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Folk religion as the "life-world": revival of folk beliefs and renewal of religious categorization in contemporary China

Shuai Chi[1,3] & Chao Liu[ID] [2,3 ✉]

Religious studies in the past paid more attention to the changes of institutional religion than to the status characteristic of folk beliefs. This paper argues that religious categorization based on institutional religion is not conducive to understanding the cultural and religious life of Chinese society, but rather leads to the stigmatization of folk religion and the reduction of the life-world. From this perspective, the historical development of folk religion affects the relationship between national elites, institutionalized religion, and civil society. Folk religion can be foregrounded and exerts great impact on the rise and fall of institutional religion. The folk religion revival in contemporary China and the development of related studies also promote the renewal of religious categorization. The revival of folk religion in the new millennium can consequently facilitate social integration and provide new possibilities for overcoming institutional religion's exclusiveness and for increasing the cultural diversity of Chinese society.

[1] School of Sociology, Nankai University, Tianjin, China. [2] School of Liberal Arts and the Xue-heng Institute, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China. [3]These authors contributed equally: Shuai Chi, Chao Liu. ✉email: zapiens@163.com

Introduction

The concept of folk religion has been historically formed.[1] In the course of its spread to other parts of the world, Western Christianity encountered not only other major civilizational frameworks (e.g., Chinese Confucianism and Taoism) and religions outside of Europe (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and so on), but also a large number of underlying folk beliefs[2] in addition to the officialy acknowldged ones. Folk religion, in contrast to institutional religion, is also known as the "diffused religion" (Yang 1967), a characterization employed to describe the Confucian characteristics of Chinese culture. With regard to folk religion, this article explores the cultural beliefs and practices of the Chinese masses in the context of Confucianism. As Yang argues, it is difficult to interpret the religious and cultural diversity of Chinese civil society in terms of institutional religion, and the understanding of folk religion in everyday life based on functionalism tends to ignore and separate the relationship between folk religion and institutional religion, failing to capture the exchange and interaction between elite and folk culture. The institutionalization of folk religion, as a sign of scientification and subjectification, does not fully reflect the life characteristics of folk religion. On the whole, folk religion is derived from the lifeworld (that is, the world of lived experiences by conscious beings) and has non-institutional, diverse, and complicated characteristics, reflecting lived attributes., Moreover, just as German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) critiqued positive science on the grounds of returning science to the life-world, the concept of the life-world may help us confirm the fundamental status of folk religion.

The concept of life-world

In *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936/1976), Husserl introduced the concept of "life-world" as a critique of positive science in order to both transcend objective science and positivism while also accounting for human consciousness and lived experiences. Life-world has three important characteristics.

First, life-world is characterized as non-subject-oriented. Husserl first mentioned in the critique of Galilean geometry that the life-world forms the basis of the meaning of natural science, and science derives from the self-evident life-world, which has been forgotten for a long time (Husserl 2001). It indicates the first important feature of the life-world, namely pre-scientific. Husserl argued Galileo's mathematization of nature and the technicalization of natural science focused heavily on the abstract form of science, while it obliterated people's intuitive experience and ignored the richness of the everyday life-world (Alltägliche Lebenswelt) (Husserl 1976, 49). The richness could be perceived in people's natural attitudes, and thus the life-world constitutes the background and field of science.

Second, life-world is characterized by subjectivity. The concept of life-world is based on Husserl's consideration of a transcendental phenomenology, which in principle opposes naturalism, positivism, and objectivism. Husserl restores the objective external world described by science to the scope of transcendental subject through phenomenology (phenomenologische Reduktion). To be more specific, starting from the subject's desire and attitude, Husserl discusses the life-world that constitutes the transcendental consciousness to enhance the form of science (Husserl 1976, 155). Thus, it is difficult to conceive of an objective world independent of the subject, and the world of contingent experience does not constitute the benchmark of science. It is also difficult to presuppose the perception and intentional attitude of the subject. This is structurally like the phenomenological reduction proposed by Husserl at the level of a transcendental

consciousness, such as the reduction of the object on which natural science is based, from intentional objects (Noema) to the so-called conscious activity (Noesis). In terms of the link between the life-world and the folk religion, the life-world is full of natural attitudes and presupposed consciousnesses of subject, more than acting as a platform for the reduction of positive or natural science, which ignores the intentional attitudes of the subject at the empirical level. Moreover, folk religion incorporates various religious consciousnesses, rituals and their practices as well as various forms of subjectified religion within itself and connects various social life needs.

Third, the life-world is also characterized by wholeness. The life-world does not exclude metaphysics, which in Husserl's view led directly to the subject-object dichotomy, but this does not prove that the idea of metaphysics is incorrect; on the contrary, Husserl hopes to reconstruct the metaphysical basis of science by placing science in the context of the more general life-world. In this way, the concept of life-world serves a transcendental philosophical purpose and thus covers the above-mentioned empirical world. This empirical world is based on the category of human transcendental consciousness. That is to say, the life-world transcends accidental empirical events and constitutes the object of transcendental consciousness. It is for this reason that the life-world can form the basis of science, providing science with a more solid source of meaning and legitimacy (Husserl 1976). Husserl's research on the broadening of the content and form of science shows the importance of the life-world in his later philosophical works, where its normative meaning can be used to modify the technicalization of natural science and be more prone to the meaning of people's lives.

However, Husserl does not give a clear account of the relationship between the transcendental and the empirical aspects of the life-world, and thus leaves a number of problems. The life-world is not the same as the social world because of its transcendental basis. Especially for Husserl, it is difficult to solve the intersubjective issue of the life-world; that is, how to establish meaning sharing between subjects to form a shared social world. It is argued that the cultural tradition of the life-world and its historical development process becomes difficult for Husserl to deal with when he discusses intersubjectivity (Zhang 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d). Husserl's life-world theory originally ignores the questions of history and practice, which are part of the empirical world. Husserl also remains concerned with the historical dimension of the life-world, but this dimension still remains transcendental and temporal (Gao 2002). Some scholars argue that Husserl's intersubjectivity cannot truly take into account the other, which always exists as "other self", and thus argue that a true "phenomenology of the other" cannot necessarily be established (Zhu 2008). The self cannot explain the other as intersubjectivity at the empirical level, and thus, it is difficult to justify the establishment of a social world. Therefore, the establishment of a social world on top of the life-world becomes problematic. Considering the existence of the other as an empirical fact is developed by later scholars.

In light of this, subsequent scholars have expanded the empirical space of the life-world. Habermas's theory of communicative action, for example, bridges the gap between the life-world and the social world. The communicative action he refers to is an action of communicative subjects that seeks to solve the problem of intersubjectivity in the life-world, achieving mutual understandings between subjects (Habermas 1981). Habermas inherits Schutz's ideological transformation of Husserl's life-world, which transitions from the subject's a transcendental consciousness to an intersubjective space of shared meaning, which is accomplished through knowledge sharing, personal

biographical situations, and the empathy of communicative subjects (Schutz 2001). While Husserl believes that the life-world with a pre-scientific feature could provide the basis of meaning for the natural sciences, Habermas seems to be less interested in the relationship between the life-world and science, and more concerned with reconciling the so-called objective, subjective, and the social world.

Habermas's attention to the life-world mainly serves his normative issues. From his perspective, due to the system composed of capital and power colonizes the life-world, the system that originates from the life-world gradually breaks away from the meaning norms of the life-world. This frustrates the rationalization process of modern society. Therefore, it is necessary to straighten out the relationship between the system and the life-world from the perspective of communicative rationality. Communicative rationality can be used in all aspects of the life-world, which can be roughly divided into personality, culture, and society. From the perspective of intersubjectivity, individuals socialize through symbolic communication, and learn cultural traditions and social norms. These three aspects correspond to the subjective world, the objective world, and the social world (Habermas 2014), and the life-world extends through communication.

These three aspects constitute the life-world but also relativize it. It is argued that Habermas excluded the philosophy of consciousness and completely unified the subject and object in the traditional sense in the "life-world" (Xia 2006, 42). The dimension of social world added to the so-called subject-object world helps build his theory of social integration, providing the basis of meaning for the rationalization of the social world. However, Habermas's usage of the life-world risks omitting the fundamental dimension of the life-world (a priori "Lebenswelt" in Husserl's sense). Moreover, Habermas pays less attention to the communication between different religions, as communicative action presupposes an ideal situation of a rational secularism. It depends on philosophical debates of rational actors, while non-rational components of the actors, such as religious faith and affections, also play a key role in the communicative process. As a consequence, the life-world in his conception is relativized without a priori meaning.

The revival of religion in many regions is also a reminder that religious and cultural practices are also reshaping the landscape of the life-world, which also affect the normative and meaningful foundations of the life-world. Some scholars have referred to Christianity as a religion of reason and have attempted to show through social sciences studies how those monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, would have an advantage in religious competition with its exclusive tensions, thus arguing that the road to modernity necessarily requires the rational guidance of monotheism (Stark and Finke 2000; Stark 2008).

In view of religious practice in East Asia, Religious Market Theory suggests that Chinese folk religion, known for polytheism, will gradually decline. In fact, the development of folk religion is also testing the explanatory power of the theory. On one hand, the definition and theory of religion based on Christianity profoundly influenced religious practices and religious changes in China in the 20th century, though folk religion was continuously rejected. On the other hand, it does not seem to prevent the overall revival of folk religion, and to some extent, it indicates the global cultural change under the background of pluralism. Many scholars point out that Chinese society experienced anti-religious and anti-superstitious movements in the late Qing and Republican eras, which incurred a great damage to the survival of religion (Shen 2006; Poon 2011; Wu 2022). In the construction of modernity and political power, the modern recategorization of religious practices and people during the Nanjing Decade

(1927–1937) of Nationalist rule in China affected the religious lives and physical order of local communities and dismissed religious associations as a dangerous realm of "superstition" (Nedostup 2009). During the Cultural Revolution all religious sites were closed down, converted for secular uses, or converted to museums for the purpose of atheist education. However, religion has still survived and thrived in China since the beginning of the Reform Era (Yang 2011). Although religions in China experienced a process of state-driven secularization, there has been a vigorous revival of religious life, a rapid growth and development of folk beliefs and practice in contemporary China (Yang 2008; Madsen 2011). This calls for a new paradigm to examine the concrete situation of Chinese religious practice, such as the modalities of practicing religion and the recategorization of religious terms, as religious pluralism in China cannot be explained by monotheistic models or institutional religions (Chau 2011; Palmer 2019).

Given the profound theoretical significance of systematic colonization of the life-world under the conditions of modernity, it is helpful to understand the complex process and experience of folk religion adapting to modernity from the perspective of life-world. After undergoing the reshaping of religious and scientific discourses in a specific period, folk religion is sometimes subjected to the scope of religious examination or sometimes marginalized. The restructuring of religious discourse in the context of secularization has further compressed the living space of folk religion. The richness and freshness of the life-world in this sense have been constantly eroded. Because of its rich soil, folk religion seems to have been able to withstand various pressures from the upper system and become rejuvenated in the new era by virtue of its own diverse characteristics.

Self-construction of folk religion as the life-world
Folk religion as life-world balances the dual needs of the sacred and the secular. Folk religion embodies the practicality, practice, and sacredness in the social life of the masses. In general, folk religion is also subject to scientific and political scrutiny for the strong secularism in pursuing the practice of faith life. In the history of anti-superstition, the scientific identity represents the moral subject and the superstitious identity represents the immoral or amoral "other" in the "scientific and metaphysical debate" (Wang 2022). Folk religion often turns into so-called superstitious activities under practical pursuits. However, such activities more or less point to metaphysical and transcendental needs. Meanwhile, folk religion may become the basis of folk beliefs because of its utilitarian solid and materialistic nature. These characteristics also reflect the versatility and wholeness of folk religion and reconstruct folk beliefs as the life-world in the new era.

First, folk religion practices constitute the basis of faith for Chinese life-world in the new era. The sociability of Christianity, which emphasizes the tension of exclusivity, does not prevail in comparison to the sociability of folk religion which accounts for the majority of people in the Chinese society. In other words, folk religion comes from folk beliefs and culture, and it ideologically belongs to unofficial culture. Most people are likely to participate in various forms of folk religious activities, such as peasants supporting the primary forms of folk religion. According to a 2007 survey conducted by Dataway on "The State of Chinese Spiritual Life," 85% of the Chinese population over 16 years old hold some supernatural beliefs or engage in religious activities (Yang 2012). According to a Gallup poll in 2014, 61% of Chinese people consider themselves strong atheists, while only 7% are religious. According to the 2018 World Values Survey, just 13% of Chinese adults consider religion (zongjiao 宗教) "very

important" or "rather important" in their lives, while it is quite different once the definition of religion is widened to include survey questions on spirituality, customs and superstitions (Pew Research Center 2023).

These figures may show a contradictory and considerable ambiguity between the so-called religious and non-religious populations. In other words, it depends on whether it is measured by formal or informal religious identity. China is the least religious country in the world, yet the everyday lives of many Chinese people who do not claim a religion are more religious in their practices than in their identities or beliefs. This distinction reflects the challenges of measuring religion in China. For instance, in China, folk religion such as the belief in religious figures or deities is more common than formal religious identity, when religion is broadly understood, as the lives of most of the Chinese people are permeated with informal religiosities (Hackett 2023). The criteria for formal conversion to institutional religion is not suitable for measuring the exact number of religious believers in China, as so-called committed atheists also have various religious elements mixed into their personal lives. It is also easier to understand the state of Chinese spiritual life from folk religion, which mixes religiosity and secularity, uniting the sacred and the secular in one's life-world. Most people's lives involve various aspects of folk religion. Their life-world constitutes a significant feature of Chinese society and culture and is inseparable from various rituals, temples, family systems, and various concepts of ghosts and gods, including a myriad of complicated rituals activities.

Second, the concept of folk religion can essentially be used to analyze the world in which most people live. For example, Freedman's (1999) study of religious clans in southeastern China investigates and interprets the relationship between folk religion rituals and civil society. In Freedman's view, Chinese religion is difficult to separate from Chinese society and culture, so it is helpful to propose a concept of Chinese religion, which intentionally clumps together the complexity and heterogeneity within Chinese religion (Freedman 1999), thereby artificially systematizing it and adding unity and compactness. Chinese religion becomes similar to the concept of Hinduism, although folk religion may replace this designation since it can embrace the folk religion of most people and connect the various rituals and family societies described above. It follows that the study of folk rituals and concepts forms an essential basis for understanding folk religion among Western sinologists and anthropologists.

Third, the belief rituals of folk religion constitute the practical basis of the life-world. The practical nature of folk religion represents the self-evident nature of the life-world. Husserl's philosophy of the life-world seems to be restricted within a transcendental category of consciousness. In contrast, within the conception of the life-world expanded by later scholars, the life-world also gradually penetrates to the practical level, while history and practice also provide a theoretical reference for the practical nature of the life-world for subsequent studies. For example, some scholars have tried to establish a relationship between the phenomenological approach and the strengths of Marxism in history and practice (Zhang 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d). The emphasis on the practicality of folk religion contrasts with the textual system of institutional religion, as Zhou's study highlights the practical characteristics of folk religion that are different from textual religion (Chau 2006). It thus emphasizes more on rituals rather than texts because folk religion focuses more on religious practices and rituals transmitted orally through legends and folk tales, while the latter makes more use of the classical and theoretical teachings of religion and pays more attention to the classical transmission of cultural forms while focusing less on religious practice and rituals. These practical features of folk

religion constitute the empirical basis of folk religion because researchers and practitioners pay special attention to folk religion's practical activities, which constitute a realistic starting point for their research interests and religious practices. In the absence of texts, the rich practical content of folk religion becomes a vital basis for sustaining the renewal of forms and the dissemination of contents, and the folk religion created by practice thus forms the basis of people's life-world. Some scholars have pointed out that the most common believers were not concerned with worldviews, and religion was simply a taken-for-granted part of everyday practice (Cao 2010, 23). However, believers in the upper class who defend the religious tradition are more concerned about the strictness and systematization of its doctrines, and the abstraction of religious doctrines is especially vague in folk religion, because the ghosts, gods, rituals, and beliefs of the folk are vivid and concrete, and the contents they carry are rich in intuition, which does not exceed the understanding ability of religious practitioners. In other words, these rituals and concepts are very easy to use and see in daily life.

Fourth, the pragmatic nature of folk religion suggests that it is difficult to be simply explained by the current categorical paradigm of religious studies. Lin's (2014) study of the conversion of belief from witchcraft to deity rituals in Pucheng Village, Cangnan County, Wenzhou, demonstrates the spirituality of folk religion. In other words, people participate in belief activities to pursue a practical effect, such as whether the rituals are numinous (ling 灵) or not. In Chinese terms, the numinous (ling) evokes a miraculous response (ganying 感应) (Murray 2014; Kieschnick 2003). Many Chinese folk religionists see God as a divine being and hope that their wishes will be answered. Although some people do not understand the doctrine, they hope that believing in religion will keep them safe and cure their diseases (Gao 2005). Therefore, the pragmatic nature is the first manifestation of folk believers' pursuit of spirituality in belief and practice, constituting a fundamental characteristic of Chinese folk religion. As Vincent Goossaert argues, "ling" becomes an essential criterion for religious specialists to judge their participation in religious practices as well as an indispensable reference for religious authorities, including that of charisma (Goossaert 2008). In addition, Chinese elite religions attach importance to "sheng" (圣) as a criterion for religious practice and the emphasis on "sheng" seems to have shifted away from the folk reliance on miraculous effects such as magical powers and ling to more personal cultivation. In contrast, the reliance on "ling" in folk religion reflects its greater emphasis on the external effects of religious functions. The reliance on "ling" reflects its emphasis on the external effects of religious functions (Dean 1998, 58). To some extent, this is because the external effects seem to satisfy more intuitive instincts and life needs for the people, and it is the basis of meaning in their daily lives. The problem of whether "ling" is effective or not has also confronted many religious practices since the Reform and Opening-up, but supernatural powers and efficacy pursued by religious practitioners may impact the social order, such as the problems brought about by the 1980s and 1990s-era qigong fever. As a kind of unofficial religious practice, qigong's practicality often leaps out of the monitoring scope of natural science and ideology, and also elicits criticism from official religious discourse. The practicability of folk belief inevitably challenges the systematic classification schema of scientific research.

Finally, in the current categorical system of religions, it is difficult to answer the question of what status and value folk religion has in China. This question, in fact, examines the subjectivity of folk religion. In terms of Yang's distinction between the categories of institutional and diffused religions, the subject of Chinese religion does not have an evident institutional character like that of Western religions. When examining the diffusion of

Chinese religion, such as the relationship between the Confucian belief in destiny and traditional culture, establishing the subjective value of folk religion is of great significance to understanding the development of Chinese religions (Liu, 2014). Moreover, folk religion influences foreign religions after they enter China. As Cao (2010) summarizes the subjectivity of religious practices in China by contending, "Treating Chinese Christians as subjects of local cultural knowledge producers rather than passive recipients would give us a new perspective to study the dynamics of religious change" (Cao 2010, 24). This is because since the Cultural Revolution, when Christianity went deep into the mainland of China, it was combined with folk religion, and even became a part of it. Christian doctrine, organization and worship serve the needs of people's life-world. Christian symbols and folk beliefs were combined to reorganize the reproduction of meaning. Therefore, this kind of folk religion reflects the local nature of Chinese religious practices. The opposite view also makes sense in that folk religion does not have fixed doctrines and organizations per se but can absorb and digest numerous religious elements, thus inventing numerous forms of religious activities (Weller 1987). Some scholars have interpreted this unity and diversity of folk religion as a pragmatic characteristic of Chinese religion, and this pragmatism comes from the constructive nature of folk religion. For example, scholars have examined different constructive forms of folk religion based on a comparative study of Mazu (Godness of the Sea) beliefs in Tianjin, Fujian province, and Guangdong province. By reviewing relevant research perspectives, scholars have summarized two modes of folk religious practices, holistic and individual, representing different processes of religious construction and providing new perspectives by combining macro and micro dimensions (Zhang and Li 2016).

The practical characteristic of folk religion also derives from this subjective constructive nature. For example, Chau summarizes five models of religious practices in Chinese history: the discourse/scriptural model, the personal cultivation model, the ritual model, the immediate spirituality model, and the relationship/conversation model. Chau points out that these models do not exist independently but rather intersect and influence each other (Chau 2011). The religious practices that occur are more likely the product of a combination of factors, and it is difficult to discern the characteristics of folk religion simply from the perspective of closed subjects. Sun (2019) suggests that there exists not a single ecological system of Chinese religious life, but a set of linked ecologies (in Andrew Abbott's terms) that are loose in overall structure, where people are integrated in a complex ecological system of religious texts, sacred sites, ritual objects, and develop varieties of ritual habitus, ethical outlooks, and spiritual connections (Sun 2019). Thus, folk beliefs of the "linked ecologies" display a ritual rationality and undergo a process of differentiation and reintegration. This constitutes Chinese religious traditions for a majority of Chinese people. Meanwhile, communication and exchange between folk religion and larger traditions are maintained all the time, and the diversity and practicality of folk religion are reflected in the process of its dynamic construction.

Folk religion renews religious categorization
Folk religion as a category has a broad meaning mixed with different elements of religious rituals and beliefs, including constrastive units such as ancestor veneration, divination, mythology, healing practices, family religion, mortuary ritual and seasonal festivals, etc. In this sense, folk religion as a category "functions more as a contrastive notion than as a constitutive one" (Teiser 1996, 21). This is because folk religion covers potentially significant variation beyond "typical," "standard," or "traditional"

types of common religions as supposed by Western scholars. What Western scholars have called "syncretism" cannot fully reflect the exact situation of Chinese folk religion. Although Berling argues Chinese folk religions are largely syncretic religions, he admits that "Syncretism has often been viewed as perfidious, random, corrupting, or superficial" (Berling 1980, 4). This is because revealed religions such as Abrahamic religions are usually reluctant to use this label to incorporate different beliefs and practices. Other scholars stress that the description of the interactions among Chinese religions as syncretic requires careful consideration because "it prejudices our ability to appreciate the character of Chinese religious experience as distinct from European" (Brook 1993, 14). The failure of Western theories to capture Chinese experiences lies in the historical and contemporary diversity of Chinese institutional religions and folk religions, in addition to pan-Chinese quasi-religious practices (Woo 2019). As Goossaert acknowledges, "these issues are very important and worthy of interest in themselves, they have to be understood in a wider context which takes in the totality of religious realities in China, including those we in the West do not see because they fall outside our representations of what is religious" (Goossaert 2005, 13). This goes far beyond the context of academic debates and displays the complexity of religion regarding its definition. Accordingly, the diversified characters of Chinese folk religions are helpful for us to renew and reexamine religious categories.

The renewal of religious categories comes first and foremost from the reconstruction of the relationship between religion and science. The essence of religion is faith, while science lays emphasis on empirical proof. However, religious faith goes beyond the rational inquiry or calculations of empirical proof. Folk religion comes from the life of the masses, and the scientific study of religion often fails to grasp the life experience of folk religion. Theoretical explanations concerning the life-world as discussed above have difficulty in establishing a valid connection between life experience and transcendence, while some scholars like Habermas lack a consideration of the nature of religious issues. In this regard, Durkheim (2016) presents the elementary form of religion through the study of religious life. In explaining the basic forms of religion, Durkheim keenly grasps the relationship between religion and science as well as their living properties. As he notes, "Generally speaking, we will first see an idea system corresponding to a certain object among those theorists who strive to make a reasonable explanation of religion" (Durkheim 2016, 575). It follows that the scientific study of religion as an idea system has a variety of explanations, and that one can hardly clearly explain the emotional experience of religion in terms of one idea. This calls for an answer to a fundamental question, "Can religion reconcile itself with science?" (Durkheim 2016, 575–576) If one must consider the intuitive feelings of the believer, it is easy to find religious emotions that come from the life experiences of the believer. According to Durkheim, "The function of religion is to motivate us to act and help us live on" (2016, 575–576). This also responds to the above statement of the relationship between religion and science from the perspective of life.

In Durkheim's view, science and religion originate from social life. Science gradually strips away from the conceptual system of religion, leaving the action part to religious practice because life is the ultimate and most basic need of people. The idea that science will gradually show its strengths in building a system of ideas is based on Kant's dichotomy between nature and freedom. Specifically, nature belongs to the object of scientific research, and freedom belongs to the field of human practice, which is the space of religious belief. Durkheim contends both science and religion come from life, no matter that he believes in the compatibility of

religion and science or not, because "the reason why we think science is valuable is that we collectively form this concept according to its nature and its role in life; That is to say, it expresses a state of public opinion. In fact, in all social life, science is based on public opinion" (Durkheim 2016, 603). So, it demonstrates that worship and belief are based on science for self-development. It also shows the fundamental urgency of life, for science is the means of life and the life-world is the basis of science. Science comes from public opinion, which can be taken as its own research object, but its basis is also based on public opinion. This kind of opinion illustrates that science comes from life experience and does not have the objectivity beyond ordinary people. However, public opinion comes from people's daily beliefs and practices, and the correctness of science is tested by this public opinion. Durkheim's theoretical analysis of religion is based on his historical investigation of primitive religion, which profoundly reveals the social origin of religion and sorts out the evolution of the relationship between science and religion from a general perspective, which also provides us with a social life perspective for understanding the characteristics of folk religion.

At the practical level of social life, the reconceptualization of folk religion of the life-world has important reference value for our understanding of the revival of folk religion in the process of modernization. The above conceptual compendium of the life-world shows that the life-world is pre-scientific, non-subjective, and presents the natural attitude of humans. Meanwhile, life-world is critical and normative because it forms the basis of science and systems. This kind of normativity seems to be more urgent in modern society. Contemporary society is "scientifically advanced," as some scholars have pointed out, but why do religious rituals that lack a "scientific" basis (Liang 2014) still exist? This question asks why folk religion has not declined in the process of modernization. To answer this question, it seems necessary to re-examine the soil of folk religion and its characteristics.

The study of folk religion has continuously presented the diverse characteristics of folk religion. For example, Adam Chau and other scholars' case study of Hei Long Da Wang Miao 黑龙大王庙 (The Temple of the Great King of the Black Dragon) demonstrates the process by which folk religion gained legitimacy (Zhou and Zhang 2014); Zhang's study of the relationship between folk religion rituals and beliefs shows the empirical nature of folk religion (Zhang 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d); Lin's study of the conversion of belief activities from witch craft to deity rituals in Pucheng Village, Cangnan County, Wenzhou, demonstrates the spirituality of folk religion (Lin 2014). The empirical and spiritual characteristics contribute to the complexity of folk religion and illustrate why it can exist tenaciously in the context of modernity. These studies examine folk religion as a topic, demonstrating the empirical richness of folk religion cases and, equally important, revealing the nature of folk religion and their changes in the context of modernity. The above characteristics of folk religion demonstrate the modern practice of folk religion as a life-world.[3]

Folk religion, as a religious category, has undergone a complex historical construction process. Research on the historical genealogy reveals that folk religion has a history of more than two thousand years in China (Ma and Han 2014). First, folk religion was not independent during the long period of development. Some scholars have pointed out that "'Folk religion' was not even an independent category in ancient Chinese culture" (Li 2008, 36). It suggests that folk religion did not have much independence even before the arrival of Christianity. Xu's study on typologies of secularism in China regarding superstition, religion and secularization shows the complexity of non-Western belief systems (Xu 2023). Secondly, folk religion was gradually conceptualized as a

subject; that is, just as the concept of religion was formed after the entry of Christian missionaries into China. In the course of global expansion, Christianity has encountered different forms of civilization, and gradually transferred Christianity as the concept prototype of religion to other corners of the world. Western missionaries, diplomats and travelers coming in Late Qing China labeled folk religion and its practices that contradicted modern Western sciences and technologies as "superstitions" (Wu 2022). It is used to describe civilizations or cultural forms similar to or different from Christianity, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. As in Weber's comparison of world religions based on economic ethics, these comparisons belong to the same category, although Weber does not recognize Confucianism as a religion.

Folk religion has been rooted in the Confucian tradition of China in a long time. Li explores the close connection between the official Confucian classics, sacrificial rites, and the local folk ritual system in in regions south of the Yangtze River. Li suggests that "the folk religion that evolved from the Confucian ancestral ritual system is the source of faith in modern Chinese religion" (Li 2017). This statement shows that folk religion is involved in the relationship between folk culture and elite culture. Although Weber's study of Confucianism was influenced by the Dutch sinologist J.M. de Groot, Weber was not able to separate folk religion from Confucianism.[4] Furthermore, folk religion touches upon the boundaries of the religious categories set by institutional religion. Neither the theoretical comparisons mentioned above nor the collisions between different religions in practice seem to be as intense as the conflict between folk religion and institutional religion since modern times. The main reason is that folk religion seems to have difficulty being placed in the same religious category parallel to other religions, especially since the religious views of Christian missionaries have seriously influenced the perception of folk religion.

The rise and fall of folk religion and the processes by which they are perceived are intertwined with the logic of power and intellectual categorization, under the influence of science and Christianity. Studies on state-religion relations in modern China shows a drastic change of religious policies and categories in the late 19th and 20th centuries (Goossaert 2006; Poon 2011). Goossaert and Palmer point out that the religious field in modern times has broadly formed a triangle of religion, superstition, and science, with non-institutional religions that do not fit the Christian definition being expelled from the religious category (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). Moreover, superstition has been defined further from the original Confucian basis, as the construction of scientific discourse further exacerbates the tensions between these concepts and their practices. This triangle has largely dominated the perception of religion in China, with the exception of Buddhism, which has reluctantly achieved a religious status similar to that of Christianity as an institutional religion, and other forms of faith that seem to struggle to achieve the same level of legitimacy. The religious nature of Confucianism was debated endlessly, and Confucianism was adjusted both actively and passively in response to the transformation of the family and state system.

After meeting setbacks to form the Confucian Churches in the early years of the Republic of China, Confucian Churches were forced to disperse and became what Duara called redemptive societies, which had the characteristics of institutional religions but also had strong folk and moral dimensions (Duara 2003). Similarly, Taoism had difficulty in asserting its legitimacy in the face of dominant scientific and religious discourses because of internal complexity. Since the May 4th Movement, scientific discourse has gained a strong ideological position across China, and many people are eager to promote the authority of science,

but also advocate the exclusion of traditional folk religion from the religious field in the name of "superstition" without distinction, depriving folk religion of its legitimacy. Along with the anti-religious and anti-superstitious movements started by Chinese political regime, arguments between science and metaphysics among intellectuals also aimed to construct a modern scientific identity with anti-superstitious discourse (Wang 2022). The triangle of religion, superstition, and science is used to find out why folk religion has been under constant attack in the anti-superstition movement. Guided by a new logic of categorization, power and knowledge have triggered a new collision, breaking down the old belief system and reshaping the Chinese lifeworld and religious categorization.

On the other hand, the conceptualization of folk religion stands out as a topic due to the research interests of Western missionaries and sinologists. In contrast to the Jesuits who focused on people in the upper classes, the Protestant missionaries seemed to have been more concerned with religious activities with "people in lower class" and tended to study folk religion as a topic, although many did so mainly to facilitate their missionary work. However, Western scholars, including sinologists, have gradually separated Chinese folk religion from their traditions through the so-called modern scientific method in recent years, distinguishing between major and minor traditions (Redfield 1956). Scholars desire to endow folk religion with independence and highlight that folk religion cannot simply be equated with "superstition" (Li 2008), so it becomes a significant turning point for folk religion. For example, in *The Religious System of China*, de Groot distinguished folk religion and it gradually developed into an accepted concept (Groot 2017).

This view contradicts some scholars who have adopted the classical religious classification system because they believe that folk religion cannot be treated as independent religions due to their lack of complete doctrine, rituals, and practices. Those scholars seize on the point that folk religion lacks systematization, so they are reluctant to put folk religion on par with the traditional Chinese "three religions" — Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Overmyer 2005). Zhang argues that even the folk religion that had gained an independent status has been marginalized in modern history due to Western missionaries' initial holistic rejection of all Chinese folk religions, as manifested by Freedman's comment on Chinese religions (Zhang 2016). Wang refers to Overmyer's view on Chinese folk religion and explains that the taxonomic character of the concept of Chinese folk religion makes it possible to refer to both unofficial secret sects and the formal textual traditions of Taoism, Confucian philosophy, and Buddhism in dispersal forms (Wang 1996; Overmyer 1993). This points to the diffused character of folk religion, which cannot simply be subjected to research methods similar to those of institutional religion, but also has the potential to be viewed as an independent category because of its nature.

In summary, folk religion is in people's life-world, and it did not become a subject before the emergence of modernity; that is, it was not studied independently as a religion according to the standards of modern science at that time. Folk religion has elements of folk belief and involves the folk form of institutional religion. Because folk religion constitutes the fundamental factor for the survival of institutional religion, it is also under attack by the dominant discourse framed by Western cultural characteristics, which fails to fully understand folk religion's form and essence. Science seems to have difficulty categorizing folk religion, and folk religion thus loses even more space for defense of its rationality. From the perspective of folk religion's genesis, folk religion as a life-world constantly questions the rationality of the religous categorization, where power and scientific knowledge

constitute a new system that reconstructs religion as an category of institutional discourse.

The legitimacy and vitality of folk religion in the new era

Folk religion has a more syneratic nature compared with exclusivist beliefs and institutional religions. Scholars point out that "it tells us what much of Chinese religion is not like, rather than spelling out a positive content" (Teiser 1996, 21). Compared to institutional religion characteristics, folk religion speaks of its composition in a more negative way. As Wu (1996) summarizes, folk religion has ten "No's." For example, folk religion has no fixed organizations like churches, no sublime objects of worship like God, no supreme authorities like religious masters, no sects, no complete ethical or philosophical systems, no professional clergy, no precepts, no rituals, no fixed religious places, and no clear religious consciousness like other religions (Wu 1996, 2). The above statements do not explain the essential characteristics of folk religion. In fact, and perhaps ironically, folk religion has all the religious factors listed above. Although folk belief lacks the support of systematic institutional organization and religious rites corresponding to institutional religion, it does not hinder the basic fact that folk belief has become the basis of religion because of its richness and diversity.

The normativity and legitimacy of folk religion are reflected in Chinese religious practices and in the paradigm shift of Chinese religions, and this paradigm shift should combine religious life and society as a whole. Some scholars have pointed out that Yang's division between diffused and institutional religions is focused on the static composition of religion due to its functionalist orientation, so it is hard to explain the religious changes in China. They therefore have proposed the concept of "embeddedness" as a theoretical attempt to understand the process of interpenetration between religion and society in China (Liu 2014). The concept of embeddedness comes from Karl Polanyi's theory in *The Great Transformation* and is used to explain that the relationship between social and economic activities also affect economic development and social operation. It can also show that folk religion in the Chinese religious context is inseparable from the changes of modern Chinese society. Those living souls that support folk religion constitute the life-world of civil society and those power systems that dominate Chinese social change act as systems that profoundly influence and facilitate such social change. Folk religion comes from the life-world and life-world is subject to the domination of the system, suggesting that in the process of modern transformation, folk beliefs are easily influenced by some scientific system and power discourse and may lose their inherent richness. This process indicates that folk beliefs, whether subjectified or not, may conceal their subjectivity and intricate interconnection with the outside world. This kind of subjectivity and interconnection are testing the legitimacy and vitality of folk religion at the theoretical and empirical levels.

The development of folk religion in the new era contributes to our understanding of the vitality and legitimacy of folk religion in the context of modernity. Many scholars have noted the difficulties encountered by diffused religions in modernization and secularization in China. Specifically, folk religion in recent history has been constantly questioned by institutional religion, ideology, and the discourses of power and science. China's modernization and transformation has posed the problematic task of discursive renewal and categorical reconstruction for Chinese religions. As Goossaert points out, "the bifurcation (imposed from the top down) of the Chinese religious tradition between acceptable 'religions' and condemned 'superstitions' had a profound impact on subsequent research" (Goossaert 2006). Li argues that folk

religion cannot be equated with superstition, as done by Christians in the early days and later a dominant theme in the modernization discourse. Nowadays, folk religion contributes to the understanding of cultural diversity, multicultural exchange and communication between religions in the era of globalization (Li 2006). The identity-based framework of institutional religions cannot reveal the diversity of religious experiences in China. Further, folk religion is deemed as the basis for communication among religions because it has multiple roles in modern society that contribute to cultural diversity.

Within a ritual rationality framework concerned with linked ecologies of religious practice, it may become possible to ask what it truly means for humans to be religious and to pray in the twenty-first century (Sun 2019). This is the case for folk religion in China. Some scholars also contend that folk religion is the basis for the balanced development of the five major religions in China from the perspective of religious ecology because Chinese folk religion often integrates multiple religions, and their multi-denominational polytheism enables the five major religions to coexist in harmony and develop together (Zhang 2012). The above statement suggests that folk religion can gain legitimacy in modern society because it can help lubricate the relationship between different religions and cultures and promote the intermingling of multiple cultures. From a life-world perspective, folk religion plays a role in harmonizing the relationship between institutional or official religions and helps people to reconceptualize the practical effects of elite discourse as a systemic presence.

Along with the development of folk religion, the study of folk religion will also broaden people's understanding of the relationship between religion and society. Jin thought that the trend of folk religion would be toward decline as it failed to be nourished by "theologization" and became increasingly vulgar in the dimension of "secularization" (Jin 1990, 249-250). This foretells that folk religion will be unsustainable under the conditions of modernity. In the new era, Jin (2008) changes his position and believes that folk religion can contribute to theoretical research on religion and change the one-size-fits-all view of folk religion, which are both folkloric and religious in nature. At the same time, folk religion is now undergoing the process of "revival" as a type of cultural reproduction, conducive to forming several "middle-level theories" by combining universal theories with local knowledge (Jin 2008).

We are now living in an era of folk religion which is multivalent, practice-oriented, and fluid. According to the "Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents" survey, 87% of the Chinese population are overwhelmingly nonreligious, while at least 75% of people in China perform some combination of rituals (Sun 2019), indicating that folk religion has been given more affirmative value in the new era by scholars of religious studies. Many scholars have argued that folk religion and its rituals are locally alive and need to be placed in the tradition of Chinese civilization and the whole society from a cultural perspective. In the new era, folk religion as an intangible cultural heritage begins to receive attention, as not only the so-called "living fossil," but also an important part of culture and society. Therefore, the study of folk religion helps to understand the changes in society, and "its value and significance go far beyond academia" (Fan and Chen 2013). This change in attitude toward the study of folk religion has been accompanied by a comprehensive revival of folk religion in China, a field regarded as a "persistent problem" in the history of modern China's scholarship. Zhang argues that this phenomenon is also due to Western missionaries' initial wholesale rejection of Chinese folk religion. However, the reality of the revival of Chinese folk religion shows that folk religion is closely related to the daily lives of ordinary people and will not be weakened by the neglect

of established religious categories. Therefore, Zhang advocates correcting the strong tendency of rejecting folk religion under the influence of the "Western religious concepts and religious views" and considering folk religion rooted in the Chinese cultural and religious background as "the most universal, authentic, and fundamental religious and cultural tradition" (Zhang 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2016). Consequently, Zhang demands that folk religion should have been given a proper position. These studies also illustrate that the academic innovation of folk religion helps people update the categorization of religion and re-understand contemporary Chinese society, especially that folk religion has shaped the life-world as the foundation of cultural traditions. Consequently, many scholars have recently emphasized folk religion's value in understanding the operation of Chinese society and religion (Fan and Chen 2013; Jin 2008; Li 2006).

The fundamental status and vitality of folk religion also play a vital role in rationalizing the relationship between folk culture and elite culture. This relationship implicates cultural interactions between different religions, civilizations and countries, issues involving political and ideological authorities, as well as the degree of openness. Moreover, folk religion refers to the religion of the lower classes as opposed to that of the elite (Teiser 1996, 21). This position may highlight distinctions in styles of religious practice in Chinese traditions, but it ignores the contributions of the elites who excavate the folk religious heritages to advance Chinese civilization and modernization. Meanwhile, the diversity of folk religion should be stressed as it plays an integral role in the Chinese society and cultural strata. Recent studies contribute to "a concern not only with the 'folk' as opposed to the 'elite,' but with how to integrate our knowledge of those two strata and how our understanding of Chinese religion…has begun to change" (Teiser 1996, 22; Lopez 1996).

On one hand, religious practices of folk religion do not exist solely in folk culture. The problem of resolving the tensions between different religious value systems is a challenge for all, and efforts made to this end by experts advocate communication between religions. For example, Don Cupitt, who holds a non-positivist view of religion, proposes the "Religious Supermarketarket Theory" in which people can choose religion as freely as they choose goods in a market to resolve the value conflict of identity (Zhu 2017). Indian thinker Raimon Panikkar, for example, has multiple religious identities: Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and secularist. Religious communication for people in the upper class requires different institutional religions to hold open positions and avoid preconceived closeness and exclusivity, which is both theoretically tricky based on the doctrines of institutional religions and practically occurring in the new era of globalization.

On the other hand, social integration facilitated by religion within the same state also faces the problem of how to reconcile elite culture and folk culture. When it comes to cultural beliefs and national identity in contemporary China, Li and Guo argue that China, where multiple cultures have coexisted for a long time, lacks an authentic foundation of sacredness and social practice supported by faith, and therefore national identity is a complex issue (Li and Guo 2016). From the perspective of folk religion, it does not necessarily represent a disadvantage for China's national identity. Folk religion plays a fundamental role in the life-world, and national identity does not become fragmented by relying on the support of folk culture. On the contrary, Prasenjit Duara argues that China is lucky not to have been dominated by faith-based communities from the perspective of modern politics. He argues that China has historically been relatively untroubled by the politicization of faith communities; whereas, in other countries and regions of the world, the struggle

between church and state could often be a big problem. While acknowledging the crucial role of the masses as believers in the construction of communities, Duara argues that the more critical aspect of dealing with religious issues is the so-called vertical integration within social integration, which entails resolving the conflict between elites and folk religion (Duara 2011). Comparing the different modernization paths in India and China, Hinduism in India is consciously responsible for maintaining a national identity as the state religion, but it is also difficult to avoid the potential conflicts between different religions. Duara finds that Chinese folk religion is vibrant because of the efficacy of inter-changing between the orthodox teachings maintained by the state and elites and folk culture, thereby coexisting, adapting, and adjusting to each other. China applies its traditionally established authoritative role to delineate good from evil and to exclude local religious practices that challenge the central power for its own ideological and power-order considerations, mainly because Chinese cultural tradition monopolizes the transcendental value authority of "heaven."

Those who take Chinese folk religion as syncretic religion should pay more attention to the diversity of folk beliefs and the difference between syncretists and sectarians. Some scholars conceptualize three types of folk religion: communal, sectarian, and individual, claiming that different types of folk religion may have different social functions and divergent trajectories of change (Yang & Hu 2012). Although it seems that Chinese folk religion may be largely catogerized as a syncretic religion, some authors insist that the sectarian movements also play a role in shaping the contour of Chinese religion and politics (Weller 1982, 463–483; Groot 2022). Due to social changes incurred by these sectarian movements, newly-emergent teachings are always dismissed as heresy or heterodox beliefs by the state in history. If the role of the state as the arbiter of religion is to be recognized, then the value of civil faith to the state needs to be reassessed. Duara places considerable value on the "vertical integration" of religion, as it aims to reconcile folk religion with elite traditions and the state. Folk religion plays a fundamental role in this kind of integration, first by facilitating the interaction between elite and folk cultures, which has a long history. The formation of the Sanyi Cult (Sanyi Jiao 三一教) in Putian, Fujian Province explains how a typical folk religion facilitates the development of a syncretic religion (Berling 1980; He 2011). It also shows that elite systems can be folkized. In Freedman's view, elite and folk cultures are based on common ground and represent two inter-translated versions of one religion (Freedman 1999, 23).

Likewise, the state's management of elite and folk culture should pay attention to the coordinating role of folk religion. Overmyer partially answers this question in his study of Chinese folk religious denominations by arguing that the tendency of traditional Chinese official institutions to classify many folk religious sects as heretical and illegal stems from the suppression of folk faith by Confucian bureaucratic ideology for fear that folk sects might impact the social order. Overmyer's research aims to show that folk religion is not so much political as it is organized more from custom and the needs of people, for which he changed the term "secret society" to "fraternity of worship." All of this study is intended to illustrate the multiple positions of folk religion in Chinese society and thus emphasize their role of peace in politics (Overmyer 1993). However, it is not necessary to avoid the possibility that folk sects may play a role in times of dynastic change, as folk religion has both political and religious orientations in addition to its folkloric character. Due to the diverse orientations and functions of folk religion, nowadays the adherents of folk religion still substantially outnumber the believers of institutional religions in Chinese societies (Yang and Hu 2012). So, it is necessary that governments pay attention to improving

the means of regulating folk religion. In Fan and Chen's view, the attitude and approach of the Chinese government to the management of folk religion continue the management of institutional religions but lacks the means to manage folk religion with "diffused" characteristics, resulting in a situation in which the government recognizes the legitimacy of folk religion but has difficulty in placing it in a proper social context (Fan and Chen 2013). In general, the revival of folk religion and its research significance have been re-recognized due to the change of the relationship between politics and religion and modernity in China. Folk religion helps to coordinate the relationship between the institutional religion and various everyday "superstitions," which is of great significance to integrate the social elite with the ordinary people and to improve their life-world as a whole.

Conclusion and epilogue: the revival of folk religion from a pluralist perspective

From the perspective of pluralism, Chinese folk religions are more than syncretic religions which have integrated different elements of institutional religions in the long history of China. On one hand, as claimed by scholars, "religious pluralism produced both broad waves of religious interaction and religious thinkers who were selfconsciously syncretists" (Berling 1980, XIII). Folk religion offers a broad space for the evolution of institutional religion. On the other hand, it is argued that "the concept of syncretism not be permitted to monopolize the full range of possible mixings that occur between distinct religions in a religiously plural society" (Brook 1993, 14). Lin Zhao-en's Sanyi Cult may be the case of syncretic religions, in the sense of the interaction and integration of the three teachings in unity (sanjiao heyi), while folk religion may also evolve into a sectarian movement or insititutional religion in certain times.

The above discussion leads us to notice two critical historical phenomena. First, folk religion is also being institutionalized under the conditions of pluralism. Meanwhile, due to the reality and theoretical problems of the dispute between gods, institutional religion is also facing the trend of fragmentation. These important characteristics of Chinese folk religions can be analyzed through the metaphor of "linked ecologies" of pluralistic beliefs and practices. From the life-world perspective, folk religion has been influencing the construction of elite discourse and promoting the continuous renewal of religious categorization. Moreover, while the life-world has been "systematically" transformed, folk religion has not lost its intrinsic vitality. On the contrary, it has been "revived." In terms of developing folk culture and facilitating people's lives, folk religion can, to a certain extent, support the space for institutional religions to communicate in the context of globalization. Some folk religious practices are being institutionalized, and mainly reflected in "redemptive societies." These folk groups actively absorb traditional religious elements such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and maintain a strong morality for the purpose of salvation (Palmer 2011). This institutionalization also leads to the emergence of Confucius churches founded by intellectuals in the early Republic of China.

Second, folk religion also has a prominent utilitarian and pragmatic dimension, especially in the diffused folk religion groups and their activities. However, folk religion does not entirely abandon the pursuit of transcendental values, which tends to blur the dimensions of the sacred and the secular and express itself in an inner transcendental way. To a certain extent, it can be said that institutional religion comes from folk religion, and folk religion is institutionalized when the conditions allow. Folk religion thus originates from the life-world with its original

meaning and, therefore, the institutionalization of folk religion reflects the systematization of the life-world. As an important element of cultural tradition, folk religion facilitates the social integration of the life-world with elite discourse and the state system.

Nowadays, the fragmentation of institutional religion is also an important social phenomenon as institutional religion is undergoing social restructuring under the condition of the battle between gods. This includes not only the mutual integration of Chinese traditional religions, such as the religious beliefs of many Buddhists in Beijing mixed with many other religious elements (Badham 2007), but also the influence brought by the spread of Christianity in China. According to Gao, "the large container of folk religion continues to break down, absorb, and transform the ideas and even teachings of various religions, such as the reincarnation and karma of Buddhism, the immortals and ghosts of Taoism, the ethics and morality of Confucianism, so as to make them popular and well known to the public" (Gao 2005, 51). It has brought about what Taylor calls "a secular age," which does not exclude religion but instead provides people the freedom to choose their religious beliefs from a variety of secular and religious cultures (Taylor 2007). Peter Berger thought that it was the secularization process at first (Berger 2011) and then all kinds of religions appeared to be reviving all over the world later, including but not limited to Christianity (Berger 1990). Both secularization and religious revival are supported by the so-called popularization of religious beliefs and the development of folk religion, because folk religion involves all aspects of social life for most people, and the practice of various religions hardly requires people to live according to the systematic norms of a particular religion. Scholars such as Talal Asad, Robert Weller, Kenneth Dean, and Diana Eck have argued, "a conception of religion that assumes the exclusivity of belief, conversion, and membership cannot capture what is distinctive about Chinese religions in particular, and Asian religions in general. The time has come for a more post-Eurocentric analysis of a non-monotheistic religious world, starting organically, from within" (Sun 2019, insert page number). Field studies have confirmed that the practice of folk religion in daily life has linked various religious systems and that even the so-called institutional religions have difficulty asserting their exclusivity in the lives of their communities. The promotion of cultural pluralism in modern society can draw on the integrative character of folk religion, as it facilitates the spread of cultural pluralism among different religions and reduces the exclusivity of exclusivist characters (Fan and Chen 2013). In other words, it brings religious practices back from the system to life-world. The doctrines and canons of institutional religions need to consider the diversity of folk lives, and thus folk religion contributes to the renewal of religious categories.

A complete definition of religion essentially connects a systematic worldview through consistent doctrines, orders, organizations, and systematic lifestyles, requirements found attractive by a very small number of religious elites. In a sense, secularization and disenchantment of religious values in this era may bring about relativism and nihilism in faith. To overcome these negative consequences, people likely need to reconstruct faiths, while various religious fundamentalists and extremists wait in the wings to intertwine with the ideologies, values, and interests in the new age. Habermas advocates the development of communicative rationality in the post-secularization era and promotes communication between different religions and secular cultures (Habermas 2008). In fact, this is a potential strength of Chinese folk religion, which maintains its richness and imagination even in a course of demystification, and thus enables itself to link the sacred with the secular and to expand the ken of modern society. At the same time, the complexity and diversity of folk religion

suggest that it not only serves functional needs, but also constantly seeks various meanings and transcendent values in daily life practices, a phenomenon that precisely reflects the rationality of folk religion in life-world. Folk religion carries various spiritual and religious developments and transitions and reveals them in the secular life, just like the rapid development of new religious movements since the secularization of Europe.

Notes

1 The historical composition of folk religion is the history of concept and its development process of folk religion (Ma and Han 2014).

2 This article does not strictly distinguish between folk belief (民间信仰) and folk religion (民间宗教), because they almost bear the same meaning in the Chinese context. Considering the idiomatic usage based on sociological and anthropological fieldwork, (民间信仰) folk religion seems to be used more frequently, perhaps because it reflects that scholars pay more attention to its diffusion. Therefore, folk religion is not strictly regarded as a type of religion (Liu F 2014). Some scholars believe that folk religion is difficult to separate from folklore and religiousness. Meanwhile, folk religion has both internal divisions and complex external relations, like other religions (Jin 2008). Some scholars have also investigated the modern practice of folk religion, conclusing that folk religion refers to two aspects — politicality and religiousness — and has the potential of politicization and religionization respectively (Li 2008, 36). The above discussion shows the complexity of folk religion. This article views that the definition of religion is extremely vague, so people cannot draw a clear line of the subjectivity and the scope of each religion in practice. Therefore, folk belief (民间信仰) and folk religion (民间宗教) can be understood as one category because they both contain elements in other religions, and it is feasible to adopt "folk religion" from the perspective of life-world. Some scholars also adopt the concept of folk religion to help explore folk activities (Chen 2020; Lin and Chen 2014; Zhang 2020). The aforementioned studies demonstrate customs and rituals of folk religion, and combine its beliefs and practices from the perspective of traditional life.

3 My understanding of category is based on Durkheim's analysis of category in class logic. Category, as a distinction between framework and content, provides a possibility of continuous expansion, which can far exceed the object range we get from direct experience or similar experience. In the *Original Classification and The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, the category of classification is a logical symbol. With the help of the category of classification, we can think about those similar things or analogical things differently (Durkheim 2016, 200).

4 Compared with Freedman and Marcel Granet, de Groot, as a Dutch missionary, understood Chinese culture from the lower culture to the upper culture. Initially, de Groot paid attention to the traditional culture of elite classic structure, and later gradually turned to folk religion (Freedman 1999). Consequently, de Groot also tried to provide a comprehensive analysis of Chinese religious culture from top to bottom. Weber's analysis of Chinese Confucian and Taoist culture is carried out in the form of orthodoxy and heresy, and largely refers to de Groot's literature (Weber 1968).

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Informed consent

Informed consent was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Chao Liu.

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