Chinese Families and Their Encounter with the Secular: An Ethnographic Study of Chinese Parents and Their Children in Edinburgh

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Abstract

The Chinese, both in China and in an international migration setting, are commonly regarded as the world's most secular population. However, the relationship between Chinese people and Chinese Popular Religion is nuanced and survey data, more often than not, do not account for the plethora of religious activities Chinese people engage in despite simultaneously self-identifying as secular. This paper examines the supposed secularity of Chinese immigrant families living in Edinburgh. It asserts that although self-identifying as secular, these families engage in undeniable religious activity and possess religious beliefs. Crucially, there is a marked difference between the beliefs pertaining to secularity of the parents and their children, with the former being adamant in their secularity and the latter being more willing to acknowledge the complicated relationship between religion and the secular.

Keywords

1 Introduction

Despite reportedly studying “the moral grammar”1 of Chinese immigrant families, Mengwei and Nehring somewhat ironically neglect to address religion. Indeed, in general one finds that the study of Chinese immigrant religiosity is a severely understudied field, with the majority of the existing scholarship focussing on Christianity.2 It is highly probable that the reason for the complete lack of discussion about religion in Mengwei and Nehring’s paper is due to the existing prevalent assumption that the Chinese, both home and abroad, are extremely secular. MacInnis, for example, has identified that “total secularization of [Chinese] society and culture”3 has taken place. However, Laliberté rightfully notes that China “is not a secular state in the sense that most people who write about the contemporary secular state understand that concept.”4 This paper intends to explore the concept of secularity within the context of Chinese families living in Edinburgh: home to approximately 8,000 Chinese people and accounting for 1.7% of the total population of the city.5 More specifically, this paper intends to identify whether Chinese parents and their children self-identify as secular, whether or not they engage in popular religious belief and practice, and whether or not there is a generational difference. By delving into the realm of popular religion, this paper also seeks to explore how Chinese families who engage in popular religious beliefs and practices reconcile this with their self-identified secular identities.

By examining secularity within the context of Chinese immigrant families, I seek to shed a modicum of insight into the ongoing question “How can differences with regard to the form of secularity be understood and explained in relation to historical, socio-economic, political and cultural conditions?”6 I also seek to add a new perspective to the ever growing corpus of scholarship on the nature of Chinese secularism: this paper seeks to compliment these studies (that will be discussed in the following section) with ethnographic data on the family level.

Scotland is commonly identified as becoming increasingly secular.7 Scotland’s 2011 Census found that 36.7 percent of the population claimed to

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3 MacInnis, The Secular Vision of a New Humanity in People’s China.
4 Laliberté, China in a Secular Age, p. 2.
5 Edinburgh Population 2022, World Population Review.
7 See, for example, BBC, Most people in Scotland ‘not religious.’
have no religion, an increase from the 27.5 percent in 2001.\textsuperscript{8} The most prominent religion is the Church of Scotland with adherents making up 32.4 percent of the population in 2011 (a decrease from 42.4 percent in 2001).\textsuperscript{9} It is worth noting that analysis of the 2001 Scottish Census data reportedly reveals that “Chinese people are the most likely to report no current religion: 63\% responded that they had no current religion.”\textsuperscript{10}

2 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{The Secular}

In order to fully explore how Chinese families in Edinburgh encounter the secular, this paper shall initially begin by briefly exploring the concept of the secular. There have been a plethora of scholarly works pertaining to the secular, secularity, secularism, and secularisation that have, in various ways, added to the popularised secularisation thesis. Dobbelaeere has proposed multiple dimensions of secularisation, – macro-secularisation (society), meso-secularisation (organisational level), and micro-secularisation (private)\textsuperscript{11} – some scholars have argued for the “deprivatization”\textsuperscript{12} of religion as part of the secularisation debate, and others have focussed more on how religion is becoming increasingly “deinstitutionalized”\textsuperscript{13} as a result of, for example, modernity. Recently, Casanova has aimed in a series of talks entitled “Global Religious and Secular Dynamics” to encapsulate the field by drawing attention to two historically competing theories: “the secularization thesis, dominant for much of the past half-century, which views the rise of European-style secularism as an inevitable byproduct of modernization; and on the other hand, contemporary theories which instead view modernization as a pluralizing force and which treat European secularism as an exception to a general trend of religious differentiation.”\textsuperscript{14}

This paper will draw upon the findings of the Leipzig project. Coining the term “multiple secularities” Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt distinguish between four forms of secularities:

1) \hspace{1cm} Secularity for the sake of individual rights and liberties

2) \hspace{1cm} Secularity for the sake of balancing/pacifying religious diversity

\textsuperscript{8} Scotland’s Census, Religion.
\textsuperscript{9} Scotland’s Census, Religion.
\textsuperscript{10} Office of the Chief Statistician, Analysis of Religion in the 2001 Census, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{11} Dobbelaeere, Secularization.
\textsuperscript{12} See, for example, Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{13} See, for example, Luckmann, The Invisible Religion.
\textsuperscript{14} Berkley Forum, World-renowned José Casanova Offers “Last Word” on Secularization.
3) Secularity for the sake of societal or national integration and development
4) Secularity for the sake of the independent development of functional domains of society.\(^{15}\)

More recently, CASHSS’ ongoing project “Multiple Secularities” has developed the original theory of multiple secularities. Herein one finds the purposeful use of the term “secularity” as an analytical concept that avoids the “ideological connotations” of the term “secularism” and is ultimately “conceived as an ideal-type [that] describes how conceptual distinctions and institutional differentiations are made between religious and non-religious spheres and practices.”\(^{16}\)

However, despite recent studies such as CASHSS’ “multiple secularities”, it is often the case that studies, as with the classical secularisation thesis that is based primarily on European Christianity, are intrinsically tied to the (Christian) West. To this end, Ji notes how previous theories often “remain essentially concerned with Western models of religious change”\(^{17}\) and calls for the notion of secularisation to be “dissociated from a particular set of assumptions and expectations grounded in specific Western religious and social structures ... [and to instead] work with a definition of religion that is implicitly based on the features of Christianity and its social integration.”\(^{18}\)

Thus one finds that the nature of the term secular within the Chinese context has received comparatively, given the extensive body of secularisation scholarship, little attention. Part of the reason for this is that the term does not have a perfect translation into Mandarin. *Shìsú* 世俗 is the most common translation of the term, but this paper intends to demonstrate that the meaning, within a Chinese context, does not mean the same as the English term “secular.” Wang writes that “the secular departed from a religious norm, whereas in China, what was worldly was the norm ... Religious affairs were never so influential in China that an indigenous concept was needed to determine how to deny or minimize the power of religion.”\(^{19}\)

The seminal meta-study on the subject of the secular in China can be found in Goossaert and Palmer’s *The Religious Question in Modern China*. Herein, they assert that today, the majority of the Chinese population simultaneously engage in multiple religious beliefs and rituals while also keeping in line with modern secularity. This volume traces the history of religion and secularity

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16 Kleine/Wohlrab-Sahr, *Preliminary Findings of the CASHSS “Multiple Secularities”*, p. 3.
demonstrating that the Republican period witnessed the “adoption of the Christian-secular normative model”\(^\text{20}\) that found its roots in the importation of the categories of “religion” and “superstition” from the West; a continuation of this trend during the early Mao era; a halt of religious activity during the Cultural Revolution; and the recent adoption of a more managerial role of the government as the state relaxed its measures against religion. Chinese religious institutions that were “decimated” during the Cultural Revolution, must adhere to the state’s secular ideology which thus leads to the proliferation of popular religion “not only beyond the regulatory reach of the state, but beyond the normative reach of official religious institutions.”\(^\text{21}\) In light of their assertion that “[a]s China becomes a full player in an increasingly integrated global society, and even begins to have an influence on the global religious arena, its religious question will remain an open one”,\(^\text{22}\) this paper seeks to examine this religious question within the specific context of immigration.

One could argue that the concept of secularisation is tightly woven into the history of China. Roetz, as part of the CASHSS project, for example, argues that “elements of a secular civilization were a reality in China long before latter-day Western philosophers strove for it.”\(^\text{23}\) Much of the scholarship pertaining to secularisation in China, both historically and presently, pertain to three core themes: blurring of the religious-secular divide, paradox, and the noted difference between the Chinese and Western context. The former is essentially the assertion that the Chinese historically and presently engage in secular religiosity. The interconnectivity of the religious and the mundane is often portrayed as a pragmatic fine line: Lǐ, highlighting the sectarian and utilitarian nature of the Chinese, argues that “under the guidance of the secular spirit, Chinese people will unconsciously transform the gods and make supernatural powers blend with human beings under the influence of human affection and human nature, so that the boundaries between the sacred and the secular are blurred.”\(^\text{24}\) Lǐ concludes that “Chinese people are accustomed to using secular logic to treat gods, they treat supernatural gods the same way they treat mundane things.”\(^\text{25}\) One thus finds something of an interconnectivity between religion and the secular. Indeed, Van der Veer coins the concept of “religion-magic-secularity-spirituality” to demonstrate this intricate interconnectivity

\(^{20}\) Goossaert/Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, p. 89.

\(^{21}\) Goossaert/Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, p. 400.

\(^{22}\) Goossaert/Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, p. 13.


\(^{24}\) Lǐ, *Bèi shìsú lǐxìng lìyòng de shénlíngmen*, p. 255.

\(^{25}\) Lǐ, *Bèi shìsú lǐxìng lìyòng de shénlíngmen*, p. 255.
of the four concepts within the Chinese context: the terms thus “emerge historically together, imply one another, and function as nodes within a shifting field of power.”

The second core theme, paradox, pertains to the assertion that the very concept of secularity within the Chinese context is inherently paradoxical. One of the most prominent examples of this can be found in the work of Ji who seeks to draw attention to the paradox of modern Chinese secularisation: namely “that secularization in China, understood as a state policy to restrain religion, may also produce what is, in essence, contrary to its aim: that is to say, some constructive consequences for religion.” Similarly, Palmer and Winiger identify a paradox in that “despite the surprising persistence, indeed increase, of religious activity throughout its process of modernization, China in many ways remains one of the most thoroughly secularized societies on Earth.” They assert that the intricate Chinese configurations of the sacred, the profane, the enchanted, and the secular “defy the simple binary distinctions used in the secularization debate.”

The final core theme, the noted difference between the Chinese and Western context, focuses on how the very study and concept of secularisation in the context of China differs from the Western context. When one employs the term “secular” within the Western context, one could argue that the implied or assumed opposite of this term is “religion.” However, Laliberté writes that attempting to find the opposite of the various terms for the secular in Mandarin does not necessarily call for a concept of religion as a distinct social sphere [...] even if Chinese have developed elaborate rituals, read scriptures, believe in life after death, propitiate gods, ghosts, and ancestors for favors, fear the consequences of immoral behavior or lack of filial piety to one’s parents, and go to place of worships.

Indeed, within the context of China, some have noted secularity and simultaneous belief in what would in a Western context be deemed religion: Chéng, simultaneously claiming that the Chinese are deeply secular while also believing in a plethora of gods, Buddhas, and ancestor spirits, argues that “as for the

27  Ji, Secularization as Religious Restructuring, p. 233.
28  Palmer/Winiger, Secularization, Sacralization, and Subject Formation in Modern China, p. 100 et seq.
29  Palmer/Winiger, Secularization, Sacralization, and Subject Formation in Modern China, p. 101.
30  Laliberté, China in a Secular Age, p. 14.
attitude towards gods, the attitude of the Chinese secular people is first of all the indifference of ‘respecting them at a distance.’”\textsuperscript{31} Some have even argued that the very debate pertaining to secularity in China is at its very core a response to Western influence: Szonyi, for one, perceives the history of Chinese religion within the context of secularisation as neither “a unique phenomenon nor as a case study of the universal processes of modernity, but rather as one example of how states and religions around the world have responded to the imposition of the hegemonic master narrative of western modernity.”\textsuperscript{32}

This paper intends to add an intimate ethnographic lens to these aforementioned studies. Instead of broadly examining Chinese secularity, this paper will examine the concept from the level of the Chinese immigrant household.

3 Chinese Irreligiosity

As this paper is a study of Chinese secularity within the context of immigration, it is necessary to acknowledge former studies pertaining to Chinese irreligiosity. The Chinese population both in China and within the context of immigrants to Europe and the United States are often predominantly regarded as irreligious. This is to the extent that Palmer and Winiger write that “the classical secularization theory [is] often assumed by Chinese scholars.”\textsuperscript{33} There are a plethora of studies that claim to confirm this irreligiosity: four surveys conducted respectively in 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2011 as part of the Chinese General Social Survey found that, an average of 87 percent of Chinese mainland adults considered themselves to be irreligious.\textsuperscript{34} \textit{The Washington Post} writes that “China tops the list of the world's least religious nations by far […] as] decades of Communist rule have installed a widespread atheistic materialism.”\textsuperscript{35} Regarding the international context specifically, the Pew Research Center found that China is “the primary country of origin for migrants who are religiously unaffiliated.”\textsuperscript{36}

Some scholars have tried to explain this identified irreligiosity. Much of this scholarship directly contrasts China to a perceived Western world. Liú, for

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{31} Chéng, \textit{Shì bǐjiào jīdújiào de dú yī shén chóngbài hé zhōngguó shìshú míngzhòng de duō shén chóngbài}, p. 12.
\bibitem{33} Palmer/Winiger, \textit{Secularization, Sacralization, and Subject Formation in Modern China}, p. 84.
\bibitem{34} Luo/Chen, \textit{The Salience of Religion Under an Atheist State}, p. 856.
\bibitem{35} Noack, \textit{These are the world's least religious countries}.
\bibitem{36} Pew Research Center, \textit{Faith on the Move}.
\end{thebibliography}
example, argues that in marked contrast to moral construction in the West, “in the thousands of years of Chinese society, moral construction and governance did not rely on religion, but had a very reasonable secular moral system, such as filial piety with family as the core.” Similarly, Liáng simply states that today “China has replaced religion with morality.” Gui makes the case that aside from traditional family ethics and social norms, the significance of religion in China has been severely weakened and belief in the supernatural has all but disappeared.

Finally, Yang argues that Chinese (particularly those from an educated background) actively deny the existence of Chinese religion for three reasons:
1) A history of Western missionary contempt for Chinese superstition and idol worship
2) A sense of superiority of science and modern rationality
3) Social evolutionist doctrines that place Western secular civilisation as the teleological end point.

This paper intends to move against this body of scholarship, following instead in line with the studies discussed in the following section that hold that the religious context of China is more nuanced than sweeping studies that claim irreligiosity might lead one to believe.

4 Chinese Popular Religion

Yang has rightly noted that many Chinese people adhere to an assortment of personalised eclectic practices without identifying themselves with any particular religion. These practices can collectively be referred to as “Chinese Popular Religion,” a classification that is simultaneously separate from while also intricately echoing the Three Teachings (sānjiào): namely, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. One could argue that the nature of

37 Liú, Zhōngguó xūyào de shì shìsú dàodé, bùshì zōngjiào, p. 391.
38 Liáng, Zhōngguó wénhuà yàoyì, p. 112.
40 Yang, Introduction, p. 2.
41 Yang, Religious Diversity among the Chinese in America, p. 71.
42 A term that is inherently nuanced. Poon notes that it is “coined by scholars in recent decades to categorize diverse religious cultures with no systematized beliefs and no sense of a religious entity, or any agreed upon collective name among practitioners and believers.” Moreover, Goossaert writes that it is “best analyzed as a pluralistic religious system, characterized by many ritual and theological continuities as well as many distinctions, and sometimes tensions, between groups and practices based on locality, social class, economic status, ethnicity, or other particularistic identities.”
Chinese Popular Religion has led to a number of scholarly misunderstandings. Woo, for example, criticising the 2001 Statistics Canada census that found that the Chinese population was predominantly irreligious, rightly notes that the inaccuracy of the data “comes from an understanding and definition of religion that begins with and rests on western notions of doctrinal primacy and communal and institutional affiliations […] [and] much of Chinese religiosity is non-textual, individual, familial, communal, broadly non-institutional, synthetic and syncretic.”43 This section will briefly elucidate some of the main scholarly themes pertaining to Chinese Popular Religion in order to better analyse the religious beliefs and practices (or lack thereof) of Chinese families within the context of immigration. It should be acknowledged from the outset, however, that although Chinese Popular Religion is rarely addressed within the context of immigration, Yang has argued that Chinese immigrant children often “find it hard to maintain the unstructured beliefs and practices of their parents.”44

One of the most prolific scholars on Chinese Popular Religion is Chau. He has argued that at the heart of popular belief in China is “magical efficacy […] [which is] conceived of as a particular deity's miraculous response […] to the worshiper’s request for divine assistance.”45 He crucially asserts that these miraculous responses “are socially constructed: it is people and their actions that enable the establishment of human-deity relations and interactions.”46 Within this socially constructed framework, humans “do” popular religion in a plethora of ways from conventional praying and giving offerings to, for example, planting trees and watching local operas. Chau has more recently argued that Chinese Popular Religion is one of the most crucial arenas in which guānxì47 is played out “not just between people in socio-political life […] but also between people and spirits, between people and sites of worship and spiritual empowerment, among religious co-practitioners […] [and] between deities.”48 This noticeably broad thematic flexibility is central to scholarly discourse pertaining to Chinese Popular Religion. Goossaert and Palmer regard “religious practices, networks, and institutions as part of a broader, open “social ecology” in which […] religious elements are in perpetual relation with other elements, and in which the components and boundaries of the religious field are

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43  Woo, Chinese Popular Religion in Diaspora, p. 152.
44  Yang, Religious Diversity Among the Chinese in America, p. 80.
45  Chau, Miraculous Response, p. 2.
46  Chau, Miraculous Response, p. 2.
47  This term has a somewhat large semantic variety but is usually taken to mean connections; relations; relationships.
48  Chau, Religion in China, p. 4.
constantly contested.” They define Chinese Popular Religion as “a coherent system (but a system with several hierarchies) [...] [in which] all communities and religious specialists ... share common cosmological notions, even though these notions are interpreted in many different ways.”

It is also worth noting that much of the scholarship pertaining to Chinese Popular Religion relates to the relationship between the government and religion. Wang, for example, draws attention to how popular religion is often overtly distinguished from institutionalised religion, writing that the government “insists on the difference between ‘religion’ and ‘folk belief’ and has not removed the discourse of ‘superstition’ from official proclamations, indicating the lingering influence of twentieth-century secular nationalism.” Similarly, Nedostup, focussing particularly on the Nanjing Decade (1927–37), examines “the modern recategorization of religious practices and people according to the assumptions of secular nationalism.” Seeking to offer an alternative to the narrative of “antisuperstition repression and resistance” herein the assertion, as with Wang, is that despite the secularising initiative of the government, the masses were able to essentially rally under community religious practice which remained embedded in daily life. Laliberté also follows this narrative, noting how although state religion fell apart in the Republican period, “the imagery, the concepts, and many of the beliefs inherent in the ancient forms of religiosity remain a central feature of popular and communal religions to this day.”

In light of prior scholarship as well as my own ethnographic findings, I believe that Chinese Popular Religion can be broadly defined by three interconnected categories:

1) **Gods (tiānshén 天神), Ancestors (zǔxiān 祖先), and Ghosts (guǐ 鬼).** Gods and ancestors are subject of commemoration. There are a plethora of gods, some widely known while others known only in specific locations. Ancestors, although not themselves deities, are equally worthy of religious obligation. When a person dies, they require a surviving relative (especially a son) to take care from them in death. In return, they can bestow various boons to the living. One can become a ghost in death for

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50 Goossaert/Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, p. 20.
51 Wang, “Folk Belief”, p. 164.
52 Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes*, p. 3.
53 Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes*, p. 11.
54 Laliberté, *China in a Secular Age*, p. 4.
many reasons such as dying without offspring. Ghosts have the power to cause varying problems for the living.

2) Bài 拜 and Lǐ 理. Both terms have a large semantic variety. Bài can mean “to pray,” “to pay respect,” “to worship,” “to visit,” and “to salute.” Lǐ can mean, among others, “inner essence,” “intrinsic order,” “reason,” “logic,” “truth,” “to pay attention to,” and “put in order.” In the context of Chinese Popular Religion, both terms constitute the essential embodiment of religious belief through a bodily action, or, in Peng’s words, “doing religion that might be filtered out by etic concepts and categories.”

In a practical sense, it can constitute giving various forms of offerings, ritual cleaning, evocation, and showing reverence.

3) Bào 報 and yīng 应. These terms also have a large degree of semantic variety. Bào can mean: “to report,” “to announce,” “to inform,” “to respond,” “to repay,” “to retaliate,” and “to retribute.” Yīng can mean “to answer,” “to respond,” “to comply with,” and “to deal or cope with.” Within the context of Chinese Popular religion, the terms encapsulate the concept of reciprocity, or, more specifically, the necessary reciprocal obligation within this universe. One can find a clear example of this in the concept of filiality (xiào 孝): “children are expected to repay their eternal debt to their parents by caring for them in old age and then later, via bài, in death.”

This study is therefore grounded in the aforementioned studies pertaining to popular religion. It also utilises the working definition of religion as coined by Yang. I have opted to use this definition on the simple grounds that from an ethnographic standpoint that accounts for both Chinese religion in the PRC as well as Chinese immigrant religiosity, Yang continues to shape the field. He argues that religion includes four elements:

1) A belief in the supernatural.
2) A set of beliefs regarding life and the world.
3) A set of ritual practices.
4) A distinct social organisation or moral community.

56 Chadwin, Speaking to My Ancestors, p. 180.
58 It should be acknowledged that this is not a comprehensive definition of religion but is instead a multidimensional categorisation that suits the context of this paper (namely an ethnographic study of Chinese Popular Religion).
5 Methodology

This study utilises ethnography in order to best look “within the Chinese household instead of arbitrarily employing cross-culture comparisons.” The fieldwork itself took place over a period of two months: from May 03, 2022 to June 30, 2022. The data collection consisted of both semi-structured interviews (which were carried out in the interviewees’ language of choice: usually Mandarin in the case of the parents and English in the case of the children) and participant observation carried out in the family homes. Interviews typically lasted between one and two hours. Herein, I utilised Harvey’s concept of “guesthood” wherein meetings with interviewees are “less like formal interviews with one-way exchange of information and more like mutually constituted relationships where knowledge is exchanged and discussed.”

Unlike, Qingling Yang who found that religion was a difficult topic to discuss with Chinese immigrants – “They were reluctant to engage into further discussion on religion because they intended to protect themselves from any possible prosecution” – I did not find this to be the case at all: every interviewee was more than happy to discuss religion and their own beliefs.

The sample itself consisted of twenty ethnic Hán households in Edinburgh. By “Chinese”, this study specifically refers to those from the PRC.

The overall sample constituted 20 mothers, 19 fathers, and 22 children. Utilising the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, I determine “children” to mean individuals under the age of eighteen. All of the children interviewed were over the age of 10, with the youngest being 11 and the oldest being 17. Each family were first generation migrants with the most

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60 Wang/Chang, Parenting and Child Socialization in Contemporary China, p. 60.
61 See, for example, Harvey, Food Sex and Strangers, p. 94.
62 See, for example, Arthur, Contemporary Religions in China, p. 16.
63 Qingling Yang, Parenting Between Cultures, p. 106.
64 China’s majority ethnic group.
65 Given that many of my interviewees were children I adopted BERA’s guidelines to ensure that my project and subsequent data were ‘ethically acceptable.’ In my capacity as researcher, I did all in my power to ensure that the participants I interviewed were protected from any manner of harm at every stage of planning and execution of the project. I therefore thoroughly briefed each participant (including the guardians) about my project, provided an ongoing option to opt out at any moment, and ensured that I acquired informed consent. Names of all participants (including the parents) are anonymised and no residential addresses are disclosed. I have assigned pseudonyms that reflect both gender and ethnic background to each participant. I do reveal the age of each child participant.
established family having migrated 15 years ago and the most recent migrants having migrated 6 years ago. Eight families came from rural areas (one from Sichuán, Hénán, Guǎngdōng, and two from Héběi, Shándōng, and Zhèjīāng respectively) while the remaining twelve all came from large urban cities: two from Běijīng, four from Shànghǎi, one from Guǎngzhōu, one from Shēnzhèn, two from Chéngdū, one from Harbin (Hā’ěrbīn), and one from Hángzhōu.

6 Discussion of Fieldwork Findings

This paper will now turn to discussing the fieldwork findings. I have opted to divide these findings between the parents and the children.

6.1 Parents

Absolutely every parent self-identified as irreligious. Indeed, in line with prior research, many even lauded the irreligiosity of the Chinese people. Mrs Hóu, for example, told me “No Chinese people believe in religion anymore. We no longer need it.” Unsurprisingly, this self-identification of irreligiosity was reflected in the parents’ attitudes towards the term “secular.” Although only two parents used the term without my being the one to bring it up, when asked directly, absolutely every parent regarded their own beliefs and practices as wholly secular. Mr Hǎo stated:

The entire nation of China is secular. Everything myself and my family believe in is secular.

All but four parents made an active distinction between their own secular beliefs and what they perceived as the predominantly religious Scottish population. Mrs Hán encapsulated this sentiment thus:

We always knew it would be difficult for our family moving from China to Scotland because while everyone in Scotland is religious, nobody in China believes in religion. I was worried that my children would not fit in at school because they do not know anything about Christianity.

Similarly, Mr Kāng simply stated that “China is secular, Scotland is religious.”

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67 所有中国人都不相信任何宗教。宗教是不需要的。
68 整个中国民族都是世俗的。我和我家人所相信的都是世俗的。
69 中国是世俗的，苏格兰是宗教的。

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However, although this fits neatly within the scholarship that claims that the Chinese are predominantly irreligious, the topic of Chinese Popular Religion complicated matters. Despite every single parent reporting irreligiosity, it was clear that every single parent was engaged in the practice of Chinese Popular Religion. Each household had some form of a shrine, ranging from small tables in the corner of a room, to entire rooms. Moreover, each parent openly spoke to me about their various beliefs and practices. Although none would refer to these beliefs and practices as religion, the dedication was pronounced. Every parent engaged in ancestor commemoration and all reported (to varying degrees of frequency) praying to a wide variety of gods. Moreover, this religious belief punctuated the daily lives of each parent to an exceptionally high degree. An illustrative example of this was when Mr Zhāng was complaining to Mrs Zhāng about his bad back. He claimed that he did not know why it was hurting him so much. Later on, Mrs Zhāng called Mr Zhāng into their ancestor room and told Mr Zhāng that his back was hurting because the last offering he had given to his late grandparents was chocolate. Mrs Zhāng acted as if the reason was blatantly obvious:

Of course you have a bad back, you stupid old fool! Your Grandfather hated chocolate!70

She then explained to me that Mr Zhāng's grandfather had given Mr Zhāng a bad back as an expression of dissatisfaction with the offering. Mr Zhāng did not question this reason for a second and instead acted as if he had simply made a foolish mistake. That night, he gave a new offering of tea. However, when I asked whether the belief in ancestors was religious or secular, they thought my question to be extremely odd. Mrs Zhāng replied:

Secular, of course! We have a duty to our ancestors but that has nothing to do with religion. We are not Christians!71

Thus, one finds a paradox that reflects the findings of Palmer and Winiger.72 Despite adamantly reporting secularity, the lives of the parents were very much governed by their popular religious beliefs. It is therefore tempting to claim

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70 你的背当然不好，你这个老笨蛋！你的爷爷是讨厌巧克力的！
71 当然是世俗！我们对祖先有责任，但是这个跟宗教没关系。我们不是基督教的！
72  Palmer/Winiger, *Secularization, Sacralization, and Subject Formation in Modern China*, p. 103.
that the reason for this apparent contradiction is simply one of semantics: that the terms “religion” or “secular” simply have different meanings in Chinese. The term religion (zōngjiào 宗教) is a somewhat recent term in Mandarin and is only really used within the context of specific religious traditions (bùtóng jiàotiáo 不同教条). Therefore, as long as a Chinese person does not adhere to one specific religious tradition, it makes sense that they would not identify as religious. To illustrate this, Mrs Wú after having made an offering to Guānyīn, explained:

My sister is a Buddhist but I am not. I do not believe in religion at all.74

Even though Mrs Wú genuinely believed that Guānyīn is a physically present god that one can pray to, this belief was not in any way regarded as religious.

One could therefore argue that this semantic difference between English and Chinese is the reason for this apparent contradiction. The self-proclaimed secular identity of all parents also extended to fully rejecting any sense of “spirituality” (jīngshén 精神) and “superstition” (míxìn 迷信): all parents adamantly claimed that on top of being irreligious, they also were in no way spiritual or superstitious.

However, one could also argue that the full picture is more nuanced. Not only did some parents genuinely believe that their beliefs and practices were secular, they also believed that it was their logical attitude towards their beliefs, in contrast to Christians, that made them secular. In a very revealing interview, Mr Hóu explained:

If you do not understand Chinese culture, then commemorating ancestors or praying to Confucius must look like religion. But if you knew Chinese culture then you would be able to see that this is not religion at all. When Chinese people pray, they do it with both their mind and their heart. For example, my cousin really really wanted a son. He tried praying and offering to our local village god but his wife just never got pregnant. He therefore saw that his prayers were not working. So instead, he started praying and offering to Guānyīn. Suddenly his wife became pregnant and they soon had a son. This is the difference between Chinese people and British people. Scottish people only pray with their heart. It is so obvious to us that the Christian God does not answer most prayers. A Chinese

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73 The bodhisattva of compassion in the Buddhist tradition.
74 我的姐姐相信佛教，但我不信。我一点都不相信宗教。
person would be able to see that praying is not working and would try another god.

When asked to elaborate on what religion actually is, Mr Hóu told me:

Religion is when you only pray with your heart. No matter how many times your prayers fail, you keep praying with your heart because you have faith.75

His wife, Mrs Hóu interjected here:

That’s right. Religion is when you believe something is right without question. The secular beliefs of the Chinese mean that we only believe what we know is a fact.76

This would suggest that reducing this subject to semantics is not giving the subject enough credit. Herein, one finds evidence that within the Chinese context, religion is based on unwavering faith, whereas Chinese Popular Religion, due to its utilitarian nature, is regarded as secular. A similar case was found with the Féng family. Mrs Féng, whose daughter was currently studying for GCSE exams, told me:

I have prayed to Cáishén77 for what feels like my whole life. My family has had good luck and I know that I can thank Cáishén for this. But last year, my daughter started to study for her GCSE’s. I know that she is smart but I was shocked when I saw what her predicted grades were. They were terrible! I therefore stopped praying to Cáishén and started praying to Confucius. Now her target grades are much better!

When asked to elaborate on her reason for turning to Confucius, she said:

It just makes sense. Cáishén is very good at bringing luck and wealth, but what does he know about studying? I had never before prayed to

75 用你的心来祈祷，这就是宗教。不管你的祷告失败了多少次，你仍然用你的心祷告因为你有信心。
76 是的。宗教就是当你毫无疑问地相信某事是正确的。中国人民的世俗信仰意味着我们仅仅相信我们知道是事实的事。
77 财神: a god of wealth who is often depicted atop a black tiger and holding a golden staff.
Confucius but I knew that praying to him just made more sense. Just look at the results!

Thus, one finds that the parents did not perceive a contradiction. Mr Liào explained the relationship between his beliefs and religion thus:

Commemorating my ancestors is not religion. I could even go to the church down the road, pray, and it would still not be religion. The Christian God is probably very powerful. He must be when you look at how many people pray to him. But he is ultimately just one god. My beliefs are secular because I use reason and then choose if and who to pray to.

When asked to explain why commemorating his ancestors was not religion, he responded:

My ancestors are not all-powerful beings that I put my faith in. I mean, I remember my Grandfather and he was anything but a god. He was drunk half the time and very forgetful! A very careless man! But it is my duty to commemorate him and everyone must always perform their duties!!

Similarly, Mr Rèn also added something of a worldly dimension to the debate:

Of course commemorating my ancestors is not religious. This is my Grandmother and Grandfather we are talking about, not some god with a white beard in the sky.

A semantic problem would imply that there is something of a misunderstanding at play. Although it is certainly the case that religion and secular do not adequately translate into the Chinese context, I would argue that the data presented here suggests that Chinese parents are actually more reflective of the relationship between their own beliefs about religion and secularity than those who misunderstand terms would suggest.

In summary, these parents all possessed strong Chinese Popular Religious beliefs but perceived themselves to be secular families living in a predominantly religious culture (namely Scotland).

78 当然敬祖不是宗教的。他们是我爷爷奶奶，不是住在天上长着白胡子的神。
6.2 Children

The children of this study painted a somewhat different picture to that of their parents. 14 reported irreligiosity whereas 8 were unsure, responding with phrases such as “I don’t know” to the question of whether or not they are religious. Unlike their parents, the children expressed a far greater sense of doubt pertaining to whether or not they are religious. Hán Bóyǎn (male; 15) looked confused when I inquired about his religious identity:

I don’t think that I believe in religion but I’m not very sure.

When I asked him to elaborate, he told me:

I know that I am not a Christian or anything like that. But we learn about religion in school and I think it’s all a bit confusing. Mum makes me offer to our ancestors and I think that that is a little bit like religion. To be honest, I don’t really think about it.

Similarly, Hóu Yǎchún (female; 17) demonstrated an impressive degree of reflection of her own identity:

No I am not religious but I think you would probably tell me that me and my family are religious. We pray just like religious people do and I have a friend who pointed at our family shrine and said ‘is that like a religious thing, or something?’ So no, I don’t think that me and my family are religious but I can see why you might think that we are.

When I asked her why she self-identified as irreligious as opposed to religious, she told me:

I don’t think that I am religious because I don’t believe in one religion. I have a friend in class who is a Christian and she can really easily tell me ‘I am a Christian and I believe in Christianity.’ What should I say? I am religious and I pray to these people – that’s right, people – that nobody else in the world prays to? My family has all these beliefs and practices that look religious but I wouldn’t call it religious because there isn’t a specific religion that these things belong to.

Thus, I found that all 22 of the children very much adhered to Chinese Popular Religion but only the minority (7 out of 22) shared the certainty of their
parents in that they firmly regarded their beliefs and practices as irreligious and saw no uncertainty in the matter. Indeed, the majority (15 of 22) saw a difference between their own beliefs and that of their parents. Hé Zhīhuá (female; 14) explained:

Mum and Dad would totally tell you that we don’t believe in religion. They would probably tell you that no one in China believes in religion. Sure, I also would say that I am not religious, but I don’t think it’s as simple as my parents think it is, you know? I’m like the only person in my whole class who prays to anything. It’s not like I’m praying to Jesus but I know how strange it sounds being like ‘I pray but I’m not religious.’

This acceptance of nuance unique to the children also extended to discussions of the secular.79 Jiǎ Mànyín (male; 15), for example, told me:

Yes we are secular because we don’t believe in any religion. But I think I am less secular than my classmates at school. They don’t pray to anyone and me and my family sometimes pray to our ancestors. I think that probably makes us a little bit less secular.

Rèn Jìmíng (male; 14) also told me:

We are probably somewhere in the middle. It’s not like you can learn about our religion in RE. We don’t exactly have a religion. But I’m not stupid. I know what it looks like when me and my parents give offerings. So we’re not religious but were also not not religious, if that makes sense. [He paused at this point before adding] This really doesn’t make sense but it’s how we are.

These children also rejected the notion that they believed in folk religion. Bái Mànyín (female; 16) told me:

I know we commemorate our ancestors and all that, but it’s not folk religion. That makes it sound like we are people from the country who need to pray to gods to make it rain. We only commemorate our ancestors because it is something that we have to do.

79 It should be noted that I had to define the term secular to all but four of the children.
Similarly, although none of the 22 children regarded themselves as spiritual, a surprising 16 of the 22 regarded their own beliefs as well as those of their parents as superstitious. Sū Yǎchún (female; 16) revealed:

My parents don’t really understand irony. They think that all of the people in my class are superstitious because they have religious education in school. When I try to tell them that nobody here cares about religion they won’t hear it. Then mum will turn around and give an offering to Guānyīn so that I will do well at school. But that’s not superstitious. That’s apparently just smart.

Péng Yǎchún (female; 15) echoed this sentiment:

Oh my god, my family is totally superstitious but mum and dad would get super angry if they heard me say it! Like, a few weeks ago there was a parents evening at school and mum was super worried about my grades. She prayed and prayed to like six different gods and then thanked them instead of me when my teachers told her that I was doing really well! That is totally superstitious!

It is clear that the migration context is key to the difference between the children and their parents. Whereas the parents of this study have maintained a Chinese perception of religion and the secular, their children had adopted a more international outlook: although the children very much retained a strong sense of Chinese Popular Religious identity, the process of acclimatising to Edinburgh society had given them more of a reflective outlook on their own religious identity. Kāng Yǎchún (male; 17) stated:

When me and my parents first moved here, they kept telling me that I would need to be careful because we are moving to a Christian country. They would tell me that because we are Chinese, we haven’t believed in religion for centuries so I will need to be respectful of all of my Christian classmates. But now that I am here, I can see that it was all bullshit. Hardly anyone here is a Christian and we are the ones who look religious to everyone else. I know that there are cultural differences and all that, but my parents were just wrong about this one. What’s crazy is that they still both think that everyone here, unlike us, is religious.

Similarly, Céng Hónghán (male; 16) told me:
My parents still think that we came from this totally secular society and that religion is like totally dead in China. It’s not like I want to tell you that I am religious or anything, but I can totally see that Scotland is way more secular than China. I mean, I am pretty sure that my family prayed more this week than most of my classmates’ families prayed in their lives.

Thus, one finds that the children in this study, like their parents, very much adhered to Chinese Popular Religion but, unlike their parents, saw their own religious identity with uncertainty.

7 Conclusion

Although the sample size was small, this study has demonstrated the complicated relationship between religion and secularity within an international Chinese context.

The most obvious conclusion of this paper is that in stark contrast to the predominant view that the Chinese are irreligious, the families in this study demonstrated deep religious convictions albeit in a Chinese manner: they themselves genuinely regarded themselves to be irreligious despite very much adhering to what those in a Western context would regard as religious. I believe that there is a strong case to be made for each of Yang’s aforementioned criteria being met:

1) A belief in the supernatural: each parent and child readily reported making contact in various ways with gods and ancestors.
2) A set of beliefs regarding life and the world: each parent and child believed that they lived in a hierarchal universe in which they themselves had various obligations to fulfil.
3) A set of ritual practices: although the form and frequency varied, ritual observation was readily observable in every household in this study.
4) A distinct social organisation or moral community: this was observed in the family units. Each parent believed they had a moral obligation to their child/children and likewise the children were aware of their moral obligations to their parents.

I thus found that even in an international context, the families still perceived themselves to exist in the same moral cosmos populated with gods and ancestors and governed by reciprocity. Indeed, Yāchún (female; 16) encapsulated this definition:
Everything about what we believe and do is superstitious! We pray to ancestors, we pray to gods, we give offerings when stupid hot water doesn’t work on a sore throat! It annoys me that my parents can’t see the superstition but it’s not like I don’t believe in all of this as well. If I’m being really honest with you, yes I believe that I can communicate with my ancestors and yes I believe that when something is bothering me, they can usually help.

Li is right in highlighting the secular logic Chinese people apply to daily religious belief and practice insofar as they themselves very much regard these beliefs and practices as secular. However, to claim that “they treat supernatural gods the same way they treat mundane things”\(^{80}\) is, I believe, an injustice to the level of importance these Chinese families placed on their beliefs. I therefore also take fault with Wang claiming that religious affairs “were never so influential”\(^{81}\) to the Chinese. Religious affairs (albeit popular religious affairs) were of enormous importance to the parents and children in this study even though they would not regard their beliefs and practices as religion. However, although this conclusion has worth insofar as it has stemmed from a rare insight into Chinese immigrant family life, it will come as little surprise to those well versed in the intricate nature of Chinese Popular Religion. The key contribution of this paper lies instead in the identification of a marked generational difference between the parents and the children of this study. Whereas the parents fully perceived themselves to be irreligious and secular, their children, for the most part, were less certain, readily acknowledging the complicated relationship between religion and the secular. Indeed, many of the responses from the parents echoed Yang’s description of being questioned by an academic from the PRC as to why she was studying religion in China when “it has never been very important in China and the Chinese people have always been pragmatic and secular.”\(^{82}\) Moreover, whereas the children were somewhat reluctant to provide concrete answers pertaining to definitions of the secular, their parents comfortably fell into Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt’s third and fourth multiple secularities categories. Indeed, I believe that it is significant that although Goossaert and Palmer’s “religious question”\(^{83}\) is still very much alive, the fact that the children were willing to directly engage with this question in a manner that has been heavily informed by their immigration

\(^{80}\) Li, Bèi shìsú lìxìng lìyòng de shénlíngmen, p. 255.
\(^{81}\) Wang, Secular China, p. 126.
\(^{82}\) Yang, Chinese Religiosities, p. 1.
\(^{83}\) Goossaert/Palmer, The Religious Question in Modern China.
context, adds an interesting new dimension to the issue. The reason for the generational difference was due to the level of migration assimilation. While the parents still held a Chinese view of religion and secularity, their children were in-between this Chinese worldview and that of their new Edinburgh home. Thus, the majority of children, after comparing themselves to their Scottish peers, were able to see how their own beliefs and practices could be regarded as religious despite themselves not seeing it as such. Herein, one finds something of an echo of Appadurai’s “globally variable synaesthesia,”84 a phrase which Appadurai employs to encapsulate “the finer pragmatic details of the difficulties of crosscultural global communication.”85 Identifying the creation of “ever new terminological kaleidoscopes,”86 Appadurai goes as far as to claim that “the very relationship of reading to hearing and seeing may vary in important ways that determine the morphology of these different ideoscapes as they shape themselves in different national and transnational contexts.”87 The children of this study were noticeably involved in the creation of their own terminological kaleidoscopes pertaining to their developing understandings of religion and the secular understandings that were informed by both the Chinese and Scottish ideoscapes. Whereas the parents espoused typical Chinese secular rhetoric founded in rationality, the children (due to their developing religious ideoscapes) not only did not share the unshifting conviction of their parents and instead took a more nuanced approach to religion and the secular, but were (in the case of more than half) willing to regarded their own beliefs as well as those of their parents as superstitious.

The lived religious landscape of Chinese immigrants remains an understudied field and studies that account for Chinese childhood religion are especially rare. Although further research is certainly warranted (especially given the limited sample size of this study), the findings of this paper will hopefully generate further dialogue.

Bio

Joseph Chadwin in a current FWF Fellow at the University of Vienna. Particularly favouring ethnographic methodologies, his research interests include

84 Appadurai, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*, p. 10.
86 Appadurai, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*, p. 10.
87 Appadurai, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*, p. 10.
Chinese religion, childhood and adolescent religion, Buddhism, Hinduism, religious identity, religion and migration, and religion and education.

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