Measuring religiosity in a religiously diverse society: The China case[☆]

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1. Introduction

Religious diversity has been increasing in many societies due to increased migration, new religious movements, and new ways of being religious or spiritual in contemporary society (Casanova, 2007; Foley and Hoge, 2007; Smith, 2002; Davie et al., 2018). In the case of United States, religious diversity increased significantly as a result of the influx of new immigrants from Latin America and Asia since the 1960s (Casanova, 2007; Martin, 2013). These new immigrants, unlike the previous European immigrants, came with diverse religious backgrounds. Although the majority of new immigrants were Christian, they brought diverse forms of Christian practices (Ebaugh, 2003). Moreover, a large number of new immigrants had non-Judeo-Christian religious beliefs or no religious belief at all (Massey and Higgins, 2011). Although the number of the followers of other non-Christian faiths remains relatively small, the increase of adults identifying with non-Christian faiths has been significant in the past years (Pew Research Center, 2015; Smith, 2002). The increasingly diversified religious contour in traditionally Judeo-Christian societies makes it more challenging to accurately measure religiosity.

Previous studies have identified various types of religiosity in traditionally Judeo-Christian societies. Robert Bellah and his associates (1985) coined the term "Sheilaism" for the phenomenon of individualized mixing of religious beliefs and practices from various religious or spiritual traditions in American society. Grace Davie (1990, 1994) suggested that many people in Britain could be characterized as "believing without belonging," that is, most people still identified with Christianity but did not attend church regularly. Later, she suggested another form of the mismatch of "belonging without believing" in European countries (Davie, 2006).

In recent years, there has also been a significant increase of religiously unaffiliated people (the religious "nones") and followers of other non-Christian faiths in the United States. The Pew Research Center (2015) reports that religious "nones" now account for 23 percent of the U.S. population, making it the second largest religious group in the United States (Lipka, 2015). However, most of the religious "nones" hold some religious beliefs and engage some religious practices. These phenomena suggest that religiosity has become diversified; religious identity, belief and practice may not align with each other for many people nowadays.

However, up to now, the most commonly used questions in social surveys are religious preference (belonging), attendance (behavior), and belief in God. These 3b indicators are considered valid as they seem to be reflective of Judeo-Christian religiosity. When tracking the changes of these indicators over time, it seems apparent that there has been a trend of religious decline in Europe and North America (Voas and Chaves, 2016). For instance, Voas and Chaves (2016) find a generational decline in religiosity in Western societies, indicating that each successive birth cohort is less likely than their previous cohort to have religious affiliation, to attend church service frequently and regularly, and to have strong religious beliefs.

However, does this mean the overall religiosity in these societies is in decline, or is it due to the inadequacy of the measurement of religiosity in the religiously diverse society? Although the 3b measures have been used for decades, and are valid for measuring the religiosity of monotheistic believers of Christians, Jews and Muslims, they do not appear to be valid for capturing the religiosity of Buddhists, Hindus, various types of folk religious adherents, and the followers of many new religions and new spirtualties. For many

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of the latter kinds, religious identity is less important than behavior, believing the creator God is not essential or necessary, and adherents are not expected to follow a weekly schedule of collective gathering for corporate worship (Heelas, 1996; York, 1995). Many fieldwork observers (e.g., Ammerman, 2006, 2013; Cadge, 2013) also emphasize the importance of religiosity and spirituality in the daily life of individuals and in home or work settings other than the church or synagogue, maintaining that religion should be understood as a lived experience that entails comprehensive dynamic daily interactions (Ammerman, 1997; Orsi, 1997). The traditional 3b measures, therefore, might not be able to fully capture the religiosity of the aforementioned religious population.

When the 3b questions are applied in cross-national surveys that include Asian societies, the insufficiency becomes more pronounced. 'Religion', as an imported term, was not introduced into most Asian societies until early twentieth century (Beyer, 2006; Turner, 2007). In the case of China, religion (*zongjiao*) and superstition (*mixin*) were adopted from Japanese neologisms by the intellectuals aiming to delineate the complex religious landscape around 1898 (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011). As a result, many individuals in Asian societies including China do not self-identify with a particular religion or regard themselves "religious" even if they hold supernatural beliefs and maintain religious practices.

In sum, given the reality of increased religious diversity in Western societies, and for the purpose of cross-national comparisons, it has become necessary to rethink the validity and reliability of the commonly used measurements of religiosity and explore new ways to measure religiosity more accurately. More detailed and specific measures of religiosity that reflect the changing religious contour should be considered in the future studies. The availability of more sophisticated analytical techniques, such as structural equation modeling, also allows scholars to overcome the simplistic approach of studying religion, and to quantify religiosity more accurately.

Using the Chinese Spiritual Life Survey (CSLS 2007), this study is intended to address this issue by examining China as a case with high religious diversity. With the measurement problem in mind, the designers of the CSLS 2007 explored some alternative ways of measuring religiosity in China, by providing more detailed options about respondents' religious life. In this article, we deploy the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with latent constructs to examine the relationships of multiple questions of beliefs and practices specifically tailored for Christians, Buddhists, and folk religious adherents. Due to data limitation, we could not include more kinds of religions or more questions in this study. Nonetheless, the findings are important for the development of improved measurement of religiosity in religiously diverse societies.

2. China as a quasi-laboratory for testing measures of religiosity

Contemporary China provides a great "laboratory-like" research site for examining the validity and reliability of measurements of religiosity in a religiously diverse society. In the contemporary world, China is distinctive in terms of religion and religiosity (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011; Yang, 1961; see also a number of edited volumes: Yang and Lang, 2011; Yang, 2008; Chau, 2011 etc.). Several major religions have substantially large numbers of followers but none is dominant in proportion in the population; religions have revived despite suppression by the Communist Party that adheres to atheism as the ideological orthodox; atheism is indoctrinated to everyone through the school system and mass media, so that many people are atheists by default; yet some religions are thriving amid rapid economic developments and social changes (Yang, 2012, 2016). Consequently, China has become a religiously diverse society with large numbers of monotheists, polytheists, atheists, and agnostics, making it a quasi-laboratory for testing measurements of religiosity.

Indeed, numerous scholars have attempted to discuss the complex religious life in China. Many scholars, especially sinologists and historians, regard Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism as traditional religions in China. Besides, there are various folk religions. Focusing on the differences between the religious contour of the West and China, Max Weber (1951), using only secondary sources, wrote the book "the Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism" noting the absence of institutional religions in the traditional Chinese society and its consequence – the lack of economic rationality. Although Weber offered good insights on many issues, his interpretation of the religions in traditional China, as the sociologist C.K. Yang (1961) argued, was from a Christian point of view, and largely misunderstood the religious life in China. Weber focused on Confucianism and Daoism, but most Chinese normally do not regard Confucianism as a religion (Sun, 2013), and few people self-identify with Daoism (Yang, 2012). According to C.K. Yang (1961), although institutional religions remained marginal in Chinese society, religions were diffused in various social institutions of the family, the state, and the economy. People commonly engaged in some religious practices and held religious beliefs, but most people did not identify with a particular religion.

In China today, the Communist authorities recognize five major institutional religions – Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. Although the ruling Communist Party upholds atheism as part of its orthodox ideology for the party members and indoctrinates it to all people through the school system and mass media, many religions are reviving and thriving in contemporary China, evidenced by the increasing number of temples, churches and mosques, and the number of followers (Yang, 2012). Buddhism is the largest institutional religion by far, with at least 100 million followers (Buddhist Association of China, 2012). Protestantism, which has more than 58 million followers, is the second largest institutional religion in China (Pew Research Center, 2011). Although it is hard to estimate the number of followers of folk religion, using the same dataset used in the current research, Yang and Hu (2012) found that approximately 580 million Chinese adults participated in at least one type of folk religious practices. China's 21 million Muslims are predominately ethnic minorities concentrating in the northwestern provinces, except for the Hui people which can be found throughout China (Islamic Association of China, 2012). There are also 5 to 12 million Catholics in China (Charbonnier, 2014; State Administration for Religious Affairs, 2017; Madsen, 2003). The presences of multiple religions make it possible to compare the religiosities of various religions.

3. Data and analytical plan

3.1. Data

The data used for this research were drawn from the Chinese Spiritual Life Survey (hereafter 'CSLS 2007'), which was conducted independently by Horizon Research Consultancy group, one of the largest and most respected polling firms in China. The research firm invited scholars at Purdue University and Baylor University as academic advisors for designing the questionnaire and developing the sampling strategy. Using a multilevel probability sampling strategy, the CSLS 2007 covered 56 locales, including three direct-controlled municipalities, six provincial capitals, 11 prefectural level cities, 16 towns, and 20 villages throughout China (Tibet and Xinjiang were not included in the survey due to practical difficulties). Within each locale, households were randomly sampled within neighborhoods. To avoid selection bias, a KISH gid procedure was adopted to randomly select one respondent aged 16–75 for a face-to-face in-home interview in each selected household. The final sample size is 7021 valid cases. The CSLS 2007 had a relatively low response rate at 28 percent due to social and political constraints in China. To reflect population parameters, we weighted the data using the 2006 Census of China.

Ranging from the most developed eastern region, to the less developed central region, and the underdeveloped western region in China, the CSLS 2007 remains one of the best surveys available for studying religious life in China. The original survey has a total of 88 questions, including questions related to demographic characteristics and social attitudes, but primarily focusing on religious life in China. We extracted responses to 26 questions specifically investigating religious beliefs and practices for three kinds of religions from the survey for the current study.

As mentioned above, the largest institutional religions in contemporary China are Buddhism and Christianity (including Protestantism and Catholicism), and there are also many practitioners of folk religion. Only very few people self-identified as Daoists and Muslims in the sample, so we had to drop them from this quantitative modeling. The models presented in this article are constructed to address the relationship between the beliefs and practices of Buddhism, Christianity, and Folk religion in China. We believe that Christians, Buddhists and folk religious followers represent distinct kinds of religiosities in their beliefs and practices, and should be measured differently, hence using "one-size-fit-all" measures to survey different religions might lead to bias in analysis.

3.2. Structural equation modeling

The current study examines the relationship of religious beliefs and practices among Buddhists, Christians, and folk religious adherents in China using SEM, which combines factor analysis and multiple regression analysis. One advantage of using SEM is that it can estimate the relationship between the manifest and hypothesized latent variables simultaneously (Bollen, 1989). It allows the incorporation of the latent variables that cannot be readily measured, such as religiosity, in the analytic models. In the conventional approach, having multiple indicators of the same construct tends to cause problems such as multicollinearity, and make the results hard to interpret. SEM gives researchers the flexibility to estimate the complicated multivariate relationships by avoiding these limitations and problems. SEM also allows researchers to estimate the relationship between latent constructs by explicitly modeling measurement error.

To fit a SEM model, a set of criteria need to be met (see McDonald and Ho, 2002 for detailed discussion). Identifying one or more hypothesized latent variables requires multiple appropriate indicators for each underlying construct, which largely depends on the quality of the available survey data. Due to social and political constraints, there are very few surveys available for studying religion in China (Yang and Lang, 2011). Additionally, most of the available surveys are not designed to investigate religion in China as the focus, or not using a representative sampling strategy. Hence, in the surveys that contain questions about religion, the questions are often too few and too simple to fully capture the complex religious life of Chinese people. Adopting data from the CSLS 2007, which has a large representative sample and detailed questions about respondents' religious beliefs and practices, we were able to take advantage of the SEM and answer the aforementioned unanswered questions.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Religious beliefs

As discussed above, the CSLS 2007 includes a number of items measuring religious beliefs. Specifically, religious beliefs were indicated by a series of questions asking whether or not the participants believed in the existence of certain supernatural power/beings. The original responses had four categories (No, it doesn't exist; Yes, it exists; hard to say/don't know; refuse to answer). In general, those who chose "refuse to answer" accounted for less than one percent of all the answers. Combining "refuse to answer" and "hard to say/don't know", we coded the responses into ordered categorical variables with 0 (No, it doesn't exist), 1 (hard to say/don't know), and 2 (Yes, it exists).

Four Buddhist belief items were used as indicators of the belief in Buddhism (hereafter 'BB'), including "b1 (belief in the existence of Buddha/Bodhisattva)", "b2 (belief in the existence of Karma)", "b3 (belief in the existence of Afterlife)", and "b4 (belief in the existence of Reincarnation)". The original survey also includes a belief item of "predestined relationship (缘分 *yuanfen*; hereafter '*yuanfen*')", which was designed to measure a belief in Buddhism. However, the concept of '*yuanfen*' has been generalized from a Buddhist term to a common expression in the modern Chinese language. Hence, the item of '*yuanfen*' is not considered a good reflection of the construct of belief in Buddhism. From a statistical viewpoint, including such an item worsen the overall model fit (i.e. RMSEA = 0.078) in the measurement model. We also checked the inter-factor correlations (structural model), excluding this item did

not noticeably alter the results. Based on the above considerations, we reported the results obtained by excluding the item of 'yuanfen' in this article.

Following previous studies (Yang and Hu, 2012), we used four folk religious belief items to measure the belief in Chinese folk religion (hereafter 'FB'), including "f1 (belief in the existence of god of heaven)", "f2 (belief in the existence of Ghosts)", "f3 (belief in the existence of god of wealth)", and "f4 (belief in the existence of ancestral spirits)".

For Christian belief, the only two measures included in the CSLS 2007 are the belief in the existence of God and Jesus Christ. However, for a single latent construct, to provide enough degrees of freedom, at least three indicators are needed (Bollen and Hoyle, 2012). Therefore, instead of constructing a latent variable measuring the belief in Christianity, we used only one manifest indicator to measure Christianity belief, which is the belief in the existence of Jesus Christ (c1).

3.3.2. Religious practices

In the CSLS 2007, the respondents were asked if they had certain religious practices in the past year, kept certain religious objects at home or workplace, and wore certain religious objects, as well as to whom they pray. In the current research, the religious practices for all three religions were considered continuous latent constructs measured by multiple indicators. We identified a series of religious practices for each religion. The original questions had four categories (Yes, No, refuse to answer, and hard to say/don't know). We coded them into binary variables "Yes/No" by combining "No", "refuse to answer", and "hard to say/don't know" as "No".

Specifically, we used items "b5 [organizational practices (attend formal services, pray, worship, and/or burn incense in Buddhist temples)]", "b6 [individual practices (recite Buddhist prayers, worship the Buddha, and/or read Buddhist texts)]", "b7 (have Buddhist objects at home)", "b8 (have Buddhist objects in workplace)", "b9 (wear Buddhist objects)", and "b10 [pray to Buddha(s)]" as indicators of Buddhist practice (hereafter 'BP').

We used five items as the indicators of the practice of Chinese folk religion (hereafter 'FP'), including "f5 (pray, worship and/or burn incense in ancestral or other temples)", "f6 (venerate ancestors or recall the soul)", "f7 (practice other folk religious activities)",[1] "f8 (have ancestral tablets or the statue or portrait of other gods or spirits at home)",[2] and "f9 (pray to local deity or ancestral spirits)".

For Christian practice (hereafter 'CP'), the indicators were "c2 [organizational practice (attend church services)]", "c3 [individual practice (read the Bible)]", "c4 (have Christian objects at home)", "c5 (have Christian object in workplace)", "c6 (wear Christian objects)", and "C7 (pray to God/Jesus Christ)".

The descriptive statistics of all observed variables are reported in Table 1 (the belief items) and Table 2 (the practice items).

Table 1
Summary of belief items (N = 7021).
Source: Chinese Spiritual Life Survey (CSLS) 2007

Buddhism	Category	Percent
b1: Do you believe in the existence of Buddha/Bodhisattva? 你相信佛祖/菩萨的存在么?	No	75.84
	Hard to say	7.95
	Yes	16.21
b2: Do you believe in the existence of Karma? 你相信因果报应的存在么?	No	69.56
	Hard to say	9.26
	Yes	21.18
b3: Do you believe in the existence of Afterlife? 你相信来世的存在么?	No	84.95
	Hard to say	9.00
	Yes	6.05
b4: Do you believe in the existence of Reincarnation? 你相信轮回的存在么?	No	85.94
	Hard to say	9.14
	Yes	4.91
Christianity		
c1: Do you believe in the existence of Jesus Christ? 你相信耶稣基督的存在么?	No	86.13
	Hard to say	9.03
	Yes	4.84
Folk religion		
f1: Do you believe in the existence of god of heaven? 你相信老天/老天爷/天老爷的存在么?	No	82.10
	Hard to say	8.15
	Yes	9.76
f2: Do you believe in the existence of Ghosts? 你相信鬼的存在么?	No	87.12
	Hard to say	7.49
	Yes	5.38
f3: Do you believe in the existence of god of wealth? 你相信财神的存在么?	No	79.53
	Hard to say	8.13
	Yes	12.33
f4: Do you believe in the existence of ancestral spirits? 你相信祖宗神灵的存在么?	No	75.63
	Hard to say	8.35
	Yes	16.02

Table 2
Summary of practice items (N = 7021).
Source: Chinese Spiritual Life Survey (CSLS) 2007

Buddhism	Percent
b5: Organizational practices (attend formal services, pray, worship, and/or burn incense in Buddhist temples 去佛寺里做法会, 祈求, 拜神, 烧香)	11.67
b6: Individual practices (recite Buddhist prayers念佛, worship the Buddha 拜佛/礼佛, and/or read Buddhist texts 念佛经)	6.42
b7: Have Buddhist objects at home 在家中保留佛教物品	10.34
b8: Have Buddhist objects in workplace 在工作场所保留佛教物品	1.47
b9: Wear Buddhist objects 随身佩戴佛教物品	6.91
b10: Pray to Buddha(s) 向佛祖/菩萨祷告	6.99
Christianity	
c2: Organizational practice (attend church services 上教堂做礼拜)	1.97
c3: Individual practice (read the Bible 读圣经)	1.37
c4: Have Christian objects at home在家中保留基督教物品	2.05
c5: Have Christian object in workplace在工作场所保留基督教物品	0.63
c6: Wear Christian objects随身佩戴基督教物品	1.32
c7: Pray to God/Jesus Christ 向上帝/耶稣基督祷告	2.39
Folk religion	
f5: Pray, worship and/or burn incense in ancestral or other temples 去祠堂或其他庙 (比如关公庙, 土地庙, 妈祖庙等, 祈求, 拜神, 烧香	4.44
f6: Venerate ancestors or recall the soul 敬拜祖先/祖宗/去世的亲人或收惊, 收魂, 叫魂	29.01
f7: Practice other folk religious activities (see note 1 for detailed description)	29.70
f8: Have ancestral tablets or the statue or portrait of local deity at home 在家中保留祖宗牌位或者神像 (土地爷像, 灶神像, 关公像, 或者门神像) 等	11.94
f9: Pray to local deity or ancestral spirits 向财神, 土地爷, 灶神, 或祖宗神灵祷告	3.85

3.4. Analytic plan

We use structural equation modeling with latent construct to investigate the correlational relationship among the religious beliefs and religious practices of three kinds of religions. Specifically, we focus on the beliefs and practices of Buddhism, Christianity, and Chinese folk religion. We begin by fitting a series of one-factor confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to check the structures of the proposed latent constructs – religious beliefs and practices. Following previous studies (Pearce et al., 2017), we also compared our proposed models with two sets of alternative models using Chi-square difference tests: 1) we compared our model with an alternative model which combined religious belief indicators of Buddhism and Chinese folk religion (We used only one manifest indicator of Christian belief in the model, so we did not include it in the alternative model.). We also compared our proposed model with an alternative model which combined all religious practice indicators of all three focal religions. 2) We tested whether researchers could combine religious belief and practice indicators of each religion. Results show that our original model with multiple factors fit statistically better than the alternative models. Therefore, for the sake of parsimony, we do not report the results of the additional analysis. Given that the established measurement models fit the data well, we further examined the structural model by adding correlational paths between the latent constructs. The path diagrams are shown in Fig. 1.

The data analyses were conducted using Mplus version 7.11 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2012). Since all observed variables were dichotomous/polytomous, we employed the robust weighted least squares (WLSMV) estimator for parameter estimation. The WLSMV estimator is robust and preferred when using categorical data and violating multivariate normality (Flora and Curran, 2004; Beaducel and Herzberg, 2006; Li, 2016). For each fitted model, we examined the goodness-of-fit, as well as the estimates of the key parameters of interest. Model evaluations were based on the robust WLS chi-square statistics and practical fit indices, including the comparative fit index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) (Tucker and Lewis, 1973), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with its 90 percent confidence interval (Steiger, 1990). For each measurement model, the standardized factor loadings and model fit indices are summarized in Table 3.

4. Findings

Results indicated that a common factor structure fitted the data well for all proposed theoretical constructs (i.e. BB, BP, CP, FB, and FP). Specifically, the CFIs and TLIs were greater than 0.95, and RMSEAs were smaller than 0.05 across all models, indicating our model fits the data very well (Bollen, 1989; Bollen and Curran, 2006; Browne and Cudeck, 1993). The model chi square for both models are statistically significant, indicating that the model does not fit the data perfectly. However, it should be taken into account that the chi square statistic is sensitive to the sample size (Bollen, 1989). After establishing the measurement models, we correlated the latent factors by fitting a structural model. As shown in Table 4, the structural model also fitted well (CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.03). We then examined the inter-factor correlations and reported the correlation matrix in Table 4.

The major findings are summarized as follows. First, for both Christianity and Buddhism, the correlations between their own beliefs and practices are very strong and positive (i.e. r = +0.73 between BB and BP; r = +0.77 between CB and CP). With regard to Chinese folk religion, the correlation between practice and belief is also strongly positive (r = +0.53); however, the association is noticeably weaker compared to the other two religions. This is not surprising because folk religion tends to have less developed sets of beliefs and practices (Yang and Hu, 2012).

Second, we find a strong positive correlation between Buddhism and Chinese folk religion. As shown in Table 4, the correlation
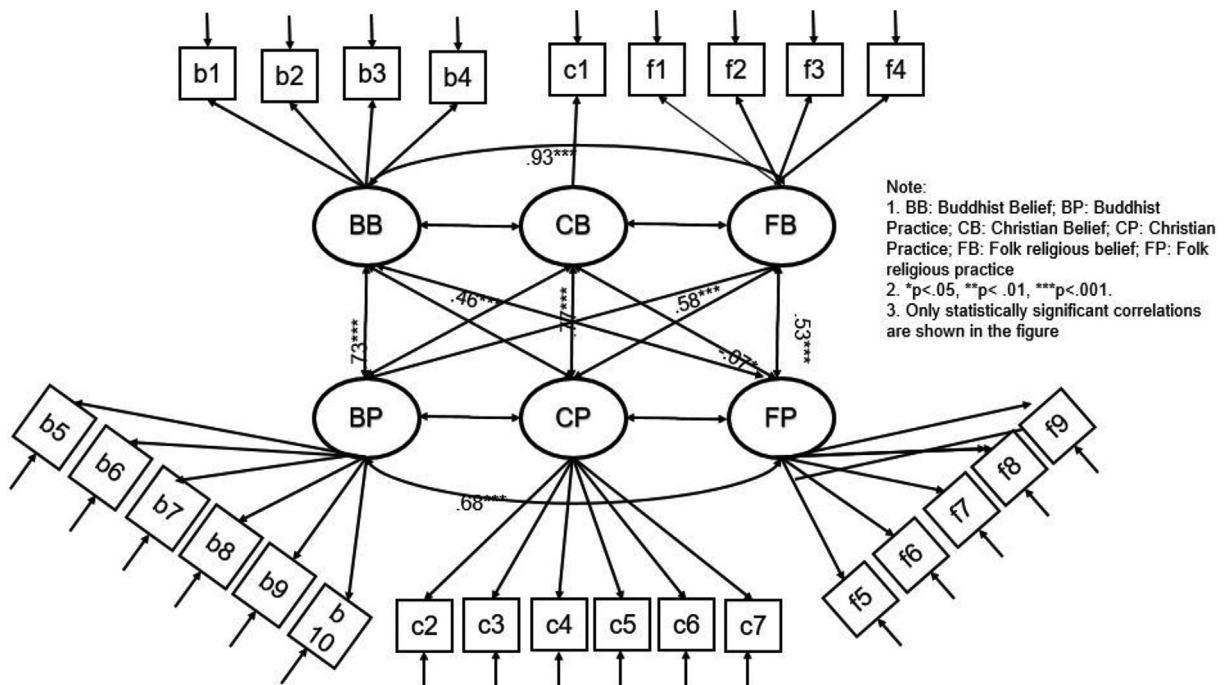
Fig. 1. Structural equation model for correlations among buddhism, christianity, and folk religion.

Table 3
Measurement model (N = 7021).
Source: Chinese Spiritual Life Survey (CSLS) 2007.

	Buddhist belief		Buddhist practice		Christian practice		Folk religious belief		Folk religious practice	
Standard Factor Loadings	b1	0.77	b5	0.85	c2	0.96	f1	0.76	f5	0.47
	b2	0.73	b6	0.86	c3	0.87	f2	0.81	f6	0.64
	b3	0.96	b7	0.76	c4	0.96	f3	0.93	f7	0.49
	b4	0.96	b8	0.63	c5	0.90	f4	0.89	f8	0.59
			b9	0.67	c6	0.83			f9	0.62
			b10	0.80	c7	0.90				
Model fit										
$\chi 2$	19.83 (df = 2,P = .00)		56.38 (df = 9, P = .00)		20.08 (df = 9, p = .02)		50.37 (df = 2,p = .00)		23.79 (df = 5,p = .00)	
RMSEA	0.04; [0.02,0.05]		0.03; [0.02,0.03]		0.01; [0.01,0.02]		0.06; [0.05,0.07]		0.02; [0.01,0.03]	
CFI	1		0.99		1.00		1.00		0.99	
TLI	1		0.99		1.00		0.99		0.97	

between beliefs in Buddhism and Chinese folk religion is 0.93, suggesting that the two constructs are almost fully-overlapped. The correlation between the practices of Buddhism and Chinese folk religion is also strongly positive (r = +0.68). We also find a strong association between Buddhist belief and Chinese folk religious practice (r = +0.46), as well as between the belief in Chinese folk religion and Buddhist practice (r = +0.58). These associations between Buddhism and folk religion are not totally surprising. David Overmyer (1976) argued that Buddhism and Chinese folk religion had become essentially inseparable due to the fact that religious believers often believed and practiced both religions, and that most Buddhists in China could be called "folk Buddhists". Given that the beliefs and practices of Buddhism and Chinese folk religion are closely related, we, as discussed above, further examined the possibility of combining them together in an analytic model. However, results show that our proposed model fit better than the alternative model, suggesting that the latent constructs are best modeled separately.

Third, the belief/practice of Christianity are not found to be significantly correlated with the belief/practice of Buddhism. The correlation between Christian belief and Chinese folk religious practice is negative and statistically significant at 0.05 level, however, the size of the correlation is very small (i.e. |r| = 0.07), which is practically negligible. Such findings suggest that Christianity is categorically different from Buddhism and Chinese religion.

Table 4
Correlational relationship among various religious beliefs and practices (N = 7021).
Source: Chinese Spiritual Life Survey (CSLS) 2007

	Buddhist belief	Buddhist Practice	Christian belief	Christian practice	Folk religious belief
Buddhist Practice	0.73***	N/A			
Christian belief	−0.01	−0.04	N/A		
Christian practice	−0.04	0.00	0.77***	N/A	
Folk religious belief	0.93***	0.58***	−0.01	−0.02	N/A
Folk religious practice	0.46***	0.68***	−0.07*	−0.06	0.53***

Model Fit	
χ^2	1971.02 (df = 285, p = .00)
RMSEA	0.03; [0.03, 0.03]
CFI	0.98
TLI	0.98

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

5. Discussion

This study examines the relationship between the religious beliefs and practices in the Chinese context using structural equation modeling (SEM). Specifically, we focus on the correlation between Buddhist, Christian, and Chinese folk religious beliefs and practices. Our results reveal interesting patterns of Chinese religions, by strongly confirming the eclectic nature of Chinese traditional religions yet the exclusive nature of Chinese Christianity.

As shown in our analysis, Buddhist belief is highly correlated with folk religious belief, to an extent that they are practically overlapping. High level of Buddhist belief is associated with high level of folk religious belief, and vice versa. Although the correlation between the practices of these two religions is also significantly positive, the size is much smaller. The previous scholarship mainly focused on the common practice of the so-called "Chinese religion", such as observing *fengshui*, funeral practices, and worshipping various local deities (Freedman, 1974; Paper, 1995; Watson, 1988). However, contradicting to what previous research found, it seems that the common core of the Chinese religion, if there is any, is the belief rather than the practice.

In modern times, there have been movements to differentiate Buddhism from Chinese folk religion. Since the 1940s, some Chinese Buddhist leaders, such as the monks Taixu (太虚, 1890–1947), Shengyan (圣言 1931–2009) and Hsingyun (星云 1927-), have campaigned for "orthodox Buddhism" (正信佛教 *zheng xin fo jiao*) and have tried hard to rid folk religious beliefs and practices from Buddhists (Pittman, 2001). How much have they accomplished such a goal? It appears that despite the theology or classical texts/doctrines of Buddhism, many Buddhist lay believers and folk religion adherents remain to be undifferentiated in their beliefs. Undifferentiating beliefs could be a characteristic of polytheism. In Buddhism, there are multiple types of supernatural beings, including Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, gods, ghosts, and demons. Similarly, pre- and post-Buddhist Chinese traditional beliefs include multiple kinds of supernatural beings, gods, ghosts, spirits, and demons. Even though some modern Buddhist leaders have tried to purify Buddhism by purging non-Buddhist beliefs and practices, it may take many years or even generations to see effective achievements among the lay believers.

Among all three religions examined in this study, Christian belief and practice have the strongest correlation, reaching 0.77, suggesting that Christian belief and practice are most consistent. The correlation between Buddhist belief and practice is also strong and positive. Whereas for folk religion, the corrections between belief and practices is only 0.53, indicating its eclectic nature. What is interesting is that when examining the correlation between Christian belief or practice with the beliefs or practices of Buddhism and Chinese folk religion, we find no association (although the correlation between Christian belief and Chinese folk religious practice is statistically significant, the coefficient is very small). In other words, Christian belief or practice is practically independent from Buddhist/Chinese folk religious beliefs or practices. Knowing one's Christian belief or practice does not predict one's Buddhist/Chinese folk religious beliefs or practices, and vice versa.

Nonetheless, our findings clearly show the difference between Christians and others in their religiosity. Using measures of Christian religiosity, therefore, might not comprehensively capture the religiosity of Buddhists and folk religious adherents. Such findings lead to a fundamental question: in a religiously diverse society, is it appropriate to measure religiosity using the conventional "3b" measures generated based on Judeo-Christian religiosity? Our answer is No.

6. Conclusion

Using China as a case of religiously diverse society, our study suggests that the conventional measures of religiosity need to be improved when measuring religiosity in religiously diverse societies. Specifically, we analyze the relationship between Buddhist, Christian, and Chinese folk religious beliefs and practices. The results of our analysis have confirmed that religiosity is indeed multidimensional (Pearce et al., 2017). To capture such multidimensionality, we need survey data that have valid and reliable questions. Proposing valid questions requires survey designers and researchers to acknowledge the diversity of religious contours in contemporary societies as well as the specific cultural contexts. Reliability of survey questions are largely dependent on the number of

items measuring the specific dimension of religiosity. Using the conventional one-size-fits-all approach will likely reflect Christian norm and fail to reflect religious diversity. Using single questions on the religious "3b" will likely yield low reliability of the data in the religious diverse societies today. We suggest that survey researchers/administrators adopt multiple questions for different religions and different dimensions of religiosity in future surveys.

For religions emphasizing everyday practices rather than congregational practices, such as Buddhism, temple attendance is not a major indicator of religiosity. More appropriate measures about everyday practices should be included in future surveys, such as the frequency of burning incenses, reciting Buddhist sutras, wearing religious accessories or having religious images at home. For religions emphasizing orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, such as Daoism, asking the respondents to what extent do they believe in a deity might generate misleading results. Future surveys should pay more attention to practices associated with these religions. For religions that are diffused in secular life, such as folk religions, using religious belonging to measure religiosity makes little sense. Employing scientific methods in studying religion relies largely on data that contain appropriate measures for different religions. Inaccurate, misleading, or sometimes wrong results could be easily produced if the measures fail to capture the complex religious life in religiously diverse societies. The CSLS sets a good example of surveying people's religious life in religiously diverse societies by asking a series of questions pertaining to different kinds of religious beliefs and practices. These questions could be used in future surveys.

The CSLS 2007, however, did not contain sufficient measures of beliefs and practices for more religions, especially the beliefs and practices for Christians and Muslims. The existing measures were also insufficient for researchers to distinguish Catholics from Protestants. We were, therefore, unable to include more religions in the SEM models. Future surveys should consider including more appropriate and specific questions about specific religions that tend to be under-sampled. Moreover, due to practical difficulties, the CSLS 2007 did not include cases from Xinjiang and Tibet, where large numbers of Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists reside. In the case of China, although an increasing number of surveys about religion or that have questions concerning people's religious life have been conducted in the past years, some religious groups or regions are not well represented, such as Catholics in China or Muslims in ethnic minority regions. Our research, again, highlights the need of data with multiple questions measuring different dimensions of religiosity in the future.

Notes

1. Other folk religious practices include: fortune telling, including face reading and palm reading 算命, 包括看面相和手相; Feng Shui 风水; Asking for assistance from someone with supernatural abilities 求助于特异功能; wear red belt or red ribbon in "the year of your own" to ward off bad luck 本命年带红腰带或红绳; wear red clothing to ward off bad luck 穿红衣避邪.
2. Other gods or spirits include: the earth god (or locality god) 土地神, the god of the kitchen 灶王爷/灶神, the god of prowess关公, and/or the door gods门神.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2018.04.001.

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