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Keywords: anthropology of religion — religious revival — religious alternative studies — Chinese academics — ecology and market

The Anthropological Study of Religion in China: Contexts, Collaborations, Debates, and Trends

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Anthropology was revived at the very beginning of China's Reform and Open Door (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) policy. So was religion (Liang Yongjia, 2015). Both institutional, officially recognised religions and non-institutional, folk religions have steadily developed over the last three decades. How, then, does the anthropological study of religion make sense of the religious landscape in post-Mao China? What are the major concerns and findings, and how (are we) to understand them? The paper tries to provide a general answer to these questions.

While there is inspiring literature on Chinese anthropology as a discipline (Guldin, 1994; Wang Jianmin, Zhang Haiyang & Hu Hongbao, 1998: 312-382; Harrell, 2001; Wang Mingming, 2005a, 2005b; Hu Hongbao, 2006: 179-226; Pieke, 2014), little is said about how Chinese anthropologists study the new Chinese religious landscape with its particular discipline. When mentioned, the anthropology of religion is taken as a part of the overall construction of anthropology as a discipline, rather than as a field reacting to the changes in Chinese society and academia. I would therefore like to highlight this reaction, because only through connecting to the historical specificity and current context can we understand why the new anthropology in China studies the religious landscape in such a particular manner that it makes the field appear to be "fragmented" and "unsystematic."

Two articles on the Chinese anthropology of religion have brought significant contributions. Chen Jinguo's (2009) review of the study of Chinese folk religion finds a demarcation between folkloristic and anthropological studies. However, the distinction seems to go little beyond academic resources, while the affinity of the two is apparent. Comparing anthropological studies of religion in mainland China and Taiwan, Zhang Xun (2017) proposes that mainland China favours "the study of institutional religions." But Chen's encyclopedic review of the study of "popular belief" challenges Zhang Xun's conclusion, which is perhaps valid only

when contrasting the studies across the Taiwan strait. Both authors however may not pay sufficient attention to the fact that many studies address religion metaphorically, without using the word “religion.” Therefore, a review of Chinese anthropology of religion needs to go beyond the keywords of “religion,” “anthropology,” and “the anthropology of religion,” a field far from being well-defined. It should take into consideration the Chinese social and academic setting, especially the deep impact from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Euro-American academia.

The paper reviews the anthropological study of religion in the last three decades against the social, political, and academic contexts. I argue that this field is a fuzzy one. In response to the religious revival initiated in the 1980s, the anthropological studies are rather fragmentary and diffuse. One of the reasons is the fact that many scholars consciously or unconsciously adopt terms other than “religion” as subjects of study, such as “culture,” “folklore,” “symbol,” and “heritage.” Intensively involved in cross-border academic collaborations, anthropological studies of religion also cross-fertilise with history, folklore, religious studies, and ethnology. However, quality empirical studies are insufficient. New trends include a focus on institutional religions and the creation of the journal *Anthropology of Religion*. Like other papers in this issue, this one use “the anthropology of religion in China” to refer to the studies conducted by scholars who have been working in mainland China since 1980.

I firstly put anthropology of religion in the contexts of religious revival and regulations, discussing its relation to religious studies and folkloristic studies. I then explore the ways in which why religion is studied under alternative labels. Thirdly, I review the external academic impact and cross-disciplinary studies that both profoundly changed the field. Fourthly, I offer a critical review of the two theories explaining the religious landscape of China-religious ecology and religious market. Finally, I highlight some new trends that have appeared in recent years. I do not intend to provide an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, I will highlight some works that are characteristic of the field. Due to word limitation, I will review mostly monographs rather than papers.

Religious revival, regulation, and academic transformation

“Anthropology” (*renleixue* 人类学) was imported (Pan Jiao, 2008), and so was “religion” (*zongjiao* 宗教) (Chen His-yüan, 2002). Indeed, they are not Chinese concepts, but were introduced by Chinese elites from imperial powers (usually from Japan) as universals deployed to re-interpret Chinese society in order to re-organise it, thereby creating new sets of relations and institutions. As time went by, the concepts may have been indigenised, but they never were entirely able to describe the Chinese society. In other words, by creating things anthropological or religious, both “anthropology” and “religion” have to face indescribable residues. Like “wearing a poorly tailored outfit” – to borrow Ge Zhaoguang’s phrase (2001: 49) – “religion” and “anthropology” were introduced to describe China, not without support from political power. We are therefore unable to clarify what “religion,” “anthropology,” or “anthropology of religion” are, as they have been and will keep on continually changing.

The conviction that religion is illusionary and unscientific is an elitist unanimous opinion in post-imperial China, rather than a view of the lay practitioners. “Religion” and “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信) were introduced from late 19th century Japan to be scapegoated as responsible for the weakness of China. Therefore, from the outset, “religion” is a pejorative word subjected to Enlighteners’ condemnation (see, for example, Nedostup, 2013). Intellectual and political elites of post-imperial China have been consistent in their attitude toward religion, as demonstrated in the 1898 campaign to “Build Schools from Temple Property” (*miaochan xingxue* 庙产兴学), “the Republican church engineering” intended to create a secularist state (Goossaert, 2008), the Nanjing government’s campaign against superstition, and the “Three-self Patriotic Movement” (*sanzi aiguo yundong* 三自爱国运动) in the heydays of the PRC. One of the consequences of the persistent elitist perspective is the exclusion of a great variety of non-institutional practices from “religion,” practices such as worshiping gods, making offerings to ancestors, invoking Shamans, seeking for oracles, consulting horoscopes, practising geomancy, and performing mask-dances. Many “pseudo-religious” or “quasi-religious” activities – qigong, spiritual-cultivation, yoga, Tantric, life-nurturing techniques, etc. – are not considered as “religion” defined by the state. Moreover, while the state defines only five religions – Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam – it has to live with the so-called “superstition.” To the state, the purpose for narrowly defining “religion” is not just to exclude the non-institutional practices, but to separate itself from “religion” with relative ease.

When opening China for foreign investment in the early 1980s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) realigned its religious policy from eradication to tolerance-cum-vigilance. The 1982 Constitution guaranteed religious freedom on the condition that religious engagement should not “disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State,” and that it be free from “foreign domination.” The most comprehensive regulation so far – *Regulations on Religious Affairs* (*Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli* 宗教事务管理条例) effective in 2005 and amended in 2017 – sought for accountable rules by laying out standard procedures

in a variety of activities. When China declares that religion should “adapt to socialist society,” it spells out a double-faced policy that sees religion as vulnerable to a possible source of separatism, extremism, superstition, disobedience, and foreign infiltration and dominance, while hoping to make use of its positive values that may contribute to better governance and international image.



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Fig. 1 - Incense burning in a Buddhist temple, Suzhou

Despite the strong regulatory measures, religious practices in post-Mao China remain vibrant. The religious population steadily increases as religious infrastructure expands under governmental or non-governmental sponsorship. Restoration of sacred sites appeals to larger populations for community and identity (re-)creation. Officially recognised religions retrieve different regimes of transcendence into different localities. Unofficial, trans-local, or transnational movements explore their sphere of activities with underground proselytising or with NGO instruments. Folk religion legitimised by cultural renaissance is embraced by an astonishingly large part of the population and commercialised with the state-agents' incentive of generating revenue through converting "invented traditions" into the tourist industry. Ancestor veneration and rituals of almanacs, geomancy, horoscope, and spirit medium intermingle with new waves of salvationist movements, and body or spiritual-healing techniques. The increasing social, political, economic disparity creates greater anxiety to seek for old ways of oracle-reading, mask-dancing, sutra-chanting, karma-fair hosting, and so on. Lastly, the national and global flow of capital, symbols, ideas, and practices also poses an unusual problem of religious pluralism with increasing mobility.

The vibrancy of religious revival is perhaps the most unexpected phenomenon to the state, who holds the old conviction that religion will decline as people are enlightened with scientific truth or enriched by economic growth. The contrary reality convinced the authority to keep a close eye on the subversive or infiltrated religious groups, and when necessary, launched countermeasures such as the anti-superstition campaign in the 1980s and the crackdown of Falungong at the turn of the century. However, the state also kept a *laissez-faire* attitude toward communal religions, non-institutionalised religions of the ethnic minorities, and quasi-religious activities, which, having little chance to become another legitimate religion, are peaceful and hard to eradicate. It is this fuzzy field that anthropological studies pay much attention to.

Some deem the reason for religious revival is "the invention of tradition" while others propose that religion is an important domain for the society to resist the state. Still others believe that the increase in religious demand reflects the inadequacy of religious supply. I have argued elsewhere that all of these interpretations are problematic since religious revival could not be reduced to calculation or material pursuit, but is a desire to connect with the other-worldliness, which entails authority and tradition beyond the realm of the individual. In other words, though religion is defined in the modern world as a personal choice, it is social and collective act (Liang Yongjia, 2015). The reason for the religious revival in China lies in the diversified ways of connecting to other-worldliness. China is never a theocracy. It allows different ways of transcendence in the social world (Duara, 2015: 170).

As an academic discipline, anthropology was formally re-established by the creation of the Chinese Anthropological Association in 1981 after three decades of banning. However, it has been a marginal discipline in the Chinese academic landscape, lacking professionals, programs, and funding. Compared with other anthropological fields such as economics, demography, or ethnicity, anthropology of religion is a small one. The forefathers who led the revival of anthropology paid

little attention to religion. Those who did – Li An-che (or Li Anzhai) 李安宅 (1900-1985), Francis Hsu 许烺光 (1909-1999), Ch'ing K'un Yang 杨庆堃 (1911-1999) and Tien Ju-kang 田汝康 (1916-2006) – were at the end of their careers and barely noticed. The seminal work on Chinese ancestral worship, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow* (Hsu, 1948), and the “bible” of the study of Chinese religion, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Yang Ch'ing K'un, 1961), were hardly ever mentioned. Liang Zhaotao 梁钊韬 (1916-1987), one of the founding fathers of the new Chinese anthropology, published his 中国古代巫术：宗教的起源和发展 (*Chinese Ancient Magic: Origin and Development of Religion*) as late as 1999. The Chinese version of Li An-che's *History of Tibetan Religion: A Study in the Field* was published only in 2005. Tien Ju-kang's 芒市边民的摆 (*Pai of the Borderland People at Mangshi*), published in Chinese as early as 1948 and in English with the title *Religious Cults of the Pai-i along the Burma-Yunnan Border* (Ti'en Ju-kang, 1986), was reprinted in 2010 for the first time after it was first published in the late 1940s. Anthropologists in the western countries who worked on Chinese religion during the Cold War were known to mainland Chinese anthropologists only in the mid-1990s: Maurice Freedman, Arthur Wolf, William Skinner, Stephan Feuchtwang, James Watson, Daniel Overmyer, Kristofer Schipper, Philip Kuhn, to name a few.

Meanwhile, religious studies remain a marginal field, too, entirely different from the place divinity schools hold in the western universities. Established in 1965 by the instruction of Mao Zedong, the field has always been a subfield of philosophy, which emphasises textual studies of doctrines, canons, thoughts, and religious figures. Most importantly, the field is dominated by the study of institutionalised religions, which is close to the state power under the co-option of the State Administration of Religious Affairs. Studies based on ethnographic fieldwork have started only recently.

One of the common experiences of the active anthropologists is the so-called “cultural fever” (*wenhua re* 文化热) in the 1980s, an academic and cultural milestone. It is a movement in which old and new academics created new venues of publications and speeches where “culture” was celebrated as the keyword for understanding the social, economic, religious and political China and the world in general, both contemporary and historical (Zhang Xudong, 1996: 35-77). Serving as an alternative trophy to the hegemonic Marxist-Leninist paradigm of class-struggle, the word “culture” became a “fever” as it got reconnected to early intellectuals and the international academic world. Among hundreds of translated works done in this period, classics of cultural anthropology widely influenced the emerging scholars. These works, serving as the major sources of inspiration for early waves of anthropological work, include Edward Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), Franz Boas' *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934), Margret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), Lucien Lévi-Bruhl's *Primitive Mentality* (1922), Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Savage Mind* (1962), and, of course, Peter Burger's *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) as well as Max Weber's classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905).

During the 1990s, a few works on the anthropology of religion were also translated. They include Wang Zijin 王子今 and Zhou Suping 周苏平's translation

of Yoshida Teigo's *Anthropology of Religion* (1991), Zhou Guoli 周国黎's translation of Brian Morris' *The Anthropological Study of Religion* (1992), and Zhou Xing 周星's translation of Watanabe Yoshio's *Folk Religion of the Chinese* (1998). The most important translation is, of course, Jin Ze 金泽 and his team's translation of *Selected Works in 20th Century Western Anthropology of Religion* (1995). In this two-volume, 1,000-page collection, we find important pieces by Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Franz Boas, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Clyde Kluckhohn, Ralph Linton, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edmund Leach, Clifford Geertz, Eric Wolf, Sherry Ortner, Roy Rappaport, Rodney Needham, Renato Rosaldo, George Stocking, and Stanley Tambiah. It was (and still is) the most complete collection in Chinese about the anthropology of religion.

In the 1980s and 1990s, many anthropological studies of religion were conducted by scholars from other disciplines such as Chinese literature, folklore, philosophy, archaeology, history, and ethnology, or by amateurs in local gazetteer offices and cultural centres. Their works comprise staple empirical studies, which are mainly recording of local temples, myths, festivals, rituals, and customs. In the mid-1990s, anthropologists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Europe and America began to work with mainland anthropologists, and began to train PhD students for mainland China. Some key universities recruited anthropologists who obtained their PhDs home or abroad, starting systematic, professional training programs throughout China. Foreign anthropologists and their students conducted much more intensive, qualified fieldwork, producing hundreds of new monographs about religious life in China. Meanwhile, the early self-taught anthropologists, along with emerging folklorists, ethnomusicologists, industrial artists, choreographers, filmmakers, painters and photographers kept producing work reporting the fieldwork they conducted. Taken together, anthropology of religion in post-Mao China grew significantly.

One of the chief promoters of western anthropology is Professor Wang Mingming 王铭铭 from Peking University. One of his earliest works, *社会人类学与中国研究* (*Social Anthropology and Chinese Studies*, 1997a) contributes a significant chapter to the most update review of Chinese religions in English-speaking anthropology. In his ethnographic works, he explores the state relations with local family and other social organisations, the status of folk traditions, modern philanthropic system, and local authority. These topics also become the content of his other two monographs: *社区的历程* (*The Pathway of a Community*, 1996), revised edition published under the title *溪村家族* (*Lineage in Xicun*, 2004), and *村落视野中的文化与权力：闽台三村五论* (*Culture and Power in Village Perspective: Five Papers on Three Villages in Fujian and Taiwan*, 1997b). His research topic and method shed new light and led to new discussions in both Chinese and English academia. In *逝去的繁荣* (*Prosperity Bygone*, 1999), he presented the intricate relations between the state and the local world in the city of Quanzhou. The book deals with religion in full scale, including the symbolic making of the city space, interactions between official orthodox and folk ritual, legend of geomancy, order of the folk ritual, the transformation of different gods and "heresies," ritual of universal deliverance, spirit-writing, secret society, etc. His meticulous study of the folk religions makes the book a milestone in the landscape of Chinese anthropology.

“Culture,” “folklore,” “belief,” “heritage”: alternative studies of the “anthropology” of “religion”

During the 1980s and 1990s, most anthropological studies of religion chose not to use “anthropology of religion,” especially avoiding the use of “religion.” There are two reasons for this. First, many believed that “religion” refers to the five institutionalised ones so that their study of non-institutional ones does not count. Second, some intentionally avoided “religion,” hoping to neutralise the sensitiveness of “religion” on the one hand, and cater for the emerging populist sentiment on the other, a sentiment which celebrates an imagined communal culture, be it national or local. When studying what is usually considered as religion, scholars of the last three decades tend to use alternative concepts, such as “culture,” “folklore,” “belief” and “heritage.”

After the “Cultural Fever,” the concept of “culture” (*wenbua* 文化) survives. It no longer connotes “high cultures” such as music, dance, and literature, but refers to all aspects of life. The classical definition of “culture” in Edward Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* was translated in 1992 and matched the connotation of “culture” in Chinese “Cultural Fever.” The definition becomes influential among the emerging scholars who begin to pay close attention to “cultural anthropology,” to which Tylor belongs. Those who adopt Tylor’s definition are usually from folklore studies. Different from Marxist concepts such as “class,” “infrastructure” or “superstructure,” “culture” creates a neutral field that eliminates the internal differences of Chinese people with its inclusiveness, thus constituting a perfect type of bricks for building up the imagined community of Chinese nationalism.

Because of the neutrality and inclusiveness of “culture,” many intellectual and political elites began to use “culture” as an alternative to “religion.” For example, Mazu 妈祖, a sea goddess originated from Fujian, has been represented as “Mazu Culture.” With its root temple in the Meizhou Island of Putian 莆田, Mazu temples are found everywhere along the vast Chinese coastline, as well as in Southeast Asia, Japan, and the U.S. Mazu involves a span of elaborate celebrations and sacrificial activities of offerings and incense-dividing, as well as a long record of imperial titles bestowed by emperors over a millennium. Because of its symbolic ties with Taiwan, the Mazu temple on Meizhou Island and other places of “Sojourners hometown” (*qiaoxiang* 侨乡) received generous donations or funding for renovation projects and academic workshops. It has become a UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009 under the category of “belief and custom,” whereby Mazu is represented as “Mazu Culture,” or “Mazu Belief” (discussed below), to characterise a spectrum of practices that include myths, temples, images, celebrations and rituals. Though the Mazu Temple on Meizhou Island is represented as the “Mecca” for all Mazu temples in the world, it is almost never described as “religion.”

Similar studies of “culture for religion” are numerous. The study of the cult of Guandi 关帝, God of War, is called “Guandi Culture;” the Dongba cult of the Naxi, not dissimilar from the Tibetan Bon, is known as the “Dongba Culture;” the Benzhu temple system in Dali of southwest China is referred to as the “Benzhu Culture.” The traditional rituals and customs across the Tungstic peoples are lumped together as the “Shaman Culture,” as in Se Yin 色音’s 中国萨满文化研究

(*Studies on Chinese Shaman Culture*, 2011). Bimo, who provides exorcist healing and funeral service among the Yi in southwest China, is called the “Bimo Culture,” as in Meng Huiying 孟慧英’s 彝族毕摩文化 (*The Bimo Culture of the Yi*, 2003). The studies of worshipping animals and natural phenomena inspired by the obsolete concept “totem” constitute the field of “totem culture,” as in He Xingliang 何星亮’s 图腾与中国文化 (*Totem and Chinese Culture*, 1992a). The popular practice of geomancy and horoscope increasingly demanded by the new rich is called “geomancy culture,” “culture of fate studies,” not to say a variety of other forms of “culturalisation” such as the “Oboo Culture,” “Beiye Culture,” “Sacrifice Culture,” “Witchcraft Culture,” “Qigong Culture,” etc.

In addition to “culture,” many empirical studies on religion come out with the titles of “folklore” (民俗), “custom,” “myth,” “cult,” and “symbol.” For example, in a book series “Chinese Folklore Series” edited by folklorists Liu Xicheng 刘锡诚 and Ma Changyi 马昌仪, almost all monographs are about religion with titles containing the word “god” or “belief”: Zhang Zichen 张紫晨’s 中国巫术 (*Chinese Magic*, 1990) does not mention “religion,” nor does Guo Yuhua 郭于华’s 死的困扰与生的执着 (*Trouble from Death and Desire for Life*, 1992). The study of myth has also become a focal point. Starting from Yuan Ke 袁珂’s seminal work 中国神话传说 (*Chinese Myth and Legends*, 1984), myth studies produce a series of monographs, such as Tao Yang 陶阳 and Zhong Xiu 钟秀’s 中国创世神话 (*Chinese Creation Myth*, 1989), Chen Jianxian 陈建宪’s 神祇与英雄 (*Deities and Heroes*, 1994), and Ye Shuxian 叶舒宪’s edited volume 结构主义神话学 (*Structuralist Mythology*, 1988). While picking up the stories about ghosts and deities in ancient Chinese literature, they also pay attention to Euro-American anthropology, attempting to explore the possibility of an anthropology of myth. “Cult” is another term many early scholars favour – He Xingliang’s 中国自然神与自然崇拜 (*Chinese Gods of Nature and the Cult of Nature*, 1992b), Zhang Mingyuan 张铭远’s 生殖崇拜与死亡抗拒 (*Fertility Cult and Resistance to Death*, 1991), and Wang Zijin’s 门祭与门神崇拜 (*Sacrifice to Door and Door Cult*, 1996), etc. The keyword “symbol” is deployed to investigate Chinese religious life too, such as Wang Mingming and Pan Zhongdang 潘忠党 edited 象征与社会: 中国民间文化探讨 (*Symbol and Society: Inquiry to Chinese Folk Culture*, 1997), Liang Yongjia 梁永佳’s 象征在别处 (*Symbol from the Other*, 2008), and Bao Jiang 鲍江’s 象征的来历 (*Origin of Symbol*, 2008). “Symbol” is an academic term comfortably situated in the western anthropology and, like “culture,” it encompasses the field of religion.

“Belief” (xinyang 信仰) is an important alternative to “religion” and is used in significant publications. Compared with “culture,” “belief” endorses the religiosity of the subjects studied, but it may mean differently. Many employ the term because “religion” should refer to those “beliefs” or “worships” with institutions, rituals, sites and clergies, while “belief” applies to un-institutionalised practices. Such a conscious dichotomy of “folk religion” vs. “folk belief,” by highlighting the non-institutional aspects of “belief,” replicates the concept of “religion” invented by the intellectual and political elites in the last century. By so doing, it avoids the possible political pressure vested in the usage of “religion,” while further reifying the institutionalisation of “religion.” Most of such studies are again conducted by

folklorists: Wu Bing'an 乌丙安's 中国民间信仰 (*Chinese Folk Belief*, 1995), Yang Lihui 杨利慧's 女娲的神话与信仰 (*Nuwa Myth and Belief*, 1998), and Bamo Ayi 巴莫阿依's 彝族祖灵信仰研究 (*Studies on the Yi's Belief in Ancestral Soul*, 1994), to name a few. One of the central figures to revive Chinese anthropology, Chen Guoqiang 陈国强 (1931-2004), edited a monograph entitled 妈祖信仰与祖庙 (*Mazu Belief and the Ancestral Temple*, 1990). Recently, Fan Lizhu 范丽珠 and Daniel Overmyer produced a book, 中国北方农村社会的民间信仰 (*Folk Belief in North China's Rural Society*, 2013), in which they discuss how intangible "belief" is made tangible through governments, headmen, organisations, and rituals.

When the State Administration for Religious Affairs created the Fourth Department, which is supposed to oversee "other religions," the legal status of "folk religion" was discussed again, but it seemed impossible to give it the status of the "sixth" religion before the law was amended. Therefore, "belief" has become a proper name to describe the communal religious activities across Chinese rural society, as well as the reason for many to accept it. For example, Chen Jinguo 陈进国's 信仰、仪式与乡土社会 (*Belief, Ritual and Rural Society*, 2005) takes geomancy (*fengshui*, roughly equivalent to the cosmology of landscape) as "belief" when examining its relation with local gods, sacrifice, funerals, and spirit-medium. Yue Yongyi 岳永逸's 灵验·磕头·传说: 民众信仰的阴面与阳面 (*Efficacy, Kowtow, Legend: The Dark and Bright Sides of (the) Popular Belief*, 2010) intends to reveal some common practices of the popular religion through the lens of "belief." Liu Zhaorui 刘昭瑞 and Wang Jianxin 王建新's edited volume, 地域社会与信仰习俗 (*Territorial Society and Belief Custom*, 2007), suggests that "belief" might have a broader significance than "religion" because of its encompassing popular religion, Christianity, and Islam.

Another reason for preferring the label "popular belief" is the study of sectarianism, which, since the 1980s, has mostly been under the rubric of "folk religion", which was actually historical studies of religious revolts. Ma Xisha 马西沙 and Han Bingfang 韩秉方's 中国民间宗教史 (*History of Chinese Folk Religion*, 1992) is perhaps the most significant contribution, in addition to Pu Wenqi 濮文起's 民间宗教与结社 (*Folk Religions and Association*, 1994), and the alternative view from Shao Yong 邵雍's 中国会道门 (*Chinese Secret Society*, 1997). To mark the difference from these studies, historians tend to use "folk belief" to describe the non-subversive folk religiosity, though some suggest it may create further confusion (Clart, 2007).

A major turn took place in 2004 when China accessed into the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, encouraging most folklorists, a few anthropologists, and many artists, historians, tourism managers, and cultural studies experts to re-align themselves into the expertise of "heritage-making." Cultural heritage institutes and academic journals were set up in many universities. Governments at all levels pumped enormous funding and created new organs to "forge" or "construct" cultural heritage projects, hoping to secure a place on the provincial or national list of cultural heritages. Some even attempted to apply for inclusion on the UNESCO list, of course through the patronage of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. In the wake of heritage-making,

numerous religious activities were re-interpreted into “cultural items” legible to the state agents who wished to support them as candidates for cultural heritages to be categorised into techniques, festival, or cultural spaces, constituting important ways of legitimising religions. The new process immediately attracted the attention of some anthropologists (Zhou Xing, 2013). A case in point is perhaps my study on the local government of Dali, southwest China, who, after successfully securing the National Intangible Cultural Heritage status for the Gwer Sa La Festival in 2006, campaigned to apply for UNESCO world Intangible Cultural Heritage (but failed). The project, submitted under the official category of “cultural space,” involved a significant amount of rituals and legends for fertility and prosperity in a network of hundreds of temples (Liang Yongjia, 2013). Similar heritage projects involving folk, non-institutional religiosity include the Naxi Ancient Music (*naxi guiyue* 纳西古乐), Sacrifice to Communal Fire (*ji shehuo* 祭社火), Sacrifice to Oboe (*ji aobao* 祭敖包), and Temple Fair (*miaohui* 庙会).

Though alternative terms to study religion predominate in Chinese anthropology of the 1980s and 1990s, there is one exception: the study of the religions among the ethnic minorities, which are not part of the officially recognised religions. The ethnic religions are often seen as “living fossils,” legitimate in Chinese social sciences and the society in general which was once dominated by social Darwinism. The idea supposes that all ethnic minorities are socially backward – i.e., at feudal, slavery, or primitive stages, in contrast with the prevalent Han majority (91.5% of the Chinese population). Therefore, it is natural to find religions, or “primitive religions,” among the ethnic minorities. Early works on the topic include Qiu Pu 秋浦’s 萨满教研究 (*Studies of Shamanistic Religion*, 1985), Cai Jiaqi 蔡家麒’s 论原始宗教 (*On Primitive Religion*, 1988), Ma Xueliang 马学良’s 彝族原始宗教调查报告 (*Reports on the Yi’s Primitive Religion*, 1993), and Lu Daji 吕大吉 and He Yaohua 何耀华’s edited volume 中国原始宗教资料丛编 (*Collections of Data on Chinese Primitive Religions*, 1993). Recent work includes Yang Fuquan 杨福泉’s 东巴教通论 (*General Course on the Dongba Religion*, 2012). As early as 1993, Zhang Qiaogui 张桥贵 and Chen Linshu 陈麟书 attempted to use anthropological knowledge from the west in an edited volume 宗教人类学: 云南少数民族原始宗教考察研究 (*Anthropology of Religion: Investigations on the Ethnic Primitive Religions in Yunnan*, 1993). These scholars do not necessarily accept the category of “primitive religion,” but they do use the term “religion” for their research.

Two major national surveys warrant special attention. The first is the publication, in the 1980s, of the “social historical investigations on the ethnic minorities” 少数民族社会历史调查 that were conducted in the 1950s and 1960s by a team of 200 professional anthropologists. Under the initiative of Mao Zedong, they conducted extensive ethnographic investigations during the so-called “Democratic Reform,” a campaign led by the Chinese Communist Party to exert direct control in China’s ethnic areas. This extensive collection produced one billion words of precious records, forming a solid foundation for the rise of Chinese new anthropology yet to make more use of the material. The second is a publication series called “Three Collections” 三套集成 (on Folk Stories, Ballads, and Proverbs), initiated by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles in the early 1980s. It is a series that

produced nearly one hundred volumes amounting to one billion words. The two consecutive surveys record a great deal of religious life in China, which reflecting the nation-state's concern for its narrative of continuity.

International cooperation and interdisciplinary studies

Along with the deepening of Chinese open-door policy, China rapidly became the fieldwork site accessible again to international anthropologists since 1949, and one of the largest sending countries for overseas students. The mutual influence is yet to be studied, but for sure, most Chinese anthropologists of religion today are products of such mutual influence, especially those who frequently visit foreign academic institutes, or even obtain PhD degrees in anthropology. Many long-term projects to which Chinese and overseas scholars collaborated also produced a number of domestically conferred PhD students. Particularly, David Faure of Hong Kong University and Helen Siu of Yale University, in collaboration with Chen Chunsheng 陈春声 and Liu Zhiwei 刘志伟 of Sun Yat-san University, extensively studied the Chinese ancestral worship and folk religion in China. Wang Chiu-Kui 王秋桂 of National Taiwan University and Kenneth Dean of McGill University initiated some significant projects. Kenneth Dean, in collaboration with Zheng Zhenman 郑振满 of Xiamen University, exhaustively studied the temple system in Putian, Fujian. The study in Guangdong and Fujian is sometimes called "the South China School," which, by focusing on lineage, folk religion, and civilising process, has had a substantial impact on historical studies. Profound mutual influence between history and anthropology, particularly the methodological merging of archival studies and ethnographic fieldwork, benefited both disciplines immensely.

The collaboration between mainland China and external institutes is worldwide. Top universities – Cambridge, London, Harvard, Yale, Stanford, HKUST, Academia Sinica, Perdue, Tokyo – are in close contact with Chinese universities such as Peking, Tsinghua, Renmin, Minzu, Nanjing, CASS, Sun Yat-san, Xiamen, Fudan, East China Normal, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Yunnan, Yunnan Minzu, Southwest Minzu, and Inner Mongolia Normal. The collaborations have produced iconic publications and influential anthropologists and historians, broadening our understanding of the landscape of Chinese religiosity. More importantly, it has become increasingly difficult to differentiate studies done by mainland Chinese and by external scholars.

Historians are also actively involved in the discussion of "belief." In *民间信仰与社会空间 (Folk Belief and Social Space, 2003)*, the editors Zheng Zhenman and Chen Chunsheng highlight the diffusion and non-institutional-ness of "folk belief." They suggest that the resilience of folk belief lies in the non-institutional realm – family and community – hard to be usurped by the privileged few. They argue that folk belief demonstrates some level of continuity because it lies outside the governmental system. In "民间"何在 谁之"信仰" (*Where is "the Folk", Who's "Belief", 2009*), the editor Ge Zhaoguang summarises three achievements of the historical study of folk religion. Firstly, it makes an excellent use of the traditional Chinese historical studies and emphasises archival research; secondly, it employs the method of anthropological fieldwork, expanding the scope of sources; thirdly, it has become a field where Chinese historical studies can really debate with the western theories.

He warns, however, that “Chinese studies” in the West are actually “foreign studies,” because the research questions that are raised are never truly Chinese. He suggests we should raise questions out of the historical traditions of China, rather than taking questions pertinent to Euro-American countries as Chinese ones. Such a proposal to raise “Chinese questions” in contrast to Western ones is typical in Chinese academia, which has turned increasingly nationalistic through an urge to address “Chinese questions,” “Chinese academia” and “Chinese tradition” independently from “Western” theories. This tendency, not devoid of anti-western sentiment, is not a simple academic “nationalism” but reflects worries about the decline of Chinese-speaking academia.

In *仪式与社会变迁* (*Ritual and Social Change*, 2000) edited by Guo Yuhua, contributors from anthropology, folklore and ethnology offer interdisciplinary views on religion. Later on, they developed their chapters into monographs such as Liu Xiaochun 刘晓春’s *仪式与象征的秩序* (*Ritual and Symbolic Order*, 2003), Zhou Daming 周大鸣’s *当代华南的宗族与社会* (*Lineage and Society in Modern South China*, 2003), Liu Tieliang 刘铁梁’s *中国民俗文化志* (*Ethnography of Chinese Folkloric Culture*, 2006), and Gao Bingzhong 高丙中’s *民间文化与公民社会* (*Folk Culture and Civil Society*, 2008). Some of the contributors produced books on other topics than religion, such as Luo Hongguang 罗红光’s *不等价交换* (*Exchange without Equivalent Prices*, 2002), Weng Naiqun 翁乃群’s *南昆八村* (*Eight Villages along the Nanning-Kunming Railway*, 2001), Naran Bilik 纳日碧力戈’s *现代背景下的族群建构* (*Ethnic Construction in Modern Context*, 2000).

Studies on different ethnic groups are also flourishing. Zhuang Kongshao 庄孔韶 revisits the Huang Village in Fujian, the fieldwork site of Lin Yueh-hwa 林耀华, who produced the classical *The Golden Wing* (1944). Zhuang Kongshao’s follow-up study *银翅* (*The Silver Wing*, 2000) describes the changes in the Huang lineage since 1949 as well as the local cult of Chen Jinggu, Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism and Christianity. In his *Temple of Memory* (2013), Jing Jun 景军 discusses the revival of the Kong family in the Gansu Province, where the lineage temple is revived not in a mechanism of returning to the past, but accompanied by cultural creation involving local and current concerns.

Studies on the religiosity of ethnic minorities abound too. Under the co-supervision of Professor Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 (1910-2005) and Professor Wang Mingming, three anthropologists published their dissertation-turned monographs based on fieldwork on the sites once visited by Chinese anthropological forefathers in the 1940s. Zhang Hongming 张宏明’s *土地象征* (*Earth Symbols*, 2005) revisits Fei Xiaotong’s *Earthbound China*. He develops Fei Xiaotong’s concept of “leisure economy” by examining the local ritual group (Grotto Scripture Association) and communal celebrations (Flower Lanterns), arguing that the public rituals demonstrate the changing relations between state and local society. Liang Yongjia’s *地域的等级* (*Territorial Hierarchy*, 2005) investigates the local and supra-local territorial cult systems in the West Town, where Francis Hsu conducted fieldwork for his *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow* (1948). Liang suggests that the systems both contribute to communal solidarity and encompass it. Chu Jianfang 褚建芳’s *人神之间* (*Between Human and Gods*, 2005) studies the ritual life and economic-moral life

in the village where Ti'en Ju-kang conducted his fieldwork, and suggests a particular mode of reciprocal relations between giving and receiving. The three studies are conducted among the officially classified ethnic minorities of the Yi, the Bai, and the Dai. The Peking University PhD graduates produced more work on the topic. Chen Bo 陈波's *生活在香巴拉 (Living in Shambhala, 2009)* put forward "the civilised Tibetans" by describing the life in a village in central Tibet, where sacrificial and pilgrimage spaces, calendars, orthodoxy and heterodoxy interplay. In Zhang Yahui 张亚辉 *et al.*'s *历史、神话、民族志 (History, Mythology, Ethnography, 2012)*, the contributors suggest the presence of a "Shamanistic Civilisation" in ancient China, where there was a "unity in diversity scheme" centred around "magicians." Examples include the official Shamanistic sacrifice and mythology of the Qing dynasty, the convergence of Confucianism and Buddhism of the Wutai Mountain, the sacred mountains and house of the Rgyal Rong, the ritual governance at the Jinci Shrine, Chengde landscape and the imperial religion, and the historical metaphor and mythological reality in the puppet drama of northern Sichuan. Wu Qiao 吴乔 in his *宇宙观与生活世界 (Cosmology and Life World, 2011)* reports the social life of the Colourful-waistband Dai in southwest China, situating the witch's time, life and death in the community, and the "governing spirit" of the village into the people's cosmology.

Both collaboration with external institutes and interdisciplinary studies are cross-border. On the one hand, it reveals the difference between international and Chinese academia resulting from decades of isolation. On the other, it again confirms the fluidity and segmented-ness of the anthropological study of religion. Chinese anthropology benefited from international anthropology, but it is not merely a passive receiver of external theoretical concerns. After all, the Chinese-speaking academia survived despite long-term political pressure, as demonstrated in many academic writings presenting particular views that are not easily found in the West. For example, the "Intermediate Circle" (*zhongjian quan* 中间圈) put forward by Wang Mingming (2008), who has conducted long-term studies in southeast and southwest China, is distinctively different from such paradigms as functionalism, structuralism, practice theory, or post-colonialism. On the other hand, mutual benefits are the key to anthropology, history, folklore, and ethnology, where some suggestions arising from the concerns within one discipline may inspire another. For example, the concept of "civilising process" in the study of folk religion conducted by historians greatly helped anthropologists rethink the discussion of "state-society relation" and "great and little traditions," making them pay more attention to the nodal function of literacy and gentry. We can safely conclude that cross-border collaborations and interdisciplinary studies not only illustrate the diversity of the anthropological study of religion in China, but also constitute the strength of this field.

"Ecology" and "market": two theoretic impacts

The anthropological studies mentioned so far are dominantly empirical and lack an obvious theoretical orientation. In contrast, two theories proposed in the last decade, one by researchers in religious studies and the other by sociologists, make louder sounds by debating with each other, overshadowing anthropology. These are the proposals of "religious ecology" and "religious market."

“Religious ecology” was put forward in 2006 by an eminent scholar of religious studies, Mou Zhongjian 牟钟鉴. Borrowing Julian Steward’s theory of multilineal evolution, Mou characterises religious ecology as “seeing the religious and secular cultures within a relatively independent community (such as a nation, a state, or a region) as a social life system, which maintains internal structural strata and external interactions with the social-cultural system of the larger context. Through adjustment and contentions, the system survives and develops through internal, continuous renewal and external interactions. Therefore, religious ecology is the study of the dynamics of religion as a life system, a theory viewing religion as live culture and aiming at promoting religious harmony” (Mou Zhongjian, 2012: 2). He believes that the religious ecology in contemporary China has lost balance because the Chinese traditional culture is rejected for the sake of atheism, leading to the suppression of the peaceful religious activities such as the folk religion, which is hard for ordinary people to accept. On the other hand, the state protects exclusive religions such as Christianity. He proposes that, while insisting on freedom of religious belief, China needs to promote inter-religious tolerance and cultural awareness. China needs to reconstruct the ecological balance by tolerating more folk religions and by indigenising Christianity, in order to “harmonise the diversity, strengthening the essential and indigenising the foreign” (*ibid.*: 9).

As early as 2008, Chen Xiaoyi 陈晓毅 already suggested an ecological interpretation in his *中国式宗教生态 (Religious Ecology with Chinese Characteristics)*. The book describes the religious landscape in a Guizhou town, southwest China, as a “structure with three layers”: folk religion at the bottom; Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism in the middle; Christianity and Catholicism on the top. The book delineates the dynamics of religious diversity in a multi-ethnic area inhabited by the Han, the Buyi, and the Miao. Moreover, Duan Qi 段琦 argues that the state’s improper interference with religions directly leads to the loss of ecological balance, which contributes to the rapid growth of Christianity. PRC’s extensive suppression of the folk religions unintendedly helps to remove the main obstacles to the spread of Christianity. The imbalance increased when the state decided to revive Christianity upon the Open-door policy, tolerating the growth of non-institutional church (house church) while tightly control the institutional church (state co-opted church). She suggests that “[we] should foster a relaxed environment for religious belief to make all religions develop sufficiently, create a competitive mechanism to let the winners win, and restore balance in the religious ecology. The rapid growth of Christianity would be naturally contained” (Duan Qi, 2006: 148-149).

Suggestions to balance Christianity with folk religion was met with alternative opinions, such as that of Li Xiangping 李向平, who argues that Chinese religious landscape is not the ecology of religions, but the ecology of religion and political power. Reducing the issue to the mutual exclusivity of Christianity and folk religion may reactivate the illusion that Christianity is a “foreign” religion and thus intensify the Sinocentric debate between “Chinese-ness and barbarity.” He suggests that instead of balancing one religion with another, China should relax the control over the religious relations by creating a free religious space (Li Xiangping, 2011). An anonymous scholar criticises the concept of “Chinese religion” (*zhonghua jiao* 中华教) proposed

by Chen Jinguo, another religious ecologist, arguing that Chen's suggestion is based on the antagonism between China and the west and that it neglects the heterogeneity of folk religion. The imbalance in the Chinese religious market and the growth of Christianity are not entirely an unintended consequence of policy, but a result of radical social changes. Christianity presents internal variations that cannot be lumped together and balanced as a whole (Ni Feng, 2009). Those against religious ecology argue that there is no correlation between the growth of Christianity and the wane of folk religion. They worry that the state might indeed adopt the ecologists' proposal and balance Christianity with folk religion.

"Religious ecology" is no more than a theoretical outline with numerous missing links. How to find "a relatively independent community"? How to decide "the internal" and "the external" of non-institutional religions? Why should religious and secular cultures be considered as "life systems"? If everyone knows culture is dynamic, why should "religious culture" be a particularly "live" one? Can theory "promote" religious harmony, and how? The proposal claims to explain the religious culture of the world, but most authors discuss only the Chinese religious policy. More important is perhaps the fact that the theory has very limited support from empirical studies. This is because the theory requires one to define *a priori* a community within which the boundaries of all religions have to be identified. However, this is extremely difficult to do unless one reifies the nation-state's border, and takes it as an academically legitimate unit, or subduing to the dominance of administrative power, exactly the contrary to what this theory claims to promote – "spontaneous" interaction of all religions.

If religious ecology intends to do nothing more than suggesting a policy, it will rapidly lose its grand ambition and academic merit. Apparently, its aim is to promote the legitimisation of folk religion, which is not a religion but a spectrum of diverse activities illegible to the state. Once legible, it immediately becomes a codified object for dominance, which involves elitist considerations such as resource allocation and the invention of traditions, to the degree of turning it into another "official religion." Such a process may contribute to the legitimisation of the various folk religious activities and expand their spaces. However, it will inevitably be reduced into organisations legible to the state by creating fixed sites, rituals, liturgy, canons and by excluding diverse non-organisational practices and grassroots interpretations, making the latter more marginalised. The frenzy of heritage-making activities over the folk religious practices has already illustrated the limits of policy. Due to their illiteracy, "absurd," "self-contradictory" explanations, "historical untruthfulness," or inability to meet the demand of the local governments' incentive for economic development, ordinary practitioners of folk religion are intentionally ignored by the political and intellectual powers responsible for making the heritage. Most of the time, these powerful heritage-making elites are only capable of creating an elitist version of the heritage incomprehensible to the silent majority. We can certainly imagine that once folk religion is codified into a social domain subject to administrative regulation, the marginalised majority will naturally look for alternative ways to practice and meet their concerns, a process that is not much different from the non-institutionalisation of Christianity.

About the same time when religious ecology was put forward, a number of religious sociologists, headed by Yang Fenggang 杨凤岗 of Purdue University, began to introduce the religious market theory into China by holding a series of forums on the “social scientific studies of religion” and producing a series of monographs. For example, Gong Zhebing 宫哲兵, Yang Fenggang *et al.* edit 宗教人类学的田野调查 (*Field Investigation of Religious Anthropology*, 2004). Gao Shining 高师宁 and Yang Fenggang edit 从书斋到田野 (*From Study Room to the Field*, 2010). Yang Fenggang (2006) proposes a theory of triple colours in the Chinese “religious market” – “red, gray, and black.” Excessive control on state co-opted religions (the “red market”) will not control religions, but will only alter the supply-demand relations in the religious market, leading to the growth of the radical religions (“black market”) and the in-between “gray market.” The reason is simple: everyone needs religion, or, putting it mildly, most humans are prone to supernatural beliefs or to become religious virtuosos. Yang’s theory rests on a dichotomy between “politics” and “religion,” deeming the state’s control of religion rooted in its atheistic ideology. Despite its rapid popularisation, the market theory was regarded more cautiously by sociologists such as Lu Yunfeng 卢云峰 who, while hoping to develop it, admitted its limitation in explaining the Chinese religious landscape (Lu Yunfeng, 2008). Ji Zhe (2008a) severely criticised it, arguing that religious market theory simply reduces religion to a kind of social phenomenon rather than presenting it as a central issue for modernity.

The fundamental flaw in the triple-colour market theory lies in its presumption that religion is a part of human nature, and religions are isomorphic and mutually exclusive, without much attention to the particularity of the Chinese society.

First, the competing relation between religions that the theory tries to propose with a market metaphor is more likely to account for exclusive, Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism). However, it is quite impossible to explain the non-competitive nature of Chinese societies full of non-institutional religions – inclusive or syncretic. To categorise different ways into different “religions” is tantamount to implying that all religions should be similar to Christianity.

Second, assuming the state as political without considering its religiosity is of course based on the Biblical dichotomy of “Caesar” and “God.” Equipped with this dichotomy, one can easily quote from certain liberal political philosophies to argue that religion is an individual choice and that any external interference is illegitimate. Theologically valid as it might be, this view is based on a certain universal-in-disguise, prescriptive philosophy, rather than on empirical, inductive social science. Scholars favouring market theory tend to argue that PRC’s strong regulation of religion was caused by its communist atheism, but they often ignore the similar phenomena in pre-1949 China.

Third, the statement that state’s excessive regulation on the “red market” will lead to the growth of the “black market” presupposes a continuum from religion to superstition, attributing the “black market” to a kind of “heresy” and assuming that people would be tempted to believe in unreal, supernatural powers. When folk religion is said to be just an “inferior” religion in the “gray” or “black” markets, one might be reminded of the Biblical outlook that people may be corrupted by idolatry if not exposed to the Gospels.

Fourth, the market theory holds that the complete absence of the state would be ideal for the “religious market,” a scenario desirable to the neoliberal construction of the market economy. However, such a condition will only benefit the evangelical churches that hold one of the strongest proselytising incentives and the richest economic resources in human history. Just like the situation in the global market, it is the giant transnational corporations that will dominate, not small businesses. In the “religious market,” only Christian denominations stand a chance. In a review article on Yang Fenggang’s recent book, Yu Anthony (2012) challenges the market metaphor of religion by asking whether it is better than its preceding one – Marx’s metaphor of “religion as opium,” which at least accurately described the addictive nature of religion. If religion is what Yang defines as merely “a unified system of beliefs and practices about life and the world relative to the supernatural,” a market metaphor cannot explain why it has to be indispensable to an individual and why the religious population shrinks in the ideal market of the U.S.

Neither the ecology theory nor the market theory attracts anthropologists much, especially the former. Anthropologists who do respond are divided into those who are interested in developing it (such as Lu Yunfeng and Huang Jianbo), and those who reject it (such as Ji Zhe and Liang Yongjia). In a conference held in Beijing in 2013, several active anthropologists – Stephan Feuchtwang, Wang Mingming, Adam Chau, Yang Der-ruey 杨德睿, Qu Jingdong 渠敬东, Chen Jinguo, Ji Zhe, Liang Yongjia, Cao Nanlai 曹南来 – expressed their criticism on the market theory, which, according to them, largely misses the anthropological literature of the last century, both Chinese and English (such as Ji Zhe, 2008b; Liang Yongjia, 2014; Zhao Bingxiang 赵丙祥 & Tong Zhoubing 童周炳, 2011).

Theories of religious ecology and religious market raise direct debate, in which the ecologists, with “cultural relativism,” criticise the market fundamentalists for favouring Christianity, while the market fundamentalists, with “freedom of religious belief,” criticise the ecologists for endorsing popular religion. However, both share similar weaknesses. First, while claiming to be universally applicable and “scientific,” both theories only address state-religion relations. Moreover, both reduce the Chinese religious landscape to competitive markets. The major difference seems to lie in the fact that religious ecology hopes for the state’s active interference, while religious market advocates the opposite. Such a difference is not dissimilar to the debates between the Republicans and the Democrats in the U.S. Congress, whose opinions are diverging to them but very similar to an outsider. Secondly, both hope for influencing the state to change China with specific suggestions, which they are very confident about when it comes to predicting how religions in China will develop. However, their empirical studies are rather inconclusive. Though both are sure what is going on, they seem not to be aware that empirical studies on Chinese religions are far from clear. A simple comparison with the scale of studies conducted on the topics of stock exchange, rural society, industry, law or population will immediately convince anyone how little empirical studies are available in the study of religious life.

Thirdly, both presume that “religion” is a natural category discoverable in the empirical world, in which interpretations provided by the actors do not necessarily

count. In both theories, religious adherents are statistically rather than sociologically significant. Studies that do take practitioners' interpretations into consideration often follow the models developed from the study of Christianity. To them, empirical studies mean little more than household visits, questionnaires, interviews, and software applications. However, as analysed earlier, it is not possible to define "religion" *a priori* in China. The issue is to explain society and to study religion as a discursive term rather than to take religion for granted and use the definition to influence policy-making. More empirical studies are needed to understand the religious landscape, because it cannot be simply reduced to a compartmentalised social realm called "religious phenomenon." Both "religious ecology" and "religious market" have to rely on a pre-defined concept of "religion," but neither realise how difficult it is to identify "religion" in contemporary China.

New trends in anthropology of religion

In the last decade, new trends deserving closer attention have emerged in Chinese anthropology of religion. First, a series of new books was translated into Chinese, including Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* (translated by Huang Jianbo 黄剑波 and Liu Boyun 柳博赞, 2006), Marcel Mauss's *A General Theory of Magic* and Mauss and Henri Hubert's *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (translated by Yang Yudong 杨渝东, Liang Yongjia and Zhao Bingxiang, 2007), Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (Huang Jianbo, Liu Boyun and Lu Chen 卢忱, 2008), Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* (translated by Yue Yongyi, 2008), and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (translated by Qin Lili 覃俐俐, 2010), etc. Secondly, some important works on Chinese religions were translated too, including C. K. Yang's *Religion in Chinese Society* (translated by Fan Lizhu 范丽珠, 2007), Stephan Feuchtwang's *The Imperial Metaphor* (translated by Zhao Xudong 赵旭东, 2008), Arthur Wolf (ed.)'s *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* (translated by Peng Ze'an 彭泽安 and Shao Tiefeng 邵铁峰, 2014), etc. Thirdly, Chinese anthropologists also published several theoretical books, such as Jin Ze 金泽's *宗教人类学学说史纲要 (Outline of the Theoretical Genealogy on the Anthropology of Religion)*, 2009), Peng Zhaorong 彭兆荣's *人类学仪式的理论与实践 (Theory and Practice of the Anthropological Study of Rituals)*, 2007), and Lu Yao 路遥's *中国民间信仰研究述评 (Review on Chinese Folk Belief)*, 2012). These works expand the theoretical explorations further.

One recent turn is the empirical studies of institutional religions. For Christianity, most of the in-depth studies have to be published in Hong Kong due to censorship. Huang Jianbo published three ethnographic studies on rural and urban Christianity – 乡村社区的信仰、政治与生活：吴庄基督教的人类学研究 (*Belief, Politics and Life in a Rural Community: Anthropological Studies on Christianity in the Wu Village*, 2012), 地方文化与信仰共同体的生成 (*Local Culture and the Formation of a Belief Community*, 2013a), and 都市里的乡村教会：中国城市化与民工基督教 (*Rural Church in a City: Chinese Urbanisation and Rural Migrant Christianity*, 2013b), all focusing on the landing and evolution of Christianity in rural and urban China, providing a vivid description of how belief is practiced in everyday life by Chinese Christians and churches. Huang Jianbo put forward three dimensions of Chinese Christianity: the proselytised Christianity, the acquired

Christianity, and the practiced Christianity, dimensions particularly illuminating through an anthropological lens.

Cao Nanlai's *Constructing China's Jerusalem* studies (2010) the famous "boss Christians" in Wenzhou in China's coastal southeast. This Christian community enjoys a great deal of freedom due to their economic power and political networks. Not unfriendly with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement church, the boss Christians are able to conduct religious activities outside the state-coopted system when they promote the faith in company premises and proselytise in other business activities. Their attempt to maintain cooperative relations with the state is not merely strategic, but based on their particular way of interpreting their commercial success, which is, according to their appropriated version of Max Weber, a success of the Protestant ethic, what they call the "combination of two civilisations" – material and spiritual, an appropriation of the state's ideology too. Cao suggests that the boss Christians do not form a closed system against the state's hegemony, but constitute a field accommodating different powers, national and local. They challenge the secularist theme that religion will decline in modernity, the stereotype that Chinese Christians are mainly the aged, the women, and the illiterate, and the impression that Chinese Christians are victims of severe persecution. More importantly, the book encompasses the model of "dominance-resistance" and makes significant theoretical contributions.

Christianity studies have proliferated in recent years. In addition to Huang and Cao, Zhang Tan 张坦 published "窄门" 前的石门坎 (*The Stone Gateway at the Narrow Door*, 2009), and Wu Ziming 吴梓明 *et al.* edited a volume 边际的共融: 全球地域化视角下的中国城市基督教研究 (*Harmony at the Margin: Christianity in Urban China under Globalisation*, 2009).

Catholic studies are also productive. Wu Fei 吴飞的 麦芒上的圣言: 一个乡村天主教群体的信仰和生活 (*Sacred Word over The Wheatland: A Study of a Catholic Group in Rural China*, 2013), based on the fieldwork conducted among a Catholic group in North China, delineates the collective memory of the sufferings in the Boxer's Rebellion, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Cultural Revolution. The author argues that unlike Christians who creates an ethic through effective techniques to change everyday life, Catholics merely form a distinctively collective identity based on common memory. In other words, the Catholics do not share a unique way of life to create an ethic called "modernity." The book is complementary to Cao Nanlai's work.

In the vein of historical anthropology, Zhang Xianqing 张先清 analyses the growth of Catholicism in the context of the local society of the Ming and Qing dynasties. In his 官府、宗族与天主教: 17-19 世纪福安乡村教会的历史叙事 (*Government, Lineage and Catholicism: Historical Narratives of a Rural Church in Fu'an, 17-19 Centuries*, 2009), Zhang finds that despite strong banning, the Catholics did well in Fu'an, in southeast China. He argues that the elites, with the complicity of the governments, supported the spread of Catholic doctrines, because the Catholic idea of women's chastity perfectly fit in the morality sanctioned by lineages.

For Islam, 流动的精神社区 (*Fluid Spiritual Community*, 2006) studies the idea of "Jamaat" (community) of a Muslim group in Guangzhou, south China. The author,

Ma Qiang 马强, suggests the essential power of Jamaat is its spirituality and fluidity, demonstrated by its resilience across time and space. The idea of Jamaat is extensively found in mosques, restaurants, companies, schools and cyberspace. At the same time, Jamaat is further differentiated in terms of language, sects, and practices, such as the idea of “Chinese-speaking Muslim,” which, as a non-political ummah, challenges the politicised idea of ummah.

For Buddhism and Daoism, in addition to what was mentioned earlier – Chu Jianfang’s study on the Dai Theravada Buddhism and Chen Bo’s study on the Tibetan Buddhism in Lhasa – Gong Haoqun 龚浩群’s 信徒与公民: 泰国曲乡的政治民族志 (*Buddhists and Citizens: Political Ethnography of a Village in Thailand*, 2009) provides a detailed description of a Theravada Buddhist community involved in the civil society politics in Thailand. Wang Jianxin 王建新’s edited volumes 南岭走廊民族宗教研究 (*Studies on Ethnicity and Religion of the Nanling Corridor*, 2011) set out to study the historical process and the current situation of Daoism in the provinces of Hunan, Jiangxi, Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou and Yunan, focusing on how ethnic minorities in the mountains accommodate and contend Daoism.

Chen Jinguo’s monograph, *Facing Kalpa: Field Studies of Contemporary Soteriological Religions* (2017), is a pathbreaking study on the field of sectarian religions. Based on fieldwork in South China and Southeast Asia, Chen Jinguo investigates the dynamics of contemporary sectarian religions (which he calls “soteriological religions”), analysing their revivals, declines, organisations, networks, micropolitics, and infrastructures. He raises the questions why sectarian movements persist in and around China and share a “family resemblance”, in spite of harsh suppression and external despise. The answer lies in a common soteriology of “facing kalpa”, which reveals the cultural logic of different Chinese who have been constantly displaced and left with no choice but actively making sense of a rapidly changing world. The book provides precious empirical data on contemporary sectarianism on the one hand, and puts forward a novel theoretical outlook on the other. It solidly sets a new bar in the study of Daoism and Chinese popular religions.



Fig. 2 - Cover of the journal 宗教人类学 (*Anthropology of Religion*)

An admirable publication, *Anthropology of Religion* (宗教人类学), edited by Jin Ze and Chen Jinguo (who recently became editor-in-chief), is published by Social Science Literature Press. It is an annual review hosted by the Institute of World Religions, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. With eight issues so far since 2009, the journal holds regular events inviting Chinese and international anthropologists to discuss on a variety of topics. Each issue includes regular columns – “voice from the field,” “vernacular perspectives,” “overseas horizon,” “intellectual conversation,” “book reviews” – and includes some English papers. It maintains a high standard with a peer-review system not easily found in Chinese academia, in which a group of well-trained anthropologists have contributed articles on some critical issues: religious ecology vs. religious market, middle-range theories on folk religions, redemptive societies, sacrifice sphere, belief sphere, deity standardisation, gentry, renunciation, etc. Recently, the journal has organised a series of events under the rubric of “the anthropology of self-cultivation” that deserves special attention.

The new trends in the anthropology of religion are under the direct influence of the conversations between Chinese anthropologists and their international counterparts, as well as some new developments in Chinese social science. Attention to institutional religions responds to some emerging issues in the Chinese society, especially to the rapid growth of Christianity. Studying this politically “sensitive” topic is a brand-new attempt among Chinese anthropologists, who have largely abandoned the practice of adopting alternative terms (“culture,” “folklore,” etc.) in their studies of religion. However, anthropologists of Christianity are predominantly Christians themselves, and they do not always address their faith with value-free analysis. The field needs more studies by non-Christians. For Islam, Daoism and “Confucianism,” studies are not numerous, especially for Daoism and Confucianism, which, having a rich historical background to extend the study, are not closed communities difficult to access, either. Moreover, more studies are needed on pseudo-religious or quasi-religious practices (such as breath-exercise, spiritual cultivation, tantric practices, yoga, life-nurturing, eremitism, etc.) or new religious movements (Eastern Lightning, Three Rows of Servants, Society of Disciples, Almighty God, etc.). Some young anthropologists have produced ethnographic studies on the religious life beyond China, including overseas Chinese religions, Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism, Astrology, Catholicism, Judaism, and Christianity.

Concluding remark: anthropology of religion at crossroad

The paper highlights some characteristics of Chinese anthropology of religion since the 1980s. I firstly set the field in the context of religious revival and regulation in China, as well as its relation to the disciplines of religious studies and folklore. Secondly, I explore the ways and reasons for the proliferation of studies under names other than “religion,” emphasising that the anthropology of religion in China is fragmentary and diffuse, without many tied-up debates. Thirdly, I review the external collaborations and their impact on China, as well as interdisciplinary studies from history and ethnology. Fourthly, I provide a critical review of the two theoretical proposals from religious studies and sociology, namely the “religious ecology” and “religious market.” Finally, I point out some new trends,

including the study of institutional religions and a new journal, *Anthropology of Religion*. My argument is that the anthropology of religion in China is rather fragmentary and diffuse, not just because of the academic power distribution and the political sensitiveness of “religion,” but also because of the imported-ness of the term “religion.” All these elements reveal that quality empirical studies are relatively few.

Recently, a community of “anthropology of religion” has gradually emerged through more frequent workshops and writings, both domestic and international. It is a good time to discuss the future of the field, which is certainly closely related to the entire situation of Chinese social science.

Since the turn of the century, four new trends have emerged in Chinese social science as a whole. First, while social science has become more rigorous, it has also lost its autonomy to the extent that it is too close to policy studies, think tank establishment, and propaganda work. Secondly, English-speaking academics, particularly American ones, intensely influence Chinese scholars by laying out a variety of topics unimportant to Chinese society. Thirdly, fundamentalist empiricism has arisen, insisting that “theories” should come out of purely empirical studies free of any theoretical premises. Fourthly, humanities and social sciences are so deeply divided that those who consciously engage in value-laden studies and those who try to conduct value-free studies stop talking with each other. All these trends can be found in the anthropological study of religion.

Upon the rapidly changing landscapes of religion and religious policy, it might not be wise for anthropologists to influence policies at the cost of value-free analysis. After all, the few empirical studies available are barely enough to suggest wise policies or minimise policy risks. This has been proven once and again, but has not deterred scholars from being keen to policy suggestions. At the same time, those who claim to have obtained the truth with pure empiricism actually cannot go without conceptual frameworks. Without rigorous training, the “empirical” studies would never be “purely descriptive” as they claim, but coarse impressions at most. The anthropological study of the religious landscape cannot go without sufficient training in the western anthropology, though Chinese anthropologists have the right and obligations to raise their own research questions. Meaningful questions can be raised only through sophisticated reflection on the Chinese academic traditions and the current anthropological literature in western languages at the same time. Neither English-speaking anthropology nor Chinese ancient classics alone can help Chinese anthropologists produce world-class studies. Of course, we need time, but what is urgent is the accumulation of more qualified empirical studies to give the world a clearer picture of what is going on in China. Until then, we are unable to expect much from the anthropological study of religion in China.

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