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Article

The State and ‘Religious Diversity’ in Chinese Dissertations

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Abstract: Religious diversity in China has attracted considerable scholarly attention in both Anglophone and Sino-phone academia. Based on the quantitative and qualitative evidence in a representative sample of doctoral and master’s dissertations successfully defended in reputable Chinese academic institutions, this article identifies two characteristics associated with the usage of ‘religious diversity’ in contemporary Chinese scholarship. Firstly, ‘religious diversity’ is prominently applied to depict inter-religious rather than intra-religious relations. Secondly, ‘religious diversity’ is often discussed along with ethnic diversity. These patterns confirm, and further illustrate, a notable theme in the China-focused English scholarly works on religious diversity, namely, that the Chinese state plays a predominant role in the making and shaping of the country’s religious diversity. Moreover, the meaning, implication, and usage of the very concept of ‘religious diversity’ in contemporary Chinese scholarly discourse are also likely to have been directly influenced by the policies and rhetoric of the Chinese state.

Keywords: religious diversity; State-religion relations; scholarly discourse; Chinese scholarship; Sino-phone academia

1. Introduction

The official ideological line in China may not be entirely friendly towards religion, but religion has profoundly shaped China throughout the country’s modern history (Tao 2015). An impressive wave of religious revival and development has taken place in China since the government restored religious freedom as a fundamental constitutional right in 1982 (Yang 2011). As a result, contemporary China provides an ideal setting for studying and reflecting on the concept of ‘religious diversity’. Not only that a wide range of religious faiths and practices can be found in contemporary China, even religious groups that appear to be practicing the same religion may still have ‘a wide range of differences ... due to their doctrinal diversity’ (Zhu 2018, p. 1).

Indeed, the diversity in China’s religious field offers exciting opportunities for scholars to engage with and test competing theories (Tao 2018), and it has already attracted considerable attention in the Anglophone academia. Among the China-focused Anglophone publications, one salient theme is the predominant role that the state plays in shaping religious diversity. In these scholarly works, ‘religious diversity’ is not merely understood as being the co-existence of mutually incompatible religions. Instead, it is construed as a way of developing the unity and harmony of society by drawing on shared pools of symbols, beliefs, norms, and rituals, something that has been manifested by the Chinese state throughout the country’s long history (Berling 1997; Palmer 2009; Chen 2010; Laliberté 2014).

This specific theme in relevant China-focused Anglophone academic publications creates a unique lens for us to examine how the concept of ‘religious diversity’ is understood and adopted in present-day Chinese scholarship. In particular, we are interested in the following question: when the concept ‘religious diversity’ is employed by Chinese academics in their scholarly works, does it also reflect the specific theme that can be identified from the China-related Anglophone scholarly works? To answer this question, we developed a tailored research strategy to reveal what Chinese dissertation authors express when they use the concept of ‘religious diversity’. Drawing upon the quantitative and qualitative analysis into our sample of more than 50 Chinese dissertations published between 2005 and 2016, we find these authors’ use of the concept of ‘religious diversity’ were in close alignment with their western peers who write about China in English.

In Anglophone scholarship, which addresses religious diversity, but does not focus on China, the term ‘religious diversity’ is often applied to illustrate the diversity within, as well as between religions. However, in Chinese dissertations, the term ‘religious diversity’ primarily depicts the relation between religions, and it is seldom applied to illustrate the variety of beliefs and practices within any given religion. Also, unlike in the general English scholarship on religious diversity, ‘religious diversity’ is often discussed in tandem with ethnic diversity in Chinese dissertations. These special features regarding the meanings and usage of the concept ‘religious diversity’, we argue, are closely associated with the profound impacts that the Chinese state has on the structure and discourse of the country’s religious diversity.

To elaborate and explain our findings, the rest of this article first reviews how the China-focused Anglophone scholarship depicts the important roles that the Chinese state plays in shaping the reality and discourse of religious diversity. It then introduces our methodology, including how we identify the equivalence of the English concept ‘religious diversity’ in the Chinese scholarly language. Next, it presents the main empirical findings from our quantitative and qualitative analysis and discusses these findings in dialogue with the relevant China-focused Anglophone scholarship. Finally, it summarises our key findings and arguments in a brief conclusion.

2. The State and China’s Religious Diversity in the Anglophone Scholarship

Diversity in China’s religious field has attracted considerable attention in the Anglophone academia. In China-related English-language academic publications, the state is generally viewed as being central to the making and shaping of religious diversity. Moreover, the relationship between the state and religion is the dominant paradigm of the scholarly analysis in these publications. These themes, however, are not so obvious in general scholarship on religious diversity in the Anglophone world. For example, as of November 2018, among the 1035 English publications that the Web of Science identified as relevant to the topic of religious diversity, only 247 included the term ‘state’ or ‘government’ in their full text.

The predominant presence of the state in scholarly discussions on China’s religious diversity may result from the fundamentally different experiences of organised religion in China and Europe (Palmer 2009, p. 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; Goossaert 2014).

As demonstrated by many academic works published in the English language, the Chinese state 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 ‘patronising a diversity of local religions ... under the authority of an imperial ritual’ (Laliberté 2014, p. 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 (2014, p. 29) 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’.

However, the Chinese state also has a long tradition of controlling and managing the religious arena (Laliberté 2016). In post-1949 China, the Communist Party 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 had 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, p. 20). It has also left a vast ‘gray market’ for many unrecognised religions to survive and thrive at the discretion of local law enforcement agencies (Yang 2006).

Clearly, according to the China-focused Anglophone scholarship on religious diversity, the Chinese state does not simply deal with religious diversity passively. On the contrary, deliberately or unintentionally, the state plays an active role in shaping the extent and pattern of religious diversity in China. The state’s influences and impacts add specific attributes to the concept of ‘religious diversity’ in China’s particular cultural and political context. It would, therefore, be interesting to investigate whether or not the close association between the state and the discussions on religious diversity also exists in the scholarly language in contemporary China.

3. Methodology

The empirical materials that we use to explore the focus and implication of the concept of ‘religious diversity’ in contemporary Chinese scholarly language are doctoral and master’s dissertations that have been successfully defended in leading Chinese academic institutions since the turn of the new millennium. 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 associated with established academics. However, dissertations that have been successfully defended in examinations are, by their very nature, satisfactory in quality and innovation 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 addition, we also chose to focus on dissertations for methodological and practical reasons. In comparison with journal articles and conference proceedings, which often prioritise the presentation of general findings or end 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 that are of particular interest to us. Furthermore, although some monographs and edited volumes may also include information that is useful to us, to this date, there has not been a comprehensive database that would allow us to identify all of these academic books through a systematic search. We were, however, able to systematically search through all of the doctoral and master’s dissertations submitted to leading Chinese institutions since 1984, thanks to our access to two quality dissertation repositories, which will be discussed in more detail later in this section.

It is, of course, possible that certain religious activities may be seen by the students and supervisors as too ‘overly sensitive’ to be chosen as the topics of dissertations, given the suspicions that the Chinese state has on religion (Tao 2017). However, the level of institutional censorship and self-censorship should be not significantly different between dissertations, book chapters, journal articles, monographs, and other academic genres in contemporary China. Moreover, 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 after a considerable length of time. Therefore, in comparison with monographs, dissertations are more likely to reflect the frontier of academic research in a timely manner.

3.1. Source of Data

Our 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 composed and published in the People's Republic of China.¹ In particular, we utilised the *China Doctoral Dissertations Full-text Database* (CDFS) 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 CDFS contains more than 350,000 doctoral dissertations submitted to 464 academic units that award doctoral degrees, and the CMFD contains more than 3.5 million master's dissertations from 752 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. Clearly, the CDFS and the CMFD offer excellent sources of data for our research regarding both quality and quantity.

3.2. The Chinese Expressions for 'Religious Diversity'

We focus on dissertations in simplified Chinese, the academic language in most Chinese universities today. Most leading Chinese academic institutions require doctoral and master's candidates 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 provide the English translation of essential concepts in the main text, or explanatory notes of their dissertation texts. These features allowed us to identify the Chinese terms that are considered to be the most appropriate translations of 'religious diversity' in Sino-phone scholarship.

To ascertain this, we first selected all CDFS- 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 'ethnic diversity', and to therefore have created more complicated phrases such as 'religious and cultural diversity' or 'religious or ethnic diversity'. In order to avoid excluding these cases, we also selected theses that included at least one sentence that contains no more than two other words between 'religious' and 'diversity'. We then eliminated all dissertations that simply feature these phrases in the bibliography, which are 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.²

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 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 Figure 1 and Table 1.

¹ The search engine that we used to collect data is available through www.cnki.org. Certain functions only operate behind the paywall.

² 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'.

As shown in Figure 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 five mentioning it on three or more occasions.

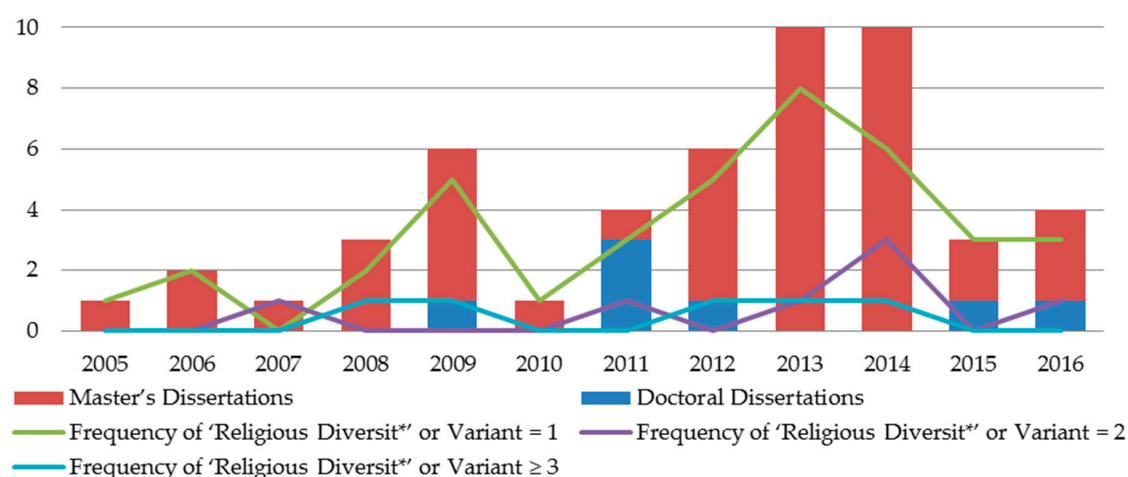


Figure 1. Frequency of the English Phrase 'Religious Diversity' in Chinese Dissertations (2005–2016).

As shown in Table 1, the English phrase 'religious diversity' or its variants did not appear in any of the dissertations' titles or in their explanatory notes. It appeared in the abstract of 40 of the dissertations as well as in the key terms of two of them. There were 11 dissertations that only used 'religious diversity' within the main text.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Usage of the English Phrase 'Religious Diversity' in Chinese Dissertations (2005–2016).

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Sections Mentioning 'Religious Diversity'													
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
Chinese Translation Used													
<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

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 for 'diversity' was *duoyang* 多样, which was used in about half of 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 nine dissertations, representing less than one-fifth of the total. It is clear, then, that *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 are used significantly more often than *chayi* 差异.

Although important nuances do exist between the meanings of *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 which 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 at the Institute of Linguistics and Social Sciences 2016, p. 336). Similarly, in *The Oxford Chinese Dictionary*, the term ‘diversity’ is translated into ‘*duoyang xing* 多样性’ when listed as a standalone word, but it is translated into ‘*duoyuan hua* 多元化’ when in a phrase such as ‘the diversity in education’ (Kleeman and Yu 2010, p. 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 language. According to Table 1, *chayi* 差异 is 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 chapter, we only consider *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 as being the Chinese language equivalents of ‘diversity’ (as in the sense of ‘religious diversity’).

3.3. Sample and Descriptive Statistics

After identifying *duoyang* 多样 and *duoyuan* 多元 as the equivalences of ‘diversity’ in the previous section, we 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. We then sought out 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.³ 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, four that were devoted to exploring specific historical events, and 14 that were included erroneously.⁴ When all of the ineligible dissertations were removed, our final sample contained 57 dissertations that directly used the words *zongjiao duoyang* 宗教多样 or *zongjiao duoyuan* 宗教多元 in order to describe certain phenomena in present-day China. The descriptive statistics of these are reported Figure 2.

As shown in Figure 2, in common with the 51 dissertations that 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 sample 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 10 or more occurrences.

³ To replicate our search, the following syntax can be run 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’).

⁴ 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.

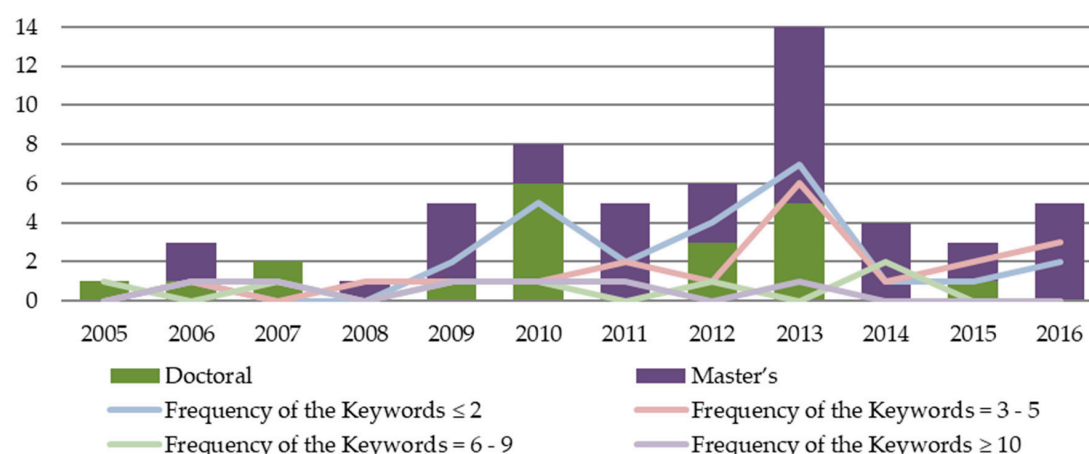


Figure 2. Frequency of the sample Chinese dissertations that address the concept of religious diversity (2005–2016).

We also collected the information regarding the academic disciplines that the sample dissertations addressed and report the descriptive statistics in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, the most common academic discipline in sample dissertations 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 a reasonable coverage of a wide range of academic disciplines in contemporary China. Based on this sample, we were able to conduct a rigorous inquiry into how the concept of ‘religious diversity’ is understood and adopted in contemporary Chinese dissertations.

Table 2. Distribution of Academic Disciplines addressed by the Sample Dissertations.

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
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
Total	1	3	2	1	5	8	5	6	14	4	3	5	57

4. Diversity between, rather than within, Religions

Our first finding from analysing the sample dissertations was that the authors were much more likely to apply the concept of ‘religious diversity’ to describe a range of different religions, rather than a range of different schools or teachings within the same religion. This is a special feature that does not exist in the Anglophone scholarship and that does not specifically focus on China, where the concept of ‘religious diversity’ is frequently employed to describe the diversity within, as well as between, religions.

As highlighted by [Johnson and Bellofatto \(2012, p. 3\)](#), in the general Anglophone scholarship, 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'. Moreover, as Wiktor-Mach (2012) argued, although the diversity between religions often appears to be 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.

Indeed, within the Anglophone scholarly 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 (Singh 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 on the intra-religious level. Of these 32 dissertations, 27 apply 'religious diversity' purely to describe the relations between different religions; four use the term on both the inter-religious and the intra-religious levels; and only one 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 the 1970s (Laliberté 2016). To be sure, the secular state in modern China is not managing the religious field by following any theological doctrine, and it 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, p. 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 evidenced 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 also 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 four 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, B. 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.

5. Religious Diversity and Ethnicity

A second feature identified from the analysis of our sample is that ‘religious diversity’ is often discussed in conjunction with ethnic diversity. This further demonstrates that as well as the diversity in China’s religious field, scholarly discussion itself on ‘religious diversity’ 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 current Chinese 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 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, p. 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 (2003, pp. 327–28), 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.

Our sample provides two sets of evidence to demonstrate that the Chinese government’s policy of associating religious affairs closely with ethnic affairs is clearly represented in academic discussions 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.⁵ A further nine sample dissertations were submitted to three universities in Yunnan, which is arguably the most ethnically diverse province in China.⁶

⁵ Minzu University is distinctive in China as a university that stimulates students’ promotion of their own ethnic identities. For more details, see Hasmath (2010, p. 75).

⁶ 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 ideology in China. This further demonstrates the profound influence that the Chinese state has on scholarly discussion on religious diversity in the country.

In 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 many minority ethnic groups in China are reported to encounter severe challenges in maintaining their religious practices in the face of economic and political pressures. Wickeri and Tam (2011), for example, argue that few of the religious beliefs and practices that developed indigenously among minority ethnic groups still exist in present-day China. 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). Empirical evidence also indicates that in certain communities of Chinese diaspora, some minority ethnic groups appear to be more religious in comparison to the Han people (Tao and Stapleton 2018).

6. Conclusions

Thanks to its unique historical and socio-political context, contemporary China offers a fascinating setting for the study of religious diversity, and it has attracted considerable scholarly attention in both the Anglophone and the Sino-phone academia. In comparison to the general English-language scholarship on religious diversity, many China-focused Anglophone academic publications specifically focus on the roles that the state plays in shaping the diversity of the country's religious field. In fact, in these publications, 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.

Through analysing sample dissertations selected from two repeatable and sizable repositories, we find that the Chinese state has not only profoundly shaped the country's religious diversity itself, but also shaped how religious diversity is studied and described in present-day Chinese scholarship. Examining quantitative and qualitative empirical evidence from sample dissertations, we found that, in the scholarly discourse in contemporary China, the concept 'religious diversity' is discussed principally on the inter-religious rather than the intra-religious level, and it is also frequently studied in conjunction with ethnic diversity. These identifiable characteristics, we argue, do not merely echo the emphasis that China-focused Anglophone scholarship places on the importance of the Chinese state's roles in shaping religious diversity in the country, but also reflect the fact that the Chinese state has markedly moulded the meaning, implication, and usage of the very concept of 'religious diversity' in contemporary Chinese scholarly discourse.

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