

‘Religion’ and ‘Superstition’ in Introductory Works to Religious Studies in Early Republican China

Christian Meyer

The concept of “superstition” played an important role in the reception of the discipline of Religious Studies (*zongjiaoxue*) in China. A general background of its introduction was the larger trend to adopt Western categories since the late Qing period. More specifically, public discourses on the role of religion in Republican China (1912–1949) led to the academic occupation with religion. While anti-religious intellectuals subsumed religion under the category of “superstition”, apologetics of religion differentiated between the two. The examples of introductory works by the Christian authors Xie Songgao and Wang Zhixin reveal two different ways of introducing and applying categories of “religion” and “superstition” to the Chinese history of religions. Their writings can be understood partly as apologetic reactions to the fierce anti-religious attacks that dominated the debate in the 1920s. At the same time they represent a way of negotiating different biographical backgrounds, traditional Chinese and Christian, in their own identities.

1 Introduction: ‘Religion’ and ‘Superstition’ in the History of Modern China

The related concepts of religion and superstition as introduced from the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had an eminent and influential place in the history of modern China. Their introduction was related to the general transmission of Western concepts and terms to China, often via Japan,¹ but also especially to the presence and efforts of Christian missionaries in China. Furthermore, connected to these two channels of transmission, reception was very much divided: While the attitude towards the adoption of the concept of religion was positive in some quarters, the anti-religious movement rejected religion(s) – both Christianity and/or indigenous religions – as backward and even generally superstitious and argued that only science promised a bright future, prosperity, and democracy.

While other aspects of this long process have already been described in detail,² the main focus of this article shall be on the hitherto rather neglected role of indigenous Christians as writers of some of the earliest introductions to the new academic discipline of Religious Studies (*zongjiaoxue*). As I see it, these Christian writers played an important role in the adoption of and reflection on the concepts of religion and superstition. Their writings can be seen as apologetic reactions to

¹ On the question of transfer of knowledge and creation of neologisms in other academic fields in China see, for example, Lackner/Amelung/Kurtz (2001), Lackner/Vittinghoff (2004), or Elman (2006).

² Most studies, however, have followed the lines of the national or anti-religious discourses. See the introduction to this volume and for China especially the works of Chen (1999), Nedostup (2001), and others.

the fierce anti-religious attacks that dominated the debate in the 1920s. From a different perspective, however, they also represent a way of negotiating different backgrounds and influences in their own biographically shaped identities. In general, the contribution of these writers to widely read and reprinted introductory works can be regarded as an integrative and essential part of the intellectual discourse and academic adoption of those concepts and eventually as a factor that worked in favor of a more positive evaluation of religions, especially as the anti-religious and anti-Christian movements abated by the late 1920s.³

By choosing the – supposedly neutral – discipline of Religious Studies the authors entered a field in which they would not directly propagate Christian faith. Yet, as we will see, Religious Studies, received from the West as a discipline often still close to theology, was adopted as a useful tool to differentiate “higher religions” – like Christianity – from lower, primitive, and superstitious religions. The approach of these writers therefore also serves as an especially interesting and important example of how the categories of religion and superstition were negotiated in early modern China.

The introductory works chosen here may serve as meaningful examples not only because they catered to a practical demand for such introductions and indicate a widespread interest in the new field of academic study of religion, but also because the inclusion of one of the works in a general encyclopedic series shows its acceptance in a wider public sphere.⁴ This acceptance is especially interesting against the background of the mid and late 1920s which saw the high tide of anti-religious and anti-Christian movements in Republican China. A further measure of the influence of the authors selected here is that their works were reprinted a great many times⁵ in contrast to other, either older, proselytizing works, which they substituted,⁶ or just less successful ones like that of Lin Buji (1926). This large number of reprints can be attributed to the fact that these books fulfilled the urgent need to counter the strong anti-religious/anti-Christian attacks in the 1920s with rational arguments.

³ For the background of anti-religious and especially anti-Christian Movements and alliances see especially Yip (1980) and Lutz (1988); cf. also Lam (1978) and Chao (1986); for the turn of the tide towards a more positive attitude to religion in the late 1920s within the Guomindang see Nedostup (2001); for the general trend to more traditional and “conservative” customs and ideals see Harrison (2000).

⁴ Xie Songgao's *Zongjiaoxue ABC*, published in the *ABC* series (see below). Another volume on *Superstition (Mixin)*, by Fei Hongnian (1931), was published in a similar encyclopedic series (*Baike xiao congshu*).

⁵ The first book treated here, *Zhujiao de yanjiu* by Xie/Yu (1926), was quite successful and was reprinted in 14 editions up to 1949 (however, as usual in Republican China, with a rather small print-run of 500 to 2,000 copies, according to the back cover of the 1949 edition); there were even later editions printed in Hong Kong by Jidujiao Fuqiao Chubanshe (2nd ed. 1959).

⁶ Such as the early comparative works of Muirhead (1879), MacGillivray (1919), Kellogg (1919), Cook (1925), or Reichelt (1925). For other early works see my forthcoming article on “Scholars of Religious Research as Observers or Participants.”

A second aspect – connected and intertwined with the first – was that they dealt with the question of Chinese Christian identity: As neophytes, the writers were applying academic concepts of religion both to their new religion and to indigenous traditions – their original biographical background – and therefore used these ideas to negotiate their new and old identities within the horizons of narrower Christian and wider public discursive contexts.

We can thus identify two main motives in their enterprises: one may be labeled apologetic and the other indigenizing. In the often dominant apologetic discourse, these Chinese Christians argued within the categories of “superstition, religion, and science”, reacting to the dominant anti-religious discourse and abandoning older, proselytizing patterns of understanding “religion and superstition”. They accepted that notions of rationality, individuality, and social ethics were applied as measures to rate religion.

At the same time, Chinese Christians shaped their identity in this very discourse by distancing and appropriation. They reevaluated material from their traditional indigenous background as partly positive – identifying points of contact with Christianity or discerning in this background a more secular interpretation (especially Confucianism) that left scope for the Christian religious faith –, while distancing themselves from everything which smacked of superstition. This situation led to a productive occupation with and exploration of the concepts and material which enriched and differentiated the discourse on religion in Republican China.

The following sections shall introduce and show the way in which the selected authors applied the Western concepts of religion and superstition in the context of their time and thereby argued in a hostile environment for a greater acceptance of religion. The first, larger part will deal with one of the very first modern introductory works to Religious Studies, coauthored together with Yu Muren, and probably written mainly by Xie Songgao in 1926, who also published a second similar volume in 1928. The works of the second author presented here, Wang Zhixin, are considerably different from those of Xie Songgao. As another kind of introduction in the field of “History of Religion”, its value consists in the fact that it demonstrated how the categories of religion and superstition were applied to Chinese *history*, reconstructing a general Chinese history of religion.

2 Xie Songgao and Yu Muren's *A Short Study of Religions*

One of the first general works introducing Religious Studies in China by Chinese authors is the 280-page book *A Short Study of Religions* (*Zhujiao de yanjiu*) of 1926, co-authored by the two Christian editors and publishers of the Protestant Christian Literature Society (Guangxuehui) publishing house in Shanghai, Xie Songgao and Mu Yuren. It was followed by a second similar 111-page volume by Xie Songgao alone, published in the encyclopedic series *ABC congshu* (*ABC Encyclopedia*) of the non-Christian publisher Shijie Shuju under the title *Zongjiaoxue ABC* (*Religious Studies ABC*), which also clearly presents the Western concept and the new

discipline. The term *zongjiaoxue* had been used shortly before in titles like Yan Jicheng's translation of Frank B. Jevons's *Comparative Religion* as *Bijiao zongjiaoxue* (Jevons 1925). Works comparing and introducing major religions had been written before, but only by missionaries or as translations of Western works and less clearly applying recent theories of the new discipline Religious Studies. Other comparable monographs, including a translation from Japanese, were published around the same time (cf. Meyer, forthcoming).⁷

Although it does not have the term Religious Studies (*zongjiaoxue*) in its title, the focus in the following discussion will be mainly on the first work of Xie and Yu of 1926, as it deals extensively with the understanding of the concepts of "religion" and "superstition". The second book (*Zongjiaoxue ABC*), which focuses on living religions, will be addressed only in passing.⁸

Structure and Overall Character

The structure of *A Short Study of Religions* is clearly different from that of the *Religious Studies ABC* of 1928: Chapter One discusses the author's own position, methods of research into religion and characteristics of religion as well as the relation of religion to life, culture, customs (*xisu*), superstition (as part of primitive religion), etc. Chapter Two deals with extinct ancient religions (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and other religions of the past). In Chapters Three and Four Xie discusses nine extant religions, including "Chinese Religion(s)" (*Zhongguo de zongjiao*) in Chapter Three, and in Chapter Four, at the very end, more extensively the Christian tradition with its "precursor" Judaism.⁹ This is followed by a final concluding chapter (pp. 269–280) and in later editions by two attachments, the history of Christianity in China (19 pp., separate pagination) and a comparison table of the eleven living religions.

Of particular interest to us is the full first chapter (with prolegomena and Xie's discussion of primitive religion, including superstition, etc., pp. 1–94) and the parts about "Chinese religion" (pp. 175–197).

⁷ According to its reference list of sources, the work of 1926, *Zhujiào de yanjiu*, also relied on several of these works.

⁸ The similarities, especially of the selected sections, between both books suggest that they were basically written by the same author, Xie Songgao; accordingly, I will also refer to him as "the author" when treating the work of 1926.

⁹ In contrast to the work of 1928, which puts Confucianism and Daoism at the end, thereby pedagogically not only focusing on the indigenous backgrounds of the readers but also especially on Daoism as the target of harsh criticism as Shamanist "superstition" (*wushu mixin*).

The Understanding of Religion in Xie Songgao's Introduction

The first chapter is formally divided into nine subsections, which fall into three groups: (1) prolegomena setting out the author's position, methods of scientific research on religion, and characteristics of religion; (2) a discussion of the relation of religion to life and culture; (3) four sections about the religion of the primitives and their customs and superstitions (*yuanren zhi zongjiao shang de xisu yu mixin*, including the categories of myth, ritual, etc.). The first section (1) is therefore most relevant for understanding the author's motivation for using the "more objective" perspective of Religious Studies rather than a theological one, while the other sections inform us about his understanding and reception of the terms "religion" (2) and "superstition" (3) in the context of his time.

In the first section, Xie distinguishes between four basic attitudes towards religion: first, the critics of religion, who regarded faith as unnecessary, "God" as non-existent (void; *xukong*), and the soul as transient. He reacts to their main argument that God is not provable by doubting himself the sheer possibility that God might be provable by means of materialist scientific methods at all (p. 1). A second group comprises those who regarded any religion other than their own as false and were therefore not able to explore other religions without prejudice (p. 2). A third group would not differentiate between religion and life or between "sacred" (*sheng*; as in "Holy Scripture[s]", "Holy days", "the Holy Spirit") and the ordinary, but followed only their conscience without a God (Shangdi); this group Xie regarded as atheists (pp. 2f.). – Interestingly, the category of "holiness" is applied here, although it remains unclear whether or not this was an adoption from Western Religious Studies. Holiness is rather abstractly associated with "dignity" (*zhuangyan*), perhaps paralleling Rudolf Otto's *majestas* (p. 3). In this context, religious worship (*zongjiao shang de libai*) and all manner of ordinary social ceremonies (p. 3, cf. pp. 89–93) are also mentioned. Yet, there is no explicit reference to Nathan Söderblom or Rudolf Otto (with specific keywords such as "numinous", "fascinans", "tremendum", etc.), or Durkheim. This is not too surprising since, as in most writings of the time, clear references to source literature are rarely indicated. Finally, religion is generally defined by its character as "transcending human life." The categories of holiness or of transcendence are clearly introduced as defining characteristics of religion in contrast to normal life.

Fourthly, at the other extreme, there were those people who wanted to separate religion from life and only observe all rites and ceremonies (*lijie*), but who remained indifferent to normal life. These people maintained only an outward form of religion, but not a religious attitude. According to Xie, religion should not induce people to leave the "world" (*chensu*) and abandon the task allotted to them in life. Religion has to be expressed not only in rituals, but must be practiced in everyday life in order to improve one's individual personality and social morality.

He adds that religion should be studied (and believed) for the following three reasons:

- (1) Since in the history of religions (*zongjiaoshi*) religion can be found in all nations, humanity and religion cannot be separated.
- (2) By studying Religious Studies (*zongjiaoxue*) we can see that many moral and outstanding people believe in religion (*xiangxin zongjiao*). As an example, Xie quotes Confucius, who, although he had never discussed religion in detail, still had an honest and deep belief in religion. He had even prayed often and did not eliminate the name Shangdi (“Highest God / ancestor”) when compiling and editing the classics *Shijing* and *Shujing* (p. 4).¹⁰ Similarly, Xie points to the modern philosopher Kant, who was a scholar with deep religious thought and belief in eternal life, and the philosopher Spinoza, who embraced pantheism. The same was true of modern-day scientists like John Arthur Thomson (1861–1933), whose work Xie translated (Thomson 1927). Writers like Tolstoy or politicians like U.S. presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were not only well-educated but also believers.
- (3) Thirdly, religious faith is an important part of personal experience, providing comfort in sorrow and help in solving life’s problems or coming to decisions concerning general beliefs in life (*renshengguan*), hope of eternal life etc., and particularly the idea that God is love. Most importantly, only the idea of forgiveness can help in regard to sins and matters of conscience. The study of religion can further help to recognize that religion is a matter of its own and, even more, something that is needed in life.

A section on “Methods of studying religion” (Section 2) emphasizes a neutral, objective,¹¹ but also sympathetic approach to religion without oppressing others (p. 8, cf. also p. 9). Positioning the history of religion (*zongjiao de lishi*) at the base of his methods, Xie also includes philosophy of religion and the “newly developed” academic discipline of psychology of religion (*zongjiao xinlixue*; p. 11), which leads to the topic of the origin of religion. On this question he presents mainly Western theories attributing it to a natural predisposition and human fear as well as the quest for security and (eternal) life. Only later did a “religious feeling” develop indirectly on this base as a feeling of reverence (*jingyangxin*) and gratefulness (*ganjixin*).¹² Xie explains that religion, according to the psychology of religion research, is a necessity for humankind. He also treats the topics of prayer and conversion with reference to William James’s “The Varieties of Religious Experience” (*Zongjiao jingyan de zhonglei*; p. 13), and research on dreams and the subconsciousness (without explicitly mentioning Freud). Psychology of religion – according to Xie’s somewhat surprising conclusion – could overcome the usual understanding of such phenomena as superstition by distinguishing between true and false (illusion) and explaining them (pp. 15f.), so that not all such phenomena would be regarded as mere

¹⁰ According to traditional understanding, which Xie seems to share, Confucius was the compiler and editor of these classics.

¹¹ See also one of the “five principles” in the work of 1928.

¹² This topic is further pursued in Section 3 on “The specific nature of religion.”

expressions of the subconscious or understood as a superstition (p. 16)! Yet this discipline – as well as apparently his understanding at least of Freud’s intentions – was still in its infancy (pp. 16f.). It is interesting to note here that psychology of religion is generally used as an aid to the objectification of religious experience, and even basic Freudian ideas seem to be simply reinterpreted as examples for the possibility of distinguishing true and false religion.

Finally, in Section 3 Xie states that religion is not a mere assertion, but a human attitude and position (*rensheng de taidu yu zhuzhang*). In other words, religion is a philosophy of life (*renshengguan*) or a compass (p. 25). Religious life could be understood as making God and the fulfillment of His will one’s own goal, striving eventually to raise the level of moral thinking (*daode guannian*) and to bring all actions in life into conformity with God’s will (p. 25).

In the last Section 5, Xie speaks about the relationship and mutual influence of “Religion and Culture” (pp. 36–46) and emphasizes the importance of religion as a positive factor also for the past and present development of culture. Xie understands Confucianism as a form of “ethical religion” (*lunli de zongjiao*), which heavily influenced Chinese culture (p. 40). Other areas significantly influenced by religion were law (e.g., Jewish law), science, art, literature, and education (including Jesus, Jewish priests, and Confucius as teachers, but also the establishment of schools by Calvin in Geneva; p. 43). Xie seems to imply that Church colleges and universities, which were attacked as being under imperialist foreign control, were a normal and helpful phenomenon for China, not unlike famous universities in the United States with their affiliated theological seminaries. Altogether, the first four sections of the introductory chapter explore the role of religion, mostly treating it as a positive stimulating factor for society and culture. According to Xie, as he puts it in his last enthusiastic sentence of the section, there has “never been a culture without religion.”

Approaches to Religious Theory: Primitive Religion, Magic, Superstition, Taboo, Fortune-telling, Myth, and Ritual

(a) The Religion of the Primitives (Section 6)

Sections 6 to 9 deal entirely with elements of religion that Xie identifies as rooted in primitive religion and often, though not necessarily or always, tending to superstition. Even though the continuity of early religion into today’s higher religion (e.g. in rituals) is important for Xie, he emphasizes the distinction between them. These sections also address important and central themes of Religious Studies such as myth and ritual.

In the first section, in accordance with the evolutionary model in contemporary Religious Studies and Anthropology, types of “earlier religion” of “primitive cultures” are presented (p. 46): The thinking of “primitive people” could be considered to be basically the same as that of modern-day humans but at a much

simpler stage, comparable to that of children. Accordingly, their religious thinking and behavior would tend toward superstition (*mixin*), and their ability to distinguish between reality and illusion would not be underdeveloped, owing to insufficient observation and discernment.

Thirdly, their personality was wilder and less cultivated,¹³ but also characterized by deep affection for their wives. In general, their thoughts and actions are said to be less stable. The absence of social organization and protection by law as well as the suspicion of others would often lead to a strong belief in spirits or magic.

Xie distinguishes the forms (pp. 50–57) of: (1) animism (*guilingjiao*), (2) totemism (*tutengjiao*), (3) fetishism (*chongbai zhouwu*) with magicians (*shushi*; already a kind of “lowest religion” with a strong use of magic, as also found especially in the middle Southern “Jianghu” area of China; p. 53), (4) worship of the dead (or ancestors; *chongbai siren*) which, in a higher form, had also developed in China, and (5) worship of idols (*chongbai ouxiang*), which had evolved from the later stages of primitive religion, still imbued with awful and unaesthetic appearance to higher, more aesthetic and cultivated forms such as those found in Greece, Rome, Assyria, and Babylon, or in Israel (Judah). Although, compared with earlier objects of veneration, these gods had attained human form, these religions still stressed not spiritual but material issues like a good harvest or peace and prosperity for the country, and the idea of personal character (*renge*) and love (*aixin*; p. 55) was still absent. Only the worship of (one) God (Shangdi), however, would have brought great progress in regard to the notion of personality, ethics, and thinking (p. 56). (6) Lastly, Xie mentions the worship of fire as a potentially constructive but also destructive primal force, which had survived in a higher form in Zoroastrianism (*Baihuojiao*).

Although he states that the ideas and concepts of these religions were generally wrong, he claims at the same time that faith in them was often honest and sincere; also, according to Xie, a certain belief in the soul and spirit was also inherent in them.

(b) Primitive Religious Customs and Superstition (Magic) (Section 7)

Section 7 is concerned mainly with the differentiation of “primitive magic” and “today’s religion”: Today, instead of performing magical rites and worshipping objects of faith like the souls of animals, plants, or the dead, one prays to God (Shangdi). And while in earlier times large buildings and organizations had not existed and at most mounds or caves had been used for religious purposes, impressive churches, Buddhist or Taoist temples, and monasteries (*jiaotang siyuan*) can now be found (p. 60). Earlier religion was mainly diffuse, and there were neither religious experts like priests nor missionaries, with the exception of shamans (*wu*), who however kept their knowledge secret and did not pass it on to the public. The

¹³ As Xie says, sometimes including pleasure in killing, cannibalism, and incestuous or violent licentious illicit sexuality.

main difference, Xie states, consists in the fact that people listened only to their feelings and lacked the rational power of judgment (*lizhi de caidu*; p. 61).

In the context of dealing with “customs and superstitions of primitive religion”, he treats several key topics. A first, significant one is magic (*wushu*), which according to Xie should be distinguished from religion, but at this stage was often closely related to it. Magical practices were, he reports, still common in the China of his day: In times of drought, e.g., processions with dragon statues took place, while in times of excessive rainfall these same statues might be locked up for several days (p. 65). Magic, especially as it was still found in the middle Southern “Jianghu” area of China, is described by Xie as savage, cruel, selfish, and unethical (p. 68).

(c) *On the Subject of Taboo (Section 8)*

Xie finds and identifies taboos in China – systematized as taboo behavior (pp. 70–81), taboos against men, taboos on certain objects (including hair cutting), taboo names and taboo days – partly as helpful, hygienic, and rather neutral customs (Chinese New Year), or as reflecting the social status of a tribal chief or ruler. They are therefore generally categorized as superstitious and largely harmful, although many customs may have meaningful and useful aspects. Regarding the abolition of such customs, Xie thus argues that we need to differentiate according to the individual situation.

(d) *Prophecy, Myth, Ritual (Section 9)*

A final Section 9 deals first with divination (*bushi*) as another variation of superstition, which was not only practiced by primitive or modern common people, but also by the educated. Despite some similarities it had to be distinguished from magic. As examples Xie mentions the mantic interpretation of birdsong, stars (astrology), and especially in the case of China the yarrow oracle, turtle shell oracle, and oracles with bamboo sticks, etc. The methods included:

- interpretation of dreams (*mengzhao*)
- geomancy (*fengshui*) as a special feature in China
- oracle (*chenzhao*) using bones of the deceased or astronomical constellations
- necromancy (*guanwang*), consulting the ancestors (*zhaogui wenbu*)
- consulting priests and prophets (in Israel), or shamans (e.g. in China)
- ordeal (*xingshi*) with a survival test (with, e.g., poison, water, fire) or self-cursing (*zishi*).

In China, Xie states, divination had been particularly popular, in particular *Yijing* divination for the educated classes, which in the text of the *Xici zhuan* commentary (attributed to Confucius) found an ethical interpretation and could therefore be considered a rational form of divination. Other forms that were more

widespread among the common people might be classified as less rational. Yet, the attitude of most people towards divination was based on the benefit to themselves or harm to others. Therefore, as Xie clearly states, it was not just superstitious (*mixin*), but mostly fraudulent and should therefore be abandoned.

In the following section myth and ritual, the two classical themes of religion, are introduced: myths (*shenhua*) should be understood as originating from the human desire to understand creation and the cosmos (heaven, earth, and origin of all things). In spite of their being invented, such myths would often also contain some historical truth. Others, however, were without any ethical or moral imagination, irrational, and still based on a primitive level of thinking.

Xie identified four types of creation myth designed to explain:

- the creation or origin of the world,
- the origin of a nation or state,
- the origin of various customs and rites, and
- the origin of the natural world, stars, etc.

Moreover, there were stories about gods and about encounters between gods and humans as in Greece. Such stories, Xie explains, then developed into a kind of short story like today's children's tales. Although related to superstition, they were not harmful.

Finally, Xie talks about ritual (or "Ceremonies" as cited in the English original, in Chinese *lijie*) also in relation to typical primitive religious ideas and superstition. Here Xie introduces the *rites of passage* as religious rites between customs and superstition: They include circumcision rites of Judaism and Islam (as well as ancient Egypt) combined with prayers to Gods or spirits. Other rites relating to marriage, for example, with elements of divination include the choice of auspicious days and bowing before heaven, earth, and ancestors, all of which contained a kind of religious superstition (comparable to the Western tradition of wedding rings). Funeral rites (including "primitive" and "uncivilized" methods such as eating the dead, placing the corpse in the wilderness, caves, water or earth, or cremation of the coffin) were associated with various superstitious customs such as geomancy (*fengshui*).

Here, again, Xie recommends neither condemning them all as harmful, nor blindly following them in every detail. Those that contain useful ethical and moral ideas should be retained (p. 92). Basically, Xie regards superstition as a way to overcome and reassure oneself against threats and fear. People without a proper, legitimate religious idea could hardly free themselves from superstition, while anyone who possessed such an idea would have no need of superstition (p. 93).

Altogether, the first chapter provides an insight into the systematic "knowledge" of the Western discipline of Religious Studies on the basis of important topics and keywords introduced to China.

Chinese Religion (Chapter 18)

Of particular interest is the way Xie treats “Chinese religion[s]”. Buddhism is introduced as a watershed in China’s religious history. Before its arrival, ancient Chinese religion was related to social stratification. The worship of Heaven, for example, was conducted by the Emperor, that of the mountains and streams by the higher nobility, and that of ancestors and spirits by the gentry and common people, but it was hardly emancipated from the most “primitive religious thought”. Only after the introduction of Buddhism – and of Nestorianism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism – did this change and the elite begin to look into Buddhist theories, while the common people rather worshipped their gods. Buddhist influences then merged with the ancient Chinese religion in a syncretistic way, so that the religions could no longer be clearly separated from each other. The different class-oriented concepts, as well as notions of “monotheism”, nature gods, spirits and magic, divination, apocryphal texts, geomancy, and other superstitions, had been mingled only after the arrival of the superstitions and customs of the new religions (p. 177). For this reason there were logical contradictions between existing religious concepts such as monotheism, polytheism, and pantheism, but on the other hand there had throughout been the idea of moral retribution, based on the teaching and education of the rites (*lijiao*) and on a general tradition as an “ethical culture” (p. 178). Chinese religion had therefore been able to absorb and assimilate other religions even without a separate religious organization.

(a) Daoism

Turning to Xie’s interesting genealogical representation of Daoism, one has to keep in mind the lack of research at that time. Early outlines of the history of religious Daoism were not done until the 1930s (Xu 1934; Fu 1934).

The early origins with Huangdi (an emperor of mythical times, but given by Xie as the author of the scripture *Huangdi neijing suwen* [*The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor: Basic Questions*]), Guanzi, Laozi, and Zhuangzi (as scholars of the “Emptiness” [or “Nothingness”; *xuwu*], “a high-idealist philosophy of life”) are described as having no religion, “religious organization, beliefs, or rites.” Only later were these theories of the Mysterious (*Xuanmiao*) misused by the practitioners of life-prolonging alchemy, the *fangshi*, for magical techniques (*wushu*), in the tradition of “Huangdi and Laozi”, or in religious Daoism for the production of talismans together with the magical superstitions of those *fangshi* experts. These traditions developed in the lineage of the Zhengyi (lit., *Orthodox Unity*) or “Heavenly Masters’ Daoism” and finally resulted in “heretical” groups such as the teachings of the White Lotus (Bailianjiao), Not-action (Wuweijiao), Inner Alchemy (Jindanjiao), White Cloud (Baiyunjiao), or the Great Perfection (Dachengjiao), which were “misusing charms, talismans, and magic spells to confuse the common people or start political movements.” This echoes the intellectual criticism but also the political

persecution of these specific groups at the time. The deprecatory view of such groups becomes even more pronounced in Xie's book *Zongjiaoxue ABC*, published two years later in 1928, in which he criticized Daoism especially heavily and explicitly as a primitive or most ordinary religion (p. 109), an unsystematic polytheism (p. 107), superstitious and backward, without recognizable personal moral standards (*rengē biao zhun*), thereby dissociating religious Daoism clearly from the norms of higher, ethical religions. Xie argues that Daoism will become obsolete in the age of modernity: Among the common people Daoism might still be as popular as Buddhism, and in earlier times it had even been related to and consulted by the court, especially the Heavenly Masters' school. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, regardless of an estimated 40 million adherents among the common people, Xie considers its influence to be waning, and due to its failure to modernize it appeared unclear to him whether Daoism would survive at all (pp. 186f.).

(b) *Confucianism*

Confucianism is evaluated much more positively in its relation to religions. Xie basically advocates Confucianism as being "religious", even though for the clear designation as "religion" he finds that some elements are lacking. He adopts arguments from the debate about Confucianism as a state religion, explaining that *jiao* in a combination like *Rujiao* (Ru tradition, "Confucianism") originally referred to education (*jiaohua*), further it is lacking an organization as well as rituals and thus does not constitute a religion. Only in the recent debates on the Republican Constitution and the question of a state religion (*guojiao*) had Confucianism been absurdly described by some people with "limited" thinking as a "religion" and Confucius as its patriarch or founder (*jiaozu*). The theories of Confucianism were, however, completely focused on teachings of ethics, loyalty, and reciprocity (*zhongshu*), while Confucius spoke only rarely about the nature and way of heaven (p. 188) and never talked positively about supernatural powers and spirits (*guaili luanshen*), which demonstrates his disapproval of animism (p. 194). There were not only no specific religious organizations or rites, but also no clear theology (*shendao guannian*; p. 188). Names such as Shangdi (for God) or spirits (*guishen*) and sacrificial rites and worship which are found in the classics were just general beliefs of society and not a distinctive feature of the Ru school. The "idea of God" (*Shangdi guannian*), although it existed, had never been developed further and was not comparable with the God of Jesus in the New Testament (p. 194).¹⁴ Reasons for the worship of heaven, earth, and spirits were not debated in any depth.

¹⁴ Mozi, according to Xie, had been much more religious, speaking explicitly of heaven (as *shangdi*) or saying that heaven wanted justice, hated the unjust, and was a father to man. This seems to Xie to be quite comparable with Christian thinking, although it was still lacking religious organization and did not dissociate itself from superstitious animism or belief in spirits (p. 195).

The yardstick of Christianity as the paradigm of religion becomes most evident when Xie remarks that no prayers or “theological concepts” such as penance, grace, etc. were developed in Confucianism. Only the *Yijing* is quoted as an example which included more “metaphysical philosophy” albeit without any hint of “religious mystery” (or mysticism; *zongjiao shang de shenmi*). Later magicians (*shushi*), however, had also used the *Yijing* and built their practices of fortune-telling on it (p. 189). It was because of the dominant influence of Confucianism since the Han period and its limited interest in religion that religion had developed so little in China.

Short Summary

Xie’s book is clearly written from a Christian position with an apologetic background in the context of anti-religious/anti-Christian movements and with a conditional openness to other religions.

Most clearly, an evolutionary pattern of primitive religion evolving to higher religions is accepted and applied to religion in general and religions in China, including Christianity, in particular. Primitive forms for Xie include animism, totemism, fetishism, shamanism, and the worship of ancestors and idols as well as taboo, divination, myth, and ritual. Interestingly, “customs” (*xisu*), although basically regarded as a heritage of the early primitive stages, are accepted and also identified by Xie in higher religions (like Christianity) and differentiated from superstition. According to Xie, “religious feeling” derived from the primitive base of fear but developed into a higher feeling of reverence and gratefulness which could contribute positively to individual human as well as cultural and ethical social life. Moreover, higher religions include rational power of judgment, in contrast to earlier forms of religion. Religion in its higher form is regarded to be in no contradiction to philosophy and science as witnessed by outstanding people like Kant, Tolstoy, Wilson, or recent scientists. Only Daoism is described by Xie in clearly negative terms as primitive and full of superstition and closely related to dubious so-called “heretical” groups as they were judged in political and public debate. According to the accepted evolutionary pattern, Xie predicts Daoism’s imminent end, while the ethical Confucianist heritage is seen in a much more positive light.

By today’s standards, which no longer accept the evolutionary pattern, the work might appear to be highly problematic or not up to date; on the other hand, Xie introduced major ideas and theories of Religious Studies current at the time of writing and applied them to Chinese traditions.

3 Wang Zhixin’s Contributions to a Chinese History of Religion(s)

In addition to Xie Songgao’s works, another type of introductory work shall be presented here, namely Wang Zhixin’s writings on a Chinese history of religion(s),

which apply a contemporary Religious Studies understanding of religion and superstition to Chinese history. Wang set out his ideas especially in three major works: *The Idea of God in Chinese History* (*Zhongguo lishi de shangdiguan*; 1926), *An Outline of the History of Religious Thinking in China* (*Zhongguo zongjiao sixiang shi dagang*; 1933), and *An Outline of the History of Christianity in China* (*Zhongguo Jidujiao shigang*; 1940), which, finally, demonstrates the early presence and later contributions of Christianity to China up to Wang's own time.

*Biographical data*¹⁵

Wang Zhixin (1881–1968) was one of the older Christian Chinese scholars of the Republican era. He had, in fact, been accepted for study at the official Imperial school in the late Qing Dynasty and was less deeply influenced by Western thinking. Later, he taught at several Christian schools and universities and worked as an editor. He was also an active member of the Guomindang. His *œuvre* includes works on the philosophy of Confucius, Mengzi, Daoism, Mozi, and Sun Yatsen. In contrast to Xie Songgao, he was one of the most active and influential Christian intellectuals of his time and is known for his propagation of an independent indigenous church.

The Idea of God in Chinese History (1926)

Wang's basic ideas are set out in his work *The Idea of God in Chinese History*, the title of which is strongly reminiscent of the debate between Pater Wilhelm Schmidt (*Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* ["The Origin of the Idea of God"]) and Nathan Söderblom (*Das Werden des Gottesglaubens* ["Development of the Belief in God"]) based on Andrew Lang's discovery of a Southeast Asian belief in a seemingly monotheistic High God, none of which, however, is mentioned explicitly.

A major point in his argumentation is the bifurcation of a belief in religious ideas and a belief in gods or spirits on the one hand and a philosophical tradition on the other: According to Wang, the belief in a "religious god" is based on feeling (*ganqing*) and intuition (*zhijue*) or personal experience (*tiren*), while the philosophical tradition is rooted in thinking and rationality (*sixiang he lizhi*). The Greek idea of God(s) was more philosophical, the Jewish concept more religious. In regard to India, he characterizes the Brahma thinking (*fantian sixiang*) of the Brahmins as wholly religious (*zongjiaoxing*; p. 2), in contrast to original Buddhism and the teaching of the historical Buddha, which he sees as philosophical (*zhexuexing*).

¹⁵ For biographical data cf. Xu Yihe's preface to the edition of Wang Zhixin's *Zhongguo Jidujiao shigang* and the theses by Ho (2000) and Wong (1999).

Accordingly, the ancient Chinese idea of God before the Chunqiu period with its belief in spirits and the teaching of “two [types of] gods/spirits of Heaven and ancestors” (*tianzu ershenjiao de sixiang*) is regarded as a clearly religious belief. The concept of “Heaven” found in Laozi and Confucius as well as the teaching on the nature of man in Xunzi and Mengzi and the Yingyang teachings, the Han apocryphic *Chenwei* writings, and the Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism with its teachings of *li* (pattern, principle), *qi* (energy, material force), and *xinxing* (heart and original human nature) etc. had gradually assumed a more philosophical character. However, this happened mainly within the realm of the educated elite. In normal society, however – this is one of Wang’s main theses – the idea of a personal god (Shangdi) and the religion of Heaven and ancestors from the ancient past has been preserved over millennia without too many other influences and challenges (p. 2). Wang later defined these two lines in his 1933 *Outline of the History of Religious Thinking in China* (p. 28f.) as – potentially complementary – directions (*luxiang*) of doubting and superstition (*mixin*). The earlier book of 1926 pursued mainly the first historical line of a philosophical idea of god, the topic of superstition is treated extensively only in the work of 1933 (three times on page 29 alone), where it is attributed especially to Daoism and portrayed as something that should be totally eradicated (*pochu*) in the future (p. 29). Wang saw it as a continuation of the belief of common society in antiquity, but according to him, it had also been changed and supplemented by Buddhist “Hīnayāna” influences (*xiao-sheng fojiaohua*). Consequently, the belief in gods, spirits, and ghosts (*xinshen xingui*) had gradually moved into the realm of superstition.

From a clearly Christian perspective, Wang argues that one had to only correct, with a reasonable mind, the conceptions of God (Shangdi) which had been passed down from antiquity but had been confused (superstitious, *mi*) and become diffuse (*mohu*) among the common people. Thus, it would be a task for “us” (i.e. Christian missionaries) to introduce the clearer Christian conception of God (p. 4), and simultaneously correct the “speculative” (*xuan zhi you xuan* [Laozi, *Daodejing*, ch. 1]) thinking of the more educated people in their overly rationalized approaches (*tai lizhihua de lu*), harmonizing it with emotional life (*ganqing shenghuo*).

In his “Introduction”, he further postulates an objective attitude of academic research. But, in general, religious belief was not built on deduction, but rather on intuition (*zhijue*) and personal experience. The Christian concept of God is used as a yardstick for a concept of God as omnipresent, omnipotent, and eternal and at the same time a loving Heavenly father, to whom the individual has a personal and non-abstract relationship.

In his conclusion, Wang states that criticism of and resistance to Christianity did not therefore actually originate from aspects of faith, but rather from the unsuitable methods of the missionaries and their ways of evangelizing, and had to do with the issue of national identity (lit., “problem of race”) in particular. Originally, the belief in one God in Christianity would not have contradicted the Chinese traditional belief in Heaven. If therefore the national identity problem had been solved, there would

be no divide at all. According to the words of Jesus “I have not come to dissolve, but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17), it would just be the task of propagators of Christianity to develop, correct, and “complete” the conception of Heaven among both the educated and the common people by means of the Christian conception of God (p. 310).

An Outline of the History of Religious Thinking in China (1933) and
An Outline of the History of Christianity in China (1940)

The 1933 book is an elaboration of the earlier one and was later reprinted. In contrast to Xie Songgao’s introductions to Religious Studies, Wang concentrates only on the Chinese history of religion. As some of its major ideas have already been discussed, I will look only at the introduction, structure, and selected topics.

The first paragraphs of Chapter One deal with the question “What is religious thinking” (*Hewei zongjiao sixiang*). Wang starts with a discussion of the term “religion” itself, which, as he saw it, in the form of the Chinese neologism *zongjiao* implied a reduction to the material or institutional aspect, i.e. temples and churches. However, this outer aspect has always been based on the immaterial one, which Wang calls “religious thinking” and which did not necessarily need any organization (*zuzhi*) or institution (*zhidu*). It also comprised the primitive stages of humankind up to the veneration expressed in contemporary everyday life and mystical thinking (*shenmi sixiang*).

In the main part we can identify three special points of emphasis:

- (1) The first emphasis, also called the two ways or directions of religious thinking (*zongjiao sixiang de liang tiao lu*, pp. 26–28), the one originating from the ancient roots and still found among the common people and the other among the elite since Zhou times, has already occurred in the earlier work of 1926, then only following up one aspect. In 1933 it forms the twofold or parallel structure of the book which pursues both lines. In the initial chapters, Wang addresses world creation myths, shamanism (*wuxi*), divination, the concepts of Heaven (*tian*), ancestral worship, but also the – negatively valued – belief in ghosts (*xingui*). The Zhou period then saw the development of intellectualization and ethicization (*lunlihua*, with special relation to religious thinking in the treatise *Zhongyong* and the songs of the *Chuci*). In Qin and Han times, not only did superstition develop, but also Buddhism and Daoism began to have a profound influence. These are treated in the subchapter on institutional religion and superstition (*zhidu zongjiao yu mixin*).
- (2) Interestingly, in the general outline Wang attempts to associate major changes with certain periods (intellectualization and ethicization with the Zhou Dynasty, Buddhism as a new factor since the Han period).
- (3) Especially since the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties (ch. 5), Wang places particular focus on the influence of foreign religions (*wailai zongjiao de yingxiang*; p. 115), alongside Islam mainly Christianity with Nestorians in Tang

(called *jingjiao*) and Yuan (at this time known as *Yelikewenjiao*) times, the Jesuits in the late Ming and early Qing period (with their contributions to science), and during the last 100 years Protestantism (*Jidu xinjiao*) – as well as the Taiping (perceived as a Christian religious group). Christianity in Chinese history then became the topic of his next major work.

While this last of Wang’s three works deals mainly with Christianity in China, it also refers to the religious background. Most interesting is an extended reference to Mozi, who had preserved the older beliefs of antiquity, but whose school perished when Confucianism and Daoism were religionized, so its “religious spirit” may be said to have continued in the Three Teachings.¹⁶ Yet the Yinyang school of the Zhanguo period also had an impact on these later teachings through older traditions that had been preserved in it (p. 11).

Short Summary

Wang Zhixin’s research is influenced throughout by his Christian position and interest, as he himself openly states.¹⁷ Yet, he also combined this approach with a will for “objective research” (*Shangdiguan, zonglun*, p. 1).

Two more aspects are of special interest to us: Although Wang begins his work on the concept of God with an analysis of the Chinese characters *shangdi* and later refers mostly to Christian, Chinese, and additionally Indian-Buddhist traditions, in his programmatic Preface of 1926 he clearly presents the idea of an original personal “high(est) God that is identifiable in all cultures” (*Shangdi*, in the Chinese version apparently understood by him in a quite literal translation as High or highest God). This idea did not arise out of his material but clearly derives from the perceived Western academic debates of early Religious Studies, as mentioned, between Söderblom and Schmidt. This is also suggested by the similar wording of the title of *The Idea of God in Chinese History* (*Zhongguo lishi de shangdiguan*). Wang’s specific achievement was the application of this question and of the conception of a personal god to “Chinese religious thinking”.

A general weakness of Wang’s presentation is the lack of regular and clear references to his non-Chinese sources (a point of contemporary criticism also of his *Zhongguo Jidujiao shigang*).¹⁸ This makes it extremely difficult to retrace and reconstruct his influences and shows that he belonged to the older generation of researchers – he was born in 1881 and had a more traditional educational back-

¹⁶ See also Wang Zhixin’s own work on Mozi (Wang 1925).

¹⁷ See Wang (1926, *zonglun*: 2); cf. also his other title “Research on Buddhism from a Christian Perspective” (*Jidutu zhi foxue yanjiu*; Wang/Ai 1924).

¹⁸ As already criticized by contemporaries, see Wang (1940: 11f.).

ground¹⁹ than Xie Songgao and other younger scholars of Religious Studies such as Xu Dishan (1894–1941).

Significantly, this is the first general overview of a Chinese history of religious thought and of Christianity in China, building on earlier in-depth research by scholars such as Chen Yuan. Wang's whole work shows a strongly non-philosophical and instead historical reexamination of the religious-philosophical traditions from a Christian perspective, albeit of a higher academic standard.

4 Conclusion

The examination of introductory works on Religious Studies written by Christian Chinese authors in the 1920s of the Republican era indicates an advanced stage of reception of the concepts of religion and superstition in a decisive phase of political and intellectual transformation in modern China. Both concepts and terms were already widely accepted.²⁰ However, their method of applying them to Chinese and foreign religious traditions in the light of the prevailing discourse on the modernization of Chinese society through science and democracy was still under negotiation.

Unlike the critics of religion who more or less subsumed religion under superstition, these authors distinguished between the two terms, although their definitions and understanding of them were very general. Xie, like other comparable authors, was profoundly influenced by an evolutionary pattern, while Wang Zhixin assumed a High-God in very early times and postulated a diverging development of two lines of tradition: a philosophical elitist and a degenerated religious one among the common people, which included a sort of belief, however, not only exclusively in gods or heaven, but also in ghosts, which he therefore categorized as superstition (or more literally “misbelief” [*mixin*]). In contrast to superstition, both authors regarded religion as a qualified belief, and a necessary counterpart and complement to science rather than a contradiction. Altogether, Religion (or higher religions in an evolutionary pattern) could and should be rational, individual, and function as a productive cultural and ethical force in society.

Furthermore, for Chinese intellectual Christians in this situation the question of a “Chinese” – but at the same time modern – “identity” merged with the apologetic interest in differentiating Christian and possibly other ‘higher’ religions from primitive forms of religion or superstition. Religious Studies, as conceived in the West and in contrast to ethnology or anthropology, thereby appeared to mostly *affirm* religion, and thus to be a helpful means to argue on behalf of “higher religions”

¹⁹ Comparable rather with Wu Leichuan (1870–1944), or, to a lesser degree, the even older catholic scholar Ma Xiangbo (1840–1939).

²⁰ Xie Fuya voiced critical remarks on the translation of *zongjiao* in 1928, but even he remarked that the acceptance of the neologism could probably already not be reversed (Xie 1928: 250).

including Buddhism and to some extent Confucianism.²¹ This approach therefore stood in sharp contrast to that of earlier missionaries who categorized these traditions as “heathen” or superstitious.

The influence of these introductory works is indicated by the large number of editions and reprints. Yet, at the same time, they were only works among others representing a religious position within the discursive field, while other anti-religious ones tended to subsume religion entirely under the category of superstition. Looking from a broader historical perspective, however, there was a trend paralleled by the institutionalization of “religions” like Buddhism and Daoism towards a general acceptance of organized religions after the high-tide of anti-religious movements already in the 1930s. This acceptance of at least five nationwide acknowledged “religions” (Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, and Daoism) continued even in the People’s Republic with the exception of the Cultural Revolution with its relapse into sharp anti-religious attitudes.

Therefore, although the introductory works of Xie and Wang were clearly influenced by their Christian standpoint and apologetic interest and operated within categories of “superstition”, “primitive religion”, and evolutionary patterns unacceptable today, they contributed significantly to the introduction of contemporary Western academic thinking into the nascent field of the study of religion in modern China.

²¹ In the case of Confucianism missionaries, starting from the Jesuits, had tried to differentiate its civil or secular aspects from its religious ones or they had applied patterns of understandings of “natural revelation” or natural religion (see e.g. Meynard 2005).

Glossary

aixin 愛心

Baihuojiao 拜火教

Baike xiao congshu 百科小叢書

Bailianjiao 白蓮教

Baiyunjiao 白雲教

bushi 卜筮

chensu 塵俗

chenzhao 讖兆

chongbai ouxiang 崇拜偶像

chongbai siren 崇拜死人

chongbai zhouwu 崇拜咒物

Chuci 楚辭

Dachengjiao 大成教

daode guannian 道德觀念

fangshi 方士

fantian sixiang 梵天思想

fengshui 風水

ganjixin 感激心

ganqing 感情

ganqing shenghuo 感情生活

guaili luanshen 怪力亂神

Guangxuehui 廣學會

guanwang 關亡

guilingjiao 鬼靈教

guishen 鬼神

guojiao 國教

Hewei zongjiao sixiang 何謂宗教思想

Huangdi Neijing suwen 黃帝內經素文

jiao 教

jiaohua 教化

jiaotang siyuan 教堂寺院

jiaozu 教祖

Jidu xinjiao 基督新教

Jindanjiao 金丹教

jingjiao 景教

jingyangxin 敬仰心

li 理

lijiao 禮教

lijie 禮節

lizhi de caidu 理智的裁度

lunli de zongjiao 倫理的宗教

lunlihua 倫理化

luxiang 路向

Ma Xiangbo 馬相伯

mengzhao 夢兆

mi 迷

mixin 迷信

mohu 模糊

pochu 破除

qi 氣

renge 人格

renge biao zhun 人格標準

rensheng de taidu yu zhuzhang 人生的態度與主張

renshengguan 人生觀

Rujiao 儒教

Shangdi 上帝

Shangdi guannian 上帝觀念

shendao guannian 神道觀念

sheng 聖

shenhua 神話

shenmi sixiang 神秘思想

Shijie Shuju 世界書局

shushi 術士

sixiang he lizhi 思想和理智

tai lizhihua de lu 太理智化的路

tian 天

tianzu ershenjiao de sixiang 天祖二神教的思想

tiren 體認

tutengjiao 圖騰教

wailai zongjiao de yingxiang 外來宗教的影響

Wu Leichuan 吳雷川

wu 巫

wushu 巫術

Wuweijiao 無為教

wuxi 巫覡

xiangxin zongjiao 相信宗教

xiaosheng fojiaohua 小乘佛教化

Xici zhuan 繫辭傳

xingshi 刑誓

<i>xingui</i> 信鬼	<i>Zhongguo de zongjiao</i> 中國的宗教
<i>xinshen xingui</i> 信神信鬼	<i>zhongshu</i> 忠恕
<i>xinxing</i> 心性	<i>Zhongyong</i> 中庸
<i>xisu</i> 習俗	<i>zhuangyan</i> 莊嚴
<i>xuan zhi you xuan</i> 玄之又玄	<i>zishi</i> 自矢
<i>Xuanmiao</i> 玄妙	<i>zongjiao de lishi</i> 宗教的歷史
<i>xukong</i> 虛空	<i>Zongjiao jingyan de zhonglei</i> 宗教經驗的種類
<i>xuwu</i> 虛無	<i>zongjiao shang de libai</i> 宗教上的禮拜
<i>Yelikewenjiao</i> 也里可溫教	<i>zongjiao shang de shenmi</i> 宗教上的神秘
<i>Yijing</i> 易經	<i>zongjiao sixiang de liang tiao lu</i> 宗教思想的兩條路
<i>yuanren zhi zongjiao shang de xisu yu mixin</i> 原人之宗教上的習俗與迷信	<i>zongjiao xinlixue</i> 宗教心理學
<i>zhaogui wenbu</i> 召鬼問卜	<i>zongjiaoshi</i> 宗教史
<i>Zhengyi</i> 正一	<i>zongjiaoxing</i> 宗教性
<i>zhexuexing</i> 哲學性	<i>zongjiaoxue</i> 宗教學
<i>zhidu zongjiao yu mixin</i> 制度宗教與迷信	<i>zuzhi</i> 組織
<i>zhidu</i> 制度	
<i>zhijue</i> 直覺	

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