

# Religions in Contemporary Chinese Society

## Course Syllabus

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### Course Description

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This course is an introductory survey of religion in China, designed primarily for upper-level undergraduates or graduate students with social science background. The course provides a foundation for non-specialists to understand major religious traditions in China, the roles religions play in Chinese society, and how China's religious field is shaped by political institutions and historical legacies.

We begin by discussing how “religion” is conceptualized in the Chinese context, emphasizing the limitations of using denominational identity (the Western Abrahamic model) as the primary measure of religiosity, and the cutting-edge literature on this front. We then examine the central role of the state in shaping the religious field in both historical and contemporary China, with comparative reference to other global models of state–religion relations. Building on this foundation, we turn to specific traditions—Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Islam, Christianity, and sectarian/heterodox traditions—and analyze how each is shaped by Chinese society and governance, as well as the shared and unique challenges they face.

**Format:** Lectures and structured in-class discussion.

### Course Requirements and Grading

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| Component                                              | Weight         |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Mid-term presentation                                  | 20%            |
| Two response papers                                    | 40% (20% each) |
| Attendance and participation                           | 10%            |
| Final paper (research proposal / academic book review) | 30%            |
| Total                                                  | 100%           |

### Mid-term Presentation (20%)

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**Format:** 15–20 minute individual presentation.

**Overview:** Each student will present a case study by adopting the persona of a religious believer or religious professional situated in a specific historical era in China (e.g., the early PRC, the Cultural Revolution, the 1980s “Qigong Fever,” or the contemporary Xi Jinping era). The goal is to move beyond abstract theory and put yourself in the shoes of a believer to understand lived religious experience under the CCP.

#### Presentation Structure

1. **Theological Profile:** Briefly introduce your tradition. What are your core beliefs, rituals, and everyday practices?

2. **Personal Biography:** Narrate your life story. Did you inherit your faith through family/socialization or convert later? What is your social background (class, education, rural/urban, etc.)?
3. **State–Society Relations (Core Section):** How do you navigate the political landscape? Do you worship in a state-sanctioned venue or an unregistered/underground space? What specific challenges or risks do you face from the state, and what strategies do you use to cope?
4. **Community Dynamics:** How do neighbors and local society view you? Are you respected, marginalized, stigmatized, or seen as socially useful?

### Research Requirement

To construct a realistic and historically grounded persona, you must go beyond course readings and consult external academic sources (peer-reviewed articles, academic books, or reputable research reports). Your narrative should be evidence-based, not purely imaginative.

### Response Papers (40%)

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Each student is required to submit two critical response papers during the semester.

**Format:** Papers should be approximately 3 pages in length (double-spaced, standard 12-pt font).

**Content:** You must address the specific prompt chosen from the list below. A successful response will not merely summarize the readings but will synthesize arguments from the assigned course texts to construct your own analytical standpoint.

**Research Requirement:** In addition to the assigned course readings, you must incorporate at least one external academic source (a peer-reviewed article or book chapter) to support your argument.

**Selection:** Please choose two of the following five topics to write on. Papers are due one week after the relevant topic is discussed in class.

### Topics

1. **The Puzzle of Measurement: “Belonging” vs. “Doing.”** Western sociology of religion often treats “denominational identity” (e.g., identifying exclusively as “Christian” or “Buddhist”) as the primary measure of religiosity. Drawing on the readings from Week 1 (Pew, Yang, etc.), discuss the limitations of applying this Abrahamic model to the Chinese context. How do concepts like “multiple religious belonging” or “deity-based practice” offer more accurate analytical tools? Crucially, evaluate the trade-offs: Does abandoning the denominational model make it impossible to compare China globally? Is there still any utility in asking Chinese people “what is your religion”?
2. **The Logic of State Power: Imperial Continuity vs. Revolutionary Rupture.** A central debate in the field is whether the CCP’s religious policy is merely a continuation of the late-imperial “regulatory state” (Brook) or a distinctly modern, Leninist rupture. Compare the logic of religious governance in Imperial China with that of the PRC. While both systems demand state registration and monitor “heterodoxy,” does the CCP’s Marxist-Leninist ideology introduce a fundamentally different goal? Is the current regime trying to *manage* religion (like the emperors) or eventually *eliminate* it?
3. **The Politics of “Superstition” and “Heritage.”** How was the distinction between “religion” (*zongjiao*) and “superstition” (*mixin*) constructed during China’s modernization process, and what political purposes did this classification serve? In the contemporary era, the state has re-labeled some folk practices as “Intangible Cultural Heritage.” Does this shift represent a

genuine acceptance of popular religion, or is it merely a new technique of state control? In your answer, discuss how these labels affect the legitimacy and survival of religious groups (such as folk religion practitioners or Daoists) today.

4. **The Political Economy of Religious Revival.** Analyze the economic drivers behind the religious revival in the Reform Era. How do local governments and religious institutions collaborate to develop a “religious economy” (e.g., through tourism or development projects)? Using examples from Buddhism (e.g., Shaolin Temple), Daoism, or the “Wenzhou Model” of Christianity, discuss whether commercialization is a necessary survival strategy in the “Triple Market.” Does this economic entanglement with the state and market compromise the spiritual authority of religious organizations?
5. **Sinicization: Cultural Assimilation or Political Loyalty?** The campaign for the “Sinicization” (*zhongguohua*) of religions has intensified under Xi Jinping. Compare how this policy impacts Islam and Christianity differently. Since Islam is often tied to specific ethnic identities (Hui/Uyghur) while Christianity is not, how does the state’s approach to controlling them differ? Based on the readings, argue whether “Sinicization” is primarily about cultural adaptation to Chinese traditions or a demand for absolute political loyalty to the Party-State.

## Final Paper (30%)

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Students may choose between Option A (Research Proposal) or Option B (Critical Review Essay). Regardless of the option chosen, the final paper is due during Exam Week.

**Length guidelines:** Undergraduate students: 10–12 pages (double-spaced). Graduate students: 15–20 pages (double-spaced).

### Option A: Research Proposal

This option is designed for students interested in developing an original research project. You are not required to collect data or conduct fieldwork for this assignment (but if you already have your data, preliminary analysis is welcome); rather, you must produce a professional research proposal (similar to a grant application or thesis prospectus) on a topic related to religion in China.

#### Required components:

- **Introduction & Puzzle:** Clearly state your research question. Why is this question important? What is the empirical puzzle or theoretical gap you are addressing?
- **Literature Review:** Situate your project within existing scholarship. What have other scholars said about this topic, and how does your approach differ?
- **Theoretical Argument:** Propose a tentative argument or set of hypotheses. What do you expect to find, and why?
- **Research Design:** Detail your methodology. What specific data would you need to test your hypothesis (e.g., local gazetteers, temple steles, interviews, survey data)? How would you access and analyze this data?

### Option B: Critical Review Essay

This option is designed for students who wish to deepen their theoretical understanding of the field. Instead of analyzing a single text, you will write a “state of the field” review essay synthesizing three academic books (selected from a list provided by the instructor).

#### Required components:

- **Thematic Synthesis:** Do not simply summarize the books sequentially (Book A, then Book B, then Book C). Instead, identify the common themes, theoretical debates, or methodological disagreements that connect them.
- **Critical Evaluation:** Engage critically with the authors' arguments. How convincing is their evidence? What are the limitations of their approaches?
- **Broader Implications:** Discuss what these three books, taken together, reveal about the current state of scholarship on Chinese religion. How do they change our understanding of state–society relations?

## Class Guidelines and Policies

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### Make-up Policy

Make-up quizzes and exams will not be accommodated. Under special circumstances and with instructor approval, missed midterm exam weights may be reallocated.

### AI Use Policy

AI can be a useful tool for studying and research (e.g., locating background facts, generating study questions, or identifying relevant references). However, the ideas and arguments must be your own, and you are responsible for verifying factual accuracy and confirming the validity of references. Work produced by AI without original intellectual contribution will be treated as plagiarism.

## Weekly Themes, Objectives, and Readings

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The course is organized thematically by week. Each week includes learning objectives and assigned readings (with occasional recommended readings).

### Part I. Conceptual and Historical Foundations

#### Week 1 — The Puzzle of Numbers: Conceptualizing Religiosity in the Chinese Context

##### *Objectives*

- Understand the basic landscape and demographic distribution of religion in contemporary China.
- Critically analyze the limits of denominational identity (the Western Abrahamic model) as a foundational measure of religion in East Asia.
- Explore alternative approaches such as multiple religious belonging and deity-based measurement.

##### *Required Readings*

- Pew Research Center. (2023). *Measuring Religion in China* (pp. 9–29).
- Yang, Fenggang, and Brian L. McPhail. (2023). “Measuring religiosity of East Asians: Multiple religious belonging, believing, and practicing.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 62(2), 221–241.
- Zhang, Chunni, and Yunfeng Lu. (2020). “The measure of Chinese religions: Denomination-based or deity-based?” *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, 6(3), 410–426.
- Smidt, C. E. (2019). Measuring religion in terms of belonging, beliefs, and behavior. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

## Week 2 — The Logic of Control: State–Church Relations in Historical Perspective

### Objectives

- Understand historical continuity in the state’s dominant role in religious governance from the imperial period to the modern era.
- Compare models of state–religion relations: the Chinese model (state dominance), the Western European model (dual authority), and the Islamic model (ulema–state alliance).
- Analyze why an independent church authority did not historically emerge in China to counterbalance the state.

### Required Readings

- Fukuyama, Francis. (2011). *The Origins of Political Order* (Chapter 18: “The Church Became a State”). Profile Books.
- Brook, Timothy. (2009). “The Politics of Religion: Late-Imperial Origins of the Regulatory State.” In *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (pp. 22–42). Stanford University Press.
- Kuru, Ahmet T. (2019). *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison*. Cambridge University Press. (Read: Introduction.)
- Yang, Ching Kun. (1970). *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*. University of California Press. (Read Introduction and Chapter 8.)

## Week 3 — The Invention of “Religion” and “Superstition”: Modernity and Classification

### Objectives

- Understand how the modern category of religion (*zongjiao*) was constructed against superstition (*mixin*) during late Qing and Republican modernization (1898–1949).
- Examine how the state legitimized certain institutional religions while criminalizing or delegitimizing folk practices as superstition.

### Required Readings

- Goossaert, Vincent, and David A. Palmer. (2011). *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chapter 2: “The Politics of Religious Modernity”). University of Chicago Press.
- Nedostup, Rebecca. (2009). *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Introduction). Harvard University Asia Center.
- Ford Campany, Robert. (2003). “On the very idea of religions (in the modern West and in early medieval China).” *History of Religions*, 42(4), 287–319.
- Poon, Shuk-wah. (2011). *Negotiating Religion in Modern China: State and Common People in Guangzhou, 1900–1937*. Chinese University Press. (Read Chapters 2 and 4.)

## Part II. The Party-State and the Religious Market

## Week 4 — Mao’s War on Gods: Ideology, Repression, and Resilience (1949–1976)

### Objectives

- Understand the origins of the CCP’s hostility toward religion (Marxist atheism vs. practical United Front strategy).

- Analyze the impact of the Cultural Revolution on religious institutions and the emergence of a political religion (Maoism).

#### *Required Readings*

- Yang, Fenggang. (2012). *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (Chapter 4: “Regulating Religion under Communism”). Oxford University Press.
- Goossaert, Vincent, and David A. Palmer. (2011). *The Religious Question in Modern China*. (Read Chapter 6.)
- Wang, Xiaoxuan. (2020). *Maoism and Grassroots Religion: The Communist Revolution and the Reinvention of Religious Life in China*. Oxford University Press. (Read Chapters 1, 2, and 3.)
- Leese, Daniel. (2011). *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China’s Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge University Press. (Read Chapter 5.)

### **Week 5 — The Reform Era: “Document 19” and the Triple Market (1979–Present)**

#### *Objectives*

- Understand the evolution of religious policies in the post-Mao era, including the significance of “Document 19” (1982).
- Apply Triple Market Theory (red, black, and gray markets) to explain the dynamics of religious regulation and growth.
- Analyze why religions experienced a revival in China.

#### *Required Readings*

- Yang, Fenggang. (2006). “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China.” *The Sociological Quarterly*, 47(1), 93–122.
- Potter, Pitman B. (2003). “Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China.” *The China Quarterly*, 174, 317–337.
- Palmer, David A. (2009). “China’s Religious Danwei: Institutionalising Religion in the People’s Republic.” *China Perspectives*, 2009(4), 17–30.
- Reny, M. E. (2018). *Authoritarian Containment: Public Security Bureaus and Protestant House Churches in Urban China*. Oxford University Press. (Chapter 1: Introduction.)

### **Part III. Traditions in Transformation**

### **Week 6 — Buddhism: “Incense Money,” Political Economy, and Soft Power**

#### *Objectives*

- Analyze Buddhist revival through local development, tourism, and the religious economy.
- Examine the state’s utilization of Buddhism as a vehicle for soft power diplomacy (e.g., the World Buddhist Forum).
- Discuss tensions between monastic practice and commercialization (e.g., the Shaolin Temple controversies).

#### *Required Readings*

- Ashiwa, Yoshiko, and David L. Wank. (2006). “The Politics of a Reviving Buddhist Temple: State, Association, and Religion in Southeast China.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 65(2), 337–359.

- “Shaolin ‘C.E.O. Monk’ Is Accused of Embezzlement and Affairs With Women.” *The New York Times*.
- Koesel, Karrie J. (2014). *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences*. Cambridge University Press. (Chapter 4.)
- “Buddhism and the State: A New Relationship.” *China Perspectives*, 2012(4), 5–10.

## **Week 7 — Confucianism: Philosophy, Religion, or State Civil Religion?**

### *Objectives*

- Debate the classification of Confucianism: world religion, secular ethical system, or governance tradition.
- Trace the shift from Mao-era anti-Confucian campaigns to contemporary promotion of Confucianism for political legitimacy (e.g., Confucius Institutes).

### *Required Readings*

- Sun, Anna. (2013). *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Introduction). Princeton University Press.
- Billioud, Sébastien. (2007). “Confucianism, ‘cultural tradition’ and official discourses in China at the start of the new century.” *China Perspectives*, 2007(3).
- Chen, Hsi-yuan. (2005). “Confucianism Encounters Religion: The Formation of Religious Discourse and the Confucian Movement in Modern China.” In *The Formation of the Modern State and the Rise of Chinese Nationalism*.
- Billioud, Sébastien, and Joël Thoraval. (2015). *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China*. (Read Chapter 1.)

## **Week 8 — Daoism: Institutionalization and “Intangible Cultural Heritage”**

### *Objectives*

- Distinguish institutional Daoism (monastic orders such as Quanzhen) from diffused Daoism (feng shui, body cultivation).
- Analyze survival strategies such as reframing religious practices as Intangible Cultural Heritage or health cultivation (*yangsheng*) to gain state protection.

### *Required Readings*

- Yang, Der-Ruey. (2005). “The Changing Economy of Temple Daoism in Shanghai.” In *State, Market, and Religions in Chinese Societies*. Brill.
- Goossaert, Vincent. (2004). “The Quanzhen Clergy, 1700–1950.” In *Religion and Chinese Society*, 699–772.
- Goossaert, Vincent, and David A. Palmer. (2011). *The Religious Question in Modern China*. (Read Chapter 4.)
- Palmer, David A. (2009). “Taoism and the Arts of Health.” In *Daoism in the 20th Century: Between Eternity and Modernity*. University of California Press.

## **Week 9 — Folk Religion: Community Governance and the “Gray Market”**

### *Objectives*

- Analyze the “gray market” status: understand the precarious legal position of “popular beliefs” (*minjian xinyang*)—how they exist in the limbo between “official religion” (*zongjiao*) and “feudal superstition” (*mixin*).
- Explore “shadow governance”: examine how local temples function as “second governments” by providing public goods (e.g., roads, schools), enforcing village morality, and mediating disputes.
- Evaluate strategies of legitimation: how do unregistered religious groups survive by reframing themselves as “Intangible Cultural Heritage,” museums, or senior activity centers?

#### *Required Readings*

- Chau, Adam Yuet. (2005). *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Chapter 4: “The Politics of Legitimation”). Stanford University Press.
- Tsai, Lily L. (2007). “Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China.” *American Political Science Review*, 101(2), 355–372.
- Dean, Kenneth. (2003). “Local communal religion in contemporary south-east China.” *The China Quarterly*, 174, 338–358.
- Wang, Xiaoxuan. (2020). *Maoism and Grassroots Religion: The Communist Revolution and the Reinvention of Religious Life in China*. Oxford University Press. (Read Chapter 6.)

### **Week 10 — Islam: Ethnicity, Accommodation, and Securitization**

#### *Objectives*

- Understand the intersection of ethnic identity (*minzu*) and religious identity (Islam) in China.
- Compare the Hui model (acculturation and accommodation) with the Uyghur model (conflict and securitization).
- Discuss recent policy shifts, including campaigns against “Arab-style” architecture and the concept of de-extremification.

#### *Required Readings*

- Gladney, Dru C. (2004). *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* (chapter on Hui identity). University of Chicago Press.
- Byler, Darren. (2021). *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City*. Duke University Press. (Read Chapter 1.)
- Yusupov, Ruslan. (2022). “Chinese-Style Mosques and the ‘Sinicization of Islam’.” *The China Quarterly*.
- Erie, Matthew S. (2016). *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law*. Cambridge University Press. (Read Introduction and Chapter 1.)

### **Week 11 — Christianity: Urbanization, Class, and Transnationalism**

#### *Objectives*

- Analyze Christianity’s demographic and geographic shifts (rural to urban; older to professional and business communities).
- Examine structural tensions between the TSPM (Three-Self Patriotic Movement) and unregistered house churches.
- Discuss the political stigma of foreign infiltration and internal theological responses (e.g., urban Calvinism).

- Compare the success of Protestantism and the relative stagnation of the Catholic church.

#### *Required Readings*

- Cao, Nanlai. (2010). *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou* (Chapter 1: "The Wenzhou Model"). Stanford University Press.
- Sun, Yanfei. (2017). "The Rise of Protestantism in Post-Mao China: State and Religion in Historical Perspective." *American Journal of Sociology*, 122(6), 1664–1725.
- Vala, Carsten. (2013). "The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State." In *State and Society in Contemporary China*.
- Madsen, Richard. (2019). "The Chinese Catholic Church: Between Rome and Beijing and Sini-cization from Above and Below." *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*, 6(1), 5–23.

### **Part IV. New Frontiers and Future Trends**

#### **Week 12 — The Politics of Heterodoxy: Sectarian Traditions and "Evil Cults"**

##### *Objectives*

- Trace continuity of redemptive societies (e.g., White Lotus, Yiguandao) into the modern era.
- Analyze the political (rather than theological) logic of *xiejiao* ("heterodox teachings" / "evil cults").
- Examine case studies including the Qigong Fever of the 1990s, Falun Gong, and the Church of Almighty God.

##### *Required Readings*

- Palmer, David A. (2007). *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China* (Chapter 9: "The Falun Gong Challenge"). Columbia University Press.
- Harrell, S., & Perry, E. J. (1982). "Syncretic sects in Chinese society: An introduction." *Modern China*, 8(3), 283–303.
- Dunn, Emily. (2015). *Lightning from the East: Heterodoxy and Christianity in Contemporary China*. Brill. (Read Introduction and Chapter 1.)
- Palmer, David A. (2012). "Heretical Doctrines, Reactionary Secret Societies, Evil Cults: Labelling Heterodoxy in Twentieth-Century China." In *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*.

#### **Week 13 — The Xi Jinping Era: "Sinicization" and Future Trajectories**

##### *Objectives*

- Understand the Sinicization of religions (*zhongguohua*) introduced in 2015: cultural assimilation vs. political loyalty.
- Analyze the 2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs and the institutional shift toward the United Front Work Department.
- Discuss possible future trajectories, including intensified control, negotiated compliance, and new forms of state corporatism.

##### *Required Readings*

- Stroup, David R. (2022). "Good and Bad Muslims: The Politics of the 'Sinicization of Islam' in China." *Problems of Post-Communism*.

- Yang, Fenggang. (2021). “Sinicization or Chinafication? Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond.” In *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below* (pp. 16–43). Brill.
- Mok, Chit Wai John. (2025). “(En)countering State-led Sinicization: Critical Discursive Responses from Roman Catholics in China.” *The China Quarterly*, 261, 162–182.
- Chang, Kuei-min. (2018). “New Wine in Old Bottles: Sinicisation and State Regulation of Religion in China.” *China Perspectives*, 2018(1–2), 37–44.
- Goossaert, Vincent. (2022). “State and Religion in China since 2012: A New Era?” *China Perspectives*.