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/06/11/china-and-the-korean-war-loom-over-trump-and-kim/?utm_term=.021ac02059cb. There is a significant body of work that more thoughtfully examines the Maoist ritual as a phenomenological religion (cite).
- ¹¹ Andy Kipnis. "Suzhi: A Keyword Approach." *The China Journal*.
- ¹² On public space in Republican cities, see Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in Republican China, 1911-1929* (Oxford, 2000).
- ¹³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2
- ¹⁴ Lagerwey, John. 2010. *China: a Religious State*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press.
- ¹⁵ ter Haar, Barend. 2009. "Yongzheng and his abbots," in *The People and the Dao: New Studies of Chinese Religions in Honour of Prof. Daniel L. Overmyer*. Edited by Philip Clart and Paul Crowe. Pp. 435-477. Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica.
- ¹⁶ ter Haar, Barend. 1999. *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. Han Bingfang. 2011. "The Taigu School and the Yellow Cliff Teaching: Another Case of Transformation from Confucian Academic Group to Religious Sect." In *Popular Religion and Shamanism*, ed. Ma Xisha and Meng Huiying,. Boston and Leiden: Brill, 207-254. Kuhn, Philip A. 1990 *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- ¹⁷ Barkey, Karen. 2013. "Aspects of Legal Pluralism in the Ottoman Empire." In *Legal Pluralism and Empires*, ed. Lauren Benton and Richard J. Ross, 83-107. New York: New York University Press.
- ¹⁸ Vincent Goossaert, *The Taoists of Peking, 1800-1949: a social history of urban clerics*. Harvard Univ. Asia Center - 2007
- ¹⁹ Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle, WA, 1997).
- ²⁰ See the account in Peill, Arthur D. 1908. *The beloved physician of Tsang Chou life-work and letters of Dr. Arthur D. Peill, F.R.C.S.E.* edited by J. Peill, London.
- ²¹ This is currently being documented in numerous journalistic, human rights and government reports. More citations to follow:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/opinion/china-re-education-camps.html>.
<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/the-police-state-of-the-future-is-already-here#.kxxwXj8MMB>
- ²² Waldron 23, note 8.
- [Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation" Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

-
- ²³ Interviews in Yunnan and Hebei
- ²⁴ *Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005)
- ²⁵ David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (Oxford, 2008).
- ²⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/with-wider-crackdowns-on-religion-xis-china-seeks-to-put-state-stamp-on-faith/2018/09/15/b035e704-b7f0-11e8-b79f-f6e31e555258_story.html?utm_term=.27d36ba92ee3
- ²⁷ Smith, Joanna F. Handlin (1987) "Benevolent Societies: The Reshaping of Charity During the Late Ming and Early Ch'ing." *Journal of Asian Studies* 46 (2): 309-337. Cai Qinyu and Li Yuanfeng (2002) "Shilun jindai Zhongguo shehui jiuji sixiang" [*A Discussion of Social Relief Thinking in Modern China*] *Dongfang luntan* 5: 90-97. Ji Zhe, "Comrade Zhao Puchu: Bodhisattva under the red flag" in *Making Saints in Modern China*, eds. David Ownby, Vincent Goossaert, Ji Zhe (New York: Oxford, 2017) 317-322. Zeng Guilin (2011) "Minguo shiqi cishan lifa zhong de minjian canyu—yi Shanghai cishan tuanti lianhehui wei zhongxin kaocha" [Civic participation in charity legislation of the Republic of China—an examination of the Shanghai Charities Association"] *Xuexi yu tansuo* 197 (6): 212-218. (English translation available at: https://www.academia.edu/30565713/_Civic_participation_in_charity_legislation_of_Republic_of_China_an_examination_of_the_Shanghai_United_Charities_Association_Translation_of_article_by_Zeng_Guilin)
- ²⁸ "Before the NGO: Chinese charities in historical perspective." *Asian Studies Review* (December 2015), 541-552
- ²⁹ **Note here the Jack Ma announcement about switching his attention to philanthropy.**
- ³⁰ <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/laws-regulations/regulations-management-of-foundations>; <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/laws-regulations/law-of-peoples-republic-of-china-administration-of-activities-of-overseas>
- ³¹ On the consolidation of TVEs and SOEs, see Jin, Cheng. 2017. *An Economic Analysis of the Rise and Decline of Chinese Township and Village Enterprises*. Palgrave 2017.
- ³² <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2123714/migrant-workers-take-streets-beijing-protest-against>; On migrant workers see the excellent coverage by the SCMP: <https://www.scmp.com/topics/migrant-workers-china>, <https://www.rfa.org>
- ³³ Lin, Li-Wen. "Corporate Social Responsibility in China: Window Dressing or Structural Change?" *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 28, 1 (2010): 64-100.
- ³⁴ *Zhongguo qiye gongmin baogao shu, 2009*. Social Sciences Academic Press: 308
- ³⁵ *Qiye shehui zeren lüpi shu* at <http://business.sohu.com/s2008/3236/s254443895/>
- ³⁶ Lin, 70.
- ³⁷ *Zhongguo qiye gongmin baogao shu, 2009*: 6-
- ³⁸ *Zhongguo qiye gongmin baogao shu, 2009*: 288-299
- ³⁹ Taylor 25

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation" Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!

-
- ⁴⁰ Jaclyn L. Neo. "Secularism without Liberalism: Religious Freedom and Secularism in a Non-Liberal State." *Michigan State Law Review*, 333 (2017): 333-370.
- ⁴¹ See discussion of contemporary views presented in "Opiate of the Masses with Chinese Characteristics: recent Chinese scholarship on the meaning and future of religion." Chi Zhen and Thomas DuBois, Introduction to Lü Daji and Gong Xuezheng, eds. *Religious Studies and Marxist Approaches to Religions in China*, trans. Chi Zhen, Volume 4 of "Selected Research on Modern Chinese Religions" series (Brill 2014), 1-20.

[Thomas DuBois](#) for "Secularities: Patterns of Distinction, Paths of Differentiation"
Leipzig, October 5, 2018

Please do not quote this paper!