

**SPECIAL ISSUE: RELIGION AND SOCIETY: CROSS-CULTURAL  
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**Beyond exclusive religions: challenges for the sociology of religion in  
China<sup>1</sup>**

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中国宗教的快速发展及相关研究将有可能重塑宗教社会学的边界。由于过分强调对排他性宗教的研究，宗教社会学一度被称为“基督宗教社会学”。然而，非排他性宗教主导的中国社会却对此提出了挑战，同时也为其提供了发展机遇。在微观层面上，非排他性宗教的普遍存在对植根于西方社会的一些核心概念——如“改宗”和“委身”——构成了挑战。在组织层面上，它挑战着“教派—教会”理论，提醒我们要对非科层化的宗教组织给予关注。在市场层面上，社会学家可以考察非排他性宗教何以在中国宗教兴盛的原因。

**关键词：**非排他性宗教 宗教社会学

The rapid growth of Chinese religion and the related studies will potentially reshape the boundary of sociology of religion. While sociology of religion focuses mainly on exclusive religions, so much so that it was once labeled “sociology of Christianity,” it meets challenges and opportunities in China where non-exclusive religions dominate the society. At the micro-level, the prevalence of non-exclusive religion poses challenges to some key concepts rooted in Western society, such as conversion and commitment. At the organizational level, it challenges sect-to-church theory, reminding us to study non-bureaucratic religious organizations. At the market level, Chinese religions are a laboratory for sociologists to examine factors leading to the prevalence of non-exclusive religions.

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## Introduction

Religions are thriving in the mainland of China. Since the government gave up extraordinary efforts to root out religion, all religions have enjoyed explosive growth in the past three decades. Christianity develops so quickly that “on any given Sunday, there are almost certainly more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe”<sup>2</sup> But it isn’t only Christianity that enjoys growth. Traditional Chinese faiths – Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and folk religion – also have enjoyed a remarkable revival, and new religious movements have erupted as well. Surely China’s experience is one of the most important religious developments in world history, and one that demands close and careful study.

But research on religions in the contemporary Chinese mainland is underdeveloped. During the militant decades before the reform and opening up, any scientific study of religion was forbidden.<sup>3</sup> When Chinese scholars again took up the study of religion in the 1980s, they found that their efforts were hampered by the political sensitivity of the project, by their lack of training in social scientific methodology and theory, and the lack of basic Western sociology of religion (hereafter, SR) literature.<sup>4</sup> Even less sociologists outside of China paid attention to Chinese religion one decade ago. Before 1998, the major English-language SR journals, *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* and *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, rarely published articles on Chinese religion. Actually, they did not publish even one article exploring Chinese religions during the period 1990-1997. The situation has dramatically changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From 1998 to 2008, the two journals have in total published more than twenty articles on Chinese religions. Religion in China has come into its own as a field of study, research and teaching in the academy.

SR publications in Chinese also thrive. Beginning from 2004, Dr Fenggang Yang organized the Annual Summer Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion in China. Many renowned sociologists in the United States and Europe actively participated in the Summer Institute and trained hundreds of young professionals. Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion has also initiated an ambitious project to recruit and train Chinese young scholars, to provide them with seed grants, and to facilitate their cooperation with scholars outside of China. When these well-trained scholars come back and teach in renowned universities, we can expect that SR will revive quickly in the Chinese mainland. For example, the Center for the Study of Chinese Religion and Society has collaborated with several journals, publishing special issues

2 Daniel H. Bays, “Chinese Protestant Christianity today,” p. 488.

3 Yang Fenggang, “Between secularist ideology and desecularizing reality: the birth and growth of religious research in Communist China.”

4 Graeme Lang, “Challenges for the sociology of religion in Asia.”

of SR articles.

We are witnessing the rise of scholarship on Chinese religions. This development will not only expand our empirical knowledge of religion, but also will potentially reshape the boundary of SR. Against this background, this article tries to probe theoretical challenges for SR in Chinese societies. We will first have a look at the Chinese religious landscape, pointing out that non-exclusive religions were and are the mainstream of the Chinese religious market. Next, we will discuss how such prevalence challenges the usefulness of standard concepts (e.g. conversion) and theories (e.g. sect-to-church) that have largely grown from the study of Christianity. The conclusion is a call for further studies.

### Chinese religious landscape: an overview

With regard to the religious landscape of traditional China, Eric Zurcher<sup>5</sup> suggests a metaphor that pictures three religions (*sanjiao*), namely Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, as three pyramid-shaped peaks sharing a common mountain base: popular religion. Aside from the above traditions, China also has a long sectarian tradition. This religious landscape has not changed dramatically till today, except for the spread of Christianity in China.

Table 1 Chinese Religious Affiliation

<b>Chinese Religious Affiliation</b>			
	2007	2006	2005
	%	%	%
<b>Total Religious Believers</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>16</b>
Buddhist	12	16	11
Christian	2	1	4
<i>Protestant</i>	1	1	2
<i>Catholic</i>	1	<1	2
Muslim	<1	1	1
Taoist	<1	<1	<1
Other	--	<1	<1
<b>None</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Refused or DK</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>
Total respondents	4,104	2,180	2,191
Sampling error	+/- 1.6	+/- 2.3	+/- 2.3
Question wording: What is your religious faith?			
Note: The differences in the three estimates may be due to sampling error and the cities sampled rather than significant shifts in religious adherence among years.			
Source for 2007 is Horizon survey reported by C100; source for 2006 and 2005 is Horizon survey reported by the Pew Global Attitudes Project.			

Source: Brian Grim, "Religion in China on the eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics."

5 Eric Zurcher, "Buddhist influence on early Taoism."

Today, the mainland of China recognizes five religions – Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam and Taoism. Because it adheres to Communism, an atheistic philosophy, it is sensitive to survey religion publicly on the mainland. But we can get a sense of the Chinese landscape from “Religion in China on the Eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics,” a report by Brian J. Grim, Senior Research Fellow in the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. On the basis of three representative surveys which were carried out by a Chinese public opinion polling firm, Grim gets the above table.

It shows that the majority of Chinese people, more than 80 percent, do not affiliate with any religious groups. But this does not mean that they are atheists. A sampling investigation of Taiwan shows that 87 percent of Taiwanese who claim to have no religious belief actually believe in or worship gods; only 6.3 percent of the population really have no religious belief and do not believe in or worship gods.<sup>6</sup> The 2005 Pew poll also found that approximately three in five Chinese believe in the possible existence of supernatural phenomena, religious figures or supernatural beings that are often associated with Chinese folk religion. Considering this figure, Grim suggests that “popular religious beliefs may be more widespread than is suggested by religious affiliation alone.” Those who do ethnographic studies on Chinese religion have a similar observation. Tamney and Chiang<sup>7</sup> suggest that almost all Chinese people practiced Chinese popular religion. Chinese popular religion is polytheistic and non-exclusive. Actually, it is not a “religion” with theologies, organizations and theists peculiar to itself. “Chinese popular religion” is a scholarly term describing the following elements: the religious practices commonly “shared by members of the entire society,”<sup>8</sup> such as Chinese geomantic omens (*kan fengshui*), pilgrimage (*jinxiang*), fortune telling (*suanming*) and merit accumulation (*ji gongde*); the worship of the three classes of supernatural beings: gods, ghosts and ancestors;<sup>9</sup> annual religious rituals and communal religious activities associated with these supernatural beings;<sup>10</sup> and territorial-cult organizations which manage the communal rituals and activities.<sup>11</sup>

Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and sects did not stress exclusivity, too. The three religions did not claim that they exclusively offered religious truths, nor did they condemn other religions as untrue or as the work of the Devil even at the height of their agitation.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, they acknowledged “a degree of truth in other religions” and admitted that “other

6 Zhang Maogui and Lin Benxuan, “The social imaginations of religion: a research problem for sociology of knowledge,” p. 102.

7 Joseph B Tamney and Linda Hsueh-Ling Chiang, *Modernization, globalization, and Confucianism in Chinese societies*, p. 156.

8 Susan Naquin and Chun-fang Yu, “Introduction: pilgrimage in China,” p. 10.

9 David K. Jordan, *Gods, ghosts, and ancestors: the folk religion of a Taiwanese village*.

10 C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese society*.

11 P. Steven Sangren, *History and magical power in a Chinese community*.

12 Wing-tsit Chan, *Religious trends in modern China*.

religions also offered a good way of life.”<sup>13</sup> With the passing of time, the three systems were mutually penetrated, interrelated, and partially identified; and, gradually, syncretism became the main tendency of Chinese religious life. These syncretic motives also led to the formation of sectarian movements in China.<sup>14</sup> Chinese sectarians self-consciously seek to create a distinctive and new religious system “out of materials that are seen as separate traditions.”<sup>15</sup> Syncretism and sectarianism were commonly united in China, contrary to what happened in Christian societies where they are incompatible.

The situation has not changed dramatically today. A survey on religious experience in contemporary China reveals that religions in China are still syncretic. With the entrance of Christianity into China, Christianity has become a target for syncretic efforts. According to the data, there are 9.7 percent of self-proclaimed Buddhists and 22.2 percent of folk religious believers who think that their experiences are affected by the power of the Christian God. At the same time, Chinese Christians have also experienced spiritual powers other than God, such as fate, ancestors, ghosts, and Buddhas. “For example, the percentages of Christians experiencing the Mandate or Will of Heaven (35.6 percent) and ghosts (7.7 percent) are even higher than those of the overall sample (respectively at 25.7 percent and 5.0 percent). In experiencing one body with the universe, those who have self-described themselves as Christians are only fewer than the Buddhists, but higher than other religious followers and the national levels.”<sup>16</sup>

Along with the popularity of syncretism, religious individualism is prevalent in China, too. Congregations are not the main means for Chinese believers to attend religious activities. They rarely go to temple unless they meet problems and they usually enshrine the god’s images or ancestor’s spirit tablet at their home for everyday worship. For example, in contemporary Beijing, Buddhist organizations or temples do not play an important role in Buddhist followers’ spiritual life; “individual believers and practitioners have become the mainstream of Buddhism, who personally communicate with Buddhas through self-commitment and spiritual cultivation.”<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Christianity in China has been indigenized in this trend, too. We are told that “Chinese Christians in rural areas do not go to church regularly, and most Protestants instead worship at home either in groups or individually, often through the way of enshrining Christian images.”<sup>18</sup>

Both anthropological and sociological studies show that non-exclusive religions dominate the Chinese religious market, while exclusive religions (Christianity and Islam) only occupy

13 Wing-tsit Chan, *Religious trends in modern China*. p. 180.

14 Judith Berling, *The syncretic religion of Lin Chao-en*.

15 David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The flying phoenix: aspects of Chinese sectarianism in Taiwan*, p. 10.

16 Yao Xinzong and Paul Badham, *Religious experience in contemporary China*, p. 84.

17 Yao Xinzong and Paul Badham, *Religious experience in contemporary China*, p. 113.

18 Yao Xinzong and Paul Badham, *Religious experience in contemporary China*, p. 91.

a small market share (less than 5 percent). In the United States, by contrast, more than eight in ten adults (83 percent) are affiliated with exclusive religious groups; only 0.4 percent are religiously affiliated with Buddhism, according to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2007.

Non-exclusive religions pose challenges to SR, which developed mainly in Christian societies. The prevalence of non-exclusive religion in China may throw new light on sociological concepts and theories such as commitment, conversion, the sect-to-church theory, and religious market theory.

### **Challenges for sociology of religion in China**

#### *Commitment and conversion*

Perhaps commitment and conversion are among the most studied concepts in SR, but they are quite problematic in the non-exclusive context. There is a large amount of research on the process of commitment to groups or organizations. Previous studies stress that exclusivity plays an important role in generating and maintaining commitment. In her classical study of Utopian groups in the United States, Kanter finds that successful nineteenth-century communes placed clear-cut boundaries; “one is either in or out.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Stark and Finke<sup>20</sup> write that “among religious organizations, there is a reciprocal relationship between the degree of lay commitment and the degree of exclusivity.”

But commitment is not a universal phenomena; it is arguably associated with collective religion.<sup>21</sup> According to Iannaccone, religious commodities are risky, promising large but uncertain benefits. There are two strategies to reduce risk: one is diversification, the other is concentration. While the first strategy leads to the formation of private religion, the second one results in the emergence of collective religion. “Most Western religions rely on collective, congregational production.” Collective religion must deal with the free-rider problem. Many do so by means of exclusivity, that is, “through costly demands that effectively isolate members from competing groups.” But “exclusivity and diversification do not mix;” private religions do not require follower’s commitment; and they sell their products “with no strings attached.”<sup>22</sup>

Since exclusivity lies at the heart of “commitment,” the concept of commitment loses its power when used in studying non-exclusive religions. Indeed, the Chinese had a very vague idea of religious commitment. Actually, there is not an equivalent of the term “commitment” in

19 Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and community: communes and Utopias in sociological perspective*, p. 80.

20 Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of faith*, p. 142.

21 L. R. Iannaccone, “Rational choice: framework for the scientific study of religion.”

22 L. R. Iannaccone, “Rational choice: framework for the scientific study of religion.” p. 37.

Chinese and Fenggang Yang<sup>23</sup> had to create a new word to translate it. In China, religions were not mutually exclusive, so it was natural for people to participate in practices of more than one religion. C. K. Yang observes that “the first striking characteristic [of religious life in China] is the general absence of any membership requirement for worshiping in a temple or convent.”<sup>24</sup>

Chinese people largely ignore affiliation to a specific religion. “Most people did not perceive or think in terms of socially defined (or bounded) religions that were in competition for their allegiance.”<sup>25</sup> They usually encountered gods and goddesses in their homes on family altars, regarding these spirits as part of family life rather than as being associated with a separate institution.<sup>26</sup> Religion outside the home meant individual spirits and specific temples but not religions; these temples were highly syncretic and “even priests in some country temples were unable to reveal the identity of the religion to which they belonged.”<sup>27</sup> People would maintain an exchange relationship with spirits when need arose and they tended to switch their loyalties according to the degree of efficacy they perceived. It is natural for them to attend several religious groups’ activities. After probing religious experience in contemporary China, Yao and Badham make the following comment: “In looking at the research as a whole we realize that it is as important not solely to focus on some of these remarkably high figures for religious experience and belief but also to take equally seriously the very low figures for religious commitment.”<sup>28</sup>

Religious commitment is unimportant in Chinese religious life. So is conversion. For Chinese people, conversion is nothing new, but it has a different meaning from that in Judeo-Christian societies. Exclusive religions stress membership; they use all sorts of social reinforcements to hold on to believers, relying on the utility of social networks, the psychological familiarity with rituals and texts, and the difficulty of learning a new system. Conversion means a dramatic shift in religious allegiance, and an overwhelming change of social networks and social capitals as well. So, in order to keep their social capital, most people will not convert under normal circumstances unless their lives change dramatically due to marriage and migration.<sup>29</sup>

However, in China, most people can switch their religious affiliation easily because of the lack of membership in most of Chinese religions. The social reinforcements for worship at a particular temple are not so powerful, particularly in areas served by a number of temples,

23 Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of faith*, p. 25.

24 C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese society*, p. 327.

25 Joseph B Tamney and Linda Hsueh-Ling Chiang, *Modernization, globalization, and Confucianism in Chinese societies*, p. 157.

26 Joseph B. Tamney, “Chinese family structure and the continuation of Chinese religions.”

27 C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese society*, p. 25.

28 Yao Xinzong and Paul Badham, *Religious experience in contemporary China*, p. 9.

29 Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of faith*, p. 119.

and the involvement with ritual and texts is much less than in canonical religions with sacred scriptures. Worshippers can more easily visit rival temples, compare what they experience or get at each temple, and switch if they find some minor difference. Chinese sects attach more importance to membership than folk religion. But even within the sectarian tradition, switching one's religious affiliation was common. "There were some people who went from sect to sect, joining first one and then another, always searching for the 'best' system."<sup>30</sup> This is much less likely to occur with the exclusive religions. With regard to characteristics of Chinese conversion, Jordan offers insightful comments:

Conversion back and forth among competing religious alternatives at all levels has been a constant option through most of Chinese history. Perhaps as a long-term adaptation, conversion has itself become part of the popular religious system, which has expanded to "contain" the notion of alternative standards of faith and practice among which conversion occurs. Traditionally, most Chinese conversion was probably "additive" (it did not require abandonment of old beliefs, merely their subordination to new ones); it was "conditional" (adherence to a religious regimen was conditioned by external standards of evaluation, such that the new religious system was not, at least initially, ultimate but was accepted only if congruent with an outside standard); and it probably normally involved "pantheon interchangeability" (loyalties were shifted from one cult or sect to another with little dramatic change in cosmology or values).<sup>31</sup>

In Jordan's words, "China has tamed conversion."<sup>32</sup> Chinese conversion, which is additive, conditional, and pantheon interchangeable, is different from the version in Western society, the version which has been fully probed by previous SR scholarship. What are the theoretical significances of Chinese conversion?

*The sect-church theory*

When probing religious organizations, sociologists mainly focus on sect or church, which is predominant in Western society. The term "sect" was first introduced by Troeltsch to refer to an otherworldly-oriented religious community which is "not a general, all-inclusive institution." A church usually accepts the secular order and it is "an integral part of the existing social order."<sup>33</sup> Many complex typologies related to sects have been developed by sociologists, such as "conversionist sects," "adventist sects," "introversionist sects" and "gnostic sects."<sup>34</sup>

30 Susan Naquin, *Millenarian rebellion in China: the eight trigrams uprising of 1813*, p. 37.

31 David K. Jordan, "The glyphomancy factor: observation on Chinese conversion," p. 297.

32 David K. Jordan, "The glyphomancy factor: observation on Chinese conversion," p. 297.

33 Ernst Troeltsch, *The social teachings of the Christian churches*.

34 Bryan Wilson, "An analysis of sect development."



It is Niebuhr who gives the terms theoretical significance. He finds that a sect that originated in response to protest against outside society would reconcile itself to prevailing circumstances and thus would be accepted by secular society. Stark and his colleagues make new contributions to the sect-to-church theory. After accepting Benton Johnson's definition of sect, which means "a religious group that rejects the social environment in which it exists," they use a single criterion to measure religious groups: tension. They find that under certain conditions religious organizations will shift in the direction of higher tension with their environment. That is to say, some religions would like to move back from church to sect.<sup>35</sup>

The sect-church theory is perhaps the most frequently cited theory in SR, especially when studying religious organizations. But the theory has come under considerable criticism when it is applied in China. Many scholars suggest that the term "sect" may be misleading in the Chinese context because it originated in Western society and contains notions of rejection, protest and resistance. For instance, ter Haar<sup>36</sup> argues that "the term 'sect' in the corresponding field of Chinese religion is commonly used for any group to which 'heterodox' beliefs are ascribed, with complete disregard for its degree of institutionalization or its religious contents." For this reason, they discard the term and use alternative ones such as "religious group," "teachings" or "branch" which they think are more value-free.

Some students think that the theory is still useful in explaining some religious phenomena in China. Daniel Overmyer, the pioneer of studies of Chinese sects, inclines to use the term sect to describe so-called "heterodoxies" (*xiejiao*). But he is very cautious about the notion of rejection. He redefines the term sect. For him, a sect is "a founded voluntary association, oriented toward personal salvation, which arises in reaction to a larger, founded religious system, which though it is established, was itself voluntary in origin." In order to reform the term into a universal one, Overmyer purposely ignores some factors of the term sect such as "exclusiveness and detachment" which he thinks are an echo of Western dualism and thus inapplicable to Chinese society.

A recent study also shows that because of state repression, the sect-to-church transformation is rare in China. In Judeo-Christian contexts, religious firms usually adapt their doctrines to reduce or increase the tension between them and the surrounding society; and the doctrinal adaptation would result in the sect-to-church or church-to-sect tendency.<sup>37</sup> But in China's history, although there were various dissenting religious groups, they rarely had a chance to become church-like. Persecution prevented the occurrence of the sect-to-church tendency and induced Chinese sectarian movements to be organizationally unstable, intellectually poor, and doctrinally syncretic.<sup>38</sup> If we try to apply the sect-to-church theory to Chinese society, we must revise it.

35 Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "The new holy clubs: testing church-to-sect propositions."

36 B. J. ter Haar, *The White Lotus teachings in Chinese religious history*.

37 Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "The new holy clubs: testing church-to-sect propositions."

38 Yunfeng Lu and Graeme Lang, "Impact of the state on the evolution of a sect."

Furthermore, the sects were minorities in China. In 1984, the Taiwan Social Change Survey data indicated that only 1.7 percent of respondents worshiped the Eternal Venerable Mother, the deity commonly worshiped by Chinese sects. The number does not change dramatically in the following decades. Sects occupy only a small share of total religious market in Chinese society. If we focus on sects or church when studying religious organizations in China, we will neglect Chinese indigenous religious organizations which have been fully probed by anthropologists. Considering that not all sociologists are familiar with these researches, we would like to use a few paragraphs to introduce the studies on religious organizations in Chinese society.

Partly due to strict state regulation, Buddhism, Taoism and popular religion failed to develop highly bureaucratic organizations. In practice, extensive pilgrimage networks were developed. Most Chinese gods, either Buddhist or Taoist, expand their influence by means of “efficacy division” (*fenling*) or “incense division” (*fenxiang*), both of which refer to “the practice by which new temples are chartered by the division of incense representing a god’s efficacy from a source temple.”<sup>39</sup> These branch temples can themselves spawn newer temples as well. This institutional division becomes the main way in which Buddhist or Taoist gods spread their influence. The branch temples normally continue to retain a relationship with the source temple by means of pilgrimage. To increase the efficaciousness of the gods, the branch temples make a yearly pilgrimage to the mother temple, usually at the “birthday” of the god they worship. All branch temples can return to the founding temple but are treated on an equal basis. Competition exists in the branch temples. “Status within the system is won by competitive gift-giving” which was “carefully recorded and carved on steles lining the walls of the founding temples.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, extensive pilgrimage networks, which operated with flexible and non-hierarchical principles, existed in traditional China: the source temple occupied the precedent status in the incense-division network, and various competitive branch temples shared the efficaciousness of the gods and made pilgrimages to the founding temple.<sup>41</sup>

In the past centuries, both Buddhism and Taoism extended influence to the grass-roots by developing their own complex pilgrimage networks which were headed by the various pilgrimage centers where the source temples were located. Four famous “Buddhist mountains” (*fojiao mingshan*) are important Buddhist pilgrimage centers, each of which is associated with a particular bodhisattva (*pusa*). Putuo Shan, in the eastern province of Zhejiang, is related to Guanyin *pusa* who represents mercy; Wutai Shan, in the northern province of Shanxi, is associated with Wenshu *pusa* representing wisdom; Emei Shan, located in the western

39 P. Steven Sangren, *Chinese sociologies: an anthropological account of the role of alienation in social reproduction*, p. 99.

40 Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One: the spread of a cult in Southeast China*, p. 54.

41 Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One: the spread of a cult in Southeast China*; P. Steven Sangren, *History and magical power in a Chinese community*; P. Steven Sangren, *Chinese sociologies: an anthropological account of the role of alienation in social reproduction*.

province of Sichuan, is linked with Puxian *pusa* who represents happiness; and Jiuhua Shan, in the central province of Anhui, is associated with Dizang *pusa* who represents filial piety.

Taoism also had its own pilgrimage centers. Equally important as the four famous Buddhist mountains are the “five famous Taoist mountains” (*wuyue*). Aside from these five mountains, Taoism also has thirty-six “cavern-heavens” (*dongtian*) and seventy-two “blessed lands” (*fudi*). Taoism also adopts some gods who emerged as popular religious deities, such as Huang Daxian.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, the original place of the god tends to become a new center for pilgrimages. For example, Meizhou, where the belief in Mazu originated, is the most important pilgrimage center for the devotees of Mazu.<sup>43</sup> For the sake of political stability and social integration, the imperial regimes generally accommodated the major religions which already existed, occasionally “promoting” local deities into the pantheon of officially worshipped gods for purposes of political cultivation of local populations.<sup>44</sup>

Along with these pilgrimage centers, there existed “territorial-cult organizations”<sup>45</sup> at the grass-roots level which were in charge of the local patron gods’ temples, pilgrimages and various rituals. These organizations also functioned on a non-bureaucratic principle. We can see this point from the *luzhu* (host of incense burner) association which is still alive in Taiwan. Each year, a *luzhu* will be chosen by means of casting divination blocks which represents the deity’s choice. Only men who are respected household heads are considered for the honor of serving as *luzhu*. As a rule, a *luzhu* is chosen on a rotating basis; one who has recently served as *luzhu* for a particular ritual is unlikely to hold the same position again for a number of years.<sup>46</sup> As a temporary governor, the *luzhu* is responsible for collecting funds, hiring opera troupes and religious specialists, building the opera canopy, preparing for the offerings and making general arrangements. Of course, the main task is to make regular pilgrimages to the “mother temple” of the local patron gods to increase the perceived efficacy of the god. And then the devotees would take an image of the god in a sedan chair to watch operas and “inspect the territory” (*xunjing*).<sup>47</sup> But these ritual associations are loosely and temporarily organized. When the rituals are over, the associations are disbanded or perform secular functions, such as managing irrigation issues, etc.<sup>48</sup>

The pilgrimage centers played important roles in linking various ritual communities and facilitating the communication between different communities. Most, if not all, of China’s important pilgrimage centers are located in peripheries and far from economic central

42 Lang and Ragvald, *The rise of a refugee god: Hong Kong’s Wong Tai Sin*.

43 P. Steven Sangren, *Chinese sociologies: an anthropological account of the role of alienation in social reproduction*.

44 C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese society*.

45 P. Steven Sangren, *History and magical power in a Chinese community*, p. 75.

46 P. Steven Sangren, *History and magical power in a Chinese community*, p. 55-56.

47 Lin Meirong, *Belief of Mazu and Han Chinese society in Taiwan*, p. 9.

48 Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One: the spread of a cult in Southeast China*.

regions.<sup>49</sup> Participants in pilgrimages were either organized by local territorial-cult groups or individually motivated by a promise to thank a deity for help rendered. To make pilgrimages, the devotees had to pass through many areas and visit many temples, including those located at important sacred sites and those along the major pilgrimage routes as well. These temples and monasteries usually “derived significant portions of their income from providing food and lodging for pilgrims.”<sup>50</sup> To facilitate the journeys of pilgrims, important temples and monasteries also produced a large number of itineraries or guidebooks to introduce pilgrimage destinations, the routes, lodgings, local customs, and so on.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the long journey of pilgrimage facilitated intense internal interactions within pilgrimage networks. In this sense, “Chinese Buddhism maintained a degree of ritual and doctrinal unity not through formal organization and bureaucratic discipline, but through informal institutions such as the pilgrimages of wandering monks and lay devotees.”<sup>52</sup> So did Taoism.

Here is our argument: the sect-church theory which was developed in Judeo-Christian society is not universally valid, especially in China; sects were religious minorities while non-bureaucratic temple networks and the related associations dominated the Chinese religious market. If we study religious organizations in China, we should pay more attention to temple networks rather than sects.

*The religious economy model*

In the past few years, the religious economy model has become more and more popular in China. Many students use this theory to explain the religious revival in China,<sup>53</sup> though the applicability of the model to China is still under debate.

Based on the assumption that the fundamental relationship between humans and divinities is a relationship of exchange and reciprocity, the new paradigm predicts that this relationship tends to be exclusive.<sup>54</sup> According to Stark and Bainbridge, “as societies become older, larger, and more cosmopolitan they will worship fewer gods of greater scope.”<sup>55</sup> These gods of great scope would require an exclusive exchange relationship with their devotees, and thus there is a tendency for religions to evolve in the direction of monotheism.<sup>56</sup> Stark and Finke argue that “Because exclusive religious organizations offer more valuable and apparently less risky

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49 C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese society*, p. 87; P. Steven Sangren, *History and magical power in a Chinese community*.

50 P. Steven Sangren, *History and magical power in a Chinese community*, p. 122.

51 Timothy Brook, *Geographical sources of Ming-Qing history*.

52 P. Steven Sangren, *History and magical power in a Chinese community*, p. 123.

53 Graeme Lang and Lars Ragvald, *The rise of a refugee god: Hong Kong's Wong Tai Sin*; Hubert Michael Seiwert, *Popular religious movements and heterodox sects in Chinese history*; Lu Yunfeng, “Entrepreneurial logic and the evolution of Falun Gong,” Yunfeng Lu *et al.*, “Deregulation and religious market in Taiwan.”

54 Rodney Stark and W. S. Bainbridge, *A theory of religion*.

55 Rodney Stark and W. S. Bainbridge, *A theory of religion*, p. 86.

56 Rodney Stark, *One true God*.

religious rewards, when exclusive firms appear in religious economies previously dominated by non-exclusive groups, the exclusive firms become dominant.” Because non-exclusive religions are “inherently weak,”<sup>57</sup> they only analyze exclusive religions in the religious market.

The above argument can be supported by the rise of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. “Each appeared in an economy dominated by nonexclusive firms, and each won because it was the better bargain, despite requiring higher costs.”<sup>58</sup> In China, however, non-exclusive religions dominated the population and exclusive religious firms were minorities. The prevalence of non-exclusive religion poses both challenges and opportunities to the religious economy model. How can we understand the lack of exclusivist religions within China, along with a stream of intellectual and sectarian theorizing which attempted to merge or integrate Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism? Why are syncretism and religious individualism popular in China?

We may begin by rejecting culturalist explanations, which ultimately leave the main question unanswered. If culture is explained by culture, we are unable to find the origins of the differences, and must rely on culturalist reasoning which is usually tendentious and often nearly tautological. Shih, for example, writes:

The following syncretic characteristics of the Chinese temperament account for Chinese religious syncretism. First, the Chinese are, in general, moderate, tolerant, and open-minded with respect to religious beliefs...They believe that the ability to tolerate and accept others’ views enriches themselves and they consider it a virtue of a cultured person. Second, the Chinese believe in the universality of truth. Although the paths leading to truth might be many and varied, truth is one.... Third, the Chinese are more pragmatic than theological.<sup>59</sup>

Disregarding for the moment the essentialist features of these claims (with the inevitable failure to accommodate all the views and mentalities which have occurred among Chinese but do not fit this stereotype), and acknowledging that some of these observations do describe the attitudes of some people in some Asian societies, we must nevertheless also observe that these points provide no way to explain why such attitudes developed among the Chinese, or whether they are a cause, or an effect, of historical religious syncretism in Chinese society. The argument amounts to the statement that Chinese are syncretistic because they are pragmatic about religion while believing in the ultimate unity of truth, and thus share a syncretistic mentality. This is nearly a tautology. Lang has also argued against culturalist explanations of other types of cultural differences between China and other regions, as for instance in the analysis of the

57 Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of faith*, p. 142.

58 Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of faith*, p. 194.

59 Shih Heng-Ching, *The syncretism of Ch’an and Pure Land Buddhism*, p. 9.

reasons why “modern science” developed in Europe but not in China.<sup>60</sup>

The most promising lines of explanation, by contrast, try to find the origins of Chinese “three-religion syncretism” in the social, economic, and political conditions of Chinese society. The analysis must explain why several different religious traditions co-existed for many centuries, why they were neither strongly supported nor completely suppressed by the state so that no single organized religion became dominant, why none of these religious traditions became (or was allowed to become) sufficiently communal or congregational to generate exclusivist claims and exclusivist socialization, and why some religious intellectuals took up the task of trying to reconcile and integrate aspects of these religions with a unificationist goal. The answers to these questions are related. The web of causation is complex, and beyond the scope of this paper. We note, however, that political considerations in maintaining the unity and political stability of the state were important throughout the period, and account for some of the outcomes.

Imperial regimes promoted a state-serving version of “Confucian” ideology through the examination system. The state-supported forms of religious observances were linked to this version of “Confucianism” and to the political needs of the state and were compulsory for officials, and hence were durable. However, other popular religions, properly controlled, were tolerable, and in their “diffused” form, were not in any case eradicable.<sup>61</sup> The imperial regimes, however, were careful to ensure that no religious organization became sufficiently well-organized and powerful to produce political challenges. Some of the resulting partial purges actually made these religions both more tolerable to the regime and more thoroughly diffused among the population. One of the purges, the assault on Buddhist institutions in 845 C.E., had the effect of forcing a simplification and amalgamation of Buddhist enterprise – both theory and practice, – weakening the clerical basis of Buddhism but also making it more accessible and comprehensible to potential worshippers.<sup>62</sup>

Whenever religious groups developed a set of theologies claiming exclusive truths or salvation, they would become a target of suppression. *Sanjie jiao* (literally, the Sect of Three Stages), a branch of Buddhism in China, is an example. This sect was established by Xinxing (540-594), an eminent monk in the Sui Dynasty. Xinxing held that the history of Buddhism could be classified into three stages; the final stage was the age of *mofa* (the extinction of the Dharma) during which no government could exist that was worthy of the respect and cooperation of devout Buddhists; only *Sanjie jiao* was valuable because it had

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60 Graeme Lang, “State systems and the origins of modern science: a comparison of Europe and China.”

61 Graeme Lang, “State systems and the origins of modern science: a comparison of Europe and China.”

62 Judith Berling, *The syncretic religion of Lin Chao-en*.

the sole formula of salvation. In the early Sui, *Sanjie jiao* was very popular and many of the most powerful officials followed and patronized it. But the apocalypticism stressed by this Buddhist sect was regarded by the state as utterly subversive and likely to provide an ideology for revolt. Hence the movement was ruthlessly suppressed. From 600 to 725, this sect was outlawed and repressed by the state four times and its organization was totally uprooted at the end of the Tang Dynasty.

The restrictions on religion became stricter in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In 1391, the Ming regime (1368-1644) issued regulations that each county should not have more than one big temple; all monks must live together for the convenience of regulation but the population of each temple should be less than forty. In addition, men were not permitted to be monks until forty years old and women should be more than fifty before they converted to Buddhism as nuns. The state held the examination for the clergy every three years and only those passing the examination could get the official license. Those who surreptitiously received ordination without an official ordination certificate would be punished.

The Qing regime (1644-1911) followed and strengthened the regulation of religious organization. When a priest died, according to the law of the Qing dynasty, his ordination certificate was surrendered to the government in order to prevent the certificate from being circulated through unofficial channels. Qing law required that Buddhist priests must be over forty years old before they offered apprenticeship to a neophyte, and each ordained priest was permitted to train only one neophyte. Considering that revolutionary secret societies tended to congregate around temples, the Qing bureaucracy also proscribed the construction of temples built by the common people.<sup>63</sup>

Strict regulation restricted the emergence of strong clergy organizations independent of state-controlled associations. Without the support of strong clergy organizations, Buddhism and Taoism failed to develop mature congregational structures which no doubt would have more effectively connected clergy and laity. It was politically risky to have congregations in a society where the state was suspicious of any mass gatherings. Partly due to this reason, exclusive religions failed to win the biggest religious market niches in China.

In addition to the restrictions on religious organizations, some rulers also promoted some discussion, dialogue, and theological debate among exponents of major religions, as occurred also under some of the Mogul rulers in India in the face of similar religious diversity, hoping perhaps both to extract some truth and to reduce religious arrogance. Thus, the imperial state sustained a diversity of hobbled religions which coexisted without any of them becoming dominant. Finally, to complement and support the political unity of the state and to promote greater religious harmony, some rulers also asserted or supported the assertion that there

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63 C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese society*, pp. 188-9.

were basic truths underlying the competing religions which rendered them, at some level, expressions of deeper common truth.

The founder of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, was one of these rulers.<sup>64</sup> In the early Ming, this view was again endorsed and legitimized by the founder of the dynasty; later some religious intellectuals attempted to take the process one step further and unite these three coexisting philosophical-religious traditions within a single system. The emperors were ambivalent about this further step, and there were several occasions when the state decreed that ‘three religions’ altars should not show Confucius in a secondary role (he was typically on one side of the altar, with Buddha in the middle and Laozi on the other side).<sup>65</sup>

State regulation partly contributed to the prevalence of nonexclusive religions in China. A recent study on the Taiwan religious market also shows that deregulation is associated with the rise of organized religion.<sup>66</sup> Will these organized religions develop toward exclusivity? What will happen when exclusive religions (e.g. Christianity) encounter non-exclusive religions? These questions are to be probed in future studies.

## Conclusions

When SR emerged in the early twentieth century, the discipline had a wide range of empirical concerns which one can see from Weber’s studies on Chinese religions and Hindu religions. The following decades’ development of SR, however, has largely been “isolated” and “insulated;” and its empirical concern is so narrow that the sociology of religion has largely become “the sociology of Christianity.”<sup>67</sup> It is time to reshape the boundary of SR. In this article, we argue that the proliferation of publications on Chinese religion brings both challenges and opportunities to SR, which is mainly rooted in the observation of religions in Western societies.

In Western societies, exclusive religious organizations are mainstream and popular religion is weak; these religious firms emphasize membership and socialize their members through formal organization and bureaucratic discipline. In China, however, the situation is the reverse: while the non-exclusive religions dominated the population, exclusive religious firms were minorities in Chinese markets. The prevalence of non-exclusive religion challenges “the usefulness of standard concepts in the study of religion that have grown largely from thinking focused on Christian contexts.”<sup>68</sup> These concepts and theories include “commitment,”

64 C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese society*, p. 46.

65 C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese society*, p. 196.

66 Yunfeng Lu *et al.*, “Deregulation and religious market in Taiwan.”

67 Bryan Turner, *Religion and social theory: a materialistic perspective*, p. 5.

68 Robert Wuthnow, “Presidential address 2003: the challenge of diversity,” p. 165.



“conversion,” “sect-church theory” and the religious economy model.

But we do not hold that Western sociological concepts and theories are invalid in China. We only hold that students cannot take it for granted that these concepts and theories are universal so that we can just use them without any reflection. Such theoretical reflection, we believe, will not only broaden the theoretical discussion of SR but also enhance our understandings of Chinese religions.

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