A Solo, a Duet, or an Ensemble? Analysing the Recent Development of Religious Communities in Contemporary Rural China

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Introduction

In contemporary China, a society experiencing rapid economic, social and institutional transition, religious communities are important due to their international and domestic significance. On the one hand, with its close links to important political issues such as minority ethnic group unrest, religious freedom in China has been a hot topic within international human rights debates for decades (Wong 2001; Kolodner 1994); on the other hand, burgeoning religious communities are considered powerful emerging social forces in China's domestic political arena, especially at the grassroots level (Chung et al. 2006; Tsai 2007).

Under such circumstances it is no surprise that discussions of 'religious freedom' and 'religious harmony' have frequently appeared in China's official discourse since 1982, when the Central Government's *Document No. 19* officially acknowledged the unjust nature of its radical anti-religious policies between 1957 and 1978 and reconfirmed that 'the Party's principal religious policy is to respect and protect religious freedom'[1]. Nevertheless, complementary laws and regulations for the implementation of religious freedom have remained frustratingly insufficient and ambiguous in China over the past three decades. This ambiguity has created ample space for interpretation, has provided political opportunity structures for both policy implementers and religious groups,[2] and has made it impossible to assess the development of religious communities in China by simply looking at formal legal and political institutions at the national level. Accurate empirical data and first-hand local knowledge are therefore indispensable for understanding the religious community in contemporary China and its recent developments.

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[1] The English translation of the *Document No 19 (1982)* is downloadable from the Centre on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University (http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Document_no._19_1982.pdf, [accessed Mar 5, 2012]).

[2] Research on petitioning in rural China has demonstrated how grassroots elites and ordinary people use the Constitution, laws and official regulations to protect their rights and pursue their demands. Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang find that petitioning in rural China is more likely to be a success if it is launched and operated by 'rightful resisters', a widely-quoted term that refers to the social actors who 'frame their claims with reference to protections implied in ideologies or conferred by policymakers' (O'Brien & Li 1995; 2005; 2006; O'Brien 1996). Such findings coincide with Cai Yongshun's (2002; 2005) research on laid-off workers and Ying Xing's (2001) research on reservoir resettlements. Therefore, it is very likely that grassroots religious leaders could also employ official rhetoric and commitments to protect the development of their groups.

Like the country's vague religious policy, China's official statistics on religious communities are described as 'guesstimates at best and fabrications at worst' (Yang 2006). To bridge this gap, in this paper, I will provide an overview of contemporary China's religious policies and communities based on original cross-provincial data collected by myself and my colleagues in summer 2008. This paper will test two mainstream theories and offers a new framework to explain why religious communities develop better in some places than others. Sample selection methods and data collection processes will be introduced and discussed along with the statistical results.

Ambiguous policy and statistics on the religious community in contemporary China

The development of religious communities in post-Cultural Revolution China is often described as a 'revival' (Wong 2001; Potter 2003). As Yang Fenggang (2006) describes, after completely banning religion for a long period, 'a limited number of Protestant and Catholic churches, Buddhist and Taoist temples, and Islamic mosques' were allowed to be re-established in China in 1979, when the country had just started its new era of 'reform and opening-up'. However, ever since then, China's official religious policy has been ambiguous. As mentioned previously, such ambiguity not only provides the central government with considerable space to shape and explain its religious regulations but also gives considerable flexibility to both local governments and religious communities to interpret the official policy in ways most beneficial to them.

Three years after the 1979 reforms, the Central Government's *Document No.19* officially granted legal status to five religions - Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. The same document, however, also restricted the activities of these groups, stating that they should only be held by officially registered religious associations and personnel and within officially registered religious sites (Yang 2004). Issued the same year, the new Constitution of the People's Republic of China also clearly indicates that the State protects religious freedom and 'normal' religious activities. Considering the complete ban on religious organisations and practices during the Cultural Revolution, it is not unfair to say that 1982 saw the Chinese Government greatly loosen its religious restrictions. However, both *Document No. 19* and the new Constitution only provide limited space for religious

activities: by ambiguously prescribing that 'the State protects normal religious activities'[3], the Constitution actually provides the State (both at the central and local levels) with strong discretionary powers regarding religious affairs, since only 'normal' religious activities are entitled to enjoy the State's protection and only the State can define which activities are 'normal'. Similarly, Article 12 of the *Regulations on Religious Affairs of the People's Republic China* clearly states that collective religious activities can only be 'held in registered religious sites', that these activities should be 'organised by registered religious bodies and presided over by religious personnel', and that their process shall be 'in compliance with religious doctrines and canons'[4]. Many scholars, therefore, argue that the State still tightly restricts religious affairs in China, particularly as only registered groups of the five official religious (i.e. Buddhism, Daoism, Muslim, Catholicism and Protestantism) are entitled to enjoy the State's protection (Ashiwa & Wank 2007, pp.339-340; Spiegel 2004, p.43; Kolodner 1994). Indeed, according to Potter (2003, p.320), the Chinese Government's recognition of the five official religions actually coincides with 'an effort to exclude folk religions, superstition and cults from the bounds of protection'. Some researchers even argue that China's religious policy 'aim[s] at control not protection' (Yang 2006, p.96; HRIC 2005).

Thanks to institutional ambiguity, while the state is able to flexibly formulate its attitude and actions towards religious communities to satisfy its own interests, religious believers and groups are also able to seek political opportunities from the same Constitution and laws. However, despite the fact that 'the [State's] predominant view on religion has moved away from militant atheism to a more scientific, objective and consequently more balanced approach to religion' (Yang 2004), religion remains a relatively under-researched field in contemporary China.

Official statistics on religious populations are usually considered rough and unreliable and are updated infrequently (Hunter & Chan 1993, p.8). According to official sources, there are over 100 million religious believers, more than 100,000 religious sites, about 300,000 professional religious

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[3] The English translation of the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982)* is downloadable from the Centre on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University (http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Constitution.pdf, [accessed Mar 5, 2012]).
[4] The English translation of the *Regulations on Religious Affairs of the People's Republic China* is downloadable from the Centre on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University (http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Regulations_on_Religious_Affairs_no426.pdf, [accessed Mar 5, 2012]).

personnel and over 3,000 religious associations in China today[5]. Considering the almost total absence of religion during the 'Cultural Revolution', such figures are impressive. However, these numbers are widely regarded as underestimates for several reasons. First, the official statistics only cover religious believers and groups that are officially recognised and registered. Therefore, individual religious practitioners and unofficial religious group members are likely to have been overlooked by the official statistics. Second, despite increasing religious tolerance in China, religious groups are still politically sensitive. Local officials may be regarded as lacking in governance capability if religious communities with radical tendencies appear in their jurisdictions, and thus have an incentive not to count unregistered religious groups. Even the head of China's State Administration for Religious Affairs once acknowledged that 'the negative numbers come from the cadres; and the cadres come from the negative numbers' (Ye, 2000, p.9). Last but not least, local governments may also tolerate or even encourage unregistered religious groups for economic reasons. According to Ashiwa and Wank (2007, p.344), through putting religious sites into commercial use, local governments are able to 'avoid the cost of maintaining religious sites' and 'increase tax revenue'. Considering the increasing financial pressure on local governments, local officials are likely to take such opportunities when conditions permit, and official religious statistics are likely to remain at the low end of the spectrum.

Outside of official statistics, many other efforts have been made to estimate the accurate scale of religious communities in contemporary China, although there is hardly any agreement. For example, *The 1997 Britannica Book of the Year* suggests that there were almost 221 million Chinese Folk Religionists in China as early as 1996 (Daume 1997), representing about 18.06% of the national population at the time. However, according to Lai (2005), a combination of official and unofficial data from various sources suggested that there were almost 200 million religious believers in China in 2003, which is 15.48% of the then national population of 1.29 billion. Yang (2006) argues that there were as many as 100 million official religious practitioners, 200 million illegal religious practitioners and more than 300 million practitioners from religions with ambiguous legal status in China; in other words, around 45.65% of the Chinese population were religious believers in 2006. Despite the huge

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[5] These figures can be found both on the official website of the central government of the People's Republic of China ('Religious Believers', http://english.gov.cn/2006-02/08/content_182603.htm, [accessed Feb 15, 2012]), and china.org.cn ('The Present Conditions of Religion in China', http://www.china.org.cn/living_in_china/abc/2009-06/29/content_18032670.htm, [accessed Feb 15, 2012]), which is supervised by the information office of the State Council of the PRC.

data discrepancies, the aforementioned figures, together with many other researchers in the field, have made reasonable contributions towards a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the actual size of the religious community in contemporary China. However, such estimates are rarely based on large-scale and first-hand empirical data from China. The cross-provincial survey that my colleagues and I conducted in summer 2008 provided a large amount of data on religious believers and groups in contemporary rural China, which has enabled us to draw a relatively more accurate estimation of the scale and distribution of religious communities in contemporary rural China.

Surveying Religious Communities in Contemporary Rural China

The huge variations among existing estimates of the religious population in China are mainly due to different research scopes, measuring methods, and data resources. The statistical results presented in this report are based on the second round of a regular cross-provincial survey scheme led and supervised by scholars at the Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy and Peking University in Beijing. As a questionnaire designer and survey instructor, I participated in both the pilot surveys and the main survey in summer 2008.

The huge cultural, economic, social, and political variations among different regions of China meant that simple random sampling was not considered an appropriate approach for our research (Bernard 1998, pp.149-152). My colleagues and I therefore divided China into six areas using conventional socio-political boundaries, with each area housing a population with relatively similar cultural, economic, and political conditions. Within each area, one sample province was randomly selected; within each sample province, five sample counties were randomly selected; within each sample county, two sample townships were randomly selected; and within each township, two sample villages were randomly selected. Through this stratified quasi-random sampling approach, our design sample scaled 120 villages. However, because two of the sample villages in Sichuan Province had been seriously damaged by a major earthquake that killed around 80,000 people, these were dropped from the final sample. One extra village in Jilin Province was included in the sample due to a practical arrangement made during the first round of the survey in 2005, and this village was kept in order to enable comparisons. The actual sample, therefore, contained 119 villages in total. Table 1

displays the descriptive statistics of these sample villages.

Table 1   Descriptive statistics of sampled villages

Province	Number of villages sampled	Average village area (mu) [6]	Average village population	Average number of village households	Average number of natural settlements within each administrative village	Average village income per capita (yuan)	Average village labour force rate (%)	Average village illiteracy rate (%)	Average village government annual income (yuan)	Average village party membership
Jiangsu	20	5629.40	2142.35	633.85	4.60	5856.45	50.49	4.43	1255448.00	51.45
Sichuan	18	5486.83	1535.33	428.78	12.35	3094.50	55.40	10.06	11198.33	34.61
Shaanxi	20	7493.30	880.55	214.05	2.20	2331.75	49.47	30.05	46230.00	22.15
Jilin	21	19586.95	1302.60	379.67	4.33	3811.57	46.97	3.95	289523.80	29.05
Hebei	20	2820.40	1264.30	310.70	1.05	2782.50	53.31	7.29	48817.50	26.95
Fujian	20	15475.15	2364.60	613.65	6.85	5415.40	55.19	7.49	656185.00	49.95
Total	**119**	**9566.84**	**1580.05**	**429.71**	**5.04**	**3894.67**	**51.70**	**10.50**	**390043.50**	**35.65**

As shown in Table 1, huge variations exist among the six sample provinces. Jilin has the largest average village area; Sichuan has the highest average number of natural settlements in each administrative village; Jiangsu and Fujian villages are relatively high in population, household, government revenue, per capita income, and party membership; and Shaanxi has the highest average village illiteracy rate. Such descriptive statistical results confirm that our approach of dividing China into different regions prior to stratified random sampling was necessary as the representativeness of the sample could otherwise have been

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[6] Mu is a Chinese unit of area. 1 mu roughly equals to 0.165 acres.

compromised by the huge demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic differences between the regions.

Through interviewing village cadres and verifying official statistics in each sample village, our investigating team collected data on village demographics, geography, economy and government capacities. Data on the history, structure and social function of rural religious communities in our sample villages was also collected by inviting elites to complete special questionnaires. In addition, about twenty villagers in each sample village were randomly selected and their basic personal information and religious faith were recorded through structured interviews. When the selected interviewee was not in the village at the time of our survey, another randomly selected villager was chosen to replace them. Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics of sample villagers.

Table 2   Descriptive statistics of sampled villagers

Province	Number of villages in sample	Average number of villagers in each village	Male proportion (%)	Average age in 2008 (years)	Education (years)	Agricultural household proportion (%)	Party member proportion (%)	Annual family income (yuan)	Ethnic minority proportion (%)	Married population proportion (%)
Jiangsu	400	20.0	67.2	51.61	6.62	97.0	15.8	33518	0.0	94.2
Sichuan	376	20.9	59.6	53.71	5.44	94.7	14.1	21738	0.3	88.6
Shaanxi	398	19.3	61.8	48.57	5.64	95.7	8.8	21636	0.3	92.7
Jilin	406	19.3	60.3	48.17	6.97	96.6	10.1	29796	20.7	95.6
Hebei	398	19.9	58.8	50.25	6.33	97.0	12.8	20145	0.0	94.5
Fujian	400	20.0	71.8	48.61	6.15	96.5	14.2	43280	0.2	95.2
Total	2378	20.0	63.3	50.11	6.20	96.3	12.6	28435	3.7	93.5

As shown in Table 2, sample villagers in Fujian and Jiangsu have relatively high household income, making the level of economic development of these two provinces the highest among the sample provinces; this is consistent with the statistical results of the sample villages displayed in Table 1. Table 2 also shows that most of our sample villages are married and from agricultural households. The average age and size of the married population in our sample villages is

higher than that of the national population, possibly because young and unmarried Chinese villagers are more likely to become migrant workers and hence are less likely to be included in our survey. The relatively high proportion of Party members in our sample data may reflect the fact that Party members are more likely to stay in their own villages, since they may enjoy better opportunities there than ordinary villagers. It should also be noted that, because our survey was conducted in June and July, when male migrant workers are more likely to return home to join the summer harvest, this may have increased the proportion of males in our survey. The ethnic minority population is significantly higher in Jilin because of the inclusion of an autonomous prefecture of Korean Chinese; however, apart from this, the ethnic minority proportion of our sample data is relatively low, as none of the five Provincial-level Ethnic Autonomous Regions were selected during our sampling process. In other words, although my colleagues and I tried our best to avoid bias throughout the entire process of survey design and data collection, some bias remains. However, considering the socio-political situation in contemporary China, much of this bias is unavoidable, if not inevitable, for such a large-scale cross-provincial survey. Therefore, despite not being perfectly rigorous, the data collected for our survey are reliable to a certain extent.

Table 3 shows data on the different religious believers in our sample. The proportions of each religion as well as the general religious population are weighted by village population, which is highly heterogeneous in our sample data as well as across the national population. According to our sample data, about 46.59% of all surveyed villagers claim they have some sorts of religious faith. This proportion is close to the estimation of Yang (2006). However, more than two-thirds of self-proclaimed religious believers (or 31.09% of all sample villagers) do not or cannot clearly identify their faith. Most of them regularly visit local temples or burn incense at home to pray for good fortune. These people believe that there are supernatural powers that dominate or strongly influence the fate of human beings, and they think their fates can be changed through offering sacrifices to gods or ancestors. These beliefs and practices are often deeply rooted in traditional Chinese cultures and customs of local communities; we thus categorise them as 'local faith and/or popular religious believers'. In addition, about 10.85% of sample villagers claim they believe in Buddhism, 3.54% of sample villagers claim they believe in Protestantism, 0.71% claim they believe in Daoism and 0.39% claim they believe in Catholicism. None of our sample villagers reports Islam as his or her religious faith, which we believe to be reasonable. In China, Islam is closely associated with certain minority ethnic groups, such as Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Dongxiang, and Kyrgyz (Gladney 2003). Most of these minority ethnic groups are distributed in two provincial-level autonomous regions in Northwest China which were not included in our survey. However, interestingly, one of the two Hui

villagers in our sample reported her religious faith as 'local faith and/or popular religions', and the other described herself as irreligious. Such phenomena may reflect the fact that Islam is more likely to be regarded as a set of manners for certain ethnic groups rather than a religion in China. The data reported in Table 3 may not be fully representative due to the bias in our sample; however, despite such limitations, our study of religious communities in contemporary rural China can still serve as a reference for further research on estimating the accurate rural Chinese religious population.

Table 3   Characteristics of sampled religious believers and irreligious people

	Weighted proportion (%)	Demographic, Political and Socioeconomics Characteristics							
		Male proportion (%)	Average age in 2008 (years)	Agricultural household proportion (%)	Ethnic minority proportion (%)	Married population proportion (%)	Party member proportion (%)	Education (years)	Annual family income (yuan)
Religious Believers	**46.59**	**61.6**	**49.45**	**96.2**	**1.2**	**93.8**	**9.6**	**5.94**	**30816**
Local faith and/or popular religious believers	31.09	64.8	46.46	96.4	1.1	94.6	9.8	5.94	29772
Buddhist	10.85	54.4	49.44	95.8	0.0	92.1	9.8	5.88	38911
Protestant	3.54	47.7	49.66	89.2	4.6	96.9	4.6	5.83	24168
Daoist	0.71	64.3	50.50	92.9	0.0	100.0	21.4	6.29	30630
Catholic	0.39	66.7	46.33	91.7	8.3	91.7	8.3	7.50	46010
Non-religious People	**53.41**	**64.6**	**50.62**	**96.3**	**5.5**	**93.3**	**15.0**	**6.40**	**26448**

Table 3 also reports important similarities and differences between characteristics of the religious and non-religious population. The two groups seem similar with regard to proportions of agricultural households and married population; however, compared with non-religious people, religious believers appear to be richer, younger, less educated, less likely to be male, and less likely to be Party members and ethnic minorities.

Mainstream religious development theories and the realities in rural China

The revival of religious communities in contemporary China not only sees new social and political forces emerging in the world's most populated country but also provides an ideal test ground for mainstream religious development theories. As mentioned previously, the ten-year 'Cultural Revolution' almost destroyed all religious communities in mainland China. As a result, the baseline

situation of religious communities in different parts of rural China was relatively similar in the late 1970s.[7] Just three decades later, however, the development of religious communities is highly heterogeneous in contemporary rural China. As reflected in our survey data, while the religious participation rates of 10 sample villages are equal to or higher than 90%, in 13 sample villages they are equal to or lower than 10%. Also, while there are more than ten religious sites in each of the six most religious sample villages, four of the sample villages have no temple or church at all. Given the same baseline situation, the uneven development of Chinese religious communities in the past three decades has actually allowed us to observe and identify the key factors impacting religious growth in rural China – and check whether they fit with mainstream theories – through cross-sectional comparisons, which, thanks to our large-scale cross-provincial survey data, can be easily carried out by ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models.

According to academic conventions, there are two competing strands of mainstream religious development theories. These are secularisation theories (including the secularisation theory and its two critical supplementary theories: the multi-dimensional secularisation theory and the pluralism theory) and religious market theory.

Secularisation theory is rooted in the research of all three principal architects of modern social science (Durkheim, Marx and Weber). Durkheim (1915, p.47) defines religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them'. Durkheim emphasises the important roles that religious communities play in forming social solidarity, but he eventually follows Comte (1975) to regard religion as an imagined assemblage that reflects facts in the real world. He therefore believes that, through the modernisation process, science will gradually takeover the social role of religion, and religion will become a purely individual issue.

Compared with Durkheim, Marx's critiques towards religion are much more straightforward. He clearly believes that 'man makes religion, religion does not make man' and 'religion is the

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[7] It should be noted, however, that the hidden pattern of religiosity may have differed among Chinese villages even during the 'Cultural Revolution'. Evidence suggests that while religious activities were absent in many Chinese villages during the Maoist Era, believers in some villages secretly persisted in worshipping God or local deities (for example, see 'The Chronicle of the Christianity Church in Wenzhoᵘ: Part 2' http://www.wzjdj.cn/news1192.htm' [accessed Feb 15, 2012]). The impact of this hidden religious pattern on current religious development, however, can be controlled by introducing a variable that reflects the religious situation prior to the forced secularisation in rural China. As shown in Table 5, I include 'number of religious sites in the village before 1949' as such a control variable in my models. This variable, however, is not significant in any of the three models, suggesting that the hidden pattern of religiosity in the imperial era has had very limited impact on the distribution of religious communities in today's China.

self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again' (Marx 1957, p.41). According to Marx (1975, p.395), 'religion in itself is without content, it owes its being not to heaven but to the earth, and with the abolition of distorted reality, of which it is the theory, it will collapse of itself'. Marx's radical critiques towards religion leave huge space for even more radical interpretation. For example, in Lenin's (1973, p.403) view, 'Marxism has always regarded all modern religions and churches, and each and every religious organisation, as instruments of bourgeois reaction that serve to defend exploitation and to befuddle the working class'.

Different from Durkheim and Marx, Weber systematically analyses the world's main religions. Through comparing the roles that different religious communities play in society, he argues that the 'Protestant Ethic' is the key reason that capitalism first emerges in Western Europe (Weber 2003) and acknowledges that religions play important roles in modernisation. But he also introduces the concept of 'disenchantment' to suggest that religious communities will lose their social influence throughout the simultaneous processes of modernisation, rationalisation and secularisation (Weber 1993). In brief, despite their divergences on religion's social roles and functions, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber all agree that modernisation marginalises religious communities in the socio-political arena. Such an assertion later becomes secularisation theory's core argument.

Following Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, secularisation has been long and widely regarded as a by-product of modernisation. As the leading figure of secularisation theory for several decades, Berger (1970; 1990) argues that modernisation will first make religion give way to science in the fields of art, literature and philosophy and then gradually separate social and cultural institutions from moral and religious orders. Similarly, Luckmann (1967) and Wilson (1985) suggest that traditional social orders that are associated with religions will be replaced by functional rationality in modern societies; and Cox (1965) and Wallace (1966) claim that religious communities' social and political roles are challenged by urbanisation, pluralism and cultural differentiation, which are normal considered modernisation's 'externalities'. In a nutshell, most secularisation theorists believe that religious communities will be marginalised from the political arena in modern societies and will lose their political influence.

Secularisation theory was able to dominate the field of religious studies for many decades because it successfully interpreted the decline of traditional Christian churches in Western Europe. This theory, however, fails to explain many interesting and important phenomena in the rest of the world. For

example, Weigel (2008) finds that the modern international regime actually provides the Roman Catholic Church with a larger platform to influence the important international debates on democracy, peace and human rights; and Bellah (1970) shows that religious communities have significant impacts on public affairs in the United States, which is often regarded as 'the most modernised society'. Based on these and many other critiques, a new generation of religious development theorists emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. These scholars also believe that modernisation heavily impacts religious communities, but they argue that such impacts may not be as simple as the previous secularisation theories suggested.

There are two strands of neo-secularisation theories. First, some scholars argue that secularisation should be understood as a multi-dimensional concept and process, and they are thus usually categorised as 'multi-dimensional secularisation theorists'. Dobbelaere (1981; 1985; 1987), for example, suggests that secularisation is driven by completely different and unrelated social, institutional and individual mechanisms; thus the fate of religious communities in modern society is complex and unpredictable. Similarly, Casanova (1994) argues that the secularisation process consists of a range of social and institutional dynamics - including the separation of secular institutions and moral orders, the reduction of religious believers, the declining participant rate in religious rituals, and the individualisation of religious practices - and that these dynamics usually vary in intensity and direction. Coincidently, Dekker and his colleagues (1997) demonstrate that individual religious practices may increase in modern society, even if the general social impact of religious communities declines.

Second, some scholars believe that the relationship between modernisation and secularisation varies among different societies, and they are often labelled 'pluralists'. For example, based on her comparative empirical studies, Davie (1994; 2000; 2002) finds that traditional secularisation theory can be successfully applied to Western Europe, but fails in the post-traditional United States, Latin America, Sub-Sahara Africa, South Korea and the Philippines. She thus describes Western Europe as a 'significant exceptional case'. Similarly, Hervieu-Léger (2001) suggests that, despite the general trend in favour of secularisation, the actual dynamics of religious communities vary among societies with different political and cultural institutions; such viewpoints are strongly supported by researchers such as Kamali (2007), Spohn (2003) and Willaime (2006). Given the strong impact of pluralist theory even Berger (1999), interestingly but perhaps not surprisingly, deviates from his previous position in the late 1990s and clearly acknowledges that religious communities outside Western Europe are actually growing alongside the modernisation process.

Religious market theory is often considered a relatively new approach (Giddens 2009); its roots, however, can be traced back to *The Wealth of Nations*, in which Adam Smith suggests that a bishop's performance is related to the salary and social consensus that he receives (Smith 1976). Although Smith never uses the concept 'religious market', as Anderson (1988) points out, he is one of the very first scholars to believe that the development of religious communities is driven by the 'invisible hand' – the relationship between supply and demand. Unfortunately, Smith's approach was neglected by students of religious development for centuries, and the recent wave of religious market theory did not emerge until the 1970s, when Azzi and Ehrenberg (1975) created the first production model of religious households. This suggests that (1) households with lower incomes are more likely to have higher church attendance and (2) within each household, members with lower personal income are more likely to have higher church attendance. Iannoccone (1998) later extended Azzi and Ehrenberg's model to suggest that religious conversions are more likely to occur in the early stage of an individual's life.

The most revolutionary religious market theorists emerged in the 1980s, when Stark and his colleagues published a series of important works arguing, in the words of Giddens (2009), that religious communities can be 'fruitfully understood as organisations in competition with one another for followers' (Finke & Stark 1988; Finke & Stark 1989; Finke & Stark 1993; Moore 1994; Stark & Bainbridge 1985; Stark & Bainbridge 1987). Mainly focusing on the supply-side of the religious market, Stark and his colleagues argue that the overall level of religious involvement in modern society is positively related to the intensity of competition among different religious communities and negatively related to the intensity of government regulations (even if such regulations are designed to increase or decrease the participant rate of certain religious communities). They believe such an argument to be true for two reasons: (1) a religious community usually has higher motivation to win followers when it faces the risk of being marginalised in competition against other religious communities; (2) competition among different religious communities introduces a larger number of 'religious products' into the market that enable the fulfilment of members' special demands. As a result, participation in religious activities may increase.

Table 4 generalises the key explanatory factors, core arguments and representative scholars of the two mainstream religious development theories. However, apart from a few exceptions, most secularisation and religious market theories are drawn from observations and analyses based on Western Europe and North America, despite the fundamental differences regarding the driving forces

of religious development. The external validity of these theories, therefore, needs to be double-checked against social facts from the rest of the world. Transitional China can be considered an ideal test ground thanks to its homogenous baseline situation and the current heterogeneous situation of religious communities.

Table 4   Summarising the mainstream religious development theories

Theory		Key Explanatory Factors	Main Argument	Important Scholars
Secularisation Theories	Traditional Secularisation Theory	Modernisation	Modernisation marginalised religious communities.	Durkheim Marx Weber Berger
	Multi-dimensional Secularisation Theory	Modernisation	The impacts of modernisation on different dimensions of secularisation are complex and relatively independent. The fate of religious communities in modern society are uncertain and unpredictable.	Dobbelaere Casanova
	Pluralism Theory	Modernisation, geographic location (and the associated social/cultural structure)	Modernisation leads to the decline of religious communities only in Western Europe. Religious communities may emerge or stay the same in other modern societies.	Davie Hervieu-Léger
Religious Market Theory		Religious competition, governmental religious regulation	Religious development is positively related to the intensity of religious competition but negatively related to the intensity of governmental religious regulations (many such regulations aim to protect or restrict certain religious communities).	Stark Finke Bainbridge

There is no operational hypothesis for either of the two mainstream religious development theories that is generally acknowledged. However, considering the fact that the modernisation process in post-Cultural-Revolution rural China is mainly driven by market-oriented economic reform, it is reasonable to employ per capita GDP (a simple, reliable and well-accepted indicator of the intensity of the market economy) to reflect the level of a village's modernity. Therefore, in order to test the secularisation theories, my first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Other things being equal, the higher the per capita GDP in a Chinese village, the lower the general religious participation rate may be.

Religious market theory suggests that religious development is related to both competition among religious communities and regulation from the government. Considering that no religion is preferentially protected by the Chinese state, intensive religious rivalry is likely to mean that different religious communities are similarly sized. At the same time, the more intensive the rivalry, the more religious the village community is likely to be. Defined as the ratio of the standard deviation to the mean, the Variation Coefficient is a commonly-used normalised measure of dispersion of a probability distribution; a higher Variation Coefficient means that the size of different religious communities will be less equal and therefore competition between different communities is likely to be less aggressive. Given the similar official religious regulations found throughout the Chinese regions (not including the five provincial-level ethnic minority autonomy regions), religious market theory can be simplified to the following operational hypothesis:

H2: *Other things being equal, the larger the Variation Coefficient regarding the size of different religious communities in a Chinese village, the lower the general religious participation rate may be.*

Three OLS regression models were created to test the aforementioned two hypotheses. For all models, the dependent variable is the general religious participation rate while the control variables include four geographic and demographic controls (per capita arable land, number of natural villages, labour force rate and ethnic minority proportion), three political controls (Party membership density, the proportion of village head and secretary's salary that is subsidised by upper-level governments, the village head and secretary's average tenure of office) and three historical controls (the number of deaths from the Suppressing Counterrevolutionaries Movement in the 1950s, the number of deaths from the mass movements during the 'Cultural Revolution', the number of religious sites in the village before 1949). The politics of county governments vary in different areas and may influence the religious participant rate; therefore, to control this impact, county-level dummy variables were also created as controls. Three models were implemented to test the hypotheses. The independent variable is per capita GDP for Model 1 and the number of religious communities for Model 2. To check the robustness of the findings, both aforementioned indicators are used as the independent variables for Model 3.

As the statistical results in Table 5 suggest, neither per capita GDP nor the Variation Coefficient is significant in any of the three regression models. In other words, other things been equal, the general religious participation rate in Chinese villages is not significantly related to its level of modernisation or the intensity of competition among different religious communities in the village. It

therefore seems that neither the secularisation theories nor the religious market theory are applicable to contemporary rural China, and a new framework is needed before we can comprehensively understand religious development in the world's largest transitional society.

Table 5   Testing the Mainstream Religious Development Theories in Contemporary Rural China

General religious participation rate	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Independent Variables			
per capita GDP	0.00000135		0.00000122
	(0.13)		(0.11)
Variation Coefficient of the size of different religious communities		-0.0254	-0.0254
		(-0.81)	(-0.80)
Geographic and Demographic Controls			
per capita arable land	-0.0000886[*]	-0.0000880*	-0.0000873[*]
	(-2.23)	(-2.26)	(-2.19)
Number of natural villages	0.00268	0.00226	0.00232
	(0.92)	(0.78)	(0.79)
Labour force rate	-0.00462	-0.0196	-0.0238
	(-0.04)	(-0.16)	(-0.18)
Ethnic minority proportion	0.0297	0.0107	0.00902
	(0.17)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Political Controls			
Party membership density	-0.926	-1.066	-1.056
	(-0.61)	(-0.70)	(-0.69)
Salary subsidy proportion	-0.129	-0.124	-0.122
	(-1.70)	(-1.66)	(-1.59)
Average tenure of office	0.000197	0.000189	0.000189
	(0.72)	(0.70)	(0.69)
Historical Controls			
Number of deaths from the Suppressing Counterrevolutionaries Movement in 1950s	0.0520	0.0518	0.0535
	(1.29)	(1.38)	(1.32)
Number of deaths from the mass movements during the 'Cultural Revolution'	0.0401	0.0431	0.0437
	(1.27)	(1.38)	(1.37)
Number of religious sites in the village before 1949	-0.00104	-0.000799	-0.000822
	(-0.09)	(-0.07)	(-0.07)
County-level Dummy Variables	-	-	-
Constant	0.257	0.458*	0.477*
	(1.33)	(2.14)	(2.14)
N	118	118	118
Adjusted R^2	0.8185	0.8200	0.8177

     t statistics in parentheses   * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Chinese local states as 'platforms of involuntary cooperation'

The main presupposition of *H2* is that the intensity of religious restriction is homogenous in rural China. This may seem reasonable on paper considering that, nominally, religious affairs in different Chinese villages are regulated by the same central policies and very similar local administrative rules. The reality, however, is very different. As Yang Fenggang (2006) points out, other than the few religious communities that are officially permitted or banned, most religious 'groups, individuals, and activities [in contemporary China] fall in a grey area of religious regulation, which can be perceived as both legal and illegal, or neither legal nor illegal'. In other words, the central government's ambiguous religious policies and regulations allow local states a certain level of flexibility in their attitudes and actions towards local religious communities. Therefore, the actual intensity of religious restriction could vary among different local states in rural China.

Existing research suggests that, compared with its local subordinates, the central government in China is more suspicious of religious development and tends to restrict religious communities more tightly. This is because such communities can be regarded as severe potential threats towards the existing political order, in terms of ideology and in terms of organisation (Yang 2006, p.96; HRIC 2005). The local states, at least some of them, are more likely to tolerate the development of religious groups and are able to do so by simply denying the existence of such communities[8]. The underlying rationales of local states are both political and economic. Politically speaking, local states are different from the central government in that they are more likely to prefer short-term interests to long-term interests (O'Brien & Li 2006; Cai 2010). Although local states may also see emerging religious communities as threats towards the regime in the long-term, they are less likely to proactively repress these communities; this is because such actions may lead to immediate resistance which could negatively affect local government performance during their annual assessments (Landry 2008). Economically speaking, local states may benefit from the development of religious communities in two ways: on the one hand, the protection of religious communities and sites may attract tourists and boost local financial income (Ashiwa & Wank 2007); on the other hand, religious ceremonies may create temporary local markets and improve the local economy, which is also a crucial assessment criterion of government performance (Gao 2006). However, a local state's tolerance towards religious communities is not unconditional. Actually, religious communities are

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[8] As both Pierre Landry (2008) and Cai Yongshun (2010) suggest, Chinese officials and cadres' personal awareness of a certain matter does not necessarily mean that the Government also 'knows' about such a matter. Thus, a religious community in local China can easily be officially 'denied' when officials and cadres exclude its information from official reports and proceedings. In fact, denying the existence of local religious communities is a widely-accepted way of implementing religious policy in local China thanks to its low political and financial cost. As Yang Fenggang (2006) suggested, this is the very reason that such a large 'grey market' of religions exists in China.

only welcomed when their potential contributions to a local state are large enough to offset the political risks that they may bring. Therefore, the scale of religious communities in a Chinese local state reflects the equilibrium between the local government's motivation for tolerance and their ability to withstand the central and higher-level governments' pressure to implement strict religious restrictions.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, China's central government has exited from many fields, but still controls the personnel system, propaganda, the People's Liberation Army, and many monopoly enterprises. Therefore, however autonomous local states may seem, they have no capacity to compete with the central government in the aforementioned crucial fields (McGregor 2010). Nevertheless, at least some local states enjoy more financial capability and autonomy in the Reform Era than ever before, thanks to the land market and foreign investments (Dickson 2000; K. Tsai 2002; Walder 1996) or due to the discretionary space that is created by a fragmented authoritarian regime (Mertha 2009; 2011).

The *de facto* discretionary power of local states gives them the ability to tolerate and even encourage the development of religious communities. Such tolerance and encouragement, however, certainly does not come without conditions. According to conventional wisdom, the will of ordinary people to develop religious communities is heard by politicians in democratic systems only because the fate of these politicians is decided by their voters; such will, however, is likely to be denied and repressed by authoritarian regimes which not only lack fair and effective elections but also strongly oppose any potential challenges towards the existing social and political order. However, my field observations and experience suggest that some local states in authoritarian contemporary China are still much friendlier towards religious communities than others. As shall now be discussed, a local state is more likely to compromise with religious communities when it happens to represent what I will refer to as a 'platform of involuntary cooperation', a structure in which local state officials intend to maximise their own power, but when their best option is to tolerate the development of local religious communities despite the hostile attitudes of their superiors towards religious diversity.

A Chinese local state represents a 'platform of involuntary cooperation' when the officials in charge of religious affairs are unlikely to be promoted but refuse to leave their position. Therefore, they have the motivation and possibility of keeping their office on the one hand but face the risks of being removed or replaced on the other. Due to China's authoritarian personnel system, officials who do not have close relationships with their superiors are less likely to be promoted and more likely to be

marginalised. I call these officials 'stagnant cadres'. In the simplest scenario, there is only one stagnant cadre who takes charge of religious affairs and this stagnant cadre has only one superior. The superior has the capability to promote, demote, or redeploy the stagnant cadre, but his or her own political career also depends on his or her performance regarding social stability, birth control, economic development and many other criteria set by the central government in annual performance assessments. The logic of the 'platform of involuntary cooperation' can thus be explained as follows:

Firstly, like many existing theories in political science, including game theory, I assume that all politicians (including the stagnant cadre and the superior) want to maximise their own power. In other words, no politician has the intention to leave his or her current position unless he or she can be promoted to a higher level.[9] Since the stagnant cadre's position is unstable due to the lack of a close relationship with the superior, he or she faces a severe risk of being replaced by a competitor. Therefore, to balance and limit the political threats from the superior, the stagnant cadre has to ally with a third-party social force.

The ordinary people in the cadre's precinct represent a possible ally for the stagnant cadre. However, due to the lack of effective election, these ordinary people are unable to influence the political fate of the superior unless they are organised into social forces that meet the following three conditions: (a) they represent a social force that can be manipulated by the stagnant cadre, at least to a certain extent; (b) they have the potential to launch collective action that may influence the superior's political career, such as collective petitioning, resistance, and demonstrations; and (c) they will not disappear or collapse even if the stagnant cadre is removed or replaced. According to my observations in rural China, many local religious communities qualify all three of these conditions: they normally have close interaction with local officials who are in charge of religious affairs; they have the capacity to launch collective resistance; and they remain active even if the local officials who support them are removed or replaced. For a stagnant cadre, these religious groups are undoubtedly ideal 'involuntary cooperative allies'.

Forming an alliance with the involuntary cooperative allies allows a stagnant cadre to keep his or her

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[9] This basic assumption does not mean that I believe that all politicians are selfish. However, as long as politicians want to achieve their ambitions – even if such ambitions aim to fulfill the interests of a society, social class, a certain group of people, or just themselves – they must first of all keep their current position safe. Politicians who do not insist on keeping their positions can hardly avoid being replaced by ambitious colleagues, even at the very beginning of their political career. Therefore, most people we observe in the political system should meet the assumptions made here.

position even when working under hostile superiors. Without the stagnant cadre, who works as a buffer between the State and the maverick religious groups, the superior's political career may become risky when he or she intervenes in religious affairs. Religious communities have the potential to launch collective resistance if they see their interests harmed, and such resistance may severely undermine the superior's political career. Therefore, even if the superior personally favours another candidate, in order to secure his or her own political career, he or she is likely to keep the stagnant cadre (who is able to ally with local religious communities) in their current position; and no matter how a stagnant cadre may personally look upon religion, in order to maximise his or her political survival, he or she is likely to tolerate, if not encourage, the development of religious communities. In other words, religious communities are likely to develop better in those places where religious affairs are charged by stagnant cadres.

A brief conclusion as the starting point for further research

Thanks to the reintroduction of religious freedom into China's constitution, laws, and administrative regulations following the radical atheist Cultural Revolution, China has seen a rapid revival in rural religious communities over the past three decades. The statistical results of our large-scale cross-provincial study show that the scale of this revival is much larger than what official figures and many existing academic estimations have claimed, although, the extent of this revival is highly heterogeneous across rural China. My statistical results suggest that both of the mainstream religious development theories fail to explain why religious communities develop much better in some Chinese villages than others, despite the same official regulations and restrictions.

Clearly, the development of religious communities in rural China is neither a solo sung by modernisation nor a duet played by a monolithic state and religious communities. Instead, I suggest that local states and stagnated cadres play important roles in shaping heterogeneous religious development: on the one hand, local cadres (at least some of them) have the capacity to tolerate the existence and development of religious communities because a fragmented regime and ambiguous religious regulations allow them to enjoy considerable *de facto* discretionary powers in religious affairs; on the other hand, local cadres (especially the stagnant cadres) have the motivation to tolerate the existence and development of religious communities because they may use such communities as 'involuntary cooperative allies' to balance and limit threats from their superiors. In other words, I think the heterogeneous religious development in rural China is actually the result of a grand ensemble which is concerted by religious communities, local states, and higher-level governments.

In this paper, I have presented the underlying logic of involuntary cooperation between stagnant cadres and local religious communities; such logic, however, remains a hypothesis until it is proved by empirical data from contemporary rural China. To test the validity of such hypothesis, further empirical studies in rural China are necessary.

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