1 Introduction

1.1 The Issue and Significance

This Element relates the history of Western Protestant missionary writings about Chinese beliefs and religions from the standpoint of their Christian background in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It investigates the historical and cultural context in which the Westerners came to terms with Chinese divine beings and gods when they arrived in China, which was, at that time, a collapsing traditional Asian empire. On the one hand, the Catholic missionaries continued the Jesuit tradition of seeking the historical roots of the Abrahamic "One God" in Chinese religions. On the other hand, the Protestant missionaries reinterpreted the Chinese pantheon and beliefs from the perspective of Protestant Christianity. With broader engagement with Asia in the nineteenth century, these Western missionaries also attempted to trace the theological and religious connections between China and West Asia, especially Persia, in light of the unilineal evolution theory of civilization. Many of the issues these missionaries addressed regarding Chinese religions laid the foundation for the modern study of Chinese religions and even East Asian religions. This Element analyzes this crucial yet underdeveloped chapter in the contemporary intellectual history of theology and faith across the Eurasian continent.

The study of Chinese religions is now often regarded as part of Chinese studies, or East Asian studies, that are classified as area studies or international studies in the contemporary college curricula in the United States. With the development of postcolonial and postmodern theories, the critical evaluation of the formation of the discipline in Europe and the United States has led to more nuanced investigations into the historical, cultural, and ideological contexts in which certain important subjects and themes were developed at the formative stage of the discipline. Contemporary scholars are now beginning to interrogate from different perspectives the definitions of many terms in the study of Chinese religions. Today very few scholars would use the term "Chinese religion" rather than "Chinese religions" to describe the spiritual reality in China, given that most scholars now view China as a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious nation. Though the current state government of China only recognizes the legal status of five religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestant Christianity), China is a vast nation with numerous other types of beliefs, rituals, and practices. Multiple ethnic groups and communities have lived their own religious lives on the ground or in the closet, using their languages, worshipping their gods, reading their texts, and performing rituals.

Nevertheless, monotheism as a modern concept and a Western construction has been a significant issue in the study of Chinese religious traditions since the

seventeenth century. Given the contemporary reflexive scholarship, decolonizing knowledge has become a trend in some modern humanities disciplines. In dealing with monotheism in Chinese religions, we cannot separate it from the larger historical and cultural context behind the rise of religious studies as a modern humanities discipline. Guy C. Stroumsa attributed the rise of the modern approach to religious phenomena to three major historical events. The first was the Great Discoveries that brought the people and religions of the New and Old worlds, especially the Americas and South and East Asia, to light; the second was the Renaissance, which generated the Western interest in antiquity and the growth of modern philology that led to the publication of major religious texts from various classical and "oriental" languages; the third was the religious wars that took place across Western Europe in the wake of the Reformation, leading Europeans to turn to the non-Abrahamic religions in the Orient.[1] Tomoko Masuzawa notes that both anthropology and oriental studies played a significant role in the introduction of numerous religious traditions beyond Europe.[2] In many publications on religions that appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christianity was first listed in opposition to paganism and idolatry and was then labeled as a universal religion, unlike many other religions such as Confucianism, Daoism, Shintoism, and Brahmanism that were classified as national religions.[3] Whether or not our understanding of Chinese religions is Eurocentric or Christianity-centric, we have inherited numerous terms and concepts from those forerunners who gave birth to the field of Chinese religions, especially Western missionaries.

Contemporary scholars in Chinse religious studies often face multidimensional challenges, such as the sources and fieldwork, academic training, and cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. When they attempt to dialogue with their predecessors in the field, they might share some common ground with these forerunners, including the use of some concepts and terms developed by these forerunners, even though these concepts and terms are historically imbued with ideology. For example, the words such as "Buddhism," "Confucianism,"

[1] G. C. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 5–6.

[2] T. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15–18.

[3] For example, R. Adam claimed that there were four major systems of religion: Judaism, Paganism, Christianity, and Mohammedism; see his *The Religious World Displayed* (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne for Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1808); W. S. Lilly categorized six major religious traditions in the *Sacred Books of the East* into national or tribal religions and universal religions. Buddhism and Islam were regarded as universal religions, along with Christianity. However, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Brahmanism were listed as national religions; see Lilly, *Ancient and Modern Thought* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), 108–109.

and "Daoism" were invented in the nineteenth century and are believed to have appeared out of the Christian missionaries' assumptions based on their thoughts on Christianity. Confucianism as a term was invented by the missionaries because they thought that it was a philosophical and moral system centered on Confucius, which was similar to Christianity as a religion, centered on Christ. The Christian missionaries saw Buddhism as a system centered on the Buddha – though they thought it should be called Dharmism since the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, was the center of this tradition in its early stages. Similarly, in Christian missionary writings, Daoism was once called "Laoism" as a system centered on Laozi (Old Master) and Islam used to be called Muhammadism, a religion based on Muhammad.

As a modern humanities discipline, religious studies first appeared as comparative religions in Europe, focusing on the comparative studies of Christianity and other religious traditions. Then the history of religions appeared as an alternative approach to the religious traditions across the world. While modern scholars from Europe turned to study other religious traditions, they first examined some key themes that they were more familiar with in European history, such as God, the national religion, the state religion, and death and the afterlife. European scholars wondered if there was one true God in traditional China, a national religion for the Chinese nation, a state religion for the Chinese state, and death and afterlife in the Chinese religions.

The concern of many Western missionaries and scholars in Europe and America in the nineteenth century when dealing with non-European religions was with monotheism and polytheism. Regarding China, the Western missionaries attempted to ascertain whether monotheism had already existed in ancient China, because if it had, it might lay the foundation for the Chinese people's acceptance of Christianity as monotheistic (Christ as the only true God). For Christian missionaries, all doctrines such as ontology, eschatology, truth, creation, and salvation lead to the ultimate question about God. Therefore, looking for the one, true God or making sense of God, or the gods, became a central issue in the missionary understanding of Chinese religions. In brief, these missionaries understood the history of Chinese religions or teachings in the framework of Christian time. For them, if there was a tradition of a one, true God in ancient China, it would mean that this idea is universal and China could fit into the time framework of Christian theology.

The sources in this book are mainly drawn from the published writings of the nineteenth-century missionaries to China. Although the Catholic missionaries, especially the Jesuits, provided the basis for understanding Chinese religions, the Protestant missionaries produced far richer writings on Chinese philosophies and religions, based on both their experiences in the

field and their reading. Unfortunately, in the nineteenth century modern archaeology was not yet well-developed in China and the oracle bones and bronze inscriptions had yet to become significant sources for understanding ancient Chinese religions. Once archaeological excavations began to take place, they changed our understanding of religious life in ancient China significantly.[4] For example, the discussion of the Great One (*Taiyi*) who gave birth to water began to flourish once the relevant text was discovered from the Guodian tomb, but it is completely missing from the writings of those missionaries.[5] Nevertheless, Western missionaries left numerous writings and records about China. As Anna Johnston noted, "British Protestant missionaries were prolific writers. Diaries, reports, letters, memoirs, histories, ethnographies, novels, children's books, translations, grammars, and many more kinds of texts spilled from their pens."[6] She emphasized that these texts are crucial to understanding the cross-cultural encounters. Indeed, the Protestant missionaries in China sent numerous reports and letters back to their home churches, addressing various mission and life issues and telling their stories in China. For example, Jane R. Edkins (1838–1861) sent many letters to her father from China. After her death, her father wrote and published her biography, along with her letters.[7] These letters become important sources of understanding her life in China and her encounters with Chinese culture. Some of the letters documented how her husband, Joseph Edkins (1823–1905), taught Chinese Christians theology and studied Chinese Buddhism and Daoism. The London Missionary Society also issued many publications for its members and subscribers, among which were the monthly *Chronicle*, quarterly *Missionary Sketches*, and yearly *Reports to the Directors*.

In Asia, the Protestant missionaries published a large number of pamphlets, tracts, journals, magazines, and translations of the Bible. Many debates on the translations of the Bible appeared in the missionary magazine *The Chinese Repository* in the 1840s following a missionary conference in 1843. More discussions were published in the *Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal*. Many Protestant missionaries published their essays, letters, reports, and

[4] M. Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998).
[5] K. Holloway, *Guodian: The Newly Discovered Seeds of Chinese Religious and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); M. Puett, *To Become a God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 160–164.
[6] A. Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire: 1800–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3. For a general introduction to the sources on Christianity in China, see R. G. Tiedemann ed., *Christianity in China, Volume Two: 1800–Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1–92.
[7] J. R. Edkins, *Chinese Scenes and People* (London: James Nisbet, 1863).

articles in these publications. The editorial and conference committees from the missionary conferences in Shanghai in 1877, 1890, and 1907 published the records or reports of these conferences. Some missionaries also published a large number of tracts and pamphlets in Chinese while working in China. William Muirhead (1822–1900), a London Mission Society missionary who spent more than half a century in Shanghai, published a Chinese book in Japan in 1879, with a concise introduction to five religions in China – Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestant Christianity. Most of these pamphlets were tracts targeting Chinese Christian audience; they were full of simple and concise statements rather than articulated discussions. Nevertheless, the Protestant missionaries often published lengthy books to elaborate on their field experience in China and their views on important issues about Chinese thought, geography, religions, and political institutions. Many of these missionaries later became Sinologists who engaged with the European and American scholarship on modern oriental studies or religious studies. Their discussions on Chinese religions combined both their Protestant Christian perspective and the scholarly orientation of modern humanities. Therefore, in this Element I will pay more attention to the writings published by Protestant missionaries that elaborated and articulated their ideas and discussions on monotheism in China in the context of both the intellectual history of Christianity in China and the history of modern humanities.

More specifically, some of the British and American Protestant missionaries became the first generation of Sinologists to occupy faculty positions in British and American higher education institutions. My analysis will pay special attention to those missionaries-turned Sinologists for their contributions to the study of Chinese religions as a new field in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because they bridged not only the gap between the Christian theology and Chinese thought but also the gap between the religious studies as a new discipline in modern humanities and the oriental studies that denoted the European and American understanding of the so-called oriental civilizations and religions. While dealing with the non-Abrahamic religions based on newly uncovered manuscripts and artifacts, the Western forerunners of religious studies often raised the issues on key concepts in Abrahamic religions, such as monotheism.

This study aims to shed new light on the rise of Chinese religious studies as part of modern humanities in the nineteenth century and its Western and Chinese historical and cultural context. It also offers a new global perspective on the cultural encounters between the Westerners and Asian religions, philosophies, and societies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally,

hopefully it will invoke more discussions on modern colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism by focusing on religion and philosophy.

1.2 The Structure

Section 2 examines the Westerners' intellectual journey of discovering the Thearch/God in ancient Chinese civilizations. For Christian missionaries, all doctrines such as ontology, eschatology, truth, creation, and salvation lead to the ultimate question of God. Looking for the true God or making sense of the gods became a central question in the missionary understanding of Chinese religions. Since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the forerunners of the study of Chinese religions, especially Jesuit and Protestant missionaries, started asking if there was a God in the ancient Chinese belief systems. When Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and Guilio Aleni (1582–1649) came to China, they encountered seventeenth-century Neo-Confucianism. The Neo-Confucian thinkers directly exposed these Jesuits to the Great Ultimate (*Taiji*) concept as the origin of myriad things. However, by tracing the historical roots of the concept of the Ultimate in Chinese civilization, these Jesuits attempted to find the similarity between the Catholic God and the Thearch (*Shangdi*, Lord of the Heaven or the Sovereign on High) in ancient Chinese tradition, not the Great Ultimate (*Taiji*). These missionaries also argued that some Confucian thinkers believed in an immortal soul. However, when they read the Neo-Confucian writings, they found that the Neo-Confucian thought did not represent the original, "pure" Confucianism in ancient China. Therefore, these Jesuits attempted to identify the Thearch in ancient China with the God in Catholicism.

Western missionaries realized that the Thearch and Heaven held absolute power and ultimate authority in the Chinese Empire. Through the ages, the Chinese state developed a set of rites for offering sacrifices to Heaven to receive rewards and blessings. The missionaries began to link this religious system to the European concept of a state religion. Even before the first Protestant missionary, Robert Morrison (1782–1834), arrived in China in 1807, the British ministers tried to identify the religious ideas and practices carried out in the court of the Chinese empire as the state religion. As early as 1795, the British scholar William Winterbotham (1763–1829) proposed that the Chinese state religion was kind of primitive worship that could be found in the practices of the emperor, officials, and gentlemen (Confucian *junzi*). Furthermore, he identified the object of this worship as the Thearch (*di*), a free, intelligent Being and an all-powerful, avenging, and rewarding Spirit. He explained that over the ages, the Chinese emperors, as the high priests, all worshipped this Being. After Morrison came to China, he also became interested in the idea of a state religion

in China. In 1834, he published an essay claiming that the Chinese state religion did not have doctrines for teaching, learning, or believing. He noted that this state religion included a set of rites and ceremonies, and it was mainly a bodily service. He pointed out that the state code of rituals institutionalized this Chinese state religion. However, as an increasing number of British missionaries came to China, they began to debate the question of a state religion in China – a debate that also continued among the other missionaries who came to China in the late nineteenth century.

Section 3 addresses the Western missionaries' rediscovery of monotheism in the what were known as the "Three Teachings" (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism) in China. Some of the critical issues in the writings of the Western missionaries about Chinese religions were connected to their understanding of monotheism and polytheism. The study of the ancestral cult and ancestral sacrifice also led to studying the ideas about death, the afterlife, and immortality. The missionaries' concerns about death, life, and afterlife in Chinese religions nevertheless came from their understanding of eschatology in Christianity. In 1859, William Dean suggested that Confucianism was the state religion in China and that it was a kind of theism, despite the fact that Confucius did not recognize God or immortality. The idea of Confucianism as the state religion of China flourished among Western missionaries in the nineteenth century, with filial piety and the ancestral cult as their main concerns. Joseph Edkins (1823–1905) suggested that Confucius and Mencius followed monotheism because they focused on ancestral cults but remained silent about traditional astrology, five-phase philosophy, and other folk beliefs. He also noted that Liezi as a "Laoist" (Daoist) thinker believed that there was a God in the world and the *Book of Liezi* recorded many dialogues between Liezi and God. Many missionaries addressed the idea of immortality, a crucial issue deeply rooted in the Christian discourse of monotheism, as it appeared in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. J. Dyer Ball connected the ancestral cult in ancient Chinese religion with the idea of the soul's immortality, which may have paved the way for accepting the Buddhist concepts of heaven and paradise.

Section 4 examines how the missionaries discussed Chinese monotheism along the Silk Road and built a connection between it and Indo-European civilizations. The nineteenth century witnessed the growing interest of European scholars in non-Abrahamic religions across Asia. Many missionaries seemed to believe that numerous religious traditions in Asia shared the theory of revelation, and that there might have been a unilinear development of religious traditions across the continent. Moreover, they assumed that the ancestors of a number of philosophical and religious traditions in East Asia could be found in

some of the more ancient traditions in West Asian civilizations, such as Babylon and Persia. To prove these assumptions, they turned to Indo-European historical philology and comparative religions.

Western explorers and archaeologists discovered and collected a large number of manuscripts and inscriptions from various parts of Asia. The scholarship on these manuscripts and notes uncovered along the Silk Road revealed various religious traditions of Asia, both living and dead, such as Zoroastrianism, Mazdaism, Manichaeism, Nestorianism, and the more well-known traditions, Buddhism and Judaism. In attempting to spread the new knowledge about these traditions and respond to Western readers' growing interest, Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) launched the enterprise of compiling the fifty-volume work, *Sacred Books of the East*. One of the most critical contributors was Joseph Edkins, a prolific Sinologist who had spent many years in China as a missionary. Edkins published many works that discussed Chinese and Persian religions' shared origins in light of Indo-European historical philology and comparative religions. He was particularly interested in whether there was an indigenous monotheism in ancient China and Persia. He attempted to build connections between the Chinese Thearch and the Persian Ahuramazda, and between China's six divinities and Persia's six ancient gods of water, wood, fire, metal, earth, and animals. Furthermore, Edkins traced the Chinese religion back to 3000 BCE Persia because he believed that he had discovered some common features in the ancient Chinese and Persian religions: dualism in the Chinese classic the *Book of Changes*, and dualism in Persian Zoroastrianism; offerings and sacrifices to the high mountains in ancient China and Persia; the five elements in both Persian and Chinese philosophies; and the twelve constellations in Babylonian tradition and zodiac theory in China. His study benefited from James Darmesteter's (1849–1894) work on the old Persian text *Avesta*, but he discussed the impact of Zoroastrianism in China and Japan. Hampden Coit Dubose (1845–1910), an American Baptist missionary active in China, continued Edkins's discussions on the internal connections among the different religious traditions in Asia. He further traced the origins of dualism in Manichaeism and its association with Buddhism and Daoism. Other missionaries were also interested in connecting the Chinese religions to those of South and West Asia.

Chapter Four investigates how missionaries developed the theory of motheism's degeneration into polytheism in Chinese history. Matteo Ricci first presented the theory that the Chinese religious tradition began with monotheism, but later it experienced a process of degeneration that led to polytheism. Some Protestant Christian missionaries echoed this idea. In the late nineteenth century, many missionaries began to discuss the degeneration of Chinese religion and mainly