

Article

Sinicizing Religions, Sinicizing Religious Studies

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Abstract: From 2015 onwards, “sinicizing religions” has become the mantra of China’s religious policy, inspiring new regulations and constraining the functioning of religious organizations. After summarizing the “sinicization” doctrine and policy, this paper examines how Chinese scholars in religious studies position themselves in such a context. It reviews the developments of the field after 1979; it appraises the complex interplay between the scholarly community and policy makers; it examines how scholars in religious studies now respond to the official policy, as they strive to balance descriptive and prescriptive assessments. It shows how the search for ideal-types as well as for ‘sinicized’ typologies and methodologies partly function as an adaptative tactic. The need to answer political imperatives revives older debates on religious forms and functions, and, to some extent, stirs theoretical imagination. However, political constraints make it difficult for scholars to focus on current religious trends, as they find it safer to debate on a somewhat atemporal model of “Chinese religion”.

Keywords: sinicization; Chinese religion; sacrificial rituals; civil religion; Confucianism; religious ecology

1. Introduction

From 2015 onwards, and especially after the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, the Chinese authorities have called for the “sinicization of religions” (*zongjiao zhongguohua* 宗教中国化) and, through position papers, study sessions, internal directives and new legal dispositions, are now “guiding” (*dao* 导) religious organizations towards this goal.¹ The ‘sinicization’ doctrine and policy are part and parcel of Xi Jinping’s vision for a ‘New Era’. At the same time, the way ‘religious sinicization’ has been constructed cannot be understood outside the historical context that defined how Chinese authorities construe and tackle religious issues.²

A contextual appraisal of the way ‘religion’ and religions are approached by government and scholars in China will frame the way we formulate and tentatively answer a series of interrelated questions: How did Chinese researchers reconstruct religious studies as a legitimate field of research in the course of the last 40 years? Could their scholarship have, wittingly or unwittingly, prepared the call currently put forward by the Party-State? How do Chinese academics now respond to this same call? Additionally, in which way does the stress on religious sinicization reshape a much older debate over the existence and characteristics of what is termed ‘Chinese religion’? Why and how does the current debate extends to the feasibility of sinicizing not only religious expressions but religious

¹ The steps leading to the religious policy’s redefinition from early 2015 till the end of 2017 are aptly described in (Chang 2018). Cao (2018) introduces a special issue of *The China Review* on shifting state-religion dynamics in China.

² Goossaert and Palmer (2011) have become the standard reference for an overview of the ‘religious question’ in modern China. Yang (2008) offers an array of essays centered on the long 20th century. Luo (Luo [1987] 1991) testifies to the state of the field in the late 1990s. Fan (2009) illustrates the methodological dilemmas met by Chinese scholars working on religion. Johnson (2017) provides the reader with a vivid journalist’s account of faith communities and believers who are anchored in a variety of contexts.

studies proper? And finally, does the ‘religious sinicization’ strategy highlight recurrent features of the interaction between Chinese scholars and policy makers? Taking this set of questions as a whole implies that the state of religious studies in China cannot be assessed independently from the political imperatives that constrain the field, but also that it would be a mistake to evaluate Chinese official appraisals and policies regarding religion without taking into account the way scholarship interacts with them.

Our line of argument will reflect the evolving nature of religious studies in China: After 1979, the “Reform and Opening” policies triggered the need to justify the continuing presence within Socialist China of religious groups and activities. Though the approach adopted to that purpose facilitated the integration of religion into social realities it eventually led to an understanding of religion constrained by a framework, both political and theoretical, that strictly determined the tasks and duties imposed upon religious practitioners, on the one hand, and researchers, on the other. This has become even more the case as Xi Jinping’s ‘New Era’ enforces stricter imperatives and ideological outlook. However, an increasing wealth of both analytical and ethnographic resources provides Chinese researchers with alternative approaches and concepts for locating religious realities within society and culture. Still, these same researchers cannot but follow indirect, even circuitous argumentative trajectories, which makes it easier for them to assess and refine ideal-types than to grasp and evaluate current trends.

2. Sinicizing Religions

2.1. Religions and the State Apparatus in History

When read through social and political lenses, the religious history of China is best apprehended as a succession of adjustments between communal cults and a regime of ritual orthopraxis enforced by the state apparatus. The Empire had gradually co-opted many of the local deities while introducing complementary rituals that united into a whole the ‘imagined community’ it was embodying.³ The local magistrate, whose ritual function was not separated from his judicial and administrative ones, presided over official calendar ceremonies as well as over those occasioned by a natural cataclysm (drought, floods, invasion of locusts); he protected and oversaw the temples on his territory; he repressed “heterodox cults” (*xiejiao* 邪教); he could even judge and condemn the deities associated to popular revolts.⁴

After 1949, the new regime had to decide on the way to best articulate popular cults and state worship. It was not enough to supervise officially recognized religions; not enough either to repress any potentially subversive and millenarian religious movement, as the government did repeatedly (just after 1949 for the syncretistic ‘new religions’ that had already emerged in the 1920s; after 2000 in the case of the Falungong; and at regular intervals for movements located at the margins of Protestantism).⁵ The state had also to assess the nature and level of ‘religiosity’ it aimed to provide society with, and to determine how state-dispensed religiosity would interact with competing or subordinate expressions.⁶

After the messianic surge of the Cultural Revolution, the policy pursued between approximately 1980 and 2012 functioned as a partial and programmed withdrawal of ‘state religiosity’, with the

³ “Sacrificial recognition of local gods was part of the job description of the Son of Heaven. This represented a very real and costly constraint on imperial penetration of local society, and may be considered *prima facie* evidence of the reciprocal and contractual nature of the relationship between the state and local society.” Lagerwey (2010, pp. 13–14) and Goossaert and Palmer (2011, pp. 20–33, 152–65, 316–35) detail the evolution of such relationship for the Late Qing, Republican, and New China periods.

⁴ In 1846, the prefect of Suzhou condemned the effigies of four deities to be tied with rope and exposed in the City God Temple because of oracles attributed to them that had incited the peasants to rebel. Cf. (Hamashima 2011, p. 131).

⁵ As to these various episodes, see the excerpts of (Goossaert and Palmer 2011) listed in Note 3. See also (Lian 2010) for Protestantism, and (Chang 2003; Lu et al. 2018) for Falungong.

⁶ Urban planning (notably the preservation, destruction or building of landmarks) is one of the ways through which the new Chinese regime engineered expressions of sacredness.

concomitant shaping of a larger religious playing ground. Such policy was sometimes hesitant and contradictory, marked by sudden adjustments, but its general direction, over a period of 30 years, proved to be constant: the Party-State was to be more a regulator than a purveyor of sacredness, insofar as the actors operating in the religious market were adhering strictly to the guidelines laid down for the purposes of ensuring political stability, social harmony, and economic development.⁷

2.2. The Xi Jinping Era and the Call to Sinicize

Xi Jinping's arrival to power coincided with a shift in religious policy that has become fully enforced from the 19th Congress of the CCP in October 2017 onwards. The report on the "2015 National Working Meeting on Religions" (held in December 2014) organized by the United Front Department did not include mention of 'religious sinicization' or any related expression yet. In April 2016, the same annual religious conference was chaired by Xi Jinping himself, who addressed the need for "building a socialist theory of religion with Chinese characteristics". Besides, ensuring the compatibility between socialism and religion, Xi stressed, required that "religions adhere to the direction of sinicization, [. . .] interpreting rules and dogmas in a way that corresponds to the needs attached to the progress and development of contemporary China" (Xinhua 2016).⁸ The official associations governing the five state-recognized religions were soon invited to join the campaign (Global Times 2017). The policy received its most solemn and striking expression in Xi Jinping's report at the start of the 19th Congress of the CCP, in October 2017. The official translation of the relevant excerpt reads as follows: "We will fully implement the Party's basic policy on religious affairs, uphold the principle that religions in China must be *Chinese in orientation* [zhongguohua] and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society" (Xi 2017). This official translation does not do justice to the idea conveyed by the verb we italicize, which should be directly translated as "to sinicize".

As the reading of the whole discourse makes it clear, the goal of sinicizing religion cannot be separated from the general proclamation that China has entered a "New Era" (*xin shidai* 新时代). "Xi Jinping's Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era", incorporated into the Constitution of the Communist Party, and, later on, into the state Constitution, differs from the ideological innovations appeared during the "Reform and Opening" era in the sense that the guidance provided by the Party, the adhesion to Chinese and Socialist values and ethic, or yet the stress on national rejuvenation are topics that take a hallowed reverberation.⁹ "When the people have faith, the nation possesses strength" (Xi 2017). As a matter of consequence, socialist values need to be integrated into the "emotional identity and the behavioral habits of each person", asserts also Xi's report to the Congress. Chinese Classics and the Marxist heritage are henceforth the two sources of morality and religion.

Such orientations have been specified throughout a number of seminars and events, often specifically held for clerics and other religious leaders. The articles and documents distributed in such forum all insist on the fact that *zhongguohua* translates into the fact that religions must work towards (1) more Chinese "religious values"; (2) more Chinese religious symbols; and a (3) "more

⁷ See (Palmer 2009); (Vermader 2009).

⁸ The April 2016 meeting was prepared by the Central United Front Work Conference, held in May 2015, also presided by Xi. It is on this occasion that he formulated for the first time the objective of "guiding religions in the direction of sinicization" (see Chang 2018, p. 41). However, the April 2016 meeting was the one that truly marked the start of the sinicization campaign.

⁹ Where Jiang Zemin was theorizing the Party's duty to represent the advanced social forces, the new culture and the interests of the majority of the population (the "Three Represents" theory), when Hu Jintao was discoursing on "harmonious society and scientific development", they were not speaking to either sensitivity nor imagination. They were not inviting their audience to identify these theoretical perspectives with their own person.

Chinese practice of the faith.”¹⁰ A distinction is to be made: (a) Religions of foreign origin must put the stress on making behaviors, liturgy, dogmas, and cultural expression fully compatible with the political, economic, and cultural aspects of Chinese society, “forming a religion with unique Chinese characteristics, and showing a special spiritual outlook” (Yushan 2018). (b) As to ‘local religions’ (i.e., Daoism and Buddhism), ‘sinicizing’ means to adapt to modern, socialist China, and to the imperatives of the ‘New Era’.¹¹ Here is what the official website of the Daoist Association has to say about the task at hand:

To adhere to the direction of ‘sinicizing Daoism’ is a necessary choice for making Daoism keep pace with the times, innovate, and develop. To study and implement the spirit of the 19th NPC and of the newly amended ‘Regulations on Religious Affairs’ means to profoundly understand Xi Jinping’s thinking on socialism with Chinese characteristics. We firmly uphold the party’s leadership and the socialist system, and we carry forward the fine traditions of Daoism patriotism, doctrinal ideas and progressive ideas, digging into the abundant Daoist Chinese culture, practicing the socialist core values and vigorously promoting the national spirit with patriotism as the core... [We thus] demonstrate the new style of Daoism in this new period of the journey towards national rejuvenation and the fulfillment of the Chinese Dream. (Yi 2017)

For saying it otherwise: a new regime of sacredness is progressively put into place, which attempts less to wipe off the social and symbolic resources found in religious expressions than to redirect their flow towards state-sponsored channels of sacrality.

2.3. Sinicizing and Restraining

The call to sinicize all religious expressions has been doubled down by the enactment of amended “Regulations on Religious Affairs”, published in September 2017 and operational since February 2018.¹² The revised regulations “uphold the principles of protecting what is legal, prohibiting what is illegal, suppressing extremism, resisting infiltration, and combating crime” (Article 3). They impose heavy fines on organizers of unofficial religious events: parishes and other structures must report directly to the police, tax office, and other authorities of their home district. The procedures for registering unofficial structures are very strict, while these same structures face controls and punishments much harsher than in the past if they fail to register. The state’s power to prohibit and punish religious activities deemed unlawful is asserted almost without any limitation (see notably articles 41 and 68). Besides, in September 2018, a new “Draft Rule to Regulate Online Religious Messaging Services” stated that no organization or individual is permitted to stream videos of religious activities like worshipping, burning incense, receiving precepts, attending mass, and receiving baptism, or broadcast those in the form of text, photo, audio, or video (Luo 2018). If the scope and degree of application of this text, and others, remain unclear, the important fact is that they are applicable whenever the state authorities deem it expedient.

Additionally, the rising of the national flag at some religious venues, first reported at Shaolin Temple (Chen 2018), has become common. The new stress on flag rising and anthem singing at religious venues, at least on some fixed days and festive occasions, still varies very much in its application, but the trend is strongly encouraged by the authorities, and has been condoned by religious leaders at a joint conference held in July 2018 (Ucanews 2018a).

¹⁰ Besides the short summary provided by the article signed Yushan (a pseudonym) quoted just below, the material used here comes from communications made in forums, the recurrent expressions of which we quote verbatim. We will enter into an explicit discourse analysis when dealing with the book of Zhang Zhigang. See below.

¹¹ This also means that indigenous religions need to work against excessive commercialization and to restrict the number of building projects, as the amended “Regulations on Religious Affairs” make it clear.

¹² See (State Council 2017). An unofficial translation of the regulations is available on (China Law Translate 2017).

Campaigns targeting specific regions, religious buildings, and activities had started even earlier in the Xi's era. Recording and analyzing these events would go far beyond the scope of this article. The churches' demolition campaign in Zhejiang (later on extended to parts of Henan and Hebei and, more sporadically, to other provinces), the forcible closure of several well-known underground Churches, or yet, on a much grander scale, the crackdown on the Uighur and Kazakh minorities in Xinjiang have been well documented.¹³ While much different in scope from what is happening in Xinjiang, the "sinicization of Islam" campaign has touched other provinces of China, notably Ningxia, sometimes generating popular protests, for instance when the tearing down of minarets has been announced or enforced (Gan 2018). Repressive measures must sometimes be coupled with 'positive' ones, such as when Chinese authorities explicitly commend worship sites deemed representatives of "religious buildings with Chinese characteristics" (Liu 2018).

Officially, 'sinicizing' religions is not akin to 'restraining' them. In practice, it is hard to separate the one from the other. When it comes to Christianity, restrictions as to the circulation of the Bible, especially on the Internet, have been reported (Johnson 2018) along intended efforts at sinicizing its translation and exegesis (Ucanews 2018b). Concurrently, the document entitled "Principle for Promoting Chinese Christianity in China for the Next Five Years (2018–2022)", compiled by the China Christian Council and Three-Self Patriotic Movement, states: "Contents of the Bible that are compatible with the core values of socialism should be deeply researched in order to write books that are popular and easy-to-understand" (Ucanews 2018c).

As already noted, the focus of this article is not on policy implementation, but rather on the way official policy and academic discourse relate to each other. Academic expertise has worked in varying, sometimes diverging, directions. The point of attention is that scholarly debates on religious issues have contributed to define the nature and extent of the problems that authorities have felt indispensable to tackle. For a long time, scholarship and leadership have engaged in a *pas de deux*, the choreography of which needs further exploration.

3. Scholarship and Leadership

The Chinese polity makes ample use of think-tanks and other consultative channels that co-opt influential academics as advisors.¹⁴ Finding its roots into the literati tradition, the system has been both maintained and renewed by the post 1949 regime. The adoption of the Soviet-inspired model of "Academies of Social Sciences" [ASS], national and provincial, has constituted one expression of this pattern of policy planning, which was put aside during the most tormented periods but was confirmed and reinforced after 1980. Today, national research centers located within the leading universities are probably more influential than most ASS institutes. Besides, competition for funding attached to national research projects channels academics towards topics favored by government authorities.

Among the names of scholars supposed to exercise (often convoluted and controverted) influence on long-term religious planning, one may mention the names of Zhuo Xinping (director of the Institute of World Religions, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, since 1998)¹⁵ along the ones of the editorial

¹³ However, foreign media reports are sometimes misleading in the way they interpret news and data. Among the assumptions such reports often include is the one of an ever-growing Christian population. In fact, the number of Christians in China may have presently reached a peak, this for at least two reasons: (a) rapid urbanization has dismantled some traditional Christian strongholds, the urban churches inheriting only part of the displaced faithful; (b) the new policies have increased the social cost of converting to Christianity. On recent debates around this theme, see (Yang 2018).

¹⁴ On think-tanks and policy making, see (Zhu 2013).

¹⁵ Zhuo Xinping published several articles around the "sinicization of Christianity", especially around 2012–2015. Early contributors to the same topic include Zhang Zhigang, Tao Feiya, Li Xiangping, and Mou Zhongjian (the latter being the one to insist most on the necessity to devise a containment strategy for confronting the rise of Christianity in today's China). Significant works are listed in (Wu 2015). Around that time, the 'sinicization' concept was understood in different—sometimes opposite—ways in 2018, there is no place any more for debate: "Scrutinizing Secretary General Xi Jinping's discussion of religious work, comprehending his subtle analysis and high-level insights on religious issues, these are the new tasks and duties that we, researchers on religion, cannot but tackle in the New Era. Combining the learning, comprehension and clarification of General Secretary Xi Jinping's discussion of religious work will also help us

team of the Annual Report on Religions in China published by the same Institute of World Religions, Yan Kejia (director of the Institute of Religious studies at n Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences), Zhang Zhigang (Peking University, Department of philosophy and religion), or yet Xu Yihua (Fudan University, expert on the relationship between religion and policy in the US, and on religions and national security).¹⁶ Other scholars intervene on specific religious traditions, with Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism being valued fields of expertise. Needless to say, not all prominent scholars are actual or virtual government advisors, and not all academics asked to contribute adhere to the governmental policies eventually enacted. Moreover, standpoints propounded by scholars are often the result of an informal process conducted through the regular cycle of conferences, roundtables, journals' special issues, and other ways by which the academia constructs issues and determines points of (relative) consent.

3.1. "Reforming and Opening" Religious Studies

The start of the "Reform and Opening" policy, in December 1978, triggered the revival not only of economic activities but also of academic and intellectual investigation. The starting anew of research and teaching in the religious field (for the purpose of which new institutions gradually emerged) implied to deal first with the "Opium of the People" catchphrase, which, for some time, had worked as the Alpha and Omega of the ideological discourse on religion. During the 1980s a debate (dubbed by Chinese intellectuals as the "North–South Opium War") developed around the interpretation of the mantra, some scholars, mainly based in Beijing, showed more strictness as to the nature of the religious phenomenon, while other, generally from Shanghai, were striving for new interpretations. The judgment enacted in a collective book edited by the Shanghaiese researcher Luo Zhufeng in 1987 (book translated into English in 1991) summarized an opinion that had already prevailed for some time: 'Opium' was to be understood as a metaphor for the negative effects that religion exercised under certain historical conditions; it was not a judgment on the very nature of religion, nor could it be used for characterizing the role of religion in a socialist society (Luo 1987; Luo [1987] 1991).¹⁷

Freeing a space for religious presence in New China meant to concurrently recreate an intellectual space for religious studies. Chinese scholars were allowed to explore anew the beliefs, practices and modes of organization of religious believers at the local and national level. Fieldwork was accompanied by more theoretical work as to the "compatibility" (*xiangshiyi* 相适应) between religion and socialism, which was generally recognized-upon the condition that believers respect state regulations and show a love of the motherland at least as great as the one they feel and express towards their faith.¹⁸ Under the label of the 'compatibility' theory, various schools and subfields of religious studies entered Chinese academia. At the same time, if several scholars maintained that traditional Chinese religion (and Buddhism as well) had generally been politically innocuous throughout the course of history¹⁹, the sudden surge of new religious movements in pre-2000 China posed new challenges to researchers, while it also underlined the importance of their expertise. If some academics tried to distinguish between "new religious movements" (*xinxing zongjiao* 新型宗教) and "evil cults"

systematically grasp and comprehensively understand the overall picture and theoretical achievements of "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." (Zhuo 2018).

¹⁶ Xu Yihua is a professor at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs of Fudan University, from which originates Wang Huning, currently a member of the party's Politburo Standing Committee, considered to be the main ideological thinker within the Xi Jinping team.

¹⁷ The new interpretation was substantiated by a new translation of the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (the work that contains the "opium of the people" passage) published in 1995, which corrected significantly the 1972 translation (see Zhang 2017, p. 48, n. 1).

¹⁸ The Biblical scholar Li Rongfang (1887–1965) had already seen in Jeremiah and Jesus the embodiments of the precept of "loving the Church and loving the nation" (*ai jiao ai guo* 愛教愛國) (Lee 2015, p. 105). Progressively, the imperative of "loving the nation" took precedence over the other, and could not be separated any more from the one of "loving the party" (*ai dang* 愛黨).

¹⁹ This required of course a serious 'editing' of the organizational forms to be included into the 'traditional Chinese religion' category, such as ignoring the Yellow Turbans, the White Lotus tradition, and other millenarian movements.

(*xiejiao* 邪教) (Zhang 1997), the sudden rise and brutal repression of the Falungong movement restricted the scope of research and discussion on the topic. At the same time, as we will now see, it engineered a striving towards a decidedly functionalist analysis of religious phenomena.

3.2. Making (Good) Use of Religions

During the first decade of the new century, the struggle for uprooting Falungong, the disquiet of the authorities confronted to the rise of unregistered religious movements, and, additionally, the debate on the decline of private and public morality, all of these contributed in assessing and asserting the positive social role that well-regulated religious organizations could and should play: to some extent, religions were purveyors of morality. The state needed to co-opt them, rather than solely control them. The goal of building a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) that Hu Jintao put forward during his time as CCPC Secretary General (2002–2012) helped specify the function conferred to religions: nurturing social harmony. Writing on “the building of a harmonious society and the role of religions”, the renowned Buddhism scholar Fang Litian stressed the following: (a) The history of Chinese religions testifies to the tolerance that has reigned among them, religious competition being overruled by a fusional dynamics: there have been no religious wars in China. (b) Second, they all have exhibited love for the motherland and have strived to safeguard its unity. (c) Additionally, all religions have been preaching love and compassion, thus contributing to charitable and harmonious relationships among people. (d) Finally, religions have nurtured respect for and harmony with natural environment (Fang [2005] 2011). Note that such description explicitly applies to all religions having taken roots into the Chinese soil, including Islam and Christianity, though most examples refer to Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion.²⁰

Obviously, Fang Litian’s appraisal, very much representative of a discourse that became widespread during the years considered, was aiming at enlarging the space given to religions. However, such discourse also contributed in imposing an extremely functionalist approach of religious phenomena: religion was defined and understood through its social effects. The most striking example of this trend is provided by the popularity of the 2007 Chinese translation of the book by C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, first published in English in 1961 (Yang 1961; Yang [1961] 2007). The unabashedly functionalist standpoint developed by Yang (exemplified by the subtitle of the book: “A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors”²¹) met with little objections from Chinese scholars. They mainly debated around the distinction propounded by Yang between “institutional” and “diffused” forms of religion (Fan 2009, p. 38). As we will see shortly, this one debate was not fruitless: it helped researchers to focus on the inner structures—mental and social—of the so-called ‘diffused’ popular religion, and it played a role in their attempts at identifying locally grown concepts that could apply to the analysis of ‘Chinese religion’. Additionally, let us note that the functionalist bias of the Chinese sociologists of religion was reinforced by the ‘religious markets’ and ‘rational choice’ theories that, for some time (and this time may not be completely over) appeared to be the *dernier cri* of the Western approach to religious studies.²²

There was another unintended long-term effect of the apologetical style developed by Fang and his colleagues: it made both scholars and Party leaders assess the use and nature of religions against a background constituted by a reframed image of “Chinese culture”. As a matter of fact, the re-establishment of religious studies as a discipline and the re-evaluation of “Chinese culture”

²⁰ Let us note that Fang Litian published a book on “the process of sinicization of Buddhism” (佛教中国化的历程) in 1989 already. See (Wu 2015).

²¹ “The word ‘function’ or one of its derivatives occurs over forty times in the twenty-seven pages of the Introduction, but by being repeated it does not become more precise.” (Freedman 1962, p. 534)

²² For instance, the article by Fenggang Yang, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China” (Yang 2006) soon became standard teaching material in graduate classes of sociology and religious studies.

went side by side. The years immediately following the beginning of the ‘Reform and Opening’ policy saw only timid breakthroughs. However, progressively, ideas such as the existence of a “basic spirit of Chinese culture”, propounded notably by the philosopher Zhang Dainian, became widespread, as also did the conviction that “Chinese culture”, whatever the realities covered by the term, was not working against but rather alongside modernization (Anonymous 1985). If the “culture fever” (*wenhua re* 文化热) of the 1980s first focused upon the Bible and World Classics, it progressively shifted towards a reappraisal of Chinese Classics and, more largely, of Chinese tradition as a body of beliefs and practices. “Chinese culture” was presented as “a culture of harmony and cooperation (*hehe wenhua* 和合文化)” (Zhang 1996). *Hehe wenhua* was supposed to correspond to the quintessence of the Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian traditions (a common nucleus to be enhanced and interpreted anew). “Harmony” was described as the fruit of a natural process of “generation and regeneration (*sheng sheng bu xi* 生生不息)”. Elaborated during the 1990s, such interpretation became naturally part of the “harmonious society” vulgate dispensed during the Hu Jintao era.

The functionalist approach of religion promoted by both the state and the academic community, combined with the re-evaluation and subsequent quasi-sacralization of “Chinese culture”, soon permeated the discourse and, to some extent, the self-understanding of religious organizations themselves. Theological constructions focused upon harmony building and loving one’s nation (Dunch 2008; Starr 2016, pp. 226–31); leaders of both the Catholic Patriotic Association and the (Protestant) Three-Self Church were (and are still) striving to find biblical ground for presenting the guidance of the Party as a form of obedience to God’s commandments (see for instance Yue 2017). The intellectual reconstruction of the “Buddhism in the world” (or “Humanistic Buddhism”) (*renjian fojiao* 人间佛教) tradition was submitted to the same imperatives (Gao 2005; Juexing 2013). During the 1950s, it was asked from religious leaders to show that their faith could somewhat concur to the building of a socialist society. From the 1980s onwards, the stress was rather on conformity to socialist morality and, more and more, to the “harmonious spirit” of Chinese culture.

3.3. The Religious Ecology of China and the Rise of Christianity

Around 2009–2012, Chinese scholars, echoing Western approaches and concerns (see for instance Eiesland 1999), attempted to correct the exclusive focus on the individual triggered by the use of the “market theory”: Religion was less to be understood as a matter of personal choice than as a way to position oneself communally, to dwell in a social and cultural setting. In that respect, the steep rise of Christianity in China during the last four decades was to be primarily explained by the imbalance in the “religious ecology” that followed the Cultural Revolution: Christian communities had substituted for traditional religious networks destroyed during the turmoil. Such a trend, detrimental to China’s social and cultural equilibrium, had to be actively counterbalanced, first by encouraging the orderly revival of popular religious networks, second by checking elements in Christianity that worked against Chinese culture and values (Duan 2011; Mou 2012; Zhang 2017, pp. 28–32).²³

Kuei-min Chang rightly notes that the “religious ecology” theory gained in popularity at the time when, in Zhejiang province, under the direction of a close ally of Xi Jinping, an estimated 12,000 to 17,000 crosses were forcefully removed from local churches. The numerous and violent clashes that followed convinced the government that, when it reached a certain demographic level, as was the case in Zhejiang and Jiangsu, Christianity was indeed a potentially disruptive force, and that religious governance needed adjustment. Chang also indicates that scholars associated with

²³ Zhang Zhigang (Zhang 2017, pp. 28–29) seems to suggest that Duan Qi (a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) was the first one to give the concept of “religious ecology” its full significance, during a forum held in 2008. Her subsequent publication is dated 2011. (Zhang also asserts that the idea that the rise of Christianity was a consequence of the uprooting of folk religion dates back to the 1990s, though the idea was not enshrined yet into the ‘religious ecology’ approach.) Chang Kuei-min mentions a publication of Mou Zhonglian on “religious ecology” dated 2009 (Chang 2018, p. 44).

the ‘religious ecology’ trend (and, institutionally, with the Centre for Religious Culture at Peking University and the Centre for Christian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) started to meet regularly in 2012, before they entered the group of 29 religious experts appointed in January 2014 by the State Council, a move preparing the redefinition of doctrine and policy that was to follow (Chang 2018, p. 40; People.cn 2014).²⁴ However, one probably should not give too much credit to the ‘religious ecology’ theory per se, even if its discourse has found resonance among some national and local cadres.²⁵ It is rather the academic debate on religion as a whole that became the ground from which the tenets of the ‘sinicization’ policy were elaborated after Xi arrived to power. This does not mean that academic stances became governmental policies (we will attempt a partial appraisal of the complex relationships between the two in our conclusion); it rather signifies that scholars progressively popularized conceptions of what a ‘religion’ is meant to be, which contributed to construct subsequent policy debates, and that some of their concepts and analyses inspired government discourse, though such analyses were reworked according to governmental strategies.

3.4. Answering the Call

As the sinicization policy was designed, systematization of its tenets was needed in order to provide decision-makers, academics, and religious leaders with an understanding of religion congruent with the tasks assigned to religious organizations. A collection of essays published in December 2017 by Zhang Zhigang (*Sinicization of Religions: A Theoretical Study*), provides the reader with a kind of textbook on the academic background of the official policy.

The first part of the book insists on the necessity to sinicize both religions and the understanding of the religious phenomenon today. Historical materialism requires, on the one hand, to conduct the analysis according to specific social conditions, on the other hand, to go from critique to action, i.e., to determine the way religion should evolve so as to better conform to the direction towards which Chinese society is heading (Zhang 2017, pp. 50–53) as we well as the worldwide trend towards religious indigenization and localization (Zhang 2017, pp. 20–21). This also calls for identifying the dangers that affect each religion present on the Chinese soil so as to adopt in each case the relevant sinicization strategy: some religions may be threatened by radicalization and extremism, other by commercialization, and still other by isolation from society at large (Zhang 2017, p. 23).

The second part of the book concentrates on the difficulties and achievements met in the historical process of sinicizing Christianity, briefly contrasted with the entry of Buddhism into Chinese culture. The third and last part—by far the longest—tasks itself with: (a) investigating the notion of “foreign religion”; (b) asserting the existence of a specifically Chinese form of religion; (c) articulating Confucianism with the more explicitly religious dimensions of the said tradition; and (d) presenting “popular beliefs” (*minjian xinyang* 民间信仰—an expression that Zhang prefers to the one of “popular religion”, though he also makes use of it) as the authentic expression of China’s religious ethos. Zhang invites us to see in popular beliefs a map of China’s lived concerns and values. The plasticity of the symbols that these beliefs put into play as well as the constancy of the moral order they embody are attested, he continues, by the way popular worship transfers from Guandi (god of war) to the Red Army, or by the elevation of exemplary personalities to the status of “red bodhisattvas” (Zhang 2017,

²⁴ The group was slightly enlarged in 2015, Among the names of the scholars being appointed, let us mention the ones of Zhang Zhigang, Zhuo Xiping, Jin Ze, Mou Zhongjian, Duan Qi, Zhao Dunhua, and of the respected scholar of literature and hermeneutics Yang Huilin, of People’s University. (SARA 2015).

²⁵ The popularity of the ‘religious ecology’ theory among officials can be illustrated by the following fact: The website of the United Front department of Jinze township (a part of Shanghai municipality, and the object of the book by Li Tiangang that we analyze in Section 4.1 of the present article) envisions the vitality of popular religion in the area as an effective containment against Christianity, and contrasts the local religious ecology with the situation prevalent in greater Shanghai. (See Vermander et al. 2018, pp. 187–88). This thesis does not appear in the book authored by Li Tiangang, but it may originate from the group of scholars and students of Fudan University that followed him during his fieldwork. Additionally, the positive assessment made of popular religion by local cadres is sometimes due to the fact that folk temples and rituals are seen as beneficial for tourism and local economy.

p. 246). Or yet, the cult of the sea goddess Mazu sees its moral efficiency being confirmed by the fact that it establishes a bridge between the people of Taiwan and those of the coastal provinces of mainland China (Zhang 2017, p. 248). Popular religion is the moral ecology shaped by the daily life of the Chinese people (Zhang 2017, pp. 239–59).

The persistence of popular religion in Taiwan is one of the reasons that leads Zhang to attempt such reevaluation (Zhang 2017, pp. 224–26), especially (though this is only implicitly stated) because of the fact that Taiwanese popular religion easily associates with local political networks, while established religions on the island pursue political agendas of their own. In the past often associated with millenarian upsurges, popular religiosity appears today less receptive to these than are groups inscribed into evangelical or syncretist Christianity. Therefore, it might be good to encourage—cautiously and gradually—expressions of “popular beliefs” that grounds and translates the social ethos promoted by the Party-State. Zhang’s stance partially resonates with the themes developed during a “national conference on popular beliefs” (note the term) that was organized by the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) in December 2016.²⁶ On this occasion, SARA’s head, Wang Zuo’an, developed a twofold discourse: On the one hand he insisted on the importance of “guiding” and “managing” folk beliefs; on the other hand, he spoke of “actively exploring and steadily promoting pilot work on folk beliefs” (Fenghuang 2016). “Pilot work” (*shidian gongzuo* 试点工作) always refers to experimental stages during which new openings and developments related to a given topic or policy are actively explored.

As we have already noted, the “religious ecology” standpoint, considers popular beliefs as the natural antidote to the spread of Christianity (Zhang 2017, p. 63).²⁷ While listening carefully to this argument, authorities remain cautious, torn between the imperative to “manage and guide” all religious expressions and the one to foster expressions of Chinese culture and spirituality that could countervail those of foreign origins.²⁸

4. Unearthing “Chinese Religion”

I already mentioned that Zhang Zhigang prefers to speak of “popular beliefs” than of “popular religion”. This is partly linked to the everlasting debate as to whether the very notion of “religion” is applicable in the Chinese context, a debate that I will briefly evoke in the next part of this essay. However, the main reason for this lexicographic preference certainly lies in the fact that Zhang wants to exalt a “moral universe” rather than a system of practices.²⁹ He makes this moral universe the standard that other religions should strive to conform with. In other words, “sinicization” must be guided by the spirit found in Chinese “popular beliefs or popular religion” or in “Chinese religious culture” as Zhang alternatively writes. He explicitly refers the origins of such research to Western scholars such as J. J. M. de Groot (1854–1921) and Marcel Granet (1884–1940).

²⁶ It is interesting to note that the aforesaid conference was held in Quanzhou, Fujian Province. Fujian and Guangdong are the two provinces where folk religion keeps most vitality.

²⁷ It should be noted that Zhang and many other scholars argue that Christianity is less ‘sinicized’ than Islam. Three reasons seem to account for what is explicitly a comparison in favor of the later: (a) Most Islamic communities are present in the Chinese soil since the Mongol dynasty; (b) the theological acculturation underwent by Ming dynasty Muslim scholars such as Liu Zhi (see for instance Frankel 2011) went further than the one attempted by the Jesuits; (c) Christianity is inseparable from the colonial project that the West pursued and, to some extent, is still pursuing in China (Zhang 2017, pp. 62–64, and various oral reports in seminars and workshops). This assessment is meant to infer that repressive policies conducted by the state against certain Muslim communities—again, primarily in Xinjiang—are not based on religion but rather on reasons having to do with “national security”.

²⁸ During informal exchanges, interlocutors also suggested to me that state authorities were skeptical of the real social impact exercised by folk religion today—and that their skepticism was well grounded.

²⁹ Li Tiangang (see below) similarly distinguishes between popular beliefs and popular religion, but he does so on a more explicit basis: The expression “popular beliefs” refers to activities led on a weak organizational basis, and generally conducted by women, while “popular religion” refers to strongly organized, men-led activities and institutions (Li 2017, p. 415).

Several Chinese scholars have gone further than Zhang in identifying a “Chinese religion” (*zhonghua zongjiao* 中华宗教 or *zhongguo zongjiao* 中国宗教³⁰) model, and not all of them equate it to a “standard” to be followed by institutionalized religions. However, there is no doubt that the stress on religious sinicization has triggered a revival of the research on the nature and distinctiveness of “Chinese religion”. For instance, the worship of the deity of the soil—which in ancient China was not primarily perceived as a foster goddess but rather as a prince (*hou* 后) protecting the population residing on its territory³¹—is a subject of renewed interpretations: In 2018, a series of five articles was dedicated to the topic in one of the main journals of religious studies, *Shijie zongjiao wenhua* (*The World Religious Cultures*). The cult of *Houtu* 后土, concur the contributing scholars, speaks of uncompromising love for the land of the ancestors—the “holy earth”—, and nourishes patriotism, hard work, solidarity with Chinese communities overseas, thus responding to the spiritual and cultural needs of the population (Liang and Zhao 2018). This most positive assessment also leads researchers to focus on the inclusion (which occurred during the Han Dynasty) of the cult of *Houtu* (initially popular and communal) into the state liturgy: The moral order proper to Chinese religion is necessarily to be confirmed and regulated through the state management of sacredness.

4.1. ‘Chinese Religion’: A Land of Contrasts

Contemporary Chinese scholars generally acknowledge the two following facts: (a) Foreign sinologists initiated the description of ‘Chinese religion’ as an integrated system of beliefs, practices and organizational features at the very beginning of the 20th century, and this description was furthered by latter-day anthropologists such as Maurice Freedman. (b) For a long time, research along this line was not dominant in the Mainland, even after religious studies resumed at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s (Li 2017, pp. 241, 544). A number of reasons accounted for this: ‘Popular religion’ was seen as ‘feudal’ in nature, and dangerously associated with secret societies and other counterrevolutionary organizations; religious studies were largely re-initiated by scholars having a background in (religious) philosophy, and thus strongly inclined to focus on the more satisfying intellectual constructions of Buddhism and Christianity; additionally, the exclusive recognition of five religions by the state authorities was somehow formatting the field of studies.

However, the stress on ‘Chinese culture’ that progressively emerged triggered a new interest in the religious components of the former. Besides, ‘folklore studies’, which was the discipline gathering material on popular rituals, gradually benefited from the reconstruction of the anthropological discipline. Chinese scholars of religion started to pay attention to the research led by Western scholars such as David Faure, John Lagerwey, Daniel Overmeyer, or David Jordan, none of whom conducted their research according to the limits imposed by official religious boundaries. Concurrently, research underwent from or within Hong Kong and Taiwan influenced the framework through which mainland China scholars were led to reconsider their subject matter.

All of this explains why ‘religious sinicization’ can now refer to the standard provided by a view of ‘Chinese religion’ against which to assess the nature of institutionalized religions and the efforts they need to make in order to become more Chinese. However, as it has developed for some time already, the research on ‘Chinese religion’ has also acquired an autonomy that makes its results not automatically aligned with the ‘sinicization’ imperative, and may even contradict some of its tenets. A book by the historian and religious scholar Li Tiangang, published exactly at the same time as the one authored by Zhang Zhigang, provides us with such alternative perspective.

³⁰ Whatever the term being used, the religious system it refers to amalgamates the three teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism) with practices and beliefs that go beyond their scope; additionally, the term applies to religious practices proper to the Han ethnic group, not to ethnic minorities; and it is not limited to the territory of Mainland China, as it is commonly found among overseas Chinese communities.

³¹ The determination of the gender of this earthly divinity, *Houtu*, varies according to the sources.

Jinze, *A Probe into the Origin of Jiangnan Popular Sacrificial Rituals*³² centers on a township located at the westernmost tip of Shanghai municipality, extending around the banks of Dianshan Lake and bordered by Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. Jinze Township exemplifies the intertwined economic and ritual connections that were existing (and are somehow subsiding) among temples and townships located on the ubiquitous waterways of the Jiangnan area, connections that were creating ‘networked’ identities rather than properly ‘local’ ones. Li Tiangang investigates the ritual circles and cycles organizing the religious spacetime of the region,³³ the reconstruction of popular religion after 1980, and, more largely, a ritual economy that articulates state-sanctioned with popular sacrificial systems. Today, in a model reminiscent of the one dominant during the Ming and Qing periods, the state recognizes and monitors temples, participates in the organization of large-scale festivals, and even condones worship at nonofficial sites, as long as these activities remain consistent with the values and practices observed at officially recognized places.³⁴

Li Tiangang builds on this historical and ethnographic analysis for offering an integrated representation of what ‘Chinese religion’ refers to, which he sees as defined by five pairs of opposites, each of them continuously struggling towards equilibrium.

The first pair associates what Li calls the “Zhou” (referring to the culture hero Duke Wen of Zhou, 11th Century BC) and the “Kong” (Confucius) traditions. The first is based on rituals meant to “feel” the approach of manes and spirits (*gan guishen* 感鬼神) and, later on, relied upon an interpretation of the Classics that perpetuated the ritual ethos; it goes with a sense of “outer transcendence”. The second develops from the Song dynasty onwards, cultivating the moral “way” (*dao* 道) instituted by Confucius and by Mencius, and instilling in the elites the primacy of the “inner transcendence” that such cultivation aims to achieve³⁵ (Li 2017, pp. 163–80, 517–21).

The second couple of opposites has to do with the continuous negotiation between popular cults (including the ones too often qualified as ‘secret’) and the official tradition. The ‘Zhou tradition’, characterized by the interdependence between rituals and Classics, is preserved through the enactment of popular rituals, while the tension between popular cults and the moral interpretation of the Classics instituted by the ‘Kong religion’ is perpetuated by the modern state. Besides, the negotiation between ‘official’ and ‘popular’ religions is manifested through the way the cult of the various deities is organized and emphasized by the state and by local communities respectively (Li 2017, pp. 206–18). The state will generally favor deities endowed with a ‘national character’, such as Dongyue, the supreme god of Mount Tai. However, it may be in the temples of these ‘national’ gods that people today celebrate the anniversary of local deities (this is indeed the situation in Jinze township).

The second couple of opposites is completed by a third one, namely the contrast between the ‘unifying’ characteristics of Chinese religion and its ‘regional’ and ‘local’ characteristics. While Chinese religion exhibits in all parts of the country some common features, such as the simultaneous presence of cults that are by essence communal and others that are defined by belief affinities³⁶, in an environment such as Jiangnan, which is shaped by innumerable waterways, the geographical constraints are

³² I translate here the term *jisi* 祭祀 by “sacrificial rituals”. The usual translation is merely “sacrifice”, but it should be made clear that the term refers not to the act of sacrificing proper, but rather to a class of rituals in which blood offerings are to be made. The use of the term thus distinguishes such rituals from other that are strictly Buddhist (and even Daoist to a certain extent), and inscribes popular rituals within what Li calls the “Zhou tradition” (see below).

³³ This notably includes: the annual ritual cycle; relationships among the temples of a given ritual territory; the ideal order of temples’ visit when pilgrims endeavor to burn incense at ten temples in one day as it is the custom in Jiangnan; or yet the order in which to pay respect to the deities located in a given temple.

³⁴ For an English-language presentation of Jinze’s worship system, based on Li Tiangang’s analysis coupled with fieldwork, see (Vermander et al. 2018, pp. 146–51).

³⁵ Li explicitly borrows the distinction between inner and outer transcendence from Paul Tillich.

³⁶ Groups of faithful who electively worship in temples located over an area larger (sometimes far larger) than the locality or the district, define what Taiwanese and Mainland researchers call “spheres of belief” (*xinyang quan* 信仰圈), distinguished from territory-based “sacrificial spheres” (*jisi quan* 祭祀圈).

less stringent, and the trans-local identity that emerges may blur the distinction between spheres respectively defined by locality and affinity.

Fourthly, Chinese religion can be understood both as an organic whole and as a compound of at least three different traditions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism), that alternatively tend towards combining themselves or differentiating further. Chinese religion taken as a whole will influence the development of each part of the compound, while social and doctrinal transformations affecting the different traditions will affect the equilibrium of the whole (Li 2017, pp. 292–325).

Finally, Chinese religion is the result of both an unyielding tradition that extends over 3,000 years (the uninterrupted continuation of blood sacrifices is one sign of it—Li 2017, pp. 368–69) and of a series of ruptures that has continuously redefined its boundaries. Notably, growing separation among different “confessions” should not be equated to the mere consequence of the surge of “foreign religions” but as one characteristic of modernity (i.e., the division of work among different organizations, and the subsequent shaping of “churches”) that nowadays also affects the self-understanding of Buddhism and Daoism (Li 2017, pp. 516–17). Remains the well-avowed fact that, historically, “the organizational model of Chinese religion is not Church-like but is the one of the soil altar and of the [voluntary] society” (Li 2017, p. 415).³⁷

Li Tiangang keeps silent on the ‘sinicization’ rhetoric, which, considering the time his book was published, is a telling fact by itself. In many ways, the description he offers of Chinese religion can be read as a deconstruction of the background against which such rhetoric has been developing. For him, (a) Chinese religion is not defined by an essence, but rather by a combination of opposites that together construct a solid though ever-evolving system; (b) Chinese religion is less a set of “functions” than a dynamic that puts into motion the overall process of social exchange and circulation; (c) communal agency possesses a resilience of its own, which makes Chinese religion “muddle through” the interventions by which the state attempts to define its essence and its uses; (d) and finally, the fact that the basic features of religious life take their origin from the ones governing grassroots society constitutes the unifying factor of Chinese religion. Consequently, when it comes to religions of foreign origin, ‘localization’ or ‘sinicization’ simply means to integrate religious forms with social structures (on this last point, Li 2017, p. 369). In other words, the integration of religious devotions and organizational forms into the social fabric of the society in which the new faith inserts itself is sinicization proper.

The reconstruction of Chinese religious science during the last four decades has been based on four pillars; ethnographic studies; historical research; interpretation of Classics; and comparative analysis. As shown by Li’s analysis, the field is now replete with resources that should make it able to escape the pitfalls that the temptation to propitiate the powers necessarily entails. Still, the temptation remains generally overwhelming.

4.2. Chinese Religion and the Ghosts of Modernity

During the 1920s and 1930s, argues the sociologist Yu Zhejun, popular religion networks became a mold from which, in Shanghai at least, civil society (in the modern acceptance of the term) tried to emerge through management and overseeing of festivals and temples (Yu 2014, p. 56). In other words, during the time of the Chinese Republic, Chinese religion met creatively with ‘Western modernity’, nurturing a set of values and conducts differing from the one instilled by traditional society. Working with Li Tiangang in Jinze Yu has also diversified and, to a certain extent, challenged the mainstream appraisal of what ‘Chinese religion’ refers to: When looking at festivals and other ritual activities he notices a diversification of roles and conducts triggered by modernization. Potential participants in religious activities are offered an array of conducts and networks, from which they can adapt their mode of participation and behavior. Worship can even become individual, a fact that goes against

³⁷ By “Church” (jiaohui 教会) Li Tiangang seems to refer to “Church”, “sect”, and “denomination” at the same time.

the received understanding of what Chinese religion is meant to be (Yu 2015, pp. 24–26, 28). In any case, one observes in Jiangnan the disappearance of lineage-based worship, the strong diminution of locality-based worship groups, and the dominance of various forms of voluntary associations (Yu 2015, p. 29).

Besides, the higher moral status that the state tends to recognize to Buddhist temples and clerics creates a tension, if not open opposition, between two channels of popular religious legitimacy: one relies on the recognition granted by Buddhist monks to the (mainly women) leaders of devotional groups; the other distinguishes lay devotional experts whose special relationship with local deities has been confirmed by rumors of both direct communication with these deities and healing powers (Yu 2015, pp. 26–28). ‘Chinese religion’ may have become a fragmented system.³⁸

The near disappearance of the locality-based worship groups raises the question of the ultimate sustainability of Chinese religion.³⁹ Can it survive the trends created by unprecedented geographical and social mobility? Consequently, what is the standard provided today for orchestrating the sinicization of religion? Will the call towards sinicization work as a way of paying lip service to values and behaviors irremediably attached to the past, as a catchword for conforming to Party’s directives, or can it still refer to ways of thinking and acting anchored into contemporary realities?

5. Sinicizing Religious Studies

Yu Zhejun pleads for the cooperative framing of a sociological typology that would help analysts make sense of the diversity of religious phenomena and organizations in China, and thus escape the pitfalls created by the faith in “Western universalism” or alternatively in “Chinese exceptionalism” (Yu 2015, p. 17). He laments the fact that his Chinese colleagues have not yet paid sufficient attention to the typologies provided by Weber, Troeltsch, or Niebuhr. The in-depth assessment of their relevancy (or lack thereof) is a necessary prolegomenon to the eventual building-up of local categories susceptible to resonate with the ones employed when accounting for other religious systems. Yu’s remark highlights an underlying aspect of the debate on religious sinicization: Should the concepts used for describing religious phenomena be also sinicized, as the realities they cover, and, if so, why, how, and to what extent?

5.1. The Search for a Methodological Apparatus

It is worth noting that the scholars we quote in this contribution, and many others, do not seriously challenge the very concept of ‘religion’. While recalling the history of the translation of the terms and the debate triggered by it⁴⁰, they stick to the opinion that there is, after all, something that can be labeled “religion” (*zongjiao*) in Chinese society. The reasons for this apparently surprising stance are many: (a) First, Matteo Ricci and other early sinologists were denying (or at least relativizing) the existence of “religions” in China, as they were describing related phenomena under the categories of “superstition”, folklore, civil cults, or alternatively philosophy (Zhang 2017, pp. 155–7; Li 2017, pp. 509–10). In other words, for a long time the West has denied to China the ‘dignity’ of having a religion of its own, and this prejudice may still weigh upon the assessment made by Chinese scholars as to the contemporary (Western) attempts at deconstructing ‘religion’ (in Chinese context or as a working concept by itself). (b) Second, Hegelian and Marxist categories still exert a deep influence on

³⁸ The opposition recorded here cannot be described merely as a contrast between institutional and diffused religions: Whatever the source of legitimacy they refer to, the leaders whose behavior is observed by Yu oversee groups that exhibit roughly similar characteristics.

³⁹ Present-days popular rituals often present the characteristics of “retraditionalizing rituals” as theorized by (Tambiah 1979) and (Rudolph 2008). The use of costumes, the intermingling with tourism strategy and the intervention of state agency make festivals and other ritual activities participate in the building-up of a revamped “traditional” identity that often intends to merge into one the local, regional and national senses of belonging.

⁴⁰ For debates on the translation of “religion” as *zongjiao* and the cultural expressions to be included or not into this category around the time when the first World Parliament of Religions was held (1893), see (van der Veer 2014, pp. 86–88).

the thinking of Chinese scholars, who might find it difficult to do without categories such as ‘religion’, ‘society’, and ‘science’ (which came more or less as a package) since such categories are not merely methodological tools but supposedly capture the very dynamic of historical development. (c) At the same time, Chinese scholars stress the fact that early rejections of the ‘religion’ concept by Chinese thinkers⁴¹ were not directed towards the contemporary meaning of the term but rather towards its understanding as *Religiosität* fostered by the exclusive relationship between an individual and his Creator. Somehow, the unfolding of a comparative understanding of the concept and notably of its sociological dimension—a development partly triggered by the taking into account of the Chinese case⁴²—has made the term ‘religion’ flexible enough for warranting the continuation of its use (Li 2017, pp. 511–16).

The inadequacy of the tools gathered into the ‘religion’ methodological box, however, has been lamented for long. Liu Xiaogan, for instance, questions the Chinese researchers’ practice of applying Western concepts to describe and understand their own belief systems, contrarily to what Chinese philosophies did when they used familiar concepts such as those of *Dao* to take into account imported Buddhist notions (Liu 2007; Fan 2009, p. 30). Still, a closer look at some of the criticisms that Chinese scholars direct toward ‘Western’ conceptual tools unveils some disturbing realities. It is for instance common procedure for Chinese scholars to deconstruct the Durkheimian sacred/profane opposition by stressing the fact that Chinese society does not work on such rigorous division of space, time, and activities typical of Western “dualism” (Li et al. 2013). Zhang Zhigang even discerns in the “sacred” as described by Durkheim a typically “Christian” concept (Zhang 2017, p. 254), thus summarily discarding the Roman antecedents of the term, Durkheim’s ethnographic material, and the insistence with which the same Durkheim reminds his reader that the scope of sacred objects can vary infinitely from one religion to another, and that there is nothing substantial to refer to when it comes to the distinction between sacred and profane. Yet, at the same time, Chinese scholars generally show much reverence towards the use of the same term by Mircea Eliade, apparently oblivious of its historical and ideological background, and finding it more universal in scope, (see for instance Jin 2015; Li et al. 2013). The difficulty in understanding the theoretical tenets that are those of the French sociological school⁴³ may be due to a deep-seated preference for ‘essentialist’ definitions and ways of proceeding. Examining one recent attempt at methodological inventiveness will shed light on what is at stake.

5.2. Crafting Alternative Concepts

Beijing University Professor Li Silong’s approach of “Chinese religion” as “humanistic religion” (*renwen zongjiao* 人文宗教) aims not only at characterizing the tradition at stake but also, and more importantly, at providing the analyst with an alternative set of concepts when describing its main tenets, so as to develop “a theory of religion with Chinese characteristics” (Li 2016, p. 43)⁴⁴. For him, Chinese religion consists of three layers: first, religious practices developed before the arrival of Buddhism (ritual corpus, mantic techniques linked to the “five agents” worldview, and divinatory methods aimed at preventing disasters and nurturing the relation between Heaven and Earth); second, “foreign religions” progressively anchored into the Chinese soil (Buddhism first and foremost, but Li makes

⁴¹ Liang Qichao (1873–1929) was the first to make regular use of the term *zongjiao* (religion) but also to answer the question “does China have religion?” with a qualified and cautious negative (Zhang 2017, p. 148). Zhang Zhigang also points out that the sentence “China has no religion” had very different meanings in the mind of Liang Qichao, Qian Mu, or Hu Shi for instance.

⁴² Present-day Chinese thinkers do not appear to focus much on the role played by colonial knowledge in the formation of the field of comparative religion. On this historical linkage, (see for instance van der Veer 2014, pp. 75–78).

⁴³ If due reference is paid to Granet, his sociological method is neither analyzed nor fully understood. Things are changing however. There are new and excellent translations of Granet’s *La religion des Chinois* and Marcel Mauss’ *Essai sur le Don*. See also a recent investigation on Granet’s theoretical training: (Lu 2018).

⁴⁴ Li Silong also edits a biannual entitled *Renwen zongjiao yanjiu* 人文宗教研究 (*Journal of Humanistic Religion*).

cursorily mention of Islam, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Nestorianism, Hinduism, and Judaism⁴⁵); and third, “popular religion and faith” (Li 2016, p. 46). This last term mainly refers to popular organizations, initiatives, and behaviors that amalgamated indigenous elements with others borrowed from foreign faiths; they notably gave birth to organizations that were for a long time labeled as ‘secret societies’, the religious element of which was overlooked. These three layers can be understood as a whole when the analysis focuses on two basic relationships: the ones linking foreign and local elements on the one hand; and ‘official’ and ‘popular’ religions on the other. Li Silong analyzes the second relationship in terms close from the ones used by Li Tiangang. As to the first one, Li Silong insists on the fact that the foreign religions that could adapt and subside were the ones that adopted the humanistic outlook proper to Chinese culture. This is where the methodological dimension of his argument comes into play.

Quoting the “Discourse on Heaven” chapter of the *Xunzi*, Li notes that, when the sacrifice for obtaining rain was performed, the gentleman focused on the observance of proper form (*wen* 文), while the people relied on the intervention of spirits (*shen* 神). The moral superiority that Li ascribes to the first attitude establishes ‘official religion’ as the standard of Chinese religion. However, Li prefers to stress the element common to popular and learned mindsets: both strive towards shaping a better-off, more peaceful and more civilized human world, be it through the study of the Classics or the performance of sacrifices. Only, elites consciously know that civilization progresses through conformity to the immanent laws of the natural world, manifested by appropriate observation of natural cycles and correct reactions to specific events. Such conformity is what ancient Chinese philosophy calls *ganying* (感应) (variously translated in the West as “stimulus–response”, “correlative resonance”, or “sympathetic vibration”). These immanent laws are somewhat made “divine” in popular religion, which operates a transfer from the realm of the “celestial” (*tian* 天) to the one of the “divine” (*shen* 神). Still, the overall logic remains one of a constant interaction between the ‘natural’ and the ‘civilized’ world so as to ensure the sustainability and development of the latter: “The way of thinking proper to Chinese religion has ‘resonance’ as a basis and ‘human culture’ as its application, turning towards [earthly] realities and focusing on the civilizational process” (Li 2016, p. 51). Only through the understanding of such mental framework can Chinese religion be properly described and analyzed.

It would be easy to deconstruct and criticize the mixture of descriptive and prescriptive elements that characterizes Li Silong’s tentative synthesis. One may also wonder whether the stress on the worldview typical of the tradition he explores truly invalidates the use of a comparative conceptual framework, such (for instance) as the one developed by Marcel Granet, who was able to combine an approach of the uniqueness of Chinese thought probably more radical than the one sketched by Li Silong with a Durkheim-inspired sociological apparatus. Still, a (admittedly charitable) reading of Li’s approach is entitled to stress the following: Approaching Chinese religion as “man-centered”, contrasted to “God-centered” religions, may eventually lead to inscribe it into a taxonomy based on new premises. In some respects, the contribution of an Emic understanding of Chinese religion to a comparative approach of the field has already been illustrated during the last decades by the development of “ritual studies”: That Catherine Bell (one of the scholars who contributed in making ritual studies become a field of its own) was a sinologist by training is no accident. The introspective return on the sources and effects of ritual activities underwent by Confucius, Xunzi, and the compilers of the *Book of Rites* still paves the way we understand ritual today. Contemporary thinkers have built upon Chinese philosophers’ insights when, for instance, they venture to assess that “explicitly sacred rites can be seen as an emphatic, intensified and sharply elaborated extension of everyday, *civilized* intercourse.” (Fingarette 1972, p. 11) In this regard, Li Silong is justified to find in Chinese Classics

⁴⁵ Li conspicuously avoids mentioning Christianity as a foreign religion that would have interacted with the local tradition. The list also implicitly introduces Nestorianism (or Church of the East, as it is now, and rightly labeled) as a religion independent from Christianity.

not only the content of Chinese religion proper but also the basis from which to unravel the inner workings of its system (and, hypothetically, of other religious systems as well).

Another element worth of interest lies in the subtext of Li's proposal: by putting the spotlight on the reading of Classics and making it centerpiece to his analysis, Li intends to plead for a type of religious science that locates itself within the Humanities tradition rather than relying merely on social sciences.⁴⁶ A recent report issued by the Institute of World Religion in Beijing confirms the fact that a debate is taking place at this jointure: it encourages researchers "to seek a balance between research on religions based on Humanities and that based on social science" (Wang 2018).

The fact remains that the privileged moral and epistemic position claimed by Li Silong for the "official religion" of China (since it best encapsulates its "humanistic" nature) is, for most (foreign) contemporary researchers on Chinese religion, deeply problematic.⁴⁷ Such a standpoint makes it easy to justify (and even request) the guidance that present-day officials impose upon religious expressions so as to make them better conform to a "humanistic religion", the essence of which believers are only barely aware of.

5.3. Civil Religion: A Retracted Debate

The call for religious sinicization could have triggered a debate about whether a distinct "civil religion with Chinese characteristics" could be described and/or constructed. After all, as we already noted, the slogan according to which "when the people have faith, the nation possesses strength" (Xi 2017), the editing of Xi's quotations of the Classics into a kind of official canon (Editorial Section of People's Daily 2015), the new solemnity conferred to the national flag and anthem as well as to a few chosen places and festivals⁴⁸, all of this speaks of (re)building "national sacredness", an operation that has been labeled in other contexts "civil religion", "political religion", or "state-based religion" (Bellah 1980; Cristi and Dawson 2007; Okuyama 2012). However, discussions among Chinese scholars around the topic took place before the 'sinicization' program was launched, and its development was most probably hindered by the fact that its continuation would have been seen as a direct interference into it. As a matter of fact, the years 2021–2014 seem to have witnessed a peak of publications around the theme. It indicates that reflection around the topic was mainly pursued towards the end of the Hu Jintao mandate, when the 'harmonious society' discourse was widely seen as failing to cement national cohesiveness.

The term "civil religion" (*gongmin zongjiao* 公民宗教) remains a specialized one, as is also the case in other languages after all, but is just as solidly attested as it is in English or French. The first complete Chinese translation of Rousseau's *Social Contract* was published in 1902. Several other translations followed, the one by He Zhaowu (see Rousseau [1762] 1958) being regularly reprinted (Chen 2007). Attempts to apply the concept to China often aim at exploring the possibility of making Confucianist doctrine and rituals an ideological basis similar in some ways to the *religio* of ancient Rome, mainly because of the stress by both traditions on ritual orthopraxis rather than on orthodoxy.⁴⁹ The debate has antecedents in Late Qing and Republican China:

⁴⁶ The Humanities in China remain shaped by the reading of the Classics as formatted by their Chinese commentators the term *jingxue* 经学 refers to such reading and commentarial tradition.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, the way John Lagerwey describes how, in his view, neo-Confucian elites and the Jesuits allied in their attempt at "rationalizing" popular religion: "The neo-Confucian elite had its own project, namely to transform Chinese society by ridding it of the rituals of shamans, Buddhists and Daoists and putting Confucian rituals in their place. [...] The Chinese elite had not yet driven all gods from the space we call China-for that they would have to wait for their twentieth century descendants, the Nationalists and then the Communists-but they were making good progress. To make a long story short, Thomist rationalism encountered neo-Confucian rationalism and found every reason to 'make a deal'." (Lagerwey 2010, pp. 3–4)

⁴⁸ CPC memorials receive reinforced attention and new packaging; the traditional mid-Autumn Festival is now also called "Harvest Festival", etc . . .

⁴⁹ See, for example, the special topic of *Zhexue fenxi* (Philosophical Analysis) of May 2012: "Confucianism and Civil Religion."

While Liang [Qichao] rejected Confucianism as a model, others tried to develop a modern understanding of history as a sign of the nation by referring to Confucian social ethics as the ‘spirit of the nation’ (*minzu jingshen*, 民族精神). This form of neo-Confucianism as a kind of spiritual nationalism ultimately failed to take root in China, since it turned out to be too difficult to unmoor Confucianism from the now defunct imperial system and turn it into the civil religion of the modern nation-state. (van der Veer 2014, p. 56)⁵⁰

Towards the end of the period when the issue was most actively debated, an article by Peking University Professor Sun Xiangyang answers negatively the question as to whether Confucianism can be constructed as the civil religion of contemporary China. The arguments he develops ground a position that is probably shared today by the majority of Chinese scholars: (a) The lack of a tradition that confers the ultimate sovereignty to the people makes it hard to establish Confucianism as a civil religion, at least in the Western meaning of the word; (b) The approach to “Heaven” that Confucianism develops does not inspire neither love nor fear, two elements that makes traditional civil religions effective. (c) Today’s Confucianism lacks the organizational elements typical of the “Church” model that makes a religion socially functional. (d) Some scholars have interpreted American civil religion as an ideological system that maintains and justifies oppression of minorities. Similarly, Confucianism could be read as a system of oppression of the Han majority against national minorities, especially the ones with a monotheistic tradition, which should incite its promoters to exercise caution (Sun 2015).⁵¹

Similar conclusions were probably reached by the team that set up and continues to adjust the ideological basis of Xi Jinping’s “New Era” policies. Official discourses and policies make it clear that policy makers concluded that, during the Reform and Opening era, China had erred by not having devised a system of civil beliefs and worship that would have filled the void left by the disappearance of Maoism. They found it obvious that the Party was still best equipped for managing symbols of legitimacy and sacredness. After all, the Party does inspire both love and fear, functions as a Church, and unites under the same ideology Han people and minorities. It is the sole instance through which to construct and nurture both orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Religions should be seen as subordinate channels of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, which the Party oversees through the sinicization policy. If consistently followed, religious sinicization may contribute additional resources for developing an all-encompassing “civil religion”, which, “making the country the object of the citizens’ adoration, teaches them that service done to the State is service done to its tutelary god.”⁵²

6. Conclusions

In many ways, religious studies in today’s China can be considered a mature and even exciting academic field. Fieldwork on rituals and organizations is well developed; textual studies benefit from a long scholarly tradition; the debates that immediately followed the start of the Reform and Opening policies integrated and furthered trends and methods coming from the West while dealing with issues proper to the country at that time; and, to a large extent, Chinese and foreign scholars researching religions in China now constitute a scholarly community defined by a strong degree of interdependence.

Yet, political imperatives continue to shape the scope of the issues to be investigated; censorship and self-censorship are pervasive (at the time of the writing of this essay, approval of religion-related articles and books has been slowed almost to a halt, though, if lessons drawn from the past are still

⁵⁰ During the same period, when ‘national salvation’ was seen as a common imperative, the idea of making Christianity the ‘national religion’ was also seriously explored by some. It not only influenced Sun Yatsen’s thinking but also the program of warlords such as Feng Yuxiang (1882–1948) and Zhang Zhijiang, (1882–1966). In a less consistent manner the same idea was found at certain periods of Chang Kai-shek’s career.

⁵¹ Sun clearly refers here to Muslim minorities. Whether he also indirectly refers to Han people believing in monotheistic faiths is unclear.

⁵² Rousseau, *Social Contract*, IV-8.

valid, this should not decisively affect the long-term development of the discipline). The last few years made the situation worse, as religions are now primarily envisioned by the state apparatus, first as part of an all-encompassing ‘national security’ problem, second as forces to be tamed and pressured, so they may not hinder the Party-State project of ideological reconstruction.

The same challenge is met by all Chinese social scientists. The objectives that Xi Jinping imparted to them in a speech delivered in May 2016 are aptly summarized by Froissart: “Chinese researchers must assimilate the social sciences contributions of other countries ‘without forgetting their roots and their culture’ and synthesize these contributions through Marxism. They must also excavate traditional Chinese culture and demonstrate its excellence while adapting it to modern society to give it a power of attraction across borders and times” (Froissart 2018, p. 6). As a consequence, “if there is a particular and probably irreducible specificity to the Chinese social sciences, it is the political hold of the CCP on research with which researchers must constantly contend, and the injunction to create a model that does not exist in countries where research autonomy is institutionalised” (Froissart 2018, p. 8).

However, social scientists, and scholars on religion in particular, are not merely passive receivers of state injunctions. First, they often display critical distance and creative thinking. Second, there is an interplay between scholarship and leadership that is not easy to fathom. In many ways, the Chinese state is fragmented: Scholars deal with the Ministry of Propaganda, the United Front, the State Administration of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and often with local governments. All these institutions develop particular agendas, and are sometimes in concurrence. Researchers also need to ensure good standing with academic authorities, their peers, students, and the general public. These various obligations can be balanced in many ways. As Michel de Certeau would have put it, scholars on religion develop fewer “strategies” than “tactics”: “[A] tactic depends on time. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities.’ The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them” (Certeau 1984, p. XIX). If Chinese scholars propound concepts and theories that are easily instrumentalized by the state (the genealogy of the ‘sinicization’ policy is a case in point⁵³), they may also open up spaces of relative freedom by ‘interpreting’ and reframing state-sponsored research directions. That Chinese religious studies remain politically and culturally heavily loaded should probably not be lamented but rather taken as a reality, and a reality that triggers effects worth of attention. This contribution has suggested that, while the sinicization imperative has dramatically impacted the direction taken by the discipline, it also reopens ancient debates, triggers ingenious detours, and activates new ways at looking both at the past and the present. Political constraints may play the role that the rigor of versification or of other literary models was fulfilling for writers of times past.⁵⁴

Still, the art of ‘muddling through’ displayed by Chinese researchers meets with obvious limits. As scholars of religion are asked to focus on identity issues, they tend to turn towards the past rather

⁵³ As we have seen, the ‘sinicization’ catchword finds its origin in the scholarly discourse, but was utterly instrumentalized by the state. A comparison could be conducted with the way the concept of ‘corporate social responsibility’, which first met with much skepticism, was acclimated into China, and relevant regulations progressively enacted during the first decade of this century. This went through the development of sino-foreign cooperative projects under the auspices of the Ministry of Commerce (which saw CSR as a major enabler for transforming the growth model), the advocacy of press organs such as *Southern Weekly* (*Nanfang zhoumo* 南方周末), and the (relative) development of professional forums and organizations as wells of NGOs (see Vermader 2014, pp. 29–45). The social impact of these two examples is of course very much different (one might even argue that CSR worked towards social empowerment, whereas ‘sinicization’ is largely a coercive tool) but the point is that, in both cases, a concept (CSR/sinicization) propounded by a given community has been progressively coopted by the state.

⁵⁴ Outside the field of religious science, a recent example is provided by Coraline Goron’s analysis of the “Ecological Civilization” concept. An integral part of the CCP’s rhetoric, it has nonetheless been used by Chinese scholars for advancing the agenda of sustainable development: “The fuzzy and evolving value content of Ecological Civilization as a political discourse has left room for the development of a range of meanings and theories of sustainability, including some that have fruitfully engaged with global research” (Goron 2018, p. 49). The author still recognizes the limits of the ‘muddling through’ that Chinese scholars are engaged in. A creative way of looking at how Chinese intellectuals engage with social and mental constraints would be to pay attention to the relation between literary form and content in Chinese thought. Chloë Starr does just that in her account of Chinese Christian theology, past and present (Starr 2016).

than towards the present and future. As a matter of fact, China's urban population rose from less than 20 percent of the total in 1978 to 52 percent in 2012 and 60.4 percent in 2019 (World Bank 2014; Worldometers 2019). Yet, the magnitude of the changes affecting the setting in which religious practices and beliefs evolve is not properly assessed. To the extent it leads to question the lasting quality of the "Chineseness" cultural model promoted by the authorities, the investigation of current trends remains a hazardous endeavor. In contrast, revisiting 'Chinese religion' at the articulation of past and present allows a researcher to take some critical distance without compromising one's position. Political caution and theoretical sophistication are virtues that, today, appear to be in need of each other.

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