


Review

A Review of Mormon Studies in China

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Abstract: Mormon studies in China began in the early 1990s and can be divided into three phases between the years of 2004 and 2017. The first Master's and Doctoral theses on Mormonism were both published in 2004, and journal articles have also been increasing in frequency since then. The year of 2012 saw a peak, partly because Mormon Mitt Romney won the Republican nomination for the 2012 US presidential election. In 2017, a national-level project, *Mormonism and its Bearings on Current Sino-US Relations*, funded by the Chinese government, was launched. However, Mormon studies in China is thus far still in its infancy, with few institutions and a small number of scholars. Academic works are limited in number, and high-level achievements are very few. Among the published works, the study of the external factors of Mormonism is far more prevalent than research on its internal factors. Historical, sociological, and political approaches far exceed those of philosophy, theology, and history of thoughts. To Mormon studies, Chinese scholars can and should be making unique contributions, but the potential remains to be tapped.

Keywords: Mormonism; Mormon Church; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Mormon studies; People's Republic of China



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Mormon studies is not only a part of American studies, but also an important part of research on world religions. The current weak situation of Mormonism research in China¹ is not commensurate with its status as a large country with global influence. A review of Mormon studies in China will help Chinese scholars understand the foundation and direction of further research, and help to strengthen the communication and cooperation between Chinese and foreign scholars in this field.

Generally speaking, Mormon studies in China is still in its infancy, with few research institutions and a very small number of scholars. Academic works are limited, and high-level achievements are few. What can be found in the field is focused on American Mormonism rather than Mormons in China. Among available published works, the research on the external factors of Mormonism surpasses both in number and in quality the research on its internal factors. Correspondingly, historical, sociological, and political approaches far exceed those of philosophy, theology, and ideological history.

This paper presents three aspects of the general state of Mormon studies in China: (1) key background information, including China's religious policy, the general situation of religious studies in China and the presence of Mormons in China; (2) the status of Chinese Mormon studies, especially the understandings of and comments on Mormonism by significant scholars; and (3) analysis of why the field is so small and what potential there exists for significant contributions, as well as advice on promoting communication and cooperation between Chinese and foreign scholars going forward.

1. Religious Policy, Religious Studies, and Mormon Congregations in China

1.1. China's Religious Policy

China claims to adopt policies on freedom of religious belief, manages religious affairs in accordance with the law, adheres to the principle of independence and self-management, and actively guides religions to adapt to socialist society. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China stipulates that citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. However, only five major religions—Buddhism, Taoism,

Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism, with a total of nearly 200 million believers—are recognized as legitimate religions. In addition, China also has four not-yet-legalized but institutionalized religions, with comparatively few believers, i.e., Judaism, Orthodox Church, Bahaism, and Mormonism. There is no independent law on religious governance. Among administrative regulations regarding religious affairs, the Regulations on Religious Affairs protects Chinese citizens' freedom of religious belief (confined to the five recognized religions), while Provisions on the Administration of Religious Activities of Aliens within the Territory of the People's Republic of China manages religious affairs of foreigners (referring to all religions) within the territory of China. Consequently, there is no law for Chinese citizens who are believers of the not-yet-legalized religions. Mormons who are Chinese citizens are thus caught in an awkward and legally ambiguous situation.

1.2. Religious Studies in China

In the academic development of contemporary China, religious studies is one of the fastest growing and most productive academic subjects. At present, about 60 universities in China offer courses related to religious studies, and more than half of them grant Master's or Doctor's degrees. There are research institutions or scholars conducting research on religious issues in the Party Schools, academies of social sciences, and socialist institutes of central, provincial, and major municipal governments.

In 2020, a voluminous book entitled *Contemporary Religious Studies in China (1949–2019)* (Zhuo 2020) was published, which comprehensively summarizes the achievements of religious studies in China. Containing nearly 700 pages, this book covers the studies of Marxist religious views, basic theories of religious studies, religious philosophy, contemporary religions, religion and international relations, and the studies on the ideological and cultural background and historical influence of ancient Christianity, Christian development, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Chinese folk religions, Confucianism, Shamanism, Jewish religion and philosophy, Chinese Judaism, etc. One of the six sections of “the study of contemporary religions”, briefly covers “studies of new religions”, but hardly mentions Mormonism.

Overall, religious studies in China sees many scholars and fruitful achievements and plays an important role within the humanities and social sciences. However, there are two major obstacles hindering its development. Religious studies remains a secondary discipline to philosophy within the classification of higher education disciplines, which restricts deeper exploration and independent development of its branches. In addition, there are relatively few journals of religious research, with only 11 CSSCI² journals, making it a crowded field for religious scholars to publish their papers in. Mormonism remains one of the most difficult subjects to have papers published on.

1.3. Mormon Congregations in China

The Mormon Church began to send missionaries to China in 1852, and officially declared China a missionary area in 1921. After the year 2000, Mormon congregations slowly developed in Chinese mainland. The Mormon Church has long pursued the policy of “going through the front door” by making dialogue and negotiation with Chinese authorities (Vendassi and Thornely 2014). The Chinese government has not recognized the legal status of Mormonism, but has been generally tolerant.

At present, there are 25,083 Mormons in Hong Kong, 61,607 in Taiwan, and 1463 in Macao.³ The number of Mormons in mainland China is no less than 28,000, mainly located in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Shenyang, Zhengzhou, Zhongshan, and other big cities, as well as medium-sized and small cities nearby. In China, foreign and Chinese Mormons meet separately, and are called by the church “China International District” and “Chinese Administrative Unit”, respectively. Mormons of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan living in the mainland can choose to attend either one of these gatherings. There are about 90 congregations for Chinese Mormons, including more than 60 branches and more than 20 smaller groups. Most of them rent residential buildings as churches. They meet for two hours on Sunday morning with the same meeting process as in other countries.

There are two or three large-scale annual activities including the National Youth Summer Camp to be held at the end of July or the beginning of August and National Single Adult Fraternity in April and October. The number of participants in these two activities is generally 100 to 200. Usually held in Shanghai, both activities require church leadership to file with the public security bureaus and the religious affairs bureaus at specified levels. In December, each branch organizes its own celebration of Christmas, or socializes with fellows in nearby cities (Z.D. Wang 2020). Chinese Mormons have not publicly become academic objects of Chinese scholars despite having been active for over twenty years, partly because of their legal status. A limited number of think tank scholars and civil servants of the united front work departments and religious affairs bureaus at various levels previously conducted some social investigations, but no further research is available.

2. Overview of Mormon Studies

In addition to four translations on American history, the current state of the United States, and the study of world religions, Chinese scholars' research on Mormonism began in the early 1990s and can be divided into three phases with 2004 and 2017 as the watershed years. The first Master's and Doctoral theses on Mormonism both appeared in 2004. Since then, the number of journal papers has increased year by year. The year of 2012 saw a peak, partly because Mormon fellow Mitt Romney won the Republican nomination for the US presidential election, which greatly stimulated Chinese intellectuals' interest in Mormonism and its influence on the election campaign. In 2017, the first national project related to Mormonism, *Mormonism and its Bearings on Current Sino-US relations*, funded by the Chinese government (National Social Science Foundation Project), was authorized.

Research produced on Mormonism to date is still limited whether compared with the research on the five major legal religions or with Bahaism, which also remains a not-yet legitimate religion in China. Due to the lack of monographic research and the nature of most of the writings as general introductions and simple discussion, a classification of achievement forms is the most effective method to review the research of Mormonism in China. There are only two monographs on Mormonism. About eighteen general introductory studies on world religion, American studies, and American religions contain one chapter or one section introducing Mormonism, and four of them are translations from English works. Additionally, there are three doctoral dissertations, twelve Master's theses, and more than forty journal papers. The current research achievements mainly adopt the approaches of history, sociology, and politics, far exceeding the approaches of philosophy, literature, theology, and history of thought.

There was one national project mentioned above and another provincial-level project on Mormonism funded in 2020 by the government. Only one specialized research institution existed, founded in 2017, and few lectures and no public academic conferences or forums have been organized in recent years. A detailed breakdown follows.

2.1. Monographs

The first monograph is *Entering the Mysterious Holy Temple-Mormonism* (Jiang 2011), published in 2011. Its author, Dongyuan Jiang, a professor at China University of Mining and Technology, specializing in English Language and Literature, first came in contact with Mormonism and developed academic interest in it when he visited Yale University in 2008. Jiang's book is a relatively comprehensive and detailed introduction to Mormonism, including its history and current situation, organizations and sects of Mormonism, Mormon teachings and beliefs in Christian views, the basic contents of Mormon scriptures, and Mormon rituals and church regulations. Its appendix includes major religious denominations in the USA, sects of Mormonism, marriages of early Mormon leaders, changes of scriptures, and growth data of certain periods. With a long list of references in English, this book can be used as a valuable guide and reference for further studies. In general, the author holds a relatively negative view on Mormonism, believing that Mormonism is a heresy and a strange, marginal sect with significant male chauvinism. He does admit, however, that

Mormonism has a far-reaching influence both in the United States and throughout the world, and occupies an important position in the field of religion globally.

The second monograph, *A Historical Analysis of Mormon Afro-American Priests⁴ in U.S.A. (1848–1978)* by Yanli Qu (Qu 2016), is based on her doctoral thesis, mainly on the ethnic issues in the history of Mormonism. Qu's work is to be introduced later in this paper.

The poor quantity of monographs on Mormonism shows not only the weak basis of Mormon studies in China, but also the degree of difficulty of publishing works on Mormonism and religion in general.

2.2. General Introductory Works

Three books on American history by American scholars, *The Growth of the American Republic* (Morison et al. 1969), *The Book of America: Inside the Fifty States Today* (Peirce and Hagstrom 1983), and *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (Billington 1974), were translated by Chinese scholars and, respectively, published in 1980, 1987, and 1991. Some of their chapters covered the history of Mormonism and its relationship with the Utah state and federal government. These were the earliest Chinese materials giving Chinese scholars access to knowledge regarding Mormonism. In 1995, an American scholar's book, *Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View* (Palmer and Keller 1990), was translated into Chinese and published, but "A Latter-day Saint View" was deleted from the title. This book introduced the history, beliefs, doctrines, and practices of Mormonism.

Among thirteen introductory books related to Mormonism by Chinese scholars, two are on China's religious policy, one on contemporary Protestantism, six on American religion and American culture, two on world religions, and two on new religions. The contents of these studies are similar, focusing mainly on history, beliefs, organizations, sects, the influence of Mormonism, etc. Their evaluation of Mormons is relatively objective and often depicts the church in a positive light.

Two scholars' remarks deserve great attention because they are from two directors of the State Administration of Religious Affairs. Xiaowen Ye, the former director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs (in office 1995–2009), once mentioned that some new religions "moved up" and some "went down" in society when discussing the problems of cults and new religions in the world. He admitted that as a new religion in America, Mormonism, while opposing the mainstream traditional religion and mainstream ideology, advocated compromising with society as far as possible. Doing so allowed the church and its followers to gradually adapt and integrate into the existing society and eventually expand after attaining recognition from the public (Ye 2014). Zuoan Wang, the current director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, basically holds a similar view. He believes that American Mormonism had successfully eased its relationship with mainstream society while setting out to institutionalize and had been called an "indigenous religion" by academic circles (Z.A. Wang 2010).

Generally speaking, Mormonism is regarded as a new religion with its own characteristics, rather than a cult, heretic Christianity or marginal sect by an overwhelming majority of Chinese scholars. They generally believe that the history of Mormonism after 1890 can be divided into three stages: 1890–1930 as the transitional period, 1930–1960 as the adaptation period, and 1960–today as the missionary stage. They believe that Mormonism has gradually institutionalized and gone mainstream in the United States. They also recognize that its positive influence in the United States and the world is growing greatly, with Romney's nomination as strong evidence (Yu 1993; Duan 1994; Qing 2002; Liu 2012; Gao 2006; Dong 2014). Some scholars have analyzed the reasons for the success of Mormonism, believing that it was a result of Mormonism's emphasis and insistence on missionary work, healthy lifestyle, and its adaptability to the times (Duan 1994).

Studies on Mormonism are both an unavoidable part of general religious studies and an essential chapter in American studies. This is true even in China. Mormonism is an influential force that cannot and should not be ignored in today's world.

2.3. Doctoral Dissertations

The first doctoral dissertation on Mormonism in China is named *Study on Mormonism* by Jingru Long, a doctoral candidate of Shandong University in 2004. This paper is still in a confidential state today, which may be on account of the author's status as a civil servant of the State Administration of Religious Affairs. She or her affiliation may not want this paper to arouse public speculation and inappropriate interpretation on China's Mormon policy.

The second doctoral dissertation is *A Historical Analysis of Mormon Afro-American Priests in U.S.A. (1848–1978)* written by Yanli Qu, a doctoral candidate of Northeast Normal University in 2013. Qu's specialty is world history, and her research focuses on western cultural history. This dissertation sets forth the background, content, and influence of black priesthood denial systematically and comprehensively with time as the proverbial horizontal line and historical events as the associated vertical line. Highlighting different effects on black believers at different points in history, this article expounds the conversion, discrimination, and integration policy of Mormon Church. Furthermore, this article also helps us to explore how black believers adapt their own culture to Mormon culture. Besides an introduction and conclusion, there are four chapters in this paper. Chapter one gives a minute description of Joseph Smith's views on slavery, black believers, and black priesthood holders on the basis of the prejudices against blacks in Mormon scriptures. Chapter two contests that the origins and consequences of black priesthood denial are the result of internal and external factors on the Mormon Church. Qu explains that Mormon Church leaders' discrimination against black people, the peculiar doctrines, the humble origins of black believers, together with slavery and the social reality of racial discrimination against blacks worked together to form the ban. Chapter three reviews the social and church status of blacks in the early 1950s, long before the black priesthood denial was repealed, and discusses the viability and urgency of abolishing the black priesthood prohibition. Moreover, in this chapter, the author makes full use of empirical analysis to illustrate the great changes that have taken place in the Mormon Church and its overseas missionary efforts after the church lifted the ban. Chapter four sums up the above, combines the black priesthood ban with Mormon black priesthood holders and Mormon black believers to probe the relationship between black social status and black religious status, and the unification of racial rights with religious rights. Based on empirical analysis, this chapter imagines the development of Mormon Church and the problems the black priesthood holders may face in the future. In 2016, this dissertation was published and became the earliest and only monograph in China on Mormon racial issues (Qu 2016).

In 2015, Junfei Li, a doctoral student in English language and literature at Shanghai International Studies University, completed his doctoral thesis *The Magic Marriage: Mormonism and American Popular Culture* (J. Li 2015). As the third doctoral dissertation, this paper discusses the relationship between the book of Mormon and the Bible, the relationship between Mormonism and American popular culture such as movies and novels, and the role of The Tabernacle Choir in the church's integration into the mainstream society after 1890. It is believed that the marriage of Mormonism and American popular culture is rooted both in the doctrine of "homogeneity between God and humanity" of Mormonism and American pragmatic values. After comprehensively sorting out the affinities between Mormonism and American popular culture, Li argues that the Janus face of Mormon image depicted in popular culture both affirms and challenges American values. As a representative of New Religious Movement religions, Mormonism has become a converging point that mirrors the conflict between traditional Christian values and postmodern American lifestyles. At the same time, the Mormon Church's affinities with popular culture have greatly enhanced the social capital of Mormon communities. Thusly, the tension between Mormonism and American popular culture can reveal both the Mormon identity and certain characteristics of Americanness. The author also points out that the mainstream of the United States today holds an ambivalent attitude that is both vigilant and acceptant towards Mormonism.

These two dissertations are detailed and comprehensive with objective and pertinent conclusions. The number of doctoral dissertations is one of the symbols of the development of an academic field. This is an indicator that China's Mormon studies remains at the very beginning stage, and many other important topics need to be studied in Chinese.

2.4. Master's Theses

There are twelve Master's theses currently. Among them, there are five historical studies: *The Westward Migration of Mormons and Their Development of Utah Grand Canyon (1830–1869)* (Y. An 1991), *Analysis of U.S. Government's Policy Towards Utah Mormons (1847–1896)* (X. An 2004), *The Origins of Spirit of Mormons (1847–1890)* (D. Zhang 2006), *A Study of the Mormon Church's Indian Policy under Brigham Young's Superintendence (1851–1857)* (Y. Wang 2008), and *The Transformation of the Utah Mormon Church in the Transitional Period (1890–1930)* (X. Li 2008); two sociological studies: *A new world religion? Analyzing the growth of Mormonism from the perspectives of sociology* (Lin 2014), and *The Analysis of the Religious Influence on the Religious Transnational Corporations in the Transnational Political and Economic Interactions* (Du 2014); two of them go through literature approach: *Cultural Explore of Gender Roles in Twilight Saga* (Sun 2013) and *Ethical Awakening in Historical Dilemma: An Interpretation of Riders of the Purple Sage* (L. Xu 2015); one in comparative religious studies: *Multiple Views of God: Research on the Religious Culture of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom* (M. Wang 2014); and two reviews of American religious history and studies on Mormon history. Each of these Master's theses fulfilled the task of sorting out and presenting Mormon knowledge in a specific area, and details of four selected works with significant academic value are laid out in this section.

Xiufen An's Master's thesis *An Analysis of the Policies of the U.S. Government towards Utah Mormons (1847–1896)* briefly introduces the development of the Mormon Church in Utah. Through studies of the contradictions and conflicts between the Mormon Church and the federal government, it explores the true aspects of American religious policies. This thesis consists of three parts. The first part specifically introduces the historical background of the Mormon Church's rising and its basic doctrines. On this basis, it expounds the early development of the Mormon Church in the eastern and central regions of the US. The second part is the main part. First, it analyzes the specific reasons that the Mormon Church was persecuted in Utah areas from discussions of five aspects: politics, economics, religious and social cultures, Indian-related factors, and its immigration policies, with great emphasis on discussions of the fundamental reasons why the church continues to clash with the federal government in political and economic ways. On the mentioned basis, An then narrates the course of the conflicts between the federal government and the Mormon Church in Utah, which were reflected in the enactment of a series of bills by the federal government such as the "Morrill Act", the "Poland Act", the "Edmunds anti-Polygamy Act", the "Edmunds-tucker Act", etc. This paper argues that the federal government gradually deprived the Mormon Church of political and economic power in Utah and stamped out the theocracy that had been set up there. It maintained the long-established constitutional government of the United States by means of effective legislature and administration, especially in the name of anti-polygamy. The final section of this paper briefly introduces the development of the Mormon Church after relinquishing the theocratic regime. After giving up their secular political power, Mormons turned to focus on the development of the church itself. Their great economic success made the Mormon Church continue to have considerable power in Utah. At the same time, Mormons took lessons from its early development experiences to avoid excessive participation in politics and to pay more attention to repairing their relations with mainstream society. It then became a basic trend for the Mormon Church to adapt to mainstream society in the United States to allow for better development.

In her Master's thesis *The Origins of the Spirit of Mormons (1847–1890)*, Dan Zhang expresses that after the Mormon Church moved westward to Utah in 1847, Mormons gradually formed a "Mormon spirit," which emphasizes unity and cooperation, education,

family and marriage, and equal roles for men and women. This spirit is based on the basic doctrines of Mormonism, although it goes beyond the limits of religion and becomes a prominent character of the Mormon people themselves. Zhang's thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter introduces the origin of Mormonism and its moving to Utah, analyzes the background for the rise of Mormonism, introduces Mormons' basic beliefs, and discusses the reasons for moving to the Utah territory. The second chapter is on Mormons' emphasis on cooperation, with the examples of agricultural and commercial businesses. The third chapter discusses Mormons' emphasis on education. Examples include educational ideas and practices of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. The fourth chapter analyzes Mormons' emphasis on family and the equal roles of women in both society and family. The fifth chapter discusses the continuation of the Mormon spirit, arguing that the influence of the Mormon spirit has continued to the present day. It also analyzes the subjective and objective reasons for the emergence and continuation of the Mormon spirit. Zhang's combining of the study of Mormon spirit with a specific historical period in Mormon history is innovative and original.

Yingjue Wang's thesis, *A Study of the Mormon Church's Indian Policy under Brigham Young's Superintendence (1851–1857)*, mainly introduces the Mormon Church towards Indians when Brigham Young was both the second president of the Mormon Church and the governor of Utah territory. Wang gives a comprehensive analysis of the Mormon Church's Indian policies in 1850s from the following angles: Mormon doctrinal views of Indians, the Mormon adoption program, conflicts between Mormons and Indians, and Mormon Indian missionary work. Wang argues that the Mormon Church's Indian policies were much more moderate and humane than the former European and the federal government. The assertion is made that while these policies certainly have a positive significance, the essence of their formation lied in the needs of the church's own religious practice and realistic survival and development rather than in making progress in opposing racial discrimination and slavery.

In her Master's thesis *The Transformation of the Utah Mormon Church in the Transitional Period (1890–1930)*, Xueli Li contests that the key transitional period of the Mormon Church is from 1890 to 1930, during which time Mormons stopped the practice of polygamy and completed the process of initial integration into mainstream society in the United States. She argues that the process of the church's transition is essentially a process of "secularization" and "modernization". Economically, the transformation was from cooperative communitarianism to capitalist individualism. Politically, the church formed alliances with the two major political parties to realize the transition from theocracy to secular government. Socially, the abandonment of polygamy and the implementation of monogamy caused changes in the status of women and in family concepts. In doctrinal practice, the scope of God's chosen people was expanded, and teachings about the Word of Wisdom, tithing, baptism for the dead, missionary work, family, and continuation of genealogy were emphasized. Construction of God's Temple was given more attention. In education, religious authority was weakened to a certain extent in schools. In analyzing the reasons for the transformation of the Utah Mormon Church and its conflicts with the mainstream American society, Li's thesis grasps the key problems as it focuses on the "three pillars" of the Mormon Church.

Thus far, Master's theses are the main and most important contributors to the understanding of Mormonism in China. Among these twelve Master's theses, six are from Northeast Normal University, which shows the school to be an important hub for the study of Mormon history. Four Master's theses and one doctoral dissertation, *A Historical Analysis of Mormon Afro-American Priests in U.S.A. (1848–1978)*, mentioned above, were directed by Xiaochuan Dong in world history, and one Master's thesis was directed by Dongyuan Jiang. This shows that Mormon studies in China has seen intergenerational transmission. It appears that these young authors may become an important force in Mormon studies in the future.

2.5. Journal Papers

There are forty-one journal papers of academic value, including twelve historical studies, sixteen using the sociology approach, four of philosophy and school of thought, three by the literature review approach and six press commentaries. Spanning across these genres, nine articles appeared in 2012. While two thirds of these studies are merely brief introductions to Mitt Romney himself and his religious background, this still made 2012 a peak year of Mormon studies in China. A review of a select number of particularly impressive studies follows.

In terms of historical studies, Yufeng An's research on the history of Mormonism in the 1990s stands out first as worthy of attention. His work is mainly about the development of the Utah Grand Canyon by the Mormon Church (Y. An 1992), polygamy (Y. An 1993), welfare programs (Y. An 1995), etc. An holds that the achievements of the Mormon Church in irrigation engineering made an important contribution to the early development of Utah from 1849 to 1869. He shows a sympathetic understanding of polygamy in history and believes polygamy played a positive role in ensuring the increase of the frontier population and enhancing the cohesion of the church. In terms of the church welfare program, An believes that it helped Utah and the federal government very much to tide over the economic difficulties from 1929 to 1938. After 1995, however, YuFeng An did not continue to engage in academic research. Beyond An's work in history, Yanli Qu and Xiaochuan Dong discussed the black issue in the Mormon Church, believing that the thoughts and remarks of predominate church leaders affected the development and trend of the ban on blacks holding the priesthood, and nourished the theory of white racial superiority (Qu 2012; Qu and Xiaochuan 2013). Other scholars have studied the restrictions of American Law on religious behavior of the Mormon Church in the 19th century (X. Wang 2015), the changes of Mormon marriage views (Long 2001), and the origin and development of Mormonism (Jin 1994; Chen 2009).

Scholarly sociological research on Mormonism mainly focuses on such topics as the relationship between politics and religion, Mormonism and the American presidential election, polygamy, the reasons for the success of Mormon Church, social influence, economic performance, etc. Among them, Yunfeng Lu, a professor of sociology at Peking University, in his article *From Edge to Mainstream: State regulation and the transition of Mormonism in the United States*, takes Mormonism as a case to discuss the influencing factors of the conversion of a religious group from denomination to church. He believes that the intervention by the US government was the main reason for Mormonism's reduction in its social tension, i.e., giving up polygamy. This case study, in his opinion, expands the content of the denomination-church theory of sociology of religion (Lu 2011).

Yihua Xu, an expert on religion and international relations at Fudan University, and others believe that Romney's Mormon faith did not exert a substantial impact on Romney's 2008 and 2012 presidential election campaigns. The increased religious tolerance in American society, and Mormons' reducing of social tensions and actively integrating into mainstream society are the basic two reasons for that (Y. Xu 2008, 2013; Z. P. Zhang 2012). Meanwhile, a handful of scholars still believe that Mormonism was the biggest obstacle for Romney and Jon Huntsman in winning support in the election (Z. X. Zhang 2008; Gong 2011).

Some scholars have studied Mormon fundamentalism and polygamy. They believe that, just like monogamous marriage, even in fundamentalist marriage, the relationship between husband and wife is diversified. Those studies expand understanding of polygamy, especially regarding the status of women who live in areas with a high concentration of Mormon culture (Zhao and Zeng 2005).

Shining Gao, a professor of religious studies at Renmin University of China, believes that the main reasons for the success of Mormonism lie in six aspects: first, its insistence on a certain degree of continuity with traditional religious beliefs; second, its tight organizational structure and power to effectively control or mobilize the vast majority of believers; third, its maintenance of a reasonable age, gender, and quality structure; fourth, its stability,

continuity, and institutionalization of organizational leadership; fifth, its well functioned interpersonal networks; and sixth, its active engagement in social services (Gao 2005). Her views have been recognized as significant by relevant Chinese government officials and leaders of Mormon headquarters.

Research on philosophy and doctrinal approach is represented by Weichi Zhou's study of the peasant uprising movement of China in the 19th century, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom or Taiping Rebellion. His paper tries to demonstrate why the spiritual banner of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement—God Worshipping Society—belongs to the Christian tradition rather than the Chinese folk religion by comparing the Society with Mormonism. Zhou believes that the two are highly similar in origin background, theology, revelation, scriptures, ceremonies, festivals, social politics views, history and church experience, etc. (Zhou 2012). This was the first article in China to get involved in the comparative study of Mormon and Chinese religion. Zhou's work is enlightening and instructive to further studies of this kind. Hongxia Song, from Zhejiang Academy of Social Sciences, conducted a comparative study on RLDS and LDS, involving many aspects including doctrines and thoughts (Song 2002).

There are two professors, in American literature from Northeast Normal University, Yunmin Zou and Xianlai Yuan, as well as Dongyuan Jiang (mentioned above) from China University of Mining and Technology, who published three articles on Mormonism from a literary perspective. The former studied the changes in the images of Mormons and female Mormons in the history of American literature (Yuan 2017; Zou and Yuan 2019), while the latter mainly criticized Mormonism in the middle and late 19th century by studying Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (Jiang 2016).

In addition to the above academic papers on Mormonism, there are also multiple commentary pieces on the present phenomenon of polygamy in America and Canada, stories of Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman Jr., press comments about the musical *The Book of Mormon* show in Australia, and even some travel notes of Salt Lake City. There are also some scholars who have studied the situation of enterprises run by the Mormon Church, the relationship between Mormons' economic performance and the economic ethics of the church, as well as the influence of the Mormon Church on the US society, especially in the western states. These works, however, are mostly anecdotal and for general knowledge, rather than part of academic studies.

In general, historical and sociological studies occupy a large proportion of the journal papers on Mormonism. However, an increasing number of scholars from other fields have been finding Mormonism a mine to explore in recent years. The academic backgrounds of researchers on Mormonism are becoming more and more diverse. As we can see, however, there is not one paper about Chinese Mormonism or Mormons in China. It seems unlikely that this situation will change as long as the Mormon Church's legal status remains in its current state.

2.6. Research Projects

The National Social Science Fund of China has been the highest-level and largest-scale project funded by the Chinese government since 1986. At the end of 2016, a topic related to Mormonism, *Mormonism and its Bearings on Current Sino-US Relations*, appeared for the first time in the announced project list. This is an indication that the central government has begun to pay greater attention than before to Mormon issues, although just from the pragmatic perspective of handling Sino-US relations. At the end of June 2017, Hongmeng Cheng of Shanghai Institute of Socialism won this funding.

From 2014 to 2016, Hongmeng Cheng worked as a postdoctoral fellow in Fudan University, Shanghai. During this time, he studied Mormonism and American politics, published a comparative study on early Mormonism and Munster commune in 2015 and a review of Mormon research in China in 2016 (Cheng and Xu 2015; Cheng 2016), and finally completed a postdoctoral report of more than 100,000 Chinese characters. After receiving the national project funding, Cheng visited the Department of Religious Studies

at the University of Virginia from October 2018 to October 2019, where he was tutored by Kathleen Flake, Mormon historian, and R.L. Bushman, Professor of Mormon Studies. Since then, he has completed a number of papers and research reports on Mormonism and its influence on American politics and Sino-US relations (Cheng 2020). For example, *A Probe of Mormonism and American Politics*, published in 2018, attempts to divide Mormonism into the following five elements: Church headquarters, educational system, welfare system, members system, and missionary projects. It also introduces the influences that each element has had or may have on American politics. It concludes that whether the sustained development or growth of the Mormon Church will simultaneously enhance its influence on American politics remains to be further observed and evaluated over time (Cheng 2018).

In 2020, the State Administration of Religious Affairs issued a project to be funded on new emerging religions, mainly focusing on the current situation and administration of Bahaism and Mormonism in China. Kejia Yan of the Institute of Religion of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences oversees this project, and Hongmeng Cheng was invited to contribute the Mormonism section.

The Chinese government having issued two projects on Mormonism within three years. It shows the urgency of understanding Mormonism from the perspective of public governance and the lack of knowledge about Mormonism in Chinese academic circles.

2.7. Research Institutions

China's only center for Mormon studies is located in Shanghai. According to the previous description, Northeast Normal University (located in Changchun City, Jilin Province) is the academic unit that has generated the most research achievements on Mormonism so far. Scholars are mainly distributed in the College of History and Culture and the College of Liberal Arts. The latter has set up a youth team project dedicated to the compilation of American Mormon literature in recent years, but neither of the two colleges has set up a dedicated Mormon research institution. The Institute of World Religions and the Institute of American Studies, two independent institutes of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (located in Beijing), have contributed a few high-level papers on Mormonism, but no Mormon research institution has been established there, either.

Yihua Xu and his students from the School of International Relations and Public Affairs of Fudan University (located in Shanghai) are the most important academic team in the field of religion and international relations in China. In 2017, the Center for the Study of Mormonism and Sino-US Relations was established, whose main members are Yihua Xu and Hongmeng Cheng. Thus far, however, no public academic activities or conferences have been held. In 2019, the Shanghai Institute of Socialism established the Center for Urban Minzu and Religious Studies where Hongmeng Cheng is mainly engaging in Mormon studies.

2.8. Lectures, Forums and Conferences

Fudan University has held a small handful of lectures on Mormonism, but has never organized or held any public academic conferences or forums. The Center for Urban Minzu and Religious Studies of Shanghai Institute of Socialism and the Center for the Study of Mormonism and Sino-US Relations of Fudan University are likely to jointly organize related academic activities in the near future. Other universities and institutes in China have not yet held any relevant lectures, conferences, or forums so far.

2.9. Brief Comments

In general, Mormon studies in China is still in its infancy with few institutions, scholars, and outstanding achievements. The completed research works mainly stem from the perspectives of history, sociology, and politics, and very few are from the perspectives of literature, philosophy, theology, and thought. Chinese scholars mainly focus on the external factors of Mormonism as a religious organization, such as its religious activities, organizational development, marriage system, racial policies, economic performance,

and the relationship between politics and religion, while philosophical and theological thinking, doctrinal analysis and its historical research remain far from adequate. The study of Mormonism lies in waiting as a “rich mine” to be unearthed by Chinese scholars in the future.

3. Analysis and Suggestions

3.1. *Reasons for Insufficiency in Achievements*

Some might first think of the not-yet-legal status of Mormon Church in China as the foremost reason why Chinese scholars are reluctant to get much involved in the field of Mormon studies. There is solid logic behind this thought. If believing in religion, especially a not-yet-legal religion, is considered somewhat politically sensitive, to do research on such a religion could also be seen as politically incorrect to a certain extent. The legal status of the church will naturally bring about an uncomfortable sense that any form of studies on Mormonism may become a hint to the Party and the government about how to treat the thousands of Mormons existing in China. It makes sense that few scholars are willing to take that risk, although the risk is not necessarily real. This, however, is not the primary reason for insufficiency in China’s Mormon studies. Making a comparison with Bahaism, which has not been recognized as a legal religion in China either, will help reveal more of why this deficit exists. As the only two new religions among the four not-yet-legal religions in China, Mormonism and Bahaism both have a much shorter history in China than others. There are, however, many more research institutes, scholars and academic works on Bahaism than those on Mormonism. China has set up at least four Bahaism research centers in chronological order in Shandong University (1996), Institute of World Religions of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2001), Peking University (2010), and Guangzhou University (no later than 2013). Among them, Peking University (one of the top universities in China) held a series of public lectures on Bahaism. At least three large-scale, international conferences on Bahaism studies were held in 2003, 2004, and 2010. Four research monographs (one general studies, two ideological researches, and the other one on Bahaism and global governance) (Cai 2006, 2010; Pang 2017; Wu 2018) and five volumes of Bahaism literature have been published (Cai 2016). There are six doctoral dissertations and three master’s theses in total, and six of them are studies on Bahaism’s philosophy and thoughts.

There are four main reasons for this gap.

The first and most principal reason is attributed to its headquarters being located in the United States, which has led to Mormonism long being considered an American religion, and thus is burdened with political sensitivity. While the headquarters of Bahaism, The Bahá’í World Centre and The Universal House of Justice, are located in northern Israel, the Mormon Church is based in the United States. In the eyes of the Communist Party of China and most of the Chinese people, Mormonism is an American religion, even though it sees itself as a global religion. As Chiung Hwang Chen states in *Rebranding The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Chinese-speaking Regions*, a foreign (especially Western) religion carries imperialist baggage in China. Indeed, one of the strongest motivating ideologies within the PRC, from its origin until now, has been an effort to resist Western (especially US) imperialism (C. Chen 2020). Besides, today the party sees America as a hegemonic country peddling the values of western religious freedom, and it feels Mormonism may be used as a tool to promote that work. By comparison, Israel is not likely to use Bahaism do the same thing. It is natural for scholars to try to avoid the politically sensitive areas when they choose what subject to study.

In addition to the political reason above, historical, cultural, and strategic factors also play a significant role in the disparity in research between Bahaism and Mormonism. The two religions have tremendously different historical records in the period of the Republic of China (1912–1949). Bahaism worked very hard to preach its faith and doctrines from 1915 to 1937, which was one of the most diversified periods in Chinese thinking. Sun Yat-sen, who served as the provisional first President of the Republic of China and the first leader of

the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party of China), during this time, was very fond of Bahaism. Yunxiang Cao, an intellectual representative of the period and the 5th President of Tsinghua University from 1922 to 1927, even converted to Bahaism. Under their influence, the elites and mass media in many major cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, carried out extensive publicity campaigns on the history and tenets of Bahaism (Cai 2006). In contrast, the Mormon Church did almost nothing during the Republic of China period.

Turning to cultural distinctions, the three core principles of Bahaism, “the unity of God”, “the unity of religion”, and “the unity of humanity” are very close to the ideals of Da Tong (大同), i.e., great harmony or cosmopolitanism, of traditional Chinese Confucianism. This similarity causes Chinese intellectuals to feel comfortable accepting Bahaism’s beliefs. Yunxiang Cao even translated the name “Bahaism” into “Da Tong Jiao” (大同教 Datongism) with Chinese cultural characteristics (Cai 2006). Some Chinese scholars believe that Bahaism is a suitable religion for intellectuals, a religion transiting from theological religion to ethical religion, a religion with the least superstition, and a modern religion that could contribute to the modernization of Confucianism (Cai 2006). In contrast, Mormonism is a religion that places a great deal of emphasis on continuous revelation and remains a traditional and theological religion in terms of ideological sources. Further, the early history of polygamy and some polygamous practices nowadays under the banner of Mormonism creates for the church a bad reputation in China. Furthermore, in the eyes of the Chinese people, sealed marriages, baptism for the dead, and other beliefs and practices come across as mysterious, strange, and vague. In summary, Chinese scholars pay more attention to Bahaism mainly because of its charisma of thoughts while instead being attracted by Mormonism mainly because of its political and economic strength in the United States. This phenomenon also partly explains why Chinese scholars prefer to study Mormonism mainly from the perspective of sociology and politics.

Finally, during approximately the past 40 years, Bahaism and Mormonism have adopted different development strategies in China. Bahaism has attached great importance to the role of civil society and intellectuals, while Mormonism pays much more attention to its dialogue with the Chinese government at the administrative level. Consequently, the former has encouraged intellectuals to develop affinity and consciously study Bahaism, whereas the latter has caused intellectuals to feel indifferent and choose to keep their distance to some extent. This explains why Bahaism studies are mainly driven by academics, while Mormonism studies are largely driven by the government.

The above five factors clearly explain the weak foundation of Mormon studies in China today, especially in contrast to factors leading to the extensive research on Bahaism. The church’s not-yet-legal status is the superficial reason, while its nature as a perceived American religion is the fundamental reason. It’s historical proselytizing trends, cultural peculiarity, and modern development strategy also play significant roles.

3.2. Potential Contributions by Chinese Scholars

Local perspective, language ability, and the cultural and social environment of Chinese scholars can enable them to make new unique contributions to Mormon Studies. Facing a foreign religion entering China, Chinese scholars surely have a unique perspective that ought to help them produce new thoughts and knowledge on a globalizing Mormon Church. The mastery of ancient Chinese language by Chinese scholars should be helpful in comparing Mormonism with ancient Chinese classics. Those sensory immersion experiences in the cultural and social environment of contemporary China can help Chinese scholars obtain first-hand information about Mormons in China and their interaction with society.

When it comes to objects of research, Chinese scholars can make unique contributions to Mormon Studies in two significant areas. One is “Mormonism and China”, and the other is “Mormonism and Marxism”. In the realm of “Mormonism and China”, Chinese scholars can carry out studies such as a “comparison between Mormonism and Chinese philosophy”, a “comparison between Mormonism and Chinese religions”, “Mormonism

and Chinese society”, “Mormonism and China’s church-state relations”, “Mormonism and Sino-US relations”, and “Mormonism and global governance”, etc.

Take the “comparison between Mormonism and Chinese religions” as an example. Michael D. K. Ing is an assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University. He published two articles on comparison of religions which both mentioned links between Confucianism and Mormonism, especially in terms of how Confucian theories of ritual highlight the otherwise neglected aspect of embodiment in Mormon ritual. He suggests scholars can do comparisons on the basis that both Confucianism and Mormonism are different iterations of the *ultimate concern* of human beings (M. Ing 2011, 2014). This is incredibly instructive and intellectually profitable. In fact, many aspects of Mormon culture and beliefs such as human optimism, tolerance for other religions, patriotism and the law-abiding spirit, and respect for ancestors and large families are quite like those in traditional Chinese culture. All these topics all deserve serious examination.

Regarding “Mormonism and Marxism”, Chinese scholars can develop research on the “comparison of Mormonism and Marxism”, a “historical comparison of Mormon movement and socialist movement”, “the Marxist approach to Mormon studies”, etc. There should indeed be no forbidden subject matter for academics. Chinese scholars can also contribute to psychology of religion, sociology of religion, and comparative religious studies when carrying out research on Mormonism.

With such need, ability, and room for meaningful exploration, there is every reason to take an optimistic view on the future contributions Chinese scholars can make in global Mormon studies.

3.3. Future Cooperation between Chinese and Overseas Scholars

In the libraries of Chinese universities and research institutions, the scarcest and most urgently needed books are those concerning systematic knowledge of Mormonism, particularly introductions, and works on history, theology, Mormonism and American politics, Mormonism and American society, Mormonism and global governance, etc. It would be wise to simply start with the translation of existing outstanding achievements in those areas in foreign countries, especially in the United States. In addition, Chinese universities and research institutions should gradually invite American Mormon experts to China to offer a lecture series, formulate cooperation plans, and gradually explore cooperation in holding international academic seminars, forums, and symposiums. American universities, including BYU, but mainly secular universities, such as the University of Virginia, the University of Southern California, and Claremont Graduate University, etc., should set up special scholarships and research programs to encourage and attract Chinese scholars, especially young scholars, to visit the United States. More and more Chinese scholars should be actively invited to participate in international conferences on Mormon studies, research projects, and paper solicitations, so as to gradually integrate into global Mormon academic networks.

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- ¹ This article mainly examines the Mormon studies by Chinese mainland scholars, excluding scholars from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. “Mormonism” here refers to “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” headquartered in Salt Lake City. In addition, it tries to focus on the study of Mormonism as a religion itself, and the study of Mormonism affiliated organizations including Brigham Young University and Genealogical Society of Utah is not in the scope of the investigation.

- ² CSSCI, a database with the full name Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index, was developed by China Social Science Research Evaluation Center, Nanjing University, seen as an authoritative criteria of scholarship evaluation in China.
- ³ Available online: <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics> (accessed on 3 March 2021).
- ⁴ The use of the term “priests” by the original author is inaccurate. The correct translation should be “priesthood holders”, according to the tradition of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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