

What Counts as Religious Experience? *Reappraising the RERC data from the UK and China*

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Thank you. I am very pleased to be here and honored to be invited to give this lecture. Given my longstanding interest in religious experiences and the methodological issues involved in studying them, I have long been aware of Sir Alister Hardy's research and the wealth of accounts here at the RERC. Until relatively recently, most of my work on RE has been historical or methodological. It is only in the last few years that I have taken up the challenge of translating my ideas into a research tool and using it to collect data about the experiences that people consider R/S/M across cultures and traditions. My initial plan was to talk to you about the design of the INOE, the process we are using to validate it, and our pilot tests with large on-line samples in the US and India and small student samples collected in conjunction with a five country project conducted by Tanya Luhmann. In discussing my initial plan with Bettina Schmidt, I learned of Paul Badham and Xinzhong Yao's efforts to extend Hardy's approach to China. Reading their book, along with reviews of their work by scholars here in the UK, led me to refocus my talk to look more deeply at what we can learn by comparing our approaches and thinking about the RERC data from the UK and China in light of the five country pilot data we collected using the INOE.

NEXT

Overview

1. **The Traditional Approach**
Case Study: Religious Experience in the UK and China
2. **An Alternative Approach**
Case Study: the Inventory of Nonordinary Experiences
3. **What Counts as Religious / Spiritual Experience in China?**
Comparing findings using the two approaches

I want to begin by looking at the approach taken by Hardy in the UK and Badham & Yao in China. Although their approach, which operationalizes the concept of religious experience, is common in the social scientific study of religion, theoretical difficulties emerged — as Badham & Yao quickly realized — when they attempted to study RE in China. I'll look at how they tried to overcome these difficulties and the critical feedback they received. In discussing the INOE, I will focus on the theoretical and design differences and skip over the development and validation of the items, in order to present data from the five-country pilot study, which included data from China. Let's begin then with the current approach. NEXT SLIDE

1. The Traditional Approach

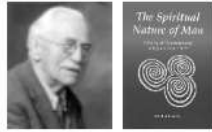
Hardy's Procedure for Studying RSE in the UK

Initial Prompt (1970)

"All those who feel that they have been *conscious of, and perhaps influenced by*, some Power, whether they call it God or not, which may either appear to be beyond their individual selves or partly, or even entirely, within their being, are asked to write a simple account of those feelings and their effects" (Hardy 1979, p. 18).

Classification of Responses (Hardy 1979, pp. 26-27):

- Sensory or quasi-sensory (visual, auditory, touch, smell)
- Extra-sensory
- Enhanced or superhuman power displayed by humans
- Cognitive and affective elements
- Dream experiences



Conclusion (1979, p. 131):

RSE = "a feeling that 'Something Other' than the self can actually be sensed; a desire to personalize this presence into a deity and to have a private I-Thou relationship with it, communicating through prayer."

As I am sure most of you know, Sir Alister Hardy solicited first-hand accounts of people's religious experiences in order to understand "spiritual feeling in a scientific age." His appeals for first-hand accounts of religious experience, which he collected here in the UK in the 1970s, focused on the experience of a power beyond the self.

[CLICK] Here is Hardy's initial prompt, often referred to as "the Hardy question." He asked "all those ... " Although Hardy thought of religious experience as a disposition or way of looking at the world, people overwhelmingly submitted accounts of sudden, discrete experiences. There are many possible reasons for this, but keep it in mind, as I want to suggest a reason I think bears further investigation later in my talk.

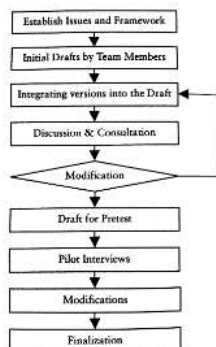
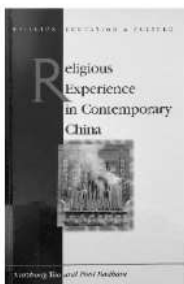
[CLICK] He then classified the responses into types of experience [READ]

[CLICK] Based on the responses he characterized RSE as "a feeling that 'Something Other' than the self can actually be sensed; a desire to personalize this presence into a deity and to have a private I-Thou relationship with it, communicating through prayer" (Hardy 1979, p. 131).

—Some years later, after Paul Badham took over as the director of the Hardy Centre in 2002, he and his then colleague Professor Yao obtained a four-year grant from the Templeton Foundation to study religious experience in China. They took Hardy's findings as their starting point in order to learn if people had REs of this sort in China. NEXT

Studying RE in China

Yao and Badham (2007, pp. 12-15)



Flow Chart for Questionnaire Design Process

In looking into this study, I was impressed by the amount of work they did. They were assisted by scholars from seven Chinese universities and trained 110 interviewers in order to collect over 3,000 questionnaires from ten representative locations across China. In light of all this work, it was discouraging to learn that scholars of religion here in the UK were quite critical of the study. As I dug into it, I realized that Yao and Badham were aware of many of the issues, but tried to resolve them without questioning the traditional approach. Thus, they recognized early on that they could not simply translate extant surveys having to do with religious experience into Chinese, in large part because the concept of RE was meaningless to most Chinese. As a result, they went through a lengthy process of creating an indigenized questionnaire [CLICK]. This is the flow chart for the design process. Notice the many steps that they went through to test their questions and refine their interview. But note, too, that they started with a theoretical framework. NEXT

Theoretical Framework

Yao and Badham (2007, p. 14)

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

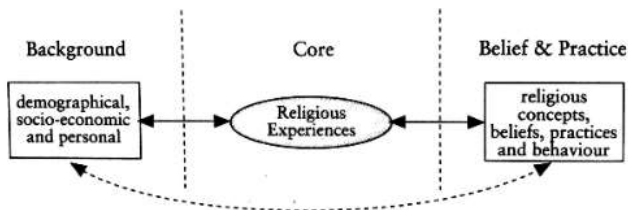


Figure 1.2 Theoretical framework guiding questionnaire design

Here is the framework that guided their design. It has “religious experience” at the center. This meant that they had to decide what counted as RE in China and design an interview protocol that allowed them to investigate it. They did not propose a definition of RE; they identified types or dimensions. To arrive at them, they compared “a number of questionnaires concerning religion in English and Chinese” (p. 12) in order to “describe what kinds of experiences were most likely expected to be religious” (p. 28). In testing process, they struggled with terminology, trying to find a balance between general terminology that worked for all Han Chinese and more specific formulations that were easier to understand but only worked for some. In the end, they offered general descriptions with illustrations. Based on this design process, they came up with the following types or dimensions of religious experience. NEXT

Types of Religious Experience

Yao & Badham (2007, pp. 22-23)

1. Experiencing the influence or control of a spiritual being or power
2. Experiencing a new understanding that has caused a change to the way of life
3. Having a dream that is extraordinary but is believed to be true
4. Having a mysterious feeling such as hearing, seeing, smelling or being touched
5. Having a visionary experience either alone or together with others
6. Experiencing union with the universe in which one has forgotten the existence of one's self and become one body with the universe
7. Others as a broad category for all that are not or cannot be included in the above six.

Here is how the first of the types — their version of the Hardy question — was operationalized in the interview [NEXT]

Notes:

How did they come up with this list?

Badham states: “It became clear to us that what we needed to do in our field work was to ask a wide variety of questions about experiences and beliefs that people may or may not have had in order to discover the extent to which religious experiences may have impinged upon their lives.”

Francis states: “Questions needed to be framed in a ways that Chinese people can recognise, and yet remain consistent with Hardy's view that religious experience is associated with awareness of ‘a power or presence different from the everyday self.’”

Interview suggests: The types listed above likely drew both on the types of experiences that Hardy identified in his responses and their knowledge of Chinese culture. It is clear from the way they worded the items that they tried to express each of these types of experience in fairly general terms. In the interviews, they asked ... interviewees if they associated the experiences with various spiritual beings or powers. We can highlight some characteristics of this approach. [NEXT]

Interview Protocol

Yao & Badham (2007, pp. 200-201)

Some people have experienced that they were once and/or are frequently influenced by a kind of power that ordinary people cannot control and explain clearly. Have you ever had such an experience? We are listing several kinds of power below. Please answer one by one if you have had such an experience.

- * The Mandate or Will of Heaven (25.7%)
- * Buddha/Bodhisattva or causational power (15.2%)
- * God/the Lord of Heaven or the divine will (6.1%)
- * Ancestor/forefathers (21.2%)
- * Ghosts or spirits (3.0%)
- * Your fortune/fate (46.2%)
- * Dao or Qi (4.2%)
- * Other, please specify (0.4%)

- ❖ Red = their generic description of for experience. The phrase “cannot control and explain” is their translation of “spiritual”
- ❖ Blue = this is their generic experience question, but they did not elicit a Y/N response. “Unfortunately we did not include a general question of yes or no asking about experiencing the influence or control of all [spiritual] powers, and this makes it impossible for us to say what percentage of all Han Chinese had experiences a [spiritual] power” (p. 35). Instead they asked about specific powers they deemed religious one by one [CLICK]
- ❖ If they said yes to one or more of these, they asked numerous follow up questions.
- ❖ However, when they draw conclusions about “religious experience” in China, they will define RE in terms of “transcendence” and all of these responses, including the most popular — Fate/Fortune and the Mandate or Will of Heaven (highlighted in purple) — will be subsumed under that heading.

We can highlight some characteristics of this approach. [NEXT]

Characteristics of the Approach

- Operationalizes *the researchers’ concept of RSE* as a set of types of experiences, which they derived from Hardy and other religion measure,
- It does not tell us how *the respondents* viewed these experiences.
- The types of experiences were expressed in terms that were comprehensible to the Chinese, which eliminated most of the specifically religious language.
- The more generic or general wording makes it more obvious that others, whether respondents or other researchers, might interpret these experiences differently.

In other words, these more generically phrased experiences can be appraised in different ways both by other researchers in psychology and psychiatry and by those who experience them. NEXT

Types of Religious Experience

Yao & Badham (2007, pp. 32-33)

1. Experiencing the influence or control of a spiritual being or power - also Schizotypal (O-Life) or Anomalous Experience (PAGE-R)
2. Experiencing a new understanding that has caused a change to the way of life - also meaningful and secular
3. Having a dream that is extraordinary but is believed to be true - also meaningful and secular
4. Having a mysterious feeling such as hearing, seeing, smelling or being touched - also Hallucination
5. Having a visionary experience either alone or together with others - also Hallucination
6. Experiencing union with the universe in which one has forgotten the existence of one's self and become one body with the universe - Mysticism and Ego Dissolution Scales (ANNEX, EDI)

Go through each items and note competing appraisals. THEN: In response to Yao and Badham's reports on this research, scholars raised the following key criticisms [NEXT]

Core Criticisms

- * Douglas Davies: Leap from reported experiences to claims regarding 'divine transcendence.' "His paper reads as though there is 'no escape' from its driving hypothesis that 'religious experience' of something 'transcendent' is everywhere present. ... But an ease of slippage from reported experiences in response to intentionally formulated questions to a divine 'transcendent' source is dangerous."
- * Brian Bocking: Use of concept of RE to mark out non-explainable aspect of human existence. "The key issue is of course the genealogy of the term 'experience' and its (largely unconscious) deployment by successive scholars of religion to mark out an area of human existence which is distinctively religious and quintessentially private, personal and thus beyond reductive explanation."
- * AI: Like many other researchers, they operationalize RE for the purposes of their research as if it were a stable thing, when we know:
 - * There are many different types of experiences, each of which could be appraised in various ways.
 - * Traditions valorize some experiences, disparage others, and encourage people to cultivate that which they value.

Two main criticisms raised by UK scholars. ... Use red text to avoid reading each quote.

PAUSE, THEN: I would put the problem this way...

ADD: Apart from a particular theology of religions, we can't make any claims about a transcendent source or sources.

So how can we approach things differently? NEXT

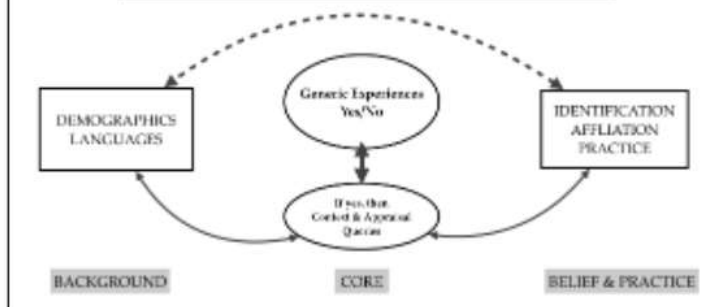
2. An Alternative Approach The Inventory of Nonordinary Experiences

- * We are not assuming that RSE is a discrete construct.
- * We are not assuming that there are experiences that cannot be explained in scientific terms.
- * We are aware that phenomenologically similar experiences studied by psychiatrists, psychologists, and scholars of religion may be transformative or debilitating.
- * We are aware that people often appraise phenomenologically similar experiences in different ways.
- * To investigate these questions, we are inverting the approach pioneered by RERC. We start with questions about experiences instead of a question about RSE.

Commentary

- * We are assuming that there are many different kinds of experiences that can be appraised as R/S/M.
- * We are not assuming we can explain everything, but we think it is important to see how much we can explain.
- * We think it is important to know why they have different effects.
- * We think it is important to recognize these local views and investigate their impact.
- * Our theoretical framework that looks like this. [NEXT]

Alternative Theoretical Framework (INOE)



- Our framework is premised on the idea that we can separate experiences and appraisals. In taking this step, we drew inspiration from two previous efforts: the Appraisal of Anomalous Experiences Interview (Brett et al. 2007), developed by psychosis researchers, and the Survey of Anomalous Experiences (Irwin et al. 2013), a self-report measure that queried experiences often appraised as paranormal.
- In this framework, RE is not the core construct. Each generic experience item is its own construct. This has important implications for validation. Instead of validating an overall construct, such as RE, we are validating each item individually to ensure that people understand it in the way we intend.
- Here's how our approach looks in practice, if we focus on just one experience item [NEXT].

Sample Question and Appraisals

Pencil/Paper Format

I have sensed the presence of what seemed to be non-ordinary forces or beings.	YES If yes, answer questions in right column	[Context] Under what condition did this experience occur? • Waking, normal state • Waking, in association with "mind altering" practices or substances • Asleep or between waking and sleeping [Valence] While this experience was occurring, how did it feel? • Somewhat negative • About neutral • Somewhat positive [Significance] How significant has this experience been for you? • Not significant • Somewhat significant • Very significant [Effect] How, if at all, has it affected your life? -2 Very negative effect -1 Somewhat negative effect 0 Little or no effect, either positive or negative 1 Somewhat positive effect 2 Very positive effect	[Cause] What do you believe caused this experience? Select the primary cause(s). • God, gods, or other deities • Other extraordinary or supernatural beings • Extraordinary or supernatural forces, powers, or abilities, including your own • Normal mental or physical processes • Drugs and/or alcohol • Mental or physical illness [Reason:] Why do you think it happened? Select the closest answer. • To offer me a sign or message. • To reward me or someone else. • To punish me or someone else. • For some other reason. • For no reason. [S/R] Do you consider this experience spiritual or religious? • Yes • No
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- [CLICK] First, people are first presented with a generically worded experience and [CLICK] asked whether they have had such an experience or not. This is our equivalent of the Hardy question; it is only one of about 75 questions we are in the process of validating. In asking a generic question with no mention of God or Power, we are inverting Hardy's procedure. Working in the Chinese context, Yao & Badham were forced to add questions and make them more generic, which made them more like our. In contrast to Yao & Badham, however, we ask them if they have had an experience of this type and do not prime them with examples. This explicitly separates the generic experience from the appraisal. If they say yes, they are asked follow up queries:
- [CLICK] The first set makes no reference to anything religious or spiritual. Yao & Badham also asked follow up questions like these. The big difference comes in the next set of questions.
 - [CLICK] Here we offer them a range of potential causes **of** and reasons **for** the experience. They can select more than one cause, but they choose out of this broad list of causes. Finally, we ask them if **they** consider the experience spiritual or religious in translated into culturally appropriate terms that we do not assume mean the same thing as spiritual or religious in English-speaking contexts. Their answers — like those of English speakers — must be interpreted in light of culturally specific meanings that we investigate through our validation process. These appraisal items have gone through a long development process, so our two pilot studies did not include this full set. Here are the followup questions that were included in the 60 item P/P version we used in the five-country pilot study. [NEXT]

Sample Question and Appraisals

60 Item MSP Pencil/Paper Version

I have had an experience in which it seemed like there was another self in my body.	YES If yes, answer questions in right column	Under what condition did this experience occur? • Waking, normal state • Waking, in association with "mind altering" practices or substances • Asleep or between waking and sleeping [S/R] Do you consider this experience spiritual or religious? • Yes • No • Unsure What do you believe caused this experience? • Natural or ordinary beings or forces • Non-natural or non-ordinary beings or forces • Both • Unsure [Valence] While this experience was occurring, how did it feel? • Somewhat negative • About neutral • Somewhat positive [Significance] How significant has this experience been for you? • Not significant • Somewhat significant • Very significant
	NO	

The three follow up questions in both — S/R, Valence, and Significance — have been stable through the various iterations of the INOE. They are the ones we analyzed and that I'll be discussing today.

Let's look next at the respondents in the five country study and compare them with respondents in the two Hardy studies. [NEXT SLIDE]

Note: "seemed like" and "seemed as if"

MSP Student Samples

US, China, Thailand, Vanuatu, Ghana (P/P 60 item)

	CHINA	THAILAND	US	VANUATU	GHANA
Sample Size	n = 96	n = 106	n = 104	n = 99	n = 134
School	Fudan University	Rajamangala University of Tech, Lanna	San Jose State	University of So. Pacific, Emaus Vanuatu IT	University of Cape Coast
Religious Identification	None = 43% Other = 3% Missing = 45%	Buddhist = 94% Other = 2% None = 1% Missing = 1%	Christian = 45% None = 28% Other = 11% Missing = 13%	Christian = 30% Other = 2% Missing = 18%	Christian = 90% Muslim = 2% None = 1% Missing = 5%
R/S					
Very + Somewhat	17%	16%	50%	76%	79%
Slightly + Not at All	83%	84%	50%	17%	19%

The 60-item P/P version was given to approx 100 college students in five countries: China, Thailand, the US, Vanuatu, and Ghana. Translated into Chinese and Thai. In particular, I want you to note the differences in Religious Identification and how that relates to how R/S they considered themselves.

- 88% of Chinese identified as None or Missing. Only 17% as Very or Somewhat Religious.
- Compare that with Thailand, where 96% of Thais identify as Buddhist, yet only 16% claim to be Very or Somewhat Religious. In other words, 88% of the Chinese identify as nothing and 94% of the Thais as Buddhist, 4/5 in both contexts say they are only 'slightly or not at all' religious.
- The situation was quite different in Vanuatu and Ghana, where the students were both highly Christian and 'somewhat to very' R/S.
- The US falls in the middle with almost 50% Christians and 28% Nones, and splitting 50/50 in terms of R/S.

If we leave out Vanuatu and Ghana and add in the Hardy study populations, we see some interesting patterns. [NEXT]

China, Thailand, the UK, US

MSI data, plus Yao & Badham data

Survey	CHINA RERO, n = 3198	CHINA MSP, n = 95	THAILAND MSP, n = 108	UK NPO 2001	US n = 104
Population	General China	Fudan University	Rajamangala University of Tech, Lanna	General UK	San Jose State
Religion Identification	None = 80% DNK = 12% Religious = 8%	None = 43% Other = 2% Missing = 45%	Buddhist = 98% Other = 2% None = 1% Missing = 1%	Christian = 72% Other = 5% None = 18%	Christian = 48% None = 22% Other = 11% Missing = 13%
R/S Very + Somewhat		17%	18%	8-7% church attendance	50%
Slightly + Not at All		83%	84%		50%

The left column adds in general data from China cited by Yao & Badham and data they cited from the British National Population Census in 2001. There are two things I'd like you to notice:

- First, 88% of Chinese who identified as None or Decline to Say in the our five country study is very similar to the 92% who identified as None or DNK in the General Population. So our MSP data is similar on that score to what we see in the general population.
- Second, some reviewers thought Yao & Badham's chapter comparing China and the UK was far-fetched b/c the East / West differences are so marked. But when we put Thailand in the picture, we see a pattern that looks quite similar to the UK and different from both China and the US.
- I'll return to these overall patterns when I interpret our data, but I want to look first at the data in light of the following questions. [NEXT]

Research Questions

- Reported Experiences Appraised as R/S: Of the experiences that participants reported having had (i.e., said yes), which did they most frequently appraise as R/S in China and in the other four countries? What does it mean to appraise an item as R/S in China?
- Significance: What experiences did participants report as most significant in China and the other four countries?

Top Five R/S Appraisals by Country

US Top five (0.4-0.75)
#03 Cluster 1 - guided by a power
#03 Cluster 2 - spirit
#07 Cluster 2 - presence of dead
#03 Cluster 2 - interacted with nonordinary forces/entities (led w #07)
#13 Cluster 5 - presence nonordinary forces/entities

Thailand Top five (0.25-0.5)
#07 Cluster 2 - presence of dead
#03 Cluster 5 - presence nonordinary forces/entities
#05 Cluster 6 - penalty
#03 Cluster 1 - guided by a power
#05 Cluster 2 - changes through thought

China R/S (0.0-0.5)
#13 Cluster 5 - presence nonordinary forces/entities 30%
#03 Cluster 2 - interacted with nonordinary forces/entities 14%
#03 Cluster 2 - spirit life 12%
#07 Cluster 2 - presence of dead 18%
#11 Cluster 2 - interacted with another world 28% (led w #07)

Ghana (0.25-0.75)
#05 Cluster 5 - perceived light w no ordinary cause
#03 Cluster 1 - guided by a power
#13 Cluster 5 - presence nonordinary forces/entities
#05 Cluster 1 - thoughts not my own
#04#04#02 (Cluster 7) led

Vanuatu (0.25-0.5)
#03 Cluster 1 - guided by a power
#03 Cluster 5 - peace, harmony, wholeness
#03 Cluster 2 - spirit
#05 Cluster 2 - changes through thought
#03 Cluster 1 - part of greater unity or oneness
#14 Cluster 6 - meaning and purpose (last three tied)

#13. I have sensed the presence of what seemed to be non-ordinary forces or entities. [US, Thailand, China, Ghana]

#02. I have had an experience of being sustained or guided by a power other than myself. [US, Thailand, Ghana]

#37. I have sensed the presence of, or interacted with, a person who was missing or dead. [US, China, Thailand]

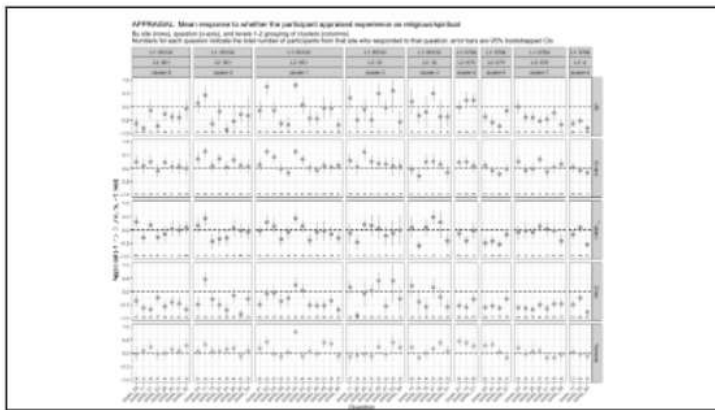
#52. I have seen light around a person for which there seemed to be no ordinary cause. [US, China, Vanuatu]

#39. I have interacted with what seemed to be non-ordinary forces or entities. [US, CHINA]

#38. I have had an experience in which it seemed that I caused changes in people or objects through the power of thought. [Thailand, Vanuatu]

- Describe LEFT SIDE: Colors code items that appear in the top five in more than one context. If we list the items that appear in the top five in more than one context, it looks like this [CLICK]
- SUM UP: Across the five contexts, it looks like presences, whether of forces, entities, or the dead, stand out in terms of what people consider S/R.
- If we look at the general pattern of responses, we see an interesting difference, however, between Vanuatu and Ghana and the other three countries. [NEXT SLIDE]

[Note: R/S: the highest scoring (relative to other items in its group) across all groups is (#40) 'mental healing' was confounded by having its appraisal (prayer) built into it.]



This chart shows the mean S/R appraisal of those who answered 'yes' to an experience for each country. The Experience Questions appear by number within clusters along the X-axis and the appraisal by country along the Y-axis. I realize this is small and hard to read. What I want you to notice is the pattern of dots in each country relative to the midline, where (0=unsure if its R/S, +1=yes, -1=no).

- US (blue green at top row), Thailand (blue in middle row), and China (violet in fourth row) all show a lot of variability around the midline.
- Ghana (second line, orange) and Vanuatu (bottom line, green) look different. Their responses don't range as widely and are mostly above the midline. Our data analyst, Kara Weisman, suggests we interpret this cautiously as it could be a 'yes bias' or an 'agreeability bias.'

So with all due caution, I want to suggest an interpretation that has implications for how we interpret what counts as R/S. [NEXT SLIDE]

What Counts as S/R? Ghana & Vanuatu

- In these two contexts there are hardly any 'no' answers. Most experiences are appraised between 'yes' and 'unsure.' This suggests that virtually all experiences can be appraised as S/R.
- In Ghana 78% and Vanuatu 79% consider themselves as somewhat to very religious or spiritual.
- Thus suggests: in highly religious and relatively homogeneous contexts, people may have a generally spiritualized worldview.

END This might correspond with what Hardy meant by "spirituality as a disposition." NEXT

What Counts as S/R? US, China, & Thailand

- In these three contexts, there is high variability, such that some experiences are appraised as R/S and others are definitely not.
- In China and Thailand only 17% and 16% (respectively) consider themselves somewhat or very religious or spiritual. In the US, participants were evenly split.
- They most often appraised these items as S/R
 - #13 Cluster 5 - presence nonordinary forces/entities - all three
 - #37 Cluster 2 - presence of dead - all three
 - #02 Cluster 1 - guided by a power - US and Thailand
 - #39 Cluster 3 - interacted with nonordinary forces/entities - US and China
- This suggests: in more secular, pluralistic, or nominally religious contexts, people are more likely to count **particular experiences (e.g.) of powers, forces, spirits, deities as S/R.**

- SLIDE FIRST
- If this finding holds up, it suggests that Hardy may have received so many reports of sudden, discrete experiences b/c the range of experiences appraised as R/S in more secular or nominally religious contexts tends to shrink.
- But what exactly is this telling us? What does it mean to appraise an experience as S/R in China?

R/S Translation: Chinese

Religious: 宗教性 *zongjiaoxing*, lit. religion-ous.

Yao & Zhao (2010, p. 28): "For the majority of contemporary Chinese, *zongjiao* is primarily perceived as a superstructure consisting of superstitions, dogmas, rituals and institutions."

Emily Ng: *Zongjiao* is "religion" in the modern sense: as a 19th century missionary/colonial-influenced neologism, it very clearly indicates "the religions"—Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and to a more ambivalent extent "popular religion".

Spiritual: 灵性 *lingxing*, lit. spirit-ual.

Yao & Zhao (2010, p. 203): use "spiritual" in English throughout *Chinese Religion*, but do not translate it into Chinese. They translate *ling* as "fairies, the numinous."

Emily Ng: *Ling* is "spirit, soul," and is used across popular Chinese religion (spirit entity, or the quality of spirit or spiritual efficacy of deities), Christianity (spirit). It's a nonmodern and modern term (e.g., heart-spirit *xinling* would be a usage that resonates with a spiritual-but-not-religious feeling, or secular-passing Buddhists), so is multiply "legible" in what it indicates.

- Here I am drawing both from Yao and Badham and from Yao and Zhao's textbook on Chinese Religion. Our translator, Emily Ng, and Yao agreed on the translation of religious and linked it with the official Chinese definitions of "religions."
- Yao & Zhao use "spiritual" in English through their book on *Chinese Religion* but do not translate it into Chinese there or in Yao and Badham.
- Emily Ng offered *ling*, which Yao translates as "fairies, the numinous," as a good translation of "spiritual." READ
- Rather than make claims about transcendence, we could think of this as pointing to a widespread human tendency to attribute agency to unseen forces and entities, as widely discussed in the CSR literature.
- But we need to ask a further question: Does the fact that people tended to appraise these experiences as S/R mean that they also viewed them as the most significant? [NEXT SLIDE]

Reported Significance and Valence

Reported as Very Significant in More than One Context

1.0=Very Significant, 0.5=Somewhat, 0=Not Significant

	Item	Freq	China R/S	RepSig
• #43 C9 – love or compassion [>0.75 China and Vanuatu, at 0.75 US, <0.75 Ghana & Thailand]. Valence – all positive.	#43	59%	-0.5	>0.75
• #14 C6 – meaning and purpose of life [>0.75 US, China & Thailand, 0.5 in Ghana, 0.0 Vanuatu]. Valence – US positive, rest about neutral	#14	45%	<-0.5	>0.75
• #41 C7 – loss [>0.75 US, at 7.5 in China, around 0.5 elsewhere]. Valence: very negative US & China, moderately negative Thailand, slightly negative Ghana & Vanuatu	#41	57%	<-0.5	0.75
• #15 C7 – insight (at 0.75 Ghana, Thailand, China, only slightly less US and Vanuatu). Valence – all positive.	#15	52%	<-0.5	0.75
• #37 C2 – presence of dead [>0.75 US, at 7.5 China, >0.5 Ghana, >0.5 Vanuatu, <0.5 Thailand]. Valence — US moderately positive (>0.25), others negative – China slightly (<-0.25), the rest moderately (-0.25)	#37	16%	<0.25	0.75

- It turns out the answer is no. If we look at experiences participants considered Very Significant (0.75 or greater), only one item from the most R/S list appears on this list (presence of the dead) and it is also a far less common experience than all the others (reported by 16% versus 45% or more for the others).
- Although what counts as most significant appears to vary quite a bit, finding meaning and purpose, sudden insight into fundamental issues, and love/compassion rate highly in 3/5 contexts.
- Loss and presence of the dead stand out as very significant in the US and China.
 - Loss is experienced as more negative in both the US and China than in the other contexts.
 - Presence of the dead is the only highly significant item regularly appraised as R/S. It tends to be appraised negatively everywhere but in the US.
- So what can we conclude from this? [NEXT]

Main Findings

- **What counts as R/S?** Across these contexts, experiences of presences, whether of forces, entities, or the dead, stand out in terms of what people consider S/R.
- **Types of Contexts.** This data suggests that there may be a difference between:
 - Contexts in which people are highly religious and open to appraising any experience as R/S to generate highly spiritualized worldviews, as in Ghana and Vanuatu
 - Contexts that are more secularized, pluralistic, and/or nonreligious where people are more likely to appraise specific experiences as R/S, e.g., China, Thailand, US, and UK.
- **How significant are such experiences in the general population relative to others?**
 - Experiences of the presence of the dead are highly significant in the US and China, but for the most part experiences that are widely appraised as R/S are not the most significant.
 - More common experiences, such as finding meaning and purpose, sudden insight into fundamental issues, loss, and love/compassion, seem to be viewed as the most significant.

Implications

1. We get a lot of useful information about the experiences that are *meaningful* to people, if we ask about significance, valence, and (presumably) effect on their lives *regardless of whether they consider them R/S*.
2. Operationalizing RE tends to presuppose that such experiences are the most important for people and precludes testing this assumption.
3. In an increasingly pluralistic world, we cannot simply operationalize RE but need measures that allow us to view experiences appraised as religious alongside others.

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