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RELIGION IN CHINA

Ties That Bind

Adam Yuet Chau

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Introduction: Relationality at the Heart of Religion in China

WHY ARE YOU READING THIS BOOK?

This book is about religious lives in Chinese societies (primarily mainland China but also Taiwan and Hong Kong). Its potential readership can be very diverse, and each kind of reader will bring something different to the reading and get something different from the book. Are you a university student taking a course on Chinese or East Asian religions to fulfill a general education requirement? Are you a Religious Studies major who has taken courses on monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) but is now ready to discover religious traditions that are radically different? Are you a seeker of spiritual wisdom who has read *Zhuangzi* and *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*) and wants to know more about the strange worlds of *qi*, *fengshui*, *yinyang*, and "the *Dao*"? Or are you a New Age guru who wants to incorporate insights from Chinese religions to enrich your repertoire? Have you fallen in love with Chinese art but feel you cannot really appreciate it unless you become familiar with the deeper religious symbolisms hidden behind the brushwork? Have you visited China or will visit China as a tourist and feel an urge to understand more about the religious traditions that sustain the vibrant religious lives you have seen in some documentary or feature films? Are you a Christian missionary who wants to understand the Chinese people's own religious traditions (i.e. "check out the competition") before heading out to convert them to Christianity? Are you a Protestant pastor or Catholic priest who has been engaging in

inter-faith dialogues? Are you a human rights activist who is concerned about the supposed lack of religious freedom in China? Are you a China watcher who is worried that with the rise of China's political and economic power in recent decades, the Chinese Communist Party's particular brand of Confucianism is going to take over the world? Are you a specialist on religion looking for a new way of understanding religious life, not just in China but in other cultural contexts as well? Or are you simply curious about how one fifth of humanity might be practicing religion differently from yourself and those around you? Whatever your motivation in picking up this book, I hope that reading it will be a rewarding experience for you.

But this book is not a run-of-the-mill introductory survey text on Chinese religion (with one chapter on Buddhism, another on Daoism, etc.). It has a particular approach and a particular intellectual agenda. I hope that reading this book will not only enrich your knowledge about religious life in China but change the way you understand religion and the world more generally. Before proceeding to the substantive chapters, I would like to explain my approach – what I have called the “relational approach” – as well as set out the parameters of the study. Here I will introduce a range of essential concepts and analytical frameworks that can serve as a mental “toolkit” at the ready for tackling (i.e. understanding) any potentially baffling religious phenomena. Along the way I hope to dispel a number of commonly held misconceptions about religion in China. I will also tell the reader a little about myself and the sources I have used.

A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING CHINESE RELIGIOUS LIFE

“So, tell me, how many religions are there in China?” “What is the biggest religion in China?” People tend to press me with these kinds

of questions when I tell them I am a specialist on Chinese religion. These are legitimate questions, but they are not the best or the most interesting questions because they anticipate easy answers (i.e. people seemed to be satisfied if I answered them with “Five,” “Buddhism”), and easy answers are never the best or the most informative answers. Indeed, one of the most important goals for this book is to show why these are not the best questions. Why not ask instead “How do the Chinese practice religion?” “On what occasions do the Chinese engage in rituals?” “What culturally specific desires and concerns inform the religious world of the Chinese?” “How is religious life embedded in Chinese society?” etc. Good questions lead to further explorations and new discoveries rather than confirm one’s received wisdoms and pre-existing categories.

Most people in the West (and in fact most educated Chinese in China as well) have been influenced by the confessional approach to understanding religious life and have thus looked at religion in China as consisting of discrete religions such as Buddhism and Daoism, each as a coherent system of beliefs and practices, as if they are the equivalents of Christianity and Islam (though I would argue that even the coherence of Christianity and Islam is more in the heads of theologians than in the practices of Christians and Muslims). Another equally prevalent approach is to view religion in China primarily in terms of philosophical and religious ideas, as sources of “Oriental spiritual wisdom,” useful antidotes to an allegedly overly materialist and rationalist West. These approaches in fact tell us more about ourselves and our own religious sensibilities, spiritual anxieties, and epistemological biases than about how the Chinese really engage in religious activities and what *they* are concerned about when they pray to the deities or go on pilgrimage.

This book proposes to look at religion in China from an entirely different perspective, focusing on the socially embedded and culturally specific “forms” that frame Chinese people’s religious practices on the

ground, i.e. how Chinese people “do” religion. The key analytical and organizing anchor of this new perspective is the notion of “relationality,” which helps highlight and foreground the numerous and most important aspects of Chinese ways of doing religion that have previously been hidden from view due to the above-mentioned blinkers and biases. Studies of *guanxi* (“social relationship”) in the China anthropology literature in the past two decades or so have allowed us to have an excellent understanding of this crucial aspect of Chinese society (see, in particular, Yang 1994; Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997). This book argues that the religious realm is one of the most crucial arenas where *guanxi* is played out (hence “ties that bind,” the subtitle of this book), not just between people in sociopolitical life (e.g. kin, co-villagers, neighbors, colleagues, superior–inferior, patron–client, briber–bribed, party comrades, ex-schoolmates, friends, social media groups) but also between people and spirits, between people and sites of worship and spiritual empowerment, among religious co-practitioners (and religionists), between deities, between ritualists and their customers, between masters and disciples, and between the state and religious groups and traditions. These relationships can be long-lasting or transient, local or translocal in scale, collaborative or contestatory, vertical or horizontal, voluntary or compulsory, free or commoditized, convergent or scattered, implicit or explicit, relatively simple or extremely complex, but they are being made and re-made all the time and they constitute the “stuff” of Chinese religious life. In other words, the ultimate aim of this approach is not religion in China *per se* but to show how Chinese people make their lifeworlds through *doing* religion.

WHAT IS RELIGION? DO SPIRITS EXIST?

In this book I deploy a rather broad definition of religion: any form of interaction with spirits, be they God, gods, ancestors, ghosts, or evil

spirits. Some scholars and readers will look upon some of the religious practices discussed in this book as “magic,” “sorcery,” or “superstition,” not quite belonging to the category of “religion.” However, this kind of distinction between “proper religion” and “primitive magic” is a product of epistemological biases that privilege particular “modalities of doing religion” (more on this in chapter 2) and hinders greatly a broad-based understanding of religious life in any society. Such a bias grants more dignity and legitimacy to religious traditions that are believed to be “higher” on an imagined evolutionary trajectory of religions, denigrating those that are supposedly less institutionalized, less systematic, more “ritualistic,” therefore “primitive” and “lower” (if not barbaric and repulsive). This is a well-known Protestant triumphalist prejudice that unfortunately still pervades most understandings of religion. Discarding this prejudice is essential for any sympathetic yet objective understanding of religion.

But do “spirits” exist? What if I am an atheist who does not believe in the existence of God, gods, ancestors, ghosts, or evil spirits? What if I am a Christian who believes in the Christian God but cannot accept the existence of these other kinds of spirits (except as objects of idolatry)? This book is certainly not meant to be an intervention in the “Does God exist?” or “Is religious belief a delusion?” debate. There are no easy empirical tests for the veracity of most religious suppositions and propositions. Since we are interested in understanding Chinese people’s religious practices, all we need to do is to treat Chinese people’s interactions with spirits as sociocultural practices and phenomena. So if I write later in this book (in chapter 4) that a spirit medium is possessed by the Azure Cloud Immortal (Qingyundaxian), this statement needs to be understood in the sociocultural context of the society in question (somewhere in rural northern Shaanxi Province), where the villagers participating in this séance *act as if* they believe in the existence of the Azure Cloud Immortal and his ability to possess the spirit medium and speak through the latter. There is no need for us to identify

with and share the beliefs informing these religious practices (e.g., beseeching the gods for divine assistance, the exorcism of an evil spirit, making offerings to ancestors). In fact, some of the Chinese people engaging in religious activities premised on such beliefs might themselves hold a "healthy" dose of skepticism or do not make a conscious connection between what they do ritually (e.g., hiring a Buddhist priest for a funeral) and all the theological and symbolic implications evoked in these rituals (e.g., the existence of a Western Realm of Supreme Bliss, the practice of reincarnation).

Having a personal religious or spiritual orientation in whatever form might potentially aid one's understanding of other people's religious practices because one might discover resonances between the two (but hopefully not just the clichés such as "all religions guide people to lead a moral life" or "all religions provide an explanation of the meaning of life"). But it could equally hinder one's understanding because one might too easily identify the familiar and thus overlook the radically different, or one might feel threatened by practices that are so different from one's own, bringing into doubt the validity of one's faith or spiritual pursuit. On the other hand, being a staunch atheist also has its advantages and disadvantages in the cross-cultural study of religion.

SPATIAL EXPANSE AND TIME FRAME

The entity that is popularly known as China or mainland China refers to the People's Republic of China (the PRC), which is the main geographical setting of this study. Though having very different political trajectories in the modern era, culturally speaking Taiwan and Hong Kong are largely Chinese, therefore I will also draw illustrative cases from these two places when appropriate.

China covers a landmass almost ten million square kilometers in size and has a population of around 1.4 billion people. There is an immense diversity of languages and cultures within China, the so-called

officially recognized 56 nationalities (*minzu*) being only one way of understanding this diversity. Other differentiating axes include coastal versus inland, urban versus rural, closeness to politically sensitive national borders, priority status in the country's developmental strategies, transnational links, historical legacies (e.g. having been a major treaty port in the past), etc. Religious diversity is not a simple "reflection" or merely an aspect of this immense diversity; it actually contributes to this diversity while constantly absorbing new elements from its varied and ever-changing societal environments (more on religious diversity in chapter 1). The map of China at the beginning of this book shows its provinces and autonomous regions, major topographical features and cities, and its surrounding regions. It also indicates some of the places from which some of the illustrative cases in this book have been drawn (not comprehensive).

The focus of this study is on religious practices in the contemporary period (i.e. the reform era in China, which began in the late 1970s). But there will be occasional mentions of the dynastic period (or the late imperial period, which mainly covers the Ming and Qing dynasties) and the Maoist period (1949–76). Therefore a good sense of the basic chronology of modern Chinese history will be useful. Giving the year of major watershed historical events, the abbreviated chronology at the beginning of this book can serve as a temporal reference.

STATISTICS: THE NUMBERS GAME

[WARNING: USER BEWARE!]

Statistics is not an innocent science (see Liu 2009). Its very name indicates that it was originally conceived as an essential tool of statecraft: In order to better govern a polity, the ruler or its modern equivalent (regimes of various ideological persuasions) needs to acquire, through the census as well as all kinds of quantitative studies, intimate knowledge of the human and non-human resources (e.g. mineral resources) within

the territorial boundaries of the nation. The statistics on human resources (often called demography) includes the size of the population as well as its composition: age and sex distribution, geographical concentration, occupational makeup, significant patterns of population movement (e.g. rural–urban migration; in-migration and out-migration), and, relevant for this book, “religious makeup.” Some countries do not take census data on religious affiliation (e.g. France, its Republican values being against particularistic affiliations). Many countries are characterized more by non-confessional kinds of religiosity for the majority of their populations (e.g. China, India, Japan, etc.) (see chapter 1). In the PRC there are added challenges of the sensitive nature of religious beliefs (not only due to the political environment), which renders any survey-based quantitative study unreliable. However, these substantial epistemological difficulties have not prevented researchers and policymakers from forcing a confessional-affiliation model onto the statistics and coming up with numbers for each “religion” within each country. Cross-national statistics abhor a vacuum; you cannot have statistics on the religious makeup of one country and not on another, especially if this other country is China. Many foreign observers have an avid appetite for numbers on religion in China, and one of the key points of interest is how fast Christianity is growing in China, which “co-incidentally” is also one of the key points of interest for the Chinese government, but for very different reasons.

In the next chapter (chapter 1) I will explain in more detail why a confessional-affiliation model is not applicable for the vast majority of Chinese people who engage in religious activities. But in order to satisfy those readers who would insist on having “some” (or any!) statistics to hang on to, I will present two sets of statistics on religious affiliations. The first set of numbers are derived from the Pew-Templeton Foundation “Global Religious Futures” project.¹ These Pew-Templeton numbers are from the year 2010: China’s total population is 1,341,340,000, among whom 18.2% are Buddhists (i.e. 244.12 million);

5.1% are Christians (i.e. 68.41 million); 21.9% practice folk religions (presumably including Daoism since there is no separate category for Daoism) (i.e. 293.75 million); 1.8% are Muslims (i.e. 24.14 million); 52.2% are unaffiliated (though it is not clear if this means “not religious” (i.e. 700.18 million); and finally, less than 1% are Hindus, Jews, and followers of other religions (fewer than 11 million).

The second set of numbers are from a White Paper entitled “China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief,” released in April 2018 by the Information Office of the State Council.² The numbers given by the Chinese government are presumably from more recent studies. Here is an excerpt from the White Paper:

The major religions practiced in China are Buddhism, Daoism,³ Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism; with a total of nearly 200 million believers and more than 380,000 clerical personnel. China has numerous Buddhist and Daoist believers, but it is difficult to accurately estimate their numbers as there are no set registration procedures which ordinary believers must follow as part of their religion. There are around 222,000 Buddhist clerical personnel and over 40,000 Daoist clerical personnel. The 10 minority ethnic groups, the majority of whose population believe in Islam, total more than 20 million, with about 57,000 clerical personnel. Catholicism and Protestantism have 6 million and 38 million followers in China respectively, with 8,000 and 57,000 clerical personnel. China also has many folk beliefs which are closely linked to local cultures, traditions and customs, in which a large number of people participate.

Curiously, while the White Paper gives a number for the total number of Muslims (more than 20 million), it does not give any numbers for Buddhists, Daoists, and those who follow folk beliefs (i.e. popular religion). But if we subtract the numbers of Muslims and Christians from the total number (200 million), we can surmise that the total

number of Buddhists, Daoists, and "folk religionists" combined would be around 136 million. If we assume that China's current population is around 1,400,000,000, the White Paper estimates the total number of believers to be at 14.29% of the total population, quite low when compared with the Pew-Templeton figure of 47%. But if the White Paper does not include those who practice folk beliefs as "believers," then the figure 136 million would just include the Buddhists and the Daoists while the "folk religionists" would constitute another, possibly very large number (I would give the number of a few hundred million). The reader needs to keep in mind that the vast majority of these 200 million "believers" have never filled out a form indicating that they are Christians or Buddhists, and the official estimate for the number of Christians will be considered very low by some observers and scholars because it would not include those attending unregistered churches (the so-called "underground churches").

Very usefully, the White Paper also provides some other pertinent statistics:

The State requires the registration of places of worship for group religious activities in accordance with the law, so as to provide legal protection and ensure that all activities are carried out in an orderly manner. At present, there are about 144,000 places of worship registered for religious activities in China, among which are 33,500 Buddhist temples (including 28,000 Han Buddhist temples, 3,800 Tibetan Buddhist lamaseries, and 1,700 Theravada Buddhist temples), 9,000 Daoist temples, 35,000 Islamic mosques, 6,000 Catholic churches and places of assembly spread across 98 dioceses, and 60,000 Protestant churches and places of assembly. ... China has printed over 160 million copies of the Bible in more than 100 different languages for over 100 countries and regions, including 80 million copies printed in the Chinese language, 11 ethnic minority languages and braille for churches in China.

I hope the above figures will satisfy those readers who are statistically inclined. The biggest problem with such attempts at "mapping" religions in China is that it is modeled on a confessional-affiliation understanding of mutually exclusive religious membership. In an important sense the whole point of this present book is to argue against this kind of (mis)understanding.

THE AUTHOR AND THE SOURCES

I think it would be useful for the reader to know a little about where the author of this book is coming from in terms of biographical background, academic training, personal experience with religion, and experience of researching and teaching about religion in China.

I was born in Beijing in 1968, at the height of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76), and spent my childhood in Beijing during the remaining years of High Maoism (what the West called "Godless China" due to its staunch atheism). It was a China of drab (drab especially to Western observers) blue or green Mao suits for both men and women and a hundred million bicycles. But it was also a China of exuberant political campaigns and socialist festivities. Other than participating in certain socialist rituals (e.g. parades on October First National Day, oath-taking as I was inducted as a Young Pioneer) and some leisure reading and radio-listening (e.g. stories featuring magical battles from classics such as *Journey to the West*, *Heroes of the Water Margin*), I did not have any exposure to religious life at home or in my surroundings. My early education and socialization were entirely secular (and of course socialist and patriotic). The Chinese state suppressed religious life of all kinds, so whatever religious sentiments and beliefs there were among some people, they had to remain hidden. Because I lived in Beijing, where the presence of the state would be most strongly felt, compliance to the dictates of the state was most likely absolute.

My mother was an Indonesian Chinese. Born in 1937, she grew up in Pekanbaru, Sumatra, when Indonesia was under Japanese occupation, and received Communist-leaning, Chinese-language education after Indonesia became independent in 1945. She went to China in 1952 at the age of 15 to help "build the socialist New China." She married my father, a Shanghaiese of Ningbo origin (born in 1936), and had two children, my older sister and myself. Because of my mother's overseas Chinese status, my whole family was able to leave China and move to Hong Kong in 1980, which was then a British Crown colony.

At age 12 I began learning English and Cantonese from scratch. At that time Hong Kong was a bustling capitalist society and a famed center of manufacture of textiles, toys, and electronics for the world market. Things religious finally appeared in my surroundings. Many of my neighbors in the apartment building burnt incense and made offerings daily at the small shrines right next to the metal gates to their apartments. These shrines were most commonly dedicated to the Locality God and the God of Wealth "at the gate" (*menkou tudi caishen*). Sometimes the neighbors burnt paper money in large tin buckets in the stairwell, producing pungent smoke. There were a few small temples and roadside shrines in the neighborhood, but they did not seem to have much going on and I never paid any attention to them. A couple of times a year there would be large festivals celebrating the birthday of deities such as the Empress of Heaven (Tianhou, known as Mazu in Fujian and Taiwan, a most popular goddess along coastal China) at temples not too far from my home (in Shaukeiwan in the northeastern part of Hong Kong island). The streets would be decorated with large colorful flags in red, green, blue, yellow, etc., and a lot of fishing boats in the bay that we could see from our apartment windows would also be decked with flags. We could hear firecrackers and Cantonese opera performances in the distance, but for some reason I never felt the urge to go and take a look. Perhaps it was because we felt unconsciously that these festivals were not for people like us immigrants; they had

a distinctly "indigenous" feel to them. Perhaps we felt a sense of snobish disdain as educated people, and from the capital Beijing no less, toward these local folks' colorful, exotic, but definitely "low-brow" cultural expressions. These festivals were simply a world quite alien to us, but I did not even bother to see with my own eyes just how alien it might have been. Little did I know that temple festivals just like these would later become one of my core research interests!

For two years I attended a primary school near my home that was run by the Church of Christ in China (*Zhonghua Jidu jiaohui*), an ecumenical Protestant organization active in Hong Kong after having been forced to leave mainland China following the Communist takeover. This choice of school was not unusual since a large number of primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong were run by religious organizations (especially Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist), as they still are today, and this particular school had a very good reputation. On numerous occasions each day all the students were required to close their eyes, hold their hands together, and pray to God. There were also regular worship assemblies in the school chapel, where we all sang hymns and listened to sermons. Participation in these religious activities did not turn me into a Christian, and there was no active attempt on the part of the school or the teachers to proselytize. It was as if we were assumed to be Christians already. I might not have wholeheartedly participated in these Christian rituals, but I do not remember having ever resisted or rebelled. These activities did not seem to have made any strong impression on me.

While many of my classmates went on to attend secondary schools also run by religious organizations (e.g. some having Catholic priests or sisters as their teachers), I went to a government-run school. There were no longer any compulsory religious rituals, even though a small number of my classmates were members of the school Christian fellowship. Five years of busy studying passed, and then one day, during the summer vacation of 1987, I accepted a Protestant classmate's

invitation to a gospel camp organized by his church (evangelical but non-denominational). At the end of the multiple-day camp (three days or maybe longer) held on the campus of a local university, I became a Christian convert (i.e. "accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior")!

I quickly turned into a devout Christian, attending church service and youth fellowship every week, avidly reading the Bible and all kinds of Christian devotional literature, and actively trying to spread the gospel to people around me, including my classmates and family members. The church fellowship, small but with many young people, was warm and supportive. There was much socializing beyond things spiritual. I was soon baptized. Hong Kong was at that time undergoing major transformations. China opened up because of the economic reforms, and many factories moved from Hong Kong to the Pearl River Delta region. The Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 sealed the fate of the colony, as Hong Kong was to revert its sovereignty to China in 1997.

In 1989 I went to the United States for university education. The changed environment cooled my religious fervor considerably. The Christians in the liberal arts college I was attending (Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts) and in the local church were welcoming, but the overwhelming majority of them were Christians because their family and upbringing were Christian. Very few shared a similar conversion and evangelical experience. I prayed and read the Bible less and less. The courses I was taking in cultural anthropology and comparative religion also led me to wonder why there are so many different religious traditions and kinds of religious practices in the world and how the Christian faith could possibly be the only Truth. My faith gradually faded and one day I told myself I would no longer be a Christian. It is ironic that I would lose my newly acquired faith in one of the most religiously fervent countries in the world, and when so many Chinese students studying in the US would discover and convert to Christianity.

After graduating from university I began doctoral training in socio-cultural anthropology at Stanford University (Palo Alto, California). Through a Chinese visiting professor's introduction, I went to rural Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi Province in northcentral China) for some preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 1995. This was my first encounter with rural China, and I was captivated by the vibrant religious life in Shaanbei, especially its temple festivals. I decided to research on the revival of popular religion in rural China as my doctoral dissertation topic, using one temple in Shaanbei, the Black Dragon King Temple (Heilongdawangmiao), as my primary case study. More systematic and much longer periods of ethnographic fieldwork followed, totaling 18 months. During these months I stayed at temples and inside villagers' homes, attended dozens of temple festivals and numerous funerals and weddings (funerals and weddings always end with elaborate banquets), traveled on the back of trucks with local opera troupes (that were performing for one temple festival after another), drank burning liquor accompanied by delicious watermelons, learned how to sing Shaanbei folk songs, helped slaughter sacrificial pigs, observed séances conducted by spirit mediums, listened to folk storytelling, walked or rode on the back of motorcycles along mountain paths, and talked to thousands of locals (peasants, merchants, local officials, opera singers and musicians, martial artists, miners, forestry workers, shopkeepers, children and teenagers, students, the elderly, factory workers, contractors, sex workers, restaurant owners, cooks and waiters, truck and bus drivers, stonemasons, construction workers, temple bosses, Daoist priests, spirit mediums, *fengshui* masters, etc.). It was exhilarating. The resulting study became my doctoral dissertation and eventually a monograph (Chau, 2006a).

I subsequently became a professional anthropologist, teaching and researching on religion in China, especially the social aspects of religious life (you will see in the next chapter why I think religious doctrines are not as important for our understanding of how people "do" religion in

China). After the long-term fieldwork in Shaanbei, I have conducted many shorter spells of fieldwork research, over the course of 20 years, in rural and urban China, Taiwan, and among Chinese communities in Southeast Asia (mainly Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore) and Europe. These fieldwork trips lasted from a few days to a month. It is this broad range of fieldwork experiences among many kinds of communities that made me appreciate the diversity of Chinese religious practices. This appreciation has been further deepened by my experience as a teacher and a scholar, teaching courses, supervising and examining dissertations and theses, reviewing article and book manuscripts, giving public lectures, interacting with colleagues at academic conferences, and constantly reading and writing. The arguments and insights presented in this book are intellectual products distilled from these experiences. As the many illustrative cases cited in this book will show, I have also drawn heavily upon the works of my scholarly colleagues, who are based in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Europe, and North America (the reader can consult the further reading and reference sections for additional explorations). Fortunately, there has been an explosive growth in studies on contemporary religious life in Chinese societies based on fieldwork (published primarily in Chinese, English, and French).

DIVERSE APPROACHES TO STUDYING RELIGION IN CHINA

What distinguishes anthropological approaches to studying Chinese religion from other approaches? What are their advantages and disadvantages when compared to those in other disciplines? Five main academic disciplines have contributed to the study of religion in China: Religious Studies, History, Sociology, Political Science, and of course Anthropology. The boundaries between these different disciplines are

sometimes porous, but each has developed its distinct topical foci, methodologies, and analytical frameworks.

The sociology of religion primarily examines how the particular characteristics of a society shape religious life. It is especially interested in broad trends in religious growth and decline. One of the most prominent debates in the sociology of religion has been around the secularization thesis (from Max Weber onward), which predicted that the spread of scientific rationalism would lead to the increasing secularization of society globally. But it turned out religious life has been a lively force in both local and global affairs. More recently, some sociologists of religion have tried to explain the differences in the degree of religious participation in different societies using a religious market model (e.g. Stark and Finke 2000; Yang 2012). Given their research interest in broad societal trends, sociologists of religion tend to work with quantitative data resulting from large-scale surveys (the bigger the better). For theories to have explanatory power, they have to “predict the outcome” accurately given certain conditions (e.g. a more open religious market tends to produce, or at least correlate with, more lively religious life). If sociologists of religion are interested in studying religions themselves, what interests them most are the institutional aspects rather than religious practices *per se*. The sociology of religion has traditionally been developed in studying Christianity in Euro-American contexts (with church membership serving as one of the most prominent “variables”); its adaptation to studying religion in China is an ongoing one. The difficulty of generating reliable survey data on religion is a major stumbling block in the advancement of the sociology of religion in China (not to mention the possibility that many aspects of religious life in China are not quite amenable to being surveyed).

Some political scientists are interested in the study of religion because of the intimate connections between political views and religious affiliations in many contexts. However, the political science study of religion

has not been well developed because of the secularist ideologies in Western liberal states that mostly exclude religion from formal politics, while most political scientists focus on politics with a capital "P" (e.g. political parties, the presidency, policymaking, democratic and authoritarian regimes, political movements, etc.). But, just as in sociology, the increasing prominence of religion in contemporary life has forced more political scientists to pay attention to religion. Questions in this field include: Do members of particular religious groups vote in certain predictable ways? How do different countries handle the thorny issues of the separation of church and state? How to identify forces of religious radicalization? How does religion contribute to sociopolitical stability or instability (e.g. violence between different religious groups, religiously inspired protests and resistance)? In the context of China, some political scientists have examined how the state manages the challenge of the rapid growth of Christianity and the extremely active faith-based charities. Just like many sociologists, those political scientists who are used to quantitative analyses are often frustrated by the lack of reliable survey data on religious affiliations in China (partly due to the political sensitivity of such enquiries and partly due to the lack of formal religious affiliations of most Chinese). Similar to the sociologists, political scientists tend to take people's religious identification as a given and are not concerned with the nature and contents of their religious practices.

Religious Studies (also called Comparative Religion) is concerned with the study of the internal contents of different religions. The primary medium of study for Religious Studies scholars is religious texts, especially those that have become "canonical" (thus constructed by the elites of the religious traditions themselves or by their "curators" in the West). The focus is more on doctrines, concepts, religious thinkers, schools of thought than the social and institutional aspects of religion. A legacy of the Western theological and hermeneutics tradition, this approach has partly intentionally and partly inadvertently constructed

non-Western religious traditions into coherent systems of religious ideas. This has resulted in our current popular understandings of Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, etc. as analogous to Christianity, each with a core of theological propositions and concepts and each with some key texts. Such a "systematic" approach to non-Western religions is reflected in most related university courses and introductory texts. In recent years some scholars in Religious Studies are advocating studying "lived religions," i.e. examining people's actual *experience* with religion (Orsi 2010 [1985]), which brings anthropological approaches to bear upon Religious Studies.

While Religious Studies scholars tend to focus on explaining what a particular religion "is all about" without paying too much attention to changes over time, historians of religion on the other hand make it their duty to trace and account for precisely these changes. Historians of Chinese religions (some of whom are art historians) have tackled questions that include: How did the Chinese indigenize Buddhism, and how did Buddhism impact Chinese society (including other religious traditions)? How did different deity cults evolve over time (some deities changed their identities, iconographies, even sex, over the course of their development)? How did elite and popular forms of Buddhism differ in the Ming dynasty? Was Confucianism invented by European missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? How did reformist Buddhism and modern Daoism emerge in the early twentieth century? In what form did religious persecution and anti-clericalism take in Chinese history? How did the word "religion" (*zongjiao*) in its modern sense come to China via Meiji Japan? What was it like to be a monk or priest in a particular historical period? As social and cultural historians, these scholars make use of a wide range of sources such as dynastic histories and edicts, county and temple gazetteers, diaries and correspondence, institutional charters and minutes, temple inscriptions, mural paintings, ritual manuals, poetry and fictional works, excavated artifacts (e.g. burial inscriptions, tomb offerings), etc.

As an academic discipline, sociocultural anthropology grew out of the Euro-American colonial encounters with peoples in the Americas, Africa, Oceania, and Asia. The earliest professional anthropologists in Europe and the United States (in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) were often advisors to colonial governments in matters relating to ways of life of the natives with a view to better governing the latter. Most of these native peoples were non-literate (not 'illiterate' since they did not have writing), and anthropologists had to live among them over a long period (often many years) to learn their languages, observe and inquire about their customs, and to make sense of their "bizarre" and "primitive" cultural practices relating to material culture, foodways, kinship, rituals, conflict resolution, etc. Long-term "participant observation" became anthropology's hallmark methodology, even as theoretical approaches evolved over time.

In the mid-twentieth century the study of agrarian societies (labeled as "complex societies") came to occupy a prominent place in mainstream anthropology (following wartime studies on the so-called "national characters" as part of the war effort), challenging the previous generations' structural-functionalist treatment of indigenous communities as isolated and bounded wholes. Most significantly, Robert Redfield proposed concepts such as "Great Traditions" and "Little Traditions" (as well as the "rural-urban continuum") to characterize the differences and interactions between literate elite cultural traditions and peasant cultural traditions. During this time, the idea of "folk religion" was born, referring to the religious practices of the common people, as contrasted with the theologically elaborate and textually rich elite religious traditions within the same society, even though it was posited that there had always been interactions between folk and elite religious traditions.

The first generation of anthropological fieldworkers conducting field research in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s (primarily

because mainland China was closed to Western researchers until the 1980s) carried with them the training they received during this transition period from British structural-functionalism and the American "culture and personality" approach to a Redfieldian-view on complex societies, further nourished by other theoretical trends such as modernization theories, Marxist theories, symbolic and interpretive anthropology, etc. From that period onward, especially after mainland China was open to foreign researchers again and also because of the vibrant religious life in the different Chinese societies, there have been dozens of fieldwork-based studies on Chinese religious life (many of which have been written by researchers based in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore). Some of the issues investigated include: How have various religious communities revived after the Maoist period? What impact are changing policies towards religion and broader socio-cultural transformations such as urbanization and transnationalism having on the ways in which people practice religion? What are the major elements of continuity and change in Chinese religious life and how can we explain them? Why does Chinese ritual life take the forms that it does? What are the attractions of Christianity for the Chinese in rural and urban areas? How do we explain the explosive growth of lay Buddhism in both mainland China and Taiwan? How do Chinese religious forms get globalized? Many of these studies will be featured in the various substantive chapters of this book, so I will not go into details here about the multitude of fascinating topics anthropologists of Chinese religion have investigated.

Even though most of the case studies presented in this book come from anthropology, I have freely drawn upon insights from works in other relevant disciplines. Indeed, anthropology has always been in conversation (i.e. having meaningful relationships) with other disciplines because social and cultural phenomena are complex and ever changing and require a good mixture of methodologies and theoretical frameworks.

The knowledge the reader will gain from this book would be a fortuitous congruence of a number of factors: the objective realities of religious practices on the ground in contemporary China; the disciplinary and Chinese Studies expertise that have been mobilized to describe and interpret the gathered data from the field (hopefully without too much personal and ideological bias); and the particular lens and background the reader has brought into the reading and understanding of the presented materials. There is plenty of room for misunderstanding, but sometimes a little misunderstanding can pave the way for much greater understanding later on. I hope that this book will pique the readers' interest enough for them to wish to explore further the fascinating and rewarding world of Chinese religious life whether through books or "participant observation."

1

Understanding Religious Diversity: Five Modalities of Doing Religion

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AS FACT AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS IDEOLOGY

In the introductory chapter I briefly invoked the notion of religious diversity in China. But in order to understand religious diversity, one has to first decide on the criteria with which one is "measuring" diversity. Many scholars of Christianity are now speaking of the existence of a wide variety of *Christianities* in the world (not only measured by the astonishingly numerous Protestant denominations or the equally numerous Catholic saint cults) (see Cannell 2006; Robbins and Haynes 2014). As Christianity has spread around the globe in the past two millennia, it has taken on all kinds of local cultural flavors and mixed with all kinds of indigenous religions. All other major religious traditions with a global reach have a similar "internal" diversity (e.g. Islam, Judaism, Buddhism).

When we speak of religious diversity in China, are we speaking of the diversity of "religions" (e.g. Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, etc.)? Or the number of deities worshiped? Or the variety of religious practices? Or the range of different kinds of religious communities? Or the number of lines of transmission of ritual techniques?

A further question that is worth bearing in mind is whether or not you believe that religious diversity is intrinsically a good thing. The answer to this question would in some way betray our ideological orientations. A firm believer in political and economic liberalism would

say "Let a hundred religions bloom!" because religions are like commercial products that should be allowed to compete with one another in a religious marketplace. An advocate of cultural diversity or multiculturalism would view religious diversity as having intrinsic value and thus call for the encouragement and protection of religious diversity for its own sake (in fact taking care to not let cruel market principles wipe out "weaker" religions and produce the religious equivalents of global franchises). This is a religious-pluralist position that treats religious diversity not just as an empirical fact but as a policy goal. But Christian missionaries and other kinds of believers of any ultimate religious Truth would prefer to see their own religion triumph over all the others. And staunch atheists would want to see a completely secularized world with no religions at all. Political leaders of authoritarian regimes would grudgingly tolerate a certain degree of religious diversity, if only for maintaining checks and balances, and for as long as religious groups constitute an easily manageable minority of the population and do not cause any trouble (for the regime or for one another). Borrowing a term from economics, the sociologist of religion Fenggang Yang has characterized this last scenario as a religious "oligopoly" (Yang 2012: chapter 7).

China has always been a religiously diverse country, but this diversity is more evident as different "modalities of doing religion" (explained below) rather than as discrete confessional religions. For the vast majority of Chinese people historically and today, the presence of a wide variety of modalities of doing religion is simply a fact of their daily lives. However, "religious diversity" as a concept is alien to most Chinese people because their approach to religion is primarily instrumental and occasion-based (what can be called an *efficacy-based religiosity*) rather than confessionally-based, and their experience of religious diversity is embodied in the employment of different religious service providers on various occasions rather than abstract systems of religious doctrines and teachings. Being an anthropologist rather than an intellectual

historian, I will look at the issue of religious diversity in China from the perspective of ordinary people engaging in religious activities on the ground rather than religious elites engaging in high-power theological debates. Next, I will explicate what I have called "five modalities of doing religion" in China.

MODALITIES OF DOING RELIGION

In the long history of religious development in China, different ways of "doing religion" evolved and cohered into relatively easy-to-identify styles or "modalities."¹ These are relatively well-defined forms that different people can adopt and combine to deal with different concerns in life. However, the specific contents within these forms can vary widely. These modalities of "doing religion" are:

1. *Discursive/scriptural*, involving mostly the composition and use of texts.
2. *Personal-cultivational*, involving a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself.
3. *Liturgical*, involving elaborate ritual procedures conducted by ritual specialists.
4. *Immediate-practical*, aiming at quick results using simple ritual or magical techniques.
5. *Relational*, emphasizing the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as among humans in religious practices.

Even though these modalities of doing religion are also products of conceptualization and schematization, I would like to argue that they are far more "real" than conceptual fetishes such as "Buddhism," "Daoism," and "Confucianism." The Chinese people have engaged with these modalities of doing religion in real practices, whereas no one ever engages with "Buddhism" or "Daoism" because these exist more

as conceptual aggregates with only imputed concreteness and cohesiveness. Religious thinkers and scholars of religion have of course attempted to make various religious practices into coherent wholes (including by giving them names such as "Buddhism" and "Daoism"), but such attempts at arriving at cognitive, conceptual, and sometimes institutional coherence have not had much impact on how most people "do religion" on the ground, where they don't care which deity belongs to which religion or which religious tradition inspired which morality book. What happens on the ground "religiously" is very much a congruence of local customs, historical accidents, social environment, personal temperaments, configurations of modalities of doing religion, and the makeup of the local ritual market (e.g. the availability of which kinds of ritual specialists to cater for the need as well as to stimulate the need of which kinds of clients). Below I shall explicate in a little more detail each modality of doing religion found in Chinese religious culture. One thing I need to emphasize, however, is that these modalities are more or less ideal types, and that they sometimes overlap (e.g. with some actual religious practices manifesting multiple modalities).

The discursive/scriptural modality of doing religion

People are attracted to this modality because of the allure of Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and other "great texts" (classics, sutras, scriptures, etc.). This modality often requires a high level of literacy and a penchant for philosophical and "theological" thinking. Key practices within this modality include compiling and editing scriptures or discoursing about "the Way" (*dao*), or preaching, and its paradigmatic forms include reading, thinking about, discussing, debating, composing, translating, and commenting on religious texts. Also included in this modality is the composing of morality books using spirit writing and Chan/Zen masters' exegesis on *gong'an* (*dharma* riddles; *koan* in Japanese). The products of this modality are usually textual (or at least eventually

appearing in textual forms) that range from a single religious tract to a whole set of scriptures and liturgical texts (*keyi*) (e.g. the so-called Buddhist Canon or Daoist Canon compiled under imperial patronage). These texts form the basis of the classical "Religious Studies" approach to studying Chinese religions, which was derived from Western religious/theological exegetical traditions. Because of this textual bias, for a long time Chinese religious practices were understood in the West as exclusively this textually transmitted esoteric knowledge or, in the context of New Age or Orientalist consumption of exotic texts, "Oriental wisdoms."

The personal-cultivational modality of doing religion

Practices such as meditation, *qigong*, internal or outer alchemy, the cultivation of the "Daoist body," personal or group sutra chanting, the morning and evening recitation sessions in a Buddhist monastery, merit-conscious charitable acts (e.g. volunteering to accumulate karmic merit), and keeping a merit/demerit ledger belong to this modality. This modality presupposes a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself (whether Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, or sectarian). The goals of this transformation and cultivation are different in each religious tradition: to become a so-called "immortal" (*xian*) in Daoism,² to be reincarnated into a better life or to achieve *nirvana* in Buddhism, and to become a man of virtue or to be closer to sagehood (*sheng*) in Confucianism. But the shared element is the concern with one's own ontological status and destiny, something akin to a Foucauldian "care of the self." In other words, the practices in this modality provide "technologies of the self." Within this modality of doing religion there are both elite and popular forms. For many, working on scriptures itself constitutes a form of self-cultivation. However, ordinary and even illiterate people can pursue personal-cultivational goals without esoteric knowledge or high literacy or much religious

training. For example, illiterate peasants can practice self-cultivation by chanting “precious scrolls” (*baojuan*) which are in metered rhymes and often memorized. The simplest self-cultivation technique is the repeated utterance of the mantra *namo amitufo* (*namo amitabha*) thousands of times a day. Though aiming at securing a better reincarnation for the next life or simply to exit the cycles of reincarnation altogether, such chanting practices help cultivate a particular kind of individual-oriented religious subjectivity. Charismatic movements sometimes precipitate out of these personal-cultivational pursuits. The modern *qigong* movement also exemplifies the personal-cultivational modality of doing religion. When Falungong practitioners let the “*dharma* wheel” (*falun*) rotate in their lower abdomen day in and day out as instructed by their master Li Hongzhi, they are engaged in the personal-cultivational modality of doing religion. The key words in this modality are “to cultivate” and “to craft” (oneself).

The liturgical modality of doing religion

This modality includes practices such as imperial state rituals (e.g., the Grand Sacrifice), the Confucian rites, the Daoist rites of fasting and offering, exorcism (e.g. a Nuo ritual drama), sutra chanting rites, Daoist or Buddhist rituals for the universal salvation of souls, the Buddhist grand water and land *dharma* assemblies (*shuilu fahui*), and funeral rituals. Compared to the personal-cultivational modality, practices in this modality aim at more immediate ritual intervention conducted in complex and highly symbolic forms, and are commissioned by and conducted for collective groups – be they families, clans, villages or neighborhoods, temple communities, or the state. This is the modality that features religious specialists (monks, Daoist priests, *fengshui* masters, Confucian ritual masters, spirit mediums, exorcist-dancers, etc.) and often involves esoteric knowledge and elaborate ritual procedures.



Figure 1: Buddhist monks conducting a Water and Land Dharma Assembly at a temple in Shanghai. Photo: Adam Yuet Chau

The immediate-practical modality of doing religion

Practices in this modality also aim at more immediate results, but compared to those in the liturgical modality they are more direct and involve shorter and simpler procedures. There is minimal ritual elaboration. Examples include divination (oracle rod, moon-shaped divination blocks, divination sticks, coins, etc.), getting divine medicine from a deity, using talismans (*fu*) (e.g. ingestion of talismanic water), consulting a spirit medium, calling back a stray soul, begging for rain, ritual cursing, or simply offering incense, etc. Because of its simplicity and low cost, this modality is the most frequently used by the common people (peasants, petty urbanites). The key concepts in this modality are “efficacy” (*ling*) (or miraculous power) and “to beseech for help” (*qiu*). The practices included in this modality are usually called “magic”

in the writings of those scholars who would not want to give them the dignity of the label "religion." Many of these simpler religious services are also provided by specialists for a fee, and they are much cheaper than the more elaborate rituals in the liturgical modality. I will be discussing this modality and the liturgical modality in more detail below as I would argue that developments within these two modalities can best illustrate how Chinese religious culture is so prominently characterized by the provision and consumption of ritual services through the payment of fees.

The relational modality of doing religion

This modality emphasizes the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as relationships among worshippers. Examples are building temples, making offerings (i.e. feeding ancestors, deities, and ghosts), taking vows, spreading miracle stories (i.e. testifying to the deities' efficacy), celebrating deities' birthdays at temple festivals, going on pilgrimage, imperial mountain journeys, establishing religious communities, and forming affiliations between temples and cult communities. This modality also emphasizes sociality, the bringing together of people through ritual events and festivals. Obviously, the other modalities all exhibit some relational and sociality aspects, but the making and maintaining of relations and the production and consumption of sociality seem to be at the foundation of those practices that I have grouped under this modality. The key concepts in this modality are "social comings and goings" (*laiwang*) and social relations (*guanxi*), or connectedness.

These five modalities of doing religion are frameworks for religious practice and action. They both restrain and enable people to express their religious imagination in words, images, sculptural and architectural forms, and actions. More importantly, these modalities lend people

readily recognizable forms to adopt and practice, not unlike the ways in which the differentiation and consolidation of various literary genres such as the novel, the essay, and poetry have facilitated their production and consumption as literary forms. At any one time in any locale of the vast late imperial Chinese empire – and to some extent today as well in the larger Chinese world – all of these modalities of doing religion were in most probability available to be adopted by individuals or social groups, though factors such as class, gender, literacy level, accidents of birth and residence, position within different social networks, temperament, local convention, and the configuration of various modalities might channel some people toward certain modalities and not others. Most peasants in China have traditionally adopted a combination of the relational and the immediate-practical modalities into their religiosity; sometimes they adopt the liturgical modality and hire religious specialists when the occasion requires them, such as funerals and communal exorcisms. Illiteracy and lack of leisure would preclude them from most of the discursive and personal-cultivational modalities. The traditional educated elite tended to adopt a combination of the discursive and the personal-cultivational modalities, but they, too, often needed the service of the liturgical specialists.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

This modalities framework focuses our attention on the ways in which people "do religion" rather than their religious conceptions. Studying people's religious conceptions is important, but it yields a bewildering diversity, whose explanation often lies more in human imagination than social processes; on the other hand, there are only a limited number of forms (modalities) that permeate the Chinese religious landscape. The varieties of Chinese religious life – i.e. the reality of religious diversity – have resulted from the elaboration of differences *within*

these modalities as well as the different configurations of various modalities. The limited number of modalities and their lasting stability and versatility, no less than the great variety in the symbolic contents of the Chinese religious world, have been a great achievement in the history of world religious cultures.

Religious rivalry in Chinese history has not taken the form of competition between membership-based churches as is common in societies with confessionally-based religiosity; rather, there has been more typically competition *between* the different modalities of doing religion and especially *within* each modality of doing religion, in particular the liturgical and immediate-practical modalities. Religious diversity in China is not manifested as the coexistence of, and competition between, confession- and membership-based denominations and churches but rather primarily as the coexistence of, and competition between, various ritual service providers with different (though sometimes convergent) liturgical programs. From the religious consumers' perspective, more differentiation in religious service provision (in terms of types of services and pricing) would mean a wider choice, which might be seen as a good thing compared to religious monopoly.

The Chinese case of religious diversity does present a challenge to our conception of religious diversity. It is a somewhat messier kind of religious diversity, with no readily identifiable religious leaders, religious organizations, or systems of religious thought. But should we sacrifice true understanding for apparent clarity? The religious elite and modern state regulatory apparatus in China have a vested interest in constructing certain Chinese religious traditions in the image of monotheistic religions; however, such a construction is carried out at the expense of the vast majority of the providers and consumers of religious services in China, as it favors the discursive modality of doing religion and suppresses most of the practices encompassed by the other four modalities (especially those in the liturgical and immediate-practical modalities), many of which are labeled as superstition or counter-revolutionary

sectarianism. The modern Chinese state in mainland China recognizes and approves five major religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam. However, it is primarily the discursive modality within these religious traditions that is granted legitimacy. As a result, for example, the Daoist Association is completely dominated by the Quanzhen monastic Daoists since they can "discourse" much better than the Zhengyi ritualists (and they appear more "properly religious" because of their monasticism), and on the national stage the Buddhists prevail over the Daoists thanks to, among other reasons, the superior Buddhist discursive apparatus (not to mention organizational prowess and transnational links; see Ashiwa and Wank 2002). Not so incidentally, the religious pluralism and inter-faith dialogue paradigms in the liberal West also favor the discursive modality of doing religion, as all religious traditions have to meet the demand of coming up with reasoned and communicable discourse in order to even enter the dialogue with the much more theologically and discursively sophisticated Abrahamic traditions. The vast majority of the world's population who "do religion" in other ways are thus silenced (or whose efficacy-oriented religiosity was forcefully twisted to conform to a confession-oriented understanding of religion). A true religious pluralism will have to acknowledge the full range of modalities of doing religion in all societies, even though this will be an immensely challenging task since our world has been so entrenched cognitively and institutionally in the prevailing paradigms.