

# **‘Religious Diversity’ in Contemporary Chinese Scholarship\***

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## **Abstract**

*Contemporary China offers a particularly interesting setting to study religious diversity as a result of its unique socio-political context. Based on the quantitative and qualitative evidence in a representative sample of Chinese dissertations, this essay identifies two characteristics associated with the usage of ‘religious diversity’ in contemporary Chinese scholarship: firstly, the focal point of ‘religious diversity’ is frequently the linkages and similarities between the roles played by different religions in a diverse but united society; secondly, ‘religious diversity’ is often discussed along with ethnic diversity.*

Religious diversity is important as an academic concept as well as a social phenomenon. Contemporary China offers a particularly interesting 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, at the same time, whether deliberately or unintentionally, there is a lack of clear regulation on the vast majority of the religious field in contemporary China, creating a space that is described by Yang (2006) as the ‘gray market’ of religion.

Diversity in contemporary China’s religious field has attracted a great deal of attention in English-language academia. These scholarly works offer significant insight into the different focus and emphasis that the concept of ‘religious diversity’ has when used in regard to China even in the English language. In particular, two interesting themes can be identified through analysing the usage of the concept of ‘religious diversity’ in China-related English scholarly works. Firstly, religious diversity is not merely understood as the co-existence of mutually-incompatible religions, as it is commonly viewed in the Western context. Instead, it is seen as a strength through which the unity and harmony of a society can be developed by drawing on shared pools of symbols, beliefs, norms and rituals.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the state is regarded as a vitally

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\* This essay is extracted from a much longer and more complex academic work titled ‘Religious Diversity in the Lens of Contemporary Chinese Dissertations’, which I collaborated with Dr Ed Griffith and will be published in an anthology of articles on religious diversity in Asia. I would like to thank Dr Griffith for his invaluable intellectual inputs and collegial spirit, without which this project probably could never have been completed. I would also like to thank Professor Timothy Garton Ash, Dr Dorian Singh, and friends at St Antony’s College, whose very kind understanding, support, encouragement, and tolerance during the process of composing this essay mean much to me.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Berling (1997), Cheng (2010).

important player in the making and shaping of religious diversity to such an extent that the relationship between state and religion has become the prism through which much scholarship in this area is conducted.<sup>2</sup>

To investigate how scholars in China understand and apply the concept of religious diversity, I conducted quantitative and qualitative enquiries into how these scholars use the term ‘religious diversity’ in their academic works.<sup>3</sup> My empirical materials are selected through the cross-database search engine provided by the *China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database*, a gateway to several databases of academic works that are composed and published in the People’s Republic of China.<sup>4</sup> In particular, I 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 collection of postgraduate dissertations that have been successfully defended in China since 1984.

## The Equivalences of ‘Religious Diversity’ in the Chinese Language

Most leading Chinese academic institutions require the candidates for doctoral and master’s degrees to present the title, abstract, and keywords of their dissertations in English as well as Chinese. In addition, 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 me to identify the Chinese terms which are considered to be the most appropriate translations to ‘religious diversity’ in leading Chinese universities and research institutes.

To ascertain this, I first selected all CDFD- and CMFD-listed dissertations that contain the precise English phrase ‘religious diversity’. It is possible for some theses to address ‘religious diversity’ along with other types of social diversity, such as ‘cultural diversity’ or ‘ethnic diversity’, creating more complicated phrases such as ‘religious and cultural diversity’ or ‘religious or ethnic diversity’. To avoid missing out these cases, I also selected theses which include at least one sentence containing no more than two other words between ‘religious’ and ‘diversity’. I then excluded all dissertations that simply contain these phrases in the bibliography, which is not normally translated into Chinese. Considering the lack of differentiation

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<sup>2</sup> For in-depth discussions on the roles that the Chinese state plays in shaping the country’s religious field in the twentieth century, see, for example, Ashiwa and Wank (2009), Goossaert and Palmer (2011), Laliberté (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Confined by my research interest, I only analysed scholarly works that are written in simplified Chinese, the native language of most scholars in Mainland China today.

<sup>4</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.

between singular and plural forms in the Chinese language, I also employed the English phrase ‘diversities’ as an additional keyword to run the same set of searches.<sup>5</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. In addition, there were another 6 dissertations that did not include any English phrases that are relevant, or similar, to ‘religious diversity’ in places other than the bibliography. I studied the Chinese translation of the English phrase ‘religious diversity’ in each of the remaining 51 dissertations.

Across the 51 dissertations there were three different Chinese translations of the English phrase ‘religious diversity’ but within each the translation was always consistent. The most commonly used Chinese phrase was *duoyang* 多样, which was used in about half of (25) the dissertations. Another frequently used translation was *duoyuan* 多元, which featured in one third of the dissertations. The least commonly used term was *chayi* 差异, which was in only 9 dissertations, representing less than one fifth of the total. It is clear that *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 are used significantly more than *chayi* 差异.

Although important nuances do exist between the meanings of *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 and will be further explored in the next section, these two words are often used interchangeably. For example, in the seventh edition of the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* 现代汉语词典, one of the most authoritative sources of the contemporary Chinese language, the term *duoyuan* 多元 is defined as ‘*duoyang de* 多样的’ (The Department of Dictionary 2016: 336). Likewise, in *The Oxford Chinese Dictionary*, the term ‘diversity’ is translated into ‘*duoyang xing* 多样性’ when listed as a stand-alone word, but it is translated into ‘*duoyuan hua* 多元化’ as in the phrase of ‘the diversity in education’ (Kleeman and Yu 2010: 210). On the other hand, the term *chayi* 差异 does not contain any Chinese character that appears in *duoyang* 多样 or *duoyuan* 多元, nor is it associated with either *duoyang* 多样 or *duoyuan* 多元 in the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* 现代汉语词典. Moreover, the common adjective *duo* 多 in *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 means ‘many’, ‘much’, or ‘a lot of’, and is often used as opposed to *shao* 少 meaning ‘few’. Therefore, both *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 tend to emphasise the multiple varieties that exist among a group of subjects. The term *chayi* 差异, however, tends to emphasise the differences between the subjects in a group, and is often used as opposed to *tongzhi* 同质 (homogeneity) or *xiangsi* 相似 (similarity). Clearly, *chayi* 差异 is substantially different from *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 in terms of meaning and usage in the Chinese

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<sup>5</sup> To replicate my 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'.

language. Among the selected dissertations, *chayi* 差异 is also used significantly less than *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 as the Chinese translation for ‘diversity’. For this reason, in the rest of this essay, I only consider *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 as the equivalences of ‘diversity’ (as in the term ‘religious diversity’) in the Chinese language.

## How are ‘Religious Diversity’ used in Chinese Dissertations?

After identifying *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 as the equivalences of ‘diversity’ as outlined in the previous section, I combined them with *zongjiao* 宗教, the Chinese translation of ‘religious’, to create two keywords that mean ‘religious diversity’ in Chinese: *zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样 and *zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元. I then selected all CDFD- and CMFD-listed dissertations in which the precise Chinese words *zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样 and *zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元 appear at least twice in any of the sections apart from the bibliography.<sup>6</sup>

Altogether, the search engine returned 163 results, and I manually reviewed each dissertation to further confirm their eligibility. I found 63 dissertations that focused on the religious diversity outside of China; 25 that were purely theoretical and did not discuss religious diversity in contemporary China; 4 that were devoted to discussion of specific historical events; and 14 that were included erroneously.<sup>7</sup> When all the ineligible dissertations were removed, the final sample contained 57 dissertations that directly used the words *zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样 or *zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元 to describe certain phenomena in contemporary China.

With regard to the academic discipline that the dissertations addressed, the most common was, unsurprisingly, Religious Studies. A significant number also fell under Marxism Studies and Sociology. 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, my sample offers reasonable coverage on a wide range of academic disciplines

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<sup>6</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 = '宗教多元 \$ 2' OR FT = '宗教多样 \$ 2' NOT (RF = '宗教多元' OR RF = '宗教多样').

<sup>7</sup> These erroneously returned results each appeared to include one of the four character phrases identified in my search terms. However, on manual inspection we determined that the four characters were not used as the singular word determined here but were two words used consecutively. The nature of the Chinese language, which does not use spaces to separate words, means this is unavoidable and makes the manual reviewing of the results essential to ensure accuracy.

in contemporary China. Based on these empirical materials, I was able to conduct a rigorous inquiry into how the concept of ‘religious diversity’ is understood and adopted in Chinese dissertations.

### Diversity in an Inclusive and Integrated Religious Field

As demonstrated in the previous section, *zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样 and *zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元 are frequently used interchangeably in the Chinese language. However, significant nuances between their meanings can be discerned. Understanding these nuances, I 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* 现代汉语词典, ‘*yang* 样’ means ‘*zhonglei* 种类’, which can be translated into the English words ‘type’ or ‘variety’ (The Department of Dictionary 2016: 1520); ‘*duoyang* 多样’, therefore, literally means ‘multiple varieties’. On the other hand, ‘*yuan* 元’ either means ‘units that constitute an entity’ or is referred to ‘*yuansu* 元素’, the Chinese word for ‘element’ (The Department of Dictionary 2016: 1608); ‘*duoyuan* 多元’ thus refers to the ‘many elements (that constitute an entity)’. Applying these differences between ‘*duoyang* 多样’ and ‘*duoyuan* 多元’ in understanding the religious field in contemporary China, we are able to make more sense of a very important nuance between the two commonly-used equivalences of ‘religious diversity’ in the Chinese language: whilst *zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样 simply expresses the fact that a diverse range of religions co-exist with one another, *zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元 also implies that the many co-existing religions are ultimately elements of an integrated and united religious field despite the apparent differences between them. This nuance is obvious in our sample.

In dissertations that only employ *zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样 but not *zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元, the authors normally simply list the multiple religions that co-exist with one another without elaborating on the relations between these religions. In many dissertations that include a high frequency of *zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元, however, the authors explicitly address the relations and interactions between different religions, suggesting that these religions all belong to an inclusive and integrated religious field.

Moreover, in the few dissertations that mention both *zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样 and *zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元, these two terms are clearly associated with different focal points. For example, in a doctoral dissertation on religious diversity in a north China town, no elaboration is provided wherever the term ‘*zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样’ is used (Wan 2013). This suggests that the author considers ‘*zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样’ to be a straightforward concept that expresses merely its literal meaning: multiple varieties of religions. However, the same dissertation provides a significant amount of ethnological

evidence to argue that ‘*zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元’ exists in the town being studied. In particular, the author not only employs ‘*zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元’ to describe how members of one religion also believe or practice other religions, but also offers detailed information on how social groups with different faiths in a ‘*duoyuan* 多元’ 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* 宗教多元’ is not used merely to refer to the co-existence of multiple varieties of religions, but also emphasises that these religions co-exist in an inclusive and integrated religious field.

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

Clearly, although appears to be more commonly used as the equivalent of ‘religious diversity’ in the Chinese language, the aforementioned quantitative analysis on my sample reveals that religious diversity in contemporary Chinese scholarship is more frequently viewed in line with ‘*zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元’. This pattern is consistent with the focus and emphasis that the concept of ‘religious diversity’ has when used with regard to China in the English language. In other words, in contemporary Chinese scholarship, as well as in many English-language academic works on China, religious diversity is primarily viewed and discussed as an inclusive and integrated religious field, which many argue has existed in China for a significant period of time.

## Religious Diversity and Ethnicity

Another feature can be identified regarding the discussion on ‘religious diversity’ in contemporary China is that it is often discussed in conjunction with ethnic diversity. This demonstrates that, as well as the diversity in China’s religious field, the scholarly discussion on this concept in contemporary China has also been profoundly shaped by the Chinese state.

Religious affairs and ethnic affairs have been closely regulated since the early days of the People’s Republic of China. As in many other countries under a similar circumstance, religion was an important factor that the Chinese state took into consideration when it implemented the Ethnic Classification Project in 1954, which classified 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 Chinese state 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 that classifies a certain subset of the Chinese population into a minority ethnic group. Moreover, as highlighted by Potter (2003, 327-8), 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 religious and ethnic identity in China.

My sample provides two sets of evidence to demonstrate that China’s official policy line of associating religious affairs closely with ethnic affairs is clearly represented in contemporary Chinese scholarship on religious diversity. Firstly, and most simply, the majority (31) of the sample dissertations either directly link religious diversity with ethnic diversity or discuss religious diversity among ethnic minority groups. In addition, among the 57 sample dissertations, 17 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, a leading Chinese university that is devoted to the study and education of ethnic minorities. It is distinctive in China as a university that ‘provides a level of acceptance that encourages students to promote their ethnic identity’ (Hasmath 2010, 75). A further body of 9 sample dissertations were submitted to 3 universities in Yunnan, arguably the most ethnically diverse province in China.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, 14 sample dissertations were submitted to the ‘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 ideology in China. This further demonstrates the profound influence that the Chinese state has on shaping contemporary Chinese scholarship on ‘religious diversity’.

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

Ironically, some observers believe that ethnic minorities in China encounter many challenges in maintaining their religious practices in the face of economic and other pressures. Wickeri and Tam (2011), for example, argue that little of the religious beliefs and practices developed indigenously among the ethnic minorities remain in today's China, although remnants of indigenous religious practices and beliefs continue even where conversion to other religions has taken place. 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 a particularly interesting setting to study religious diversity. Drawing on the quantitative and qualitative empirical evidence from a representative sample, I find that between the two most popular equivalences of 'religious diversity' in the Chinese language, *zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元 is used much more frequently than *zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样, suggesting that, in contemporary Chinese scholarship, the diverse religious beliefs and practices in China are predominantly viewed as elements of an inclusive and integrated religious field. I also find in my sample that 'religious diversity' is frequently studied in conjunction with ethnic diversity. Both patterns, I argue, reflect the fact 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 contemporary Chinese scholarship.

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