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Religion in China: Some Introductory Notes for the Intrepid Western Scholar

Eileen Barker

The relative opening up of China following the ‘Ten Lost Years’ of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) has offered Western sociologists of religion a fantastic opportunity to observe and learn about new (to us) ways of being religious (and of being not religious) within a particular kind of atheistic regime.¹ Those who are most likely to benefit from this opportunity are, obviously enough, sinologists who are familiar with the languages and understand the cultures of China. But this does not mean that scholars with little or no knowledge of China cannot learn much either directly or indirectly about its people and their religions. An exploration of China and its religions can, moreover, enrich the Western scholar’s perception of the religions with which they are more familiar by helping them to recognise what these religions are *not* – which can, perhaps paradoxically, help them to obtain a deeper understanding of what they *are*. As Kipling (1891) wrote: ‘And what should they know of England who only England know?’

This chapter begins with some introductory background information that I have found helpful as an orientation to the context within which religion is practiced in China. It then discusses a few basic methodological points concerning comparative approaches to the concept of religion. As a Western sociologist of religion, just about my only qualification for this endeavour, pressed upon me by the editors, is that I am *not* an expert. I do not speak the language and have spent no more than seven relatively short visits in the country. Yet, for this very reason, I have found myself on a steep learning curve, becoming aware of some of the issues and aspects of China and its culture that might be taken-for-granted by those better acquainted with the scene, and thus perhaps less likely to communicate such matters to those with little or no familiarity with the subject.

The Diversity of China’s History and Culture

Whilst Westerners have frequently been presented with a picture of Chinese conformity, an essential first step in understanding the country is to become aware of the enormous diversity of China’s peoples and its remarkable cultural history. Just as England can be represented in foreigners’ minds by Shakespeare, Princes Di, London buses, the Beatles, Manchester United and football hooligans, so can popular images symbolising China include Confucian scholars, the Great Wall, Panda bears, Mao Zedong – and, more recently, the pictures that swept around the world of the tanks and defiant students in Tiananmen Square, the great skyscrapers and smog of Beijing, and peasants in coolie hats toiling in the fields. But, just as there is far more to England, there is, of course, far, far more to China than these popular images could possibly convey.

The number of Chinese alone should alert us to the variety to be found within the Republic. Its 1.3 billion inhabitants account for around one fifth of the world’s population. Whilst the Han comprise by far the largest ethnic group (92 per cent), 55 other ethnic minorities are recognised and these total over a 100 million individuals. Each minority has its own language, and although Mandarin is the official language (except in Hong Kong and Macau), there are around 100 different indigenous languages belonging to six language families, most of which are mutually unintelligible. Further complexity results from the existence of the largely self-governing ‘special administrative’ territories of Hong Kong² and Macau,³ and the existence of the Republic of China (ROC).⁴

The extensiveness of Chinese demography is more than matched by the richness of its history. Contemporary China has developed out of one of the oldest continuing civilizations in the world. Half a million or so years ago Peking man was, at least according to some archaeologists, using tools and fire. The written history of China dates back to the Shang Dynasty during the second millennium BCE with the introduction of one of the world’s oldest writing systems. The Terracotta Army bears witness to the sophistication of the recently unified China in the early third century BCE, as does the construction of the Great Wall. Joseph Needham’s voluminous tomes (1954+), *Science and Civilisation in China*, testify not only to the remarkable accomplishments of Chinese science and technology from the Confucian era

¹ In this chapter, ‘religion’ will be used very loosely to refer to almost any phenomenon that might be considered ‘religious’ by either Westerners or Chinese.

² The British returned Hong Kong to the Chinese People’s Republic in 1997.

³ The Portuguese handed Macau back in 1999.

⁴ The ROC consists of Taiwan (formerly known as Formosa) and a few other small islands to the south-east of the Chinese mainland.

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through the middle ages and beyond, but also to the pervasive influences of Chinese religions and philosophy on the rest of the society throughout the various dynasties.⁵

The Diversity of China's Religions

It was about 500 BCE that Confucius was elucidating a moral, social and political philosophy that has influenced and continues to influence the lives of millions in China and elsewhere.⁶ Some time during the first or second centuries BCE, Buddhism was introduced to China, and throughout the ensuing millennia various schools of Buddhism have been fed into the culture at all levels of the society. Taoism (sometimes written in English as Daoism), which is frequently referred to as the third main 'religion' of China, also emerged during the first few centuries CE out of various traditions and beliefs that were to be found in ancient China. As with all the great religions, Buddhism and Taoism are found in diverse forms, and numerous different schools, sects, and 'heresies' are to be found throughout contemporary China.

Perhaps one of the most important observations that can be made about Chinese religiosity is that Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are not necessarily 'either/or' religions. It is by no means uncommon for individual Chinese to identify themselves to a greater or lesser degree with all three of these traditions, whilst incorporating various aspects of what is sometimes generically known as Chinese Folk Religion. Westerners familiar with the more exclusivist religions of the Abrahamic tradition might be forgiven for assuming there would be a relatively straight-forward answer to the question 'To which religion do you belong?' But they would be mistaken in such an assumption.

Of course, Western sociologists of religion are not unfamiliar with syncretistic religions. They may, for example, be familiar with Candomblé, which incorporates veneration of the Virgin Mary with veneration of Yoruba Orishas, and/or with the Ecumenical Ministry of the Unity of All Religions and some of the other innovative spiritual and religious movements that cluster around Ojai in California. The situation is, however, considerably more complicated and more widespread when one contemplates the diversity to be found within the kaleidoscope of Chinese folk religions, which can encompass elements of shamanism, animism, divination, fortune telling, alchemy, astrology, traditional medicine, martial arts, feng shui, and ancestor worship, and which can be manifest in all manner of rituals, festivals and other public and private celebrations.

Traditional Chinese religiosity may not embrace the One God of the Abrahamic traditions, but this certainly does not mean that supernatural beings are not venerated and/or worshipped. These entities may take the form of deities, saints, immortals, trees, animals (the Chinese dragon is particularly important) and other aspects of nature, fairies, spirits, demons or ghosts, the latter occupying a special place between humans and the pantheons of assorted gods. But whilst Western sociologists of religion have recently become more conscious of some varieties of polytheistic and pantheistic beliefs through studies of the New Age, Paganism and Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism (and, to a lesser extent, Shinto) that have migrated to the West, they should be wary of assuming that such beliefs are interchangeable with those to be found in China, even when similar words for the various entities are used in translation.⁷

However, just as it would be a mistake to assume the religious scene in China is fundamentally similar to that found in the West, it would be equally mistaken to assume that the Chinese religious scene was fundamentally *different* from that in the West. Sociologists of religion have become increasingly aware of the many ways in which their subject matter can no longer be limited by the confines of conventional, institutionalised religion. It is, for example, not uncommon today for Westerners (particularly young Westerners) to claim that they are 'spiritual, but not religious' although exactly what they mean by this is by no means fully understood by sociologists – or, perhaps, even by those describe themselves thus (Barker 2008). Comparative analyses with data from anthropological, ethnographic and historical studies have alerted us to much of the ethnocentrism (and, often, Christo-centrism) of Western sociology of religion, and

⁵ Sommer (1995) provides an introductory reader of texts covering a wide range of religious and philosophical works from antiquity to the modern era.

⁶ A record of his sayings and actions is reputed to be written down in *The Analects of Confucius*.

⁷ Sometimes there is no obvious equivalent, as in the case of the 'place god' or *Tudi gong*, whose powers are restricted to a particular location, such as a home, or a street or bridge. This god, who is subject to the city god or spiritual magistrate, might be an historical person who has become deified, having been beneficial during his lifetime, but who can be cursorily replaced should his benefits no longer be apparent.

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an increasingly globalised world has brought more vividly to our attention the enormous range of ways in which human beings can be religious.

From the Silk Road to the Internet

Eastern civilizations have, of course, influenced and been influenced by Western civilizations since – and before – the times of the Silk Road(s) (Foltz 1999). Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have all been on Chinese soil for well over a millennium, with successive waves of missionaries bringing not only their respective Truths, but also (for better and for worse) other influences through trade and Western education. Jehovah's Witnesses first set foot in China in the 1880s (Barrett 2001: 195), and other nineteenth-century sects, such as the Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists, have now been joined by a host of newer religious movements, although most of these have tended to keep themselves hidden as far as possible from the authorities.

But the traffic has not just been in one direction. Westerners can observe colourful aspects of oriental religion in the China Towns of London, Melbourne, Chicago or Paris, where Buddhist temples and shrines to the ancestors have been erected, and dragon and lion dances are performed each Chinese New Year. There are also Chinese immigrants who have established their own, Chinese, churches (Yang 1999). And there are the Chinese missionaries who, having concluded that Christianity needs a revival, are not only evangelising their Christianity throughout China, but are also re-importing to the West the beliefs that they or their ancestors first learned from Western missionaries (Cao, N. 2007; Chan 2006). Furthermore, the West has been the recipient of a steady flow of new religious movements that originated in the East, the greatest numbers being from India but some from Japan, Vietnam, or Korea, and yet others from Taiwan and mainland China.⁸

Painting with a broader brush, there are Western scholars who write about the Easternization of the West, pointing to a motley array of beliefs, philosophies and concepts that have infiltrated North America and Western Europe, radically changing their character over the past decades (Campbell 2007; Heelas (2008). And, indeed, it is not difficult to see Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist elements that have found their place in the religious and spiritual supermarkets of contemporary Western society. Such imports may become incorporated into already existing belief systems or they may just exist 'out there' in the 'cultic milieu' as a resource to be drawn upon as and when wanted (Campbell 1972). Concepts such as reincarnation or the complementarity of yin and yang, which were utterly alien to all but a few Westerners less than half a century ago, are now common-place elements in the vocabulary of many and the *Weltanschauungen* of several.⁹ Exactly how extensively such a process of Easternization is indeed taking place is open to question, but it is undoubtedly a question worth pondering. It is, however, possible that the 'Eastern sacred canopy' depicted by such authors is not quite as uniformly experienced in the East as is sometimes supposed.

The Political Context

For many it might seem that the most obvious differences between the ways in which religion is practised in the West and in China lie in the different political contexts. Important incidents that have affected China and its current position both internally and in relation to the rest of the world, particularly Christendom, were the Opium Wars¹⁰ and the Taiping¹¹ and Boxer Rebellions,¹² which have been said to have

⁸ Movements from Taiwan that have a high profile in the West include the True Buddha School, and those from the PRC include the New Kadampa Tradition and Falun Gong.

⁹ The European Values Survey found around a quarter of respondents claimed to believe in reincarnation – interestingly, many of these also said they believed in the resurrection of the body.

¹⁰ In 1839 the Chinese government confiscated 20,000 chests of opium from British merchants (who had been trying to compensate for a growing trade deficit by exporting opium from British India), and terminated trade between the two countries. This resulted in the Anglo-Chinese or Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860), which the Chinese lost, resulting in the imposition of the 'Unequal Treaties' which forced the Chinese into various trade concessions ceding territory such as Hong Kong to Britain.

¹¹ The Taiping Rebellion (1850-64) was a peasant rebellion led by Hung Xiuquan, who combined Protestant Christianity with ancient Chinese beliefs to establish the 'Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace'. Eventually the rebels were defeated by the Imperial forces, but not before 20 million had lost their lives. Ninian Smart (1983: 149) has commented that 'The problems of the Taipings were brilliantly solved in Maoism as a new religion to replace the older traditions of the Central Kingdom'.

¹² The Boxers were a secret society, practiced in the martial arts and opposed to the interference and influence of foreigners, particularly from the West. The Boxer Uprising (1899-1901), which led to the massacre of hundreds of Western missionaries and thousands of Chinese Christians and the destruction of foreign property, was eventually quashed largely through the intervention of the 'great powers', including Britain, Germany, Italy, Japan and the USA.

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contributed to the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, putting an end to dynastic China. Other international confrontations that have undoubtedly had an effect on the culture and religion of China during the past century or so include various conflicts with Japan,¹³ and the Second World War;¹⁴ but there can be little doubt that amongst the most significant events in China's recent history have been the replacement of the Qing Dynasty by the Republic of China in 1911,¹⁵ the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, and the Long March(es) of the Red Army that resulted in the ascendance of Mao Zedong (1893-1976) and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Then there was the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which, as well as involving the widespread persecution of the 'enemies of the people', resulted in the destruction of temples, monasteries, churches and mosques by the Red Guards, whilst severely undermining ancient Chinese culture and attempting to stamp out all forms of religion.

Despite the fact that the political situation in China has become considerably more relaxed about religious matters, the fact that the PRC remains an atheistic one-party state obviously affects the ways in which religion can be experienced – and how it might be understood by Westerners. The 1978 Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and since the mid-1980s the government has supported recognised religions in a variety of ways by, for example, sanctioning the rebuilding of numerous temples, promoting ventures such as World Buddhists Forums and an International Forum on the Dao De Jing,¹⁶ and forbidding the mining of Buddhist mountains. Five religions are officially recognized by the state: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. However, by no means all manifestations of these religions are recognized. For example, the *Roman Catholic Church* is banned in China,¹⁷ and the state robustly denounces the Dalai Lama.¹⁸

The precise position of those religions that are not recognized is difficult for the Chinese, let alone the Westerner, to understand. Several unrecognized religions manage to operate quite openly and freely in the PRC. Some of these actually co-operate with (usually regional or local) branches of the state, sometimes providing educational facilities and other charitable contributions. Other religions are explicitly outlawed. Fenggang Yang (2006: 97) has referred to this tripartite division as red (officially permitted religions), black (officially banned religions) and gray (religions with an ambiguous legal/illegal status).

The Westerner may initially find it curious that an atheistic state is involved in the appointment of priests in the 'patriotic' Catholic Church, and that it selected the eleventh Panchen Lama in 1995,¹⁹ after the Dalai Lama had identified a different child. This apparently paradoxical juxtaposition of secularity and religious involvement would seem to be related to the PRC's attempts to ensure that its citizens' activities are not influenced by foreign powers. Making no distinction between temporal and spiritual loyalty, the government cannot risk Catholics turning to the Pope or Tibetans to the Dalai Lama for spiritual guidance as, it is feared, this could signify disloyalty to the Chinese state. However, it is not only fear of the influence of foreign or multi-national religions that affects the government's reactions to religions (widely defined). Any organisation that can mobilise a sizable number of its members independently of the state can be seen as a potential threat. An obvious example here is the Falun Gong movement, which was outlawed in July 1999 shortly after ten thousand practitioners had gathered for a protest in Beijing in April of that year. Branded as an evil cult, its members now have to undergo a regime of 're-education' by the state (Ministry of Civil Affairs 1999: 1; Ownby 2008: ch.6; Palmer 2007: 266-77).

Religious Practices in Contemporary China

Attempting to assess the extent of religiosity or exactly who is religious is not a problem unique to China,²⁰ but there do seem to be some factors that complicate the situation in China. It would certainly be foolhardy

¹³ Of particular note are the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5 and Japan's seizure of Manchuria in 1931.

¹⁴ China had sided with the Allies during the First World War, but, more crucially, had fought with them in World War II against the Japanese, who had been carrying out invasions on Chinese territory for some time.

¹⁵ It is now Taiwan that refers to itself as the ROC.

¹⁶ The Daodejing (also translated as the Tao Te Ching) is traditionally believed to have been written around the sixth century BC by Lao Tse (Laozi) and is central to the thought of Taoism (and other facets of Chinese culture).

¹⁷ The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association has oversight of the Chinese Catholic churches, which are required to renounce the primacy of the Pope in Rome.

¹⁸ Possessing an image of the Dalai Lama is a criminal offence in Tibet.

¹⁹ The Panchen Lama is the second highest ranking Lama after the Dalai Lama in the Gelugpa (Gelug) sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

²⁰ In the English/Welsh 2001 Census, 72 per cent of respondents reported that they were Christians, yet less than 8 per cent attend church on a weekly basis – and 390,127 respondents (0.7 per cent of the population) claimed that they were Jedi Knights.

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to accept the first statistics that one chances upon. An official publication stated in 2001 that ‘More than 100 million Chinese people have acknowledged religious beliefs’ (New Star 2001: 80); various other sources suggest that several hundreds of millions more could be considered religious. Some of the confusion is undoubtedly due to the fact that there have been state restrictions on academic research, and it is not altogether surprising that ‘underground’ religions are reluctant to disclose their membership to approved investigators.²¹ A general suspicion of the government can result in surveys being unreliable, with low response rates, and conclusions frequently being drawn from non-random samples.²² But there is also the problem of the *kinds* of religion that predominate in China. Although there are certainly plenty of festivals and other celebrations, Eastern religions tend not to hold regular services on a weekly basis in the ways that Jews and Christians may on their respective Sabbaths. Nor do Buddhists, Taoists and Confucians belong to congregations in the ways that members of the Abrahamic faiths belong to synagogues, churches and mosques.²³ And, as mentioned earlier, it is not uncommon for the Chinese to identify themselves with two or more religions.²⁴

Turning from statistics to a more qualitative approach, Westerners who are fortunate enough to visit China may find themselves somewhat bemused by the bustle, the smoke and the smell of the incense in shrines and temples as they observe, without exactly understanding, spirit-writing on trays of sand; fortune tellers and diviners busy at trestle-tables; altars crowded with offerings of flowers, oranges, plucked chickens, and cans of beer; walls covered with the names and photographs of departed relatives; stalls where one can purchase goods for their comfort in the after-life – and the glowing furnaces in which one can burn the ‘spirit/ghost money’, the paper clothes and papier-mâché cars and houses. The visitor might well find such scenes both strange and exotic – yet, at the same time, be struck by the apparent ‘ordinariness’ of the rituals for the worshippers, who pop in, almost casually it seems, on their way to and from the market, in stark contrast to the atmosphere of solemn sacredness or ‘holiness’ one might experience in, say, a European cathedral.

Attending a Christian service is likely to seem more familiar to Westerners. If invited to attend a House Church meeting they could, however, be wrong to expect a visit to a private home with a few believers gathered together and strumming a guitar.²⁵ They could instead find themselves in a spacious room housing 200 or so in a large office block. They might be told that the congregation consists of Evangelical Christians, but the service is unlikely to replicate either the ‘happy-clappy’ scenes of Western Pentecostalism or the exuberant enthusiasms of the African churches. Attending a Chinese church can be somewhat like attending a Presbyterian service in the West. The (mainly young) members of the congregation are neatly, though not elaborately, dressed and while they exhibit an obvious commitment, this is contained and orderly.

In other words, a first impression of public displays of the Chinese ‘doing religion’ (be it congregational Christianity or visits to a traditional temple) might suggest that this is not as separated from daily life, or as ‘special’ as much of Western religiosity would frequently appear to be.²⁶ The visitor would, however, be

²¹ Jehovah’s Witnesses, who are generally well-known for not only the accuracy but also the openness and comprehensiveness of their world-wide statistical data, have reportedly ‘stated, without elaborating, that it would be imprudent to disclose information about the number of Jehovah’s Witnesses and congregations in China, or about their geographical representation across the country.’ It should be added that they also stated that they were not aware of any arrests or detention of Witnesses in China (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2006).

²² In random samples each member of the population being investigated has an equal chance of being selected. Because non-random samples can draw on a biased selection of respondents, they are liable to provide information that is both incorrect and misleading.

²³ It might, however, be noted that a trend towards ‘believing without belonging’ has been remarked upon in the West (Davie 1994).

²⁴ But even ‘reliable sources’ about the number of Christians can vary enormously: An official publication in 2001 stated that Chinese Protestants had exceeded 10 million and Chinese Catholics four million (New Star 2001: 80-81); an officially approved website states that there are six million (Christian) believers in China http://wiki.china.org.cn/wiki/index.php/Christianity_in_China/ [last modified 5 August 2001]; a western journalist wrote in 2003 that ‘the number of Christian believers in China, both Catholic and Protestant, may be closer to 80 million than the official ... figure of 21 million’ (Aikman 2003:21); I have been informed by Church leaders that the figure is currently (2010) thought to exceed 100 million.

²⁵ House Churches are those Christian churches that are not recognised by the PRC. Official Christian Churches include recognised coalitions such as the China Christian Council, the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (Protestant churches who adopt the principles of self-governance, self-support (financial independence from foreigners) and self-propagation (indigenous missionary work)).

²⁶ I was given a somewhat different experience of Chinese ‘religiosity’ when a Chinese government official whom I had met previously in London took me to a night club in Beijing. My surprise was prompted not so much by the fact that the entertainment

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well advised to seek explanations from Chinese speakers and to read as much as possible about what might be going on. It is all too easy for Westerners to impute the wrong meaning to actions performed by fellow Westerners – how much more likely are they to make mistakes about what is happening in an unfamiliar culture.²⁷

Religious Concepts and Concepts of Religion

To repeat, the very concept of religion is a tricky one. As social animals and as scientists we need concepts to organize the natural and social worlds – a language of some kind is necessary for us to make sense of what we see, hear, taste, touch and smell, and necessary for us to communicate with each other and, indeed, with ourselves. But *how* we cut up the world – *where* we draw the boundaries that unite certain phenomena and separate these from other phenomena – is arbitrary, or at least relative to the social situation in which the boundary-drawing is executed (Douglas 1966). Those who inhabit different communities can use different sounds and signs, but they might also organise the world in different ways; and not only can the positioning of boundaries vary, the boundaries themselves can differ according to the strength with which they are drawn, and their degree of permeability and/or negotiability (Douglas 1970).²⁸ Furthermore, because moving a boundary from one position to another can result in significant consequences, those with a vested interest in the *status quo* will fight hard to preserve existing distinctions and prevent the introduction of change.

So far as the concept of religion is concerned, there can be advantages and disadvantages to being recognised as a religion. The law and its administrators may juggle with definitions of religion so as to include popular or powerful religions whilst excluding smaller, less powerful and less popular religions, which may be referred to as new religious movements, cults or sects (Richardson 2004). In the West, millions of dollars have hung in the balance, depending on whether or not the status of 'religion' has been officially (legally) sanctioned. The Church of Scientology, which is not obviously a religion (at least according to some definitions which could also exclude some forms of Buddhism), has fought in the courts to prove that it is a religion and thereby eligible for tax concessions (High Court of Australia 1983).²⁹ Conversely, Transcendental Meditation has fought to prove it is *not* a religion so it could be taught in US prisons and public schools (Scott 1978: 5-6).

In the belief that what was true about the 'elementary forms of the religious life' would be true about more complex religions, the French sociologist, Émile Durkheim, incorporated both functional and substantive components into what he hoped could be a definitive definition of religion.³⁰ It is, however, questionable whether his definition is all that useful when considering Chinese religions. First, when he defined religion as:

a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them (Durkheim 1915: 47),

it is not clear that what we might want to call religious beliefs and practices always function to unite adherents into one single moral community (whether or not it is called a Church). Secondly, it is not clear that, for the Chinese,

The division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought (ibid: 37).

When social scientists indicate what a word means they may be *reporting* what *others* mean by the word, or they may be *stipulating* what *they* are going to mean by it (Hospers 1956: 32-3). *Reportive definitions* are accounts of what the people who are being studied mean by (or how they use) a particular concept.

included a scantily clad lady dancing with a large python, as by the fact that alcoholic drinks were flowing freely and the club was owned, I was told, by devout Muslims from a region in the north-west of the country.

²⁷ According to Max Weber (1947: 88), understanding the subjective meaning attached to action is, definitionally, at the very core of the sociological enterprise.

²⁸ A frequently drawn distinction is that between the complementarity of the yin and yang in Chinese thought as opposed to dualistic distinctions of Western thought.

²⁹ The complexity of the situation was illustrated by Bryan Wilson (1989: chapter 13) listing 20 different characteristics, some, but not all, of which, he argued, would have to be present for a movement to qualify as a religion. He found eleven of these clearly present in Scientology, five clearly absent, and the presence of the remaining four characteristics arguable.

³⁰ Substantive definitions, declare what a religion *is* (belief in a Supreme Deity, for example); functional definitions, assert what the religion *does* (such as providing answers to questions of ultimate concern) (McGuire 1992: 9-15).

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Stipulative definitions, on the other hand, are among the methodological tools of sociologists; these can be *more or less useful* (rather than more or less true) in helping us to discover and describe what the social world is like; they are not making a statement about reality or even about what anyone else means by religion, they are simply stipulating how the concept will be used. Obviously enough, if scholars are asking questions using a concept in either an interview or a questionnaire, or if they are observing behaviour where the concept is being used by the subjects under study, then there must be a shared understanding of the meaning of the concept.

I first became aware of the extent to which there could be a gap between Western and Oriental understandings of religion when, in Hanoi, a member of the Vietnamese government's Committee for Religious Affairs told me that the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese did not have any religion. When, in surprise, I mentioned several beliefs and practices (such as ancestor worship and burial rituals) that seemed to be common to most Vietnamese, I was told that these were nothing to do with religion – these were part of Vietnamese culture. My immediate reaction was that this was the result of a communist ideology that had to redefine religion into something else in order to paint a picture more in keeping with an atheistic regime. Once I started visiting China, however, it became increasingly apparent it had not been the official but I who needed to recognise that what Westerners called religion could, and perhaps should, legitimately be referred to as culture rather than religion.

To elaborate this point, let us take as an example the concept of the after-life. A central component of traditional Chinese culture is the belief that the living and the dead co-exist. This, together with the teachings of filial piety associated with Confucius and Lao Tse,³¹ implies not only that elders, particularly parents, are to be respected, heeded and cared for during their lives, but also that they should be respected, heeded and cared for following their death. Descendents are traditionally expected to install an altar in their home in front of which they can pay homage to their ancestors each day.³² In short, one's ancestors, including one's parents and grandparents, are venerated as if they were still living – and this is an integral part of every-day culture, not merely an aspect of institutionalized, organized religion.

Yet, for sociologists of religion, ancestor worship can be a legitimate part of their subject matter, and they can learn much through exploring the different salience that apparently similar concepts can have for believers in different social contexts. The Confucian concept of Heaven (*Tian*) is not like the Christian concept of Heaven. For the Chinese, Heaven can be conceived as an omniscient entity, endowed with personality but no corporeal form. Earth (the 'Middle Kingdom') may be subject to the 'Mandate of Heaven', but this is not as a discrete belief attached to a particular religious dogma; it is, rather, an integral part of a culture – not so much *a* world view as a *this-world-and-the-other-world* view.

Not that one can completely divorce ideas about the influences of heaven on earth from the Western civilizations. It is possible to recognise *some* similarities with the images evoked by the sculptures of the Parthenon, the painted churches of Northern Moldavia, or the Sistine Chapel. The Lord's Prayer (*Pater Noster*), which is repeated in millions of homes and churches throughout Christendom on a daily basis contains the words 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6: 10); and there can be no doubt that many religions practised in the West hold firm to the conviction that their lives are strongly influenced by what is happening in the Christian heaven, the Islamic Paradise, or some kind of spirit world (Beverly 2005; Nelson 1969). Nonetheless, it could be argued that these beliefs are not as 'ordinary' or common-place for contemporary Westerners as they are for contemporary Chinese – in the West they are more likely to be found within a religious package, whilst in China they are more frequently found as part of the every-day, taken-for-granted culture.

Recognising the different ways in which members of different religions and cultures understand and cut up their worlds is difficult enough, but sometimes further, avoidable, problems are introduced through methodological errors (Barker 1995; 2007). The rest of this chapter is devoted to pointing to some of these

³¹ Lao Tse (Laozi, Lao-Tzu, Lao-Tsu) was a philosopher who may have lived in the sixth century BCE and who is revered as a deity in most forms of Taoism. He is said to have written the *Tao Te Ching*, a book that is not only fundamental to Taoism but has also influenced other aspects of Chinese religions and culture.

³² It is also the custom to pay tribute to ancestors on occasions such as the Ghost Festival on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar.

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unnecessary mistakes which can be found in both Western and Chinese accounts of religion, concentrating particularly on 'religion' and related concepts.

As a fairly basic principle, if a stipulative definition is to be acceptable for scientific research, it needs to be operationalizable. That is, the content of the definition has to be empirically recognizable so that other scientists could check the presence or absence of the phenomenon in question. Defining a religious person as someone who is filled with the Holy Spirit may be appropriate for a theologian, but not for the social scientist concerned with finding out what happens to be the case, but which could be empirically shown to be otherwise.³³ Having no means of judging the truth or falsity of theological claims, sociologists of religion have to be methodologically agnostic; they cannot use supernatural beings as independent variables in their explanation. Thus, the President of the China Christian Council may refer to movements such as the Disciple Union, the Anointed King, the Lord God, and Eastern Flash as heretical destructive cults and, as such, 'the biggest hindrance to the development of Christianity in China' (Cao 2009: 204). But when she declares that:

Religions have the obligatory responsibility to resist cults through training believers with correct doctrine, to protect them from the harmful heretical teachings and activities [and] Academia should pay more attention to investigate and study heresies, and to guide public opinion' (Cao, S-j. 2007: 238),

those who share her theological position may agree, but social scientists would be stepping beyond the confines of their disciplinary expertise were they to obey her injunction.

Relatedly, scientists should not prejudge an outcome by defining one or more of their key variables so that they assume, as part of the definition, a characteristic later claimed to be a *discovery*. Thus, if religion is *defined* as the belief in a supreme being, we are not learning anything if we are told it has been found that religious people believe in God. Sometimes it is assumed that a group *cannot* be a religion because of some of its characteristics. For example, one of the PRC's officially sanctioned publications claims that it has been proved that Falun Gong 'is not a religious organization at all, as they seduced people, amassed dirty money and killed people' (Jia 1999:5). It is, however, likely that there would be very few groups that could be called 'a religion' were they to be excluded on the grounds of proselytising, getting rich and/or killing people. Certainly none of China's officially recognised religions would pass the test.

Cults, Sects and Xiejiao

As mentioned earlier, Falun Gong has been officially labelled as an evil cult. Although there are several technical definitions of the terms 'cult' and 'sect' in the sociological tradition (McGuire 2002, chapter 5; Stark and Bainbridge 1987: 328), these have come to be understood as pejorative terms in popular parlance, so sociologists of religion resorted in the 1970s to employing the more neutral term 'new religious movement' (Barker 2004; Melton 2004).³⁴ Enquirers contacting INFORM frequently want to know whether a particular movement is a 'genuine religion' or a 'cult'.³⁵ Despite the fact that it may sound, even to the enquirer, that the request is for purely factual information, describing a group as a 'cult' can reveal more about the speaker's subjective approval or disapproval than about any properties of the movement itself. In the context of Chinese scholarship, the term 'sect' was abandoned by ter Haar (1999: 12) because, he argued, it was so closely linked to existing negative views of the White Lotus Teachings that its use would risk the automatic adoption of many of the assumptions that he was actually investigating, and, thereby, prejudice his conclusions.³⁶

The Chinese word *xiejiao*, often translated as 'destructive cult' or 'evil sect', is associated with similarly negative overtones. More precisely, the concept can be translated as heterodox (*xie*) teachings (*jiao*). Originally it was applied to *teachings* that were opposed to the correct (*zheng*) teachings of Confucianism, but was later used as a label for *groups* of persons following such teachings and/or behaving in a manner perceived as threatening by the labeller.³⁷ It has been argued, however, that whilst the English word 'cult' is used to imply a movement or group is in tension with ecclesiastical or denominational religion, *xiejiao* is

³³ 'The criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability' (Popper 1963: 37).

³⁴ In French, *culte* is used to refer to respected religions, with the term *secte* being reserved for religions disapproved of by the speaker.

³⁵ More information about Inform (Information Network Focus On Religious Movements) can be found at www.Inform.ac

³⁶ The term 'White Lotus' has been used to refer to certain monks and lay Buddhists as far back as the fifth century, but it later became a derogatory label applied to a number of sectarian organisations.

³⁷ An early example was the Yellow Turbans, a secret Taoist sect involved in a peasant uprising in 184 CE.

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now more related to a political category, and its meaning of harming social stability is far wider than the cult's meaning of distorting religious doctrine. In other words, *xiejiao* has now moved beyond the historical concept to become 'a modern legal concept with operability' associated with the aim of cracking down on 'the criminal behaviours of destructive cult[s]' (Xi 2007: 159-161). The baggage that the concept carries in the state's official definition is evident in Article I of the Interpretation of article 300 of China's Criminal Law, which states that *xiejiao*, an 'evil religious organization', refers to illegal organizations that are set up using religions, Qigong or other things as a camouflage, deify their leading members, and confuse, poison and deceive people, recruit and control their members, and endanger the society by fabricating and spreading superstitious heresies (Qu 2007: 320).

Falun Gong itself says that it is 'an ancient practice' that includes qigong exercises and meditation, the object of which is 'refining the body and mind, moral and spiritual elevation in accordance with the universal principles of Truthfulness, Compassion and Forbearance'.³⁸ Its founder, Li Hongzhi (1998), and its representatives have insisted that Falun Gong is neither a religion nor a cult, let alone a *xiejiao* (Xie and Zhu 2004), but, reading through Falun Gong's literature and its websites, one may detect a certain ambiguity over the extent to which it might be classifiable as a religion, and there have been detailed discussions by Western social scientists on the shifting challenges involved in its classification (Ownby 2008; Palmer 2007). When reading official PRC literature, however, what might strike one is the variety of ways in which dubious methodological means are used to demonstrate the movement's iniquity.³⁹

Sometimes claims are made that the view that Falun Gong is an evil cult is endorsed by universally acknowledged authorities, without always identifying these authorities.⁴⁰ Sometimes the movement is damned through 'guilt by association'. Several articles have, for example, drawn attention to the collective suicides and/or murders of the People's Temple, the Branch Davidians, the Solar Temple and Heaven's Gate, and the release of gas by Aum Shinrikyo members (Ji et al 1999: I, 26; II, 38; IV, 4) in attempts to demonstrate that Falun Gong is similarly dangerous, despite the fact that it has remarkably little in common with these movements.⁴¹

It is not difficult to find assertions such as: 'The followers of a cult are re-educated, have their brains washed and start with a clean slate' (Zhen Yan 1999: 2). A metaphor such as 'brainwashing' is not, however, a scientifically acceptable term – no one has removed the brain of a cult member and then washed it; and no adult convert has been known to start with a totally clean slate after 're-education'. Furthermore, one might enquire whether the process of re-education can be applied equally to universities, cults and/or correction centres? The same process might be called brainwashing by one person but conversion or education by another. The term selected frequently seems to reflect the speaker's evaluation of the *end state* of the process, rather than the *process that produces* that state.

The concept of brainwashing was first introduced by an American journalist (Hunter 1951) as a translation of *hsi nao* (wash brain) to describe Chinese indoctrination techniques at the time of the Communist takeover, but soon became employed to describe influences ranging from the training of the US Marines to every-day advertising slogans. Then, from the 1960s, research by a Harvard psychiatrist, Robert J. Lifton (1961), into 'brainwashing' in China was taken up by anxious and confused parents to explain why their children were joining new religious movements – especially those that had originated in the East. A number of the parents, persuaded that their (adult) child had been subjected to irresistible and irreversible brainwashing techniques, hired 'deprogrammers' to kidnap the convert from movements such as the Unification Church, whose members were dubbed as 'Moonies' after their Korean founder, Sun Myung Moon (Barker 1989: 101-10;157-164).⁴² However, although Lifton's study usefully illuminates a number of persuasive techniques employed by the Chinese communists, its overly simple application by some

³⁸ <http://www.falungong.org.uk/> [accessed 18 February 2010]. See also Li (1998).

³⁹ It is not being argued here that Falun Gong is either a religion or a cult, nor that it is either a 'good' or a 'bad' movement. Merely that non-scientific arguments have been employed in presenting such conclusions.

⁴⁰ The most influential 'cult-watching group' in America issued a statement in 2004: "reports in the Chinese press and elsewhere that AFF [ICSA] has branded Falun Gong a cult are false, as are reports that AFF [ICSA] has said Falun Gong is *not* a cult" (Langone 2007: 237).

⁴¹ One obvious difference is that Falun Gong practitioners have not committed mass suicide or poisoned innocent commuters. Other, possibly less obvious, differences include the fact that members of the 'suicide cults' lived together in tightly controlled communities.

⁴² Although hundreds of 'victims' were forcibly deprogrammed between the 1970s and 1980s, this illegal practice has only rarely occurred in the West since the mid-1990s, but it has continued, albeit increasingly contentiously, in Japan (Antal 2003).

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commentators to the process of conversion into the new religions is tenuous. Research has shown that only one in ten of those who went through the Unification Church's so-called brainwashing process actually converted to the movement; and of those who did join, the majority had left the movement of their own free will within two years (Barker 1984; Galanter 1980). Furthermore, the vast majority of the first cohort of second-generation Unificationists, despite being brought up and socialised in the movement, have now left it. In other words, contrary to widespread claims, the process of recruitment into Unificationism is clearly neither irresistible nor irreversible.⁴³ This is not to say that 'undue influence' may not be brought to bear in certain circumstances, but it is necessary to be more precise in distinguishing between 'normal' and 'undue' influence – after all, almost by definition, social life involves influence of one kind or another in almost every interaction.⁴⁴

Occasionally a control group might not be as representative of the 'normal' as is implied. In a study that is interesting from a number of perspectives, the Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, organised a specialised 'Mental Control Research Group' to investigate 'the reasons for practicing 'Falun Gong', its influences upon its practitioners, and measures for helping them out of the evil cult' (Wenzhon et al 2007: 282).⁴⁵ One of their conclusions was that Falun Gong 'influences its practitioners' brain waves, weakening their mental response to normal stimulations while strengthening their brain activity with 'Falun Gong'-related stimulations (ibid: 295). Some social scientists might be surprised to learn not only that the research started from the conclusion that Falun Gong was an 'evil cult', but also that the method involved the comparison of 15 Falun Gong practitioners who had 'already transformed'⁴⁶ with, as a control group, 15 judicial policemen who had been 'engaged in watching and educating law-breaking 'Falun Gong' practitioners for over four years' (ibid: 286).

As in the West, a number of inaccuracies arise because the comparative method, which lies at the very basis of *all* science, has not been employed and, as a result, the incorrect generalisations have been drawn from perfectly accurate accounts of specific behaviours. It is, for example, a fallacy to assume, because all members of a class exhibit a particular characteristic, that this is a characteristic peculiar to that class when, were a comparison made with a control group,⁴⁷ it might be discovered that the characteristic in question is related to a larger population and has nothing to do with the group *per se*. Barend ter Haar has pointed out that the accusation directed at 'heterodox' religious leaders that they collected money from their followers is perfectly true, but it is also true of leaders of any other religious leader, so the accusation does not tell us anything distinctive about the heterodox leaders. 'The accusation is not' he says, 'selected so much to describe, as to condemn these leaders' (ter Haar 1999: 15). It might, indeed, have been more informative if we were to learn that the heterodox leaders had *not* collected money from their followers. Likewise, it is all too easy nowadays to forget that the media are more likely to report wrong-doings by a member of an unpopular religion than they are to report a similar misdemeanour by a 'normal' member of the population. For example, the press may, on a number of occasions, accurately report the suicide of a 'cultist'. The reader may then start to wonder what it is about 'cults' that makes their members commit suicide. S/he might not, however, notice that there are not reports of suicides by 'ordinary' members of the public. If, however, the *rate* of suicide in the group were compared with that in the population at large, it might be found that the latter was twice that of the former – leading us to ask what it is about cults that *prevents* their members from committing suicide. Of course, further investigation would be required. It may be that the movements attract an atypically suicide-resistant set of converts – but at least it would not be assumed that what is assiduously reported is more typically the case than what is not reported.

Another common error arises when it is assumed that a religion or any other kind of group or movement exhibits the same characteristics at different times or in different places. Although there will be some common threads, it needs to be recognised that any particular religious movement will change according to the social context in which it is found. The fact that Falun Gong is significantly different in England,

⁴³ Other work questioning the brainwashing hypothesis can be found in, for example, Anthony and Introvigne (2006); Ginsburg and Richardson (1998); Richardson (2003).

⁴⁴ For classic statements about the influence of the social context on the individual, see Weber (1947, p.88ff); Marx (1973); Durkheim (1952); Berger and Luckmann (1967).

⁴⁵ This was with the cooperation of the China Association for Science and Technology and the Beijing Association for Science and Technology.

⁴⁶ They had 'transformed' by rejecting Falun Gong after 'education'.

⁴⁷ A control group is a group of people, matched as far as possible with the group under study, except for a specified variable, the presence or effect of which the researcher is investigating.

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Australia, Canada and Hong Kong than it is in the PRC will be, in part, due to the actions of the practitioners, in part to the actions of the respective states and, perhaps especially, to the interactions between the movement and the different societies.⁴⁸

Concluding Remarks

Much more could, of course, be written about the similarities and differences to be discovered between religion as it is experienced in the West and in China; and much more could be written about the methodological challenges that face Western scholars as they approach the subject through their own research or that of others. What this chapter has offered could be no more than a suggestion of some of the discoveries, questions and obstacles that might greet the Western sociologist of religion who becomes fascinated by the richness and diversity of China and its culture and religions.

A comparison of the amazing variety of ways in which men and women are capable of being religious enables us to go beyond our own taken-for-granted understanding of the common place as the normal and thus, it might be assumed, as the natural. We are given a Monty Python-type opportunity to see the familiar in the unfamiliar and the unfamiliar in the familiar, and thus to learn so much more about both 'them' and 'us'. The rapid changes that are occurring at all levels and in all regions of the People's Republic of China promise many further opportunities for learning and surprises for the curious scholar of religion.

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⁴⁸ An excellent example of differences related to time and place is provided by Yunfeng Lu's (2008) account of the changes undergone between the 1930s and the early twenty-first century by the Chinese sect, Yiguan Dao, in both mainland China and Taiwan.

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