

# Religion in China

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Photography by Frankie Huang, Rice University '17*

The morning of November 15, 2013, the Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP) hosted Feng-gang Yang, Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society (CRCS) at Purdue University, for a public conversation on Religion in China. Elaine Howard Ecklund facilitated the event utilizing questions submitted by RPLP student fellows and ranging in topic from religious freedom to the sociological and religious climates in China.

During the interview-style conversation with Ecklund, Yang articulated several distinctions between the religious environments of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. While a Taiwanese understanding of pluralism mirrors that of the United States, Hong Kong exhibits much greater control over religious expression, favoring Christianity due to its British influence. Yang described the Mainland Chinese model as a mixture of Soviet Bolshevik and French Revolution ideologies; that is, historically, cultural elements encouraged atheism analogous to the French enlightenment and, at the same time, strong political controls consistent with Leninist militant atheism emerged as important within the Chinese governing structure. Yang commented that a more lively civil society in China has evolved during the 21st century, in part due to developments within the religious sphere. Though he currently regards Chinese civil society as weaker than it should be, he offered specific examples of certain strengths in this area, such as Christian lawyers who challenge ordinances and advocate for religious and civil rights.

Ecklund also invited questions from the audience, during which time Yang addressed the topic of the growth of Islam in Western China. According to Yang, riots in certain parts of the region have resulted in that area being cut off from the world. Other questions from the audience centered on religious freedom and, in response, Yang noted that

both religious freedom and academic freedom in the United States and China begin with freedom of thought. To this point, he seemed optimistic about the significant opening up of discussion among government, scholarship, and religious organizations in China within the arena of religious studies.

One audience member asked, "how does history relate to the current events in China?". Yang offered that religion as a cohesive concept is new to China. Historically, Chinese people have not identified with one religion over another. However, according to Yang, this reality is changing, in part due to trends in migration. Yang suggested that although many people have left China over the past century, those remaining in China still retain Chinese customs and religions, some reviving traditional practices such as ancestor worship.

As Ecklund commented in her closing remarks, Yang offered a breadth of interesting insights, which will serve the RPLP well in future conversations.



Esther Chan, RPLP Post-Baccalaureate Fellow, engages in the conversation on Religion in China.