The Social Functionality of Multiple Religious Belonging in Modern China

Abstract

Multiple religious belonging refers to the idea that individuals can belong to more than one religious tradition. While recognizing one's religious identity by the tradition itself, one may have the disposition to submit to the conditions for membership as delineated by that tradition. This paper aims to explore the concept of multiple religious belonging in modern China, focusing on its pattern as well as the social functionality that provokes such a pattern. The methodology is developed using structural functionalism from, in particular, Emile Durkheim, who investigates how different institutions, practices, and customs exist because of their contribution to the reproduction and integration of society. This essay studies the social functions of multiple religious belonging in three small to larger social units: family, community, and the state. As a result, one may understand how multiple religious belonging functions in modern China and thus consolidates each member's identity within the social units.

Keywords: Multiple religious belonging, Chinese Religions, structural functionalism, Emile Durkheim, folk religions

現代中國多重宗教身份認同的社會功能性

摘要

多重宗教身份認同意指一個人能同時屬於多於一個宗教傳統。當人在傳統中尋著他的宗教身份，他會逐漸認同該宗教傳統及成為此宗教的會員。本文將研究現代中國多重宗教身份認同的概念，關注此概念的模式及此概念的社會功能性如何達到該模式。本文的方法論主要採用艾彌爾·涂爾幹的結構功能主義，研究不同機構、做法和風俗如何達到仿造與整合社會的效果。本文將研究三個影響多重宗教身份認同社會功能、由小至大的社會單位：家、群體和國家。此方法將幫助我們理解現代中國中的多重宗教身份認同及它如何強化各社會單位的會員的身份。

關鍵詞

多重宗教身份認同，中國宗教，結構功能主義，艾彌爾·涂爾幹，民間宗教

Introduction

For Chinese, multiple religious belonging[1] is the reality they live in—the idea that individuals can belong to more than one religious tradition is not alien to them due to their daily encounter of different traditions in society (Phan 2003). Developed from a Christian theological approach, the comparative theologian Catherine Cornille (2002) defines religious belonging as "the recognition of one's religious identity by the tradition itself and the disposition to submit to the conditions for membership as delineated by that tradition." Thus, multiple religious belonging is "a full commitment to at least one religion, though there are still a number of ways in which one may extend that sense of belonging to include other religious traditions" (Cornille 2002). This is often seen as a common phenomenon in Asia because numerous religions flourish there. In contrast, religious scholars in the West have only begun to discuss multiple religious belonging with respect to the traditions of Abrahamic religions, which, due to their exclusivistic nature, do not allow their believers to participate in another religion.[2]

Although multiple religious belonging is known to be a phenomenon in China, investigation into its social function, that is, from a social scientific perspective, is still uncommon.[3] Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the concept of multiple religious belonging in modern China, not only focusing on its pattern but also the social functionality that provokes such a pattern. As one of the first few studies that tackles this issue, this paper may enrich one's understanding of how multiple religious belonging operates in a society that

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[1] The author is aware of the term "multiple religious identity" that is also frequently associated with this discourse. However, as Chinese religions highlight the efficacy of the rituals, rather the religious identity, which will be further explored in the later sections, the author prefers the term "multiple religious belonging" to narrate the complexity of the religious discourse in China.

[2] According to Daniel Migliore, exclusivism in Christianity refers to the idea that "Jesus Christ alone is the way, the truth, and the life. There is no salvation other than through faith in him," see Migliore, 2004.

[3] Paul Hedge of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, has published an article in *Open Theology* to engage with the discourse of multiple religious belonging; However, his argument mainly suggests that multiple religious belonging is not an appropriate term to narrate the phenomenon of Chinese religions. Instead, he prefers the phrase "strategic religious participation in a shared religious landscape." For details, see Hedges, 2017.

has not been predominately influenced by Abrahamic religions.

Methodology

To achieve the aforementioned aim, the methodology of this paper is developed using structural functionalism from, in particular, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), who investigates how different institutions, practices, and customs exist because of their contribution to the reproduction and integration of society (Calhoun 2002). This paper studies the social functions of multiple religious belonging in three small to larger social units: family, community, and the state. Through the examination of these three social units, one may comprehend how multiple religious belonging functions in modern Chinese society and thus consolidates the identity of each member within the social units.

In this article, I employ the definitions of believing and belonging from Vassilis Saroglou (2011), Director of the Center for Psychology of Religion, the University of Louvain, Belgium. Believing tends to relate to "an (external) transcendence—and its 'connection' with humans and the world," while belonging is the behavior that people are affiliated to "religious groups, communities, and traditions … to satisfy their need to belong, hold, and profit from a social identity." As readers may notice, belonging does not necessarily refer to a transcendental experience, although the groups one belongs to may consist of religious activities that give such an experience. This is also the reason that the particularistic and pluralistic approach of multiple religious belonging are not as helpful. As Daan F. Oostveen (2017) rightly observes, in East Asia, participants of religious rituals are less concerned with religious teachings and more with practices. I will elaborate this point when discussing the three social units.

While Cornille (2002) has addressed different approaches to analyze multiple religious belonging, this paper mainly focuses on the most common one, that is, to understand and

legitimize the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging and highlight the ultimate religious experience at the foundation of all traditions. This paper will focus on the patterns of multiple religious belonging and survey how those patterns are beneficial for members within a particular social unit.[4] For the purposes of this paper, a "social unit" indicates "an individual, or a group or community, considered as a discrete constituent of a society" (Oxford University Press n.d.). Also, the time frame of "modern China" refers to China in the last one hundred years.

To illustrate the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging more clearly, this paper will use the Belgian religious scholar Jan van Bragt's (1928–2007) investigation on Japan as a starting point, to show how scholars have recently reflected on the concept of multiple religious belonging in East Asia before we discuss religious diversity as well as multiple religious belonging in China. The next section will briefly summarize the sociological study of religions in China, highlighting both Max Weber (1864–1920) and C. K. Yang's (1933–2007) work. The paper will then examine the social functions of multiple religious belonging in the context of family, community, and the state social units, and end with my reflection on the significance of the social functionality of multiple religious belonging in modern China.

Japan as a Model of the Social Functionality of Multiple Religious Belonging

For Van Bragt (2002), the founding director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya, Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism function complementarily in Japanese society. As he describes, being a Shintoist is part of the Japanese identity while following Buddhist custom for funerals is part of Japanese culture. The highly reciprocal nature of these two religions are reflected in the statistics about the religious population in

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[4] My approach is different from Daan Oostveen (2019), who argues for a non-hierarchal and decentralized form of religious belonging which he calls "rhizomatic belonging." Different from him, I perceive multiple religious belonging in China, and broadly in East Asia, exists with its social function, although participants of religious rituals may not realize such a function.

Japan: in Van Bragt's figures, 79 percents of Japanese self-identify as Shintoists, while 75 percents regard themselves as Buddhists.[5] The reason for the extremely high percentage of both religions is that many Japanese perceive themselves as both a Shintoist and a Buddhist, and do not consider it a problem to belong to more than one religion.[6] This phenomenon, according to Van Bragt, is a "division of labor." Being a Shintoist represents an affiliation with the local community while being Buddhists illustrates belonging to their families. Van Bragt argues that the cause of this phenomenon is that, different from the Western concept of religion, religion in Japan does not necessarily offer moral guidance; it only concerns itself with rituals and practices. While Buddhism and Shintoism govern the rituals and practices of the Japanese, Confucianism is regarded as the moral authority and the source of principles of social life. This kind of sense of belonging is perhaps different from the kind of believing in monotheistic religion in the West—for the Japanese, religions have different functions that are related to their social roles. The differentiated functions of religion allow the Japanese to have multiple religious belonging, similar to the scenario in modern China.

Multiple Religious Belonging in China

One may argue that Chinese also has a similar mentality on "the division of labor" of different religions; it is, however, involved with Abrahamic religions as well. In response to the questionnaire of Commission IV of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910,[7] Timothy Richard, a Welsh Baptist who worked for Christian Literature Society for China, indicated the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging in China in his questionnaire in regard to religious situations in the mission fields. He identified the

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[5] The percentage here is calculated from Van Bragt's figures in the article. For details, see Van Bragt, 2002.

[6] The concept of committing into a religion in Japan is, as discussed above, slightly ambiguous, which leads to the difficulty in assessing the number of believers in Japan. Contrary to Van Bragt's statistics, Mark R. Mullins's figures show that there are only 30–33 percents of the Japanese consider themselves as having "personal faith," while others usually see themselves as "without religion" (mushūkyō). For further discussions, see Mullins, 2011.

[7] For the nature of Commission IV, see Stanley, 2009.

complementarity of religions in China with Christianity, labeling Confucianism as "Buddhist Christianity," while commenting that Daoism reveals its fulfillment in Christianity (Stanley 2009). Nonetheless, due to the rich history of religious diversity in China, the Chinese are used to the occurrence of multiple religious belonging and almost take it for granted.

One of the more significant pieces of multiple religious belonging is from Chen Yingzhu 陳映竹, a research student at the National Taiwan Normal University, who investigated the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging among Confucius intellectuals. Using the autography of the Chinese Catholic Ha Dachang 夏大常, Chen (2014) examines Ha's perspective on rituals due to his dual identity as a newly converted Catholic in the seventeenth century and his position as a Confucius scholar. Chen's study reflects Confucius' emphasis on harmony and illustrates how Ha smoothed out the dichotomy between the two religions.[8] Although our study will not cover much on Catholicism, the significance of Chen's study is that it highlights the correlation of Confucian rites with other religions, which is also our focus in this paper.[9]

The Sociological Understanding of Religions in China

When discussing the sociological perspective of religion in China, one should not omit the German sociologist Max Weber's *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* published in 1915. Weber in his book criticized China's failure to develop rational bourgeois capitalism as a result of the absence of religious ethics, which he considered a major component in Christian doctrine. As the Chinese sociologist C.K. Yang (1961) has indicated, due to Weber's focus on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, a monograph

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[8] Albertus Bagus Laksana SJ, a comparative theologian at Universitas Sanata Dharma, Indonesia, also highlights the attempt of Yang Tingyun (1562–1627), a Catholic elite, to synthesis the cosmology of Christianity and Confucianism. For details, see Laksana, 2014.

[9] For the detailed discussion of the similarity and difference between Confucian rite and Catholic doctrine, see Chen, 2014.

published ten years earlier than *The Religion in China*, there are certain aspects in the latter that do not outline the whole picture of Chinese religions; instead, the latter merely concentrates its study on religious ethics and its correlation with capitalism (Weber 1968). Nevertheless, Weber's writings are usually treated as one of the earliest texts that analyzes religions in China through a sociological lens, because his findings on the functional aspect of religions in China were relatively new in his time.

Due to Weber's inadequate information that fails to fully grasp the complexity of religions in China, Yang's *Religion in Chinese Society* (1961) can be perceived as a counter-action to Weber's writing. For Yang, Weber's *The Religion of China* is over-influenced by Christianity, which has dominated and shaped religious views in Western society but is not applicable to Chinese society. Perhaps the more serious problem for many Western scholars is that they tend to define religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (Durkheim 2001). Unlike Christianity, Chinese religions may not have such uniformity across their various rituals and practices. Because of this kind of insufficiency in the field of religious studies in the West, Yang's *Religion in Chinese Society* reinvestigates the characteristics of Chinese religions and discusses how Chinese religions can perform their social functions in the society. Based on Yang's findings, the following section will elaborate on such functions, highlighting the role of multiple religious belonging in modern China.

Multiple Religious Belonging as Social Function in China

Developed from Van Bragt's observation of Japan and the preliminary study of multiple religious belonging above, the following will analyze the social function of multiple religious belonging in three social units, from small to larger ones: family, community and the state.

Family

The term "family" here refers to "an intimate domestic group made up of people related to one another by bonds of blood, sexual mating, or legal ties." (Marshall and Scott 2009) As Kenneth Dean (2001) suggests, ancestral veneration indicates the fundamental ritual role of family (*jia* 家) in everyday life. Similar to Japanese culture, religions in China also involve a division of labor—while ancestral veneration builds solidarity among members, Confucianism guides the morality of each person. In some ways, the coexistence of ancestral veneration and Confucianism complements each other and becomes a social function of multiple religious belonging.

The cult of ancestral veneration is popular in East Asia, not only in China, but also in Korea and Japan. According to H. K. Yeung (2008), ancestral veneration acts as a continuation of remembrance and affection for the dead. For those worshipers, death does not separate their linkage with the ancestors; instead, by burning incense, candles, and paper money, the living ones can provide the ancestor's needs in the other side of the world and honor their death.

In light of this link between the living and the dead, ancestral veneration serves its social function by consolidating relations within the family. For most participants, ancestral veneration promotes prosperity and harmony at home because they believe that the ancestors will bless them by their continuous offerings. While the action of ritual reaffirms their belief, for Yang (1961), this also contributes to the integration and perpetuation of the family as a social unit in Chinese society. The bonding of the family has been strengthened by their rituals. As Yeung (2008) mentions, participants in ancestral veneration perceive it as the continuity of the family line and reverence for one's elders and forefathers. The custom of ancestral veneration enhances their collective identity as a family.

In addition to the solidarity that ancestral veneration brings to the family, Confucianism provides moral guidance within the social unit. As both Yeung (2008) and Yang (1961) indicate, Confucius denies the existence of spirits, and sees the sacrificial rites as expressions of gratitude toward the originators and recalling the beginning of the family line.[10] For Confucius, this is a symbolic gesture to express filial piety. By performing such rituals, the young ones learn how to show respect to their existing fathers and elders in the family. As the British anthropologist Ellen Oxfeld (2016) also notes in her article "Moral Discourse, Moral Practice, and the Rural Family in Modern China," parents are expected to educate children morally and children, in return, support and care for their parents as a moral duty, even after their death. Following Confucian moral guidance, the living ones perform the rituals of ancestral veneration to fulfill their responsibility as descendants.

Another aspect of Confucianism that strengthens the identity of a member of a family is the appropriateness of behaviors in regard to one's social roles. For Confucius, a "father [should] be a father, [a] son [should] be a son." (Confucius n.d.) In other words, a father should behave like a father and a son like a son. In the Confucian ethical system, each member of society has his or her own role. As discussed earlier, a father has a responsibility to educate his son; on the other hand, the son has to show his filial piety to his father. To act according to one's social role is of high importance in Confucian morality, for it brings to harmony not only to the family but also to the society as a whole. Confucius sees family as a foundational unit for extending harmony to larger social units. Acting appropriate behavior as a family member can help the family, as well as the society, function properly.[11]

This kind of concept reveals the functionality of multiple religious belonging within Chinese families—while the cult of ancestral veneration shows affection to their loved ones,

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[10] For details of Confucius' explanation of sacrificial rites, see Legge, trans., 2016.
[11] The American philosopher Herbert Fingarette in his book *Confucius—the Secular as Sacred* highlights the importance of ritual (*li* 禮) as a social function among different social roles. For details, see Fingarette, 1972.

Confucianism reinforces such beliefs with moral guidance that emphasizes filial piety. As elaborated in *The Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經), Confucianism views the body as a gift from parents; therefore, it is essential to glorify their parents and remember their ancestors (Legge 2016). Since both ancestral veneration and Confucianism stress on the remembrance of ancestors, their beliefs complement one another and legitimize the possibility of multiple religious belonging in the social unit family.

Community

The second social unit we will analyze is community. "Community" in this paper refers to "a particularly constituted set of social relationships based on something which the participants have in common." (Marshall and Scott 2009) This does not only indicate the common interests of the members but also includes the solidarity given by the group due to the communality of its affiliates. In this section, two perspectives of the social function of this unit will be highlighted: the necessity of ritual efficacy in modern China and the collective consciousness given by religious activities.

Similar to the Japanese scenario, rituals can be highly functional for many Chinese people, which the Chinese anthropologist Adam Chau terms as "efficacy-based religiosity." According to Chau (2013), Chinese usually value the efficacy of the rituals and not their religious identity. They perform rituals according to specific occasions. For example, Chinese may get married in a Christian church but never attend its Sunday service or label themselves as Christians; they may hire Daoist or Buddhist priests for funerals but never regularly worship in a Daoist or Buddhist temple (Chau 2013). For them, affiliating with a particular religious organization is not essential to perform those rituals.

Due to this understanding, the emphasis on the functionality of rituals allows for the occurrence of multiple religious belonging, especially due to the absence of moral guidance

in these rituals. Unlike Christianity in the West, Chinese do not have to follow certain rules to attend rituals from particular religions, such as being a member of the church to participate in the Eucharist. On the contrary, most of the moral advice is provided by Confucianism, which introduces certain virtues like loyalty, filial piety, contingency, and righteousness in the classical *Sizi* 四字 (Four Virtues) as the rules of thumb.

In the last two thousand years, Confucianism has been used as the moral orthodoxy for all generations in China. As Yang (1961) describes, among the Three Teachings (*sanjiao* 三教)—Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, only Confucianism provides ethical systems that guide its followers to live in the secular world. In *Mahayana Christian Theology*, Lai Pan-chiu (2011), an interreligious scholar of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, comments that Mahayana Buddhism, especially the branch of pure land Buddhism, overemphasizes the afterlife and thus does not elaborate on any engagements with the world. The otherworldly approach of Buddhism and Daoism, as a result, leads the participants of the Three Teaching to seek moral guidance in other religions; for example, Confucianism in this case.

As discussed in an earlier section, although Weber's comment on the absence of ethical systems in Chinese religions seems to disapprove of religions in China as a whole, his observation squarely illustrates why multiple religious belonging can happen in modern China and is not as common in Western countries.[12] Since China does not have a monotheistic religion like Christianity that emphasizes one set of ethical doctrine, Chinese can be freed from the boundaries of any ethical system in a particular religion and can participate in any ritual they want to without moral conflict.

Despite the counter-discourse that people in modern China do not believe in Confucianism anymore, because of the atheistic approach of the Communist Party of China

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[12] Recent scholars have shown that multiple religious belonging can also happen in the other parts in Global South. See Williams, 2019.

(CPC) on religious policy,[13] I perceive that the concept of Confucian morality is still deeply rooted in modern China. One cannot ignore the influence of how Confucianism has changed the ethical system in society. Rather than treating it as a bygone religious tradition, I agree with Yang (1961) that modern Confucians retain the belief of heaven and fate as the dictating force of their life. Because of this, behaving in ways that conform to the Confucian moral system and acting according to one's social role are of high importance, since the Chinese believe that there is a higher force that guides their way of life.

Returning to the discussion of solidarity in a social unit, the collectiveness of a community can be developed through the continuous participation in several rituals. As elaborated in the previous section on family, rituals in modern China are a division of labor. Although the division of labor seems to loosen the bond of the community by differentiating religious identities, I would argue that it strengthens the identity of the community because religious diversity is a social norm in modern China. As Thomas D. DuBois (2016), Professor of Humanities at the Beijing Normal University, discusses in his article "Local Religion and Festivals," local communities develop their own religious culture to express their internal hierarchies of membership and status as well as their local pride. By the repetition of different rituals, the apparent diversity of the religions leads to solidarity in the communities and reinforces their identity within the social unit,[14] apart from the natural bond that establishes within families (Yang 1961). This type of solidarity is further enhanced by the state, who plays a major role in religious policy in China that indirectly allows the occurrence of multiple religious belonging.

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[13] Here it should be clarified that Confucianism was almost wiped off during the Cultural Revolution, along with other religions such as Buddhism and Daoism. Also, from the beginning of the twenty-first century, the term "harmonious society" (和諧社會) from Confucianism was also been used frequently in political campaigns. However, the emphasis of heaven and fate seems to be omitted in those campaigns. For details, see Gao, 2005.

[14] In the American sociologist Richard Madsen's article, the function of rebuilding communal bonding is constructed through re-building ancestor temples. For details, see Madsen, 2014.

The State

In modern China, the social function of multiple religious belonging is deeply influenced by the state-citizen relationship, especially given the power dynamic involved in state control. By definition, the "state" here refers to "a distinct set of institutions that has the authority to make the rules which govern a society" (Marshall and Scott 2009). For the purpose of our paper, the state represents the People's Republic of China (PRC).

As discussed in the section of community, for citizens, local communities are platforms that consolidate their collective consciousness of their citizens. However, in the state's level, one more concern is added to the interpretation of the concept of multiple religious belonging, which is, the power relation between the state and its citizens. In this section, I will use the American sinologist Kenneth Dean's (b. 1956) example of local rituals in Southeast China to argue that, because of PRC's enforcement of the types of religions in China, it indirectly allows multiple religious belonging to flourish in the country.

The PRC's concept of religion is slightly different from the usual conception in the West. Religion and its interpretation have been used as a means of consolidating power since the Imperial China period. As Weber (1968) describes, the primeval "Lord of Heaven" was introduced as a Chinese cult status symbol above the government. Yang (1961) also suggests that "it was believed that a living official had superiority over the gods and spirits of a rank lower than his." Thus, the official could reward or punish as the situation required, due to the power and position authorized by this kind of religious belief. Religion was not only utilized by the government but also by the rebels. For example, during the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century, the rebellion leader Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864) claimed himself to be "God's Chinese son" to initiate the political movement and to attempt to overthrow the Qing government (Wickeri 1988). Thus, the PRC is very cautious about the manipulation of religion.

Due to the concern about utilizing religious organization as a means of political movements, the Communist Party of China (CPC) released an official statement called *Document 19* in 1982, which elaborates the CPC's concept of religion and expresses its religious policy in China. *Document 19* is significant in the development of Chinese religions since it was the first document released regarding religion since the end of the Cultural Revolution. According to *Document 19*, there are only five official religions in China: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Every other religious organization is considered to be illegal. Moreover, religious activities outside the five authorized religions are labeled as superstitious, including the ancestral venerations and local rituals discussed in the previous sections. Besides the limitation on the types of religious organization allowed, the document also clearly states that religious organizations should be "beneficial" to the country, which means that religious leaders have to be patriotic, law-abiding, and support the socialist system (The News of the Communist Party of China 中國共產黨新聞網 1982). Since the document does not clearly define the appropriate actions of patriotism in religious organizations, local religious organizations, as well as the local rituals in Dean's fieldwork observation, had to be approved by officials case by case.

Dean's research of rituals at the Putian 莆田 plains in the Fujian province is a 20-year longitudinal study. These rituals are usually held during the *yuanxiao* 元宵 festival, which celebrates the first full moon in the Chinese lunar calendar. The diversity of the rituals can be shown in the various activities taken place, such as spiritual medium, processions of the gods, the rites of the Three Teachings, and food offerings in the temple (Dean 2001). During the festival, multiple villages participate in the preparation to ensure it run smoothly. Furthermore, business leaders associated with the villages provide the fund for the temple ritual committee and sometimes participate in the planning of the festival along with the committee. Even CPC members and retired government officials join the committee to help

out. Due to the nature of the ritual festival, it is also called as "China's second government," because the regional ritual alliances provide local self-governance of their area and involve in political and economic tasks (Dean 2001).

The *yuanxiao* festival demonstrates an interesting scenario that, while all the ritual activities above are categorized as superstitious (迷信) in *Document 19* and should be forbidden in the CPC's standard, this festival runs every year in Putian, and even CPC officials participate in the planning. The continuation of the festival shows the flexibility of the CPC's religious policy toward local religious groups.

Nonetheless, the flexible yet ambiguous approach of religious policy in China allows multiple religious belonging flourishing in the villages. Due to the restriction on the number of authorised religions, in order to gain official acceptance, some local religious organizations have to claim themselves as Daoist (Dean 2001), which also have happened in late Imperial China during the Three in One movement.[15] While participants in the festival still see it as local rituals and festivals, at the operational level it is regarded as Daoist ritual activities, notwithstanding the presence of the rites of the Three Teachings. As Dean (2001) observes, the concept of local religion cannot be well defined by CPC's religious policy of five official religions because it involves the more complex and lived experience of the rural communities. Despite the lack of clarity in handling religious rituals, the collectiveness of these local rituals defines the Putians as who they are. Unlike the Western concept of treating Christianity as the major element of believers' identities, mono religious belonging has less significance for them, because it does not contribute to their collectiveness as Putians, at least not in the case of the *yuanxiao* festival.

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[15] In around the thirteenth century, the Chinese imperial government defined its own concept of religious freedom by the means of government patronage. To receive patronage, religious organizations had to fulfill the category of approved religions from the government. Since some of them could not make the requirement, they had to claim themselves as Daoist. For further explanations, see Berling, 2013.

The functionality of multiple religious belonging is revealed in this sense because it provides the flexibility for the Putians to register in religious traditions that are different from their religious rituals and thus, permit them to continue the yearly festival smoothly, without the commitment of a particular religion. Although it seems to be a forced belonging for Putians as they are requested to recognize these rituals as Daoism instead of folk religions, the syncretic nature of the rituals in Putian, as Dean argues, illustrates the complexity of their festival mixed with Daoist, Confucian, Buddhist, and folk religious rituals. I would perceive their multiple religious belonging as a more voluntary one because this is simply *Sitz im Leben.* The CPC's apparent rigidity on religious policy does not limit the operation of the festival but gives the opportunity for the Putian communities to strengthen their bond by belonging to multiple religions. The interwoven religious experience of the rituals extends their collective identity as Fujian local communities and, at the same time, to obey the state's religious policy as citizens.

Conclusion

From a sociological perspective, all collective patterns of life happen for a purpose. For most Chinese, multiple religious belonging is merely the way of life in Chinese society. In the participants' level, not many of them wonder why religious diversity exists in modern China, just as Japanese seldom see being both a Shintoist and a Buddhist problematic.

The contribution of this paper is that it analyzes how multiple religious belonging functions in different social units in modern China. Because of the absence of moral systems in different religious rituals, the Chinese can participate in any rituals and belong to multiple religions without moral conflict, unlike the exclusivistic view of Christianity that restrains its believers to its ethics doctrine. The lack of moral guidance in rituals is then filled in by Confucianism, which legitimizes the responsibility of performing ancestral veneration with

its emphasis on filial piety. Furthermore, efficacy-based religiosity, as a rule of thumb, draws ritual participants to engage with several religions. Belonging to one religion is not an issue for the Chinese, because being affiliated with their community is of higher importance. This explains why multiple religious belonging is acceptable for many Chinese.

Another striking factor is that, although the CPC tries to promote atheism, multiple religious belonging is still deeply embedded in society. The rituals of Chinese religions are not limited by the label of "superstition"—they deepen and transform human experience by the provision of solidarity in communities. This is perhaps why local authorities have never been harsh towards these "superstitious" organizations, because of their benefit brought to the local communities. While I doubt the ambiguous approach towards religious policy in China will change in a short period of time, the family-community-state typology I raise in this study can be useful in other parts of Asia, where multiple religious belonging is the norm of society and the state has certain degrees of control towards religious policy. This is perhaps a task I will leave to other experts in Asia.

All in all, multiple religious belonging is not only a phenomenon but also exists with a purpose—it allows members within each investigated social unit to consolidate their own identity, whether that the social unit is family, community, or the state. Enhanced and enriched by the collectivity of the rituals and practices, the functionality of multiple religious belonging results in a complex social experience for the Chinese in the modern era.

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