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Edited by Kiri Paramore

# Religion and Orientalism in Asian Studies

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## The Study of Chinese Religions in the Social Sciences: Beyond the Monotheistic Assumption

Anna Sun

Scholars of China have been struggling for years with how to *analyse* the diversity and apparent contradictions in Chinese religious practice.<sup>1</sup> In *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Goossaert and Palmer 2010), we see how the very ideas of ‘religion’ and ‘belief’, which are deeply rooted in Protestant Christianity, continue to cause great confusion in the study of Chinese religion. Indeed, an understanding of religion that focuses on belief and membership cannot capture what is distinctive of Chinese religious life. For instance, in the World Values Survey, 93.9 per cent of Chinese respondents answered ‘No’ to the question ‘Do you belong to a religious denomination?’ and 89.7 per cent answered ‘Never’ to the question ‘How often do you attend religious services?’ But if we focus on everyday religious practices in China, we find that 67 per cent of people have performed ‘ancestral rites on the gravesite of a deceased family member in the past year’ (Sun 2013).

As in many other societies with non-Abrahamic religious cultures, people in China will often visit different temples for different purposes: a Buddhist temple to pray for health or for fertility; a Confucius temple for success in examinations; a Daoist temple devoted to a local god for protection of one’s fortune in business. This picture, in the abstract, is not so different from what one might have seen in ancient religious practices in Rome, with temples for local gods and hero cults everywhere, coexisting and interdependent of one another. In fact, the majority of Chinese people perform rituals from different religious traditions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, the so-called popular or folk) largely indiscriminately. In addition, there is also the phenomenon of

the so-called syncretistic religious practices, including Catholics performing ancestral rites, and Christians calling themselves Confucian Christians. It is not unusual for people to have multiple religious identities in China, and to burn incense in front of any altar they may encounter.<sup>2</sup>

As will be expanded upon further in the next two chapters, the problem of trying to analyse non-Abrahamic religious practices and cultures through originally Protestant-inspired categorizations of religion is of course undoubtedly a historical one.<sup>3</sup> Yet, its consequences are still very much with us today. Indeed, this is a problem particularly salient for scholars who conduct empirical research in China, for their research methods, especially survey work and other forms of data gathering, require them to operate under a stable and clear classification scheme. What makes the aforementioned problem particularly difficult as well as captivating is the fact that it is deeply rooted in the fundamental theoretical problem of religious plurality. How should we understand religions and religious practices that coexist through fluid boundaries? How should we approach an account of religious life that does justice to its intrinsic multiplicity?

In recent years, scholars of Asian religions have shown us that there have been creative uses of religious categorizations in Asian societies throughout history. In his nuanced historical analysis of the Buddhist 'tactics' of dealing with religious plurality in China, T. H. Barrett suggests that the Buddhist use of the paired Chinese concept '*nei-wai*' ('inner and outer') has served an important role in distinguishing Buddhism from other traditions in China.<sup>4</sup> In recent work in the study of Japanese religions, the emphasis on the *honji suijaku* paradigm, or 'combinatory religion', referring to the dynamic interconnections between Shinto and Japanese Buddhism, allows us to challenge the preconceived boundaries between doctrines, deities, and practices (Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003).

As a sociologist of religion, my focus is on the theoretical interventions made by scholars in the past as well as the new directions in which we may wish to proceed in the future, especially for studying Chinese religious life as lived experience. In this chapter, I begin by introducing the unquestionably antiquated concept of henotheism, a nineteenth-century 'solution' to the question of religious plurality and in many ways a product of colonial constructions of knowledge. I then focus on the more contemporary alternative,

the concept of syncretism, which has been advocated by many scholars in the past few decades. I then move on to discuss the notion of the cultural tool kit or repertoire, new concepts adopted from the sociological study of culture, which may indeed provide a fruitful new theoretical framework. I suggest that this approach allows us to view assorted Chinese ritual practices as parts of a 'Chinese religious repertoire', which refers to sets of diverse religious habits, rituals and beliefs from different religious traditions that are more or less shared by Chinese people. I end with a brief suggestion for another new theoretical approach, one that focuses on the interaction and interdependence of diverse religious systems. It requires the development of an ecological analysis of the Chinese religious system and a return to a more polytheistic imagination.

### The intriguing idea of henotheism

Among the many half-forgotten concepts from the early history of the comparative study of religion, henotheism is one of the most intriguing.<sup>5</sup> It was a concept much used as well as much debated at the end of the nineteenth century, yet it is barely mentioned today, with a few interesting exceptions. It may not come as a surprise that the concept has been associated with Friedrich Max Müller, who is usually considered the founder of comparative religion and the science of religion. And it may not come as a surprise that the concept was rather contested in Max Müller's day, like many other ideas he advanced. Let me start with two concrete examples from the end of nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in which the term 'henotheism' is used in relation to China. The first is from James Legge's *The Religions of China*, first delivered as 'the spring lecture of the Presbyterian Church of England' in London in 1880:

Five thousand years ago the Chinese were monotheists – not henotheists, but monotheists; and this monotheism was in danger of being corrupted, as we have seen, by a nature-worship on the one hand, and by a system of superstitious divination on the other. It will be my object to show, first, how the primitive monotheism has been affected by these dangers in the course of time, and how far it has prevailed over them. (Legge 1880: 16)

Here Legge speaks of 'primitive monotheism', which is in danger of being corrupted by 'superstitious' practices often associated with polytheism. He pointedly states that the origin of Chinese religion ('five thousand years ago') were not henotheistic.

The second text is *China and Its Future: In the Light of the Antecedents of the Empire, Its People, and Their Institutions* (1899), written by James Johnston (1819–1905), a Presbyterian missionary to China and a great admirer of James Legge. According to the online *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, 'Johnston's stay in China was brief, but his impact on the English Presbyterian mission was significant. He was the third English Presbyterian missionary to arrive in Amoy (present day Xiamen) in Fujian Province.' He was in China from 1853 to 1857. There is an extensive discussion about Chinese religion in his book, especially the puzzling phenomenon of the non-antagonistic relationship among Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism:

The mutual relations of the three forms of religion in China are of the most friendly character. They are not antagonistic to one another. They have formed an alliance, based, on the one hand, on a frigid religious indifference, and on the other by their being supplementary to one another. (Johnston 1899: 136)

The same man may be what is commonly called by foreign writers a thorough Confucianist, and yet a devout worshipper in the temples of the Taoists and Buddhists. Even Emperors, who acted in their official capacity as high-priests in the patriarchal rites and sacrifices, have been leaders in Taoist superstitious practices, and some were devout Buddhists. As for the great mass of the people, they practice all the three forms of worship, and at all the great events of social and domestic life, the man who would call himself a follower of the old faith would think himself quite consistent in calling in the priests or monks of Taoism and Buddhism to perform their ceremonies at the birth, the burial, or marriage of his sons and daughters, and the ministers of these two different sects would see no impropriety in the union of their diverse rites. The frigid creed of Confucians is no incompatible with their introductions. (138)

What, then, is the true religion of China, which we find so free from the innovation of imported Buddhism and the corruptions of Taosim? The answer must be brief. First of all, the creed is what may be called henotheistic. (140)

Johnston then defines his use of 'henotheism':

The supreme object of worship is One, but he is attended by subordinate deities, or deified ancestors or heroes, who receive a lower form of worship, and are regarded as attendants on the Supreme God, who is worshipped with the highest honours. ... This supreme object of worship is known by the names or titles of *Ti* (Ruler), or *Shang-ti* (Supreme Ruler), or *Thien* (Heaven), the name by which God was designated in the earliest times, and found in use by Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, and applied by Daniel to the God of Israel: 'until thou know that the heavens do rule'. The use of the term heave for God as the great *Ruler*, is quite in harmony with the Chinese conception. The name of the dwelling-place of God is used for that of its great Occupant as not only appropriate in itself, but as more reverent than the personal name. ... The attributes of *Shang-ti* are summed up by Dr. Medhurst, Dr. Faber, and other competent authorities. ... 'This,' Dr. Medhurst adds, 'is what China holds, and, in her highest exercise of devotion, declares concerning *Shang-ti*. I am confident the Christian world will agree with me in saying, "This God is our God."' This might be called *monotheism*, were it not that the word signified not only the worship of one God, but the *entire exclusion* of all other objects of worship, even of an inferior kind. We prefer to call it *henotheism*, which implies, in the sense in which we use the term, the worship of one Supreme God, but does not exclude the worship of other gods subordinate to the One. (140–1)

What is interesting about this understanding of henotheism is that it places great emphasis on the strict hierarchy of deities: the one supreme god has to be higher than the other gods and is worshipped accordingly, 'attended by subordinate deities, or deified ancestors or heroes, who receive a lower form of worship'. It is not the plurality of gods that worries Johnston, a missionary who had to deal with Chinese ritual practices such as ancestral rites; it is the anarchy of gods that is the real concern.

Friedrich Max Muller's original conception of henotheism is indeed different. In 'Semitic Monotheism', published in 1860, quite early in Max Müller's long career in Great Britain (he settled in Oxford in 1848 and died there in 1900), Max Müller lays out his idea of henotheism as follows:

There are, in fact, various kinds of monotheism, and it becomes our duty to examine more carefully what they mean and how they arise. There is one kind of monotheism, though it would more properly be called theism, or

henotheism, which forms the birthright of every human being. (Max Müller 2002: 29)

He defines it in the language of natural theology, speaking of the intuitive knowledge of a creator that is universal in human nature, which is a position he expresses consistently in his writing, from *Chips from a German Workshop* to his lectures on the 'Science of Religion'. He puts it in the following way in 'Semitic Monotheism':

What distinguishes man from all other creatures, and not only raises him above the animal world, but removes him altogether from the confines of a merely natural existence, is the feeling of sonship inherent in and inseparable from human nature. That feeling may find expression in a thousand ways, but there breathes through all of them the inextinguishable conviction, 'It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves.' (30)

For Max Müller, there is a crucial difference between monotheism and henotheism:

The primitive intuition of the Godhead is neither monotheistic nor polytheistic, and it finds its most natural expression in the simplest and yet the most important article of faith – that God is God. ... There are, in reality, two kinds of oneness which, when we enter into metaphysical discussions, must be carefully distinguished, and which for practical purposes are well kept separate by the definite and indefinite articles. There is one kind of oneness which does not exclude the idea of plurality; there is another which does. When we say that Cromwell was a Protector of England, we do not assert that he was the only protector. But if we say that he was the Protector of England, it is understood that he was the only man who enjoyed the title. If, therefore, an expression had been giving to that primitive intuition of the Deity, which is the mainspring of all later religion, it would have been – 'There is a God,' but not yet 'There is but "One God."' The latter form of faith, the belief in One God, is properly called monotheism, whereas the term of henotheism would best express the faith in a single God. (31)

In other words, the key difference between monotheism and henotheism is that the former assumes exclusivity, whereas the latter assumes plurality. This is indeed very different from the hierarchical henotheism proposed by others, such as Johnston. Five years later, in 1865, Max Müller delivered his 'Lecture on the Vedas, Or the Sacred Books of the Brahmans', at the Philosophical

Institution in Leeds. Here he suggests that the religion of the Veda is not polytheistic, and we should be careful not to see it as such terms, for polytheism is something we find 'repugnant':

Large numbers of the Vedic hymns are childish in the extreme: tedious, low, commonplace. The gods are constantly invoked to protect their worshippers, to grant them food, large flocks, large families, and a long life; for all which benefits they are to be rewarded by the praises and sacrifices offered day after day, or at certain seasons of the year. Only in order to appreciate them justly, we must try to divest ourselves of the common notion about Polytheism, so repugnant not only to our feelings, but to our understanding. No doubt, if we must employ technical terms, the religion of the Veda is Polytheism, not Monotheism. ... Yet it would be easy to find in the numerous hymns of the Veda, passages in which almost every important deity is represented as supreme and absolute. Thus in one hymn, Agni (fire) is called 'the ruler of the universe', 'the lord of men', 'the wise king, the father, the brother, the son, the friend of man: nay, all the powers and names of the other gods are distinctly ascribed to Agni. But thought Agni is thus highly exalted, nothing is said to disparage the divine character of the other gods. ... This surely is not what is commonly understood by Polytheism. Yet it would be equally wrong to call it Monotheism. If we must have a name for it, I should call Kathenotheism. The consciousness that all the deities are but different names of one and the same godhead, breaks forth indeed here and there in the Veda. (55)

The context of this discussion is clearly the negative connotation of polytheism – or paganism – in contrast to superior monotheistic Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Max Müller is concerned with the usual treatment of the religion of the Veda as merely polytheistic. In his own interpretation of the Veda, he sees much of the characteristic of what he calls 'the primitive intuition of the Godhead' (31). The solution he offers is to use the idea of henotheism to distinguish what he sees in the Veda from the polytheism of the pagans, who are perceived to be religiously corrupt and inferior.

The concept of henotheism was not first originated by Max Müller. It was by Wilhelm von Schelling (1775–1854), with whom Max Müller studied in his youth. In fact, Max Müller attended Schelling's lectures on the philosophy of mythology in 1843–4 at the University of Berlin, which greatly influenced his thinking. In Schelling's formulation, henotheism is one of the two



developments of 'primitive theism'. As the late-nineteenth-century theologian Francis L. Patton summarizes,

While Max Müller is the originator of the word henotheism, it is to Schelling that we are indebted for the distinction expressed in the original application of it. Schelling's views are given in the earlier part of his 'Philosophy of Mythology', and are refereed to very copiously by Schultze in his 'Fetichismus'. Primitive man was possessed of a religious nature. ... This primitive belief was monotheism, but it was a relative and not an absolute Monotheism. From this watershed of primitive Theism, two streams have descended, one issuing in pure Monotheism, the other in Polytheism. (Patton 1882: 17)

Robert Karl Gnuse also states that 'F. Welcker, *Die griechische Götterlehre* (3 vols.; Göttingen: Dietrich, 1857-62), obtained the term "henotheism" from Schelling and used it to describe the primordial monotheism of Greeks who supposedly worshipped only Zeus' (Gnuse 1997: 132). After the burst of interest in the end of the nineteenth century, discussions of henotheism gradually faded away. There have been sporadic mentions of it in the twentieth century, and when they do occur, interestingly, it is often in the context of Chinese religion and Hellenistic religion.<sup>7</sup> Here are two notable examples in the Chinese case. The first is an entry from a recent encyclopaedia of Confucianism:

*Henotheism*: The belief in a particular god while at the same time acknowledges the existence of other gods. Henotheism has been used to describe various religious traditions at different points in their history. The potential for belief in the early Confucian tradition in *Shang-ti* (Lord upon High) and *T'ien* (Heaven), raises the question of henotheism, particularly when both names are found in textual sources indicating a recognition of *Shang-ti* by the Shang people and of *T'ien* by the Chou people. It seems, however, that they are different names for the same idea. Yet the Confucians repeatedly understand *Shang-ti* or *T'ien* as an absolute force in the universe rather than anything that can be identified as a god. (Taylor and Choy 2005: 212)

This understanding of Confucianism is similar to Legge's, which emphasizes the theistic nature of early Confucian tradition. In fact, it does not make use of the concept of henotheism, stressing that '*Shang-ti*' and '*T'ien*' 'are different names for the same idea.' The second example is from a recent collection of essays on Chinese philosophy, *Chinese Philosophy in An Era of Globalization*

(Wang 2004). Zhou Dunhua, a scholar of early Chinese philosophy, argues that monotheism and henotheism existed in early China in his essay 'The Chinese Path to Polytheism':

Although Chinese religion's major form was polytheistic, nevertheless it did not entirely devolve into polytheism. It went through three stages: first, in the historically earlier period, through the worship of the highest deity, thought it was not at all a primitive henotheism, we can at least say that it was something approaching henotheism because it was a relatively simple worship focused on the highest deity. Second, religion during the Shang and Zhou periods reached maturity and had a typical, systematic polytheism. Third, after the Warring States period, there remained something approaching monotheism as well as the heavily documented polytheism. (Zhou 2004: 66)

Although there is no mention of Max Müller, this argument clearly follows the Müllerian tradition of analysing the development of religion along the spectrum of monotheism-henotheism-polytheism. It also assumes a 'progressive' trajectory of religious development, with monotheism possessing a higher value than polytheism. In his response to Zhou's essay in the same edited volume, Stephen Davis, a philosopher of Christian theology, stresses that there are in fact many variations of monotheism:

1. Atheism – no God, gods, or divine reality exists. This is the opinion of many educated people today, both in the West and in the East, and especially in those places in the East that have been strongly influenced by Marxist thought.
2. Monism – there is only one reality; all differentiation is only apparent or illusory. There are several religions or philosophies that espouse radical monism. Advaita Vedanta Hinduism is certainly an example.
3. Esoteric monotheism – other things exist beside the one God, but God is the sole underlying reality of all things.
4. Metaphysical Monotheism – one and only one undifferentiated God exists. Judaism, Islam, and many other religions espouse this theory.
5. Trinitarian Monotheism – the one and only God exists in three persons. This is the orthodox Christian view.
6. Metaphysical Henotheistic Monotheism – many gods exist, but one of them is more powerful or more perfect than the others, and is to be worshipped.

Some scholars of the Hebrew Bible hold that this is the view of God held by the preexilic Hebrews.

- a. Cultural Henotheistic Monotheism – many gods exist, all or many of them roughly equal in power or perfection, but one of them is singled out by a given culture to worship.
- b. Polytheism – many gods exist, and all of them, or at least a certain number of them, need to be correctly worshipped (Davis 2004: 70).

What is striking about this typology is that there is no place for henotheism. It returns to the traditional dichotomies of atheism versus theism, and monotheism versus polytheism. As Davis states,

Now my point in listing these eight views is that *all* the religious theories listed here between 1 and 8 can be and often are referred to as ‘monotheistic’. So the trichotomy that Professor Zhou uses in his paper – monotheism/henotheism/polytheism – is, in my view, not as helpful as it might be. (70–1)

This view that nothing exists between the poles of monotheism and polytheism is exactly what Max Müller tries to change when he expands on the concept of henotheism he inherited from Schelling. Has his efforts been in vain? One of the few contemporary scholars of Hinduism who have made use of the concept of henotheism, Wendy Doniger responds to Max Müller’s position in an interesting way:

But the polytheism of Vedic religion sometimes function as a kind of serial monotheism that the Vedic Scholar Friedrich Max Müller named ‘henotheism’ or ‘Kathenotheism’, the worship of a number of gods, one at a time, regarding each as the supreme, or even the only, god while you are talking to him. Thus, one Vedic poem will praise a god and chalk up to his account the credit for separating heaven and earth, propping them apart with a pillar, but another Vedic poem will use exactly the same words to praise another god. (Wendy 2010: 2)

She then terms this phenomenon ‘serial monotheism,’ akin to ‘serial monogamy’:

Bearing in mind the way in which the metaphor of adultery has traditionally been used by monotheistic religions to stigmatize polytheism (‘whoring after other gods’), and used by later Hinduism to characterize the love of God (as in the Bengali tradition of Krishna and Radha), we might regard this attitude as a kind of theological parallel to serial monogamy, or, if you prefer,

open hierogamos: 'You, Vishnu, are the only god I've ever worshipped; you are the only one.' 'You, Rosaline, are the only woman I've ever loved; you are the only one.' (2)

This is clearly a misunderstanding of Max Müller's usage, which does not assume an exclusive commitment to a deity. But what she is doing is to try to break away from the metaphysical cage of binary thinking:

To the question, 'Is Hinduism monotheistic or polytheistic?' the best answer is, 'Yes' (which is actually the answer to most either/or questions about Hinduism). (1)

In our world of multiple religious traditions, with God, gods, and spirits coexisting, concepts such as henotheism help us see that monotheism has not necessarily been the norm of religious life. The late-nineteenth-century attempt to understand the historical development of religion as a linear trajectory, either monotheism-henotheism-polytheism, or polytheism-henotheism-monotheism, is an intellectual project most scholars of religions today have left behind. It has a monist structure regarding religious life that we cannot longer ascribe to.

However, henotheism, along with monotheism and polytheism, are thought-provoking theoretical categories. One might cross the symbolic boundaries of religions all the time without noticing, the way one is unaware of the complex formation of rivers or oceans when one is swimming in them. These categories represent different modalities of relationship between deities, between ritual practices, and between people who move amongst different religious traditions.

### Syncretism as an alternative category of religion

The problem of the classification of Chinese religions is of particular importance to scholars who conduct empirical studies of Chinese societies. We rely on such classifications to carry out empirical research such as religion surveys, which can be an essential part of both scholarship and modern statecraft. Indeed, the problem of how to classify Chinese religions has scholarly, social, as well as political implications. Many scholars of Chinese religions have

voiced their discontent over the commonly accepted general classifications of Chinese religions today.<sup>8</sup> This is a fundamental problem that also troubled Wilfred Cantwell Smith:

We have here a recapitulation of a standard gradual process of reification: the preaching of a vision, the emergence of followers, the organization of a community, the positing of an intellectual ideal of that community, the definition of the actual pattern of its institutions. The last two steps seem to have been taken only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. ... The Chinese also do not fit into a pattern of religious systems. We have already seen how the vigorous attempt to impose such a pattern on them from the outside is now beginning to be abandoned by Western scholars in the light of closer awareness of the situation itself in China. Western and Muslim students tend to be baffled when they first learn that a single Chinese may be and usually is a 'Confucian', a 'Buddhist', and a 'Taoist'. They cannot imagine how a person can 'belong to three different religions', as they put it, at the same time. The perplexity arises not from something confused or bizarre about China so much as from the conceptualization of religious systems, which is brought to bear but is evidently inappropriate (Smith 67–8).

Let us consider alternative conceptualizations of religious classification. Is syncretism the answer? Scholars of Chinese religions have been using the concept of syncretism as a theoretical tool for years, especially in the study of popular religions. As Judith A. Berling puts it, 'Syncretism is central to the religious life of the Chinese' (Berling 1980: 1). In recent years, Jordan and Overmyer take up this concept in their study of Chinese sectarianism in Taiwan; Kenneth Dean uses it as a key framework for his study of the cult of the 'Lord of the Three in One' (*sanyijiao*); and it is also the central concept in Stephen Sharot's discussion of popular religion in China in the context of a comparative sociology of world religions (Jordan and Overmyer 1986; Dean 1998; Sharot 2001).

According to Luther H. Martin, the notion of syncretism was first invented in the nineteenth century to study Hellenistic culture as 'the east and west mixture of people', and its origin in comparative religion indeed gave the early notion of syncretism an 'essentialist or *sui generis* understanding of religion' (Martin 2000: 277–80). Many scholars have challenged the concept; one of the most recent ones is Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, who states in his book *The Dao of Muhammad* that the process of Chinese Muslim identity formation 'is not

adequately captured by such terms as “accommodation” (which implies some sort of “compromise”), or “syncretism” (which assumes the blending of distinct, well-defined entities to create a new, distinct, and well-defined entity)’ (Benite 2005: 12–13). In his often-discussed essay ‘Syncretism’, first published in 1956, Hendrik Kraemer says the following about Chinese religions:

One of the best-known features of Chinese universism is that the three religions – Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism – are virtually treated as one. The religious allegiance of the average man is not related to one of the three religions. He does not belong to a confession or creed. He participates, unconcerned as to any apparent lack of consistency, alternatively in Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian rites. He is by nature a religious pragmatist. (Kraemer 2004: 39)

It is worth noticing that Kraemer uses the term ‘Chinese universism’, for this is also used by J. J. M. De Groot in his 1912 book *Religion in China: Universism: A Key to the Study of Taoism And Confucianism*, whose work on Chinese religions produced some of the major texts in the early stages of the world religions discourse (De Groot 1912). This model of syncretism is well-known among scholars of non-Western religions. For instance, similar arguments have been made about other Asian religions; Toshimaro Ama has argued that, in Japanese religious life, people blend Shinto, Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity into a ‘hybrid form of spirituality’ (Ama 2005).

In ‘Syncretism and the History of Religions’, Robert D. Baird responds to Kraemer in the following way:

The important point here is noticed by Kraemer himself. To the Chinese believer there was no inconsistency in such a religious practice for they were treated virtually as one. The reason for this is that there was a broader and over-arching religious attitude which made it possible to incorporate all such practices and beliefs as seemed useful. Kraemer says that the Chinese believer was in this case a pragmatist by nature. If that be true, then that was his/her religious attitude, and it was hardly inconsistent to act in the described manner. It is the outsider who does not share such an attitude, and fail to recognize its significance. It is also the outsider who uses the term to describe the phenomenon. (Baird 2004: 55)

In other words, Kraemer’s formulation of syncretism is more of an outsider’s view, rather than an insider’s understanding of lived religious experience.

Baird explains his position in more detail in the same essay under a section entitled 'Syncretism, a Barrier to Understanding':

The term syncretism is usually not used by a believer to describe his or her own religion. One of the most common uses of the term in the history of religions is to describe certain Eastern religious expressions. ... It seems to be implied that in each case the Eastern religious expressions have brought elements together that are conflicting and illegitimate. This is never the religious attitude of those involved, however, who sense no such logical problem. The failure to find a recognition of inconsistency where it might be expected has been problematic for Western scholars. (54)

For Baird, the methodological problems with syncretism make it irredeemable. However, the concept has been revised and reinvented extensively in recent years, and we now have seen many constructive uses. As David Chidester puts it,

In the study of religion, this postcolonial notion of hybridity has been anticipated by the term 'syncretism.' Although the term has borne the burden of suggesting impure or illicit mixtures of religion, it has more recently been recovered as a medium of religious innovation. (Chidester 2000: 435)

For example, Kurt Rudolph proposes several new perspectives on syncretism in his essay 'Syncretism: From Theological Inventive to a Concept in the Study of Religion'. In order to discover 'the most relevant heuristic means of pursuing syncretism research', he offers a typology informed by the sociology of religion, with categories such as 'symbiosis', 'amalgamation or fusion', and 'metamorphosis'. Rudolph believes that the symbiosis model fits Chinese religions the best:

Symbiosis, not merely in the sense of the newly-won unity of two or more traditional components, but also in the 'living together' of two externally separate forms of religious expressions which the believers consider to be a relative unity. In China and Japan, two or three religions exist side by side and are selectively taken by most, depending upon the exigency (Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism; Shintoism and Buddhism). (Rudolph 2004: 81)

In *The Syncertic Religion of Lin Chao-en*, the study of a sixteenth-century Chinese scholar-official, Berling offers the following definition of syncretism:

Syncretism may be tentatively defined as the borrowing, affirmation, or integration of concepts, symbols, or practices of one religious tradition into

another by a process of selection and reconciliation. Syncretic borrowing may not be entirely conscious, but it is not a hypocritical manipulation. ... Syncretism is here defined as a religious category. (Berling 1980: 9)

What sets these new uses of syncretism apart is the emphasis on practice and action, rather than propositions and doctrines. Note that Rudolph speaks of the 'living together' of two forms of 'religious expressions', and how they 'exist' side by side as 'a relative unity'. Similarly, Berling speaks of the 'borrowing, affirmation and integration' of ideas as well as 'symbols or practices'.

This emphasis on experience and action suggests a new way of solving the 'inconsistency' argument inherent in the older notion of syncretism; it moves us away from the purely theoretical discussion of propositions and truth claims, and concentrates instead on the actual practices of people, as Taylor suggests in his discussion of 'Neo-Confucian Syncretism' (Taylor 1982). But one problem remains. Berling says, 'Syncretism is here defined as a religious category'; she seems to imply that it could coexist conceptually with other religious categories, such as Christianity or Islam. Does this mean that, in empirical work, we should classify religious practitioners in China as Christians, Muslims and Syncretists?

A related issue is the fact that not all Chinese religions are the same in terms of their distance from the syncretism model. As C. K. Yang points out in *Religion in Chinese Society*, there is a distinction between what he calls the 'institutional religion' and 'diffused religion' in China (Yang 1961). In the case of institutional religions, we find Buddhist temples or Christian churches with monks or priests/ministers; in the case of diffused religion, the religious activities are conducted in more secular settings, such as the family. If we adopt the syncretism model of classification, we would risk collapsing people who practise rituals that cannot be clearly defined as Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or Daoist (which would include perhaps the majority of Chinese ritual practices) into the 'syncretism' category. In fact, scholars show that it is in fact difficult to even separate Buddhist and Taoist rituals from the so-called popular religion ones (Goodrich 1991; Feuchtwang 2001). This approach would likely to result in having a great number of Chinese religious practitioners counted as syncretic, which would pose a new methodological problem in empirical research. One possible solution to this problem is to introduce an entirely different conceptualization of religion, which focuses on the diversity of religious practice rather than



coherence of particular traditions. By adopting ideas from the field of sociology of culture, scholars of Chinese religions have been approaching the plurality of Chinese religions with the concepts of 'tool kit' and 'repertoire'.

## The Chinese religious tool kit or repertoire

In her influential 1986 essay 'Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,' Ann Swidler offers the following definition of 'cultural tool kit':

Culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or 'tool kit' of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action.' ... Culture consists of symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories and rituals of daily life. It offers an image of culture as a 'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems. (Swidler 1986: 273)

As Robert Campany suggests in a discussion on finding new ways of studying religion, what Swidler shows us is how 'agents using culture's repertoire in complex, varying ways on various occasions,' and the idea of the tool kit can indeed be very useful in understanding religious actions (Campany 2003: 318). He concludes,

If we imagine religions and cultures as repertoires, then everyone – not merely those who study religions but also those who participate in them – is potentially in the position of bricoleur, syncretist, and comparativist. (319)

The notion of tool kit is indeed important to the understanding of Chinese religions. First, it emphasizes the fact that there are diverse religious traditions (beliefs, symbols, objects and practices) available to people, the way very different tools are ready for use in a large tool bag. Second, it stresses the freedom and creativity of individual actions in Chinese religious practices, which explains the seemingly perplexing phenomenon that many Chinese appear to practice 'several religions' simultaneously.

The religious classification system used today – adapted by both the Chinese state and most scholars of Chinese religion – is one that came out of the world

religions legacy and modelled on a Judeo-Christian, monotheistic framework, which is very much in conflict with the actual practice of Chinese religious life. The result is that this classification system is incapable of capturing the complexity of actions of individual Chinese religious practitioners. In this classification system, a person has to be either a Buddhist, a Daoist, a Confucian, a follower of folk religion (which overlaps greatly with Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism) or someone who is 'syncretistic'.

One may see the Chinese religious tool kit as something readily available to people, for the various tools are transmitted through familial and communal life. In this model, the focus is not on the distinction between different religious traditions or doctrines, but rather on the shared rituals, beliefs and other symbolic practices, which may be claimed by various religious institutions and organizations. As a result, people may draw from the assorted resources from the religious tool kit for different purposes and actions.

Besides Swidler's conception of tool kit, Michèle Lamont's articulation of cultural repertoires is also crucial to our reformulation of Chinese religious syncretism (Lamont and Thevenot 2000; Lamont 2001). As Lamont explains in *Money, Morals and Manners*, her emphasis is different from Swidler's:

In contrast to the voluntarist view of culture suggested by tool kit theorists, the multicausal explanation I propose takes into consideration how remote and proximate structural factors shape choices from and access to the tool kit – in other words, how these factors affect the cultural resources most likely to be mobilized by different types of individuals and what elements of tool kits people have most access to given their social positions. (Lamont 1992: 135)

To put it simply, Swidler focuses more on the repertoires that a society makes possible to its members (the supply of cultural tools), whereas Lamont is more concerned with what affects the access that different groups of people have to the tool kit (access to cultural resources), as well as what affects the ways they make use of the repertoire (the conditioning of their strategy for action). In other words, it is not enough for us to find out what different tools there are in the syncretic Chinese religious tool kit in different times or regions; we also need to understand what contribute to certain groups of people's access to certain religious beliefs and practices, as well as how and why certain groups of people use certain strategies in their religious practice.

For instance, if we want to study how urban young professionals use the Chinese religious tool kit differently from rural peasant elders, we need to ask questions such as: Do they have equal access to the tool kit? The urban professionals are likely to know more about Western religions such as Protestantism and Catholicism, whereas the rural elders might know more about ancestral worship and how to worship a variety of local gods. Do they have different strategies in using the tools available to their groups? The urban professionals are perhaps more likely to be searching for values and beliefs if they decide to visit a Protestant church; they might have more practical goals in mind when they pray in front of the statue of Confucius on Chinese New Year's Day. On the other hand, the rural elders might burn incense in front of the pictures of their ancestors or a statue of the God of Wealth regularly as part of an everyday routine, and they might attend temple ceremonies on certain holidays as members of a close-knit clan.

In order to analyse the complex ways that the Chinese religious repertoire are used, I believe the following needs to be done in empirical social science research:

1. Collect lists of available *tools* in the Chinese religious repertoire.

We need to know about the diverse rituals, beliefs, narratives, and other practices that are available to Chinese practitioners.

2. Survey the *social institutions* through which these tools are preserved, shared, transmitted, and reinvented.

We need to understand through which social institutions – family, clan, church, mosque, temple, religious festivals, and/or other forms of social institutions – these tools are passed from one person to another, and from one generation to the next.

3. Survey the *situations* in which such tools are used.

We need to have a concrete sense of the situations in which people make use of these tools, such as holidays, weddings, funerals, medical emergencies, and other everyday situations.

4. Analyse how different social groups of practitioners may have different degrees of *access* to such tools.

We need to study the issue of access by examining institutional factors such as state power, economics, education, occupation, ethnicity, the rural/urban divide, and other societal factors.

5. Analyse how different social groups may have different *strategies* in using these tools.

We need to study the issue of socially shaped strategies by analysing structural and institutional factors similar to the ones listed above.

After these foundational data are collected, we can move on to try to answer even more intricate questions. For instance, are there competitions between different religious institutions? How do people make sound judgments about the relative merits of different religious teachings and practices? What Robert Wuthnow says about the internal tensions of pluralism in America may indeed be used to discuss religious life in China:

The virtue of American religion, it is often said, is that pluralism permits people to draw comparisons, sorting out the good from the bad, and at least to be more mindful of the options set before them. As pluralism increases, some increase in competitiveness and even conflict among religious traditions may also be expected. Competition alone will not ensure that the best in religion triumphs over the worst. But mindfulness of the comparisons among teachings and practices can generate valuable considerations of their relative strengths and weaknesses. ... Religious pluralism will prove most enriching if it results in a practice of sustained critical reflection about the unwavering human desire for transcendence. (Wuthnow 2005: 314)

The syncretic nature of Chinese religious practice means that people are constantly making comparisons, judgments, and choices. How do people discriminate when they are facing large repertoires of different teachings and practices? How is 'sustained critical reflection' achieved in this process? These are sociological as well as ethical questions, and they can only be answered after we have gained a comprehensive understanding of the history and texture of the actual religious tool kits or religious repertoire of the Chinese people.<sup>9</sup>

### Towards a new theory of Chinese religious life

The following is from the classicist John Scheid's definition of Roman religion:

- This is a religion without revelation, without revealed books, without dogma and without orthodoxy.
- It was as ritualistic religion and, as such, was strictly traditionalist.

- It was a religion in which rituals and ritual attitudes defined and disseminated representations of deities and of the order of things.
- It was religion which kept explicit expression of belief quite separate from religious practice.
- It was a religion under no particular authority or leader, even at the level of public cult. Religious authority was always shared. Nor did this religion recognize any specific founder, whether divine or sent by God.
- It was a polytheistic religion. The gods varied according to the community concerted; they were, so to speak, members of the same community as their worshipers (Scheid 2003: 18–19).

As a scholar who has conducted extensive ethnographic work on religious life in China, I find this account of Roman religion in Late Antiquity to be the closest comparison to the everyday religious practice I observe in contemporary Chinese society. It may seem radical to make such a broad analogical connection across vastly different historical periods. However, when one stands back and surveys the landscapes of ancient Roman religion and religious practices in China today, one senses that the study of contemporary Chinese religion may indeed benefit from the scholarship on Roman society.

Glen W. Bowersock's *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* shows the flourishing of Hellenism alongside Christianity in different parts of the Roman Empire. According to Bowersock, late Roman paganism consisted of patronage of the classics, acceptance of classical literature and art, and the participation in pagan rites. In other words, Christians and pagans alike shared the classical tradition. This is illuminating when we compare the centrality of Hellenism in the Roman Empire with the centrality of Confucianism in the history of Chinese religious life.

In Jörg Rupke's extensive studies of Roman religion and society, such as *From Jupiter to Chris: On the History of Religion in the Roman Imperial Period* (2014) and *The Roman Calendar from Numa to Constantine: Time, History, and the Fasti* (2011), we see an emphasis on the interconnectedness between rituals, politics, and other aspects of everyday life in ancient Rome. Along with colleagues in the fields of ancient history, archaeology, classics, and Jewish studies, Rupke is now promoting a new research programme of 'lived ancient religion', which 'hopes to stimulate the development of new approaches which

can encompass the local and global trajectories of the pluralistic and multi-dimensional religions of antiquity' (Rupke et al. 2015: 2).

In my current ethnographic project, 'The Social Life of Prayer in Contemporary Urban China: Beyond the Monotheistic Imagination', I focus on the interconnections between polytheistic Chinese religious traditions – a combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and the so-called folk or popular religions – and the rising tide of monotheistic religions (China today has the world's seventh largest Christian population and the twelfth largest Muslim population). Indeed, like ancient Rome, contemporary Chinese society is one in which widespread polytheistic religious traditions, from ancestral veneration to worship of local deities, coexist with monotheistic religions. To recognize this rich, complex, and constantly evolving reality of Chinese religious life require a new imagination. Religions in China are not separated by straight boundaries, like islands made of stone; they are more like living things in a vibrant ecosystem, constantly changing and constantly evolving through conflicts as well as interdependence.

I believe that the deep-seated monotheistic assumptions are often the reasons behind scholars' difficulty of analysing the logic of practice of a predominately polytheistic religious life. As many scholars have already argued, a conception of religion that assumes the exclusivity of belief, conversion, and membership cannot capture what is distinctive of Chinese religions in particular, and Asian religions in general (Yang 1961; Goossaert and Palmer 2010; Schmidt-Leukel and Joachim Gentz 2013). Although there has been recent work challenging the dominance of the monotheistic framework (Dubois 2014), new theoretical tools need to be developed in order for us to carry out nuanced analytical and empirical studies.

Religious ecology could serve as a new framework for the study of religion, focusing on the diversity, plurality, and resilience of practices rather than on the homogeneity of belief and stability of membership. Such an approach would help us connect rather than isolate different religious traditions, and it would help us gain not only fuller knowledge of contemporary religious life in China, but also deeper understanding of the ongoing encounters between polytheistic religions around the world and Abrahamic monotheisms today.

Hegel famously said, 'Monotheism of reason and the heart, polytheism of the imagination and art, this is what we need!' For Hegel, reason has replaced

the notion of God, and polytheism should be found only in the aesthetic realm. But we as scholars also need the polytheistic imagination to do justice to the actual experiences of today's living religions. There is no better place to start than China.