Throughout the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first century, “religion” continued to stir up controversies in China. The debate over whether Confucianism is a religion lasted from the early 1900s till the present, generating scores of books and treatises in Chinese as well as other languages. Cultural elites of the republican period (1911-1949), such as Hu Shi, insisted that religion had never been important in Chinese civilization, while the Western-trained social scientists such as C. K. Yang saw an exceptionally rich religious life therein. In 1999, the PRC government declared Falungong a cult – and thus not a religion – and launched a relentless suppression of it. Criticism pointed to the crackdown as violation of religious freedoms. At the core of these political, historical and cultural clashes lies one unsettled question—“What is religion?”

Part of the difficulty in finding a clear-cut answer is historical. The Chinese language did not possess an equivalent to the English term “religion” (as distinct from a corpus of teachings) until the turn of the twentieth century. The lack of a proper term meant that religion was not cognitively demarcated from other realms of human activities. Religious motivations and outlooks, rather than articulating themselves in a distinctive voice, were often entwined in activities and discourses we would describe as secular. Scholars have noted that both the elites and the populace in pre-modern China viewed the human and
superhuman worlds as one continuum. Many ostensibly worldly endeavors and practices were underpinned by a religious ethos.

The introduction of the term *zongjiao* (“religion”) into the Chinese language at the beginning of the twentieth century, in this context, signified an epistemological shift. The neologism gave recognition to religion as a category in its own right, indicating an awareness of its distinctiveness. This awareness, in turn, set in motion the sociopolitical process of marking religion off from other spheres of activities. The early twentieth century witnessed many social groups reforming themselves according to one or another officially approved definition of religion. Meanwhile, society at large was to go through a cleansing of religious residues. Both the Republican government under the Nationalist Party and the PRC government under the Communist Party had an “anti-superstition” agenda of social reform. Outside its designated sphere, religion was supposed to play no role in modern society.

The continuous efforts to contain religion to its proper place, however, proved to be a messy and testing process. As Rebecca Nedostup’s research shows, the Nationalist Party’s anti-superstition campaign of the 1930s failed not only due to confusions over the definition of the key concepts, but also because religion was too deeply imbricated in other aspects of social reality. Top-down campaigns like this helped familiarize the populace with the new categories – *Zongjiao* became a commonplace word in modern Chinese. Yet, the objective of demarcating and confining religion was never achieved. The so-called religious revival of the post-Mao era (1976 to the present) clearly
demonstrates that many traditional practices and notions have remained vital and ubiquitous in Chinese society. After a century’s investment of political capital and educational resources, how the modern categories mesh with these practices and notions continues to be hazy. According to anthropologist Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, those who participated in the revival of deity temples, local festivals, and lineage organizations in the 1990s often wondered whether what they did fitted the ticket of either religion or superstition.\textsuperscript{4} Their wonder betrays an awareness of the categories, but also attests to the incomprehensibility of these categories to grassroots social actors.

The project of creating a modern secular society, where religion’s role is clearly outlined and checked, has proved to be a failure. The historical question nevertheless remains: Why was it attempted in the first place? What compelled the opinion leaders and politicians to contrive such a project? And what did they see in the concept of religion?

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The term zongjiao had been in use since the medieval period. Instead of denoting a category, it merely meant “to revere a doctrine,” “the reverence for a doctrine,” or “the revered doctrine.”\textsuperscript{5} Zongjiao as a modern Chinese term was a borrowing from the Japanese word shūkyō. It was part of the linguistic circulation in East Asia: classical Chinese phrases were gleaned and recast to facilitate Japan’s translation and importation of Western knowledge in the second half of the nineteenth century. The very same phrases then traveled back to China as new vocabulary.\textsuperscript{6} Although Japan’s influence on the emergence of the Chinese term is undeniable, tracing zongjiao to shūkyō was only
half of the story. Scholars have agreed that in its early history, the term frequently implied simply Christianity. Anthony C. Yu, for example, claimed, “Whenever the Chinese term zongjiao was used, [Christianity] almost inevitably became its assumed standard referent.”7 Yu was writing about China, but his generalization may be applied to Japan. In the second half of the nineteenth century, both countries were set upon by Western powers and witnessed the advent of Christian missionary enterprise, aiming at nothing less than a total conversion of their peoples. This shared experience facilitated the linguistic trade.

Treaty negotiations, which recorded the inequality between these East Asian states and Western states, often involved religious questions. In 1858, for instance, Japan signed a “Treaty of Friendship and Commerce” with the United States of America, which assigned specific religious rights to American citizens in Japan. That same year, the Sino-American and Sino-English treaties of Tianjin recognized the Christian missionaries’ right to preach their religion on Chinese soil. In both cases, finding an indigenous term for “religion” proved difficult. Japan’s leaders settled on a Buddhist word shūhō, literally “sect law,” as in the clause “Americans in Japan shall be allowed the free exercise of their religion.”8 The Qing government (1644-1911) came up with a different solution. In the Treaty of Tianjin the term “Christian religion” occurs in the following passage: “The principles of the Christian religion, as professed by the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, are recognized as teaching men to do good.” But in the official Chinese version, the phrase was conspicuously left out. In its place, “Protestantism [Yesujidu shengjiao] and Catholicism [Tianzhujiao]” are listed side by side as two teachings that both
encouraged good deeds. These examples illustrate the linguistic lacuna in Japan’s and China’s legal and political dealings with the Western powers. To fill this gap, shūkyō was coined in Japan in the 1870s. In China, the government and elites continued to understand religion through preexistent category of jiao (“teaching, doctrines”), until shūkyō was imported in the late 1890s.

The delay in coining a new term did not insulate China from the impacts of “religion.” Officially banned in 1724, the teaching of Christianity became licit once more in 1858. Inspirational books and pamphlets, specially prepared for Chinese readers, began to circulate in coastal cities. Missionaries’ self-narrative and representation also provided information about the Western practice and notion of religion. In the 1860s and 1870s, frequent disputes between missionaries and Chinese converts, on the one hand, and the non-Christian Chinese, on the other, drove gentry-officials to devote more energy to religious issues. Thanks to the treaty system, Christianity enjoyed a privileged legal position in relation to other religions. Missionaries invoked the treaty rights to protect Christian communities when conflicts of any kind arose. The situation obliged Chinese elites to interrogate the Christian view of “religion.” As it happened, much epistemological groping had taken place before the new term was coined.

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Before the mid-nineteenth century, the indigenous category that grouped religions together was jiao. Most systems that we nowadays would consider as religions bear the word in their appellations. Christianity for example, was called yejiao, literally, “the teaching of Jesus;” and Confucianism, rujiao, “the teaching of scholars.” As Robert F.
Campany has pointed out, rather than attributing agency to the doctrine proper, the use of *jiao* placed the emphasis on “the source of the teaching, the one who taught it.” A more inclusive way of grouping, *jiao* differs from “religion,” in its lack of a strong “contrastive” emphasis on being “opposed to other, non-‘religious’ kinds of things” such as superstition and magic. It places the illicit and the orthodox beliefs and practices in the same class without any categorical divide.\(^\text{12}\)

Furthermore, *jiao* was supposed to work in tandem with the exercise of political power. Confucianism viewed education (*jiao*) and governance (*zheng*) as inseparable. They were each other’s proper function, and both were the necessary components in the mission of bringing civilization to “all-under-heaven.” Before the era of the nation-state, this civilizing pretension formed the ideological cornerstone of political legitimacy. To determine and inculcate the correct teachings was the state’s rightful responsibility and prerogative. Conversely, the state had the exclusive authority to regulate religious affairs so as to ensure the functioning of the orthodoxy.

The dynastic state thus created a hierarchy within the category of *jiao*. Residing at the pinnacle was Confucianism, the ultimate orthodoxy and “prototype” of the category.\(^\text{13}\) The question of legitimacy of any given *jiao* can only be resolved by mapping it against the orthodox doctrines. The various forms of *jiao* could never be too far from them. Buddhism, *fojiao*, and Daoism, *daojiao*, were approved only to the extent that they complemented the basic moral tenets of Confucianism, rather than standing on an equal footing with it. Below Buddhism and Daoism were numerous religious groups associated
with labels such as *Bailian jiao* (teachings of the white lotus), *Taiping jiao* (teachings of great peace). The imperial state viewed their deviations from the sanctioned teachings and practices as objectionable, but often had not choice but to tolerate them. Only when deviations became seditious would the label of *xiejiao*, literally, “straying teachings,” would be doled out as the precursor of government crackdown.

This paradigm started to crumble in the late-nineteenth century. In comparison with their 16th-century predecessors, Christian missionaries who arrived in China three centuries later came with a very different ideology. As a large number of Protestant evangelists entered the mission field, they saw in Chinese religions the same idolatry and ritualism that plagued Catholicism. They were more vocal and direct than the accomodationist Jesuits in their criticism of China’s “heathen” culture. W. A. P. Martin, a prominent American Presbyterian in China, for example, ascribed the widespread worship of Buddhist and Daoist idols to the deficiency in China’s orthodoxy. Confucianism needed to amend this flaw by developing doctrines that addressed the supermundane and honored the relationship between God and humans. In other words, it needed to become more like Christianity.\(^{14}\)

Protestant missionaries also brought a particular narrative of history, which presented Protestantism as the spiritual force behind the secular power of Europe and America. In his influential catechism, W. A. P. Martin explained to his Chinese readers that Protestantism “communicated to people their heavenly mandate, encouraged them to devote themselves to improving the nation, and inspired them to study science.” As a
result, the people were content, society was orderly, and the nation grew wealthy and self-sufficient. The spread of Protestantism outside the West had the obvious effect of transforming the previously unruly societies. In Southeast Asia, India, Burma, the reach of Christian missions coincided with the eradication of local “barbarism.” Christianity was the civilizing force of the modern era. 15

In reality, the nineteenth-century mission movement was deeply implicated in the expansion of imperialism. The Christian missionaries had different roots and objectives from those of the imperialist powers. However, the building of their global enterprise was unthinkable without the latter’s infrastructure and protection. The official opening of China as a mission field, for instance, had to be attributed to the effect of the unequal treaty, forced upon the Qing government at the gunpoint of the Anglo-French alliance in 1858. Missionaries’ rights to travel and evangelize were warranted not by Chinese laws, but by a series of such treaties. Legal cases involving missionaries and, later, Chinese converts, were thus set apart from the normal procedure, and supervised by a special central bureau. In 1862, the French legation even negotiated a special reduction of community levies for Chinese Catholics, a clause later extended to all Christians.16

The asymmetric relations of power between China and a “Christian West” nevertheless obliged the educated Chinese to consider Christianity as the force to be reckoned with, and to take serious interest in the “Christian way.” Even those who were staunchly anti-Christian read missionary publications and watched their actions closely. Because of the global dominance of the Western powers, knowledge about Christianity became the
currency for understanding the world and its history. In 1897, Kang Youwei, a reformist Confucian and a keen consumer of missionaries’ publications, put forward an imperial memorial that proposed to separate Confucianism out from other state affairs. Confucianism needed its own organization that represented its political interest and acted as the Christian church’s Chinese counterpart. Kang used the same Chinese term for the Christian church, jiaohui, to designate it. All conflicts pertinent to foreign religions would be administrated by the Confucian Church, and thus be contained within the arena of jiao. No longer would missionaries’ complaints about China’s religious discrimination escalate into the political crises that had in the past led to war. The Western doctrine of separation of church and state was adopted to fend off the encroachment of the Western religion.17

This strategizing exemplified how Christianity’s long shadow shaped the conception of modern Confucianism and the category of jiao. Kang, in as early as 1891, had started streamlining the complex Confucian legacy into a systematic set of doctrines, a more manageable canon of sacred texts, and a saintly figure as symbol of its ultimate unity. In private writings, he readily admitted that his “reformation” was to prepare Confucianism for the inevitable showdown with Christianity.18 From missionaries’ publications, especially the Protestant discourse of heathenism, he derived that the global expansion of Christianity aimed at nothing less than a total domination of the world’s spiritual life. Its spread heralded a time of vicious struggle. Confucianism had to resist by safeguarding its supreme teachings with new representation and organization. It also needed a strong
secular state to back it up. All these were methods that had been employed and proved effective in the example of Christianity’s advancement in the world.

This imagination of struggle for survival changed the lax attitude towards other religions in China. The state of being in combat necessitated a consolidation of the home base and a monopoly of political support. Echoing missionaries’ disdain for idolatry, Kang criticized the government for granting imperial sanction to all kinds of worship and urged the throne to “convert all improper temples into Confucian temples and order men and women of every rank to worship and offer sacrifices to Confucius.”19 The Christianized view of Chinese religions justified the disparagement of other systems. Kang created a new category of “non-religion,” wujiao, in his writings. By this, he did not mean atheism. Rather, those belief systems demonstrating no potential of surviving the Christian conquest were to be displaced from the category of jiao.20 Historically, Buddhism had showed its vigor by building a cross-regional following. However, because only one system would emerge as the victor of the struggle, when delineating the global future of religion, Kang also had to imagine this jiao being stamped out.

Kang’s proposals of 1898 pioneered the political efforts to demarcate “religion” as a distinctive realm, and prefigured the hostile policies towards religious practices that failed to fit into the newly conceived category.21 They represented a new paradigm for political management of religions, a paradigm that took Christianity as the prototype and ranked others according to their proximity to it. Zongjiao was adopted to denote this new paradigm. After a century’s circulation, the term today has become part of the daily
vocabulary. The fitting of the paradigm into China’s social context, however, is still a work in progress and a project full of glitches.

5 For examples, see Anthony C. Yu, State and Religion in China: Historical and Textual Perspectives (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 12-14; Chen Hsi-yuan, “‘Zongjiao’ – yige Zhongguo jindai wenhuashi shang de guanjianci” (“Zongjiao”: a key term in the cultural history of modern China), Xin shixue 13.4 (December, 2002): 46-49.
7 Yu, 8.
9 Early examples of the use of shūkyō to translate “religion” can be found in the mid 1860s, see Suzuki Norihisa, Meiji shakuyō shichō no kenkyū: Shūkyōgaku kotohajime (Studies in Meiji religious thought: the beginnings of religious study) (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku shuppankai, 1979), 15–17. By the time of the 1870s debate on religious freedom (shūkyō jiyū), it had become a standard term in public discourse.
10 After the First Opium War (1839–41), the Qing authorities had adopted a more tolerant attitude towards the sectarian practice of Catholicism, which went underground and took on specifically Chinese attributes after 1724. The opening of trade ports after the Treaty of Nanjing (1842) also gave foreign missionaries legal protection for religious activities on Chinese soil for the first time. These activities were supposed to be limited to the treaty ports. Still, the most zealous missionaries recruited Chinese coverts for evangelical work and sent them to the countryside.
11 Despite this accepted translation, there have been caveats against simply equating jiao with the modern notion of “teaching” or “doctrine.” Anthony C. Yu, for example, emphasizes the religious connotations of jiao, as being invested in “a set of activities, a form of ritual intended for efficacious communion and intercourse between the human and non-human realms.” (22).
14 W. A. P. Martin (Ding Weiliang), Tiandao suyuan (Evidence for Christianity) (Taipei: Wenquan chubanshe 1967), 67a-b.
15 Martin, 66a-67a.
19 Kang, “Qing shangding,” 125.
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