Religious Chic

Exported from Holy-Writings.com on 2026-07-06 — 1 clipping

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"But I feel Chinese society is showing much more willingness to understand and accept the Bahá'í faith than 20 years ago when the religion was reintroduced to China after its last apperance in the 1930s."

She cited her research papers on Bahá'í being turned down for publication because of doubts over possible cult status four or five years ago. Lately, they have found more acceptance.

"I have been thinking about applying for a national project to study its status as I've felt it's growing in popularity," said Wan, a lecturer of the School of Philoso-phy and Social Development at Shandong University.

Real-estate tycoon Pan Shiyi and his wife Zhang Xin are among China's most famous followers, according to media reports.

"I like Bahá'í because it's a very tolerant religion and easy for me to understand and follow," said Deng Sheng, who converted more than 10 years ago.

"The essential message of the Bahá'í faith is unity. Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the religion, taught that there is only one deity and one human race and that all the world's religions represent stages in the revelation of God's will and purpose for humanity.

"The time has arrived for the uniting of all peoples into a peaceful and integrated global society."

For this reason, Bahá'í is translated as datong jiao ("the religion of great unity") in Chinese.

New religions work in two directions, wrote Ye Xiaowen, a former director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs.

One is moving upwards to stand alongside traditional and mainstream religions, while the other is going down towards mysterious anti-government cults.

Luckily for the Bahá'í faith, Ye cited Bahá'í as belonging to the former.

An official surnamed Wang at the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Ethnic and Religious Affairs said he knew China had Bahá'í practitioners.

"But I don't know their number and scale…because it has not registered with the government," he said.

"Theoretically it should have registered for group activities, but as our country applies a policy of free religion, as long as those activities don't break the law, the government will let them be."

With the rapid rise of China and expanding relations and communications with the world outside, not a few Chinese people appear to be looking toward their spiritual.

The majority of Bahá'ís in China are young people with a higher education, Wu Yungui and Wan Lili agreed.

Bahá'í expanded into China from the West in the 1990s. The willingness of

Chinese to embrace new things and the ability to read foreign languages might account for the group's rapid mainstream acceptance, Wan believed.

Followers might also be attracted to the faith's lenient, pragmatic and non-binding style, Wan said. For example, the teachings advise against leading an extravagant lifestyle.

"But if a follower is occasionally wasteful, the religion will not punish him overly like in some other stricter religions," Wan said.

With hindsight, Deng Sheng said he recognized in himself a strong yearning to fill a spiritual void and believe in something even 10 years ago when he was a fresh law graduate from Xiamen Univer-sity in Fujian Province.

"Money is important but it's not enough," said Deng, an exlawyer. "I don't want to lose the real meaning of life by chasing aimless material goals."

After careful comparison, he converted to the Bahá'í faith because its inclusive nature was closest to his heart.

Pan Shiyi talked to the China Entrepreneur magazine at a Bahá'í forum in Macao in November.

Asked why he had moved from Taoism to Bahá'í, Pan said he became a follower shortly after getting to know the religion in 2004 as "the Bahá'í faith is very special."

"Some other religions regard the human body as a stinking skin bag, denying the usefulness of material existence," he reportedly said.

"But the Bahá'í faith attaches equal significance to the spiritual and material."

Fang Jia, her husband Deng Sheng, Tebogo Khutsoane-Hinton and Sean Hinton study together after prayers. Photo: Cheng Quan

The normal routine is for Bahá'í friends to take turns organizing and hosting prayer meetings at home. British investment banker Sean Hinton, wife Tebogo Khutsoane-Hinton and their three children chaired an evening prayer and discussion gathering in Beijing.

The worshippers – seven adults and four children – first took their seats, then Hinton handed each a passage from the Bahá'í writings and suggested who read which part.

With a soft, divine song playing in the background, Hinton started reading, "The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct."

The participants closed their eyes, crossed their hands and drifted into their own sacred space.

"When I'm praying, I feel like I'm having spiritual yoga," said Liu Nian, 26, a bank employee. "The worries of life gradually dissipate and happiness emerges."

Following prayers came informal discussion – which the Bahá'ís call "study" – on topics including competition, truthful lies and the function of education – ethical dilemmas encountered in everyday life.

Bahá'í has seven holy books to study – normally it takes about one or two years to finish the set. There is no priest to organize or host events: longer-believing Bahá'í worshippers act as "facilitators", with the emphasis placed on acts of service.

"Although I know many Bahá'í friends in Beijing, I don't see the Bahá'í faith as likely to take over like Christianity in China," Deng Sheng said after the prayer meeting.

"I like its loose organization."

Although most Chinese grow increasingly tolerant and understanding towards each others' religions, the majority still remains atheist.

He Lei, a graduate student of municipal engineering at Harbin Institute of Technology, was born to a family with a couple of Buddhists.

In his memory whenever the family ran into trouble, his aged grandma would pray before a Buddha statue.

"I thought it superstitious at that time," he said. "Because no one could tell me what the real Buddha looks like and where he lives."

He Lei even had a fierce debate on the existence of God with a Christian who tried to convert him.

The student of science in one of China's prominent technology universities felt uncertain about his religious beliefs until a Chinese culture teacher taught his class tai chi.

"I came to realize that the human body contains numerous mysteries I had never thought about before," He Lei said. "My body was like an energy field when I practiced tai chi – I suddenly found a beautiful world outside the routine of my life."

Despite this spiritual experience, he adheres to no religion.

"Because I don't want to be bound up by one religion. Sometimes when you choose one, you lose all the others," he said.

Another reason He Lei attributed to his atheist view was that he believed religions rarely solved real-time problems.

"Some people just want to evade problems by claiming to believe in God," he said. "And some others are just scared of being punished by God when they do something against His teaching," he said.

Emphasizing himself as a committed materialist, Zhang Zhao, another graduate student at the same school as He Lei, opined that the Bible is a book loaded with wisdom that satisfies his curiosity about the Western world.

"But I'm not going to follow a religion," Zhang said. "As I see it, for many people, religion functions by providing an interpretation of our world.

"When I see the omnipotent power of science and technology, I believe they can solve problems I cannot.

"When I was absorbed in reading the Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine, I gained faith in traditional Chinese culture. There are many possibilities."

Zhang said he had never heard of Bahá'í.

"New religions strike me as something of cult," he said.

Liu Haijia, a journalism junior at the Communication University of China in Beijing was not sure if she wanted to explore any religious beliefs.

"But that will probably become ‘yes' in the face of major adversity."

Zhang Jinyu, a graduate student of sociology at Nankai University in Tianjin, said she would never be converted.

"Only if someone preached religion to me when I was feeling really weak."

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Views6730 views since posted 2013-01-31; last edit 2013-01-31 UTC;

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