The Dilemma of Pursuing Chinese Religious Studies in the Framework of Western Religious Theories
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Summary: In the academic research on religion in China, there have been gaps and dilemmas as the result of differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Throughout this initial period, Chinese scholars have often attempted to interpret Chinese traditional culture and belief with reference to Western viewpoints and theories. But in studying Chinese religion in this way, many problems and dilemmas inevitably arise. Philosophers, too, adopted this starting point—a strategy now identified as reverse analogical interpretation. This approach has also had great influence in the conventional line of thinking in the social scientific study of religion. By discussing the existence and influence of reverse analogical interpretation in Chinese religious studies, this paper intends to strengthen the social science basis of religious studies in China. One negative result of this western orientation is that the potential substantive contributions of Chinese religion to the larger field of religious studies is slighted. Reverse analogical interpretation tempts even the Chinese researcher to overlook the distinctive features of Chinese religion. This paper begins with an analysis of the application of the term religion in Chinese academic research and then reflects on the dilemma of employing western theories of religion in Chinese cultural environments. The hope is that this reflection may contribute to a heightened consciousness of both the benefits and the difficulties involved in such cross-cultural intellectual exchange.

Key words: Religion, Western Theory, Reverse Analogical Interpretation

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In the academic research on religion in China, there have been gaps and dilemmas as the result of differences between Chinese and Western cultures. In his significant analysis in *Religion in Chinese Society*, which appeared some five decades ago, C.K. Yang wrote: “For many years I have been perplexed by the problem of the place of religion in traditional Chinese-society”.¹ Throughout this initial period, Chinese scholars have often attempted to interpret Chinese traditional culture and belief with reference to Western viewpoints and theories. But in studying Chinese religion in this way, many problems and dilemmas inevitably arise. Philosophers, too, adopted this starting point—a strategy now identified as reverse analogical interpretation.² In the 4th century of the Common Era the earliest interpreters of Buddhism in China turned to Daoist concepts to illumine this foreign faith. This hermeneutical strategy, called *ge yi* (格义), matched unfamiliar Buddhist notions such as the Dharma with familiar notions such as the Dao. In the early 20th century Chinese interpreters of religion often did just the reverse: they used unfamiliar notions – western definitions of religion – to explain their own familiar world of belief. Such a strategy, which Liu Xiaogan (刘笑敢) has named “reverse analogical interpretation,” has led to unfortunate judgments about religion in Chinese culture. This approach has also had great influence in the conventional line of thinking in the social scientific study of religion. By discussing the existence and influence of reverse analogical interpretation in Chinese religious studies, this paper intends to strengthen the social science basis of religious studies in China.

For nearly twenty years, the present author has been engaged in research of Chinese religion as well as learning about Western religious theories. Obviously the western traditions of research and theory have produced an impressive range of comprehensive studies of Chinese culture and religion. But it must be recognized that there are occasional inconsistencies between characteristics of Chinese culture and religion, and the interpretations of these realities as they appear in the framework of Western religious concepts and theories. The western theoretical framework of sociology of religion, transplanted to China, functions as the ‘standard operating procedure.’ Or, as sociologist Ambrose King has said so well, “Sociology is a western flower.”³ Therefore, Western theories of religion have provided the basic research methods and instructional codes for the study of China’s religious heritage. When China establishes its academic study of religion in the light of Western religious theories, Chinese scholars will be influenced by these models and categories as they set out to understand Chinese religion. The culturally particular role of religion in Chinese society may be too easily overlooked or undervalued; and, as the scholarly record shows, this has even led to debates about the very existence of religion in China. One negative result of this western orientation is that the potential substantive contributions of Chinese religion to the larger field of religious studies is slighted.

Reverse analogical interpretation tempts even the Chinese researcher to overlook the distinctive features of Chinese religion.

This paper begins with an analysis of the application of the term *religion* in Chinese academic research and then reflects on the dilemma of employing western theories of religion in Chinese cultural environments. The hope is that this reflection may contribute to a heightened consciousness of both the benefits and the difficulties involved in such cross-cultural intellectual exchange.

**The Term RELIGION and Relevant Concepts**

Harvard theologian Francis Fiorenza has asked the right question:

“How do we study religion in ways that do not substitute or privilege our own categories and thereby misunderstand and devalue the beliefs and practices of other cultures, past and present?”

In the first years of the 20th century, a Chinese translation of the English term ‘religion,’ *zong jiao* (宗教), appeared in the Mainland. This new term and complementary term for ‘superstition,’ *mixin* (迷信), were “all adopted from Japanese neologisms crafted a few years before, and were used to express Western notions which had not existed in the Chinese discourse until then.”

With these imported categories, “religion was now understood in the Western post-reformation sense of a system of doctrine organized as a church separate from society; the word was first equated with Christianity, and debate began (and is still going on to this day) regarding what, in the Chinese tradition, might be put under this category.” As Chinese scholars in the early 20th century, intent on adapting Chinese society to the onrushing dynamics of modernity, sought to understand ‘religion,’ they were presented with a definition that emphasized institutional structures, well-developed doctrines, organizational roles for trained clergy, and a distinct dichotomy between sacred and profane. None of these characteristics, of course, would be of much help in analyzing the religious dynamics alive in their own deeply spiritual culture.

**Dilemma One: Is there Religion in China?**

Although the question seems simple — even simplistic — this issue touches several theoretical levels. Does ‘religion’ in this question bring with it all its western specifications? A better question might be: what words best describe religious belief as it exists in China? In the early part of the 20th century Wang Zhixin (王治新) searched for indigenous terms that might convey the essence of religious belief. He suggested that the basic concept of “religion” in China could be demonstrated by the term “moralization by sacred ways”, which appeared in the *Zhou Yi* (周易): “based on the sacred ways, the running of four seasons never goes wrong. The sages devised guidance by the way of gods, and the (people in the) empire became

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6 See Goossaert, Ibid.
Other scholars have argued that the term **zong jiao** (‘religion’) has been long used to describe the three moral traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. This term has been applied to a great many Buddhist documents, but without the distinctive meanings found in Western writings on religion. Even though the term ‘religion’ has few roots in the Chinese culture, it has now become transplanted in Chinese soil along with other Western concepts and ideologies, and has had great influence on Chinese scholars who were studying Chinese society, culture and religion.

**Asking The Right Question:**

Anthropologist Li Yiyuan (李亦园) has suggested that a problem arises when foreigners ask the wrong question of Chinese. Outsiders are likely to enquire, “What religion do you Chinese belong to?” A Chinese person is likely to respond, “it’s hard to say!” A Westerner often assumes that to have religious beliefs necessarily implies belonging to a religious organization. Accordingly, they would ask about a person’s membership in a religious institution. Li Yiyuan judged that if the query was phrased not in terms of institutional membership, but of belief, a better conversation might be had. If one asked, “what do you believe in?”…many Chinese would find it easier to respond to this question.”

China scholar Vincent Goossaert reframes the larger question in a useful way. “People generally do not consider themselves members of a religion, but of a community: household, clan, professional guild, etc.” In these ordinary, everyday gatherings – instead of in formal religious organizations – many Chinese give expression to their deepest beliefs.

C.K Yang also attempted to find a Chinese term for ‘religion’ that would fit in Chinese culture and society. He recalled the deeply Chinese notion of the Dao – a transcendent way and cosmological principle that governs the universe, including the human world. Yang also noted the religious resonance in the Chinese word **men** (门), meaning door, as in passageway leading to enlightenment and salvation. He likewise acknowledged the common use of **jiao** (教) or ‘teaching’ with its moral and religious connotations, such as in the Chinese term for Buddhism: **fo jiao** (佛教), the (religious) teaching of the Buddha. The word **zong** (宗), meaning piety, devotion, or faith also carried many religious overtones. In fact, the modern neologism, **zong jiao**, was precisely a union of these two traditional terms.

We might also reflect on the existence of religion in China on the institutional level. Even when Chinese scholars accept the term religion, it is still not easy to determine the existence and assessment of religion in Chinese society and culture.

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10 Goossaert, Ibid.
Before C.K Yang's groundbreaking work, scholars often questioned whether religion existed in China; doubt about whether folk belief amounted to genuine religion pervaded scholarly discussions. Wang Zhixin thought that religious belief in China was so influenced by Confucian humanism that it amounted to little more than moral education and transmission of cultural values. Others proposed that the Three Teaching of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism were essentially vehicles of moral education, and should not be seen as religious.13

As the 20th century dawned in China, many intellectuals were captivated by the rationalism of the European enlightenment. Their approach to religion in China was profoundly shaped by this Western, ‘scientific’ perspective. If the Confucian tradition was questionable as a religious system, their own country’s heritage of folk belief was deeply embarrassing. The influential intellectual Liang Qichao (梁启超), after comparing Chinese practices and Western religious institutions, wondered about the nature of Chinese belief: “The history of religion consists of the story of theology and the change of religious organizations. Theology goes beyond the realistic world to talk about paradise, about the soul after death… From there two points, whether China has any religion or not is a question that merits serious study.”14 The philosopher Liang Shuming (梁漱溟) also said: In the world, the religiosity of China and Chinese people is the weakest... The majority of Chinese philosophy concentrated on human life, and this is also the case of modern philosophy.”15 Looking back to ancient times, he opined that “There was no religion before Qin Dynasty and it is a great shame to add Daoism into the history of religion. What Daoism does to the whole country year after year was of no good at all and it just bewildered people and broke the peace.”16 Liang’s views were representative in the academic field of his time. Hu Shi (胡适) had affirmed that the educated people in China were indifferent to religion.17 As a whole, Hu argued, “China is a country without religion and the Chinese are people are not bound by religious superstitions.”18

The environment in which the philosopher Qian Mu (钱穆) was brought up was full of Chinese traditional beliefs and rituals. In Soul and Heart, Qian wrote, “I was born in the countryside, where people live in big families. There are nearly one hundred people in the whole county and they share the same surname. Moreover, they would gather on the occasion of a wedding or funeral. It is a great moment for all of the residents to offer sacrifices to ancestors.” His early memories were of a pervasive spiritual atmosphere: “Year after year, the aged people were always telling their offspring the story of ancestors as well as other family legends. Therefore, the world of human beings and the world of ghosts are tightly connected.” After learning about Western culture, Qian found “a sharp difference between Western religious philosophies and our own views on topics like the universe and human life.” Compared with Western institutional religion, Buddhism, in Qian’s eyes, could not be

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14 Liang Qichao, Methods of Chinese History Studies.
15 Liang Shuming, Eastern and Western Culture and Philosophy, p. 198.
16 Liang Qichao, Methods of Chinese History Studies.
18 Hu Shi. MingJiao (名教), in the first volume of Three Collection of Works of HuShi,
considered a religion. “The spirit of Buddhism is similar to that of Chinese culture. Although it can be called a religion, its object of faith is an internal Buddha or Bodhisattva, rather than an external God. At this point, Buddhism is consistent with the Chinese spirit of admiring sages. Therefore, Buddhist beliefs seem to begin and end in human beings. We can say Buddhism is a kind of religion that set its basis on human beings.”

These assessments of religion in China show the influence of Western values. C. K. Yang recognized that these attitudes -- that China is non-religious, and devoid of traditional beliefs -- to be partially the results of the worldwide wave of modernization. Science was judged to be the most powerful strategy for improving human life and endowing people with real benefits. An early generation of Chinese scholars, influenced by Western culture, believed that China’s lack of religiousness might well be an advantage in a season of secularization and modernization. Many of these scholars also struggled to emphasize, in the face of the onslaught of Western science, politics and economy, the excellence of their own Chinese culture.

Yang judged that “The modern Chinese scholars’ argument for the insignificance of religion in Chinese society was partly a reflection of the world’s trend toward secularization. Modern Europe emerged from a violent reaction against the medieval church. Science has given man the most powerful weapon yet known for unlocking the secrets of nature and for providing hitherto undreamed-of tangible benefits. Intellectually, this is an age of rationalistic orientation which waves off religion with defiance and even with contempt.” This led Yang to conclude: “It is quite natural for modern Chinese intellectuals, who have followed the West in exalting science, to catch the spirit of the times and to shun religion.”

Yang also recognized other motivations at play in these negative evaluations of religion in China: “But perhaps an even stronger motivation for the assumption of an “unreligious” or “rationalistic” society for China lies in the Chinese intellectual’s necessity of emphasizing the dignity of Chinese civilization in the face of the political and economic superiority of the nationally oriented Western world.”

In these discussions of Chinese religion there was the need to be scientific and to advocate the suppression of superstition. The New Culture Movement, the pursuit of science and democracy, and the transplantation of new education system all challenged religion and related studies. Not until the 1980s were there studies or works on religious theory, theology, religious history or religious practice which could reflect the basic attitude towards religion in the academic fields. The prejudice that Chinese belief was essentially superstitious may have developed initially in the attitudes of some Western missionaries, but it was subsequently adopted by both Western and Chinese scholars. The result was that the scholars of later generations were reluctant to attribute any value to China’s traditional beliefs.

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In 1962, C.K Yang showed that what China lacked was not religion, but the institutional and organizational structures so prevalent in western religions like Christianity. As a result the evaluation of religion in China remained very challenging. Yang’s response to this dilemma was to develop a broader concept of religion that would be more adequate to Chinese religious phenomenon and belief. “From a broad viewpoint, religion should be viewed as a continuum from ultimate atheistic belief with passion to theistic belief with transcendent values symbolized by supernatural being and sustained by organization.”

When Yang’s book was published in the early 1960s, social circumstances in mainland China made it difficult for his work to be appreciated. It was also, at first, little appreciated in the West. In his review in the *Journal of Asian Studies* in 1962, Maurice Freedman did not see Yang’s book as much of an achievement. But in a 1974 article entitled “On the sociological study of Chinese religion”, Freedman came to a very different reading of Yang’s achievement. “(Yang’s) book is, after all, the latest of the very few works of its kind: an attempt to characterize Chinese religion as a whole and in relation to the society within which it was thought and practiced.” Freedman placed Yang’s work in the sociological tradition of Max Weber and Marcel Granet, and wrote: “In what I have said so far I have tried to show that there is a sociological tradition, culminating for the moment in Yang’s book, which takes Chinese religion to be one entity.” Robert Redfield viewed Yang’s work as “the first functional study of Chinese religion” and praised it as “a large achievement.” It was not an exaggeration to say that Yang’s study was a triumph of sociological interpretation over other forms of interpretations of the Chinese religion.

Meanwhile, Anthropologist Li Yiyuan, after much field research experience, showed that Chinese religious belief is immersed in common life and every aspect of the culture. Religious belief in this culture had not become distilled into the organizational structures or systematic doctrines so familiar in western religion. Because of these particular cultural qualities, the western notion of distinct religious organizations does not adequately describe religious activities in China.

Li describes how Chinese religious beliefs find expression in broad but persuasive concepts of a “harmony between the heaven and human,” or “an adjustment with four seasons and all natures in harmony.” These beliefs find practical, daily expression in Chinese traditional medicine, its surname system, ancestral veneration rituals, augury, geomancy, and other rituals. All of these reflect the character of religion that is diffused throughout the culture and that is dedicated to concerns of daily life.

The formal academic study of religion could not begin in the Mainland until after the Cultural Revolution. Progress over the past thirty years has been steady but slow. Only in the 1990s was there a concerted effort among many Chinese scholars to come to terms with the rich heritage of popular belief. Daniel Overmyer, in his review of this recent surge of academic interest, observes: “what we find here is not only a new academic direction, but the fact that a great culture with long history begins to recognize and approach the expression of religious traditions shared by its majority.

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Dilemma 2: Interpreting Chinese religion with transplanted concepts

We have discussed the influence of Western religious vocabulary and theories, and the related confusions when these are applied uncritically to China’s religious heritage. From the perspective of vocabulary, there are still many problems related to the proper understanding of religious terms. As Liu Xiaogan has indicated, Western theories regularly and repeatedly have influenced Chinese philosophy. The same is true in the case of Chinese religious studies: social scientific theories of religion are rooted in western concepts of society and culture. Translation of these terms in the Chinese language often has little resonance with Chinese cultural experience or heritage. When Chinese scholars employ these terms, they may well forget their specific historical connections with the European Enlightenment and the fact that these words developed in the field of Western social science.

For example, in Western religious thought, the concept of secularization has played a prominent role; but this is, of course, the distinctive secularization that has developed in the midst of modernization in the West. This social dynamic is intimately rooted in the history of Christendom in Europe. To uncritically apply the notion of secularization to Chinese society is likely to lead only to confusion and misunderstanding.

Another example concerns Confucius’ supposed agnosticism. This term has deep historical associations with western Christianity: what constitutes authentic or orthodox belief and the historical challenge to belief that developed in the Enlightenment. When the term ‘agnosticism’ is uncritically applied to the Chinese context, it makes it easy to neglect Confucius’s deep esteem for the transcendent forces of Tian and Dao. Again, confusions arise from the careless application of a western concept to Chinese culture.

C.K. Yang’s contribution to the academic study of religion has been considerable. Yet Yang had to begin with a western understanding of institutional religion before being able to distinguish China’s diffused religion. Even if ‘diffused’ serves as an insightful description of the non-institutional belief system in China, the English term carries with it – at least for some scholars – pejorative nuances. Daniel Overmyer argues that ‘diffused’ implies a kind of disorganized, even incoherent religion. A common translation of ‘diffused’ (Yang wrote his book in English) has been sankaide (散开的). Professor Qu Haiyuan(瞿海源) prefers the translation of kuosanxing (扩散性宗教) and Prof. Chen Na (陈纳) suggests that misanxingzongjiao弥漫性宗教 is more proper translation. In my Chinese translation of Yang’s classic work I translate this term as distributed religion fensanxing (分散性宗教).

Vocabulary that is distinctive to the Chinese religion – terms such as Tian (天), Li (礼), Yuanfen (缘分) ,and Mingyun (命运) – have been slow to gain acceptance in the social scientific study of religion. Chinese scholars have likely learned, if only indirectly, that such terms bear pre-modern connotations and do not

comfortably fit within an accepted western framework of research. But these terms were the product of the worldview of ancient China and have reached every level of the culture. They carry a rich cultural heritage, and point to distinctive features of the Chinese religious tradition. Happily, scholars today are beginning to recognize their distinctive and untranslatable quality. Professors Hall and Ames, for example, point to the hazards of simply translating tian as ‘heaven’ – with its innumerable, unavoidable Christian nuances. China scholar Benjamin Schwartz reminds us of the range of the rich term li which transports this notion well beyond the narrow confines of the English term ‘ritual.’

“Li (礼)...refers to all those...prescriptions of behavior, whether involving rite, ceremony, manners, or general comportment, that bind human beings and the spirits together in networks of interacting roles within the family, within society, and with the numinous realm beyond.”

The Chinese term mingyun, with its rich historical nuances of how each life journey is both determined by external forces (ming命) and yet remains flexible (yun运) is often simply translated as ‘fate’ – again, with the western connotations that accompany the English term. When the western terms ‘heaven’ and ‘ritual’ are employed to translate Chinese phenomena, they manage to insinuate meanings that are not present in this very different cultural context. The solution that many scholars are coming to is to ‘set aside’ a dozen terms – such as tian (天), dao (道), li (礼), mingyun (命运) – as critical terms in their own right, not needing translation.

There are many problems if we explain Chinese religious questions by relying exclusively on Western concepts; these problems are similar to the dilemma caused by reverse analogical interpretation in the domain of philosophy. If we insist on attempting this, much of the intellectual heritage and worldview that has influenced Chinese culture over thousands of years will be lost to academic studies. Fortunately, more and more scholars today are giving attention to terms that can reflect daily religious practices of Chinese people.

When describing characteristics of folk religion in China, Overmyer proposes that “Chinese local religion also shares a common set of theoretical assumptions, its own ‘theology,’ which is based on the belief that the living and the dead, gods, humans and ghosts are all connected by bonds of mutual influence and response; bonds of mutual obligation that are based on a sense of a moral universe in which righteousness, respect and destructive behavior eventually bring their own retributions.” Only if we emphasize concepts, expression and symbols of Chinese belief, will we attribute deserved significance to Chinese religious activities. That is to say, we need to attach importance to native religious practices and beliefs; this helps to rid our academic work of dilemmas caused by relying solely on Western religious theories and methods.

25 See Benjamin Schwartz’s study, The World of Thought in Ancient China, p.67
Part Two: Chinese Religious Studies in the Framework of Western Religious Theories

The aim of much modern social science has been to develop a universal theoretical framework to interpret human civilization, and this is also true in religious studies. Even today, many researchers still embrace this goal. Social scientists, influenced by the physical sciences, often seek to discover general laws of human society and propose common religious phenomena shared by all human beings. The intent is to describe characteristics that would apply to all religious phenomena. To satisfy this need for establishing cross-cultural commonality, the study of religion can become highly theoretical and abstract, finally becoming isolated from lived religiousness. But in fact a great many religious terms cannot be simply abstracted from their distinctive cultural roots.

In a forward to readers of the Chinese edition of Act of faith, the author writes: “If it would be foolish to try to formulate a physics that only applied to the United States, or a biology that held only in Korea, it is equally foolish to settle for a sociology if religion that applied only to Western nations. In our theoretical work we have attempted to formulate propositions that apply everywhere – that explain religious behavior as adequately in China as in Canada.” 28 Those words illustrate the hunger for an all-inclusive paradigm or even ‘grand narrative’ that explains all religious phenomena. I have been arguing that such schemes end by absorbing non-western phenomena into western paradigms of religious belief – or by excluding those that simply do not fit in the all-embracing schema. Yet another peril looms in regard to religious studies: strategies of measurement that work well in physics and biology are found lacking when researchers enter the domain of human beliefs and ideals; the market economy, with its multiple mathematical calculations cannot do justice to the incalculable movements of the human heart.

Dilemma 1, Difficulties of establishing the integrity of Chinese religion

Professor C K Yang’s contribution to the world of scholarship is certainly not confined to the study of Chinese religion, but his work on Religion in Chinese Society stands out as remarkably distinct and masterfully ingenious. It should be pointed out that the problems he dealt with and the interpretations he gave in his book concerned much more than Chinese religion. The focus of his study was Chinese society and religion as an integrated whole. 29

The most challenging task Yang faced was the development of concepts and theories adequate to Chinese religion. Yang attempted to construct an interpretive framework to express the complex predicament of Chinese religion. “An important reason for the obscurity (in Chinese religions) is the lack of structural prominence of a formal organized religious system in the institutional framework of Chinese society,

which leads to the frequent interpretation that the numerous popular cults are unorganized and are of little importance in the Chinese social and moral order.\textsuperscript{30} To Yang, it was inevitable that some answer be proposed for the question of vagueness and he did just that. In his concept of diffused religion, on one hand, he constructed a concept of Chinese religion that is in accordance with Western academic standards, and on the other hand, he made it possible that those folk beliefs and rituals to become topics worthy of religious studies.

Yang’s studies were influenced by structural-functionalism, and diffused religion offered a theoretical framework that clarifies those multilateral, complicated or even seemingly disordered religious phenomena in China. Although Yang made a great contribution, no one arose to continue his creative work. Young Chinese scholars continued to be trained in the Western academic system and they easily became preoccupied by Western religious theories and complex methods. Moreover, some scholars chose to concentrate on detailed descriptions and expressed little interest in building relevant theories.

Dilemma 2: Obstacles to an academic ‘break-through’ in Chinese religious studies

From the beginning of modern times, the economic impulse of western capitalism has exercised considerable influence on many fields of academic study. It brought material, utilitarian and rational attitudes into people’s life. Meanwhile, it challenged other aspects of human life, especially religion that had once been influential throughout society. As capitalism spread, Europe and North America became industrial societies; at the same time the social sciences were coming into existence. As a result, religious theoretical studies in modern society are often connected with interpretations of the rise of capitalism and the fate of religion in modernity. The founders of sociology all produced influential research studies on religious issues. Although their lines of thinking are different, there was a common characteristic: to see religion within the development of modern, capitalist society. This greatly influenced Chinese scholars’ understanding of how to recognize and study religion.

There is no doubt that Marxist theories on religion also have had considerable influence, especially on Chinese scholars. Marx, of course, was convinced that only with the elimination of religion, would humanity achieve practical and lasting happiness. The criticism of religion helps people get rid of such an illusion, enabling human beings to think and act rationally. Therefore, people could build their reality and circle around their own sun.\textsuperscript{31} There are characteristics of that social epoch in Marxist theories on religion. Marx’s thought on capitalism has often found recognition in the academic field. It is not the focus of this paper to discuss and assess Marxist theories on religion, but what we want to point out is that a dogmatic interpretation of Marxism often constrains Chinese scholars’ understanding of religion. A misunderstanding of Marxism defeats any proper understanding of Chinese religion. Even today, some scholars propose hollow theories in the name of Marxism without fully understanding

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, p. 20.

the thinking of Marx. Meanwhile, other scholars merely focus on issues such as atheism, theism and whether religion is the "opium of people." These scholars hope to find an approach to study religion from an ideological perspective and accordingly their researches are often not well respected.

Weber’s perspective on religion and society is quite different from Marxism. Although he saw that modern capitalism entailed a movement of secularization, Weber was also attentive to the disenchantment that accompanied this historical process. He acknowledged that "In a mature capitalistic world, religious organizations are supplanted and rational sciences are supreme". Therefore, Weber spared no efforts in his close study of the relationship between the rise of capitalism and Protestant Christianity. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber’s contribution was to point out that, in addition to economic factors, the inner-worldly asceticism of the Protestant ethic also supported the spread of capitalism. He especially emphasized the inner worldly asceticism of Calvinism. With this attention to a distinctively religious discipline, Weber’s theory gained considerable theoretical power, which has even been used to explain why there was no capitalistic economy in East Asia, especially China.  

Weber’s religious studies, especially those on the development of capitalism, greatly energized Chinese religious studies. Yu Ying Shih has observed that Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* has had the same influence on the study of non-western societies as has Marx’s works on history. In *Modern Religious Ethic and the Spirit of Businessperson*, Yü’s posing of the question is similar to that of Max Weber’s study, as becomes apparent in the title chosen by Yü for his book. Quite explicitly Yü says that he wants to pose a "Weberian" question to Chinese history. He wants to examine whether the Chinese religious ethic has produced something similar to the "inner-worldly asceticism" of Calvinism and Puritanism. To that end, he utilizes the concept of "inner-worldly asceticism" developed by Weber as an ideal-type with which to compare Chinese historical data.  

In the 1980s, many sociologists and economists discussed the cultural factors of the economic development of East Asia from the perspective of Weber’s questions, and they were aware of the intimate relationship between cultural factors and religious ethics. As a result, we not only found Weberian questions about a religious ethic and modernization, but also concepts such as inner-worldly asceticism appearing in various discussions. However, this tradition of inquiry, rooted in Weberian proposals, as little more than a supplement. Accordingly, the line of approach was unable to generate a widespread academic break-through in the study of Chinese religion. 

With the Opening and Reform in China, religious studies gradually emerged from the academic forbidden zone. Religious issues became a focus again as the economy

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34 Ibid.  
35 Ibid.  
developed along with a religious resurgence. Chinese religious studies still has much further to go, before we can fully understand these theories and apply them to Chinese realities. Even more distant is the possibility of a theoretical break-through regarding Chinese religion. If we carefully access the still-modest amount of religious research undertaken by Chinese scholars in the field of sociology of religion, we find these studies are still permeated with Western terms and modes of thinking. Relevant religious concepts reflect the Western academic history. It is an embarrassment that the study of Chinese religion cannot be pursued without depending on Western concepts.

During the decades when China was cut off from the world, many theories in religious studies were undergoing significant changes, becoming outdated or simply being rejected. Many of these changes were, naturally, not recognized by Chinese scholars at the time. For example, there were great changes in secularization theory, from an early conviction of the irreversibility of disenchantment to later, more sophisticated discussions. Even Peter Berger has participated in the discussion of a de-secularization that is part of the surprising religious vitality in many places in the world today.

Many scholars in China have undertaken the heavy work of interpreting Western religious theories, but sometimes their work displays a lack of depth and full understanding. While it is customary to apply Western theories directly to Chinese realities, this remains a risky undertaking because the theoretical framework, interpretation manners and criteria are all Western.

At present, the academic study of religion faces a great many dilemmas, even as the social sciences in China are thriving. He Guanghu (何光沪) has remarked, “There are still few translated books available today. Religious studies are thriving in advanced countries and there are many recognized scholars and publications. However, we do not even have sufficient statistical data on our own nation yet. This situation prevents us from opening our eyes and absorbing academic research based on our research. As a result, we are being held back in doing on our own research.”37 I realize my “translation” is rather awkward as well. The quote simply did not read very well in English.”37 It is hard to understand why we should only base our research on Western foundations. Yet Chinese scholars are not confident with their own studies and seem too often to simply rely on Western research achievements.

For example, the application of rational choice theory to Chinese society has recently influenced the Chinese academic field very much. Yang Feng Gang points out: “while fully aware of the deficiency of Stark’s theories, I still propose that principles of religious market theory are comprehensively applicable with certain revisions. It is hard to find an alternative theoretical framework when treating Chinese religious practice. For example, secularization theory is not helpful in interpreting Chinese religious resurgence.”38

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Conclusion: Studying Chinese Religion as a Whole

As early as his *Religion in Chinese Society*, C. K. Yang clearly brought up the question: Of three civilizations of Europe, India and China, the status of Chinese religion is especially vague. He found that available western theories could not explain the dynamics at play in the Chinese culture. This is by no means the problem of Chinese religion itself, but instead points to the deficiency of the interpretive models then available. The differences of religious practice between Western and China are far from being eliminated by introducing Western academic concepts. Many examples demonstrate that there is an inner logic of Chinese religion in practice, some of which is ignored by Western religious theories. For instance, it is hard to collect information on the exact number of adherents in China because Chinese styles of religious belief do not carry the same insistence on chosen membership. The western insistence on tracking membership is much less relevant in this culture. Also, Chinese religion does not possess the exclusivist orientation so familiar in western religions. Scholars have learned to take for granted the incompatibility of Christianity and Islam, or even more striking, the seeming incompatibility of Protestant and Catholic Christianity. In the Chinese culture, on the other hand, religious believers – whether Buddhist or Daoist or Confucian – remain quite comfortable with the beliefs and rituals of others. In addition, Chinese religion preserves a great many ancient views of the universe – some of which have developed into a kind of shared cultural heritage that is fused with beliefs that are distinctively Confucian, or Buddhist or Daoist.

This does not mean we should abandon modern Western theories in Chinese religious studies. Rather scholars ought to become more familiar with the seductions of the ‘reverse analogical interpretation’ and find ways to avoid this style of research. We should not forget the dangers that accompany a sole reliance on Western theories, and we also should remember that comparative studies can enlighten our own research and offer opportunities for break-through insights. Weber’s insights about the mutual influence of societal and religious forces lay the foundation for much fruitful subsequent research in sociology of religion, including religion in China. Meanwhile, the distinctive practice of Chinese religion offers us unique resources to dialogue with other civilizations. The study of Chinese religion may yet make a significant contribution to humanity’s appreciation of the religions of the world.

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