

Transcript of Radio Program ([EDITED FOR WEBSITE philosophy-religion.org](http://philosophy-religion.org))

From American Public Media, this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. Today, "Recovering Chinese Religiosities."

In grand historical perspective, China is a crucible of religion and philosophy. Confucianism, Taoism, and numerous Buddhist schools originated in China among a vast landscape of ancestral rituals and polytheistic traditions.

Mayfair Yang, who's now a professor of Asian Studies at the University of Sydney in Australia, did not set out to study Chinese religious life. In the early 1990s, she received a research grant from the National Science Foundation to study civil society in a rural coastal region of China. But there she found, to her surprise, that all the non-governmental organizations that underpinned civil society had some kind of religious character.

Ms. Yang: They were lineage organizations that had experienced a revival. They were temple associations oriented around various deities. They were also Christian churches. In this area there's a lot of Christians. Also, Taoist ritual practices and also Buddhist temples and Buddhist monasteries. And they were concerned with connecting this world and the divine beyond. That really allows them to be outside this kind of state official nationalistic discourse, because they are concerned with life, human life, in this more transcendent sense.

Ms. Tippet: I wanted to probe the relevance of such traditions amid China's better-publicized economic trends, and I wanted to understand how they became hidden in the first place. Mayfair Yang's explanation of this weaves back and forth in time through events as far-flung as the Opium Wars, the era of the Imperial Court, and the civil war between the Nationalist Kuomintang Party and Mao Zedong's forces that culminated in the Communist rule of China.

Mayfair Yang herself has roots in the U.S., in China, and in Taiwan, where she spent her early years. Her own family observes the occasional ancestral ritual.

Ms. Tippet: Now, you write about encountering an attitude in academic circles that I think is prevalent in Western culture and American culture — certainly, at large — a notion that China is and has been historically an essentially secular pragmatic culture, that civil society on the ground that has to do with a very diverse religiosity is really not known, not on the radar of Western observers.

Ms. Yang: Yeah. Chinese educated elites have sort of forgotten that China had a very rich and sophisticated and diverse religious life as well as ritual life. And there was a will to forget in the modern period of the 20th century.

Ms. Tippet: And this is such a fascinating point that you make. I mean, what you're saying is that to the extent that there is an amnesia about religion in China, even among Chinese leaders, now, and also to a certain extent kind of judgmental repressive ideas about religion in China now ...

Ms. Tippet: ... stem back to a century in which China learned about religion from the West.

Ms. Yang: Right. Yeah. That's the irony of history.

Ms. Tippet: And so tell that story because it's a very ...

**Ms. Tippett:** ... new idea.

**Ms. Yang:** Well, it was really the 19th century when China lost the Opium Wars of the 1840s and was forced in subsequent humiliating treatment by the West to open its doors to trade with the West, and that's when all the treaty ports were set up, including Hong Kong and Shanghai, where you have this influx of Western missionaries coming in.

**Ms. Tippett:** And these were Protestant missionaries, I think.

**Ms. Yang:** Yes.

**Ms. Yang:** And there was a kind of muscular Protestantism that moved into China, different from the previous Jesuits. The Protestant missionaries tended to be a bit more narrow-minded, and it was also in the 19th century that you have the industrialized West becoming much more sure of itself and even arrogant, I would say.

**Ms. Yang:** And the missionaries and the Western traders and travelers imparted certain attitudes to the Chinese elite — their attitudes of dismissal and denigration towards ...

**Ms. Tippett:** Judgmental, I think.

**Ms. Yang:** ... traditional, yeah.

**Ms. Yang:** Towards traditional Chinese culture, traditional Chinese popular religion.

**Ms. Yang:** So what the Nationalistic Chinese educated elite who were trying to build up China, strengthen China to repel the West, they got this idea that they had to kill traditional culture in order to modernize. They absorbed a contempt for what was called idolatry.

**Ms. Yang:** You can see this is kind of like Western missionary kind of talk.

**Ms. Yang:** Because they went to China, they found all these icons and idols of deities.

**Ms. Yang:** You know, China has such — it's a very polytheistic religious system in popular Chinese religion. You have tons and tons of deities and goddesses and gods sitting on thrones, major gods and minor gods and nature gods. And most gods were at one time human beings ...

**Ms. Yang:** ... who did something exemplary and then later were canonized. So the educated elite absorbed this contempt for idolatry and what they called ...

**Ms. Tippett:** The word superstition ...

**Ms. Yang:** ... superstition.

**Ms. Tippett:** ... right, is what gets thrown around.

**Ms. Yang:** Right.

**Ms. Yang:** [*Speaking Chinese Word*] Superstition was introduced from the West, and its history in the West is tied in with the Protestant Reformation that regarded the Catholics as superstitious and overly ritualistic.

**Ms. Yang:** That was one thing about the Protestant in China is that they thought that the Chinese were so into ritual this reminded them of those Catholics who were into this meaningless ritual.

**Ms. Yang:** You know, Chinese culture is a highly ritualistic culture, including the imperial state. It was endless state sacrifices. Ritual was highly important to Confucian thought and practice. Confucius himself — most of the five Confucian classics and the four books of Confucius that are left to us are all about ritual practice and rituals.

**Ms. Tippett:** And that's not the idea of Confucianism that comes down now.

**Ms. Yang:** Confucianism kind of reinvented itself as a philosophy, because that was regarded as more civilized and advanced. And from then on ...

**Ms. Tippett:** So that was part of the same dynamic then.

**Ms. Yang:** Yeah. Yeah. You get rid of the ritual practice, because that's seen as more backward and useless and, you know, remake yourself more as humanism, as a moral philosophy. But actually that is only part of Confucianism.

**Ms. Tippett:** Right. You know, I have to say, this phenomenon of secularization has been common in the last, hmm, half-century, century, across the world. You know, this is something scholars are waking up to and cultures are waking up to, that religion didn't go away but elites in cultures across the world did become secularized under Western influence as opposed to Enlightenment influence. But it's a bit surprising to me that this happened also to this extent in China, because we tend to think of China as more impervious

**Ms. Yang:** Yeah. I would say that China was rather late compared to Japan in dealing with the Western intrusion. China was — because it had been the number one in Asia for so long, centuries and millennia, it was a bit complacent and really didn't face up to the threat until rather late. So the nationalistic elites were in a hurry to catch up.

**Ms. Yang:** So there was a kind of rush. So China took the path of revolution. For them, it made sense; it was the fastest way to change things. And you had to change things in a really radical, you know, turn-everything-upside-down kind of way. And that's what China did, which is a very different path to modernity than Japan. And China's intellectuals really believed that science was the answer and that science was totally opposed to religiosity.

**Ms. Tippett:** They took that notion from the West of rationality and the superiority of scientific knowledge.

**Ms. Yang:** Right. Yeah. And also they absorbed completely this notion that all human societies went through stages of development towards liberation by science and technology. Of course, you know, now that we have problems like global climate change, we understand the arrogance of our ways.

**Ms. Yang:** But, you know, China still, in a sense — because its crucial changing point was in the 19th century — it's still kind of in that grip that we can, through human sort of technology and science and social engineering, we can totally save ourselves.

**Ms. Tippett:** In the decades following its rise to power in 1949, Chairman Mao's Communist Party dismantled organized religion in China. Over the past 30 years, though, the Chinese Constitution has incrementally expanded legal freedoms for five officially sanctioned religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Islam. Confucianism was never a religion, per se, but its moral instruction on noble living framed Chinese society and governance for centuries. An ancient and abiding pluralism distinguishes the Chinese spiritual landscape from other world civilizations which have been principally shaped by a single faith or a few strong competing faiths. And in contrast to Europe, for

example, where Christian authorities once commanded governments and armies, Chinese religions have historically been weak at an institutional level, subservient to the practical and spiritual authority of the state.

So Mayfair Yang points out that when the Chinese government has cracked down on specific forms of religiosity in recent times — on the Falun Gong movement, for example, or Tibetan Buddhism, or on the Vatican's right to appoint bishops — some perceived or actual defiance of state authority has been involved. She traces the roots of this dynamic back to the imperial era.

Ms. Yang: The state had a monopoly of access to heaven, the supreme deity, Tian, and only the emperor could sacrifice and commune with heaven. And he was regarded as the son of heaven. And the centralized state had six ministries, one of which was called the Ministry of Rights, that oversaw religion and education and ritual throughout the land. And a local area, if they discovered a local deity, could petition the state to have this deity recognized and absorbed into the official state canon of gods, pantheon of gods. And the state would investigate and, you know, kind of like the Catholic Church or the Vatican would ...

Ms. Yang: ... research to see if this person was worthy of becoming a saint. You know, the Chinese imperial state did that. So there were some centralizing mechanisms, but on the whole one would also have to say that the imperial state was rather flexible, that even if it chose not to recognize a local deity, that deity can still be allowed to go on at the local level. Wouldn't receive any state funding for their temple and, you know, the local community who worshipped that deity wouldn't be so glorified or elevated, but so long as you didn't make the state fear that you were going to mount some kind of religiously inspired millenarian rebellion and start up a new dynasty, then you were pretty much let alone. You know, throughout all the centuries — China has such a long history. You know, Buddhism came in at the beginning of the Han Dynasty that was about contemporary with Roman times. And then you had Islam coming in through the Silk Road, both the landed Silk Road from the northwest as well as the later maritime Silk Road by the sea through southeast China. And then, of course, you had Christianity coming in later. So, yeah, it's received a lot of the world religions.

Ms. Tippet: What happened to these diverse and vibrant impulses during the era of Chairman Mao and Communism? Where did they go?

Ms. Yang: Yeah. Well, that's a sad chapter of Chinese history.

Ms. Yang: But one needs to remember that the sort of Communist hostility towards religion and local deity cults and Buddhist monks and nuns and so forth, as well as Christian priests, did not start with the Communists. The urgency that was felt for building up national strength — military strength and industrial strength — at the cost of traditional culture, that whole way of thinking ran throughout 20th-century China. The Communists were the most extreme about it, but the Kuomintang before them also carried out state secularization campaigns. They also sent troops out into the countryside to smash idols, and they also confiscated temples and Buddhist and Taoist temples and monasteries and deity temples. The Communists were just the most extreme and radical, and I would say the Cultural Revolution period was the most destructive because it was a reign of terror.

Ms. Tippet: You know, I once interviewed Anchee Min, the novelist, and she's written a lot about her experiences growing up during the Cultural Revolution. And she talked to me about how Mao manipulated quite effectively something that is essentially a religious and spiritual impulse to be good.

**Ms. Yang:** Yes. There's a lot of spiritual and religious aspects to what I would call the cult of Mao. And I think that you can only have that cult of Mao once you've decimated all the different outlets for spirituality and religiosity, when you've closed up all those traditional outlets.

**Ms. Yang:** So Mao was definitely larger than life. There were a lot of people who really believed that he was superhuman, that he had superhuman powers, that he would live to the age of 135, that with his long earlobes he was, you know, already selected as somebody who was sacred, who had some kind of special destiny. And there was this kind of sacrificial element to the way that ordinary people would sacrifice everything for him or for the idea that he represented: revolution, salvation of China, and so forth. People would pin Mao buttons to their skins, not just to their clothing. And people would, you know, tattoo Mao images to their skins. So there's this religious element that has to be recognized about that.

**Ms. Tippett:** And so in Communist ideology, religion was a feudalist creation that had to be put aside. I mean, I was very interested to read that, for example, the Taoist priesthood or the relationships of the Buddhist sangha or the relationships of authority within the religious traditions were labeled exploitative and that that was one of the justifications by which they were dismissed and dismantled.

**Ms. Yang:** The main dismantling started in the 1950s with the land reform and because a lot of land was owned by monasteries and temples, Taoist and Buddhist ...

**Ms. Yang:** ... but especially Buddhist; they were targets for land reform. And so the Buddhist and Taoist monks were portrayed as, you know, landowners. They were landlords ...

**Ms. Yang:** ... who rented out their land to tenant farmers. And for communist ideology, these monks, they're idle people. They're nonproductive laborers. They're sitting there living off of tenants' rents, and all they're doing is praying, chanting, and meditating. They are not ...

**Ms. Tippett:** Not productive.

**Ms. Yang:** ... doing anything.

**Ms. Tippett:** This kind of thinking was part of China's justification for invading and annexing Tibet in the 1950s and '60s, and it can still be found in a white paper of the Chinese government from the year 2001. Criticizing a theocratic, backward social system in Tibet, this reads in part: "The society of old Tibet under feudal serfdom was even more dark and backward than in Europe in the Middle Ages. ... Officials, nobles, and upper-ranking monks and monasteries accounted for less than 5 percent of Tibet's total population but owned all the farmland, pastures, forests, mountains, and rivers and the majority of the livestock." The report continues: "The Dalai Lama ... had all the political and religious powers in his hands. ... The widespread temples, numerous monks, and frequent religious activities consumed a huge amount of manpower and the greater part of material wealth in Tibet, greatly hindering the development of the productive forces there." Again, Mayfair Yang.

**Ms. Yang:** The Tibet question is very complicated, and I'm definitely not an authority on the history of Tibet. But Tibet experienced a great deal of religious destruction in the Cultural Revolution period.

**Ms. Yang:** This was not something that was necessarily just, you know, directed by the center in Beijing. It was a lot of, you know, spontaneously organized Red Guard groups from all over China who went to Tibet and they were unmonitored and they just wreaked destruction. So much of the precious religious properties in Tibet were destroyed and decimated. I think it's also because throughout the 20th century, China itself had gone through so much secularization and its attitudes towards these traditional religions had become so

altered, that when the Chinese went to Tibet in the '50s and '60s during the Cultural Revolution, what they encountered was a culture so different from their own, because Tibetans, they had not undergone the 20th century secularization ...

Ms. Yang: ... that the rest of China had. And so when the Han Chinese went to Tibet, I think that they were just struck by how quote/unquote "backward" the Tibetans were and how quote/unquote "superstitious" and ...

Ms. Tippett: Those words again.

Ms. Yang: ... quote/unquote how "feudal" they were.

Ms. Yang: And so for the Han people, they were liberating the Tibetans from their own ignorance.

Ms. Tippett: And, I mean, I think this is really important. As you say, the issue of Tibet is extremely complex and difficult and sensitive and, you know, what you're describing is not something that was utterly cynical. I mean, you know, however misguided ...

Ms. Tippett: ... and tragic, there were all kinds of complex human dynamics going on that also had a long, long history.

Ms. Tippett: And you're saying that some of the seeds for this had been planted by the white Europeans.

Ms. Yang: Yeah. Actually taught the Chinese.

Ms. Tippett: To dismiss religion.

Ms. Yang: And at that time, it's kind of ironic, because today the West has this very easy line against China about the freedom of religion.

Ms. Yang: But we just need to remember that a lot of these attitudes of Chinese officialdom and their hostility towards religion comes from the 19th century when the West was hardly into religious freedom. You know, Christianity was the name of the game.

Ms. Yang: At that time in the West, there was this muscular Protestantism that thought that Christianity was the most superior, and they were not advocating freedom of religion much ...

Ms. Yang: ... at that point. So this is — the 19th-century attitude is what the Chinese absorbed.

Ms. Tippett: In my unedited conversation with Mayfair Yang, she delved deeper into the many complexities of the religious history of China. On our Web site, for example, hear her analysis of the repression of the Falun Gong movement. Also, her explanation of why Taoism might be distinctly equipped to counterbalance the excesses of China's rapid economic growth. Download the MP3 of this program and my complete conversation with Mayfair Yang at [speakingoffaith.org](http://speakingoffaith.org).

*[Announcements]*

Ms. Tippett: Welcome back to Speaking of Faith, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett. Today, we're exploring what my guest, anthropologist and filmmaker Mayfair Yang, calls "Chinese religiosities, ancient and modern." She offers a provocative take on how the West influenced the Chinese state's overstance against religion in the past century. But she stresses that this

is not consonant with the robust relationship between religions, rituals, and culture in the sweep of China's long history.

And there are many indications that religion is again on the rise in China now. A recent study at a Shanghai university that was widely publicized in China and the West suggests that a third of all Chinese over the age of 16 are now openly religious, and that percentage is far higher among young adults. Growth is being registered in China's officially sanctioned religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam, as in a vast landscape of ancestral and polytheistic traditions.

As Mayfair Yang analyzes this, she draws on her years of fieldwork in the once rural, now rapidly industrializing Wenzhou region as well as on better-publicized trends in urban areas.

Ms. Yang: In urban areas, I would say Christianity is quite big and, again, this maybe has something to do with the appreciation of Christian culture as an example of a kind of Western modern culture. So there's even a kind of a movement of educated people who don't really believe in the supernatural aspects of Christianity, but they appreciate Christian culture ...

Ms. Yang: ... as a kind of civilized modern progressive kind of culture. Yeah. So there is that, and I think that the ideological days of Maoism provided people with a complete sort of cosmology that their whole lives would be dedicated to the revolution to bring about good. Then you have the deflation of that balloon with the all the events of the 1980s and '90s, and so it no longer offers them the whole cosmology that they seek or need to give meaning to their lives.

Ms. Yang: In the end, the explanation for death that science gives us is not very satisfying. It doesn't, you know, help us to orient our lives and to give purpose and meaning and motivation to the things that we pursue. And religion, all religions, deal with that most important question and issue that we all have to deal with in our individual lives, and that is facing death.

Ms. Tippet: Mm-hmm. Now, many ...

Ms. Yang: In the countryside.

Ms. Tippet: Oh, yes. Tell me that. Your fieldwork has been in the countryside, hasn't it? So what's happening there?

Ms. Yang: Yes. This area of the countryside that I'm looking at is very prosperous. They are very entrepreneurial people. They fan out across China. They're called Wenzhou people from the province of Zhejiang in southeast China, and they have a reputation in China as being extremely entrepreneurial and very economically successful. But what is seldom recognized is that they have revived so much traditional Chinese culture and traditional popular religion. These people are very dynamic. In that sense, they're very modern in that they carry around cell phones, they get the latest technology of first VCD and then DVD players.

And yet, they are very traditional in that they've revived traditional lunar festivals and traditional kinship institutions like lineage organizations. And they have very elaborate ancestor halls where they conduct sacrifices to their ancestors annually, and they go to the festival in springtime when the whole family as well as extended families or whole lineages will go up into the mountains where their ancestors' tombs are. They would sweep the tombs and clean it up once a year so that their ancestors will be nice and comfortable and won't have to deal with the weeds. And they'll offer food sacrifices to their ancestors and then eat the food

afterwards. Chinese people don't like to waste food. So this food is given to the ancestors. It's blessed by the ancestors, and then they eat them themselves as a sort of picnic.

Ms. Tippet: So, I mean, I'm just imagining if you describe that, say, to some of your fellow academics in the United States or in Australia, they might use that word "superstition" again.

Ms. Yang: Well, you know, I've known many Chinese who I've taken around when they visited the U.S. or Australia, and they're just taken aback by how superstitious Westerners still are, because there are so many churches. The churches are packed and full. And they just can't believe that in the White House in the United States, you've got a president who says to an interviewer — journalist interview — that, you know, "Did you consult your father when you decided to invade Iraq?"

Ms. Yang: And President Bush Jr. said, "No. That's not the right father to consult. I consulted a higher father." You know, so.

Ms. Tippet: That strikes them as wrongheaded.

Ms. Yang: Yeah. As rather funny, as rather curious in the late — early 21st century.

Ms. Tippet: Now, there's also a lot of talk about Confucianism being, well, I mean, I know that there have been some best-selling books, millions of copies sold of kind of, you know, basic Confucian philosophy, and that also the Chinese government is, to some extent, reviving Confucian beliefs, launching Confucian institutes in other countries. And I think that some Western observers look at Chinese citizens' new interest in Confucius, his emphasis on right behavior and social good and acting noble, and see that as appearing as a kind of antidote to this capitalism run wild. Is that analysis correct? Is it too simple? How would you describe that?

Ms. Yang: Well, yes, I do think that would be an antidote, but it's not the single antidote that Chinese traditions have available.

Ms. Yang: Buddhism is another antidote. Buddhism tells us that, you know, don't get too taken up with the desires of this world, that we live in interconnection with all sentient beings. Taoism also tells us that, you know, don't, you know, go in pursuit of earthly reputation and ambition; what's important is to be connected with the oneness of nature and the cosmos and to seek simplicity. So I would say that probably all of the different traditional religious cultures and also, to quite an extent, Christianity too, would have these counterbalancing merits towards the excesses of capitalism.

Ms. Tippet: Mayfair Yang has also conducted fieldwork in her native Taiwan. In the year 2000, she witnessed a historic pilgrimage of several thousand Taiwanese worshippers of a maritime goddess, Mazu. They traveled from Taiwan back to the goddess's natal home in Fujian province in China. An estimated two-thirds of contemporary Taiwanese worship Mazu in some form. Mayfair Yang says that as Taiwan's history diverged from that of the mainland, it also embodied a different kind of encounter between traditional Chinese religious sensibilities and modern culture. And she says this is having ripple effects back to China as ties deepen across the Taiwan Strait. Just this month, regular direct passenger flights recommenced for the first time since Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang fled from Mao's Communist takeover nearly 60 years ago.

Ms. Yang: Chiang Kai-Shek himself was a Christian. And actually when Kuomintang went to Taiwan, the government supported Christianity much more than the traditional religions. And so the Kuomintang also wanted to eradicate superstition, but they were less disciplined and organized and systematic about it.

**Ms. Yang:** Therefore, they were less systematic in their destructiveness, whereas the Communists were much better disciplined and organized and so the destruction was much greater in China.

**Ms. Yang:** And, you know, Taiwan was just a place where a lot of people, different kinds of people, retreated, not just the Kuomintang and its soldiers. In mainland China in the early part of the 20th century, there was a lot of what I would call revitalization movements. These are very large groups with a certain kind of religious inspiration, but they were quite modern in many different ways in that they preached a kind of social salvation. They might have a savior figure based loosely on traditional Buddhist, Taoist popular religion kind of forces, but they preached freedom from alcoholism and opium. They preached doing good in the world. But they were really decimated by both the Kuomintang and the Communists. The extermination went on all the way into the '50s in China. The ones who survived it managed to make their way to Taiwan. And the Kuomintang was selective about how it treated them.

**Ms. Tippett:** You know, you tell a story about a pilgrimage in 2000 to ...

**Ms. Tippett:** ... maritime goddess Maz — Maz —

**Ms. Yang:** Mazu. Yes.

**Ms. Tippett:** Mazu. Would you just tell that story?

**Ms. Yang:** Yeah. So the Kuomintang allowed a lot of popular religion to go on. And in more recent times, because Taiwan has become so much more democratic and you have a multiparty system that is legalized, and they found that, you know, to get votes they have to appeal to the common people who is their voting constituency. They have to campaign, in fact, in these popular religion temples, the more influential ones. So in Taiwan, especially since the lifting of martial law in 1987, popular religion has had a field day of revival as well as a lot of these Buddhist organizations, some of which are very wealthy and very transnational in their orientation.

**Ms. Yang:** One such Buddhist organization is called the Ciji Merit Foundation, founded by a very modest Taiwanese nun in the 1960s. And she has started a movement that has really appealed to the middle class in Taiwan who are quite well-to-do and have donated a lot of funds, many of whom are willing to put their own lives on the line to go to disaster — to join disaster relief. And many of them, of course, went to Sichuan province after the earthquake. And many people at the earthquake place were very impressed by how both Western foreigners as well as overseas Chinese treated the dead.

**Ms. Yang:** Because whereas many very secular Chinese earthquake relief people sort of unceremoniously dumped the body into mass graves and whatnot, these foreigners did a little religious ceremony, whether it be Buddhist or burning some incense or saying some prayers and so forth. They treated the dead with great respect. And I've interviewed the Ciji Foundation members in Taiwan ...

**Ms. Yang:** ... when I was there in the year 2000, and one woman told me how she participated in earthquake relief disaster. The epicenter was in central Taiwan, and she said that they were the first to arrive, even before the soldiers came. But these soldiers when they came, they were youngsters, 18 years old, and these soldiers were totally freaked out by all these dead bodies lying around, limbs strewn about, and blood. And they were just petrified; they couldn't move. And Ciji gathered them all together, all the relief people, and they conducted a serious Buddhist chanting for the dead. And that, just going through the ritual, honoring the dead, it really brought a lot of peace to the soldiers. And from then on, after they did the ritual, then they could go about their business with much more calm and more efficiency and effectiveness.

**So I imagine that that is what happened and that probably left some deep impressions on the local Chinese in Sichuan province.**

**Ms. Tippett: That does come back to the point you made a while ago, that religions, unlike other forms, other aspects of culture, address these issues of life and death directly ...**

**Ms. Tippett: ... in a way that politics can't, ideology can't, and science can't.**

**Ms. Yang: And that's why, you know, the secularization thesis is basically dead at this point.**

**Ms. Tippett: Right. The secularization thesis is**

**Ms. Yang: For a long time scholars believed that, you know, with modernization we are leaving religion behind. We are leaving all those superstitions and magic behind, and we no longer need them. But, really, it's a grim world, what science has given us. We still need a higher kind of a pursuit, I think, to transcend all the grim realities of our everyday lives.**

**Ms. Tippett: But, you know, it is transcendent and yet what you're describing about how dead bodies are treated and how that in fact matters to human beings is very practical.**

**Ms. Yang: Yes. I think that we would like our dead bodies to be treated with respect.**

**Ms. Yang: And we would like to be remembered after we die. I think all of us do have some kind of yearning for immortality. And there is a lot of room for a sort of mixture of religiosity and secularism in our modern societies, because when I talk with these — I call them ex-peasants — down in Wenzhou, they are of peasant background. They've all experienced hard work in the fields, but now they're into their family industries and in trade and so on. But, you know, when I talk to them, they're not total believers. They have their doubts. But I think in the end, it's the ritual practice, it's going through the rituals, their life cycle rituals of weddings and funerals and birth rituals and new house launching rituals and the various celebrations of gods' birthdays and various lunar festival rituals. It's going through rituals that connect those moments that you connect up with the world of the gods beyond where the gods come down and you're in their presence or your ancestors come down when you conduct an ancestor sacrifice and you're in their presence. There's this kind of sacred moment that gives you kind of renewal from the earthly life that can be very tedious. And it also gives you that kind of community spirit that all the members of your community, whether it's your kinship community or your local community, come together for this festival. They're donating money for the common good, for something meaningful to remember some local god who did some good deeds for the community in the past.**

**Ms. Tippett: And this kind of recovery of ritual ...**

**Ms. Tippett: ... does bring Chinese culture back to some foundations, doesn't it? And even the original ...**

**Ms. Yang: Yes.**

**Ms. Tippett: ... the ritual — the original spirit of Confucianism as you described it to me, and that's very interesting, that circle.**

**Ms. Yang: Yeah. It's such a tragedy that throughout the 20th century, there's been so much decimation of culture, traditional culture. And traditional culture was really given a very reductionistic bad name. I mean, certainly there were bad things about traditional culture, but you don't throw out the baby with the bathwater.**

**Ms. Yang:** And Chinese culture, you know, is so long and enduring, there are such wonderful things in its past that needs to be recuperated and revived, because it can play a very beneficial role for all the modern problems that China faces today.

**Ms. Tippet:** Right. Just my last question. Explain this to me, that the Beijing Olympics will begin on the eighth day of the eighth month of the year '08 at 8:08:08 p.m.

**Ms. Yang:** Yes. Right. Well, it's because the number eight, *ba* in Mandarin and also Cantonese, it rhymes with the word *fa*. *Fa* means, you know, develop and expand. It means, you know, it often has this kind of economic meaning of get rich. Which is like good luck, prosperity, good luck, good fortune. And so the eight is magical. You'll never find the number eight available for your cell phone number if, you know, you get to pick your cell phone number, because that's already taken by other people.

**Ms. Tippet:** The senior producer of *Speaking of Faith* is Mitch Hanley, with producers Colleen Scheck and Shiraz Janjua, and Rob McGinley Myers, and with help from Alda Balthrop-Lewis. Our online editor is Trent Gilliss, with Web producer Andrew Dayton. Kate Moos is the managing producer of *Speaking of Faith*. And I'm Krista Tippet.

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*Mayfair Yang, Ph.D.*

Ph.D. in Anthropology - University of California, Berkeley

**Areas of Academic Interest:**

- ✦ Critical Theory
- ✦ Gender & Feminism
- ✦ Media Studies
- ✦ Sovereignty & State Power
- ✦ Cultural Approaches to Political Economy

**Religions in China**

**Prof. Yang** received her Ph.D. in Anthropology at U.C. Berkeley, and has taught at U.C. Santa Barbara since 1987. She has also assumed teaching, research, and visiting scholar positions at the University of Michigan, University of Chicago, Beijing University, Academia Sinica in Taiwan, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and the Center for the Study of World Religion at Harvard University.

Yang is interested in issues of religion, secularization, and the state in modernity, especially in the tensions and traumas accompanying the break with traditional orders under colonial and post-colonial conditions. Her areas of research and teaching are: critical theory; gender and feminism; media studies; sovereignty and state power; and cultural approaches to political economy.

Yang's cultural and geographical region of specialization is China and China's offshoot cultures and diaspora in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and the West. Although her research is based on fieldwork

in contemporary China and Taiwan, her approach is always informed by a vision of the *longue duree* in Chinese history, and she has published on ancient China.

#### Research:

With a five-year National Science Foundation research grant, she has conducted fieldwork in rural Wenzhou, China since 1991 on the revival of popular religion and lineages and their negotiations with state secularization. The title of her book in-progress is: **Re-Enchanting Modernity: Sovereignty, Ritual Economy, and Indigenous Civil Order in Coastal China.**

#### Publications:

- ♦ *Chinese Religiosities: Disjunctures of Modernity and State Formation.* Edited by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (forthcoming)
- ♦ *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China.* Mayfair Yang, editor. University of Minnesota Press, (1999).
- ♦ *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: the Art of Social Relationships in China.* Cornell University Press, (1994). (American Ethnological Society First Book Prize, 1997)
- ♦ "Ritual Economy and Rural Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics" in *Cultural Politics in a Global Age: Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation.* David Held and Henrietta Moore, editors. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007.
- ♦ "A Sweep of Red: State Subjects and the Cult of Mao" in *Religion und Politik in der Volksrepublik China (Religion and Politics in Contemporary China).* Wiebke Koenig, Matthias Koenig, and Karl-Fritz Daiber, eds. Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2006.
- ♦ "Spatial Struggles: State Disenchantment and Popular Re-appropriation of Space in Rural Southeast China" in *Journal of Asian Studies*, (August, 2004).  
available at: <http://repositories.cdlib.org/gis/30/>
- ♦ "Goddess across the Taiwan Straits: Matrifocal Ritual Space, Nation-State, and Satellite Television Footprints" in *Public Culture* (May, 2004)  
available at: <http://repositories.cdlib.org/gis/31/>
- ♦ "Using the Past to Negate the Present: Ritual Ethics and State Rationality in Ancient China" in *Religion: A Reader in the Anthropological Tradition.* Michael Lambek, ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
- ♦ "Une histoire du present: Gouvernement rituel et gouvernement d'Etat dans la Chine ancienne", in *Annales*, no. 5, Sept.-Oct. (1991).
- ♦ "Mass Media and Transnational Subjectivity in Shanghai: Notes on (Re)cosmopolitanism in a Chinese Metropolis" in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader.* Jonathan Inda and Renato Rosaldo, eds. Oxford: Blackwell (2002).
- ♦ "Putting Global Capitalism in its Place: Economic Hybridity, Bataille, and Ritual Expenditure" in *Current Anthropology*, vol. 41, no. 4, (2000).

- ♦ **"The Gift Economy and State Power in China", *Comparative Studies in Society & History*, vol. 31, no. 1, January (1989).**

**"The Modernity of Power in the Chinese Socialist Order", *Cultural Anthropology*, v. 3, no. 4, November (1988).**