swer Li’s question. According to the data in Yang Jisheng’s Tombstone, the ruling CCP did not want knowledge of the catastrophe to spread. In pursuit of a cover-up, the party opened the mail and did not forward letters depicting the mass starvation. Militias were ordered to “intercept and attack people attempting to flee.” Armed patrols surrounded famine regions. Fleeing villagers were often beaten to death “and stripped of their clothes” or “bound hand and foot” and led off by a rope to slave labor. Local officials could be penalized for allowing villagers to flee. In reporting deaths, “Those not included were local people expiring outside the locality.”

Officials therefore searched homes to make sure no one fled. If villagers had fled, remaining family members could be beaten to death, leaving more food for surviving killers. The killings were cruel and degrading.

And yet people fled for food to survive. There are numerous reports of “one corpse after another in the ditches,” of people dying on the roadsides, of corpses littering the fields. Some of those corpses had thighs and buttocks cut off for food. Cannibalism of strangers was a survival mechanism. Wild dogs attacked the bodies where they lay. Villagers learned the dangers of trying to flee.

The system left “no escape for victims.” Some idealistic youngsters with faith in Mao and communism stoically died with their families, imagining themselves as making a heroic contribution to the revolution. If a family member sacrificed for the family and died at home, there were “hopes of claiming that person’s portion of food at the communal dining hall” and keeping the family alive.

Denied any way of “saving themselves,” villagers could only “await death.” “There were no anguished appeals to heaven, no hemp-robed funerals, no firecrackers and hell money to see the departed to their final destination, no sympathy, no grief, no shock, no dread. Tens of millions of people departed the world in an atmosphere of mute apathy.”

Economist Li is a Holocaust denier. He is as bad as, or worse than, one who would deny the Nanjing Massacre or Auschwitz. He does not mourn or learn from the innocent dead. Some scholars argue that Holocaust denial should have no place in the academy.

Edward Friedman
Professor of Political Science
Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison


This book is expanded from a talk given by the author at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley in 2002 and from a published paper in Religion East and West in 2003. The author Anthony C. Yu is Carl Darling Buck Distinguished Service Professor in Humanities and Professor in the Divinity School, the University of Chicago. He translated the famous Chinese religious folk story Journey to the West in four volumes.
The thesis in this book is that “there has never been a period in China’s historical past in which the government of the state has pursued a neutral policy toward religion.” In other words, the free exercise of religion was never encouraged in Chinese history. The materials examined here include textual records of both official institutions and various religious traditions.

Yu begins with a discussion of the definition of religion, traces the use of similar terms in Chinese literature, and tries to refute the assertion that the outlook of China’s society is essentially secular. He equates ritual, not a set of doctrines, with the essence of religion. One could agree with the author that the term of religion is broad, and different societies can express religiosity differently. One would note that the Chinese religions do not require a weekly worship or a Sabbath rest.

The relationship between state and religion from antiquity is explored. Early in China the state created religion and ritual to regulate people’s lives. Later emergent and transplanted religions existed in symbiotic relationship with the state to derive mutual benefits. In China it was the state which canonized a person, in contrast to the role of Vatican in Europe. One could note that Chinese religion wielded no power as the medieval popes had, and there were no written prophets in Chinese history who claimed to speak for God. Chinese religions are subservient to the state, and Western religion is used to play a balance of power role.

Yu mentions early emperors tended to deify themselves as much as the Egyptian Pharaohs did. Daoism introduced ideas of paradise, or the promise of another country. It helped to revert the concept of a divinized ruler back to a mere mortal. The promise of transcendence of Daoism led to democratization. Yu notes that the heavenly kingdom was a projection of earthly kingdom. Daoist masters also connected practice of medicine with religion. The end result was that many emperors died or suffered greatly from taking some exotic herbal drugs. There were some atrocious wars related to religion in China, and they were used to refute the claim that Chinese people are more tolerant religiously. One would note that the transcendence in Daoism is not comparable to the transcendence of Christian theism. That is part of reason that Chinese Christians prefer to use “shen” to denote God, instead of “shangdi”. The religious wars in China were related to the deterioration of living condition, not strictly fought on doctrinal ground.

The indigenization of Buddhism is described. There was a great influence from Indian culture, and conversely the Buddhist doctrines were also modified to harmonize with Chinese ethical teachings. Yu praises the work of Gu Zhengmei in demonstrating the Buddhist influence in the political ideology. From Gu’s work one can see that the imperial state was motivated by religious concerns, and policy debates were often inter-religious rivalry among the Three Religions. The great persecutions of Buddhism by three Wu-di’s are described in length, and the good fortune of Xuanzang in acquiring large number of Buddhist writings is also depicted. In this chapter on Buddhism, Yu wants to demonstrate that Chinese culture was not secular: the politics and religions were interconnected, and the impacts were two-way directional. One would note that throughout human history, men were quite religious due to human nature. Until the Renaissance and Enlightenment, no culture could really be secular.

In the final chapter, Yu draws a parallel between the current governmental control of religion and the state control and use of religion in China’s past. He states that Chinese may not consider religious liberty as a basic
human right. The conflict between religion and politics in the West, results in many social upheavals. He advises that Westerners should not “be too smug in their colloquy with the Chinese on politics and religion.”

Yu has provided sufficient evidence for his thesis. He has achieved his goal admirably. Indeed different dynasties in China did try to regulate people’s lives, including religion, when they had the power. The religion or quasi-religion in China was never strong enough to stand on equal ground with the imperial power. In Western society, the papal power was at one time more powerful than the national kings, and the pope could even regulate king’s behavior. Only during the recent few hundred years have the national churches and religious institutions lost their power; the free exercise of religion and plurality of belief became the current norm. Indeed, there were similarities between religious phenomena of the East and West. However, there also existed substantial differences.

T. Timothy Chen
Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey