

## **Title**

Religious Diversity with Chinese Characteristics? Meanings and implications of the term 'religious diversity' in contemporary Chinese dissertations

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## Religious Diversity with Chinese Characteristics? Meanings and implications of the term ‘religious diversity’ in contemporary Chinese dissertations

### Introduction

Religious diversity is important as an academic concept as well as a social phenomenon. An emerging body of literature has been devoted to analysing religious diversity in China. For example, in a previous chapter in this book, drawing up extensive ethnographical fieldwork, Gideon Elazar demonstrates how the religious landscape in China’s Yunnan Province has been enriched by a non-Chinese missionary community. Clearly, contemporary China provides an interesting setting for the investigation and understanding of religious diversity. Existing literature also shows that the degree of religious diversity is impressive not only in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau but also among some overseas Chinese communities (Tao and Stapleton, 2018). Not enough attention, however, has been paid to the ways in which the very concept of ‘religious diversity’ is received and applied by Chinese scholars in contemporary China. This chapter aims to bridge that gap by questioning how the concept of ‘religious diversity’ is used in dissertations that have been successfully defended in Chinese universities in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

Compared with journal articles and monographs, dissertations are more likely to be neglected by academic reviewers, as their authors are junior scholars who, normally, have not yet obtained the cultural capital of established academics. However, dissertations that have been successfully defended in examinations are, by their very nature, satisfactory in quality and innovative in their arguments. Thus, they offer a reasonable empirical lens through which we can understand how the concept of ‘religious diversity’ is viewed, adopted, and applied in contemporary Chinese scholarship.

In this chapter, after establishing the importance of contemporary China as an interesting setting for exploring the concept of ‘religious diversity’, we analyse selected English language academic works relating to this concept as it is found in China. In so doing, we bring to attention two salient themes concerning the general perspective on Chinese religious diversity held in English literature. Firstly, ‘religious diversity’ is understood to be different in Western and Chinese contexts, with an apparently greater emphasis in China on integrated and compatible ‘co-elements’ in contrast to a co-existing but mutually incompatible range of religions or religious denominations seen in the West. Secondly, focusing on the case of China, the state’s proactive shaping of the diversity of the country’s religious field has also been widely noted. Following this section on China-related English scholarly works, we introduce our

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<sup>1</sup> Certain sections of this chapter are based on Tao and Griffith (2018). But this chapter includes additional information and discussions that have not been previously published. The authors thank Grace Varty for her assistance in proofreading.

method of selecting empirical materials and the essential descriptive statistics of the dissertation sample that we analysed.

Evidence (both quantitative and qualitative) extracted from our sample uncovered three interesting characteristics associated with the usage of ‘religious diversity’ in contemporary Chinese dissertations. Firstly, unlike in the West where ‘religious diversity’ is often applied to illustrate the co-existence of mutually incompatible religions, the focal point of ‘religious diversity’ in these dissertations is often concentrated on the similarities between roles played by different religions in a diverse but united society. Secondly, in these dissertations ‘religious diversity’ frequently depicts relations *between* religions; it is seldom applied to illustrate the variety of beliefs and practices *within* any given religion. Finally, in contemporary Chinese dissertations ‘religious diversity’ is often discussed in tandem with ethnic diversity. Linking these characteristics with the two themes visible in relevant China-related English scholarly works, we suggest that the Chinese state has not only notably shaped the condition of the country’s religious sphere itself but has also influenced how this field is treated and depicted within China’s intellectual community.

### Contemporary China as an Interesting Setting for Study of Religious Diversity

China has had a relatively rare experience of being a society in which religion was virtually eradicated. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began imposing severe political pressure on, and harshly persecuting, religious groups and believers shortly after establishing the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. As a result, almost all religious groups were disbanded within the three decades after that (Tao, 2017). However, since the end of the 1970s, as the CCP regime has switched its priority from ideological struggles to economic development, it has adopted more pragmatic strategies towards religions and tried to use certain religious content for its purpose. Although the Chinese state remains suspicious, even hostile, towards religion under many circumstances, religious freedom was restored as a fundamental constitutional right for Chinese citizens in 1982. China has since witnessed an impressive wave of religious revival and development (Yang, 2011; Tao, 2012).

China’s extraordinary experiences since the mid-twentieth century make the country an ideal setting for studying and reflecting on the concept of ‘religious diversity’. The CCP’s hard-line policies towards religion in the first thirty years of the PRC curtailed an extensive range of traditional elements from the religious landscape in China. However, after China opened its doors to marketisation and globalisation in the late 1970s, the official atheist ideology appeared to be unable to fill the spiritual vacuum left by the absence of previous religious beliefs and activities. This was particularly true for those who felt a strong need for inner peace and certainty in the volatile social and political atmosphere during the post-1978 reform era (Yang, 2005). Subsequently, once the total ban on religious activities was lifted in 1982, an

extraordinary range of religions – traditional and new, indigenous and foreign-oriented – began to emerge in China. Moreover, within the few major religions, such as Protestantism, Daoism, and Buddhism, there exist multiple schools and denominations. It can, therefore, be observed that the religious field in contemporary China is highly diverse.

Also, contemporary China offers a striking setting for the study of religious diversity because the state plays an important, albeit not always decisive, role in shaping the religious field. The Chinese state explicitly permits and bans a limited number of religious beliefs and activities. Nevertheless, whether deliberately or unintentionally, there is a lack of clear regulation over the vast majority of religions in contemporary China, creating a space that is described by Fenggang Yang as the ‘gray market’ of religion (Yang, 2006). The vague boundaries comprising the state’s power in the religious arena have led to a significant level of diversity in state-religion relations in contemporary China. Under certain circumstances, and despite respective ideological differences, religious groups may cooperate with one another, or even with the authoritarian and atheist state, to work on shared agendas (Tao and Liu, 2013; Tao, 2015; Tao, 2018). On other occasions, different religions or religious denominations may compete with one other, or compete with the state, for followers and influence (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011). This complex state-religion relationship has, in turn, further shaped the religious diversity in contemporary China. As an example, for the maintenance of its legitimacy and of wider social order in the reform era, the Chinese state has expressly endeavoured to support religions that are traditionally associated with Chinese society (Johnson, 2017). Notably, in 2001, Li Ruihuan, a powerful member of the Standing Committee of the CCP’s Politburo, declared that much of Chinese culture is rooted in religion and that ‘harmonious assimilation’ meant that both religious freedom and socialism under the rule of the CCP were perfectly compatible (Palmer, 2009).

The CCP’s attempts to unite religious diversity and socialism in this way have been successful on some occasions. Underpinned by its flexibility, the case of the resurgence of Daoism is a notable example of one such success. Daoism, from the twentieth century onwards, has become increasingly diverse in terms of the number of movements which can be described as ‘Daoist’, though regardless, each of these movements draws on practices from a ‘self-consciously Daoist scriptural tradition’ (Palmer and Liu, 2011: 158). New followers of Daoist teaching, not seeing Daoism as contradictory, may continue other religious activities even as they take up Daoist practices. Such flexibility also extends to the priests, who seem not to mind that Daoism is only a secondary affiliation for many of their followers. Consequently, Daoism fits in well with the CCP’s strategy of ‘harmonious assimilation’.

However, traditional religions are not the only active players in the religious field of contemporary China. As insightfully noted by Fenggang Yang, the year of 1989 was seen as a ‘watershed’ for religious reawakening in China (Yang, 2014). Before 1989, few Chinese intellectuals had ever set foot inside a

church. After 1989, feeling that democracy was no longer a feasible alternative following the events of June that year, many Chinese intellectuals ‘flocked to Bible study gatherings, fellowship groups, and churches *en masse*’ to search for the meaning of life (Yang, 2014). As a result, the fastest growing religion in reform-era China is Protestant Christianity, of which many denominations do not necessarily have a direct link with the earlier Christian movements in China’s history. This is in stark contrast to the experience of Russia, where a religious revival in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union largely saw a return of the dominant religion of the pre-Communist era (Yang, 2005; 2014).

The growth of religious consciousness in China, therefore, differs from the traditional perception of its place in modern societies. Modernisation had previously been considered by many classic thinkers, from Max Weber to Karl Marx, to be a process that would lead to the inevitable secularisation of societies. After religion was nearly eradicated in China in the early 1970s, modernisation, marketisation, and globalisation appear to have come hand in hand with the revival of religions in China and have played important roles in boosting diversity of religion. This clear trend of resurging religious diversity in China during recent decades, therefore, deserves careful scholarly consideration.

### China’s ‘Religious Diversity’ in English Scholarly Works

Diversity in contemporary China’s religious field has attracted considerable attention in English language academia. Scholarly works offer significant insight into the specific focus and emphasis that the concept of ‘religious diversity’ has when it is used regarding China even in the English language. In particular, two interesting themes can be identified by analysing the usage of the concept of ‘religious diversity’ in China-related English scholarly works. Firstly, religious diversity is not merely understood as being the co-existence of mutually incompatible religions, as it is commonly viewed in the West. Instead, it is construed as a strength in that it is— a way of developing the unity and harmony of society by drawing on shared pools of symbols, beliefs, norms and rituals. Secondly, the state is regarded as a vitally important player in the making and shaping of religious diversity to such an extent that the relationship between state and religion has become a primary prism through which much research in this area is conducted.

### *Harmony despite Difference*

A commonly-identified distinction between religious diversity in the West and China by English language literature is the exclusionary nature of the former. The ‘inclusivist’ tendency of the major Chinese religions is set in stark contrast to the ‘exclusivist or sectarian’ forces that have shaped the religious landscape in Europe; China, therefore, is regarded as a ‘useful model’ in an exploration of what an inclusivist approach to religious diversity would involve (Berling, 1997: 9).

As argued by Cheng, the general Western understanding of religious diversity is a range of religions or religious customs that are *mutually incompatible* (Chen, 2010: 353). The major theological traditions that have dominated European culture are set against one another as contradistinctions, irreconcilable on a fundamental level. The Chinese tradition, however, sees the differences between major theologies as being compatible or resolvable, allowing for harmony despite difference, or '*he er bu tong*' as Confucius put it. It is and has long been common for many Chinese people to partake in multiple religious practices throughout their lives (Berling, 1997: 43). This seemingly contradictory idea that diverse beliefs or traditions can be served within the same physical and philosophical spaces poses questions for observers rooted in Western traditions.

To understand this difference in theological approach, one must appreciate that Chinese religious tradition does not emphasize a single and ultimate God; diversity, therefore, is 'native and natural' to the main traditional religions in China (Chen, 2010: 357). This diversity, moreover, is seen as being part of a greater whole, itself a fundamental aspect of the 'way' – or *dao* in Chinese (Berling, 1997: 41). The interrelated guiding principles of Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism have allowed for integration of the three within the Chinese context. The differences between the three lie in their focus on dealing with different aspects of humanity. This is contrary to the three Abrahamic religions which are divided on how the same aspect of humanity should be addressed. It is this contrast that underpins the difference in approaches to religious diversity in the East and West (Berling: 41-42; Chen, 2010).

Beyond their interrelated principles and 'a common pool of religious images, texts, symbols, and practices' (Berling, 1997: 45), the three main branches of religious orthodoxy in Chinese culture share a pragmatism that allows them to remain compatible with each other and with other religious traditions (Pak, 2007: 115). Despite the acceptance of religious diversity in Chinese culture, rules and competition exist within the sphere of religious diversity. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptualisation of socio-economic fields, Berling suggests that the 'players' (religious leaders vying for patronage and cultural influence or followers vying for blessings) have to navigate 'rules' (established cultural patterns and codified laws) and 'obstacles' (cultural, social, or economic practices and forces) through employing 'plays' (a set of common religious images or elements which limits and defines the possible choices that can be made) (Berling, 1997).

Berling illustrates this neatly by citing a Buddhist monk's tomb on which filial piety was referred to as being the best way for Buddhism to be practised. Not only would such a crossover be unimaginable between two of the Abrahamic traditions, but this also serves to demonstrate one of how Buddhism's place in Chinese culture is defended through the utilisation of deeply-rooted norms from another major religious tradition (ibid: 41-42). Such a utilisation would not be possible in the Western religious

traditions that define themselves in contradistinction to one another and compete *against* each other for cultural space.

### *The State as a Key Player*

Within the China-related English language academic literature, the state is generally viewed as being central to the making and shaping of religious diversity and this relationship between the state and religion is the dominant paradigm of scholarly analysis. This is, arguably, the result of the fundamentally different experiences of organised religion in China and Europe (Palmer, 2009: 17). It also reflects the ongoing mutual establishment of the state and the religious field throughout China's late-imperial and modern periods (Ashiwa and Wank, 2009; Goossaert and Palmer, 2011). For example, through considering 'diversity and plurality' in Chinese religious practices in the social contexts of the nineteenth century, Goossaert (2014) shows that a 'plurality of religiosities' (ways of practising the religions rather than different religions *per se*) signified state recognition of those religious practices which could be accommodated.

The Chinese state, as demonstrated by many academic works published in the English language, is capable of both making and breaking religious diversity. It is a common pattern throughout Chinese history that the state closely associates itself with Confucianism while also 'patronizing a diversity of local religions ... under the authority of an imperial ritual' (Laliberté, 2014: 27). As the Chinese state positioned its secular standing during the modernisation process from the late Qing period onward, it gradually developed a strategy to embrace and to support religious diversity within designated boundaries (Ashiwa and Wank, 2009; Goossaert and Palmer, 2011). Moreover, as Laliberté argues, China's modern-day secular state is the result of an 'emancipatory modernist discourse from nationalists and communists' and 'a legacy of religious diversity existing in imperial China' (Laliberté, 2014: 29).

However, the Chinese state also has a long tradition of controlling and managing the religious arena (Laliberté, 2016). In post-1949 China, the CCP regime only gave status to easily identifiable and already well-established religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Daoism. This left the vast array of communal cults that were so ingrained in rural communities forbidden under the stigmatisation of 'feudal superstition'. Many religious networks were left with no option but to become registered with the government under different categories other than 'religious', such as 'health'; the somewhat unintended consequence of this, though, has been that some practices which might have previously been dismissed or banned as 'feudal superstition' are now protected as important aspects of Chinese culture designated as 'intangible heritage' (Palmer, 2009). For example, *qigong* – not always religious but always 'somewhat spiritual' – came to be a 'way station for religious awakening' (Yang, 2014). The state-led nature of this process, as Palmer argues, has created a 'relatively homogenous institutional structure' for the major

organised religions (Palmer, 2009: 20). It has also left a vast ‘gray market’ for many un-recognised religions to survive and thrive at the discretion of local law enforcement agencies (Yang, 2006).

It is evident, therefore, that the Chinese state does not simply deal with religious diversity passively. On the contrary, it proactively shapes the extent and pattern of religious diversity in China, both deliberately and, sometimes, unintentionally. This, along with the inclusive and integrated nature of the diversity in China’s religious field, as identified in the previous subsection, adds specific attributes to the concept of ‘religious diversity’ in China’s particular cultural and political context. We, therefore, concluded that it would be interesting to investigate whether or not, in addition to English language literature, similar features also exist in contemporary Chinese scholarship.

## Empirical Materials

To explore how the concept of religious diversity is understood and applied by researchers in contemporary China, we conducted quantitative and qualitative enquiries into how authors use the term ‘religious diversity’ in their dissertations. Confined by our research interest, we only analysed dissertations that are written in simplified Chinese, the academic language in most Chinese universities today. In this section, we will introduce the source of our data, identify equivalent terms of ‘religious diversity’ in the Chinese language, and elaborate on how we selected the empirical materials for our subsequent analysis.

### *Source of Data*

Among the several major genres of academic works, we chose to focus on the doctoral and master’s dissertations that have been successfully defended in leading Chinese academic institutions since the start of the twenty-first century. This decision was taken for several practical reasons. Firstly, in comparison with journal articles and conference proceedings, which often prioritise the presentation of general findings or results, doctoral and master’s dissertations are normally longer and richer in content, meaning that they are more likely to encompass a wider range of details which are of particular interest. Secondly, although some monographs and edited volumes may also include information that is useful to us, a comprehensive database which would allow us to identify all of these academic books through a systematic search has yet to be developed. We were, however, able to systematically search through all of the doctoral and master’s dissertations submitted to leading Chinese institutions since 1984, through two quality dissertation repositories that will be discussed in more detail later in this section. Besides, it is possible that certain religious activities may have been seen by the students and supervisors as too ‘overly sensitive’ to be chosen as the topics of dissertations. However, the level of institutional censorship and

self-censorship should be not different between dissertations and monographies given the academic and political circumstances in contemporary China.

Moreover, the successful doctoral and master's dissertations submitted to leading Chinese academic institutions are reviewed, and endorsed, by examiners who are qualified academics in their relevant fields. We could not have the same level of confidence in the consistency of academic quality in monographs and edited volumes, as there is no way to identify which ones have been peer-reviewed before publication in China. Furthermore, many monographs are developed from doctoral and master's dissertations, and this process normally takes a considerable length of time. In comparison with monographs, postgraduate dissertations are more likely to reflect the frontier of academic research in a timely manner.

We selected our empirical materials through the cross-database search engine provided by the *China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database*, a gateway to several databases of academic works composed and published in the People's Republic of China.<sup>2</sup> In particular, we utilised the *China Doctoral Dissertations Full-text Database* (CDFD) and the *China Masters' Theses Full-text Database* (CMFD). Between them, these two repositories constitute the most comprehensive electronic collection of postgraduate dissertations that have been successfully defended in the People's Republic of China since 1984. The CDFD contains more than three hundred thousand doctoral dissertations submitted to 431 academic units that award doctoral degrees, and the CMFD contains more than three million master's dissertations from 719 academic institutes that award master's degrees. Most of these academic institutes are located within leading Chinese universities or graduate schools affiliated to the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Therefore, the CDFD and the CMFD offer excellent sources of data for our research in terms of both quality and quantity.

### *The Equivalences of 'Religious Diversity' in the Chinese Language*

Most leading Chinese academic institutions require candidates for doctoral and master's degrees to present the title, abstract, and keywords of their dissertations in English as well as in Chinese. Additionally, some doctoral and master's candidates also proactively incorporate the English translation of the essential concepts in the main text or explanatory notes of their dissertation texts. These features allowed us to identify the Chinese academic terms that are considered to be the most appropriate translations of 'religious diversity' in leading Chinese universities and research institutes.

To ascertain this, we first selected all CDFD- and CMFD-listed dissertations that contained verbatim the English phrase 'religious diversity'. We believed that it is possible for some of these theses to have addressed 'religious diversity' along with other types of social diversity, such as 'cultural diversity' or

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<sup>2</sup> The search engine that we used to collect data is available through [www.cnki.org](http://www.cnki.org). Certain functions only operate behind the paywall.

‘ethnic diversity’, and to therefore have created more complicated phrases such as ‘religious and cultural diversity’ or ‘religious or ethnic diversity’. To avoid excluding these cases, we also selected theses which included at least one sentence that contains no more than two other words between ‘religious’ and ‘diversity’. We then eliminated all dissertations that feature these phrases in the bibliography, which is not normally translated into Chinese. Considering the lack of differentiation between singular and plural forms in the Chinese language, we also employed the English phrase ‘diversities’ as an additional keyword to run the same set of searches.<sup>3</sup> Altogether, the search engine returned 151 items, among which 94 dissertations were written in English and did not include a Chinese translation for religious diversity. Besides, there were another six dissertations that did not include any English phrases that are relevant, or similar, to ‘religious diversity’ in places other than the bibliography. We studied the Chinese translation of the English phrase ‘religious diversity’ in each of the remaining 51 dissertations, and the descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

< Table 1 to be placed here >

As shown in Table 1, these 51 dissertations were successfully defended between 2005 and 2016 and included seven doctoral and 44 master’s dissertations. There is no clear trend in terms of the frequency of submission of these theses, although more than half (26) were submitted during the three years from 2012 to 2014. Among the 51 dissertations, 39 mentioned the phrase ‘religious diversity’ (or a variant as outlined above) on only one occasion, with seven dissertations mentioning it exactly twice and 5 mentioning it on 3 or more occasions. The term did not appear in any of the dissertations’ titles or their explanatory notes. It appeared in the abstract of 40 of the dissertations as well as in the key terms of 2 of them. Eleven dissertations used ‘religious diversity’ within the main text.

Across the 51 dissertations we examined, there were three different Chinese translations of the English phrase ‘religious diversity’, although within each work the translation was always consistent. The most commonly used Chinese phrase was *duoyang*, which was used in about half of the dissertations. Another frequently used translation was *duoyuan*, which featured in one-third of the dissertations. The least commonly used term was *chayi* which was in only nine dissertations, representing less than one-fifth of the total. It is clear, then, that *duoyang* and *duoyuan* are used significantly more often than *chayi*.

Although important nuances do exist between the meanings of *duoyang* and *duoyuan* which will be further explored in the next section, these two words are often used interchangeably. For example, in the

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<sup>3</sup> To replicate our search, one can run the following syntax through the ‘professional search’ function provided by the *China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database*: FT='religious /PREV 3 diversity' OR FT='religious /PREV 3 diversities' NOT RF='religious diversity' NOT RF='religious diversities'.

seventh edition of the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian*, one of the most authoritative sources of the contemporary Chinese language, the term *duoyuan* is defined as ‘*duoyang de*’ (The Department of Dictionary at the Institute of Linguistics and Social Sciences, 2016: 336). Similarly, in *The Oxford Chinese Dictionary*, the term ‘diversity’ is translated into ‘*duoyang xing*’ when listed as a standalone word, but it is translated into ‘*duoyuan hua*’ when in a phrase such as ‘the diversity in education’ (Kleeman and Yu, 2010: 210). On the other hand, the term *chayi* does not contain any Chinese character that appears in *duoyang* or *duoyuan*, nor is it associated with either *duoyang* or *duoyuan* in the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian*. Moreover, the common adjective *duo* in *duoyang* and *duoyuan* means ‘many’, ‘much’, or ‘a lot of’, and is often used as opposed to *shao* meaning ‘few’. Therefore, both *duoyang* and *duoyuan* tend to emphasise the multiple varieties that exist among a group of subjects. The term *chayi*, however, tends to emphasise the differences between the subjects in a group and is often used as opposed to *tongzhi* (homogeneity) or *xiangsi* (similarity). *Chayi* is substantially different from *duoyang* and *duoyuan* in terms of meaning and usage in the Chinese language. According to Table 1, *chayi* is used significantly less than *duoyang* and *duoyuan* as the Chinese translation for ‘diversity’. For this reason, in the rest of this chapter, we only consider *duoyang* and *duoyuan* as being the Chinese language equivalents of ‘diversity’ (as in the sense of ‘religious diversity’).

### *Sample and Descriptive Statistics*

After identifying *duoyang* and *duoyuan* as the equivalences of ‘diversity’ in the previous section, we combined them with *zongjiao*, the Chinese translation of ‘religious’, to create two keywords that mean ‘religious diversity’ in Chinese: *zongjiao duoyang* and *zongjiao duoyuan*. We then sought out all CDFD- and CMFD-listed dissertations in which the precise Chinese words *zongjiao duoyang* and *zongjiao duoyuan* appear at least twice in any of the sections apart from the bibliography. Altogether, the search engine returned 163 results, and we manually reviewed each dissertation to ascertain its eligibility. We discovered 63 dissertations that focused on religious diversity outside of China, 25 that were purely theoretical and did not discuss religious diversity in contemporary China, 4 that were devoted to exploring specific historical events; and 14 that were included erroneously.<sup>4</sup> When all of the ineligible dissertations were removed, our final sample contained 57 dissertations that directly used the words *zongjiao duoyang* or *zongjiao duoyuan* in order to describe certain phenomena in present-day China. The descriptive statistics of these are reported in Table 2.

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<sup>4</sup>These erroneous results each appeared to include one of the four phrases identified in our search terms. However, upon inspection, we determined that the four characters were not used as the singular word originally set out here but were in fact two words used consecutively. The nature of the Chinese language, which does not use spaces to separate words, means that this is unavoidable and makes the manual reviewing of results essential to ensure accuracy.

< Table 2 to be placed here >

As shown in Table 2, in common with the 51 dissertations we initially selected to identify the equivalences of the English phrase ‘religious diversity’ in the Chinese language, the 57 dissertations in our sample for further analysis were also successfully defended between 2005 and 2016. Although there is no clear trend in terms of the frequency of submission of these dissertations, almost one quarter (14) were submitted in 2013, and two-thirds (38) were submitted during the five years from 2009 and 2013. Within our sample, there were 20 doctoral and 37 master’s dissertations.

We also calculated the frequency of the two keywords central to our investigation. Among the 57 dissertations, 25 had only one or two occurrences of the keywords, 19 contained between three and five occurrences, seven saw between six and nine occurrences, and six had ten or more occurrences. With regard to the academic discipline that the dissertations addressed, the most common was, unsurprisingly, Religious Studies. A significant number also fell under Sociology as well as Marxism Studies, which is a recognised discipline in its own right in China. There were nine other disciplines in the sample, including Ethnology, Management Studies, Education, Human Geography, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Politics and International Studies, History, and Psychology. In other words, our sample offers reasonable coverage of a wide range of academic disciplines in contemporary China. Based on these empirical materials, we were able to conduct a rigorous inquiry into how the concept of ‘religious diversity’ is understood and adopted in contemporary Chinese scholarship.

### ‘Religious Diversity’ in Contemporary Chinese Dissertations

In this section, we will report on the three major findings that we generated by analysing the quantitative and qualitative evidence in our sample. As subsequently demonstrated, our findings not only confirm, but also further illustrate the two previously outlined themes regarding the application of ‘religious diversity’ in China-related English language scholarly works.

#### *Diversity in an Inclusive and Integrated Religious Field*

As demonstrated before, *zongjiao duoyang* and *zongjiao duoyuan* are frequently used interchangeably in the Chinese language. However, subtle differences can be discerned between them. Consideration of these nuances, we argue, is essential for comprehending how the concept of ‘religious diversity’ is actually viewed and used in contemporary Chinese scholarship.

According to the seventh edition of the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian*, ‘*yang*’ means ‘*zhonglei*’, which can be translated into the English words ‘type’ or ‘variety’ (The Department of Dictionary at the Institute of

Linguistics and Social Sciences, 2016: 1520); ‘*duoyang*’, therefore, literally means ‘multiple varieties’. On the other hand, ‘*yuan*’ either means ‘units that constitute an entity’ or refers to ‘*yuansu*’, the Chinese word for ‘element’ (ibid.: 1608); ‘*duoyuan*’ thus indicates the ‘many elements (that constitute an entity)’. By applying these differences between ‘*duoyang*’ and ‘*duoyuan*’ to our understanding of the religious field in contemporary China, we are able to make more sense of a very important difference between the two commonly-used equivalents of ‘religious diversity’ in the Chinese language. Whilst *zongjiao duoyang* merely expresses the fact that a diverse range of religions co-exist with one another, *zongjiao duoyuan* additionally implies that the many co-existing religions are ultimately elements of an integrated and united religious field despite the apparent differences between them. This distinction is brought to light in our sample.

In dissertations that only employ *zongjiao duoyang* and not *zongjiao duoyuan*, the authors tend to simply list the multiple religions that co-exist with one another without elaborating on the relations between these religions. For example, in exploring the situation of *zongjiao duoyang* in Yunnan, Hong wrote that ‘Yunnan has multiple types of religions, including Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Daoism, and the primitive religions among the minority ethnic groups’ (2016: 13). Likewise, in a section titled ‘*zongjiao duoyang*’, Luo wrote that ‘the minority ethnic groups in China are heterogenous in their religious beliefs, and religions they practice include Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, nature worship, and ancestor worship’ (2010: 24).

Contrary to general application of ‘*zongjiao duoyang*’, however, within the many dissertations that include a high frequency of ‘*zongjiao duoyuan*’, the authors explicitly address the relations and interactions between different religions, suggesting that these religions all belong to an inclusive and integrated religious field. For example, Zhuan Ma discusses ‘*zongjiao duoyuan*’ alongside ‘religious tolerance’ and ‘the harmony among religions’. Ma claims that ‘various religions live together in Beijing peacefully and they cooperate well with one another’, and argues that ‘religions should respect, appreciate, and learn from one another; leaders of different religions should continue the friendly communications between them; and different religions should work together to construct a harmonious society’ (2011: 70). Lixin Ma was even more explicit in stating that “‘*zongjiao duoyuan*’ does not only mean the co-existence of multiple religions; it is, more importantly, a guiding ideology that argues all religions are equal and should tolerate one another’ (2006: 21). Cao (2006) also used an extensive range of cases to depict the interactions and integration among Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism throughout China’s history.

Moreover, in the few dissertations that mention both ‘*zongjiao duoyang*’ and ‘*zongjiao duoyuan*’, these two terms are clearly associated with different focal points. For example, in a doctoral dissertation on religious diversity within a town in the north of China, no elaboration is supplied whenever the term

'*zongjiao duoyang*' is used. This suggests that the author considers '*zongjiao duoyang*' to be a self-explanatory concept meaning 'multiple varieties of religions'. However, the same dissertation provides a significant amount of ethnological evidence to argue that '*zongjiao duoyuan*' exists in the town being studied. In particular, the author not only employs '*zongjiao duoyuan*' to describe how members of one religion also believe in or practice other religions, but in addition offers detailed information on how social groups with different faiths in a '*duoyuan*' religious field work together to carry out the annual spiritual fair that underpins the township's cultural identity. It is clear, therefore, that the term '*zongjiao duoyuan*' does not merely refer to the co-existence of multiple varieties of religions, but also emphasises that these religions are each 'elements' co-existing and comprising an inclusive and integrated religious zone.

Within our sample, it is evident that contemporary Chinese scholarship on religious diversity tends to place more emphasis on the inclusiveness and integration underlying any apparent differences among the multiple varieties of religions in China. This tendency can be demonstrated threefold from the materials examined. Firstly, among the 57 sample dissertations, more than three quarters (43) employ only '*zongjiao duoyuan*'; just under one fifth (11) employ both '*zongjiao duoyuan*' and '*zongjiao duoyang*'; and approximately five per cent (3) use '*zongjiao duoyang*' only. Secondly, in all but one of the 11 dissertations that mention both '*zongjiao duoyuan*' and '*zongjiao duoyang*', the former is consistently mentioned more frequently than the latter. For example, there are six dissertations in the dataset that mention '*zongjiao duoyuan*' on twelve or more occasions, but in each of these '*zongjiao duoyang*' is not mentioned more than twice. Finally, the maximal amount of times that '*zongjiao duoyuan*' is mentioned in a dissertation is 21, whereas the maximum frequency that '*zongjiao duoyang*' is mentioned in a dissertation is 4 times. Moreover, whilst the dissertation with highest frequency of '*zongjiao duoyuan*' does not mention '*zongjiao duoyang*' at all, the dissertation with the highest occurrence of '*zongjiao duoyang*' also mentions '*zongjiao duoyuan*' 4 times, meaning that both terms are mentioned an equal number of times in that dissertation.

Clearly, although, according to Table 1, '*zongjiao duoyang*' appears to be more commonly used as the equivalent of 'religious diversity' in the Chinese language, the aforementioned quantitative analysis on our sample reveals that religious diversity in contemporary Chinese scholarship is viewed more frequently as '*zongjiao duoyuan*'. Matching up with the two previously delineated themes identified in many English language academic works on China, these results show that, in modern Chinese scholarship, religious diversity is primarily considered and discussed in terms of referring to an inclusive and integrated religious field (which many argue has existed in China for a significant period of time).

### *Diversity between, Rather than within, Religions*

To return briefly to English language scholarship, the concept of ‘religious diversity’ is frequently employed to describe the diversity within, as well as between, religions. As highlighted by Johnson and Bellofatto, there are two different ‘levels’ of religious diversity: inter- and intra-religious diversity; the former ‘describes the degree of over-all diversity of distinct religions’, whereas the latter ‘encompasses the diversity found within a ... religion’ (2012: 3). Although diversity between religions often appears obvious, the religious field can be ‘sensitive to both in-group and out-group distinctions’ and inquiries into the diversity within a religion can sometimes result in ‘astonishing’ findings (Wiktor-Mach, 2012).

Within the English language literature, there is an emerging trend of scholarship that demonstrates the importance of understanding intra-religious diversity. Cush and Robinson (2014) highlight the increasing recognition of diversity within Christianity, while Robert (2000) further points out that ‘the increasing cultural diversity within Christianity, with the recognition of the local within the global and the global within the local, complicates the writing of church history in the twenty-first century’. In addition, Arthur (1986) shows that the history of intra-religious diversity within Christianity offers an informative case to shed light on radical divergence. Looking beyond Christianity, an increasing body of publications has also been devoted to making sense of the diversity and interactions amongst different denominations or sects within Islam (Isherwood, 1990; Charrad, 1998), Judaism (Rebhun and Levy, 2006), and Sikhism (Sing, 2006; Singh 2014). However, our sample shows that such a trend has not yet appeared in scholarly discussion on religious diversity in contemporary China. Among all 57 sample dissertations, 32 include explicit information that allowed us to determine whether the author uses ‘religious diversity’ on the inter-religious level or intra-religious level. Of these 32 dissertations, 27 apply ‘religious diversity’ purely to describe the relations between different religions; 4 use the term on both the inter-religious and the intra-religious levels; and only 1 dissertation employs the term to exclusively describe the diversity within a religion.

These results, we suggest, reflect the influential role that the state plays in shaping the religious field in contemporary China. As noted in many China-related English scholarly works, the Chinese state has a long tradition of regulating the country’s religious arena, which remains highly-restricted today despite the loosening of control since the end of 1970s (Laliberté, 2003). To be sure, the secular state in modern China is not managing the religious field following any theological doctrine, and probably has little interest in so doing. On the contrary, for a state that considers itself to be a ‘modern’ and ‘rational’ political entity, just as in many other policy areas, a much higher priority has been placed on administrative efficiency when it comes to designing religious regulations. As a result, the Chinese state officially recognises only a handful of clearly delineated institutionalised religions, and many religious groups that vary hugely in beliefs and practices have been categorised arbitrarily into one single

recognised religion purely for administrative convenience. Many diffused traditional religious networks and practices in China, for example, were integrated into the national religious institutions of Buddhism and Daoism, 'creating an unprecedented level of national integration of these two religions' clerical networks and liturgies' (Palmer, 2009: 18). In addition, although many other varieties of religious undertakings remain active in China, they are normally carried out under other names (Yang, 2006). Although the contemporary Chinese state explicitly recognises a few religions, there is neither clear nor substantial guidance provided regarding the state's position on the relations between different denominations or sub-groups within these religions.

It is clear that the Chinese state's regulation of the religious field has shaped the understanding of 'religious diversity' in modern Chinese scholarship. Among the 27 sample dissertations that employ 'religious diversity' to simply describe the relationship *between* different religions, most do so in reference to the difference between the five religions officially recognised by the Chinese state. Moreover, the Chinese state does not view Protestantism and Catholicism as two denominations within Christianity but instead as separate religions. In official documents, Protestantism and Catholicism are always listed as two separate religions, in common with Islam, Buddhism, and Daoism. This pattern is repeated in the majority of the aforementioned 27 dissertations. For example, when elaborating on religious diversity in Xinjiang, Si (2016) explicitly identifies this as being the diversity between Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Similarly, Wei (2016) also explains the situation in Yunnan along the same lines.

In the 4 dissertations that consider 'religious diversity' at both the inter-religious and the intra-religious levels, Buddhism is the sole religion in which intra-religious diversity was explored; the only two denominations that were mentioned in these dissertations were Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. This pattern not only reflects the pronounced distinction between the two Buddhist denominations in religious practice but is also in accordance with the official position of the Chinese state. For example, since its establishment in 1953, the Buddhist Association of China, which is the official supervisory organ of Buddhism in China, has always included leading figures in both Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism in its management. Moreover, the Buddhist Association of China operates two distinct sets of institutions to regulate Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, demonstrating that the Chinese state actually offers equal status to these two Buddhist denominations.

In the only dissertation to exclusively focus on intra-religious diversity, Chen (2007) offers rich information on the diversity between four Protestant Christian denominations in a township in Southwest China. This is the only dissertation in our sample to not closely follow the framework determined by the Chinese state when it comes to discussion on religious diversity. However, since 2007, no other sample dissertation was able to replicate the contribution of Chen in offering insight into the intra-religious

diversity in contemporary China. This, we argue, supports our conclusion that the Chinese state has not only profoundly shaped the country's religious field itself, but has also shaped how this religious field is studied and described in present-day Chinese scholarship.

### *Religious Diversity and Ethnicity*

The final feature identified from the analysis of our sample is that 'religious diversity' is often discussed in conjunction with ethnic diversity. We argue that this further demonstrates that, as well as the diversity in China's religious field, the Chinese state has profoundly shaped scholarly discussion itself on 'religious diversity' in contemporary China.

Religious affairs and ethnic affairs have been closely regulated since the early days of the CCP regime. As was the case in many other countries under similar circumstances, the Chinese government took religion into consideration when it implemented the Ethnic Classification Project in 1954, classifying China's extraordinarily diverse population into only 56 officially recognised ethnic groups that are entitled to representation (Mullaney, 2011). Hui, for example, is used by the CCP regime to 'refer to those (Chinese) Muslims who do not have a language of their own but speak the dialects of the peoples among who they live' (Gladney, 1996: 20). In other words, in this admittedly somewhat extreme case, religion was the single factor used in classifying a certain subset of the Chinese population into a minority ethnic group. Moreover, as highlighted by Potter, due to 'the overlap between religious belief and ethnic tension', the Chinese state also 'regulates religious activities of minority nationalities in Tibet and Xinjiang closely to ensure repression of nationalist separatism', demonstrating again the perceived link between religion and ethnic identity (Potter, 2003: 327-328).

Our sample provides two sets of evidence to demonstrate that the CCP's policy of associating religious affairs closely with ethnic affairs is clearly represented in the academic discussion on religious diversity in contemporary China. Firstly, the majority (31) of the sample dissertations either link religious diversity with ethnic diversity or discuss religious diversity among ethnic minority groups. In addition, among the 57 sample dissertations, 17 works were defended in universities with specific links to the education and research of ethnicity. Of these, 14 were submitted by students at Minzu University of China, which is a leading Chinese university that is devoted to the study and education of ethnic minorities.<sup>5</sup> A further 9 sample dissertations were submitted to 3 universities in Yunnan, which is arguably the most ethnically diverse province in China.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Minzu University is distinctive in China as a university which stimulates students' promotion of their own ethnic identities. For more details, see Reza Hasmath (2010: 75).

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, 14 sample dissertations were submitted to so-called 'normal universities', which are higher education institutions that were created to train undergraduates to be teachers. Most of these dissertations were authored by students in courses such as 'Ideological and Political Education', which aims to train educators of the official

In the English language literature, however, religious diversity does not appear to be so closely linked with ethnicity. Even in cases where religious diversity is discussed along with ethnic diversity, the two concepts are often used in parallel, rather than overlapping each other (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Lancee and Dronkers, 2011). In the very few cases where the two concepts are considered to intersect, the focus is placed on the ethnic diversity within religious communities, rather than the religious diversity among ethnic minority groups (Dougherty, 2003). It is, therefore, reasonable to believe that the frequent occurrence of ethnicity in Chinese dissertations that discuss religious diversity reflects the strong influence that the Chinese state has on the religious field.

Ironically, some observers point out that ethnic minorities in China encounter many challenges in maintaining their religious practices in the face of economic and political pressures. Wickeri and Tam, for example, argue that few of the religious beliefs and practices that developed indigenously among remaining ethnic minorities in present-day China, although remnants of indigenous religious practices and beliefs continue even where conversion to other religions has taken place (Wickeri and Tam, 2011). It should be noted, however, that other scholars have argued that some ethnic minority groups in China actually enjoy a greater extent of religious freedom than the majority of the population (Tang and He, 2010).

## Conclusion

Contemporary China offers an arguably fascinating setting in which to study religious diversity because of the country's unique historical and socio-political context. Many English scholarly works have identified two notable features that the concept of 'religious diversity' displays when used in relation to China. Firstly, in the Western context, 'religious diversity' is predominantly understood as the co-existence of a range of religions or religious denominations that are mutually incompatible. Our research shows that the use of the term 'religious diversity' in China is more often used in reference to the differences within an inclusive and integrated religious field. This highlights an important conceptual difference between Western and Chinese employment of the term, with the latter having a more subtle and nuanced understanding of its connotations. Secondly, it has been widely noted that in the case of China, forgoing dealing with the concept of religious diversity in a passive manner, the state instead proactively shapes the diversity of the country's religious field. This active involvement of the state is an important aspect of the way in which religious diversity in China should be analysed.

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ideology in China. This further demonstrates the profound influence that the Chinese state has on scholarly discussion on religious diversity in the country.

Both of these features, we argue, are also demonstrably represented in modern Chinese scholarship on religious diversity. Examining quantitative and qualitative empirical evidence from our representative sample, we find that of the two most popular equivalences of ‘religious diversity’ in the Chinese language, ‘*zongjiao duoyuan*’ is used much more frequently than ‘*zongjiao duoyang*’, suggesting that, in the contemporary Chinese academic world, the diverse religious beliefs and practices in China are predominantly viewed as elements of an inclusive and integrated religious sphere. Furthermore, we found in our sample that ‘religious diversity’ is discussed principally on the inter-religious rather than intra-religious level and is also frequently studied in conjunction with ethnic diversity. All three of these identifiable characteristics, we argue, reflect the fact that the Chinese state has not only markedly moulded the country’s religious field itself, but has also affected how this religious field is studied and described in current Chinese scholarship.

Clearly, China’s historical experiences and socio-political conditions have enriched and broadened scholarly understanding of the concept of ‘religious diversity’, and insights that can be gleaned from distinctions between these differing conceptual iterations are not purely linguistic ones.

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Tables

**Table 1 Frequency of the Term ‘Religious Diversity’ in Dissertations (2005-2016)**

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
<b>Total Number of Dissertations</b>	1	2	1	3	6	1	4	6	10	10	3	4	51
<b>Degree Level</b>													
Doctoral	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	1	0	0	1	1	7
Master’s	1	2	1	3	5	1	1	5	10	10	2	3	44
<b>Frequency of ‘Religious Diversit*’ or Variant</b>													
1	1	2	0	2	5	1	3	5	8	6	3	3	39
2	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	0	1	7
≥ 3	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	5
<b>Sections Mentioning ‘Religious Diversity’</b>													
Title	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Abstract	1	2	0	3	3	1	4	4	9	7	2	4	40
Keywords	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Main Text	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	2	1	3	1	0	11
Explanatory Notes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Chinese Translation Used</b>													
<i>Duoyang</i> 多样	0	0	1	1	3	0	4	3	5	4	2	2	25
<i>Duoyuan</i> 多元	0	1	0	2	1	1	0	2	3	5	0	2	17
<i>Chayi</i> 差异	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	2	1	1	0	9

**Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Sample Dissertations**

<b>Year</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Total Number of Dissertations</b>	1	3	2	1	5	8	5	6	14	4	3	5	57
<b>Degree Level</b>													
Doctoral	1	1	2	0	1	6	0	3	5	0	1	0	20
Master's	0	2	0	1	4	2	5	3	9	4	2	5	37
<b>Academic Disciplines</b>													
Religious Studies	1	2	0	0	0	2	2	1	4	1	2	2	17
Marxism Studies	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	11
Sociology	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	4	1	0	1	8
Ethnology	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	5
Management Studies	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
Education	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
Human Geography	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Culture Studies	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
Anthropology	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Politics and International Studies	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
History	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Psychology	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Frequency of the Keywords</b>													
≤ 2	0	1	0	0	2	5	2	4	7	1	1	2	25
3–5	0	1	0	1	1	1	2	1	6	1	2	3	19
6–9	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	2	0	0	7
≥ 10	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	6

Notes