

**A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF  
ATHEISM AND RELIGION IN CHINESE NEWS MEDIA:  
1978-2011**

by  
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*To Haitao, Irene, Andrew, Isabella,*

*With love and appreciation*

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## ABSTRACT

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Title: A Content Analysis of the Representation of Atheism and Religion in Chinese News Media:  
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This dissertation aims to fill in the lacuna left by previous research of empirical and systematic examination of atheism vis-à-vis religion in China. Moreover, I intend to reckon with the puzzling discrepancy between high proportion of self-identified atheists and high percentage of religious believers and practitioners among mainland Chinese. Through quantitative content analysis of the representation of atheism and religion in the official newspaper, the *People's Daily*, and the commercialized newspaper, *Southern Weekend*, and comparing and contrasting the representation of two particular religions, namely, Buddhism and Christianity in the *People's Daily*, I demonstrate that as the tonal uses, interplay of secularization and desecularization trends over time, and framing of religions effectuate the configuration and reconfiguration of the relative meanings and locations of atheism and religion in the symbolic realm of media representation in reform-era China, the transfiguration reveals to the audience the discursive instability and fluidity underlying the concepts of “atheism” and “religion.” I argue that the Chinese party-state’s pragmatism and commercialized media’s commitment to modern journalism are among the major enabling factors for the discursive practices of the news media that we see. As atheism and religion are both embraced and contested, albeit differentially, in symbolic representation by the news media, it facilitates the Chinese’s self-identification as an atheist and simultaneously believing/behaving as a religionist, in spite of the apparent logical incongruity in the double-identity.

## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction and Background**

The social scientific study of religion in China has seen modest growth over the past three decades. Though much more research is needed, a wide range of topics related to religion has been covered (e.g. gender, conversion, culture, national identity, political economy, and subjective well-being, etc.). Church-state relation is a particularly salient issue that has attracted relatively extensive scholarly attention (DuBois 2005; Dunch 2008; Dunn 2008; Goossaert 2006; Jaschok 2003; Kung 2010; Kupfer 2004; Lambert 2001; Leung 2005; Luo and Andreas 2016; Mair 2013; Palmer 2009; Potter 2003; Schak 2011; Seiwert 2016; Sun 2017; Tong 2010; Vala 2012; Vermander 2009; Welch 1972; Wenger 2004; Yang 2006, 2007, 2012; Yü 2011).

However, one gap in academic investigation of religion in China remains unfilled. To date, not a single academic publication has specifically addressed the question of atheism in China. This gap looks particularly conspicuous when one compares related scholarship on China and the former USSR. Volumes of books based on empirical research have come out on atheism in USSR (e.g. Froese 2008; Peris 1998; Powell 1975; Shirley and Rowe 1989), while none exists on China. Some sociologists would probably argue that such a lack of attention is simply an honest reflection of the fact that atheism in China has never been promoted with as much tenacity, aggressiveness and extensiveness as in their Soviet counterpart (e.g. Froese 2008; Lee 1965). Christopher Marsh (2011), for instance, asserts:

Despite, or perhaps because of, the confidence each had in the truth of Marxism and its destiny to prevail over religion, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) never carried out a comprehensive and intensive program to promote atheism. In comparison with the Soviet Union, when it came to atheist propaganda efforts, the Chinese fell far short of their comrades in the USSR. While the Soviets had gone to great lengths to promote atheism, including mass publishing, adult educational programs, required college-level courses, even cinema, China's communists never

ran any atheist promotion campaign or put into place a comprehensive program to promote atheism among the masses (173).

This sweeping characterization of atheism in China is premature at best, as there has been no systematic study of it, or simply untrue, as many people living in Chinese society would attest to the ferocity of atheist campaigns in China.

Indeed, ample evidence indicates that atheism, or to be more precise, secularism of an anti-religion type, has been part and parcel of the nationalist ideologies propagated by avant-garde intellectuals and the nation-building states alike in the perpetual quest for modernity since the end of the imperial China. The Chinese communists were a late comer to the game (e.g. Duara 1991; Goossaert 2006; Li 2001; Nedostup 2001, 2010; Veer 2011). In the literature review section, I first offer a brief review of the history of Chinese communists' atheist and anti-religion propaganda.

Moreover, the most comprehensive survey of mainland Chinese's spiritual life reports a striking discrepancy: while 58% of Chinese surveyed in the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents (Horizon Co., N=7021) self-identify as atheists, only 15.4% of the respondents can be considered "pure atheists" in the sense that they do not hold any religious beliefs or conduct religious practices listed in the survey (Yang and Lu 2010). The large discrepancy between the high proportion of self-identified atheists and the low percentage of "pure" atheists is reflective of the efficacy and limits of official atheist ideology at one and the same time, when it is read against the backdrop of societal desecularization (Yang 2004). To understand why so many Chinese are able to live with this logical incongruity, we need to better understand the dynamics between atheism as political ideology and the social-political processes. Following Karpov's injunction to examine the interplay of secularization and desecularization in the supra-individual

domain of symbolic representation, this study focuses on the coverage of atheism and religion in news media in post-reform China.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

This study does not discuss the work and evolving forms of the Communist Party organs and government bodies that are responsible for organizing the propaganda network, on which plenty of ink has been spent (e.g. Akhavan-Majid 2004; Brady 2006, 2008; Chan 2007; Shao, Lu and Hao 2016; Stockmann 2013; Stockmann and Luo 2017; Zhang 2011). Instead, against the backdrop of the changing dynamics among the party-state, media, and the market (Zhao 2000a, 2004, 2008), this study looks at media products, specifically, newspaper articles in reform-era China in order to answer the following questions:

- 1) What has representation of religion been like in official newspapers? How much negative, positive, or neutral representation of religion is offered?
- 2) What have been the patterns of atheist propaganda in the official news media?
- 3) Can a trend toward desecularization or secularization be identified in the symbolic representation of religion and atheism in official newspapers?
- 4) Are different religions treated the same or differently in their representation in the official newspaper?
- 5) What has the representation of religion been like in commercialized newspapers? Is their representation more negative, neutral, or positive toward religion?
- 6) What patterns of secularization and desecularization can we detect in the representation?

### 1.3 Conceptual Framework

What can help explain the confluence of a high level of religiosity (85%) with a high level of identification with atheism (58%) among the Chinese? Most researchers of forced secularization in the former Soviet Union and its Eastern European bloc countries tend to treat individual-level religiosity and atheist identity as a zero-sum game, just like the atheist proselytizers under their examination (e.g. Froese 2004, 2008; Froese and Pfaff 2005). That is, if one is religious in any sense, one cannot be an atheist at the same time, and vice versa, since by definition an atheist denies the validity of religion. However, the Chinese case does not fit into this logic. While it is possible some Chinese self-identify as atheists for the reason that it is the politically correct and/or socially desirable thing to do, this explanation leaves unsolved the puzzle of why they are willing to admit to religious involvement at all. In the United States, for instance, religiosity and spirituality are regarded as highly desirable characteristics. In survey research, this may lead to the social desirability bias where respondents exaggerate in their responses to empirical assessments of religiosity and spirituality (Hadaway, Marler and Chaves 1993). That is, they tend to self-report higher levels of personal religiosity and religious involvement than they actually adhere to. We can say that in this case the discrepancy is a matter of degree. In the Chinese case, however, it is not. The incongruity is conceptual, as atheism and theism are logically antithetical. Thus, the social desirability bias is not adequate to explain the Chinese case. We need to look elsewhere for illumination.

Indeed, reality on the ground suggests that it is not unimaginable to be both religious and atheistic at one and the same time. Froese (2005) observed that Muslims in the five Soviet Republics of Central Asia were able to claim atheist identity without having to renounce Islam. Froese noted several major enabling factors. The first was the nationalist aspirations of the Central Asian countries to modernize their societies. Central Asia's Islamic leaders saw Soviet



intervention as a favorable opportunity to help actualize their hopes. Soviet Russia provided resources to industrialize Central Asian countries' economy, establish public education system, and train skilled workers, among other things, which soon brought them ahead of other countries in the Islamic world in terms of economic and technological development. Moreover, Central Asia's Islamic leaders also saw Soviet Russia as an ally in the ideological resistance to Western imperialism. Furthermore, Islamic elites in Central Asia came up with ingenious interpretations of the coercive measures used by Soviet communists to force secularization upon their societies, so much so that, for instance, the dissolution of all Islam courts was taken positively as an effective means to modernize the juridical structure of Islam and thereby settle a long-time dispute among factions of Islam.

Reading Froese's narrative, one has the impression that the political and theological characteristics of the Islamic states in Central Asia were so adept at reconciling with the communist Soviets that they would accept without much ado about measures (e.g. the elimination of Islamic schools, tremendous reduction of active mosques, weakening traditional Islamic family ties with inter-faith marriage, and relegation of Islamic religion to the private sphere of personal faith that was stripped of public expression, institutional support and traditional heritage and, in most cases, hollowed out to the bare minimum of acknowledging Allah as the one and only God, etc.) which would in other circumstances be taken as atheist assault and met with at least some degree of resentment, if not outrage and active political resistance. As much as we want to be convinced that innovative reinterpretations of both communism and Islam helped reduce the tension between Soviet atheist secularization and Islamic faith to the extent that Muslims in Central Asia were willing to proclaim an atheist and Muslim identity at one and the same time, Froese said too little about what mechanisms were at

work so that the logical contradiction at the conceptual level between atheism and Islam was resolved.

Indeed, Froese presented an interesting case where atheism and religion are not inexorably opposed to each other. I am to use the Chinese case to unravel how secularizing and desecularizing forces have been functioning together in particular ways to construct the meanings of religion and atheism in the Chinese media during the reform era that makes possible the mutual accommodation of atheism and religion. I draw on the conceptual framework of “desecularization” developed by Vyacheslav Karpov (2010) to explain this rather peculiar effect of the party-state’s demarcation of symbolic boundaries around religion and atheism and the extent to which these boundaries are maintained or contested in the arena of symbolic representation in reform-era China.

Before I discuss Karpov’s ideas, let me point out two things. The first is that my study is informed by the symbolic boundaries approach. As Lamont and Molnar (2002) define them, “symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon [or contest] definitions of reality” (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 168). This approach helps shed light on our understanding of the construction, maintenance and contestation of symbolic boundaries as a dynamic process that various social actors take an active part in. As far as the media representation of atheism and religion is concerned, the official and commercialized news media may converge or diverge in the ways they construct, work with, and/or contest the symbolic boundaries around these categories. Moreover, a key function of symbolic boundaries is to “separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership” (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 169). As Edgell and

colleagues (2006) have shown, “Symbolic boundaries are effective... in promoting a sense of solidarity and identity by virtue of imagining an ‘other’ who does not share the core characteristics imaged to be held by those who are legitimate participants in the moral order; the imagined community must have outsiders as well as insiders” (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006: 231). Wuthnow argues “Order has somehow to do with boundaries. That is, order consists mainly of being able to make distinctions—of having symbolic demarcations—so that we know the place of things and how they relate to one another” (Wuthnow 1987: 69). The demarcation of symbolic boundaries is fundamentally a power struggle that produces and sustains inequality. In the socio-political context of reform-era China, the party-state plays an important role in drawing symbolic boundaries via the official media when it comes to religion vis-à-vis atheism, granting legitimation to atheism and some religions while placing other types of religiosity outside the boundaries of normality and morality. Commercialized media, which is strongly driven by market forces and more readily heeds readers’ needs and responses, may choose to push the boundaries set up by official media and modify the official symbolic demarcations.

The second is that my argument assumes that the mass media in general and political propaganda in particular depend on the efficacy of language and other symbols in creating meanings that influence people’s thinking and perception. Many a theorist has elaborated on the constructedness of reality through language and symbols. For example, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posited that language determines thought (Carroll 1956). John Austin’s speech-act theory foregrounded the conditions of felicity for “words” to “do things” (Austin 1962). Berger and Luckmann theorized that the “symbolic universe” is able to give reality legitimacy and order (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Pierre Bourdieu’s “symbolic violence” posited that the state, through monopolizing the symbolic power, classifies social groups into hierarchical relations

(Bourdieu 1991). Empirical research has demonstrated the effects of mass media on its audience with ample evidence (e.g. Anderson et al. 2003; Chiricos, Eschholz and Gertz 1997; Felson 1996; Newton 1999; White, Oates and McAllister 2005). For two especially pertinent examples, Julian Po-Keng Chang interviewed 250 randomly chosen residents of Beijing in 1991 and found that the most potent images of the Soviet Union created by the CCP propaganda in the early 1950s have not disappeared almost four decades later. “Audience integration of those images into their political vocabulary provides new evidence of the efficacy of Chinese propaganda” (Chang 1995: 13). Yao (2012) found that people who read articles in the *People’s Daily* which frames religion mainly as a political issue are more likely to individually frame religion as a political issue, though their attitude toward religion may not go along the same line.

For better understanding, “desecularization” needs to be situated in the debate over the “secularization thesis.” Since the late 1950s the field of the sociology of religion had gradually come to be preoccupied with secularization understood as the inevitable decline of religion caused by modernization (see Swatos and Christiano 2000 for a review). Since the mid-1980s, however, secularization theories have been under fire from opponents who summoned massive evidence of religion’s resilience and religious revival around the world to invalidate claims of religious decline (e.g. Hammond 1985; Robbins and Anthony 1990; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987; Stark and Finke 2000; Warner 1993). Scholars who were not convinced that secularization theories got it all wrong strove to reckon with the newly acknowledged evidence and theoretical challenges and refine the secularization thesis (e.g. Chaves 1994; Smith 2003). Through their efforts, the scholarship in the sociology of religion regarding secularization has been enriched and brought to a new level of sophistication.

Casanova's tripartite recapitulation of the "secularization thesis" and its critique has gained wide acclaim (1994). According to Casanova, "secularization" in the scholarly debate usually denotes one or more of three processes, namely, differentiation of societal institutions from religious norms, decline of religious beliefs and practices, and privatization of religion. Casanova found that the secularization thesis was valid with regard to the first process, as modernized countries do show a greater degree of differentiation of social life. As to the second dimension of secularization, Casanova noted that diverse evidence from empirical reality made it hard to identify a linear, downward trend. It is the third dimension of secularization that he found most problematic, because religion, even when it stands as a separate social sphere, can and oftentimes does assert influence over public affairs in today's world, albeit often drawing accusations from the camp of secularizing forces of overstepping its proper boundaries of operation. Using examples of Brazil, Iran, the United States and Poland, Casanova formulated the idea of "deprivatization" to refer to the fact that "religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity and theories of secularization have reserved to them" (Casanova 1994: 5).

Peter Berger famously proposed a "desecularization thesis" to explain religious resurgence worldwide. He observed that such global religious resurgence indicates counter-secularizing trends which are reactions toward, for one thing, the uncertainties brought about by modernity and, for another, the influence of the cultural elites' secular view of reality that the nonelites feel they are subjected to and resent (Berger 1999:11). Karpov took up the task of theorizing desecularization. First and foremost, Karpov conceptually differentiated desecularization as counter-secularization from religious expansions in general. "Escalation of religions' societal influences can be termed desecularization if and only if it develops in reaction

to preceding and/or ongoing secularizing trends” (Karpov 2010: 236). As the review below of the history of Chinese Communists’ political atheism clearly demonstrates, forced secularization under the spur of militant atheism had been bearing down on the Chinese people for three decades before enlightenment atheism took over and gave religion limited breathing space starting in the early 1980s. Therefore, the fast-progressing religious resurgence in China during the reform era forms a definitive case of desecularization because it has developed as a reaction to coercive, totalizing secularization.

It needs to be highlighted that to Karpov, the primary theoretical significance of developing the desecularization thesis is not to seal the secularization debate. “Desecularization and secularization studies are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they tell mutually complementary stories of the complex relationships between religion and society; that is, to the extent that both theories are understood as scientific accounts rather than conflicting normatively prescriptive models of modern society” (Karpov 2010: 237-238). Building on Casanova’s conception of “secularization,” Karpov maintained that desecularization could be symmetrically “conceptualized as including three counter-secularizing processes: a rapprochement between formerly secularized institutions and religious norms, a resurgence of religious beliefs and practices, and a return of religion to the public sphere” (Karpov 2010: 240).

Moreover, regarding the historical trajectories of secularization and desecularization trends, Karpov agreed to Sorokin’s conception of a pendulum-like model of fluctuations between ideational (religious) and sensate (secular) systems.<sup>1</sup> Western sensate culture was enjoying

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<sup>1</sup> “According to Sorokin, sociocultural systems cyclically oscillate between the ‘ideational’ and the ‘sensate’ poles. At the center of ideational systems are beliefs in supernatural truth; they emphasize transcendental knowledge and spiritual and religious value orientations. Sensate cultures center on empirically and rationally established truths and forms of knowledge and are essentially secular and materialistic in their value-orientations and chief pursuits.” (Karpov 2010: 246)

growing dominance starting in the sixteenth century up until the mid-twentieth century when it ran into a profound crisis and entered into “a transition phase marked by resurging ideational influences” (Karpov 2010: 264). We can say that in the Chinese case the pendulum of history was moving toward the side of sensate culture since the onset of Chinese modernity in the late nineteenth century. This movement culminated in the forced secularization of the Maoist era. The pendulum has been swinging back toward the side of the ideational culture since the launch of reform in the late 70s.

To Sorokin, neither the ideational nor the sensate system is ever perfectly integrated. “A fully religious or a fully secular society is at best an ‘ideal type’ or, at worst, pure fiction. Ideational systems have sensate enclaves and vice versa” (Karpov 2010: 246). The secular and the religious always co-exist in multifarious forms.

Based on these theoretical ideas and the empirical reality of atheism and religion in contemporary China I posit that there is a general trend of moving from secularization toward desecularization in the reform era. In order to grasp the transitioning nature of this ongoing process, I further distinguish three types of secularization and two types of desecularization in terms of intended thoroughness of social transformation intersecting with two types of social actors (see Figure 1.1).

Secularization of the militant atheistic type and the enlightenment atheistic type (Yang 2011), which are on the leftmost side of the second row in Figure 1.1, has in common the unabashed denunciation of religion as ontologically illusionary. What differentiates them is that the former embodies the strong determination to actively eliminate religion whereas the latter believes in resorting to propaganda and education, rather than coercive forces to “free” people from the grip of religion. The militant atheistic type of secularization is best represented by the

<div>Secularization ← → Desecularization</div>					
<div>Militant atheistic ↔ Enlightenment atheistic ↔ Modernizing ↔ Deprivatizing ↔ Theocratic</div>					
	Religion is the opium of the people, serves the ruling exploitative class, needs to be actively eliminated using coercive force.	The supernatural is an illusion; religion is backward, unscientific, will eventually wither away; atheist propaganda and education is needed.	Non-atheistic type of secularization, differentiation of societal institutions from religious norms and influences, privatization, decline of individual religiosity	A rapprochement between formerly secularized institutions and religious norms, resurgence of religious beliefs and practices, return of religion to the public sphere.	No <i>de jure</i> or <i>de facto</i> separation of church and state; wholesale religious advocacy; a total religious transformation of society
From above	<i>e.g. nationwide crackdown on the Falun Gong movement in 1999</i>	<i>e.g. propaganda campaigns against superstitious beliefs and practices</i>	Deliberate differentiation <i>e.g. Jiang Zemin's "accommodations" approach to religion</i>	Religion is used in the construction of political community. <i>e.g. Jiang Zemin's speech in 2001, the CCP's "Confucius strategy" in the construction of nationalism</i>	(??)
From below	<i>(e.g. neo-leftists; popular nostalgia for the revolution)</i>	<i>(e.g. neo-leftists; popular nostalgia for the revolution)</i>	Religion can be studied using social scientific methods which refrain from making claims about the ontological status of the supernatural. <i>e.g. social scientific study of religion in the academia</i>	<i>e.g. religious fellowships on university campuses, flourishing of religious publications</i> Religion enters the public sphere <i>e.g. Christian rights lawyers</i> Institutional rapprochement <i>e.g. communal temples playing an important role in local politics, Buddhist temples doing philanthropy</i>	<i>e.g. mainland China's new Confucians Kang Xiaoguang and Jiang Qing's advocacy for reestablishment of Confucianism as national religion</i>

Figure 1.1. Conceptualization of Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends



iron-handed suppression of religion during the first thirty years of Chinese Communists' rule. In the reform era in China, the Falun Gong movement bore the brunt of the latest national crackdown which mobilized both the propaganda machine and the state apparatus of violence. However, in today's China both of these two types of secularization are circumscribed to a limited number of targets such as "evil cults," pseudoscience, and "superstitions" of various sorts, rather than on all religions.

"Modernizing secularization" can be defined relative to the atheistic counterparts. Most remarkably, modernizing secularization remains unconcerned with the question of whether the supernatural is real or illusionary. Institutional differentiation and privatization of religion (Casanova 1994) belong to this category.

Down toward the right of the second row in Figure 1.1 is what I call "deprivatizing desecularization" and "theocratic desecularization." Karpov suggested these two types without spelling out a typology of them. Combining insights from Karpov and Casanova, I define "deprivatizing desecularization" as a trend in which we see a rapprochement between some of the formerly secularized institutions and religious norms, a resurgence of religious beliefs and practices, and/or a return of religion to the public sphere. In December 2001, the then President of PRC Jiang Zemin gave an important speech to the National Religious Work Meeting convened by the Politburo and State Council, acknowledging for the first time that religion could act as a stabilizing force in society and, as such, could be mobilized as a positive force for national development (Leung 2005: 910). Media representation of religion took on a more positive tone after Jiang's speech (Yao et al. 2011). Moreover, the party-state has increasingly relied on the "Confucius strategy," as it is called by Paul Froese (2008: p). The party-state has been promoting Confucianism as a unifying force in Chinese society. Among other things, the

party-state has sponsored “Veneration of Confucius” ceremonies that are highly publicized in the media. In doing so, the communist state attempts to borrow from religion the idea of the sacred so as to stabilize a collective sense of morality as the country is transitioning into a market economy and to symbolize a Chinese national identity in the global context (DuBois 2010; Sun 2005). This case exemplifies the return of religion, or more precisely, the sacred, into the public sphere.

According to Karpov, theocracy is one type of regime which “legitimizes its rule by a political ideology derived from its dominant faith and attempts a total religious transformation of society” (Karpov 2010: 256). Theocratic desecularization thus refers to the advocacy for or the process of social transformation to bring about theocracy. It is characterized by the abolishing of *de jure* or *de facto* separation of church and state and/or wholesale religious advocacy (e.g., Iran after 1979, Turkey in recent years).

Theoretical ideas on the role of agency help me further refine Figure 1. Social and political conflicts between two groups of social actors with specific interests, grievances, and cultural and ideological orientations leads to two possible outcomes: secularization occurs when the group trying to reduce religion’s social significance wins out over the other group wanting to enhance it (Chaves 1994; Smith 2003), while desecularization happens when the former group loses to the latter group (Karpov 2010: 252). It needs to be noted that agents of desecularization are not necessarily religionists. For example, Lisovskaya and Karpov (2010), in their examination of the desecularization of Russia’s state schools, argued that it was the secular and religious elites in post-communist Russia who were in close collaboration to bring religion back to the country’s education system. The Chinese party-state’s deployment of the Confucian strategy while clinging onto atheism illustrates that the party-state seems to be functioning as an

agent for both secularization and desecularization at one and the same time, albeit on different fronts.

Karpov posited that desecularization, like secularization, can be seen as initiated and carried out “from below” and/or “from above,” depending on the social actors involved (Karpov 2010: 254). Take desecularization for instance. According to Karpov, “when the activists and actors involved are grassroots-level movements and groups representing the masses of religious adherents, we are dealing with a desecularization ‘from below.’ When the activists and actors largely include religious and secular leadership, a desecularization ‘from above’ is taking place.” In the last two rows of Figure 1.1 I list several instances corresponding to types of secularization and desecularization *from above* and *from below* in reform-era China as examples. The national crackdown on the Falun Gong movement since 1999 and propaganda campaigns against superstitious beliefs and practices exemplify forced secularization of the militant atheistic type and secularization of the enlightenment atheist type *from above*, respectively. However, I have not found cases of these two types of secularization *from below*, though I would not be surprised to know they exist, given the ascendancy of neo-leftist ideology since the June 4<sup>th</sup> Democratic Movements (Misra 2003) and the (oftentimes much commercialized) nostalgia for the communist revolution among the Chinese population (Barmé 1999).

With regard to modernizing secularization *from above*, the Chinese states since the early twentieth century have actively intervened in the creation and regulation of the category of religion. As Michael Szonyi argued, “secularization in China was a dual movement of distinction and intervention, to distinguish religion from superstition and to reshape those aspects of religious life that did meet the new criteria (of modernity) to make them better serve state agendas. Differentiation meant the deliberate construction of a religious sphere by elites and the

state, with corresponding responses by religious groups” (2009: 317). The “accommodation” approach toward religion in the 1990s best exemplifies the state’s stance. According to Leung (2005), Jiang Zemin, who became the President of PRC shortly after the crackdown of the pro-democracy movement in 1989, laid out the policy that “religion should ‘accommodate’ to socialism by bending and adapting its rules and disciplines to harmonize them with the needs of the state.” “To justify these policies the Party argued that religious affairs belong to the public sphere, having many connections to state policies. They are not, in other words, to be regarded as matters where private conviction or conscience can be allowed to reign supreme. Under this view, the regulation of religious personnel, activity, and the location for all religious activities must be subject to public administration” (Leung 2005: 908).

From Fenggang Yang’s study (2004) of religious research in reform-era China we can get a glimpse of modernizing secularization *from below*. Yang showed how the revival of religious beliefs and practices (desecularization at the micro-level) and a relatively relaxed political climate in reform-era China has helped motivate scholars in the academia to increasingly abandon the dogmatic atheist stance on religion and adopt a scientific perspective which endorses neutrality and objectivity, “thus making it possible to affirm both the positive and the negative functions of religion” (2004: 116). To add a note of clarification, while atheist propaganda and the scientific study of religion are both secularist in orientation, they are incongruent in that the former goes so far as to claim to know the ontological status of the supernatural (as non-existent) whereas the latter consciously avoids doing so.

While the afore-mentioned “Confucius strategy” instantiates deprivatizing desecularization *from above*, cases of deprivatizing desecularization *from below* abound. At the level of individual religiosity, scholars of religion in China have noted that religious beliefs and

practices have been rapidly reviving among the Chinese (e.g. Hunter and Chan 1993; Kindopp and Hamrin 2004; Madsen 1998; Overmyer 2003). In terms of institutional rapprochement, communal temples are found to be playing an important political role at the local level (Chau 2006; Dean 2003; Eng and Lin 2002). At the national level, the Falun Gong movement, as Szonyi (2009) observed, exemplifies deprivatization best because it is arguably the most openly deprivatized religious group in the PRC, despite the party-state's vigilance toward religious deprivatization which it sees as a potential threat to the regime. Chinese Christian rights activists, who use legal means to protect villagers from corrupt officials and businessmen and to uphold Chinese citizens' human rights (Carnes 2006), constitute yet another instance of deprivatization according to Casanova's conception: "When religion enters the public sphere to protect not only its own freedom of religion but also all modern freedoms and rights, and the very right of a democratic civil society to exist against an absolutist, authoritarian state." (1994: 57)

Advocacy for reestablishment has come *from below*. Mainland scholar Kang Xiaoguang is particularly articulate in his promotion of the Confucianization of China by turning Confucianism into a state religion. To Kang, an overhaul of the social-political structure of Chinese society according to Confucian principles and ideals, rather than western liberal democracy, is the superior way to solving problems arising from China's modernization and globalization (Chen 2009). A sociologist at the People's University of China, Kang oftentimes cannot have his works published in mainland China. The censorship to silence Kang's voice indicates that his radical Confucianism gets on the nerves of the CCP who is the least pleased to see the trend toward desecularization going that far.

This study engages the secularization and desecularization debates in the sociology of religion through examining the dynamic construction, reconstruction and contestation of the

symbolic boundaries around atheism, religion and alternative religiosities in the official and commercialized news media of reform-era China. It sheds light on the nature of the co-existence and interaction between secularizing and desecularizing trends against the backdrop of the macro-level political economic forces instigating these trends. Empirical evidence yielded from this study provides a unique opportunity for testing, refining, and possibly extending these theoretical perspectives.

#### **1.4 The Perspective of Media Framing**

This study is theoretically informed by the perspective of media framing which emphasizes the capacity of media messages to construct reality and wield social influence. Frames and framing have been widely used in the analysis of the mass media (Gamson et al. 1992). Goffman (1974) laid the foundation of a social-constructivist conception of frames, maintaining that frames help audiences “locate, perceive, identify, and label” the flow of information around them. Entman (1993: 52) suggested that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.”

Frames often deploy keywords, labels, metaphors, catchphrases, stereotypes, rhetorical associations, and other symbols that connote positive, negative or neutral assessment of the events in question (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Powell 2011). When a frame is frequently used exclusively with regard to an event, the audience tends to take its narrative as more natural and normal (Haskell 2007). “Because frames typically diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe, they are capable of exerting great social power when encoded in terms or phrases, and once the term or phrase is widely accepted, communicators cannot use other words without risking being

misunderstood or lacking credibility. In this way a frame can actually influence language” (Kerr and Moy 2002: 56). Alternative frames will have to fight hard to contest those that have gained traction among the audience (Chong and Druckman 2007). Conversely, through questioning the dominant frames by asking how and why alternative frames are excluded, frame analysis goes beyond the immediate textual messages presented in the media and casts light on how power comes into play in the framing processes (Ban 2016; Brownell and Warner 2009; Ibrahim 2010).

Various frames have been identified in studies of media representation of religion (e.g. Gormly 2004; Kerr 2003; Kerr and Moy 2002; Toolin 1983). One major strand of scholarship has examined framing to reveal media biases toward marginal or minority religious groups. For instance, Ibrahim (2010) found that after the 9/11 attacks on World Trade Center, as a result of journalists adopting public policies and attitudes, network news in the United States framed Islam differently. Islam in the U.S. was represented as a religion of peace and the patriotism of American Muslims was highlighted, whereas Muslims outside of the U.S. were mostly framed as fanatic, violent, and full of hatred toward America. Bantimaroudis (2007) found that from 1997 to 2004 two leading Greek newspapers portrayed Protestants predominantly in a negative light, as “heretics,” and Greek Protestants as “Western agents” and “unpatriotic,” in contrast to the prevailing ideology which promoted the idea that the “genuine” Greek was the Orthodox Greek. Revelation of media biases serves as a critique of the marginalizing and rejectionist ideologies and practices of the myriad social actors involved in the production of prejudicial media framing of minority religious groups.

Scholars have noted that many factors come into play in the process of framing, including journalists’ personal value orientation (Buddenbaum 1998), media agenda (Huckins 1999; Powell 2011), public policies (Ibrahim 2010; Reese 2009), societal forces such as social

movements (Cooper 2002; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993), shared cultural orientation (Kabir and Bourk 2012; Richardson 2001), and political philosophy of a society (Gans 1979), etc. While this is true for the media in Western societies where the press supposedly serves as the “fourth estate” to facilitate democracy through providing pluralistic information for the public to make choices and participate in public debates (Manning 2001), in an authoritarian state such as China, the state’s regulation and control of the media complicates the framing process. As Brady observed:

One of the most important means by which information is controlled in China is through establishing the news agenda and the correct political terminology for what can and cannot be said in the public arena. In Chinese this is called the “*tifa*” (提法), the politically correct way of referring to something. The Central Propaganda Department and its local equivalents issue regular detailed materials setting the “*tifa*” for public discourse in China, and, in some cases, even internationally. These guidelines restrict the range of information available to the public, establish the correct phraseology to be used, and set the tone of debate (Brady 2017: 131).

Studies have shown that the Chinese government has been the most influential player at shaping news frames, especially when it comes to politically sensitive news, trumping other factors such as journalistic professionalism, market demand, and popular interest, etc. (Han 2011; Kao 1998; Steinhardt 2015; Yao 2007; Zhou and Moy 2007). However, the party-state is not the monopolistic player operating in the symbolic realm of media representation in reform-era China. In what follows, I provide a more comprehensive depiction of the field of news media since the launch of market reform and of the reconfiguration of power relations between the party-state, media and the market.



### 1.5 News Media in China during the Reform-era

As its owner, the Chinese party-state requires the news media to follow CCP and government policies and to direct public opinions in support of these policies. The party-state subjects the news media to government regulation and control through the State Administration of Press and Publication of the PRC (Brady 2017; Chen and He 1998). However, the party-state has not been the sole player dominating the news media in China. Media reform since 1978, which includes deregulation, decentralization, commercialization and partial privatization of media outlets, has given rise to a booming media industry (Lynch 1999; Shambaugh 2007; Shirk 2011; Stockmann 2010a). In 1978, for instance, China had 186 newspapers, all of which were fully subsidized by the state and relied on subscription for distribution. In 2007, China's media market had 2,137 newspapers, selling over 85 million copies daily, and nearly all of them depended on commercial means (e.g., advertisement, business sponsorship) for financing (Hadland and Zhang 2012). As the traditional media (e.g. print, radio, film, terrestrial TV) and new media (e.g. the Internet, cellular telephones, cable and digital TV) have been proliferating in the Chinese media market, they have to be hard at work to compete for a market niche by providing contents that appeal to certain groups of consumers, especially those of the rising urban middle-class with formidable purchasing power. In order to woo the favor of consumers, the majority of Chinese media have not only chosen to focus their content provision on entertainment, information and business reports, rather than political indoctrination, but also have discarded partially, if not completely, the paternalistic, didactic style of reporting and adopted new modes of content delivery that resonate more strongly with the consumers (Donald and Keane 2002).

The diversification and multiplication of media forms and contents has greatly piqued the interests of China observers who were looking for signs of media autonomy that may signal the

democratization of Chinese society. Four decades into media reform and several cycles of media liberalization and reactions against it later (Brady 2017; Liu 2006; Zhao 2004b, 2011), early scholarly assessment, which made optimistic predictions based on journalists' struggles for media autonomy in the 1980s about the transformative power of Chinese media (e.g. Chu 1994; Goldman 1994; Huang 1994; Huang and Yu 1997; Lull 1991; Lynch 1999; Pei 1994; Wu 2000; Zha 1995), gave way to more sober depictions of the resilience of the authoritarian rule of the Chinese party-state (Dimitrov 2017; Hadland and Zhang 2012; Pan 2000; Repnikova 2017; Stockmann 2010a; Zhao 2011). Stockmann and Gallagher (2011), for instance, reported the role of the media in sustaining the stability and effective rule of the Chinese authoritarian regime by helping to bolster the party-state's legitimacy through providing sophisticated messages that sound more genuine to the readers, but nonetheless conform to the state's censorship and lack in multiplicity of information sources. Stockmann (2013) asserted that the state-media relation in China stood as a unique case of "responsive authoritarianism" where the commercialized media brought about "political change without democratization" (5):

In China, the introduction of market mechanisms leads the media to undergo cycles of liberalization and retrenchment, whereby the state walks a fine line between tolerating space to respond to market demands and controlling media content. In the long term, these dynamics appear to lead to greater openness of space in news reporting and cautious adjustments of central policy positions to popular demands. At the same time, they do not produce greater pluralism of political voices in media, as state media accommodate market demands while maintaining a roughly uniform information flow (Stockmann 2013: 5).

The party-state has instated a slew of measures, apart from prescriptions on media ownership, to ensure its control of the news media and punish transgressors. Journalists must obtain state-issued licenses in order to work legally and must attend compulsory trainings. Before publication of news reports, the propaganda departments of the Party send directives to news media outlets instructing on what should be covered, what cannot, and how an event should

be framed (Brady 2017). The party-state agencies also deploy post-publication sanctions on those who have pushed the boundaries too far. Prominent examples include the removal of the editor-in-chief of *Southern Weekend* Jiang Yiping in 2000 for publishing investigative reports on official corruption and malfeasance that made big waves, arresting *Southern Metropolis Daily*'s editor-in-chief Cheng Yizhong and general manager Yu Huafeng with corruption and bribery charges and sentencing them to years of prison times for publishing reports on the Sun Zhigang case<sup>2</sup> and the return of SARS in Guangzhou City<sup>3</sup>, and the closing-down of *Freezing Point* in 2006 and *New Beijing Times* in 2017. Indeed, whereas most of the news media in reform-era China has submitted docily to the demands of the state and the market, serving as the mouthpiece of the former and lapdog of the latter (Zhao 2004b), a small number of Chinese journalists and news media outlets have been braving the odds and pushing the envelope in their coverage of social problems, official corruption and power abuse, and business wrongdoings. Given that they have to maneuver their way through the matrix of the regulatory party-state, the popular demand of the market, and the profit-seeking objective of their own organization, the news media have been described as “dancing beautifully, but with hands cuffed” (Lin 2006) and playing the watchdog role but “on Party leashes” (Zhao 2000a).

Individual media outlets are affected by the reform to varying degrees. Regarding newspapers, scholars generally differentiate them into three types based on the extent of commercialization and liberalization: official newspapers, semi-official newspapers<sup>4</sup>, and

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<sup>2</sup> Sun Zhigang was a twenty-seven-year-old college graduate from Hubei Province who came to Guangzhou to look for work as a graphic artist. Failing to produce a temporary living permit and his ID card, he was arrested by the local police and later beaten to death in the detention center. *Southern Metropolis Daily* was the first to break the story which instantly caused a national uproar and eventually resulted in the convictions of twelve city police officers and the abolition of the custody and repatriation system.

<sup>3</sup> The lawsuit and its detrimental outcome to Cheng and Yu were widely considered a blatant retaliation by the local government for the paper's outspokenness.

<sup>4</sup> Semi-official papers (usually *wanbao*) fall somewhere in between the other two diagonally opposed types.

commercialized newspapers (Stockmann 2011; White 1990). Their differences are brought into sharp relief if we compare and contrast those at the two ends of the spectrum.

Official papers are sponsored by a government organ and include both Party (*dangbao*) and political machine papers (*jiguanbao*). They are financed by a mix of state subsidies and advertising and are managed like an organ of the party-state. The commercialized papers finance themselves solely through advertising, investment and circulation, and are run like an enterprise with the goal of profit-making. Stylistically, the language of commercialized papers is colloquial and lively, in contrast to the stilted and formulaic language of official papers (Shirk 2011: 9). In terms of space for news reporting, official papers tend to focus on the most important political issues, whereas commercialized papers tend to cover less sensitive issues related to society, sports and entertainment.

Nonetheless, commercially liberalized papers are much more likely to venture to the edge of the boundaries of what is allowed than those of official papers. Commercial liberalization of the media is also associated with less government influence over the selection, framing and wording of stories. In terms of expertise, official papers are experts on the position of the party-state organization the paper is registered with, while commercialized papers are especially knowledgeable about the common people, stressing issues that are “close to ordinary people’s lives” (Stockmann 2011). While official papers’ primary loyalty continues to go to the Party, commercialized newspapers are now mostly serving the consumers (Esarey 2006: 22; Lin 2006; Pan 2000).

Through interviews with media practitioners, Stockmann (2011) found that in terms of objectivity official papers were perceived to carry propaganda, which means selective reporting and leaving sensitive issues out, whereas commercialized papers were considered to run “real

Table 1.1. Differences between Official and Commercialized Newspapers

	<b>Official Papers</b>	<b>Commercialized Papers</b>
<i>Orientation</i>	Ideological indoctrination; promotion of Party policies	Diversified information, entertainment
<i>Style</i>	Stilted, formulaic language	Colloquial, lively
<i>Space for reporting</i>	Focus on political issues	Social issues, sports and entertainment
<i>News source</i>	Propaganda departments, public relations offices	Diversified: hot-lines, tipsters, colleague networks and networks of friends, etc.
<i>Expertise</i>	Official positions	Common people's lives
<i>Perceived objectivity</i>	Mouthpiece, selective reporting, "watchdog"	Real news, balanced reporting
<i>Financing</i>	Subsidies from the state, advertising	Advertising, investment, circulation
<i>Organizational style</i>	Run like a state-organ	Run like an enterprise
<i>Primary loyalty</i>	CCP	Consumers
<i>Subscription</i>	Compulsory subscription at various levels of government agencies	News stalls, retail sale, voluntary subscription
<i>Examples</i>	<b><i>People's Daily</i></b>	<b><i>Southern Weekend</i></b>

news" that reports the facts in a more balanced fashion, providing the complete story including negative aspects. In terms of news sources, propaganda departments and public relations offices are the most important news sources that release selective information to Party newspapers and "well-behaved" journalists of commercialized newspapers. Commercialized newspapers are keen on cultivating diverse news sources such as hot-lines, tipsters, colleague networks and networks of friends, etc. in order to counteract the dominance of official news (Lin 2008: 21). Table 1.1 summarizes the major differences discussed above between official and commercialized papers.

It needs to be noted that the contours of official vs. commercialized papers sketched above are "ideal types." The reality on the ground is that the tug-of-war between politics and the market often renders their boundaries murky and unstable. Zhou He (2000), for instance, found that the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*, one of the top five most influential Party newspapers, has been pulled in different directions by the forces of domineering politics on one side and those of

an enterprising market on the other, resulting in its growing tendency toward depoliticization, increased responsiveness to the audience, and redefinition of its role. He saw the director of the newspaper saying to him in private: “Our first and second pages are planned economy, but the rest is all market economy” (128).

## **1.6 Religion in Chinese News Media**

Considered one of the politically sensitive issues, religion is off-limits for open debates in Chinese media, unless otherwise instructed by the regulators (Chu 1994). It may seem paradoxical to some to learn that despite its proclaimed adherence to and active propagation of atheism, the party-state in the reform era has regulated the journalistic practices regarding religion in a particularly scrupulous way. The party-state requires that “all news reports relating to religions show respect to minority customs and religious beliefs, and refrain from anything that smears, insults, or discriminates the image of minorities or distorts religious creeds” (Zhang and Zhu 2011: 806). The party-state also stipulates that “in propaganda, we must pay sufficient understanding and respect to minority customs and religious beliefs, and... shall not deface, insult, or fabricate. When it comes to sensitive issues, more attention shall be paid to avoid hurting the feelings of minorities and providing excuses for hostilities” (Zhang and Zhu 2011: 806). Provisions of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television require “that propaganda on important issues related to ethnic minorities and religions shall be conducted prudently and strictly, pursuant to the central government’s unified arrangement and standard” (Zhang and Zhu 2011: 806). These censorship guidelines are in line with Document No. 19 and are set to forestall any media content that may hurt the feelings of minority nationalities and arouse their strong indignation and protest are put in place to prevent negative impact on ethnic unity and social stability and to avoid unwanted international attention (Mackerras 2003).

These regulations and provisions could severely constrain atheistic assault on religion. For instance, when a front page article of the *Worker's Daily* (*Gongren Ribao*) on February 7, 1998 criticized worshippers and believers visiting various temples in Beijing as practicing “modern superstition,” it drew strong protest from the religious communities who took it as a serious insult against religion and blatant contradiction to the laws and regulations that grant the freedom of religious belief to Chinese citizens (Zhang and Zhu 2011).

The party-state has made changes to religious news reporting when it is politically profitable to do so. Through content analyzing the *People's Daily* over a period of ten years (1996-2005) Yao and colleagues found that since 2001 when the then-president Jiang Zemin acknowledged in an important speech that religion could help stabilize society and should continue to exist as a fundamental component of human civilization, there has been a steady increase in the number of articles devoted to religion and a slightly more positive tone in the coverage of religion (Yao et al. 2011). However, the changes are small and slow, and religion remains a sensitive topic in official Chinese media, for high-ranking government officials are still the dominant sources of news on religion (Yao et al. 2011). In another study, Yao (2007) found that the CCP's religion policy has greatly shaped the official media's framing of religion as a political issue (Yao 2007).

## 1.7 The Data and Methods

### 1.7.1 Data

To best capture the dynamics of the relationship between the party-state and the media vis-à-vis the matter of atheism and religion, I choose two major Chinese newspapers, namely the *People's Daily* and the *Southern Weekend*. This decision is made out of the consideration that they are the most influential of the official papers and commercialized papers, respectively.

Based on interviews with editors and journalists in Beijing and Chongqing, Stockmann (2010) made a diagram, illustrating the structure of the Beijing newspaper market as seen by media practitioners. On this diagram, the x-axis displays the degree of commercialization and the y-axis indicates the space for news reporting (from closed to open). The *People's Daily* is placed at the top-right corner, surpassing any other paper for being the least commercialized and the most closed in terms of space for news reporting. In the same league are *Workers' Daily* (*gongren ribao*), *China Daily* (*zhongguo ribao*), *Economic Daily* (*jingji ribao*), and *Beijing Daily* (*beijing ribao*), but these official papers are slightly more commercialized and less closed in the space for news reporting.

By sharp contrast, *Southern Weekend* is found to be on a par with *21<sup>st</sup> Century Economic Herald* (*21 shiji jingji daobao*), *New Beijing Daily* (*xin jing bao*), and *Beijing Times* (*jinghua shibao*) as the most open papers in terms of space for news reporting and the most commercialized<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the *People's Daily* and *Southern Weekend* are the most influential of their respective types. The *People's Daily* is not merely any official media, but THE official mouthpiece of the CCP center. Other official media may or may not be exactly the same. By the same token, *Southern Weekend* is at the most forefront of investigative journalism. Taking these two papers for my study is justified not on the ground of representative sampling, but strategic sampling.

### 1.7.2 *People's Daily* (*renmin ribao*)

*People's Daily* is the mouthpiece of the Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party, the top decision-making body in China and is under the direct control of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee. *People's Daily* expresses the official views of the CCP

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<sup>5</sup> The business model and personnel control mechanism of *Southern Weekend* is discussed in Chapter Three.



and presents the Chinese government's domestic and foreign policies. The party-state leaders and CCP's Propaganda Department impose direct supervision of the editors of the *People's Daily* who must act in accordance with their instructions, or "commands" (Wu 1994: 195-196).

As the "key link in the entire communication system" (Yu 1964: 96), the *People's Daily* enjoys a hegemonic predominance over other news venues. Radio, television, and other newspapers in China often rehash important editorials and commentaries from *People's Daily* through re-broadcasting (*zhuanbo*) or reprinting (*zhuanzai*). Its editorials and commentaries were the essential materials for "discussion" during obligatory weekly "political studies" sessions in the workplace, a mechanism of political indoctrination installed in 1949 but abandoned since the reform (Houn 1965; Shirk 2011; Wu 1994; Yu 1964)

In the reform era, *People's Daily's* central place in political communication and propaganda remains unaltered. However, the social and political liberalization enabled by the reform and marketization has caused its readership to dwindle tremendously. Survey research demonstrates that nowadays only particular groups of the population continue to read the official press in order to track policy trends, while others turn to unofficial papers for information and entertainment (Stockmann 2011). But these groups are the elites of Chinese society: "decision-makers, government officials, executives, experts, and scholars" (Polumbaum 2008: 45). Eighty-nine percent of government officials use this newspaper to seek policies guidelines (Lee 1990). Statistics show that while in 1993, the newspaper had an estimated circulation of 2.78 million, this figure had plummeted to 1.8 million ten years later (Gang and Bandurski 2011: 42).

As to data access, the *People's Daily* Database covers all articles published in the newspaper from 1945 onward. The database offers full-text search functionality.

### 1.7.3 *Southern Weekend* (nanfang zhoumo)

I acquired the three CD-Roms which contain the full-texts of all the 776 issues of *Southern Weekend* from 1984 to 1998 published by the Southern Daily Group in 1999. The China Core Newspaper Full-text Database, hosted by the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) information construction project, holds the digital versions of the *Southern Weekend* issued from 2003 to 2012. Both data sources provide full-text search functions.

One major caveat is due here. Despite my best efforts, I was unable to locate any digital archives that host the full-text articles of *Southern Weekend* for the years 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002. The Southern Daily Group has not published any digital collection of the paper since 1999. Moreover, CNKI only has issues of this paper published from 2003 to 2012. CNKI claims to include over 17 million articles published by 636 important domestic newspapers since 2000. While for many of the newspapers in this database (e.g. the *People's Daily*), the issues available for browsing and search date back to 2000 and extend to the present, it is curious why *Southern Weekend* only has 10 years of issues archived. Furthermore, key word search using the religion terms I choose to retrieve data for this study on *Southern Weekend*'s official website ([www.infzm.com](http://www.infzm.com)) brought out articles dated as far back as 2015, though using some other terms may fetch articles dated 2013. It gives me reason to think that the official website is selective about what articles to make available for web search. I suspect the reason for the limited availability of digital archiving of *Southern Weekend* is political. Recently, through indirect personal connection, I learned from someone currently working for *Southern Weekend* that the paper has its own internal database, but restricts access to its back issues other than what is available on its official website not only to the public, but also to its own journalists and editors. To gain access, they must obtain permission from some officials in the Southern Media Group which owns *Southern Weekend*. Although I have not found another source to verify and amplify

the information, I surmise that the restricted availability of digital archives of *Southern Weekend* is indicative of the tightening up of ideological control in the Xi Jinping era.

I thought about browsing other formats of *Southern Weekend* (e.g. print, microfilm, microfiche, etc.) than digital databases to collect articles for the four missing years. However, while previous studies have employed the method of identifying relevant articles by browsing through newspapers (e.g. Cho 2007; Hart, Turner, and Knupp 1981; Kabir and Bourk 2012; Richardson 2001), it might not work as well for my research. One reason is that this method works best when the articles to be collected are featured articles in prominent positions of a newspaper or in a specific section dedicated to a subject (e.g. religion section, law and society section, finance section). By contrast, the great majority of the articles I retrieved from the digital databases through key word search is neither featured articles nor prominently positioned, and neither paper has a religion section. Instead, religion/religiosity, more often than atheism, can be found virtually on any page of the newspapers (other than advertisement pages). The key search word of religion/religiosity may be contained in as short as a phrase or sentence or as long as a whole article. For example, the word “superstition” (*mixin*) can be found listed side by side with gambling, prostitution, and petty theft in an article that stresses the leadership of CCP cadres and members in the construction of socialist new countryside that include, among many other things, the continued fight against social ills. That means the word “*mixin*” is surrounded by hundreds of other words that may not have anything to do with superstition *per se*. It is also possible that the word is used in an article that criticizes the belief and practice of a specific “superstition” (e.g., fortune telling, geomancy, numerology, sorcery and witchcraft, exorcism). While it is relatively easy to identify the latter article as relevant for my study using the browsing method, it is much harder to find the former through browsing. Acting on the qualms that using the browsing

method might lead to serious undercount of articles on religion and atheism in *Southern Weekend* for the years 1999-2002, I decided against it.

Is missing four years of *Southern Weekend*'s data so big a problem for my research project as to hurt its validity? My assessment is that it is not. First of all, I am not trying to generalize my findings to the years that I have no data of, which is why I make sure that when I present findings on *Southern Weekend*, I specify the time periods. Second, the analysis of the two time periods that I have data of *Southern Weekend*, namely, 1984-1998 and 2003-2011, already says plenty about this paper, and offer much for thought in light of the theoretical framework I am using. When opportunities rise in the future, I will fill in those four years and provide a complete picture.

#### **1.7.4 Methods**

I used the NVivo software and EXCEL to help organize the concepts and categories. At the initial stage of data exploration, I analyzed the data systematically and inductively, seeking to find concepts that help organize the ideas presented in the articles. After repeatedly going between the data and the organizing concepts I came up with, I identified the secularization vs. desecularization theories to be the best to represent the data at a higher level of abstraction. I then identified the major tones and frames in the discursive construction of the official newspaper's coverage of religions and related my findings to the secularization vs. desecularization theories.

The primary research method used is human coder content analysis. "Quantitative content analysis is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, to describe the communication,

draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption” (Riffe et al 2005:25).

The unit of analysis for this study is newspaper articles, including news reports, commentaries, editorials, and policy and legal documents, etc. The dataset include every article published between 1978 and 2011 in the *People’s Daily*, as well as from 1984 to 1998 and 2003 to 2011 in *Southern Weekend*, that contain such key words as “atheism” (*wushenlun*), “Buddhism” (*fojiao*), “Daoism” (*daojiao*), “Confucianism” (*rujiao*), “Christianity” (*jidujiao*), “Catholicism” (*tianzhujiao*), “Islam” (*yisilanjiao*) and “Muslim” (*musilin*), “superstition” (*mixin*), and “evil cult” (*xiejiao*).

The attributes I code for each article include: article publication time (year, date), relevance (yes or no), about (China, international), tones (positive, negative, neutral, mixed), secularization vs. desecularization (militant atheistic, enlightenment atheistic, modernizing secularization, deprivatizing desecularization, theocratic desecularization). An article is coded “no” on “relevance” if the key word it contains only appears, for instance, in a proper noun and the rest of the article has nothing to do with atheism or the religion/religiosity the key word points to. For instance, the key word Christianity (*jidujiao*) shows up in a great number of articles in the *People’s Daily* where it is a constitutive part of the title of a U.S.-based newspaper, the Christian Science Monitor (*jidujiao zhenyan bao*); the articles themselves, on the other hand, do not discuss Christianity at all. These articles are all coded as irrelevant for the purpose of the study.

The coding attribute of “about” indicates if the religion or atheism discussed in an article is one in China or outside of China. Previous studies have suggested that the domestic vs. foreign distinction in media representation of a religion can be important and revealing of the

relationship between the media and public policy (Ibrahim 2010; Sheikh, Price and Oshagan 1995).

Tones expressed in a report on religion can be positive (e.g. applauding it for its contribution to maintaining the “harmonious society”, or claiming religion is part of culture), negative (criticizing it for being backward, anti-scientific, obstructing progress, economically wasteful), neutral (e.g. simply stating a fact that a foreign head of the state is a Christian believer without further engaging this fact in the rest of the article), or mixed (e.g. both negative and positive attitudes expressed in the same article).

Four tones are identified in the representation of atheism: negative, positive, both positive and negative, and neutral. The numbers and percentages of tones toward atheism are reported separately from those toward religion.

“Militant atheism” and “enlightenment atheism” are identified, first of all, by the presence or absence of the term “atheism,” and theoretical/ideological concepts used (e.g. Darwinism, historical materialism and/or dialectic materialism, socialist civilization, science, rationality, “opium of the people,” “instrument of exploitation in the hands of feudal rulers and imperialists,” etc.). As distinguished conceptually by Yang (2011), militant atheism urges for active elimination of religion using coercive force, whereas enlightenment atheism believes that atheist propaganda and education is needed to facilitate the eventual demise of religion. Thus, news articles that affirmatively report on police raiding religious gatherings and rounding up believers and offer condemning comments on religion as superstition, for instance, fall into the “militant atheistic secularization” type. By contrast, if an article criticizes police action against believers as violation of religious freedom while at the same time express support for atheism as the ultimate truth, it is considered to belong to the “enlightenment atheistic” style secularization.

Table 1.2. Coding Instruments for Five Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends on Religion Articles

	<i>Key Words, Phrases, Meaning Blocks</i>
Militant-atheistic Secularization	<p><i>Negative Representation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Religion is reactionary, opium of the people.</li> <li>--Religion is the imperialist's instrument of exploitation/infiltration.</li> <li>--Action to fight against bad beliefs and evil cults that cause serious injuries, even death, using state apparatus of violence</li> </ul>
Enlightenment- atheistic Secularization	<p><i>Negative Representation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Religion is inferior to the proletariat mentality, Marxist materialism, and/or atheism.</li> <li>--Religion corrupts CCP's morale and morality.</li> <li>--Religion does harm to construction of socialist spiritual civilization/socialist culture.</li> <li>--Religion distorts socialist life-view, socialist values.</li> <li>--Religion is delusional, false, fetter of the mind.</li> <li>--Religion is defeated by science, rationality, Darwinism.</li> <li>--Religion hinders healthy development of socialist economy.</li> </ul>
Modernizing Secularization	<p><i>Negative Representation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Decline of religiosity, disenchantment regarded as a good thing</li> <li>--A religion being inferior to traditional secular Chinese culture.</li> <li>--Religion meddles in politics, arguing for the privatization of religion.</li> <li>--A religion is not conducive to CCP's rule, arguing for bringing the dissident group back in line, rather than eliminating it by force.</li> <li>--"Superstitious hue/elements" in traditional holiday celebration, temple fairs, artistic work, and cultural products, etc. that would be better to eliminate.</li> </ul>

Table 1.2 continued

Deprivatizing Desecularization	<p><i>Negative Representation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Religion not well assimilated into Chinese culture, inferior to Chinese religious culture.</li> <li>--Religion contributing to conflict, war, and violence; call for peaceful co-existence.</li> <li>--Religion going against the grain of pluralism and tolerance, showing intolerance of difference, inter-religion tension, persecute or oppress unorthodoxy and diversity.</li> <li>--Religious individuals or groups involved in illegal acts.</li> <li>--Common negative traits or human weaknesses such as greed, corruption, hypocrisy, vanity, pride.</li> </ul> <p><i>Positive Representation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Religion is culture.</li> <li>--Religion adapting to CCP's pragmatism.</li> <li>--Religion rallying for CCP's policies and decisions.</li> <li>--Religion co-existing harmoniously in socialist China</li> <li>--Religion fighting for a just cause (e.g. peace, justice), political activism,</li> <li>--Religion contributing to the development of other institutions such as medicine, law, geography, sports, etc.</li> <li>--Religion providing spiritual services in rituals</li> <li>--Religion providing public goods such as poverty relief, disaster relief, charity, volunteer work</li> <li>--Religion being a source of morality</li> <li>--Religion defining cultural identity and cultural membership</li> <li>--Religious diversity, pluralism, tolerance</li> <li>--Commonality among different religious, universality</li> </ul>
Theocratic Desecularization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Religion being set up as the state religion</li> </ul>

With regard to modernizing secularization, I look for framing of religion or forms of religiosity that neither denote nor connote Marxist atheism while indicating support for secularization in terms of the privatization of religion, separation of other social institutions from the norms and influences of religion, and valorization of modern secular, humanistic values over religious values/practices, etc. Into deprivatizing desecularization fall representations of religion/religiosity as being culture or part of a national or regional culture, affirming its active



Table 1.3. Coding Instruments for Five Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends on Atheism Articles

	<i>Key words, phrases, meaning blocks</i>
Militant-atheistic secularization	<i>Positive Representation:</i> --to expand the atheist battleground --strict penalty to the CCP members who believe in religion
Enlightenment-atheistic secularization	<i>Positive Representation:</i> --call for atheist/materialist propagation and education; --positive portrayal of atheist theories/atheists --contributions made by atheists to the history of thought, of science, and of philosophy --social policies based on atheism are rational -- A religious person converts to atheism.
Modernizing secularization	<i>Negative Representation:</i> --critical of militant atheistic behaviors as excessive --critical of antagonism between religious and atheist countries/groups.  <i>Positive Representation:</i> --Atheists do not believe in ghosts
Deprivatizing desecularization	<i>Negative Representation:</i> --atheism limits poetic imagination --atheists have spiritual needs, salvation of their souls. --atheists have moral deficiency  <i>Positive Representation:</i> --Atheists and the religious can live and work together --Atheist appreciates the religious --“People not only have the freedom to believe in religion, but also the right not to believe in religion and to propagate atheism.”
Theocratic desecularization	

role in fighting for a just cause, participating in public service such as disaster relief, providing moral wisdom and ethical guidance, meeting people’s spiritual needs, embracing the market economy, and transcending the limitations of modern science and technology or the banality of materialistic, secular life, etc. (See Table 1.2 and table 1.3).

When I was following the coding schemes laid out in the previous chapter for emotional undertones (positive, negative, neutral, both positive and negative) and trends of secularization

Table 1.4. Additional Coding Instruments for Five Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends on Religion Articles (*Southern Weekend*)

<i>Key Words, Phrases, Meaning Blocks</i>	
Militant-atheistic Secularization	/
Enlightenment-atheistic Secularization	/
Modernizing Secularization	<p><i>Negative Representation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Idolization is risky.</li> <li>--Writing history from a religious perspective is biased.</li> <li>--Religion goes against modernist values such as gender equality, modern hygiene, unity of sex and love in relationships; discourages participation in sports; needs psychological counseling</li> <li>--Religion as a symptom of the problematic side of modern life.</li> <li>--Religion as a result of political uncertainty or inaptitude.</li> <li>--Critical of entanglement between religion and political power</li> <li>--Religion being counterproductive to common sense</li> </ul> <p><i>Positive Representation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Secularize toward a moderate Islamic state, democratize.</li> </ul>
Deprivatizing Desecularization	<p><i>Negative Representation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Over-commodification and commercialization of religion</li> <li>--Religious individual's moral laxity that goes against religious teaching.</li> <li>--Stringent religious rules and laws bear hefty social costs.</li> <li>--Overemphasizing religious formalism, underrating salvation of the soul.</li> </ul> <p><i>Positive Representation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--What used to be regarded as "superstition" is now considered "culture."</li> <li>--Religious faith plays an important role in one's life.</li> <li>--Religion embraces the market economy.</li> <li>--The spiritual transcends limitations of the materialistic, the secular, the scientific, the dogmatic.</li> </ul>
Theocratic Desecularization	/

(militant atheistic secularization, enlightenment atheistic secularization, modernizing secularization) and desecularization (deprivatizing desecularization, theocratic desecularization) based on content-analyzing the *People's Daily*, I realized that *Southern Weekend's* representation of religion and atheism sometimes goes beyond that found in the *People's Daily*. Thus, in

Table 1.5. Additional Coding Instruments for Five Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends on Atheism Articles (*Southern Weekend*)

<i>Key words, phrases, meaning blocks</i>	
Militant-atheistic secularization	/
Enlightenment-atheistic secularization	<i>Negative Representation:</i> --Regrettable that an atheist converts to a religion
Modernizing secularization	<i>Negative Representation:</i> --critical of so-called atheists misguided by blind faith --against organized religion and atheism
Deprivatizing desecularization	<i>Negative Representation:</i> --atheistic perspective deprives people of enjoying folk customs ridden with religious elements --critical of atheists who denigrate religion or think religion is virus. --Karl Marx, as an anti-religion atheist, did not have much to say about moral cultivation.  <i>Positive Representation:</i> --Self-professed atheist believes in miraculous things.
Theocratic desecularization	/

addition to the coding instruments listed above in Table 1.2., I use those summarized in Table 1.4 and Table 1.5 for content analyzing religion and atheism articles from *Southern Weekend* for tones and the secularization vs. desecularization trends. For instance, some articles from *Southern Weekend* may argue that religious idolization is a risky business that may do harm to society, that writing history from a religious perspective is a biased approach, that some religion/religiosity may inculcate beliefs and practices that run against modernist values such as gender equality, modern hygienic standards, and the unity of love and sex in a relationship, etc. I coded articles with representation of religion along these lines as showing a negative tone and advocating modernizing secularization.

## 1.8 Significance of this study

Few previous studies have zoomed in on how atheism and religion are covered in Chinese media. When press coverage in the reform-era is examined, for instance, none of the most commonly used subject categories is “religion” or “atheism” (e.g. Chang, Wang, and Chen 1994; Guo and Chen 1997; He 1998, 2000; Lee 1981).<sup>6</sup> This oversight is particularly curious, considering the fact that since the 1980s religious revival in China has been growing in momentum, creating a large “grey” religious market (Yang 2006) and that since the nationwide crackdown on the Falun Gong movement in 1999, overt atheism has been gaining grounds in propaganda and education. While politically sensitive scholars located outside of China are aware of the inconvenience and discomfort the issue of religion has brought to Chinese leaders in the reform era, it has not deterred many of them from choosing to work on various aspects of religion in China. The reasons why none has studied atheism as an official ideology vis-à-vis religion are unclear. However, it is my conviction that a close examination of media coverage of atheism and religion will shed considerable light on the extent to which the party-state in the reform-era draws symbolic boundaries on its body politic. Based on orthodox atheist ideology, the party-state includes atheists and excludes particular types of religionists in its efforts to define suitable modern subjects.

Recently a group of scholars in the field of journalism and mass communications has started to examine news coverage of religion in mainland China. Yao and colleagues’ study (2011), however, suffers from several limitations which my study seeks to overcome. First of all,

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<sup>6</sup> In He (2000), for instance, twenty-one subject categories were employed to examine the content of the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*. They are: “economy,” “international and foreign relations,” “sports,” “science, technology, education, arts, and culture,” “Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan,” “life experience,” “politics,” “spiritual civilization,” “environment,” “crime/law,” “human interest,” “public welfare and health,” “model/hero,” “information and how-to,” “social issues,” “disaster,” “history,” “media,” “corruption,” “military,” and “special economic zone issues” (He 2000: 131).

their study mistakes the *People's Daily* as the most representative of Chinese news media. While the *People's Daily* is a great source for identifying the impact of political change on official discursive behavior, it is far from being representative of news media as a whole in contemporary China. Thinking that it is amounts to a grave disregard for the growing influence of commercialized newspapers that have been thriving, sometimes precariously, in the reconfigured market of news media since the reform. As the Data and Methods section of this chapter shows, in many ways commercialized newspapers are so different from official “mouthpiece” media such as the *People's Daily* that they cannot be represented by the latter. My study will examine both types of media.

Moreover, in Yao and colleagues' study the use of a single key word search (i.e., “religion”) has left many relevant articles out. Amalgamating all religions into a single variable gravely distorts the reality of religious diversity in China. Additionally, not including “atheism” as a key search word produces a partial picture of the media's symbolic construction of religion at best. My study will use “atheism” (*wushenlun*), “Buddhism” (*fojiao*), “Daoism” (*taojiao*), “Christianity” (*jidujiao*), “Catholicism” (*tianzhujiao*), and “Islam” (*yisilanjiao*) and “Muslim” (*musilin*), as well as “superstition” (*mixin*) and “evil cult” (*xiejiao*) for search terms in order to better capture the complexity of CCP's discursive practices.

## 1.9 Organization of this Thesis

The first chapter serves as an introduction to my thesis. In this chapter, I discuss the motivating questions for this project: first, why no empirical study of atheism as an ideology has been conducted? Second, how do the Chinese live with the logical incongruity of self-identifying to be irreligious or an atheist while engaging in religious beliefs and practices? I argue a close examination of how the Chinese news media represent religion and atheism in the reform-era can

help answer these questions. In this chapter, I specify the research questions I intend to explore in this study, I then introduce the theoretical framework of desecularization and the perspective of media framing, which are both methodologically and substantively essential to my study. In the section on data, I outline the major differences of official and commercialized media in relation to reconfigured power relations among the state, market and the media. I then offer explanations for my choice of the *People's Daily* and *Southern Weekend* for content analysis.

Chapter Two first provide empirical background knowledge by way of doing a historical sketch of the atheist and anti-religion propaganda by the Chinese communists since its founding days, which helps situate the subject of my research in its historical context. Through content analysis of 390 articles from the *People's Daily* (1978-2011) and 41 articles from *Southern Weekend* (1984-1998 & 2003-2011), I find that atheism *per se* is not persistently and enthusiastically promoted by the state media in the three decades since 1978, except at times of political campaigns against forms of religiosity that are perceived by the CCP to be menacing to their rule. In the commercialized paper, atheism *per se* similarly has little visibility. The difference between the official and commercialized media's representation is that the former uses mostly positive tone while the latter has more neutral and negative tonal use in framing atheism *per se*. Although the commercialized paper does sometimes represent atheism *per se* in different perspectives than the official paper, they can hardly constitute overt, polemical engagement with the official construction of atheism *per se* as a political ideology.

Chapter Three delineates the secularization vs. desecularization trends in the official news media—the *People's Daily*—from 1978 to 2011. Through human coder content analysis of 22,218 articles on six religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Catholicism, Islam), two forms of religiosity (“superstition,” “evil cult”) and atheism, I find that both the

negative and positive tones have a strong presence in the representation of religion over time. Among China-related articles, the positive tone has a stronger, more consistent presence than other tones, especially among articles on Chinese religions. The negative tone shows a great deal of fluctuation, especially in the years of political campaigns against illegalized religiosities. Among international articles, both the negative-only and positive-only tones are used heavily on representation of the three monotheistic religions. While the deprivatizing desecularization trend is predominant over time, militant- and enlightenment-atheistic secularization have a strong presence over time among China-related articles, but not international articles. Modernizing secularization trend has a weak presence among both China-related and international articles. Only one article falls in the theocratic desecularization category. I discuss the findings and their implications in the conclusion.

In Chapter Four I content-analyzed 1,759 articles from *Southern Weekend* dated from 1984 to 1998 and from 2003 to 2011, again on six religions, two forms of religiosities and atheism. I find that on average *Southern Weekend* publishes fewer articles per week than the *People's Daily*. *Southern Weekend* has more varied tonal use in the representation of religion than the *People's Daily*, as well as a stronger trend toward desecularization, especially in the new millennium when it divests itself of the mouthpiece role and uses a much-enlarged vocabulary in the representation of religion that is divorced from political and ideological pedagogy. Content analysis of 22 *yulun jiandu* (watchdog) articles on Buddhism reveals that *Southern Weekend* is bold enough to investigate the complex relationship between religion and secular forces such as the party-state and the enterprising market and disclose what goes wrong in the process of desecularizing religion.

In Chapter Five I zoom in on Buddhism and Christianity and compare and contrast their representation in the *People's Daily* from 1978 to 2011. Although the deprivatizing desecularization discourse is predominantly used in the representation of both religions, positive and negative frames are differentially applied to them. Through content analysis of the frames used in the articles, I find that Chinese Buddhism tends to be portrayed in more positive frames, culturalized, depoliticized, and made a vehicle for the expansion of economic cooperation between China and other Asia countries. Christianity is heavily politicized. In international news Christianity appears frequently in frames of conflicts, war and intolerance; in domestic coverage it is connected to Western imperialism and subversive enemy forces. Tibetan Buddhism coverage uses both strongly positive and negative frames. Representation of religion in the official media serves as a manifestation in the cultural realm of symbolic representation of the religious oligopoly that characterizes the religion-state relationship. The differential use of positive and negative frames on Buddhism and Christianity constructs a desecularization discourse that is particularly crafted to give the feeling that Buddhism is a better religion than Christianity.

In Chapter Six I discuss the key findings in light of the theoretical framework of secularization vs. desecularization, how well they help answer the research questions I set out to explore, and what the contributions my research makes to the fields of sociology of religion and media. I give concluding remarks regarding the implications of this study, point out its limitations and future directions for research.



## CHAPTER 2. REPRESENTATION OF ATHEISM IN CHINESE NEWS MEDIA

### 2.1 Abstract

This chapter examines the representation of atheism *per se* through content-analyzing 390 articles that contain the term “atheism” (*wushenlun*) from the official newspaper the *People’s Daily* (1978-2011) and 41 articles from the commercialized newspaper *Southern Weekend* (1984-1998 & 2003-2011). I find that atheism *per se* is not persistently and enthusiastically promoted by the state media in the three decades since 1978, except at times of political campaigns against forms of religiosity that are perceived by the CCP to be menacing to their rule. In the commercialized paper, atheism *per se* similarly has little visibility. The difference between the official and commercialized media’s representation is that the former uses mostly positive tone while the latter has more neutral and negative tonal use in framing atheism *per se*. Although the commercialized paper does sometimes represent atheism *per se* in different perspectives than the official paper, they can hardly constitute overt, polemical engagement with the official construction of atheism *per se* as a political ideology.

### 2.2 Brief History of Atheist and Anti-religion Propaganda by Chinese Communists

The CCP has espoused atheism since its inception in 1921 (Gong 2007: 5). It played an important role in orchestrating with its Kuomintang counterpart the anti-Christian, anti-Confucian, and anti-superstition movements during the 1920s (Lutz 1988; Nedostup 2001, 2009; Yip 1980). However, political expediency required the Communists to occasionally form strategic alliance with various secret societies and religious groups in the battle against more immediate “enemies” before they drove the Kuomintang to Taiwan (Nedostup 2001). Atheism

was at these times considered a potentially alienating discourse counterproductive to the consolidation of a united front and therefore oftentimes tuned down or thrust under the rug.

As it grew steadily in power and strength in the early 1940s, the CCP made uprooting superstition the major focus of its atheist indoctrination. In the Yan'an revolutionary base area, the Communists set up a whole array of propaganda programs such as political schools and classes to train Party members, literacy classes for peasants and workers and specialized schools for artists and writers, workers' and peasants' theatrical troupes for every county and district, and newspaper reading groups, etc. Expelling superstitious beliefs, along with fostering revolutionary consciousness, improving hygiene, spreading progressive ideas about women, and undermining the Nationalists, was among the main objectives of these thought-reforming programs (Boshier and Huang 2010; Holms 1984; Li 1996; Yu 1964: 47-53).

After the CCP took power in mainland China in 1949, there has been a tug-of-war between "militant atheism" and "enlightenment atheism." As Fenggang Yang (2012) observed:

Enlightenment atheism regards religion as an illusory or false consciousness, being both nonscientific and backward; thus, atheist propaganda is necessary to expunge the misleading religious ideas. In comparison, militant atheism treats religion as the dangerous opium and narcotic of the people, a wrong political ideology serving the interests of the exploiting classes and antirevolutionary elements; thus, political forces are necessary to control and eliminate religion. In other words, if enlightenment atheism hopes for a decline in religious doctrine through scientific development, mass education, and propaganda, militant atheism sees a need to take greater social and political measures to control and eradicate religion. While the former may imply some pity for and sympathy to the believers and consent to a certain degree of tolerance of existing religions, the latter regards religious believers, leaders, and organizations as counterrevolutionary forces that should be restricted, reduced, and eliminated (46).

The history of CCP's atheist propaganda can be divided into three distinct periods. The first period spans from 1949 to 1978 and is characterized by the predominance of militant atheism. Religion was politicized and denounced as the instrument of exploitation at the hands of feudalism, capitalist and imperialist powers. By 1957 the CCP had nationalized religious

institutions and their properties, restricted religious activities, and effectively stunned religious growth (Yang 2011). A nationwide crackdown was launched on “reactionary sects and secret societies.” Witches, sorcerers, Fengshui masters, fortune-tellers, and geomancers, etc. were forced to adopt other trades for a living. Trusting the newly consolidated and expanded mass propaganda machine would most potently remold the Chinese people’s mentality, the CCP monopolized the realm of symbolic representation and made cable radios, loudspeakers, “big characters” wall posters (*dazi bao*), and blackboards almost ubiquitous in China (Apter 1995; Apter and Saich 1994; Schoenhals 1992; Schurmann 1966; Whyte 1974; Yu 1964; Zhang 1999). Traditional stories where religious elements abounded ceased to be published. “New stories” were created that pontificated on the moral and practical failings of fatalistic and superstitious beliefs and urged people to act on their own will power and the presumed “collective human capacities” to overcome obstacles in life (Chang 1979). In academic research, Marxist theory was dogmatically applied to analyzing traditional religions and their histories. In 1964, the World Religion Research Institute (WRRI) of Chinese Academy of Sciences was founded for the purpose of developing what Mao Zedong designated as “criticizing theology,” a euphemistic term that refers to studying religion from the critical perspective of Marx-Leninism. Party branches and the China Association for Science and Technology at all levels of operation were required to carry out popularization of natural sciences and atheism and propagate the Marxist theory of the law of social development, utilizing popular forms of propaganda easily accessible to the masses (Lindbeck 1961; Schmalzer 2008; Xu 2011).

During the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), militancy toward religion was elevated to a new height and wholesale eradication was attempted, resulting in the closing of all religious venues, destruction of innumerable religious artifacts, and banishment of religious

personnel to secular life, labor camps, or the death roll for those who dared to resist (Yang 2004: 104). Draconian measures were undertaken to control the symbolic realm by condemning and silencing the so-called “backward” and “anti-revolutionary” voices, religion being a major one. In literature, art and entertainment religious reference was purged (Egan 1984; Wang 1982; Zaniello 1974).

The second period started upon Deng Xiaoping’s launching of the “opening up and reform” policy in 1978. As pragmatism prevailed over ideological dogmatism, enlightenment atheism replaced militant atheism, and religious policy changed from complete eradication to limited toleration (MacInnis 1996). In 1982, CCP issued the circular “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Affairs during the Socialist Period of Our Country,” commonly known as Document No. 19 of 1982. According to Yang (2012), this document officially established enlightenment atheism as the guiding principle for religious policy in the reform era:

It states that religion in socialist China has five characteristics: it (1) will exist for a long time, (2) has masses of believers, (3) is complex, (4) entwines with ethnicity, and (5) affects international relations. As a result of such characteristics, religious affairs must therefore be handled with care; religious believers should be rallied for the central task of economic construction, and religious freedom should be guaranteed as long as the believers love the country, support CCP’s rule, and observe socialist laws. Document No. 19 acknowledges the mistakes of militant atheism. But it also clearly reaffirms the atheist doctrine: religion will eventually wither away, and atheist propaganda must be carried out unremittingly, albeit not inside religious venues (Yang 2012: 50)

Since the 1980s, myriad forms of religious traditions, both officially sanctioned and unsanctioned ones, have revived and even flourished across China (Overmyer 2003). Research has frequently shown that economic reform has brought the state and religion into new forms of relations that allow certain religions to enjoy official “blessing” and rapid growth (e.g. Cao 2006; Chan et al. 2009; Dean 2003; DuBois 2005; Overmyer 2003). Nonetheless, the shortage economy of religious supply (Yang 2009) and the existence of massive black and grey markets

of religion (Yang 2006) crystallize the limits of official tolerance toward religion. Resistance to religious restrictions and regulations constitutes open defiance to official atheist ideology (Dunn 2009; Potter 2003; Yang 2006).

From 1978 to 1999, militant atheism experienced increasing obscurity. It was ensconced in institutions such as the Religious Studies Society and the Atheism Society. In the early 1980s, an intense debate broke out among circles of intellectuals and political theoreticians over whether or not atheism propaganda should be effectuated across the country. The left-leaning camp argued that scientific atheist education and propaganda was a prerequisite for the socialist construction and “four modernizations”<sup>7</sup> of the country. The opposite side countered that atheist propagation would amount to a lethal assault on religion and that requiring religious adherents to believe in Marxist atheism was no different from turning them into apostates. Fearing that nationwide propagation of atheism would get out of control and backslide into such extremism that would give rise to another Cultural Revolution, most people in the debate favored bowing out of it. The Atheism Association’s annual conference was discontinued after its last meeting in 1986. Research on scientific atheism and atheist propaganda went into virtue dormancy.

The wholesale crackdown on the Falun Gong movement in 1999 marked the beginning of the third historical period when militant atheism staged a forceful comeback. The CCP mobilized all the state apparatuses of propaganda and coercion in the suppression of the Falun Gong movement. In July, 1999, a bimonthly journal *Science and Atheism* (*kexue yu wushenlun*) was launched by the China Atheism Society under the auspices of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, with the stated objective of disseminating materialism and scientific atheism. In 2004, in response to the plea of several key members of the Chinese Atheist Association, six central

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<sup>7</sup> “Four modernizations” was set up in the Deng Xiaoping era as goals to strengthen and modernize the sectors of industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology.

government departments, including the CCP Organization Department, CCP Publicity Department, Spiritual Civilization Construction Office of the Central Communist Party Committee and the Ministry of Education of PRC, together with the Chinese Academy of Social Science, issued the “Notice on Further Invigorating Marxist Atheism Research, Propaganda and Education Work” (Li 2010). Stressing the importance of strengthening Marxist atheism research and propaganda in the struggle against various sorts of “evil cults,” pseudoscience and superstitions indigenous to China, as well as thwarting attempts by overseas “hostile forces” to westernize or split China, the Notice mandates that schools, the academia, mass media such as radio, television, newspapers and magazines, and other popular forms of communication such as the Internet, movies, TV shows, local opera, books and electronic publications should all serve as important “battlegrounds” for Marxist atheism propaganda and education.

Nevertheless, proponents of militant atheism have severely circumscribed their contentious target. A good example is a textbook entitled *Selected Readings of Marxist Atheism for Government Cadres*<sup>8</sup> authored by Gong Xuezheng and Li Shen, two of the leading Marxist atheists in contemporary China. While they did discuss “theism” and how human history and science, in particular, has proved it wrong, most of their criticism was directed toward “evil cults,” “pseudoscience,” and various types of “superstition.” The five officially recognized religions were barely mentioned in the pages. As has become evident by now, the media have been a central component of the party-state’s apparatus of control. When the Communist party deems it necessary, it actively deploys the media for the dissemination of atheist and anti-religious propaganda.

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<sup>8</sup> *Makexi zhuyi wushenlun ganbu duben*. Beijing: Renmin Press, 2004.

In the next section, I provide description of the data collected from the *People's Daily* and *Southern Weekend* on atheism *per se*, before presenting findings from content-analysis of the tonal use and secularization vs. desecularization trends in the framing of atheism *per se*. By “atheism *per se*,” I mean those articles that contain the term “atheism” (*wushenlun*), in distinction from those that do not have this particular Chinese word, but nonetheless use atheistic secularization frames, which I will discuss in the next two chapters.

### 2.3 Representation of Atheism *Per Se* in the *People's Daily*

#### 2.3.1 Description of Data on Atheism *Per Se* in the *People's Daily*

Key word search retrieved 400 articles that contain the word “atheism” (*wushenlun*) from the *People's Daily* online database from 1978 to 2011. As is shown in Table 2.1, after removing 10 duplicate articles from the *People's Daily* dataset, I kept 390 articles for analysis.

Figure 2.1 shows the number of atheism *per se* articles in the *People's Daily* over the years under study. The yearly number of atheism *per se* articles remains under 20, except for

Table 2.1. Numbers of Articles on Atheism *Per Se* in the Two Papers

	Numbers of Articles of Atheism <i>Per Se</i>		
	Data Retrieved	Excluding Duplicates	Relevant
<i>People's Daily</i>	400	390	<b>390</b>
<i>Southern Weekend</i>	41	41	<b>41</b>

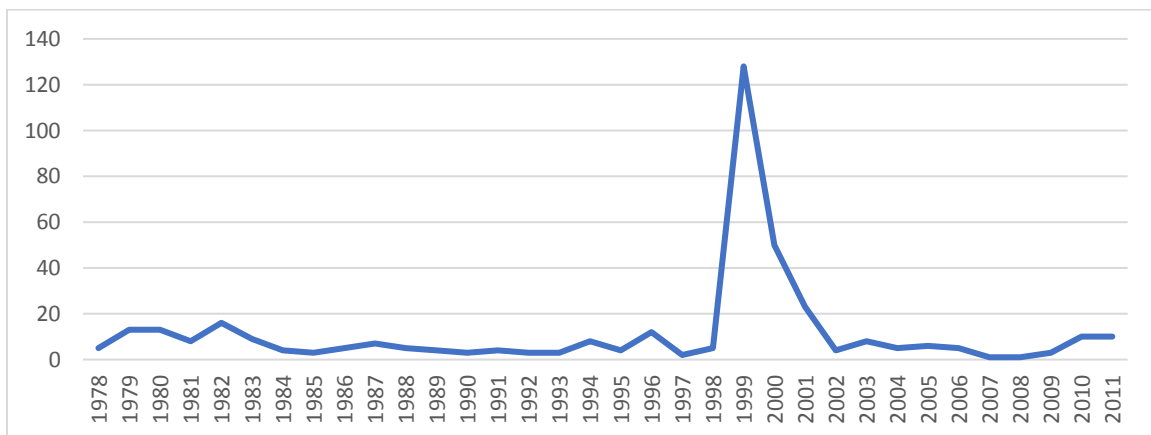


Figure 2.1. Number of Atheism *Per Se* Articles in *People's Daily*: 1978-2011

1999 when it shoots up to about 130 and comes down to 50 in 2000 and 23 in 2001. This dramatic spike starts at the time when the central government ordered the crackdown on the Falun Gong movement in spring, 1999 and used the mass media in the sweeping propaganda campaign to denounce the movement as an evil cult. The number then dwindles down and comes back to under 20 in 2002 and onward.

### **2.3.2 Tones of Representation of Atheism *Per Se* in the People's Daily**

As is seen in Table 2.2, 88.2% of the 390 articles from the *People's Daily* on atheism *per se* are topically about China, and positive toward atheism *per se*, while 5.1% are international articles that are positive toward atheism. A small fraction of the articles (4.4%) uses the neutral tone toward atheism. Only 2.3% of the articles represent atheism *per se* in a negative light. No articles use both positive and negative tones.



Table 2.2. Numbers of Articles on Atheism *Per Se* by Topical Areas and Tones in *People's Daily* (1978-2011)

	Atheism (% cell)	
	China	International
Negative	7 1.8%	2 0.5%
Positive	344 88.2%	20 5.1%
Both positive and negative	0	0
Neutral	13 3.3%	4 1.0%
<b>Total</b>	364 93.3%	26 6.7%
		390 100%

### 2.3.3 Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends among Atheism *Per Se* Articles in the *People's Daily*

Figure 2.2 shows that among atheism *per se* articles in the *People's Daily*, both militant-atheistic and enlightenment-atheistic secularization trends shoot upward in 1999, the former much higher than the latter, and then slide down in 2000 and return to their normal levels of activity and elevation from the x axis in 2002. This demonstrates the dramatic increase in the deployment of both militant and enlightenment atheistic secularization discourses in the political and ideological battle against the Falun Gong movement during the nation-wide crackdown that

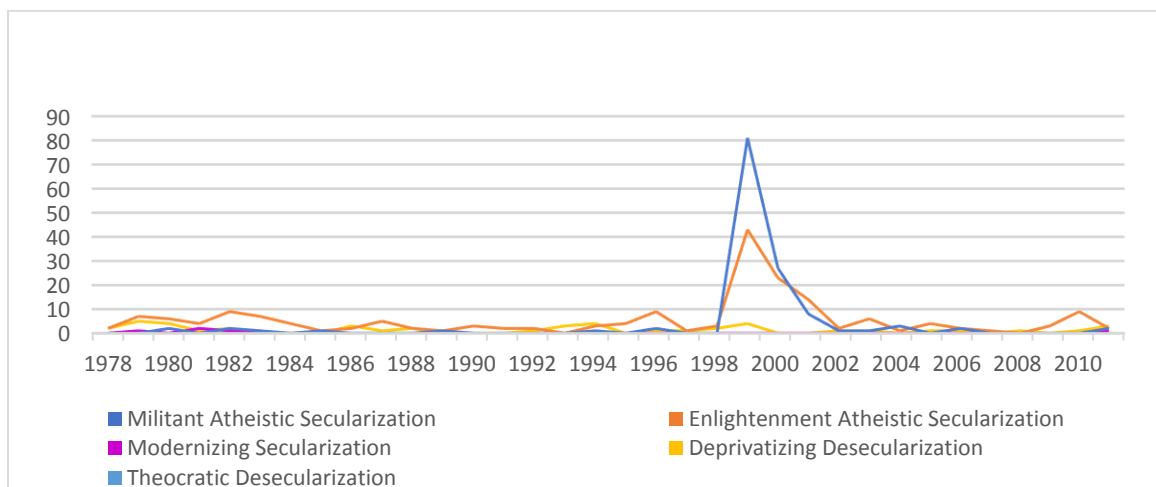


Figure 2.2. Trends of 5 Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization among Atheism *Per Se* Articles in *People's Daily* (1978-2011)

began in 1999 and subsided in 2001. In articles that use militant atheistic secularization discourse, atheism *per se* is represented as a political weapon of thought lethal to “evil cults” such as Falun Gong and crucial for winning the battle against it. Propagating atheism, as well as Marxist materialism, scientific knowledge and scientific spirit, patriotism, collectivism, and socialism, etc., is to go hand in hand with coercive measures of confiscating Falun Gong publications, breaking up its cell groups and rounding up their leaders, forced conversion of adherents to apostates, etc. The quotes below very well illustrate this kind of framing:

If Marxism does not occupy the battlefield of thought, non-Marxism and anti-Marxism will surely do... Grassroot Party organizations of all regions and all departments must use Falun Gong as a negative example, be perceptive of the new circumstances and strengthen the education of Marxist materialism and atheism among the masses. They must explain the policies and tasks well (laid down by the Party), conduct thought work and political work among tens of thousands of households, let science take root in people’s hearts, and leave no room for heretical and fallacious ideas.<sup>9</sup>

The fight against Falun Gong aims at not only eradicating the “evil cult” itself, but also meeting the existential and spiritual needs of the masses that Falun Gong caters to such as the needs for meaning, truth, and good health. A legion of secular ideas, values and practices, including Marxist atheism, is deployed to replace the religious movement and meet the masses’ needs:

(We must) carry out the ‘bring-three-things-down-to-the-countryside’ (*san xia xiang*) movement to a new level, putting the social educational function of culture to its full use and actively guiding the cultural consumption of the masses; forcefully propagate Marxist materialism and atheism, strengthen the popularization of the scientific spirit, scientific ideas, scientific methods and scientific knowledge; enhance the peasants’ ability to discern and resist idealism and feudal superstition; spread medical and hygienic knowledge, scientific health care and natural scientific knowledge; improve peasants’ ability for self-health care and scientific health regimen. These measures are conducive to forming the good social mentality of valuing culture, scientific learning and personal hygiene in the countryside, fundamentally reinforcing the positive results of denouncing Falun Gong and adopting wholesome, beneficial, and colorful spiritual and

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<sup>9</sup> Jiceng dangzuzhi yao zhanzai douzheng qianlie (Grassroot Party organizations must stand in the forefront of the battle), Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), November 15, 1999, 1.

cultural life in order to occupy the battlefield (of thought) in the countryside and maintain social stability.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 2.2 also shows that of the five lines, the enlightenment atheistic secularization line has a relatively more consistent and active presence in the years other than 1999-2001, whereas the militant-atheistic secularization line has few activities going on besides the years of 1999 to 2001, reflecting the general policy reorientation since the issuance of Document No. 19 from militant atheism to enlightenment atheism. In the articles that use enlightenment secularization discourse, the sense of immediacy, urgency and militancy that characterizes militant secularization discourse is virtually absent. The enlightenment atheism articles stress gradual, uncoerced secularization of the masses, including religious adherents, through continuous education and propaganda in Marxist atheism and socialist values. Some of them are actually calls for secularization of this kind. Some articles provide the portrayal of how a religious person changes into an atheist through conviction, not coercion. For instance, an article published in the 1980s talks about how “a pious Muslim turned into a glorious atheist convert.” What plays a crucial part in his conversion is neither propaganda nor forced secularization measures, but that he got financially much better-off which he attributes to the economic reform policies the CCP carried out. “Several years ago I worked my heart out, but to no avail. I was still dirt poor. Allah was not efficacious.”<sup>11</sup> The logic of this articles goes that getting rich is a materialist vindication of the veracity of atheism. However, the logic of this article may be plausible in the early years of the reform, but in the 1990s when the economic reform brought about so much dramatic changes to the Chinese society, for better or for worse, that this logic would sound naïve, if not

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<sup>10</sup> Quanguo wenhua keji weisheng “sanxiaxiang” dianshi dianhua huiyi yaoqiu jiaqiang nongcun jingshen wenming jianshe weihu nongcun gaige fazhan daju (Teleconference on “three down-to-the-countryside”—culture, science and technology, and hygiene—requires strengthening the construction of spiritual civilization in the countryside and maintaining the reform and development of the countryside), *Renmin ribao* (*People’s Daily*), November 26, 1999, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Sanfang Muhamad (Three visits to Muhamad), Huang Bin, *Renmin ribao* (*People’s Daily*), February 27, 1987, 4.

ludicrous. Indeed, the party-state started to see that this kind of logic did not pan out in real life. As the Chinese were getting rich, material prosperity did not translate into secularization of consciousness. Instead, all kinds of religiosity and spirituality were surging in China. Enlightenment-style secularization through atheism did not work as well as expected. Subsequently, the official media abandoned this kind of framing.

Atheism *per se* is also written into a historiography of how materialism and atheism developed, combatting idealism, theology and theocracy in western philosophy, science and politics, and culminated in Marxism. Lucian of Samosata (c. 125-after 180 AD)<sup>12</sup> and Titus Lucretius Carus (c. 99BC-c.55BC)<sup>13</sup>, both from the Roman Empire, David Hume<sup>14</sup> (1711-1776), Denis Diderot<sup>15</sup> (1713-1784), Bertrand Russell<sup>16</sup> (1872-1970), and Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>17</sup> (1905-1980), etc. are heroes of this history. The historical narrative backs up philosophical sagacity with scientific breakthroughs to construct a secularizing teleology of social evolution. “The history of social development of humanity is a history of struggle between science and superstition. Copernicus, Bruno, Galileo, and innumerable other scientists braved the gallows and the fire stake, stood up to the persecution and oppression of the feudal theocratic and the Vatican, and persevered in their belief in science and truth.”<sup>18</sup> These historiographical narratives

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<sup>12</sup> “liushan zhaxue wenxuan” xuanyi chuban (Selected translation of the *Philosophical Work of Lucian of Samosata* is in print), Wang Shouben, Renmin Ribao (*People’s Daily*), October 6, 1980, 5.

<sup>13</sup> “Wuxing lun” chongxin chuban (*The Nature of Things* is in print again), Cheng Menghui, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), November 17, 1981, 5.

<sup>14</sup> “Waiguo zhaxueshi yanjiu jikan diwuji” (Collection of western philosophical research V), Lei Yongsheng, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), December 20, 1982, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Zhandou wushenlun zhe dideluo—Jinian faguo weiwu zhuyi zhaxuejia dideluo shishi erbai zhounian (Militant atheist Diderot—Commemoration at the bicentennial anniversary of his death), Jiang Chunfang, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), August 6, 1984, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Kexue wushenlun gei ren zhenli he zhizhi (Scientific atheism brings truth and wisdom to people), Ren Jiyu, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), July 8, 2004, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Jinian Sate (Remembering Sartre), Wu Yuetian & Luo Xuecun, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), June 21, 2005, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Cong xuesheng jiechu “shenmi lian” shuoqi (Comments on students’ getting into contact with “mystery link”), Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), May 30, 1994, 8.

on atheism *per se* carry the mission of secularizing the Chinese through enlightenment thoughts and ideas.

In Figure 2.2, the deprivatizing desecularization line seems to have more activity prior to 1999 than in the time after 2001. The deprivatizing desecularization discourse that contains atheism *per se* is found in official speeches, policy statements, and stories about harmonious co-existence of atheists and religionists. For instance, Li Ruihuan, the then Chairman of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, said at the national United Front work meeting in late 1993:

The United Front in the new era is a most inclusive alliance consisting of all the people who work for socialism, the patriots who support socialism, and the patriots who support the unification of China. With such unprecedentedly inclusive alliance, we can unite all communists and non-communists, Marxists and non-Marxists, atheists and religious believers, ethnic Han people and ethnic minorities, our fellow countrymen and overseas Chinese—in sum, all forces that can be united, and devote the willpower and wisdom of the whole nation into achieving the overarching objective of realizing the four modernization, uniting China, and revitalizing the Chinese nation.”<sup>19</sup>

Allowing the co-existence and alliance, if not complete equality, of atheists and non-atheists in the collective effort to build socialist China amounts to granting legitimacy to the religionists as part of the political community which, in the Mao-era, would exclude believers and in the 1980s would include only religious leaders.

Deprivatizing desecularization discourse is also illustrated by atheism *per se* articles that insist on the truth of atheism or the atheist identity, while nevertheless acknowledge the veracity of certain aspects of religion. For instance, in one article, the author asserts that as an atheist, he is dubious about supernatural believes and practices, but can appreciate the bravery and

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<sup>19</sup> Li Ruihuan zai quanguo tongzhan gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua (Speech by Li Ruihuan at the national United Front work meeting), Renmin ribao (*People's Daily*), November 7, 1993, 1.

perseverance the High Monk Jianzhen<sup>20</sup> demonstrated in his efforts to travel to Japan and spread Buddhism, which made a prominent mark in the history of cultural exchange between China and Japan.<sup>21</sup> Recognizing the fortitude of will power of a religionist in a public forum such as the *People's Daily* is a big step toward letting religion return to the public sphere in the reform era. In the zenith of forced secularization during the Mao era, morality was reserved for the communists, Marxist atheists and revolutionaries to define and exemplify; all religionists were considered embodiments of delusional and backward consciousness and, unless reformed, were excluded from the socialist moral community.

In another article, the author, as a self-claimed atheist, expresses heart-felt sympathy for the dead laborers and P.O.W.s who were forced by the Japanese invaders to build the Burma Railway during WWII. Their ghosts, as the author is told by the tour guide, often come to haunt the bridge over the River Kwai where lost their lives during WWII. “Alas, who does not have mother and father? To die in a land not one’s own and without the knowledge of one’s family makes it impossible for their family and loved ones to pay visits to their tombs. Where else could their spirits go?”<sup>22</sup> An atheist’s capacity for understanding the plight of the dead, as it is expressed in the article, also brings to the fore the limitations of atheism which has no place for ghosts and spirits. The invocation of the spirits of the dead in the narrative marks the transference of an atheist to the theist realm.

The modernizing secularization line has close-to-none activity. The theocratic desecularization line has no activity at all. Close reading of the nine negative articles indicates

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<sup>20</sup> Jianzhen was a prominent Chinese Buddhist monk who overcame various hardships to go to Japan and introduced the Ritsu sect of Buddhism in Japan in the eighth century.

<sup>21</sup> Huanying Jianzhen heshang de zhenrong huiguo (Welcome the return of the High Monk JianZhen’s statue), Liao Chengzhi, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), April 25, 1980, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Pingdiao Guihe qiao (Payig respects at the bridge over the River Kwai), Zheng Ronglai, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), February 28, 2006, 16.

that some of them censure self-professed atheists for being enthralled in idolatrous mania or immoral conducts and others suggest atheists, too, have spiritual needs whose fulfillment they should look for somewhere else. However, the negative tone is couched in mild and brief language, rather than engaged discussion. I see neither open debate nor overt challenge of atheism in the *People's Daily's* coverage of atheism *per se*. It reflects that the then-president Jiang Zemin asserted at the national United Front work meeting in 1993: “We must not allow dispute between the believers and non-believers, between believers of this religion and believers of that religion, and between believers of this sect and believers of that section. Once we find out, we should educate and admonish those involved, and firmly stop them.”<sup>23</sup>

## 2.4 Representation of Atheism *Per Se* in *Southern Weekend*

### 2.4.1 Description of Data on Atheism *Per Se* in *Southern Weekend*

Key word search brought up a combination of 41 articles from *Southern Weekend's* CD-ROM collection of full-text articles published between 1984 to 1998 and the CNKI database between 2003 and 2011. As is shown in table 2.1, all of *Southern Weekend's* atheism *per se* articles were coded as relevant.

Figure 2.3 shows the yearly number of atheism *per se* articles published over time in *Southern Weekend*. From 1984 to 1998, the yearly number is 3 or less. In the late 2000s, it increases to 4 in 2007, 5 in 2008 and 4 in 2010 and 2011.

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<sup>23</sup> Jiang Zemin yu quanguo tongzhan gongzuo huiyi daibiao zuotan shi qiangdiao, nuli shi tongzhan gongzuo xingcheng xin qishi kaichuang xin jumian, cujin jizhong gefangmian liliang ba jingji jianshe gaoshangqu (At the round-table discussion with delegates at the national United Front work meeting, President Jiang Zemin stresses that we should work hard to revigorated the United Front work and reach a new stage of development, and to help rally all social forces into better economic construction), Renmin ribao (*People's Daily*), November 8, 1993, 1.

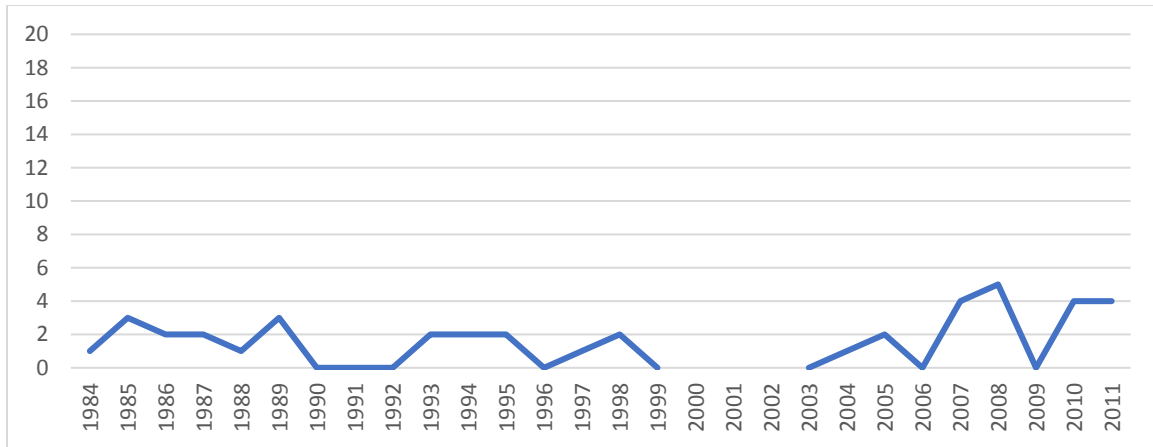


Figure 2.3. Numbers of Atheism *Per Se* Articles in *Southern Weekend*: 1984-1998 & 2003-2011

#### 2.4.2 Tones of Representation of Atheism *Per Se* in *Southern Weekend*

The representation of atheism *per se* in *Southern Weekend* has greater variation in the usage of tones than that in the *People's Daily*. As is seen in Table 2.3, while 93.3% of atheism articles in the *People's Daily* used the positive tone, the corresponding percentage drops to 56.1% in *Southern Weekend*, with 22% using the negative tone toward atheism.

Table 2.3. Number of Articles on Atheism *Per Se* by Topical Areas and Tones in *Southern Weekend* (1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

	Atheism		Total
	China	International	
Negative	6 14.6%	3 7.3%	9 22.0%
Positive	19 46.3%	4 9.8%	23 56.1%
Both positive and negative	1 2.4%	0	1 2.4%
Neutral	5 12.2%	3 7.3%	8 19.5%
<b>Total</b>	31 75.6%	10 24.4%	41 100%



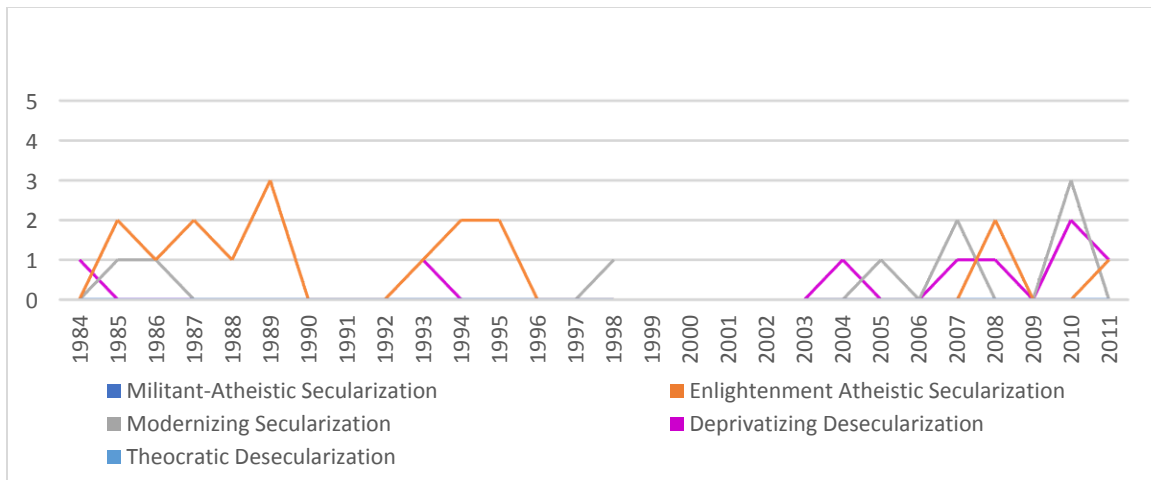


Figure 2.4. Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends among Atheism *Per Se* Articles in *Southern Weekend* (1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

Figure 2.4 shows the five types of secularization vs. desecularization trends among atheism *per se* articles in *Southern Weekend* over the two time periods under study. The militant-atheistic secularization discourse is not present at all. The enlightenment-atheistic secularization trend has the strongest presence of all in the period from 1985 to 1995; it virtually disappears from 1996 to 1998 and shows up again in 2007 and 2011 in the new millennium. The first part of this trend is reflective of *Southern Weekend*'s identity as an urban tabloid in its first stage of development (1984-1995) when it published politically innocuous contents.

The modernizing secularization and deprivatizing desecularization discourses are sporadically used between 1984 and 1998, but has more appearances in the 2000s. Some articles provide alternative views of atheism that are transgressive to the official representation. For instance, Norman Mailer, who is presented as the "famous American writer, two-time Pulitzer Prize winner," "America's Tolstoy," and "America's conscience," is said to "oppose both organized religion and organized atheism."<sup>24</sup> Others express disapproval of the atheists who

<sup>24</sup> "Meiguo de tuo er si tai" jinru wanshendian ("America's Tolstoy went to the pantheon), Nanfang zhoumo (*Southern Weekend*), November 15, 2007, D23.

cannot appreciate and enjoy the folk customs observed during traditional festivals that are filled with religious rituals and taboos.<sup>25</sup> No theocratic desecularization trend is present.

## 2.5 Conclusion

As an official ideology vis-à-vis religion, atheism *per se* is not persistently and enthusiastically promoted by the state media in the three decades since 1978, except at times of political campaigns against forms of religiosity that are perceived by the CCP to be menacing to their rule. At the same time, open debate and overt challenge to atheism is off limits in the *People's Daily*. Although most of the time atheism *per se* is closeted, it remains an important ideological and theoretical resource that the CCP resorts to when it considers it politically necessary.

Just like the *People's Daily*, atheism *per se* has little visibility in *Southern Weekend*. What differentiates *Southern Weekend* from the *People's Daily*, as far as coverage of atheism is concerned, is nearly half of *Southern Weekend's* articles use either negative or neutral tone on atheism, whereas in the *People's Daily* nearly all the articles are positive toward atheism. Although some articles from *Southern Weekend* represent atheism *per se* in frames that are different from the *People's Daily*, they are mostly flash-in-a-pan style of transgression that do not engage the official symbolic representation of atheism *per se* in any significantly polemical way.

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<sup>25</sup> Zhufu suixiang: guonian (Thoughts from a housewife: Celebrating the Spring Festival), He Zhuoqiong, Nanfang zhoubao (*Southern Weekend*), January 22, 1993, 3.

## **CHAPTER 3. SECULARIZATION VS. DESECULARIZATION TRENDS IN OFFICIAL NEWS MEDIA 1978-2011**

### **3.1 Abstract**

To reiterate the central puzzle this research aims to shed light on, why do so many Chinese embrace an atheist identity while acting like a religionist (in belief and/or behavior)? I argue that the media in China during the reform-era have contributed significantly to the Chinese' being at ease with this particular logical contradiction. Closely monitored and censored by the party-state, the Chinese news media are churning out both secularizing (atheistic and non-atheistic) and desecularizing representations of religion simultaneously and in particularly crafted ways. The resulting symbolic construction of atheism and religion thus helps in superseding the logical contradiction which the two opposing discourses (atheistic and religious) present to the consumers of the messages, making it possible for them to live with the contradiction.

This chapter configures the secularization vs. desecularization trends in the key official news media—the *People's Daily*—from 1978 to 2011. Through human coder content analysis of 22,218 articles on six religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Catholicism, Islam), two forms of religiosity (“superstition,” “evil cult”), and atheism, I find that both the negative and positive tones have a strong presence in the representation of religion over time. Among China-related articles, the positive tone has a stronger, more consistent presence than other tones, especially among articles on Chinese religions. The negative tone shows a great deal of fluctuation, especially in the years of political campaigns against illegalized religiosities. Among international articles, both the negative-only and positive-only tones are used heavily on representation of the three monotheistic religions. While the deprivatizing desecularization trend

is predominant over time, militant- and enlightenment-atheistic secularization have a strong presence over time among China-related articles, but not international articles. Modernizing secularization trend has a weak presence among both China-related and international articles. Only one article falls in the theocratic desecularization category. I discuss the findings and their implications in the conclusion. This study is important because it is the first attempt to systematically study the representation of religion in the official media in China during the reform era and its findings will enrich the theoretical debate over secularization and desecularization.

### 3.2 Hypotheses

Based on the reviews and theoretical discussions in Chapter 1, I posit that for the official news media the coverage of religion rarely ventures to the extremes. That is, neither militant atheism nor wholesale religious advocacy has gained a strong foothold in official news media. Militant atheism is marginalized for the most part, except when political necessity brings it back to the stage. What we see in the news media will be the framing of religiosity in enlightenment atheistic discourse, with a gradual increase of the modernizing secularization and deprivatizing desecularization discourses over the years, especially since the 2000s.

***Hypothesis 1.1:*** The tone of religion coverage is more positive than negative in the official media.

In their study Yao and colleagues (2011) take the positive tone of religious news reporting as a sign of desecularization of the media.

***Hypothesis 1.2:*** The tones of representation vary across different religions and religiosities in the official media.

**Hypothesis 2:** Desecularization trend runs stronger than the secularization trend over time in the official media.

Secularization of the militant atheistic style refers to agitational calls to eliminate religion and persecute religious adherents or affirmative reportage of actions of such kind. Militant atheist propaganda is likely to be used at times when the CCP perceives its rule to be threatened and subsequently tightens control over media. Specifically, the 1989 democratic movement and the Falun Gong movement are two major events in reform-era China that gave the hard-liners excuses to reassert militant atheism.

**Hypothesis 3.1:** Secularization of the enlightenment atheistic style maintains a continued presence in official newspapers.

**Hypothesis 3.2:** Modernizing secularization becomes stronger over time in official newspapers.

**Hypothesis 3.3:** Deprivatizing desecularization becomes stronger over time in the official media.

**Hypothesis 3.4:** Enthused advocacy for religious values (theocratic desecularization) is not likely to appear in official newspapers.

### 3.3 Results

#### 3.3.1 Descriptions of Data Collected

Based on the key words search mentioned above, I retrieved a total number of 25,714 articles, spanning 34 years from 1978 to 2011, from the *People's Daily* digital database. After initial cleaning of the data, excluding duplicates, I was left with 25,530 articles. I then coded all the data for relevance, and obtained the final dataset of 22,218 articles on six religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Catholicism, Islam), two forms of religiosity ("superstition," "evil cult"), and atheism. Table 3.1 shows the numbers of articles on the various religions/religiosity and atheism through the three steps of dataset formation.

Table 3.1. Numbers of Articles on Religions and Atheism Collected and Coded for Relevance (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

	Buddhism	Daoism	Confucianism	Christianity	Catholicism	Islam- Muslim	Superstition	Evil Cult	atheism	<b>Total</b>
Data retrieved	3387	755	94	2839	1143	10599	4969	1528	400	25714
Excluding duplicates	3311	732	94	2828	1121	10576	4963	1515	390	25530
<b>Relevant</b>	<b>3195</b>	<b>549</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>1663</b>	<b>858</b>	<b>10294</b>	<b>3685</b>	<b>1500</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>22218</b>

Table 3.2. Numbers of Articles on Religions and Atheism by Topical Areas: China vs. International (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

	Buddhism	Daoism	Confucianism	Christianity	Catholicism	Islam- Muslim	superstition	Evil cult	atheism	<b>Total</b>
China	2785	534	65	552	356	1749	3586	1314	364	11305
	87.2%	97.3%	77.4%	33.2%	41.5%	17.0%	97.3%	87.6	93.3%	50.9%
Interna- tional	410	15	19	1111	502	8545	99	186	26	10913
	12.8%	2.7%	22.6%	66.8%	58.5%	83.0%	2.7%	12.4	6.7%	49.1%
<b>Total</b>	3195	549	84	1663	858	10294	3685	1500	390	22218
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

As is seen in Table 3.1, the Islam-Muslim sub-dataset has the greatest number of articles (10,294), followed, in descending order, by the subsets of “superstition” (3,685), Buddhism (3,195), Christianity (1,663), “evil cult” (1,500), Catholicism (858), Daoism (549), atheism (390), and Confucianism (84).

Table 3.2 shows the numbers of articles in the subsets differentiated by topical areas—China vs. international. All three Chinese religion subsets—Buddhism (2,785 vs. 410), Daoism (534 vs. 15), and Confucianism (65 vs. 19)—have much more articles that are related to China than international coverage. The subsets of “superstition” (3,586 vs. 99), “evil cult” (1,314 vs. 186) and atheism (364 vs. 26) have the same characteristic. By contrast, the three monotheistic religions—Christianity (552 vs. 1,111), Catholicism (356 vs. 502), and Islam (1,749 vs. 8545) have greater numbers of international articles than China-related ones.

### **3.3.2 Tones of Representation of Religion**

Table 3.3 indicates that overall, more articles contained negative (46.5%) than positive (40.4%) representation of religion, while 5% contained both negative and positive tones, and about 8% were neutral toward religions and religiosity. Moreover, the numbers of articles that use negative representation of religion are close among the China-related (45%) and the international (48%) subsets, while 48.7% of China-related articles use a positive tone toward religion, about 17% higher than that of the international subset (32%). More articles from the international articles have mixed tones (7.3%) and neutral tone (12.7%) in their representation of religion than from China-related articles (2.8% and 3.5%, respectively). Figure 3.1 presents the same information in a graphic way.

Table 3.3. Total Numbers of Articles on Religion by Topical Areas and Tones (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

Religions, Superstition and Evil Cult (% cell)			
	China	International	Total
Negative	4925 45.0%	5229 48.0%	10154 46.5%
Positive	5323 48.7%	3487 32.0%	8810 40.4%
Both	306 2.8%	790 7.3%	1096 5.0%
Neutral	387 3.5%	1381 12.7%	1768 8.1%
<b>Total</b>	10941 100%	10887 100%	21828 100%

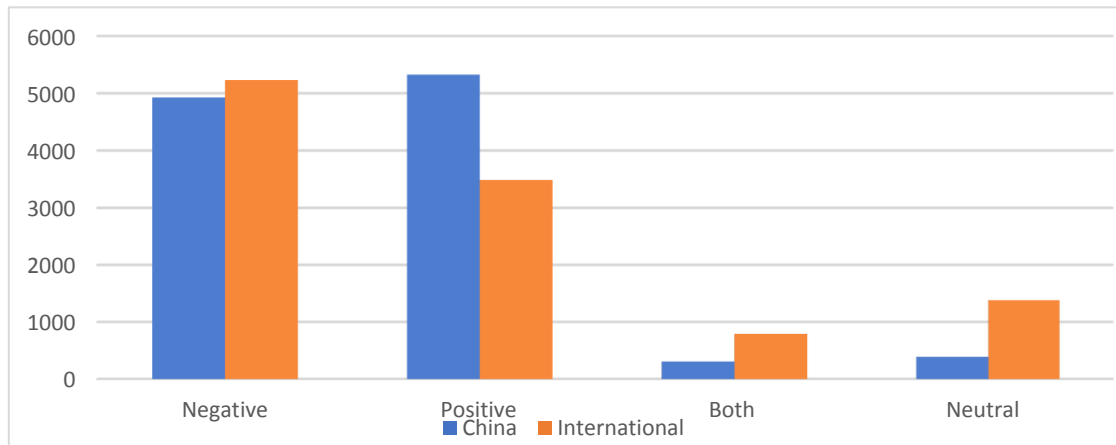


Figure 3.1. Tones of Representation of Religion: China vs. International (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

Table 3.4 demonstrates that for both Chinese religions (87.3% Buddhism, 91.4% Daoism, 60% Confucianism) and monotheistic religions (67.2% Christianity, 71.7% Catholicism, 96.7% Islam), the China-related articles overwhelmingly represent religion in a positive light. Among the monotheistic religions, more international articles use the negative tone than positive tone for Christianity (64% vs. 17%) and Islam (48.3% vs. 32.2%), in the representation of these religions. The great majority of negative representation of “superstition” and “evil cult” are China-related articles.



Table 3.4. Numbers of Articles on Various Religions by Topical Areas and Tones (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

	Buddhism		Daoism		Confucianism		Christianity	
	China	Int'l	China	Int'l	China	Int'l	China	Int'l
Negative	52 1.9%	9 2.2%	17 3.2%	1 6.7%	9 13.8%	0	93 16.9%	714 64.0%
Positive	2431 87.3%	332 81.0%	488 91.4%	14 93.3%	39 60.0%	18 94.7%	370 67.2%	194 17.0%
Both	159 5.7%	3 0.7%	11 2.1%	0	3 4.6%	1 5.3%	23 4.2%	18 2.0%
Neutral	143 5.1%	66 16.1%	18 3.4%	0	14 21.5%	0	65 11.8%	186 17.0%
<b>Subtotal</b>	2785 100%	410 100%	534 100%	15 100%	65 100%	19 100%	551 100%	1112 100%
<b>Total</b>	3195 100%		549 100%		84 100%		1663 100%	

Table 3.4. Numbers of Articles on Various Religions by Topical Areas and Tones (continued. *People's Daily* 1978-2011))

	Catholicism		Islam-Muslim		Superstition		Evil Cult	
	China	Int'l	China	Int'l	China	Int'l	China	Int'l
Negative	28 7.9%	114 22.7%	27 1.5%	4123 48.3%	3394 94.6%	85 86.7%	1305 99.3%	183 98.4%
Positive	255 71.7%	177 35.3%	1692 96.7%	2748 32.2%	46 1.3%	4 4.1%	2 0.2%	0
Both	48 13.5%	14 2.8%	7 0.4%	752 8.8%	55 1.5%	2 2.0%	0	0
Neutral	25 7.0%	197 39.2%	23 1.3%	922 10.8%	92 2.6%	7 7.1%	7 0.5%	3 1.6%
<b>Subtotal</b>	356 100%	502 100%	1749 100%	8545 100%	3587 100%	98 100%	1314 100%	186 100%
<b>Total</b>	858 100%		10294 100%		3685 100%		1500 100%	

In order to better capture the similarities in the use of tones among the articles, I combine them into three groups: Chinese religions, monotheistic religions, and “superstition” and “evil cult.” Table 3.5 summarizes the tones used in these three groups of articles, differentiated by topical areas. Figure 3.2 provides a graphic view of the similarities and differences among the three groups of articles discussed in the previous paragraph.

Table 3.5. Numbers of Articles on Chinese Religions, Monotheistic Religions, and “Superstition” and “Evil Cult” by Topical Areas and Tones (*People’s Daily* 1978-2011)

	Chinese religions		Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam		Superstition and Evil Cult		Total
	China	Int’l	China	Int’l	China	Int’l	
Negative	78 2%	10 0.3%	148 0.1%	4951 38.6%	4699 90.6%	268 5.2%	10154 46.5%
Positive	2958 77.3%	364 9.5%	2317 18.0%	3119 24.3%	48 0.9%	4 0.08%	8810 40.4%
Both	173 4.5%	4 0.01%	78 0.6%	784 6.1%	55 1.1%	2 0.04%	1096 5.0%
Neutral	175 4.6%	66 1.7%	113 0.9%	1305 10.2%	99 1.9%	10 0.2%	1768 8.1%
<b>Total</b>	3828 100%		12815 100%		5185 100%		21828 100%

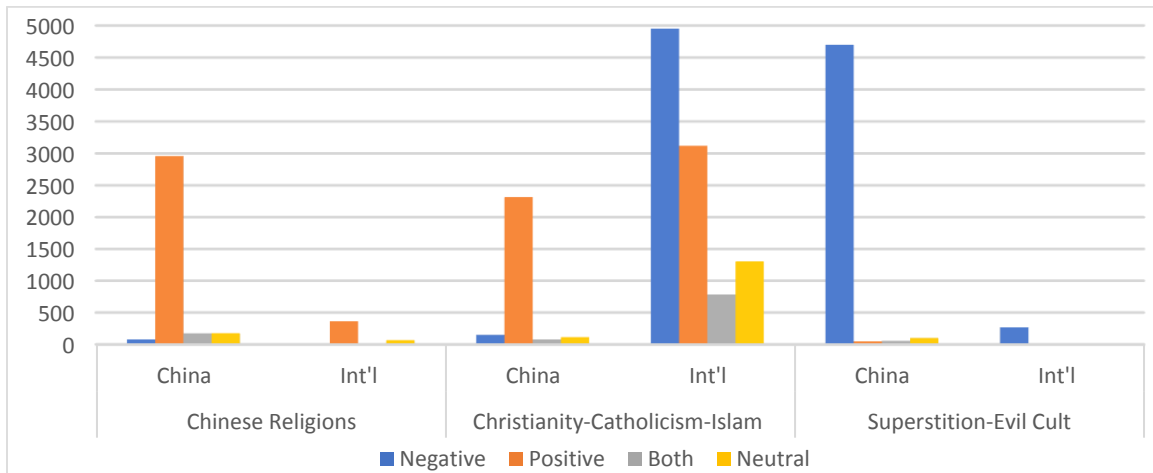


Figure 3.2. Tones of Representation: Chinese Religions, Monotheistic Religions, and "Superstition" and "Evil Cult" (*People’s Daily* 1978-2011)

### 3.3.3 Tones of Representation Over Time

Figure 3.3 presents the overall trends of the usage of tones in the representation of religion over time in the *People’s Daily* (1978-2011). The blue line indicating negative representation has a strong presence throughout the years. It peaked in the years around 1999-

2001, indicating that the propaganda campaign cracking down the Falun Gong movement was in full swing. Minor peaks appear in the years around 1989 and 1995.

The orange line, which represents the usage of the positive tone, also has a strong presence in terms of level of elevation from the x axis. However, aside from the peak around 1979, it remains to be relatively steady, and no clear trend, either upward or downward, can be detected. At times, it is overtaken by the negative line, which sees much greater fluctuation.

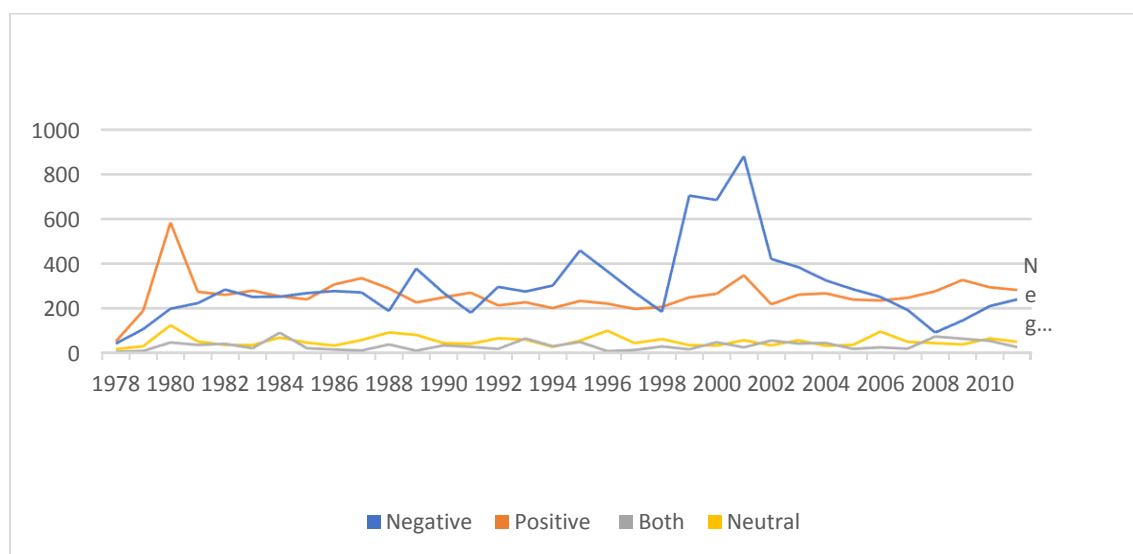


Figure 3.3. Overall Usage of Tones in Representation of Religion over Time (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

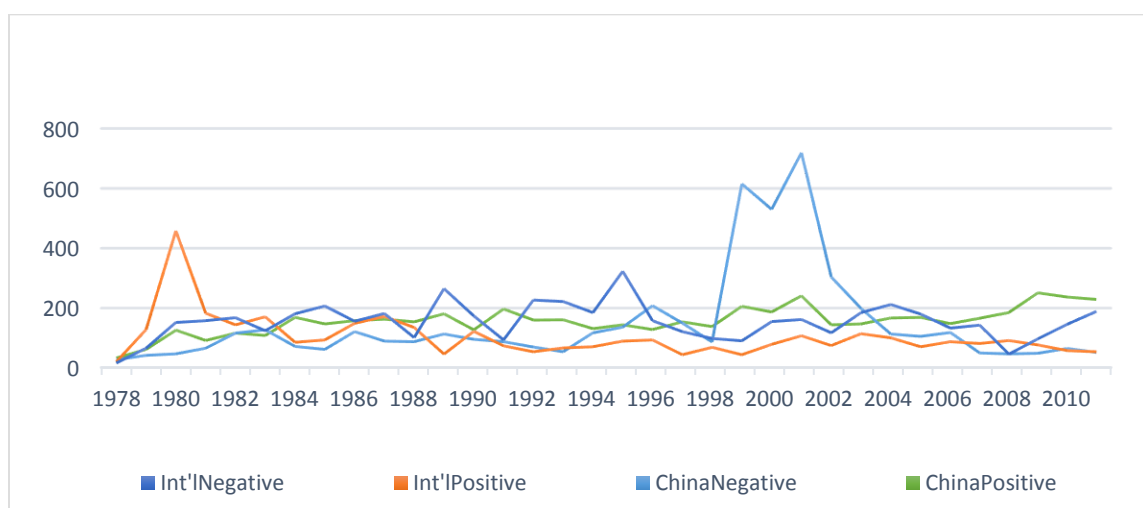


Figure 3.4. Tones of Representation over Time: China vs. International (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

Figure 3.4<sup>26</sup> indicate the positive and negative tones used over time among China-related and international articles. What is noteworthy is that the negative tone has been used more than the positive tone since 1990 among international articles, except for the

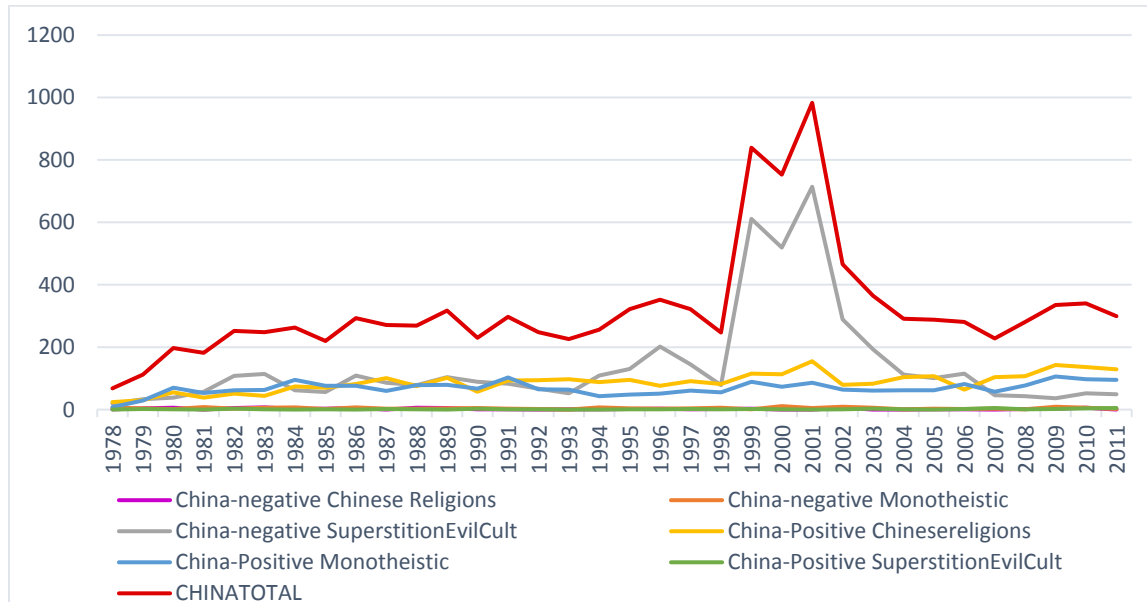


Figure 3.5. Tones of Representation over Time in China-Related Articles: Chinese Religions, Monotheistic Religions, and “superstition” and “evil cult” (*People’s Daily* 1978-2011)

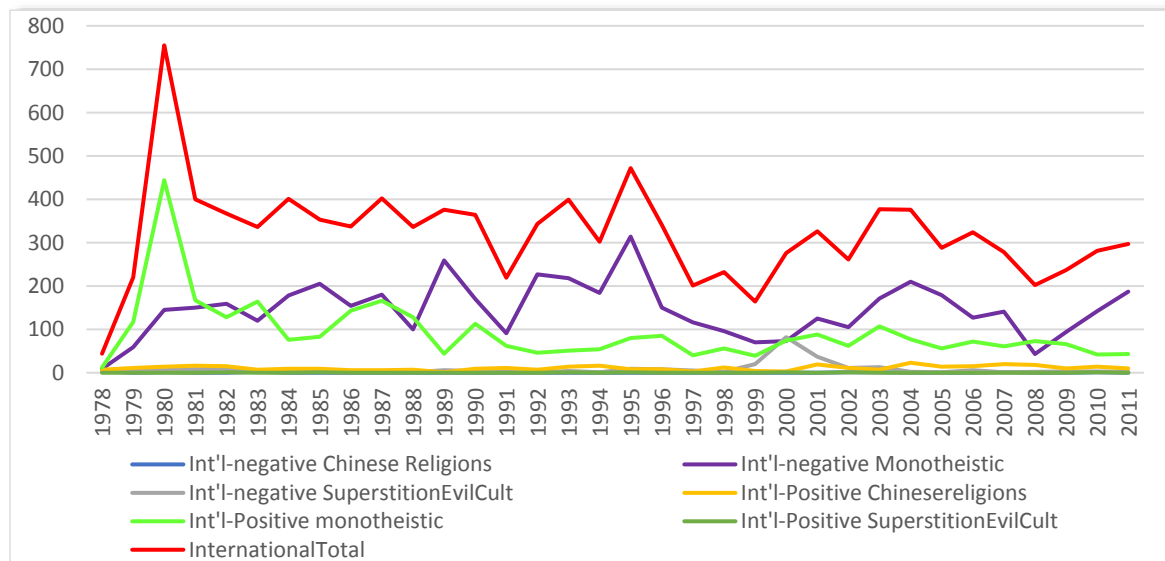


Figure 3.6. Tones of Representation over Time in International Articles: Chinese Religions, Monotheistic Religions, “Superstition” and “Evil Cult” (*People’s Daily* 1978-2011)

<sup>26</sup> Lines indicating neutral and mixed tones are omitted from the graph for the sake of parsimony.

year 2009; in 1980, the use of positive tones in international coverage reached a peak that is never surpassed in the later years. The positive line of China-related articles has been higher than the negative line throughout the three decades, except for the year 1997 and the period between 1999 and 2003. A modernizing upward tick can be seen in the positive line.

Figure 3.5 zooms in on the positive and negative tones of representation of religion in China-related articles grouped by three categories: Chinese religions, monotheistic religions, and “superstition” and “evil cult,” with a red line showing the changes over time in the total number of China-related articles. Three lines stand out from the other which are mostly flat over time. The negative line of “superstition” and “evil cult” has the strongest presence, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s when it surpasses all the other lines, and its peak corresponds to the peak in the red line of total number of China-related articles. The positive lines of Chinese religions and monotheistic religions shows a strong, consistent elevation over the x axis.

Figure 3.6 graphs the tones of representation of religion among international articles, grouped by three categories of religion/religiosity, with a red line showing the total number of international articles over time. Two lines are remarkable. First, the negative line of monotheistic religions indicates the greatest amount of fluctuation among all the lines, especially during the 1980s and early 1990s. Second, the negative line of “superstition” and “evil cult” is flat and barely shows elevation from the zero baseline of the y axis, except for the years around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Third, the positive line of monotheistic religions shows much more elevation and fluctuation in the 1980s than later years. The peak in this line occurs around the year 1980, and corresponds to the peak in the red line of overall numbers of international coverage over time.

### 3.3.4 Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends

#### 3.3.4.1 Overall Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends

Figure 3.7 shows the overall secularization vs. desecularization trends in the representation of religion and atheism in the *People's Daily* from 1978 to 2011. Although no clear trend is detectable in both the secularization line and the desecularization lines individually, the general trend toward desecularization is clear, as the desecularization

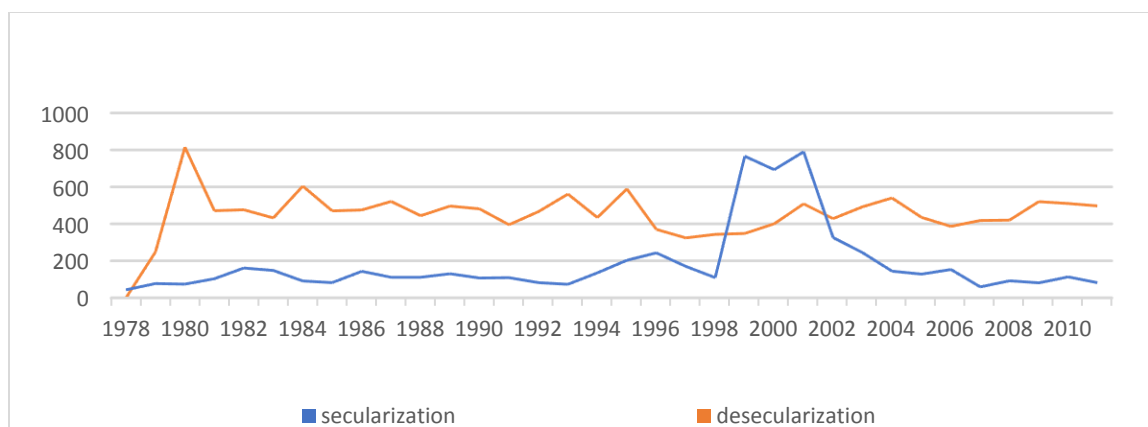


Figure 3.7. Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

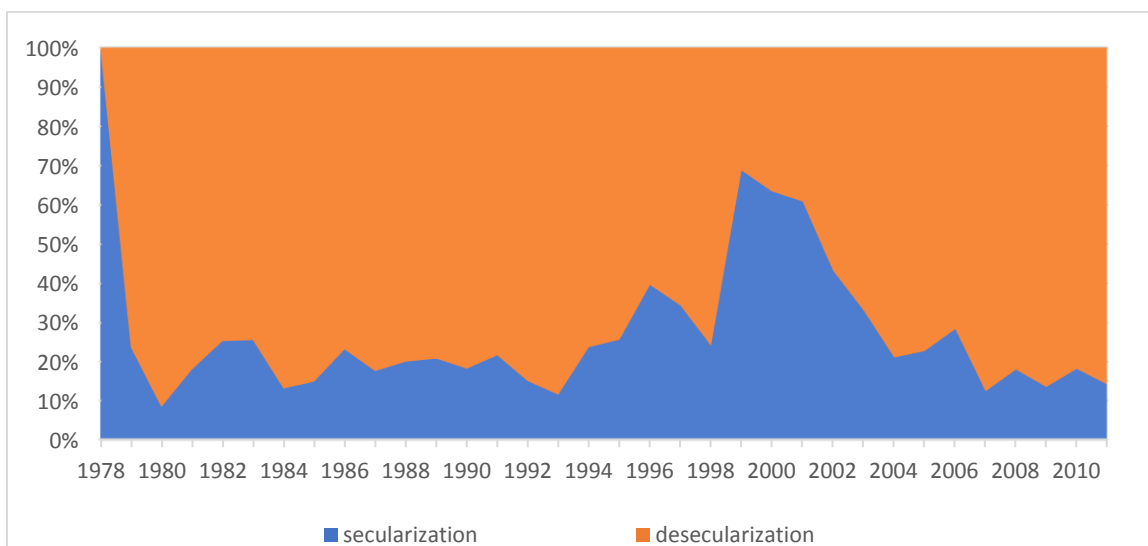


Figure 3.8. Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends: 100% Stacked Lines (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

line has much higher elevation from the zero baseline of the x axis than the secularization line, except when this trend was interrupted in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the nationwide crackdown on the “evil cult” Falun Gong and “pseudo-science” was raging in China. Figure 3.8 uses the 100% stacked lines to represent the same information. Hypothesis 3.1 is supported.

Figure 3.9 breaks it down into five types of secularization vs. desecularization trends. With its levels of elevation much higher than the other four lines for most of the

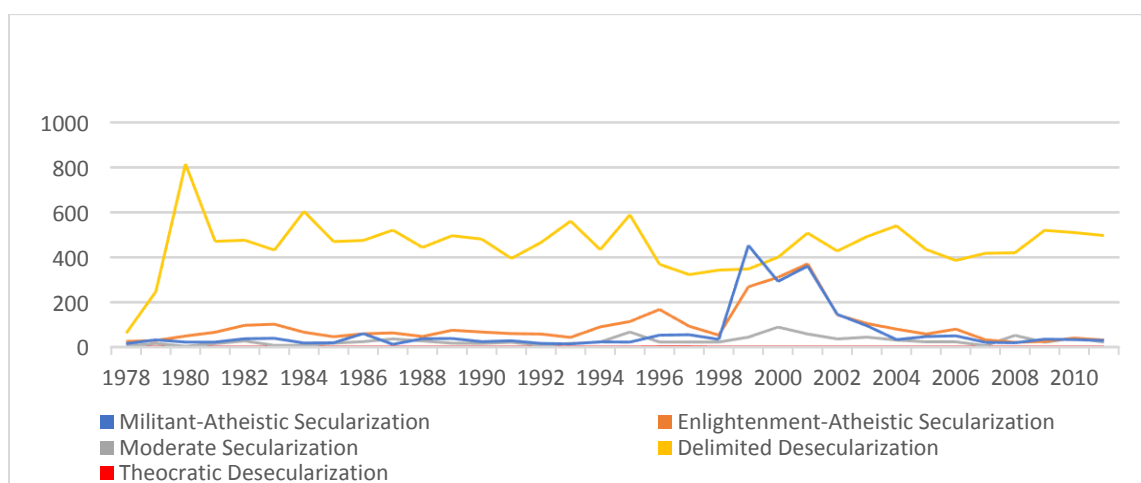


Figure 3.9. Trends of 5 Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

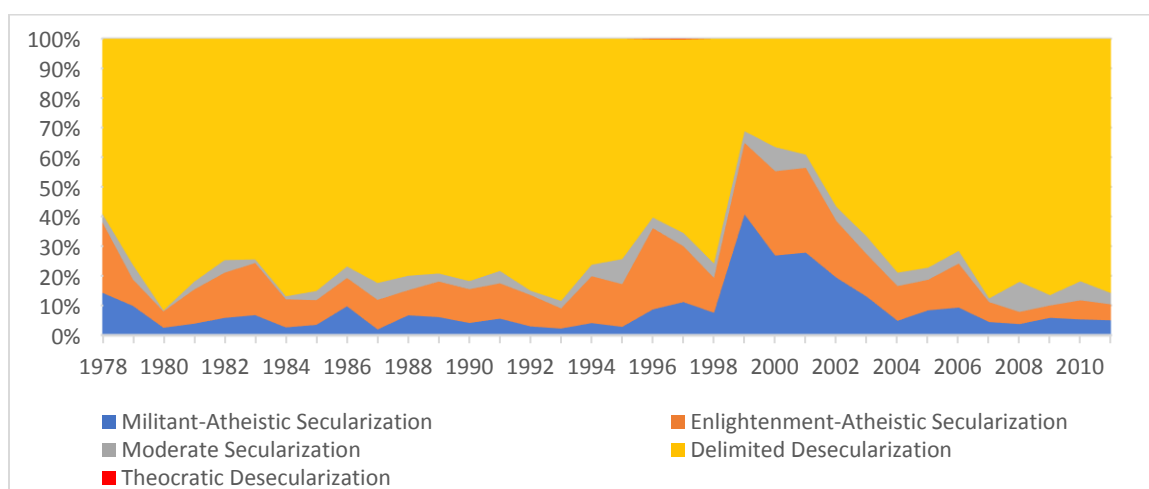


Figure 3.10. Trends of 5 Types of Secularization and Desecularization: 100% Stacked Lines (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

time, the line of deprivatizing desecularization predominates in the graph, reaffirming that desecularization is the prevailing trend in the representation of religion in the official news media from 1978 to 2011. Figure 3.10 graphs the same information, using 100% stacked lines.

Figure 3.11 presents the five secularization vs. desecularization trends among China-related articles in a line graph. We see that while the deprivatizing desecularization trend is unmistakably the strongest and shows an upward spiral over the long run, the

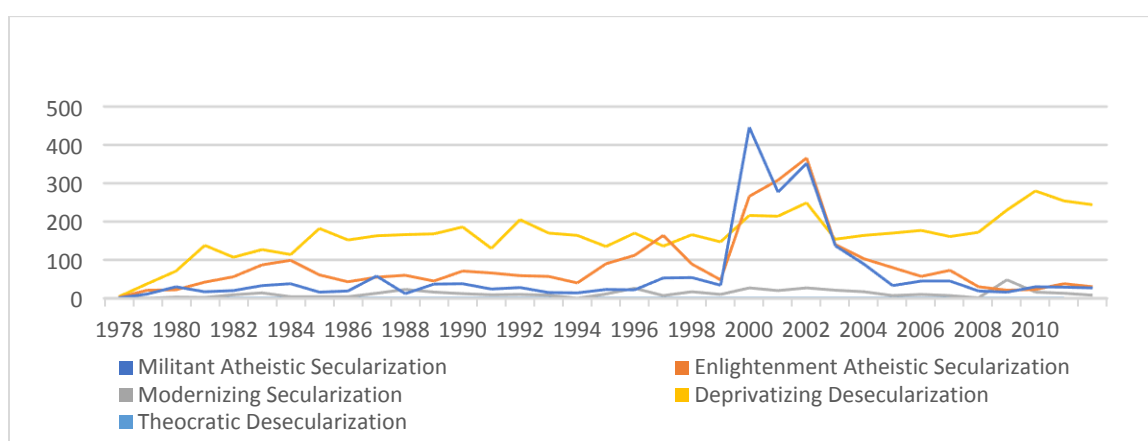


Figure 3.11. Trends of 5 Types of Secularization and Desecularization among China-related Articles: Line Graph (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

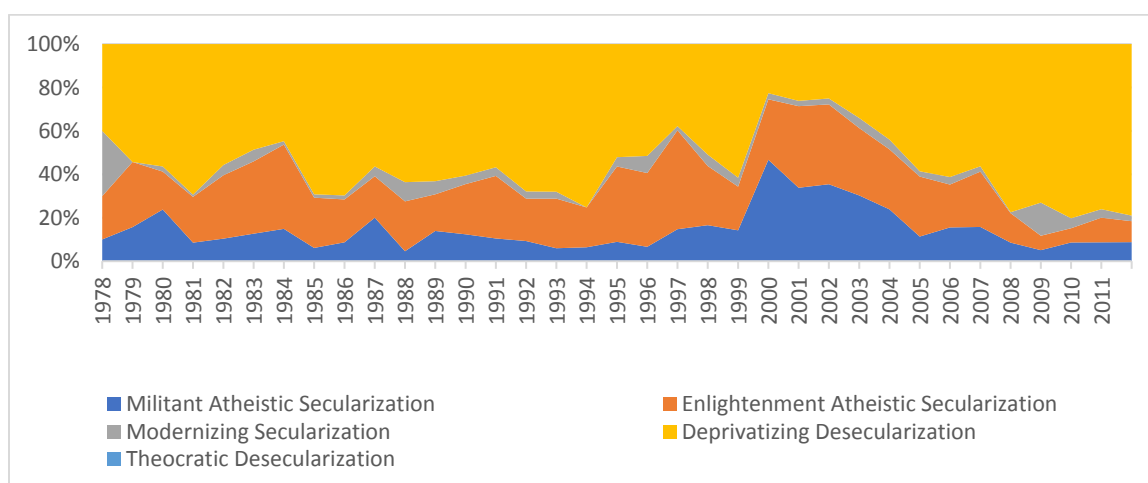


Figure 3.12. Trends of 5 Types of Secularization and Desecularization among China-related Articles: 100% Stacked Lines (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)



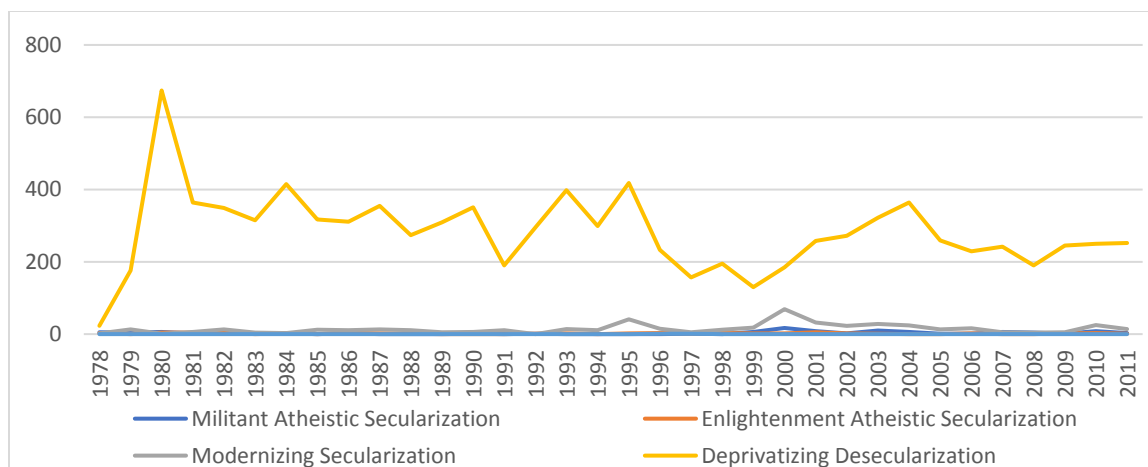


Figure 3.13. Trends of 5 Types of Secularization and Desecularization among International Articles: Line Graph (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

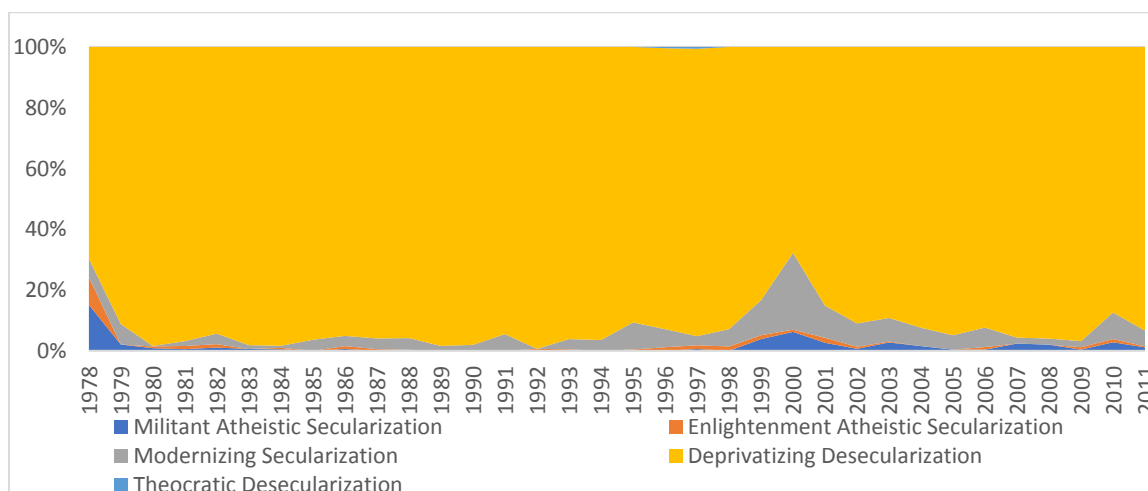


Figure 3.14. Trends of Five Types of Secularization and Desecularization among International Articles: 100% Stacked Lines (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Besides these three years of heightened usage of atheistic designated line is surpassed by both the line of militant atheistic secularization and the line of enlightenment atheistic secularization around the time of the nation-wide crackdown on Falun Gong at the turn secularization discourse, we see that the enlightenment atheistic secularization has maintained a stronger presence over most of the years under study than the militant atheistic secularization discourse. Moreover, the modernizing secularization trend has a weak presence, whereas the

theocratic desecularization trend is nowhere to be found. Figure 3.12 presents the same information, using 100% stacked

Figure 3.13 and Figure 3.14 show the trends of the five types of secularization vs. desecularization in the representation of religion and atheism among international articles in a line graph and a 100% stacked lines graph, respectively. The preponderance of deprivatizing secularization is obvious. However, a slightly downward trend could be detected in the deprivatizing desecularization line. One may recall that in Figures 3.2 and 3.6 negative tone prevails over other tonal usage in the representation of international, monotheistic religions. Reading these figures together with Figures 3.13 and 3.14, one might puzzle over why the desecularization trend, rather than secularization trends, is predominant. The reason for it is that although many international articles on monotheistic religions, especially Christianity and Islam, depict these religions in a negative light, they tend to use the “contributing to war and violence” frame which, as is discussed in Chapter Five, does not put into question the ontological status of the supernatural these religions hinge on. Nor does it oppose religion’s involvement in political processes. Instead, this frame champions peace-making and resolution of disputes through democratic political processes.

The line of modernizing secularization shows more small-scale ticks than both the militant atheistic secularization and enlightenment atheistic secularization lines which remain mostly flat and lack of activity, indicating that as an official ideology, atheistic discourse is seldom applied to the representation of religion in other countries than China. The theocratic desecularization style of representation does make an appearance in 1996, registering one article about Confucianism as state religion in imperial Korea.

### 3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examine the representation of religion in the leading official newspaper the *People's Daily* from 1978 to 2011. Using human coder content analysis, I coded 22,218 articles on six religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Catholicism, Islam), two forms of religiosity (“superstition,” “evil cult”), and atheism. Major findings indicate that, first, as far as the tones of representation is concerned, while the overall picture is that the *People's Daily* uses negative representation slightly more than positive representation of religion, giving the first impression that it is well-balanced, a closer examination reveals that the use of tones varies by topical areas and religion. Regarding variation by topical areas, we can say that the tonal balance is found among China-related articles, but not among the international subset which uses the negative tone on 50% more articles than positive tone. This finding indicates that for one thing, the official guideline for the media to cover domestic affairs in positive light does not seem to apply well to religion, which is why we do not see an overwhelming majority of China-related articles about religion being cast in positive light. Adding the variable of religion, we see that for all six religions, the great majority of China-related articles are represented in positive light. The negative tone is used mostly in China-related articles on “superstition” and “evil cult.” Through positive representation of officially sanctioned religions and Confucianism and negative representation of “superstition” and “evil cult,” the party-state demarcates via official media the discursive boundaries around what is politically correct and orthodoxy and what is not in the Chinese context.

For another thing, the official guideline to cover foreign countries, especially China's ideological rivals, in negative light is better followed in the representation of Christianity and Islam by the *People's Daily*. The purpose of this distinction is probably to show the “superiority” of socialist China over other forms of polities.

Second, both the militant- and enlightenment-atheistic styles of secularization maintain a continued presence in the official newspaper over time. They are mostly used in articles that are China-related and target beliefs and practices labeled as “superstition” and “evil cult” and represented in negative light. These findings suggest that for one thing, the official media confines the application of atheistic secularization discourses to domestic affairs, thus provincializing, rather than universalizing their legitimacy. This restrained discursive practice runs against the grain of Marxist atheism which claims to be a universal theory. For another thing, the official media also refrains from using the atheistic secularization discourses in the representation of both Chinese religions and monotheistic religions, allowing room in discursive practice for reaffirming their growth and merits.

Third, the use of modernizing secularization is less than moderate among both China-related and international articles, indicating that for one thing, the official media may not have much interest in saying more than they did about the advantages of traditional secular Chinese culture, which would involve questioning the official historiography of China’s entry into modernity and its landmark event of the May Fourth New Culture Movement that denounced traditional culture as cannibalistic customs and ethics. For another, the official media may also be hesitant to dwell too much on explaining or exemplifying secularization in the sense of the separation of religion and the state and privatization of religion, for the simple reason that CCP is not practicing the separation of religion and the state, and has not made religion a private matter for individual believers. Instead, the party-state has a heavy hand in regulating and managing religious affairs, keeping religion under its control. This alternative model of secularization would obviously not benefit the ruling party-state’s rule, and therefore better be soft-pedalled to the side.

Fourth, while the overall trend of deprivatizing desecularization is predominant for most of the time under study over all the other four trends, it is less prominent among the China-related articles than international ones, which constitutes another indication that the official media refrains from using secularization discourses in representing religion in other countries. The official media tends to take religion in other countries as what it is in their context.

By categorizing religion into domestic affairs and foreign affairs and deploying discursive practices such as provincializing the atheistic secularization discourse almost exclusively to China, soft-peddalling modernizing secularization discourse in both China and international coverages, and contextualizing religion in using the deprivatizing desecularization discourse, the official media has generated heterogeneous representations of religion and atheism that may make the audience raise questions about the absolute validity of atheistic secularization discourses and make a choice that also consists of heterogeneous elements: claiming to be an atheist while engaging in various kinds of religious beliefs and practices.

## **CHAPTER 4. SECULARIZATION VS. DESECULARIZATION TRENDS IN COMMERCIALIZED NEWS MEDIA: THE CASE OF *SOUTHERN WEEKEND* (1984-1998 & 2003-2011)**

### **4.1 Abstract**

*Southern Weekend*, a weekly newspaper first launched in 1984 in Guangdong Province, has been hailed as a beacon of investigative journalism in China both domestically and internationally. While a fair amount of scholarly attention has focused on this particular newspaper to shed light on the evolving relation between media and the authoritarian party-state, little has been said about its coverage of religion/religiosity. This study fills the gap. In this chapter, I answer three major questions: first, what has the representation of religion been like in *Southern Weekend* in terms of emotional undertones (positive, negative, neutral, or mixed)? Second, what patterns of secularization vs. desecularization can be identified in the representation? Third, how investigative journalism that substantially involve religion effects framing of secularization and desecularization? I used quantitative content analysis to answer the first two questions, and qualitative content analysis for the third one. I make comparisons with the *People's Daily* en route.

### **4.2 Introduction**

Since the launch of the reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s, the party-state has not been monopolizing the news media in China. Media reform that has resulted in the deregulation, decentralization, commercialization, and partial privatization of media outlets has given rise to a booming media industry (Lynch 1999; Shirk 2011; Stockmann 2010a). For examples, newspaper titles have increased from 188 in 1980 (Hassid 2007: 416) to 1,894 in 2016, with a total of 39 billion issues of newspapers put in circulation and the total sale price

reaching 40.8 billion RMB (about 6.2 billion US dollars)<sup>27</sup>. The number of radio and television stations increased from 400 in 1978 (Shao, Lu and Yao 2016) to over 2,400 in 2016, with a total of 7.8 million hours of radio programs<sup>28</sup> and over 7.8 million hours of TV programs produced that year<sup>29</sup>. In 2016 China claimed 228.3 million cable TV subscribers, 201.6 million IPTV users, and 58.2 million pay-IPTV subscribers<sup>30</sup>, and internet users reached 731 million, which was over half of the Chinese population (Chui 2017).

Nonetheless, individual media outlets are affected by the reform to varying degrees. Of the three types of news media (official, semi-official, and commercialized), the commercialized news media are enjoying a greater extent of freedom than their official and semi-official counterparts. Signs of such freedom include but are not limited to: 1) Journalists in general have become professionalized and adopted more Westernized way of reporting. *Southern Weekend's* editor-in-chief Qian Gang, for instance, trained his news report team on Pulitzer Prize winning journalists work and changed news reporting from didactic advocacy for justice to “emphasizing separating facts from opinions, ensuring multiple sourcing, and the stressing of the importance of documentation and verification” (Cho 2017: 164). Journalists have also gained more autonomy in news reporting than ever before (Greenberg and Lau 1990; Lin 2006; Lin & Zhao 2008). 2) Pluralist perspectives in reporting are allowed as long as media practitioners do not overstep certain boundaries set by the Propaganda Department, giving rise to greater objectivity. 3)

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<sup>27</sup> “Basic Information on Press and Publication in 2016,” data issued by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People’s Republic of China (SAPPRFT), September 27, 2017. <<http://www.gapp.gov.cn/govpublic/80/1802.shtml>>, accessed June 23, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> “Report on Radio Broadcasting in China in 2016,” by SAPPRFT, October 20, 2017. [http://www.nrta.gov.cn/art/2017/10/20/art\\_2178\\_39206.html](http://www.nrta.gov.cn/art/2017/10/20/art_2178_39206.html), accessed June 23, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> “Report on Television Reviewing in China in 2016,” by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), October 20, 2018. <[http://www.nrta.gov.cn/art/2018/10/20/art\\_2178\\_39216.html](http://www.nrta.gov.cn/art/2018/10/20/art_2178_39216.html)>, accessed June 23, 2019. (Note that the SAPPRFT was split into three state administrations in April, 2018, including the State Film Administration, the State Administration of Press and Publication, and NART).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Ideological laxity and diversity are tolerated to some extent, making room for less ideologically loaded materials to flourish (Lee 1990). Depoliticization of a limited degree has ensued. 4) Journalists may write critical reports about other administrative districts of the same or lower level in the administrative hierarchy. Since administrative districts elsewhere or ranked lower have difficulty censoring such unfavorable media reports without appealing to higher levels of the administrative hierarchy, many times the reporters are left unscathed (Esarey 2006: 162-163).

Although no study to date has specifically addressed the question of what the representation of religion is like in the commercialized news media, the liberalization of the media in general gives us ground to speculate that religion may have obtained increased presence in commercialized media. Indeed, as Chan observes,

In the past, religion was a taboo subject in the public sector. The public's thirst for knowledge about religion, long denied by the state, compounded by the liberal market economy, is now stimulating the availability of a whole range of religious-related products to the public. The market-driven publishing industry in China seems to have spotted the overwhelming demand from the public, mostly not religious believers, for books on religion... *Newspaper articles on religion*,<sup>31</sup> discussions on religion in Internet chat-rooms, religious names on commercial products, and religious music are commonly available to the public as people increasingly search for a transcendent meaning to life (Chan 2005).

Furthermore, given the commercialized news media's greater freedom and autonomy, it is perhaps reasonable for us to expect them to serve less as propaganda organs and be more attentive to trends of secularization and desecularization from *below* and cover religious events in less politicized, more pluralistic and more objective terms. This forms a sharp contrast to official newspapers which are found to still frame religion in political terms, as high-ranking government officials are the dominant sources of such news (Yao et al. 2011).

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<sup>31</sup> The emphasis is mine.



Notwithstanding, we still have reasons not to be too optimistic. Scholars studying Chinese media in the reform era tend to subscribe to the view that instead of losing control, the party-state is still capable of exercising influence over the commercialized media and curbing media freedom. Empirical studies have found that through various mechanisms, the party-state has been quite able at both circumscribing media freedom (Esarey 2006; He 2000b; Lee et al. 2000; Zhao 2002) and reining in media freedom when it sees a threat to its power and legitimacy (Stockmann 2010a). It would not be surprising if the commercialized news media take the safe road and “swat the flies, not the tiger,” meaning that their coverage does not seriously challenge the restrictive parameters set by the official newspapers. Indeed, for the Chinese to embrace both atheist and religious identities and be at peace with the embedded logical contradiction, it is more likely that the supposedly more autonomous papers’ coverage of religion and atheism falls well within these parameters, rather than asking hard questions that would push the Chinese to make a decisive choice between atheism and religion.

### **4.3 The Case of *Southern Weekend***

#### **4.3.1 Epitome of *yulun jiandu* journalism**

In the much diversified mediascape of reform-era China (de Burgh 2003; Lee 1994; Shirk 2011; Wang and Lee 2014; Zhao 1998; Zhao 2000a), commercialized newspapers are earnest to shun the insipid style of ideological mouthpiece which severely handicap their popular appeal and profit-making power. While most have chosen the easy road to become providers of tabloid-like infotainment (Hassid 2011), a few have ventured to reinvent and enliven the practice of serious watchdog journalism that expose corruption and abuse of power, reveal structural causes of injustice, and promote equality and justice in society (Cho 2010; Svensson, Sæther, and Zhang 2014). *Southern Weekend*, a popular subsidiary of Guangdong Province’s Party daily, is one of a

handful of publications that have succeeded in their endeavor of and commitment to serious journalism in terms of garnering critical accolades from both inside China and overseas and gaining prominence in the public arena (Wang and Lee 2014).

*Southern Weekend* has been regarded by China observers as one of “China’s top papers” (Hassid 2011: 831) and “one of China’s most outspoken publications” (Bandurski and Hala 2010: 62). Some even singled it out as “the only courageous medium in the whole country,” while dismissing other venues as “state servants” producing insignificant, pretentious work (de Burgh 2003: 813). The book *Investigative Journalism in China: Eight cases in Chinese Watchdog Journalism*, which editors David Bandurski and Martin Hala claim to be “a collection of case studies of the best journalism from modern China” (3), has a whole chapter—“The Kingdom of Lies: Unmasking the Demons of Charity”—devoted to the story of how a young reporter from *Southern Weekend* came to expose local corruption in the form of ripping off funds donated for school children by Project Hope, one of China’s largest charity organizations. Another chapter “Breaking through the Silence: The Untold Story of the Henan AIDS Epidemic” detailed how the *Southern Weekend* came up with a story that “offered the most complete, vivid picture yet of AIDS in Henan, and how the tragedy had come about,” based on first-hand accounts from villagers in Shangcai County, Henan Province (51).

The muckraking journalism *Southern Weekend* has produced, especially during its heyday from the mid-1990s to 2001, made tremendous waves and helped establish the newspaper as a most socially conscientious, politically audacious print medium in reform-era China. For scholars interested in the media-state relations in mainland China, *Southern Weekend* has been an important site to observe the dynamic development in this relationship, elucidate on the changing faces of the party-state’s authoritarian rule, and deliberate on the possibility of

democratization in China (Esarey 2007; Hassid 2008; Polumbaum and Lei 2008; Qian and Bandurski 2011; Rosenthal 2001; Sæther 2008; Shirk 2011; Tong 2010; Tong and Sparks 2009; Zhao 2000a). At least three doctoral dissertations have focused their analyses solely on *Southern Weekend*<sup>32</sup>.

In this chapter, I analyze representation of religion in *Southern Weekend* from 1984 to 1998 and from 2003 to 2011 to answer three questions. First, what has the representation of religion been in terms of emotional undertones? Second, what patterns of secularization vs. desecularization can be identified in the representation of religion and atheism? I use quantitative content analysis to answer these two questions. Third, how investigative journalism that substantially involve religion effects framing of secularization and desecularization? I use qualitative content analysis to answer the third question. I also discuss the similarities and differences in the representation and coverage of religion and atheism between *Southern Weekend* and *People's Daily* en route.

#### **4.3.2 Historical Sketch of *Southern Weekend*: Metamorphosis of a Commercialized Newspaper**

*Southern Weekend* was not born a fighter for investigative journalism. Scholars of Chinese media have delineated its metamorphosis into three stages (Chen 2016; Cho 2007, 2013; Guan, Xia and Cheng 2017). The first stage spans from its launch in 1984 to 1995 and is characterized by the “cultural turn” where the newspaper distanced itself from the propagandist role and instead focused on culture and entertainment. During this period, *Southern Weekend* had no reporting team of its own, only eight editors. Rather than producing original reportage (Hong

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<sup>32</sup>“News production in a transitional society: The case of Southern Weekend” by Bing Hong, Fudan University, Shanghai, 2005. “The emergence, influence, and limitations of watchdog journalism in post-1992 China: A case study of Southern Weekend” by Li-Fung Cho, University of Hong Kong, 2007; “Popular newspapers in post-Mao Guangzhou: Toward a social history of Southern Weekend, 1984-2010” by Wenrui Chen, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2016.

2005), it relied on external authorship, reprints, informal submissions, and correspondence between readers and editors for its contents (Chen 2016). While from the beginning the paper clearly demonstrated a humanistic propensity to stress the individual and the quotidian, rather than grand narratives of the nation and the Party, the avowed ambition of its founders to make the paper a vehicle for the “most advanced ideas and values” (Guan, Xia and Cheng 2017: 238) nevertheless materialized in a mosaic of the socialist, Confucian, and the new popular defined by cultural products from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and western countries (Chen 2016). At this stage of development, its tabloid-like popular contents distinguished *Southern Weekend* from the Party newspapers, and its moral paternalism marked it off from other tabloid, commercialized papers mushrooming inside Guangdong Province and across China that tended to free themselves from ideological concerns. Toward the end of the 1980s, *Southern Weekend* was shifting its emphasis from culture and entertainment toward social problems, which proved to be a move in the right direction, as it greatly boosted sales nationwide and enabled its expansion into a financially independent newspaper in the early 1990s (Guan, Xia and Cheng 2017).

As the paper was flying off the racks at newsstands, editors of *Southern Weekend* were emboldened by the favorable market response and institutional affirmation from its parent paper, as well as the Central Government’s encouragement of the media to provide more watchdog reporting in order to reign in local corruption, to take a step further and publish more serious exposé stories. The years from 1996 to 2001 marks the second stage of development that is considered the “golden time” of investigative journalism for *Southern Weekend*, when it devoted a larger proportion of the expanded paper to investigative reporting on social problems coming on the heels of economic reform. With its own team of reporters formed in 1997 and trained on Pulitzer Prize winners’ journalistic writings, *Southern Weekend* developed its distinct style of

investigative reporting that places the emphasis on verifiable facts, structural factors, and social ramifications of an event (Cho 2007). Breaking critical news on corruption and official malfeasance, business misconducts, legal malpractices, injustices endured by the commoners, and social ills of various kinds, *Southern Weekend* established itself as one of the most prominent media outlets in China (Wang and Lee 2014).

*Southern Weekend's* success owed much to the strategic practice of “cross-regional watchdog reporting” (*yidi jiandu*). The conventional press structure stipulated that the local government be in charge of the licensing, ownership approval and selection of top management personnel for major media organizations within their geographic jurisdiction, and at the same time restricted local media's news coverage to its own geographic regions. Thus a municipal level paper in Guangdong, for example, would be effectively limited to cover events happening within the confines of that city, not other cities, be they in or outside of Guangdong. Such structural arrangement had restrained the local media from producing watchdog journalism for fear of drawing the ire of local political authorities who had the administrative means to intervene to censor the contents and censure the editors and journalists, if not removing them from their posts. This structural impediment has been vitiated as the tensions between the provincial and Central governments, as well as among provinces, kept growing (Cho 2007). Welcoming the Central government's spur for the media to play a greater part in their watchdog role over local official malfeasance, the local media were eager to get on board and produce muckraking stories that disclosed wrongdoings and problems in other regions that had little administrative power over them, supply circumventing local political protectionism and at the same time racking up sales by satisfying consumers' thirst for sensational exposé stories (Cho 2007; Guan, Xia, and Chen 2017).

For *Southern Weekend*, *yidi jiandu* journalism proved to be extraordinarily successful and helped establish it as one of the most outspoken voices in the Chinese public arena in the late 1990s. Success aside, this strategic practice had antagonized the paper with local officials in other regions who kept complaining to the Central Propaganda Department (Tong 2011). Mounting pressure to tighten the control of *Southern Weekend* transpired into action in 2000 when the top editors of *Southern Weekend* were ousted out of office and replaced by propaganda officials who were set to reign the paper in.

The year 2001 marked the third stage of the evolution of the paper when it repositioned itself as a high-brow newspaper catering to the urban middle class with rising purchasing power. The motto of the golden time of investigative journalism “give power to the powerless, give hope to the pessimists” was replaced by new ones such as “more knowledge is more power” and “read us and know China” (Cho 2013). After several rounds of reshuffling of managing personnel at the paper, mass exodus of outspoken journalists, and the installation of a rigid censorship mechanism into the internal editorial process, *Southern Weekend*’s sharp edge of watchdog journalism was enfeebled (Cho 2013; Guan, Xia, and Chen 2017), which caused its popularity to decline and circulation to plummet by a two-thirds drop (Hassid 2008).

Content aside, *Southern Weekend* adapted hiring and remuneration systems that made it most competitive at attracting top-notch journalists and producing high-quality reports. Upon its inauguration in 1984, under the charismatic leadership of its founding editor Zuo Fang, a veteran journalist who knew well how to maneuver the demands of both the party-state and the flourishing market, *Southern Weekend* soon became one of the top-selling weekend papers that would expand its circulation from 7,000 in 1984 to 475,000 in 1991. During his tenure as the editor-in-chief of *Southern Weekend*, Zuo managed to set up a personnel arrangement with its

parent paper, *Southern Daily*, that was quite unusual at the time. Rather than accepting whoever the parent newspaper appointed, Zuo was given discretion in hiring his own staff, to the extent that he could refuse to hire someone *Southern Daily* recommended, and vice versa. However, with only eight editors and no reporting team of its own, *Southern Weekend* depended on reprints and open submission from freelance and amateur writers for its content. Its appeal at this time derived mostly from the “infotainment” that filled its pages, rather than fact-based reporting. It relied on advertising, commercial sponsorship, newsstand sale and post-office subscription for financing, albeit via its parent paper. It was not until 1993 that *Southern Daily* allowed *Southern Weekend* to have its own departments of accounting, distribution, and to double its size from four pages to eight. With the newly gained business independence and expansion of news space, *Southern Weekend* saw its circulation reach 1 million in 1993 and annual profit rose from 2,89 (0.5 million USD) to 4.82 million RMB (0.83 million USD) from 1992 to 1993. *Southern Weekend* instituted the practice of using 10% of its revenue as bonuses to reward journalists who wrote good investigative reports.

As *Southern Weekend* started exploring for a new identity since 1993 and by 1996 had reoriented itself toward fact-based muckraking exposé of social ills and official malfeasance, the number of reporters increased from 1 in 1991 to 25 by the end of 1997 and 36 by 2000. The newspaper tended to hire investigative reports as “contract employees.” Unlike “authorized employees” who received such benefits as housing allowances, health insurance and legal residency in Guangzhou, as well political scrutiny into their personal dossier and ideological and family background, making it much harder for them to take political risks and jeopardize their livelihood, contract journalists received handsome payment based on the quality and quantity of investigative reports they wrote. Journalists at *Southern Weekend* were thus better positioned to

take on the subject of their investigative reporting without much fear of a doomed future. Political pressure could still force them to leave their jobs at *Southern Weekend*, but the stakes were much lower and they could find jobs at other media venues easily. Journalists' salaries at *Southern Weekend* were relatively high not only compared to other newspapers, but also to other occupations. It was topped with a monthly bonus. "Decisions about who gets bonuses were made by a designated group of editors who not only look at the quality of the story but also take into account the newspaper's circulation figures and the reader's response to the article" (Cho 2007: 163). The hiring and remuneration systems thus brought the journalists closer to the side of the market, rather than that of the party line.

## 4.4 Results

### 4.4.1 Descriptions of Data Collected

Based on key words search, a total number of 2,045 articles was retrieved, spanning 24 years from 1984 to 1998 and 2003 to 2011, from the CD-ROMs and CNKI mentioned above. After excluding duplicates, 2,043 articles were left. Initial coding for relevance further eliminated 284 articles, with 1,759 articles forming the final dataset for further analysis. Table 4.1 reports the number of articles on six religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Catholicism, Islam), two forms of religiosity ("Superstition," "evil cult"), and atheism through these first three steps of dataset constitution.

As is seen in Table 3.2, the Buddhism subset has the largest number of articles (396), followed by those of Islam (365), "superstition" (313), and Christianity (312). With the Catholicism (172) subset being slightly over half the size of the Christianity subset, the remaining subsets have less than 100 articles (80 for the Daoism subset, 41 for the atheism subset, 40 for the "evil cult" subset, and 36 for the Confucianism subset).



Table 4.1. Numbers of Articles on Religions and Atheism Collected and Coded for Relevance (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

	Buddhism	Daoism	Confucianism	Christianity	Catholicism	Islam-Muslim	Superstition	Evil Cults	Atheism	<b>Total</b>
Data retrieved	400	95	43	330	176	380	536	44	41	2045
Excluding duplicates	399	95	41	330	176	380	536	44	41	2043
<b>Relevant</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>312</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>365</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>1759</b>

Table 4.2. Numbers of Articles on Religions and Atheism by Topical Areas: China vs. International (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

	Buddhism	Daoism	Confucianism	Christianity	Catholicism	Islam-Muslim	Superstition	Evil Cults	Atheism	<b>Total</b>
China	323 81.6%	76 95.0%	29 80.6%	158 50.6%	41 23.3%	77 21.1%	296 94.6	22 55.0%	31 75.6%	1053 59.9%
International	73 18.4%	4 5.0%	7 19.4%	154 49.4%	135 76.7%	288 78.9%	17 5.4%	18 45.0%	10 24.4%	706 40.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>396</b> 100%	<b>80</b> 100%	<b>36</b> 100%	<b>312</b> 100%	<b>176</b> 100%	<b>365</b> 100%	<b>313</b> 100%	<b>40</b> 100%	<b>41</b> 100%	<b>1759</b> 100%

areas—China vs. international. Compared to the *People's Daily* data configuration, what is similar of the two papers is that the three traditional Chinese religions—Buddhism (323 vs. 73), Daoism (76 vs. 4), and Confucianism (29 vs. 7), as well as the “superstition” (296 vs. 17) and atheism (31 vs. 10) subsets still claim much more China-related articles than international ones in *Southern Weekend*, and the reverse is true for the Catholicism (41 vs. 135) and Islam (77 vs. 288) subsets, just as they do in the *People's Daily*. One difference between the two papers is that the Christianity subset in *Southern Weekend* actually has slightly more China-related articles (158) than their international counterpart (154), whereas in the *People's Daily* many more international articles have to do with Christianity than China-related articles. This may suggest *Southern Weekend's* propensity to take Christianity as an important, if not an indisputably integral part of Chinese modernity. Another difference between the two papers is that the numbers of China-related and international articles in the “evil cult” subset is close to each other in *Southern Weekend*, whereas in the *People's Daily*, over ninety percent of “evil cult” articles are China-related. Without *Southern Weekend's* data from the years from 1999 to 2001 when the government-mandated crackdown on Falun Gong as an “evil cult” was raging throughout China, it is hard to say anything conclusive about what this means.

#### **4.4.2 Tones of Representation of Religion**

Table 4.3 indicates that overall, more articles used positive (47.3%) than negative (31.5%) tones in the representation of religion in *Southern Weekend* over the two time periods under study, which is the reverse of the configuration of the *People's Daily*. toned articles are found among China-related subset (7.9%) and the international subset (7%). A near 10% difference is found between the percentage of international articles (19.8%) that use the neutral tone and that of China-related articles (9.5%) in *Southern Weekend*, a difference similar to that in

Table 4.3. Total Numbers of Articles on Religion by Topical Areas and Tones Relevance  
(*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

Religions, Superstition and Evil Cult (% cell)			
	China	International	Total
Negative	287 28.1%	254 36.5%	541 31.5%
Positive	557 54.5%	255 36.6%	812 47.3%
Both	81 7.9%	49 7%	130 7.6%
Neutral	97 9.5%	138 19.8%	235 13.7%
<b>Total</b>	1022 100%	696 100%	1718 100%

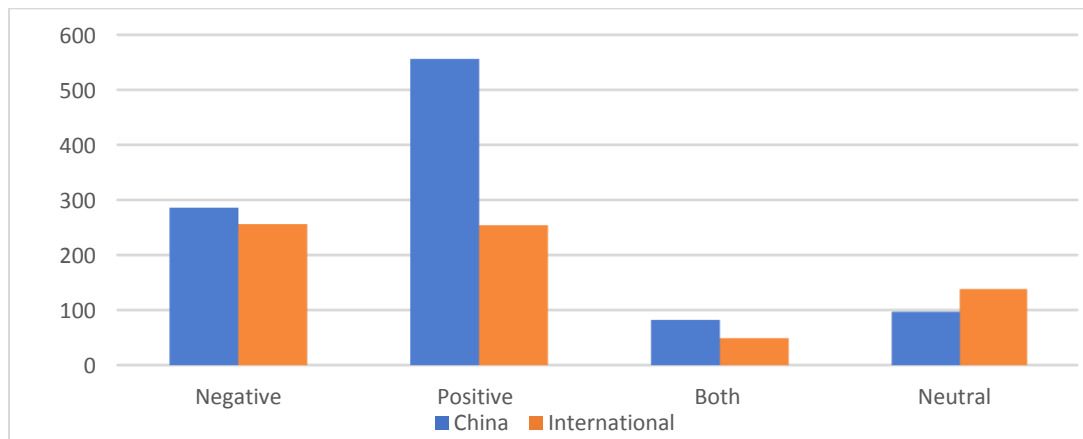


Figure 4.1. Tones of Representation of Religion: China vs. International (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

*People's Daily*. Figure 3.1 presents the same information in a graphic way.

Additionally, a larger percentage of articles used mixed tones (7.6%) and the neutral tone (13.7%) in *Southern Weekend* (21.3% in total) than the *People's Daily* (13% in total). Furthermore, more of the international articles (36.5%) are portrayed in negative light than that of China-related articles (28.1%) in *Southern Weekend*, but they are lower than the corresponding numbers in the *People's Daily* (45% and 48%, respectively). The percentage of China-related articles that represent religion positively (54.5%) is about 8% more than that among international articles (36.6%) in *Southern Weekend*, a difference much smaller than that (16.7%) international articles

Table 4.4. Numbers of Articles by Tropical Areas and Tones: Chinese Religions, Monotheistic Religions, “Superstition” and “Evil Cult” (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

	Chinese Religions		Monotheistic Religions		Superstition and Evil Cult		Total
	China	Int'l	China	Int'l	China	Int'l	
Negative	43 8.4%	5 1.0%	30 3.5%	224 26.3%	214 60.6%	25 7.1%	541 31.5%
Positive	303 59.2%	59 11.5%	183 21.5%	193 22.6%	71 20.1%	3 0.8%	812 47.3%
Both	50 9.8%	5 1.0%	16 1.9%	44 5.2%	15 4.2%	0	130 7.6%
Neutral	32 6.3%	15 2.9%	47 5.5%	116 13.6%	18 5.1%	7 2.0%	235 13.7%
<b>Total</b>	512 100%		853 100%		353 100%		1718 100%

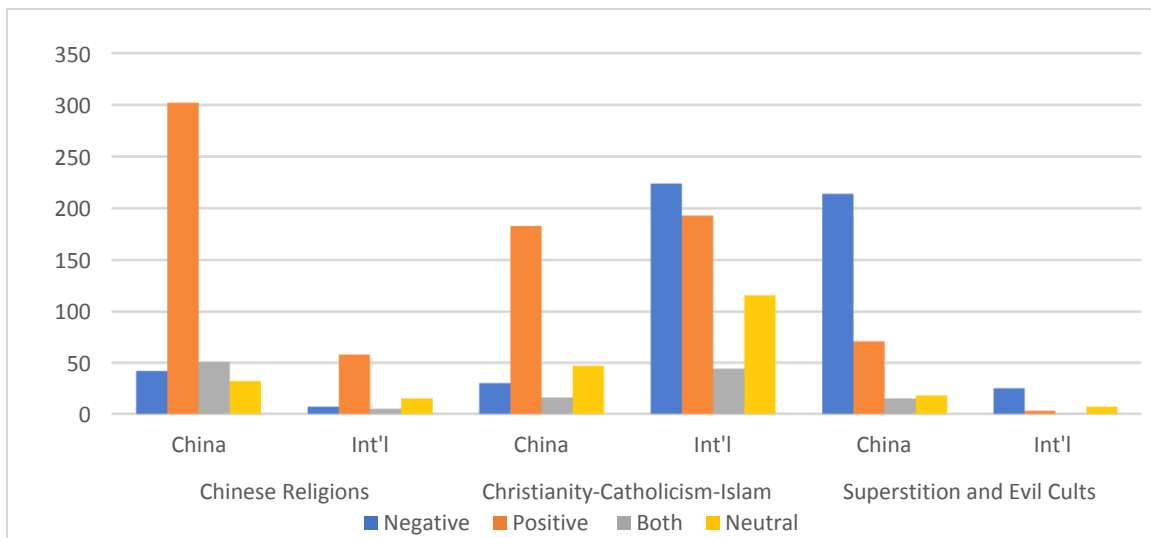


Figure 4.2. Tones of Representation: Chinese Religions, Monotheistic Religions, and “Superstition” and “Evil Cult” (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

international articles (36.6%) in *Southern Weekend*, a difference much smaller than that (16.7%) from the *People's Daily*. Similar percentages of mixed-toned articles are found among China-related subset (7.9%) and the international subset (7%). A near 10% difference is found between the percentage of international articles (19.8%) that use the neutral tone and that of China-related

articles (9.5%) in *Southern Weekend*, a difference similar to that in the *People's Daily*. Figure 4.1 presents the same information in a graphic way.

Table 4.4 presents the usage of tones when the eight types of religions and religiosities are combined into three groups—Chinese religions, monotheistic religions, and “superstition” and “evil cult.” Figure 4.2 offers a graphic view of the similarities and differences among the three groups. Compared to the *People's Daily*, the concentration of the usage of tones is less prominent in *Southern Weekend*.

#### 4.4.3 Tones of Representation over Time

Figure 4.3 provides a line graph of the overall usage of tones in the representation of religion over time in *Southern Weekend*. The blue line of negative representation spiraled upward from 1984 to 1998, showing more activity than the grey line of neutral representation and yellow line of mixed tones. From 2003 onward, however, although it fluctuated up and down, tipping upward around 2010-2011, the line of negative tone did not show much more activity than the lines of neutral and mixed tones, as both of these lines show more activity than in the previous decades. Moreover, the orange line of positive representation started strong in 1984, took a turn down to the bottom around 1987-1988, and spiraled upward since, though not without large fluctuations, especially in the new century. The orange line hangs high above the other three lines in the 2000s, even during its down time. In terms of the overall trend, the positive line of *Southern Weekend* shows a conspicuous upward spiral compared to that of the *People's Daily*, especially in the new century when it overtakes the negative line.

Figure 4.4 presents the different usage of tones among China-related and international articles. The most eminent line is the green line of positive tone among China-related articles. It started strong in 1984, dipped to the bottom around 1987-1988, and coming back up and

remaining steady in the 1990s, occasionally overtaken by the negative lines of both the China-related and international articles. In the new millennium, it shows a sharp upward spiral, and despite large fluctuations, it hangs above all the other seven lines.

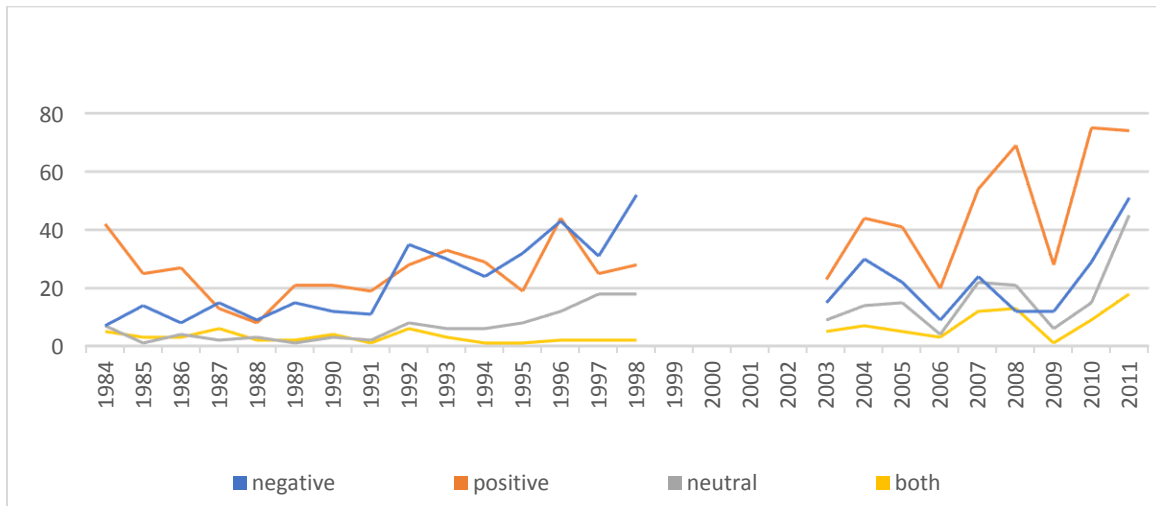


Figure 4.3. Tones of Representation of Religion over Time (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

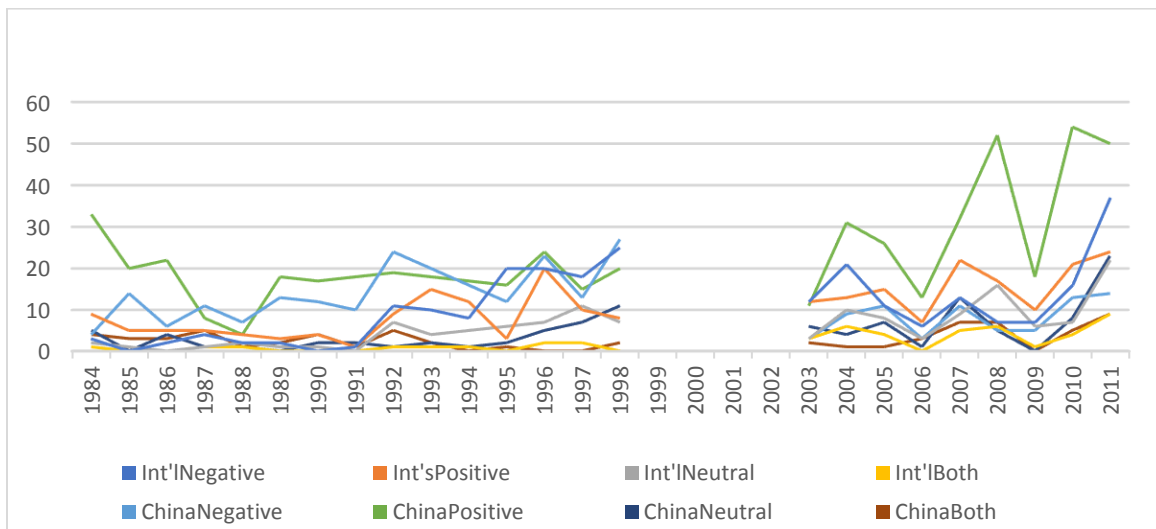


Figure 4.4. Tones of Representation over Time: China vs. International (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

The negative lines of both China-related and international articles show an upward spiral in the 1990s. However, the trend did not continue into the new century. The two lines remain low, albeit with some fluctuations, until 2011 when both ticked upward.

The orange line of positive international articles started to show more activity in the early 1990s. Going into the new century, its curve nearly coincides with that of the green, positive line of China-related articles, albeit at a much more modest level of elevation from the x axis. In the 2000s, the four lines indicating neutral and mixed tones also show modernizing increase in activity, albeit with fluctuations.

Compared to the *People's Daily*, the positive line of China-related articles in *Southern Weekend* is more conspicuously predominant in the new millennium than the one of the official newspaper. The positive line of international articles outperforms the negative line of international articles in *Southern Weekend* for most of the time during this period, while in the *People's Daily*, it is the opposite.

Figure 4.5 provides a line graph of the tones of representation on religion over time among China-related articles divided into three groups: Chinese religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism), monotheistic religions (Christianity, Catholicism, Islam), and “superstition” and “evil cult.” Three lines are especially noteworthy. First is the grey line indicating negative tone used on “superstition” and “evil cult.” Before the turn of the century, it shows an upward trend and is one of the two most active and elevated lines. In the new millennium, its elevation from the x axis drops to become one of the lowest, and its activity level also drops to be one of the mildest. The negative line of “superstition” and “evil cult” among China-related articles in the *People's Daily* shows similar patterns of change over the corresponding periods of time.

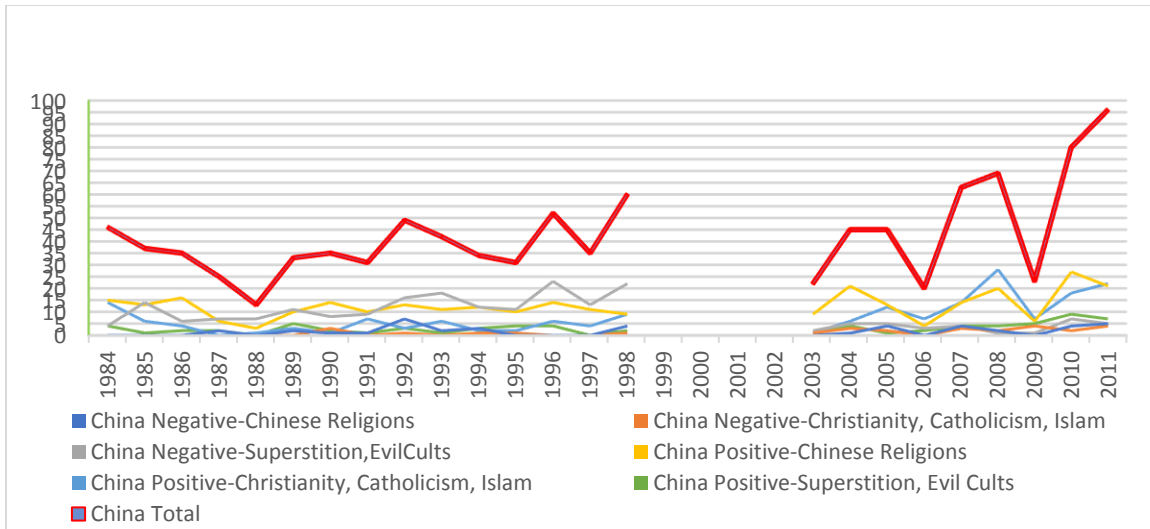


Figure 4.5. Tones of Representation over Time among China-related Articles: Chinese Religions, Monotheistic Religions, “Superstition” and “Evil Cult” (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

The second remarkable line is the positive line of Chinese religions. In the 1980s and 90s, it is as active and elevated as the grey line of “superstition” and “evil cult.” However, no upward trend can be detected during this time. Going into the new century, it becomes one of the most active and elevated lines, with the level of elevation surpassing all the lines in the previous decades. The positive line of Chinese religions among China-related articles in the *People’s Daily* demonstrates a similar pattern over the corresponding periods of time under study.

The third is the positive line of monotheistic religions which registers low level of activity and elevation in the 1980s and 90s, but shoots up in the new century to be on a par with the positive line of Chinese religions, increasing in levels of both activity and elevation, albeit with fluctuation. The corresponding line of the *People’s Daily*, however, does not show comparable patterns of change. Rather, it has moderate levels of activities and fluctuation over time.



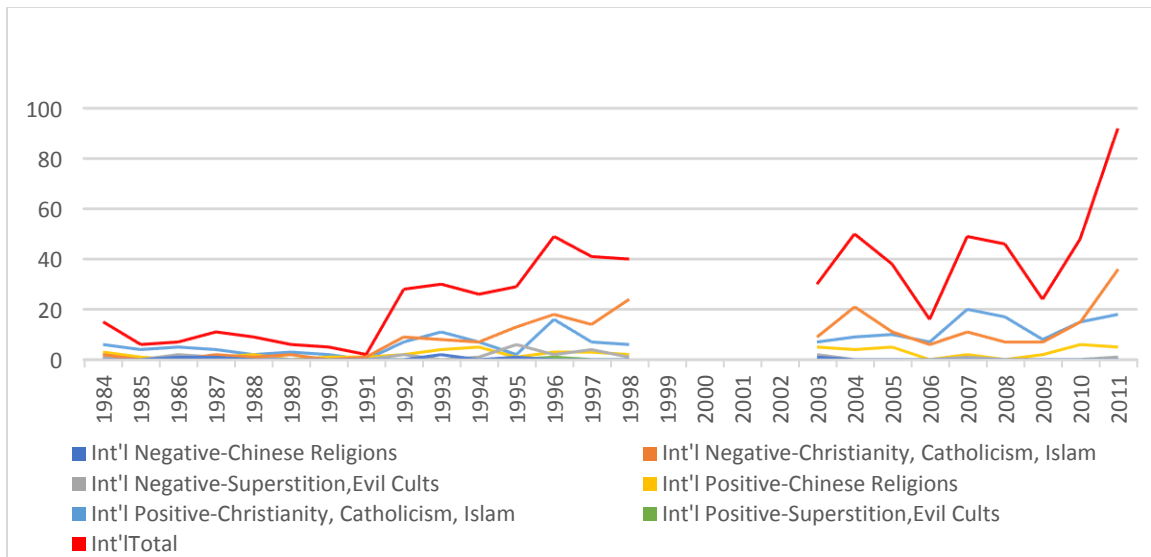


Figure 4.6. Tones of Representation over Time among International Articles: Chinese Religions, Monotheistic Religions, “Superstition” and “Evil Cult” (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

The positive line of Chinese religions and the positive line of monotheistic religions of *Southern Weekend* suggest that their increased levels of activity and elevation contribute to what is observed in figure 3.4 regarding the green line of positive China-related articles hanging high above all the other lines in the new century. The positive line of “superstition” and “evil cult” demonstrates mild increase in levels of activity and elevation in the new century. During this time, a number of China-related articles in *Southern Weekend* questions what used to be called “superstition” and instead treat them as “culture,” which explains the increase in the positive line of “superstition” and “evil cult.”

Figure 4.6 offers a line graph of the tones of representation of religion over time among international articles grouped into Chinese religions, monotheistic religions, and “superstition” and “evil cult.” First, the orange line of negative tone on monotheistic religions (second line from the front) takes off in the 1990s, spiraling up rapidly in this decade. The positive line of monotheistic religions (fifth line from the front) shows a similar trend to the orange line of negative tone on monotheistic religions before the turn of the century. Together, these two lines

contribute to the upward spiral of the overall line of international articles in the 1990s. Second, in the new century, however, the orange line of negative tone on monotheistic religions has a wide U-curve, with low elevation and little activity between 2005 and 2009. The positive line of monotheistic religions, by contrast, shows a reversed U-shape in the years between 2006 and 2009. In sum, international articles on the three monotheistic religions have tended to use a greater variety of tones since the beginning of 1990s. Compared to the *People's Daily*, the most remarkable difference is that the positive line of monotheistic religions overtakes the negative line of monotheistic religions in the years between 2006 and 2010.

#### 4.4.4 Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends

Figure 4.7 presents the secularization vs. desecularization trends in the representation of religion and atheism in *Southern Weekend* from 1984 to 1998 and from 2003 to 2011. The desecularization line hangs over the secularization line throughout the periods under study. Figure 4.8 uses a 100% stacked line graph to represent the same information. The desecularization trend is obviously growing in the period between 1984 and 1998 and becomes predominant in the new century. The secularization trend has its heyday around 1987 and has been going downward moderately in the 1990s to between 30% to 40% of the annual articles,

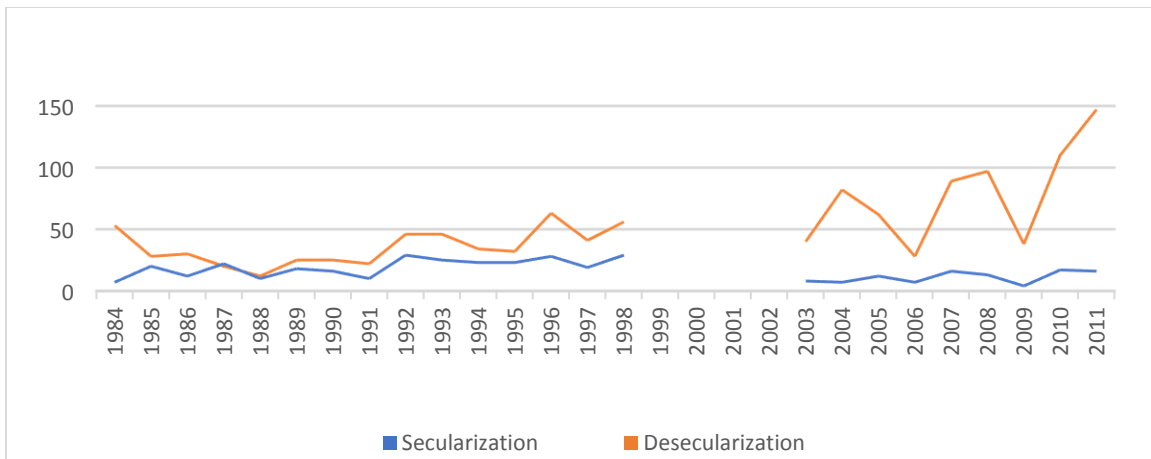


Figure 4.7. Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends in the Representation of Religion and Atheism: Line Graph (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

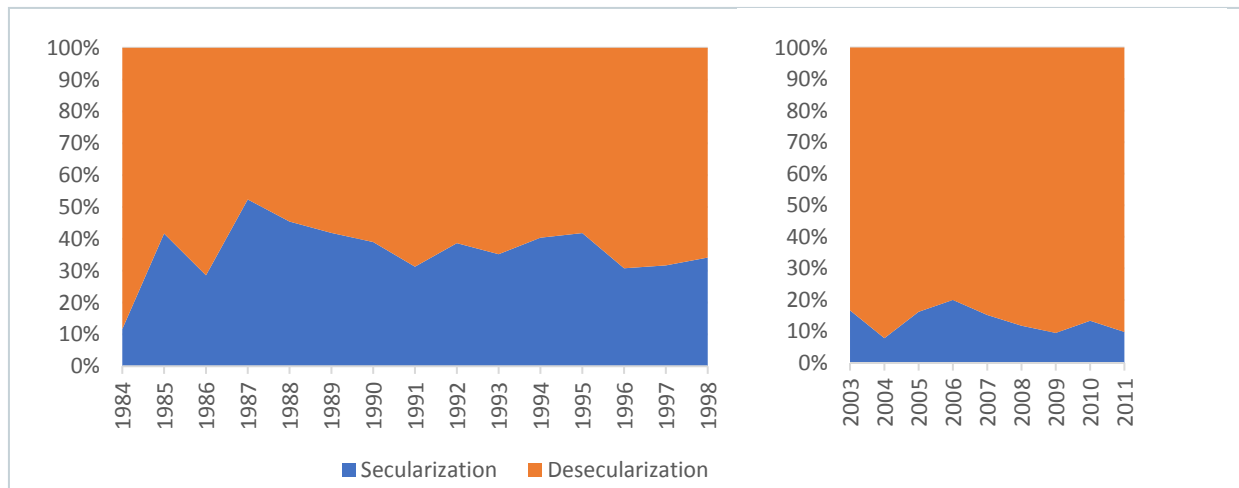


Figure 4.8. Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends in the Representation of Religion and Atheism: 100% Stacked Lines (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

and then dropped sharply in the period of 2003-2011 to less than 20% of the yearly articles. The secularization trend runs stronger in *Southern Weekend* in the 1980s and 90s, accounting for 30% to 50% of the yearly articles, than its corresponding part in the *People's Daily* which accounts for 15% to 25% of the annual articles, except for the year 1996 when it reaches over 30%. As a result, the secularization and desecularization lines are much closer to each other in *Southern Weekend* between the 1980s and mid-90s, with the gap growing wider and wider in the late 1990s and the new century. The gap between the two lines in the *People's Daily* sees no such dramatic change over the corresponding time periods.

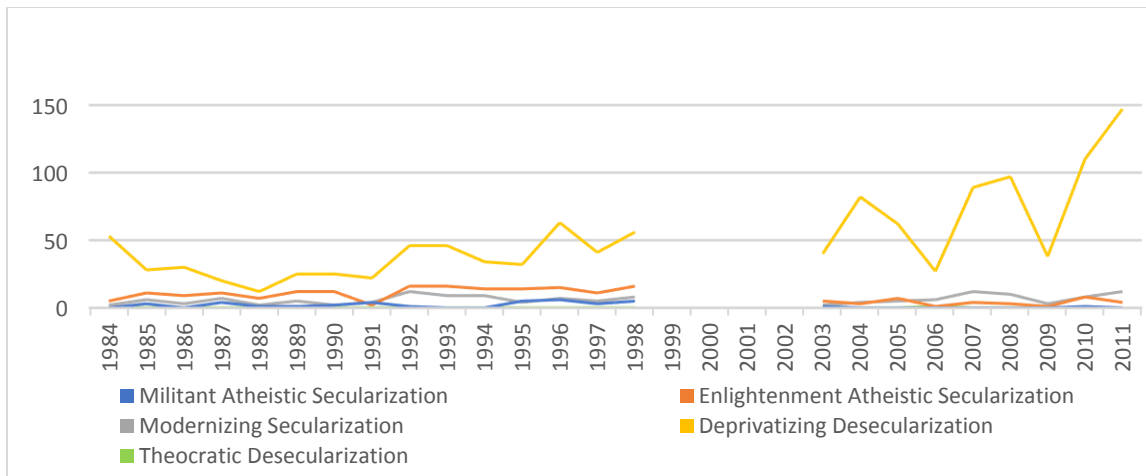


Figure 4.9. Trends of 5 Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization: Line Graph (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

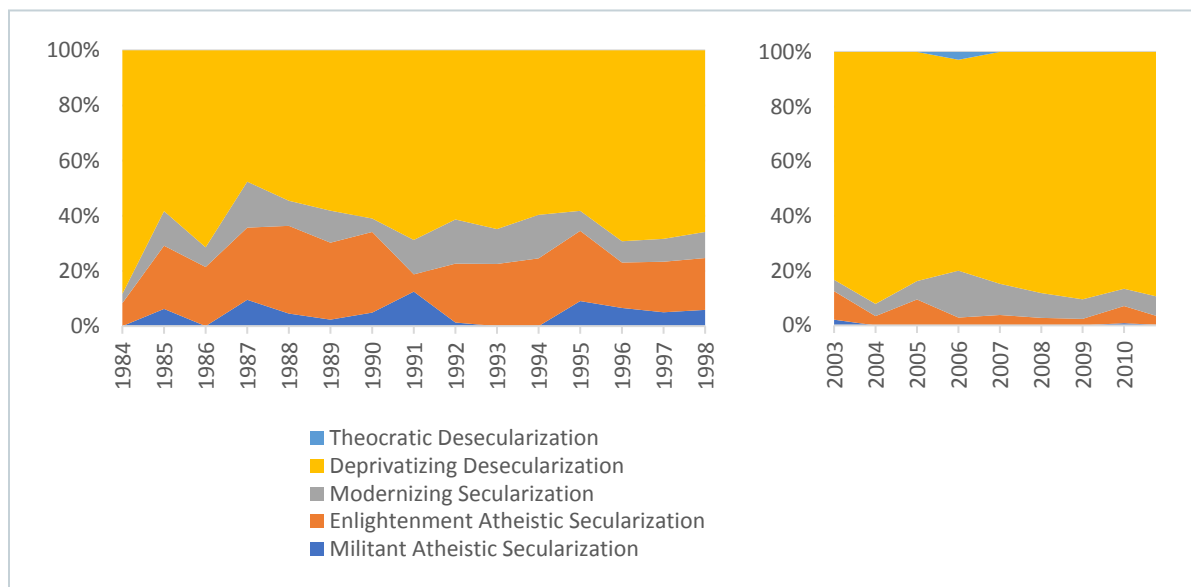


Figure 4.10. Trends of 5 Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization: 100% Stacked Lines (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

Figure 4.9 and Figure 4.10 break it down into three types of secularization and two types of desecularization. Deprivatizing desecularization is the predominant line, hanging over all the other lines throughout the period under study. And the line shows a clear upward spiral, albeit with fluctuations. The militant atheistic secularization line shows a mild degree of activity in the period between 1984 and 1998, and nearly disappears in the new century. The enlightenment

atheistic secularization line is the second most active and elevated line before the turn of the century, but it drops in both activity and elevation in the new millennium, accounting for less than 10% of each year's total number of articles on religion and atheism. The modernizing secularization line remains a constant, moderate presence through the years.

The atheistic secularization trends are more active in the period between 1984 and 1998 in *Southern Weekend*, accounting for 20% to 30% of yearly articles, than those in the *People's Daily* which account for less than 20% for most of the years in this time. This suggests that in this period when *Southern Weekend* did not have their own report team and depended on reprints and external contributions for contents, its identity as a subsidiary of a provincial-level party newspaper still mandated it to publish contents that are ideologically orthodox. In the new century, the militant-atheistic secularization trend virtually disappears in *Southern Weekend*, unlike that in the *People's Daily* which sees no major change from the previous decades. This may indicate that *Southern Weekend*, with its new identity as a leading *yulun jiandu* newspaper, is distancing itself from the version of secularization that most intimately relies on the state's power apparatus for its actualization. The modernizing secularization trend is more active than the militant-atheistic secularization trend in *Southern Weekend*, while the opposite is true for the *People's Daily*. In the new millennium, as the atheistic secularization trends diminish in *Southern Weekend*, the modernizing secularization trend maintains its 5%-15% proportion of the yearly articles.

Figure 4.11 and 4.12 present the trends of five types of secularization vs. desecularization among China-related articles. The deprivatizing secularization line is moderately higher than the other lines in the 1980s and 90s, except from the time around 1987 and 1988 when it dips to its lowest level of elevation. Deprivatizing secularization articles account for around 50-60% of the

China-related articles during this time, again with the exception of the years 1987 and 1988 when the percentage drops to about 40%. Entering the new century, it becomes the predominant line, spiraling upward, hanging high above the other lines and accounting for over 80% of all the China-related articles.

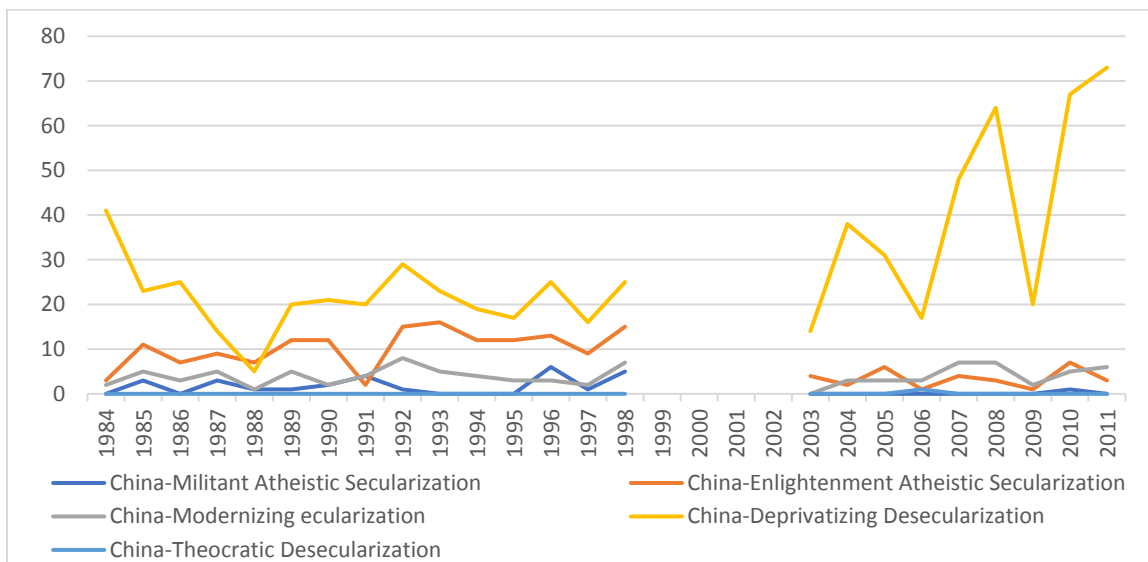


Figure 4.11. Trends of Five Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization among China-related Articles: Line Graph (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

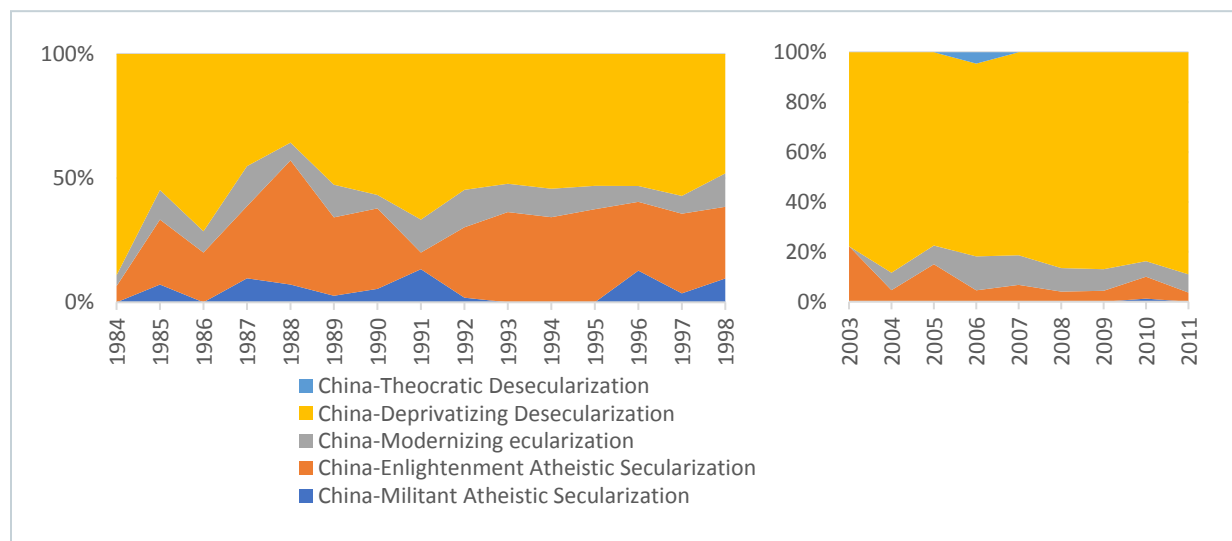


Figure 4.12. Trends of Five Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization among China-related Articles: 100% Stacked Lines (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

Enlightenment atheistic secularization is the second most active line in the 1980s and 90s with a moderate degree of elevation, accounting for 20-30% of the total yearly number of articles during this period, with the exception of 1987 when the percentage spikes up to about 40%. In the new century, its activity level decreased to a low of around 10% of the yearly total, except for the years 2003 and 2005 when the percentages jump up somewhat to 15-20%.

Militant atheistic secularization has a mild level of activity in the large part of the the period between 1984 and 1998, accounting for around 10% of the total yearly number of articles, except for the years of 1993-1995 when there is no activity. Going into the new century, its presence is close to none. The modernizing secularization trend maintains a mild presence throughout the periods under study, accounting for 10% or less of the yearly number of articles. The theocratic desecularization line has only one activity in the year 2006, registering one article.

Compared to the *People's Daily*, *Southern Weekend* tends to use less of the militant-atheistic secularization discourse before the new century, and almost stops using it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, for most of the time under study, *Southern Weekend's* modernizing secularization trend is stronger than the corresponding one in the *People's Daily*.

Figure 4.13 and 4.14 provides graphs from two perspectives of the trends of five types of secularization vs. desecularization over time among international articles.

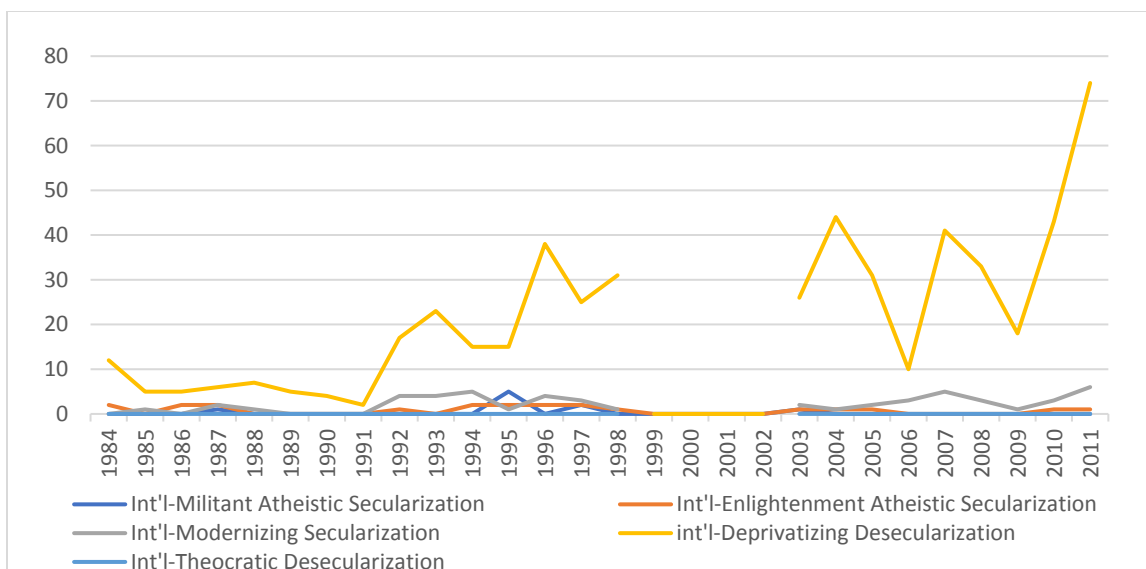


Figure 4.13. Trends of 5 Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization among International Articles: Line Graph (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

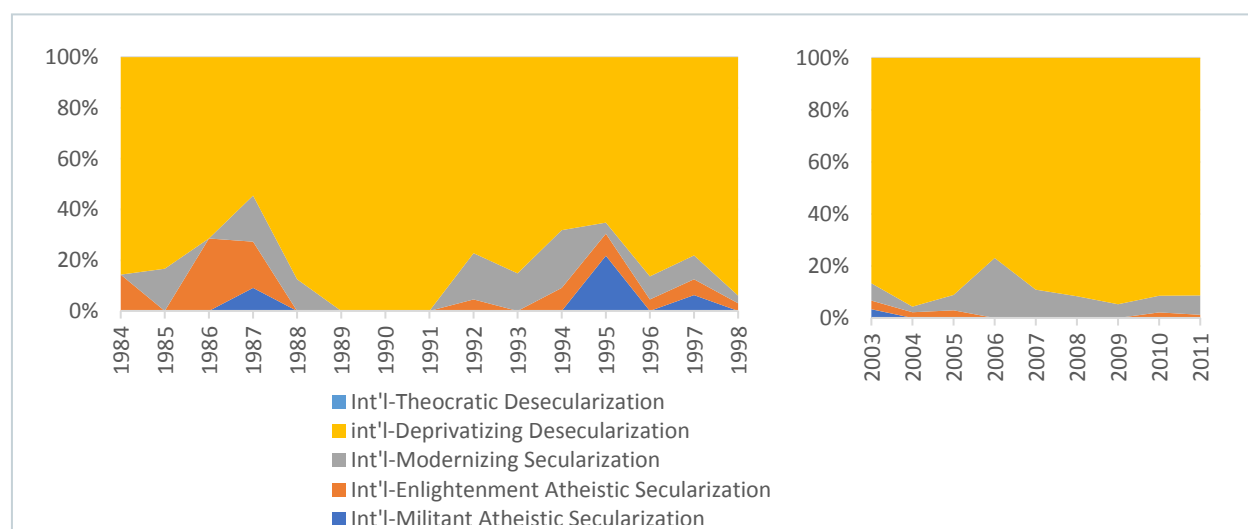


Figure 4.14. Trends of 5 Types of Secularization vs. Desecularization among International Articles: 100% Stacked Lines (*Southern Weekend* 1984-1998 & 2003-2011)

Throughout the period under study, the deprivatizing desecularization line is predominant, spiraling up in the 1990s, going up and down in the 2000s but still maintaining its prevalence over the other lines. From figure 4.14, we see that this trend becomes more preeminent in the new century, accounting for 80-90% of the total yearly number of articles.

The modernizing secularization line accounts for from 0% to around 20% of the total yearly number of articles. Its presence is stronger than the militant-atheistic and enlightenment-



atheistic secularization trends for most of the years under study. The militant atheistic secularization line shows some activity only on the years 1987, 1995, 1997 and 2003. The enlightenment atheistic secularization line has slightly more activity than the militant atheistic secularization line. However, the two lines account for 20-25% of the total yearly number of articles only on the years 1986, 1987, and 1995. For the other years, they are either absent or constitute around 10% or less of the yearly number of articles. The theocratic desecularization trend has no presence among international articles in *Southern Weekend*.

*Southern Weekend* tends to use the atheistic secularization discourses among international articles more than the *People's Daily* in the 1980s and 90s. Close reading indicates that for most of the time, the enlightenment-atheistic secularization discourse is used in articles that offer scientific explanations to some phenomena believed to have supernatural causes, thus dismissing the “supernatural beliefs” and valorizing science. Militant-atheistic secularization discourse is used in articles targeting “evil cults” in other countries for the deaths and social disruption they caused and arguing that the legal measures taken to sanction them, handicapped by the concerns of the freedom of religious belief, are not adequate to completely eradicate the bad ideas. While few of the articles directly references to Marxist theories or socialism, the logic is atheistic for sure.

## **4.5 *Yulun Jiandu* Articles on Buddhism**

### **4.5.1 Identifying *yulun jiandu* articles**

To identify investigative reporting on religion and atheism, I drew on Cho's (2007) definition of *yulun jiandu* articles as “any news report or commentary that could be (1) identified by an independent headline and author, and that (2) referred to any news reports or commentaries that did not stress official achievements and uniform Party ideology, but focused on criticisms,

negative incidents, conflicts, debates and alternative viewpoints” (175-176). Adding the condition that the news report or commentary needs to be substantially about the religion, rather than religion being something marginally related to the article, I applied this definition to coding the articles on Buddhism<sup>33</sup> articles from *Southern Weekend* over the time periods of 1996-1998 and 2003-2011, as digital data on the paper are missing on the years from 1999 to 2002. I then look for the same subject matter in the *People’s Daily* and compare and contrast the representation from the two papers.

#### 4.5.2 Description of *yulun jiandu* Articles Related to Buddhism

I identified 22 (5.6%) out of the 396 articles on Buddhism in *Southern Weekend* to be *yulun jiandu* articles, including 11 (2.8%) commentaries and 11 (2.8%) investigative news reports. Using the subject matters of these articles in key word search in the *People’s Daily* database, I was able to retrieve relevant articles and qualitatively compare the representation in the two papers. I argue that three major differences exist in the two papers’ respective coverages of these contraversal events and topics vis-à-vis the secularization vs. desecularization discourses.

Table 4.5 lists the titles, publication dates, names of authors, and whether an articles is a commentary or news piece. Each article is marked by a letter (C for commentary, N for news) and a number for easy reference to the list.

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<sup>33</sup> I also tried Christianity subset and could barely find any *yulun jiandu* articles that fit the definition I provided here. The virtual absence is obviously not because Christianity in China today is immune from the political economic impacts from both the authoritarian state and the market. My speculation is that it is off limits even for *Southern Weekend* to publish any investigative journalism substantially about Christianity in today’s China.

Table 4.5. *Yulun Jiandu* Articles among the Buddhism Subset in *Southern Weekend*

Date	Title and Author	Type (ID)
March 14, 1997	Why the unwillingness to accept “cloned humans”? The philosopher says: Conventional thinking fails to outrun modern science and technology (为什么不愿接受“克隆人”? 哲学家说传统思维“跑”不过现代科技). By Zhao Tingyang	Commentary (C1)
March 14, 1997	The absolute difference between human beings and animals is the former have a mysterious right. The scholar of religion says: Nature is the foundation of society (人有与动物截然不同的神秘权力, 宗教研究者说自然是社会的根本). By He Guanghu	Commentary (C2)
September 1, 1998	Why did the White Horse Temple ring its New Year’s bell ahead of time (马寺钟声缘何提前敲响)? By Cui Ying	News (N1)
September 18, 1998	The case of the Dharma Master Haideng: A sliver of history on the god-making movement (海灯案造神运动的一段历史原声带). By Yu Liuwen	News (N2)
February 20, 2003	Ridiculous: “Resurrection” of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Leshan (荒唐! 巴米扬大佛乐山“复活”). By Zeng Min & Yi Xi	News (N3)
July 24, 2003	Law suit filed by a Buddhist monastery (官司入佛门). By Xie Chunlei	New (N4)
June 17, 2004	Cultural heritage is our expressions (文化遗产就是人类的表情). By Xia Yu	Commentary (C3)
June 17, 2004	Yungang Grottoes: Aging in weathering (云冈石窟: 在风化中苍老). By Xia Yu	News (N5)
August 5, 2004	Chang Jiahuang: Chiseling out a new Dunhuang Grottoes (常嘉煌: 凿出一个新敦煌). By Wu Chenguang and Fa Yisha	News (N6)
October 19, 2006	Why Tibet is the dreamland (为什么西藏令人神往)? By Sheng Hong	Commentary (C4)
March 22, 2007	Being unreasonable by worldly standard can bring the spiritual quality into sharp relief (“不近人情”才凸显神性). By Chen Ming	Commentary (C5)
March 22, 2007	The distance of Buddhism from modern people (佛教和现代人的距离). By Hua Fangtian	Commentary (C6)
March 22, 2007	Some people denounce me to be an imposter monk (有人骂我是“假和尚”). By Zhao Ling	Commentary (C7)
November 1, 2007	Can Buddhist monks not bow to the kings (沙门可以不敬王者吗)? By Liang Wendao	Commentary (C8)

Table 4.5 continued

December 27, 2007	Otherworldly orientation vs. this-worldly orientation (出世与入世). By Huang Xiaowei	News (N7)
January 10, 2008	Periodization of art: What do we want from Tibet (绘画断代: 向西藏要什么). By Qiu Zhijie	Commentary (C9)
August 7, 2008	Where should the monks' buttocks sit (和尚的屁股该坐在哪?)? By Gui Jin	Commentary (C10)
February 12, 2009	Is it right to open the Ashoka Tower, take the Buddha's parietal bone relics, and build China's "capital of Buddhism" (开阿育王塔, 取佛顶真骨, 建全国佛都?)? By He Haining	News (N8)
May 27, 2010	Unearthing Buddhist holy relics: Is it to fulfill the need for conservation or simply economic impulse (开启佛教圣物, 保护需要还是经济冲动?)? By Ju Jing	News (N9)
April 21, 2011	Controversies over the re-building of the Grand Bao'en Temple in Nanjing (争议南京重建大报恩寺). By Ju Jing	News (N10)
October 6, 2011	Mental health problems abound among government officials ("官心病"知多少). By Fang Kecheng	News (N11)
October 20, 2011	Religious sites are neither the officialdom nor the marketplace; Buddhist monasteries must maintain their serenity and purity (道场非官场市场, 佛门须清净纯洁). By Li Tie	Commentary (C11)

### 4.5.3 Qualitative Analysis of *yulun jiandu* Buddhism articles

#### 4.5.3.1 Religion and Ethics: Rapprochement between Religion and Science vs. Refusal to Desecularize

In the March 14, 1997 issue of *Southern Weekend*, two young scholars at the time were invited to voice their own opinions with regard to human cloning (C1 and C2)—Zhao Tingyang, associate researcher from the Institute of Philosophy at the China Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and He Guanghu, researcher from the Institute of World Religions at CASS. While both scholars invoke Buddhism, together with other religious traditions such as Daoism and Christianity, in discussing the challenging ethical issues involved in this new technology, they hold opposing positions. For Zhao, people are limited to gauging the consequences of a new technology through the lens of their cultural traditions: human cloning is considered sacrilege to

God in the West, while in the Chinese culture based on Buddhism and Daoism, people do not take it as hard. Zhao urges people to develop ideas that are compatible with the rapidly technologizing society, rather than making hasty judgment. For He, religion is the foundation wherein lies the ultimate human value. The Buddhist idea of affinity and the Daoist idea of the “Dao following nature” point out a state of natural existence and development that is not controlled by humans. The problems with science and technology is that it makes humans do damages to nature. Human cloning is denounced because it goes against the grain of Western and Eastern religious beliefs: nature is the foundation of human society.

What is remarkable about these two commentaries is that they bring religion into meaningful discussion of the ethical issues involved in science. Both look into religious traditions to find justifications for the different reactions to human cloning, although they differ in their understanding of what Eastern religious tradition is. To Zhao, Eastern religious tradition makes people disinterested in the bioethics of human cloning, whereas He asserts that both Eastern and Western religious traditions fundamentally resist human cloning. Despite their differences, the debate itself and He’s ideas constitute an example of discursive practice in the line of deprivatizing desecularization. This point is brought to better light when we compare these commentaries from *Southern Weekend* with reports of religion vs. bioethics of human cloning in the *People’s Daily*.

Key word search of “human cloning” (*kelong ren*) and “ethics” (*lunli*) retrieved 40 articles published between 1996 and 2011 in the *People’s Daily* database. While these articles report how human cloning has raised ethical challenges in Western societies such as Britain, the United States, and Germany, etc., they rarely include religion into the discussion. Key word search by “human cloning” AND “Buddhism” did not get any hit, and “human cloning” AND

“religion” brought up five news articles that briefly mention that ethical challenges of human cloning come from all sides of Western societies, including religious people who argue this technology violates the sanctity of human life as the sacred creation of the divine power. They report no debates over the ethical issues in human cloning in China, only that the Chinese government has decided it is unethical to conduct human cloning for reasons of medical uncertainty and technological prematurity and has prohibited it. Thus, in the *People’s Daily’s* representation, religion is kept at arm’s length from providing ethical judgment of science and technology in China, which can be taken as a discursive measure to safeguard the institutional differentiation of religion and science.

#### **4.5.3.2 Desecularization in All Its Complexity: Clarification vs. Obscuration**

##### **4.5.3.2.1 The defamation lawsuit of the Dharma Master Haideng**

*Southern Weekend’s* news report on September 18, 1998 (N2) focuses on disclosing the procedural injustice and its ramifications on the part of some local courts and prosecution involved in the defamation case of the Dharma Master Haideng. The news report is based on five different sources. The first source is Jing Yongxiang, the journalist who penned the letters and articles exposing the trickery and quakery of Haideng, who had come to be regarded as a supreme kungfu master, achieved dharma master, medical genius, and revolutionary hero in China. Despite the mountain of evidence he had gathered, Jing said the courts handling the case deprived him of the right to proper procedures and decided Jing lost the case without granting him a hearing. “It was a ridiculous ruling.”

The news report’s second source is the plaintiff, Fan Yinglian, a close aid and disciple of Haideng’s, who insists that his winning of the defamation case against Jing was a victory of the rule of law. The third source is Xiao Dingpei, a former local propaganda department cadred and

a neighbor of Haideng. Xiao was one of the first to write about Haideng in the early 1980s, praising his mastery of kung fu. As the whole country was swept up in the kung fu fever and the media were eager to find a kung fu master to put under the spotlight, Xiao realized very soon that Haideng was taking advantage of this opportunity for fame and giving boastful statements about himself that exaggerated his knowledge and skills. Witnessing this god-making movement barreling on, Xiao admitted he regret to be one of the first who opened the “Pandora’s box” and then choose to remain silent. The fourth source is Zhou Shousen, a defense lawyer for Jing. Zhou is indignant that they lost the case. For him, the ruling poses a challenge to “the construction of the rule of law with Chinese characteristics,” because the courts made multiple violations of procedural justice. “The ruling clearly indicates that the movement of making Haideng into a god-like figure is by no way incidental.” The fifth source is Zhang Yang, a renowned writer who authored *Haideng Myth*, unabashedly calling both Haideng and Fan Yinglian charlatans. Zhang said the courts knew they did many things wrong in handling the law suit. His book, Zhang claims, “is the final verdict!” This news report exemplifies investigative journalism by providing multiple perspectives from people who are directly involved in the law suit, giving them voices, and withholding of the journalist’s own judgment.

Key word search of “Haideng case” (*haideng an*) in the *People’s Daily* database retrieved one article dated July 26, 2001<sup>34</sup>, almost three years after the court ruling came out. Two thirds of this 2,600-character article gives a recap of the case and of Haideng and Fan Yinglian’s fraudulent acts as evidence that this case should be reviewed so as to rectify the wrong ruling. Given that this case had been widely publized and Haideng discredited by the time, this article

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<sup>34</sup> Shenhua yijing dapo, zhifa bixu gongzheng, yixie zhuanjia xuezhe huyu jinkuai yifa fucha “haideng an” (The myth is already broken. Justice must be served. Experts and scholars call for reviewing the Haideng case as soon as possible), Fu Changbo, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), July 26, 2001.

spent much ink beating the dead horse. The remaining one third of the article cites officials and leading scholars who reaffirm the call for review. Two points are remarkable in this report. First, unlike the *Southern Weekend* article which relies on people closely involved in the case for sources of information, many of the officials and scholars the *People's Daily* article turns to are not directly related to the case at all. What we see here is a good example of what Lee (1981) observes—the official media in authoritarian China habitually appeals to authority, however far-fetched it is to the case.

Second, what is lacking in this article is that it does not pinpoint how the court ruling transpired to be so fallacious. Although the brief editorial comments at the end of the article urge “those relevant government departments and individuals” to “deeply reflect on their actions and responsibilities,” its failure to provide the specifics of what exactly went wrong mystifies the legal process, rather than educating people on it so that people can be better-informed citizens who can help safeguard their right to transparency of conduct from public office holders.

#### **4.5.3.2.2 The Ashoka Tower Controversy**

*Southern Weekend* ran several investigative news reports on the Ashoka Tower controversy in Nanjing from 2009 to 2011 as it unfolded. These reports reveal how the various social actors representing a motley of heterogeneous social, political and economic interests contest the legitimacy of others' proposed course of action and promote that of their own. From the beginning, the reader can see that the overpowering political and economic forces' resolution to re-establish Nanjing as the Buddhist capital of China is economically motivated. Nanjing's Buddhist history and culture is to be packaged into an important commodity—the Ashoka Tower, the holy relics and the Grand Bao'en Temple that hosts these artifacts being the most important part of it—that attracts tourists and pilgrims from near and far and helps boost the



service sector of the city's economy. While this is a familiar story of culture paving the way for economics (*wenhua datai, jingji changxi*), the twist in *Southern Weekend's* reports is that they disclose the unsettling and contraversial nature of the city's decisions. First, the city's abrupt announcement of the resolution to rebuild the Grand Bao'en Temple came as an astonishment to many people. In the past ten years when the rebuilding plan was in the making, no public hearing has been held, which is in violation of the 2005 regulation instigated by the State Department that any plan to build on or near a site of major historical significance must hold public hearing to solicit input from archiologists, historials, and culture experts, as well as the general public. The non-compliance of the Nanjing's city government of this law deprives the public of their rights to know and to participate in the decision-making process of matters that affect them. Second, while the groundbreaking ceremony has been scheduled for May, 2011 and the construction is set to start shortly after, the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA) has not approved it yet.

Key word search of "Grant Bao'en Temple" (*da baoen si*) in the *People's Daily* database identified four relevant news articles from 2008 to 2011. Two of the reports<sup>35</sup> are about important archiological findings. One news article<sup>36</sup> reports that it is undecided yet whether the Ashoka Tower is to be opened or not. The reasons given are restricted to cultural considerations, excluding political economic factors from the picture. The report quotes the vice director of Nanjing Museum and head of the Nanjing Cultural Heritage Bureau, with the latter saying that ultimately they will follow the NCHA and the Bureau of Religious Affairs' recommendations.

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<sup>35</sup> 2010 niandu shida kaogu xin faxian jiexiao (Ten new archeological discoveries in 2010), *Renmin ribao (People's Daily)*, June 10, 2011. Kaogu youduoshao neng gaibian lishi? (How much can archeology affect history?) *Remin ribao (People's Daily)*, June 17, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Nanjing ayuwang ta shifou dakai shangwu dinglun (It is undecided whether the Ashoka Tower in Nanjing will be opened or not), Shen Lin, *Renmin ribao (People's Daily)*, November 24, 2008.

The fourth report<sup>37</sup> breaks the news in a celebratory tone of the Buddha's parietal bone relics being taken out of the Ashoka Tower, with no mentioning of controversies at all.

#### 4.5.3.2.3 Building Real-sized Replica of the Bamiyan Buddhas

The *Southern Weekend* report on the “resurrection” of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Leshan is similarly provocative. It describes the damages the construction process was doing to the cliff stone tombs hanging on the mountainside. This area has been designated as a key national historic site on account of these Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) cliff tombs; any construction is prohibited by law except for conservation purposes. However, defying objections from conservation experts, one of whom works for the World Bank's cultural heritage conservation projects, Leshan Urban Planning Bureau, Leshan Culture Bureau, and Sichuan Provincial Cultural Heritage Administration, etc., the company Oriental Capital of Buddhism Co. was pushing ahead with this project. Behind their impudence is the strong backup from the Leshan city government.

Key word search of the Bamiyan Buddhas (*bamiyang dafo*) AND Leshan in the *People's Daily* database brought up one commentary<sup>38</sup>. The commentator starts with summarizing the controversies discussed in the *Southern Weekend* article (N3), without naming the parties involved, before going off the case to criticize the problem of the massive construction of fake “cultural sites” all over China as being wasteful, lack of authenticity and environmentally unfriendly.

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<sup>37</sup> Nanjing fodinggu sheli zhenrong zaixian (Buddha's parietal bone relics in Nanjing are revealed for the world to see), Shen Lin, Renmin ribao, (*People's Daily*), June 13, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Jia jingguan buke zao (Do not make fake cultural sites), Ye Yu, Remin ribao (*People's Daily*), February 26, 2003.

#### 4.5.3.2.4 Collective Action of Wutai Mountain Monks

While reports on the Haideng case and the building of Bamiyan Buddhas replica do not include the perspective and voices of Buddhist believers, the investigative report on the collective action of Wutai Mountain monks does (N7). As mining around the mountain has not only made negative ecological and environmental impact, but the shock waves from detonation of explosives have done damages to the historic artifacts and temple buildings, monks from more than a hundred temples over the Wutai Mountain have united to stop the encroachment and destruction. They are frustrated to see that the local government, who issues permits to the mining companies, is unwilling to put a stop to it, for the mining industry is a major source of tax revenue for the local government.

Key word search of “Wutain Mountain” (*wutai shan*) and “mining” (*caikuang*) in the *People’s Daily* database retrieves one relevant article<sup>39</sup> dated three months earlier than the *Southern Weekend* article. It reports that to better prepare for the application of the Wutai Mountains for world natural and cultural heritage listing, a work team was sent down by the Shanxi provincial government to investigate the mining situation around the Wutain Mountain. However, the report says little more than listing the names of the mining companies.

#### 4.5.3.2.5 Downside of Privatizing Desecularization of Buddhism

Some commentaries in *Southern Weekend* do not shy away from debating the deleterious effects commercialization and commodification of Buddhism has done to the religion. For instance, taking note of the fast revival of Buddhism in today’s China, Zhao (C7) points out that while the complete divorce from worldly life and asceticism of monkhood has earned the

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<sup>39</sup> Qunei yanjin caikuang, zhujin hui fu zhibei, Wutaishan “qingsao shanmen” (Mining is strictly prohibited. Revegetation is under way. Wutai Mountain clears its ground of mining companies), Bao Dan, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), July 13, 2007.

monastic Buddhists admiration and respect from people, the monasteries are not “pure land.” “As temples get richer, thanks to the growing market economy, some monks have become nonchalant in faith and lax in discipline, some are busy forming cliques of interests and entangled in business disputes, and still some are full of themselves and devoured by selfish desire. These deviant behaviors have done damage to the reputation and respectability of Buddhism.” Gui Jin (C10) takes to task the the chief abbot Shi Yongxin of the Shaolin Temple, questioning his scandalous life style and the way he runs the Shaolin Temple like an entertainment business.

Li Tie (C11) goes further to say that bureaucratization of monasteries and commercialization of Buddhism in the Chinese political economic context has amounted to a special configuration of the power relations of the two institutions that contradicts the modern idea of the separation of church and state and corrupt Buddhism’s spiritual authority. “How can Buddhism still teach its followers to renounce worldly pleasures and still claim to help them purify their heart and mind and anchor their soul?” Li asks.

From the discussion of the *yulun jiandu* news and commentaries above, *Southern Weekend*’s openness toward naming the parties involved, especially those in positions of power who are liable for what went wrong is crystal clear. The *yulun jiandu* news pieces reveal that agents of state power become enablers in the making of an imposter (the case of Dharma Master Haideng) and fake artifact (full-sized replica of the Bamiyan Buddhas) and in letting extraneous interests trump religious interests, to the detriment of the latter. If we read through the surface of their expressed contents of legal injustice and official actions or inactions that harm the interests of the religious, we can interpret the news coverage as disclosure of some of the ways that desecularization is unfolding in the Chinese political economy. The fact-based narrative

construction of the news reports is less inviting of the reader to question the return of religion to public life *per se* than to examine, through contemplating questions about the authenticity of religiosity and the right to self-representation, why and how its return has to assume the form it does and imagine what could be done better to safeguard religious interest and values from being sidetracked and corrupted by secular forces. The conflict involved in the events discussed is not an ideological one and not narrated as if it is.

The three *yulun jiandu* commentaries aim their critical angel at the secularization happening within religion, whether it is Buddhist monasteries or the practicing believers. These commentaries use Buddhist principles and values to challenge the self-secularization of some Buddhist institutions and individuals. Similar to the *yulun jiandu* news reports discussed above, the commentaries presume the value of the desecularization of religion and from there, invite reflections on what is derailing it.

#### **4.5.3.3 Place for Spirituality in Representation**

As I will discuss in Chapter Five, in its representation of Buddhism, the *People's Daily* tends to stay clear of the spiritual dimension of the religion and instead treat it as a consumable culture or romanticizable site. *Southern Weekend*, by contrast, does not recoil from bringing spirituality into discussion.

In early 2007, in the wake of the widely publicized news of several famous actors and an artist taking the tonsure, *Southern Weekend* published several commentaries and news articles about Buddhism in contemporary China. Chen Ming (C5), a renowned scholar at the Capital Normal University, is straightforward in saying that “as today’s world has become excessively materialistic, it is time for people to think about the spiritual dimension of existence, beyond the mundane quest for fame and money, without which life is incomplete.” Chen thinks that

renouncing this-worldly morality and obligations and taking refuge in monkhood, despite its seeming “unreasonableness,” brings into sharp relief the sacred nature of spirituality.

Hua Fangtian (C6), a researcher on religion from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, maintains that “people who have faith are happier than those who do not.” Dismissing the biased perception that Buddhism is a pessimistic, selfish faith and people tend to convert to Buddhism after they experienced major setbacks in life, Hua insists that “the commitment Buddhists make to liberating not only themselves, but also other people from the cycle of life and death requires a tremendous amount of will power and perseverance.” Unlike Chen, Hua admonishes monasticism for distancing Buddhism further away from modern life, and argues that what keeps Buddhism going strong today is the lay believers who put their faith into practice in daily life and unostensibly make contributions to society.” Zhao Ling (C7) thinks news of famous personages taking the tonsure “gives people the opportunity to openly talk about faith, finds spiritual resonance among the modern people who are looking for answers (to questions about life), and shares the power of faith. Just like what a Christian said, no matter what religion one believes in, it is always a good thing that faith makes one think about the meaning of life.”

These commentaries do not bring atheism into the debate on the meaning of life. In their construction of symbolic boundaries around what gives life value and meaning, atheism is excluded as a source. Instead, religion is presented as the rightful and fundamental origin for the meaning of life. These commentaries can be taken as a public call for the adoption of spirituality and religiosity, a move toward desecularizing people’s mind and heart.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I content-analyze 1,759 articles about religion and atheism published from 1984 to 1998 and from 2003 to 2011 in the reputable *Southern Weekend* on the tones and

secularization vs. desecularization trends of representation and compare them to those of the *People's Daily*. I also identify 22 *yulun jiandu* articles from the Buddhism subset. Through comparing with reports on the same subject matters retrieved from the *People's Daily*, I find that the *yulun jiandu* articles in *Southern Weekend* tend to bring religion into discursive territories that the *People's Daily* would not. Several findings invite further discussion.

First, *Southern Weekend* publishes an average of 1.35 articles per week that are related to religion and atheism, while the number for the *People's Daily's* is 6.2 per week. As far as religion is concerned, *Southern Weekend's* dearth of engagement can have several explanations. As a weekly newspaper, *Southern Weekend* is not geared toward publishing time-sensitive news, whereas the *People's Daily* is. Many of the news coverage in the *People's Daily* are indeed of this nature. Moreover, *Southern Weekend's* shortage of religion and atheism coverage may indicate that religion is still a relatively more regulated topic that the censors keep a closer eye on, so much as that outspoken, commercialized newspapers such as *Southern Weekend* would not venture to cross the line too much. On the other hand, the shortage of coverage itself could be a conscious decision on the part of editors and journalists of *Southern Weekend* to prioritize other social issues and controversies that they deem would more likely appeal to the urban middle-class readership.

Second, in the 2000s, an increasing number of articles uses modernizing secularization and deprivatizing secularization discourses in *Southern Weekend*, whereas in the *People's Daily* it is the enlightenment-atheistic secularization trend that prevails over other trends which have little to zero activity. Taken together, this indicates that in the new century *Southern Weekend* is increasingly distant from the mouthpiece role than the *People's Daily* in terms of overt propagation of atheist orthodoxy. However, I can hardly say *Southern Weekend* has represented

atheism in a way that poses overt, articulate challenges to it. The challenge it brings to atheism is often covert and brief, albeit thoughtful.

Third, as far as tones of representation is concerned, for the three Chinese religions as a whole, *Southern Weekend* use more negative, less positive, and more mix-toned representation among their respective China-related subsets than the *People's Daily*. Over time, we see more positive, more negative, more mix-toned, and more neutral representation of the Chinese religions in the new century than the 1980s and 90s. This indicates that in *Southern Weekend's* China-related articles, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the representation of Chinese religions is further removed from the official guideline of covering domestic news in positive light than both the period prior and the *People's Daily*. It is more level-headed compared to the *People's Daily*.

For the three monotheistic religions, one commonality in their representation is that in the 2000s, we see the increased use of the neutral tone and mixed-tone in their China-related and international subsets. It indicates greater multiplicity of perspectives and more efforts to withhold value judgment. Another commonality is that all three religions see greater positive representation among their respective China-related articles subsets, albeit to different degrees, in the new century than before. The three monotheistic religions also see divergent trends. Christianity and Catholicism both have increased positive representation among international articles in the new century, but Islam does not. Negative representation among international articles decreases in most part of the new century for Christianity and Islam, but not for Catholicism. Negative representation among China-related articles increases in the new century for Islam, but not for Christianity and Catholicism.

For “superstition,” the percentage of negative representation is much lower in *Southern Weekend* than the *People's Daily*, but the percentage of positive representation among the subset



of China-related articles goes higher. Since the 1980s, *Southern Weekend* has published articles in which beliefs and customs that used to be considered superstitious is pointedly and appreciatively redefined as part of culture. Over time, we see that prior to the new century, *Southern Weekend* shows an upward trend in representing in a negative light China-related articles on superstition and evil cult. This trend is more prominent in the superstition subset than the evil cult subset. In the new century, this trend declines to the extent that few articles use the negative tone. Besides, in the new century, more articles on “superstition” use the positive tone. *Southern Weekend*, especially after it acquires the new identity as an avant garde watchdog newspaper, contests the official demarcation of what is marginalized and denigrated in the discursive construction of religion, albeit often without much overt contention, and extends legitimacy to forms of religiosity that are officially regarded as heterodoxy.

Fourth, overall *Southern Weekend* shows a stronger trend toward desecularization vis-à-vis the *People's Daily*, especially in the 2000s when representation of desecularization increases in both absolute number and relative percentage. In the 1980s and 90s, the percentage of the yearly articles on religion that use the secularization discourse is greater in *Southern Weekend* than in the *People's Daily*, indicating a strong tendency on the part of *Southern Weekend* to act as a mouthpiece media, as far as representation of religion is concerned. In the new century, *Southern Weekend* virtually abandons the militant-atheistic secularization discourse, and greatly diminishes the enlightenment-atheistic secularization discourse, while the modernizing secularization discourse remains largely at the same level as the previous decades, and deprivatizing desecularization is used on an increasing number of articles. The same pattern largely applies to both the China-related and international subsets. It is clear that in the new millennium *Southern Weekend* divests itself of the mouthpiece role and uses a much-enlarged

vocabulary in the representation of religion that are divorced from political and ideological pedagogy.

Fifth, although *Southern Weekend* is renowned for its watchdog role and its *yulun jiandu* journalist practices, it does not seem to act it out on coverage of religion very much, given the small number of *yulun jiandu* articles I identified among the Buddhism articles. However, close reading of these articles indicate that *Southern Weekend* is audacious enough to break into territories that in the *People's Daily* is either off the limits of the circumscribed area or obscured. Rather than simplistic portrayal, *Southern Weekend's* news reports and commentaries target the complex relationship between religion and secular forces such as the party-state and the enterprising market and disclose what goes amiss and awry in the process of desecularizing religion. These articles assume the value of religion and desecularization and are discursively constructed in a way that free them from atheistic and other ideological implications.

My research on the *Southern Weekend* bears several limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, the gap the missing years of 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002 have produced in the analysis is obvious. While it does not make the analyses based on the available data invalid, filling the gap would surely help complete the trends identified in this chapter.

Second, to keep my current project under a manageable scope, I limited my analysis of *yulun jiandu* journalism to Buddhism articles. It would be interesting to examine this type of investigative journalism on articles of other religions and religiosities and identify the similarities and differences in the coverage. As religion as a whole remains a sensitive topic and different religions tend to be treated differently in the oligopolistic political economy, studying the *yulun jiandu* journalism on various religions in *Southern Weekend* could shed further light on both the range and limitations of its journalistic venture.

## **CHAPTER 5. RELIGIOUS OLIGOPOLY IN THE SYMBOLIC REALM: REPRESENTATION OF BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN OFFICIAL CHINESE NEWSPAPER 1978-2011**

### **5.1 Abstract**

The previous two chapters provide portrayals of how official and commercialized newspapers represent atheism and various religions and religiosities in reform-era China in light of the theoretical framework of secularization vs. desecularization. Through analyzing media products, they shed light on the construction, maintenance and contestation of the symbolic boundaries surrounding atheism and religion by social actors differently positioned in the political economy of contemporary China who actively respond to the party-state, the market, consumers, and the journalistic profession. In this chapter, I zoom in on the official newspaper, the *People's Daily*, and through content analysis of the frames used in Buddhism and Christianity articles published from 1978 to 2011, I find differential treatment exists between representations of these two religions. Chinese Buddhism tends to be portrayed in more positive frames, culturalized, depoliticized, and made a vehicle for the expansion of economic cooperation between China and other Asian countries. Christianity is heavily politicized. In international articles Christianity appears frequently in frames of conflicts, war and intolerance; in domestic coverage it is connected to Western imperialism and subversive enemy forces. Tibetan Buddhism coverage uses both strongly positive and negative frames. I argue that via its mouthpiece media the Chinese party-state metes out differential treatment of Buddhism and Christianity in the realm of symbolic representation, which can be best understood as a manifestation in the cultural sphere of the religious oligopolistic structure the party-state institutes.

## 5.2 Introduction

Representation of religion in the media has attracted more and more scholarly attention in Western academia in the past two decades (e.g. Buddenbaum 1998, 2002; Hoover and Lundby 1997; Haskell 2007; Morgan 2013; Stout and Buddenbaum 2003). Adopting the constructionist perspective in assuming that discrepancy necessarily exists between religion as social reality and its representation in the media, academic research has examined this particular relationship from many angles that have enriched our knowledge and understanding of how the media works and its social and political impacts through affecting the audiences. The origination of this study is inspired and informed by three major aspects of research in this area. First, research has revealed how the tension between media as a secular institution and religion manifests itself in media representation of religion and reflected on the role media plays in the process of secularization (Hart et al. 1981; Haskell 2007; Olasky 1990; Silk 1995). Second, some studies have shown how marginalized religion is represented by the media, often in comparison to media portrayal of mainstream religion, to disclose media biases and possibly societal prejudices against the marginalized religion (Chen 2003; Dahinden et al. 2002; Ibrahim 2010; Stout and Buddenbaum 2003). Third, some research has unraveled the dynamics between the state, media and religion. For instance, in countries where the separation of church and state is barely observed, the media often produces religion news that promotes the religion closely linked to state power, relegating other religions to the status of “heresies” (Bantimarioudis 2007).

Inspired by these lines of research, this study explores how the official media of China, a country helmed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that embraces Marxist atheism for its official ideology, has represented religion in the reform era. As religion has been expanding rapidly in reform-era China (Ji 2011), the investigation of the portrayals of religion by official media constitutes a timely effort to reflect on the relationship between state, media and religion.

To date, few studies have systematically studied this important relationship in contemporary China. This study fills the gap.

Specifically, this study builds on the theory of religious oligopoly (Yang 2007, 2010) and examines how the *People's Daily*, the most important mouthpiece of the CCP, has represented Buddhism and Christianity since the launch of the reform and open-up policy in 1978<sup>40</sup>. I choose to compare and contrast Christianity and Buddhism because they are the two fastest growing religions in China today and have become the top-two largest religions (Yang 2014). Moreover, they provide the contrast more sharply than other religions.

This study makes three additional contributions. First, it is the first attempt to systematically identify frames used in official Chinese media in religion coverage over the past three decades. The identification of patterns and trends of framing helps address the question of how the CCP's espousal of atheist ideology interplays with its official recognition of institutional religions in the symbolic realm. That is, how it uses the official media to generate both secularizing and desecularizing discourses that craftly delineate around each religion the symbolic boundaries, which they often share to contrasting degrees. I point out that the demarcation is reflective of the party-state's wariness and fears, pragmatic calibration, and atheistic commitment. Second, this study provides a glimpse into the discursive environment that religions in China are enthralled and impelled to maneuver in so as to gain an edge in the competition for religious market share. As the differential treatment of Buddhism and Christianity by official Chinese media clearly demonstrates favoring the former over the latter, it puts Christianity at a relatively disadvantaged position in the cultural sphere. However, I argue

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<sup>40</sup> The "reform and opening-up era" refers to the time starting in late 1978 when political, economic and legal reforms were officially launched at the Third Plenary Session of the CCP 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in Mainland China. The Party-state rerouted its attention from class struggle to economic marketization, scientific and technological modernization, and opening to the outside world.

that both discriminatory and favoritist framing can be constrictive, denying religious adherents the chance to voice their own thoughts and ideas. Third, I argue that differential treatment of religions in the official newspaper's representation constitutes an important manifestation in the cultural sphere the religious oligopolistic dynamics in reform-era China. The findings of this study substantiate the theory of religious oligopoly and augment the debate over pluralism in the field of the sociology of religion.

### **5.3 Religion in China: Religious Oligopoly**

According to Yang (2010, 2012), the state-religion relationship in China today is best described as neither a religious monopoly (i.e. one religion is dominant and all others are banned by the state) nor pluralism (i.e. the state treats all religions equally and religions compete in a free religious market), but religious oligopoly (i.e. the state allows a few religions legal status while banning others). The two key components in Yang's typology are the presence or absence of government regulation and of competition among religious firms in the religious market. In the Chinese religious oligopoly, the party-state grants approval to five major religions, namely Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity (Protestantism), Catholicism and Islam, despite the fact that most of the world's major religions have found followers in China (Qu 2011). It stipulates and enforces tight regulations over the religious affairs of these five religions through a large array of governmental control apparatus (Kindopp 2004; Potter 2003). While the five official religions compete with one another to attract more believers, their competition is not on a level playing field because the party-state metes out unequal treatment to the five religions (Yang 2007, 2010).

Scholars have observed that the Chinese government has bestowed favoritism to traditional Chinese religions such as Buddhism and Daoism, giving political support and administrative greenlight more readily to their monastery expansion and religious growth

(Johnson 2017; Yang 2007, 2010). Multiple reasons are enlisted to account for the state's favoritism toward Buddhism. First, official historiography often narrates Chinese Buddhism<sup>41</sup> into a model case of successful assimilation to Chinese society. Its purportedly apolitical stance toward worldly affairs is most appealing to the authorities who believe Buddhism poses minimal threat to CCP's rule and social stability. Second, local governments have taken Chinese Buddhism as valuable economic resources that attract voluminous tourists and foreign investments, bringing in handsome revenues (Fisher 2008; Ji 2004, 2011; Laliberté 2011). Third, the central government has calibrated on its political usefulness in facilitating diplomatic relations with those Asian countries that have large Buddhist constituencies, as well as with Taiwan and Hong Kong (Laliberté 2011).

By contrast, the party-state tends to impose restrictions more stringently on Christianity.<sup>42</sup> Official discourse often reminisces Christianity's historical link to Western colonialism and imperialism with indignation, and is quick to warn of its current connection to "overseas enemy forces" which are believed to harbor "insidious intensions" to challenge and subvert CCP's leadership (Chan 2004; Spiegel 2007; Yang 2007). Such suspicion and weariness often devolve into paranoia that prompts the government's actions that clearly undermine the pro-reform principle of economic pragmatism, as epitomized by instances of revocation of the business

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<sup>41</sup> Buddhism probably first arrived in China in the third century BC from India. Over time it evolved into various distinct religious forms—shaped by both internal dynamics and external social forces such as governmental policies, elite patronage and popular religious demands—and disseminated widely into the social and cultural life of Chinese society. Buddhism in today's China is commonly categorized into three ethnicized sects: Han Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Theravāda Buddhism. Han Chinese Buddhism is most influential in China proper, especially in Southeast China. It claims the largest number of followers and monastic endowment compared to other religions in China. Tibetan Buddhism find ethnic followers in Tibet and Qinghai provinces, as well as parts of Inner Mongolia, Gansu, and Sichuan provinces. Theravāda Buddhism is mainly practiced in the Sipsongpannā region of Yunnan province in southwest China among the Dai-lue ethnic group.

<sup>42</sup> The time of Christianity's first entry to China is still open to debate. Verifiable evidence indicates that between the seventh and sixteenth century Christian missions to China had little success in proselytizing the Chinese. Christianity did not take roots in the Chinese soil until after the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It has become the second largest religion in China in terms of the size of its membership.

licenses of overseas Christian investors in China and freezing their assets on charges of conducting illegal religious activities (i.e. proselytizing, praying, and Bible studies, etc.) in their firms (Tong 2013). As the party-state has downplayed Marxist ideology and embraced nationalism instead for its legitimacy claims, it has shown greater tolerance for traditional religions, Buddhism included, in a strategic attempt to curb the rapid expansion of Christianity (Goossaert and Palmer 2011).

The relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and the Chinese state today is paradoxical, to use Schell's word (1998: ix). In the Chinese religious oligopoly, Tibetan Buddhism seems to bear similarities to both Chinese Buddhism and Christianity, as the party-state oscillates between loosening up regulations and extending favoritism to Tibetan Buddhism at some times and tightening down on control at others (Kapstein 2004). On the one hand, acknowledging that Tibetan Buddhism is a defining feature of Tibetan people's national identity and pride, the Chinese state has shown cautious willingness to allow more autonomy for Tibetans and supply increased funds for developing Tibetan Buddhism, hoping to win the heart of Tibetans (Kapstein 2004; Goldstein 2004) and deflect charges of human rights violations from the international communities (Tuttle 2005). On the other hand, when religious revival has reached a point where it has fueled the pro-independence activism among Tibetans in nationalistic opposition to Chinese rule in Tibet, the Chinese state has tightened control over Tibetan Buddhism (Goldstein 2004; Han 2013).

As religious firms in China often need to compete for the government's favor in order to survive and grow (Yang 2007), the party-state's unequal treatment of the religions means they are not competing on an equal footing. The official media's differential representation of Buddhism and Christianity is best understood as a manifestation of the cultural arrangement in



the realm of symbolic representation that reinforces the political and legal arrangements of religious oligopoly instituted by the regulatory party-state. Although both religions are predominantly represented by the deprivatizing desecularization discourse, the frames that are differentially used on Buddhism and Christianity demarcate the symbolic boundaries of what the party-state posits the two religions to be and not to be. The differential use of positive and negative frames constructs a desecularization discourse that is particularly crafted to give the feeling that Buddhism is a better religion than Christianity. One of the potent consequences of the construction of oligopolistic symbolic boundaries is that through channeling how the general public thinks of the two religions along the boundary lines delineated by the official media, it abets social regulation<sup>43</sup> of similar patterns, fostering social norms and the culture at large to be friendly to traditional Chinese religions and ill-disposed at best and hostile at worst to Christian religions. Lack of equal treatment by the state via the official media can amount to deprivation of the right to self-representation and determination for some religions and impedes the development of authentic pluralism.

## 5.4 Data and Methods

### 5.4.1 Data

The *People's Daily* database covers all articles published from 1978 to 2011. The database offers full search functionality. Key word search was conducted. The term *fojiao* (Buddhism) identified 3,311 articles; the term *jidujiao* (Christianity)<sup>44</sup> yielded 2,828 articles. Preliminary coding determined that 3,195 (96.5%) Buddhism articles and 1,663 (58.9%)

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<sup>43</sup> According to Grim and Finke (2006: 8), social regulation refers to “the restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion by other religious groups, associations, or the culture at large.”

<sup>44</sup> The Chinese term “jidujiao” is used to refer to both the denomination of Protestantism and Christianity as an umbrella term for all Christian persuasions. A handful of articles that use this term to denote Catholicism are excluded from analysis in this paper.

Christianity articles were substantively about these two religions and thus included in the data analysis. Excluded were 62 (1.9%) Buddhism articles and 90 (3.2%) Christianity articles that focused on either religion in general or other religions, as well as 54 (1.6%) articles that were irrelevant to Buddhism. Also excluded were 1,075 (38.0%) Christianity articles where *jidujiao* appeared only in proper nouns such as names of a newspaper or a university in articles that otherwise had nothing to do with Christianity.

#### 5.4.2 Coding Instruments

Following the coding method specified in Chapter 1, I coded each article for the such attributes as publication date, relevance, about (China, international), tones (positive, negative, neutral, mixed), and secularization (militant atheistic, enlightenment atheistic, modernizing) vs. desecularization (deprivatizing, theocratic). Based on the coding schemes for positive and negative tones listed in Chapter One, I categorized them into seven positive frames and five negative frames.

*Frames:* The articles that contain positive and/or negative undertones are further coded into frames. As is seen in Table 5.1, seven positive frames are identified: religion as culture frame; supporting the CCP frame; religious development frame; frame of social services, spiritual/moral provision and values; frame of religion contributing to a just cause or development of other institutions; frame of pluralism and common cultural origin; frame of universality.

The five negative frames are: frame of religion being a factor in war, violence and intolerance; frame of atheistic impugment; frame of being averse to CCP's rule and meddling in politics; frame of religion being inferior to secularism or secular Chinese culture; frame of criminality

Table 5.1. Coding Instruments

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Coding Categories</b>	<b>Descriptions</b>
General Topical Areas	China-related	The article talked about Christianity in China or Buddhism in China proper.
	Tibetan	The article talked about Tibetan Buddhism.
	International	The article talked about Christianity/Buddhism in countries other than China.
Evaluative Undertones	Positive	Expressed sympathy, approval or support toward the religion represented; indicates appreciation.
	Negative	Expressed criticism, blame or disapproval toward the religion reported.
	Neutral	Plainly stated the facts; showed no demonstrable attitude.
Positive Frames	Religion as culture	Associated religion with culture
	Supporting CCP	Expressed appreciation and support for the government and its policies that may or may not have to do with religion.
	Religious development	Expressed affirmative attitude toward events such as cross-national or cross-Taiwan-strait religious exchanges, publication of religious books and magazines, expansion or renovation of religious venues, and decennial celebration of the Three-Self Movement, etc.
	Social services, spiritual/moral provision and values	Considered a religion the source of morality, values, spirituality and wisdom; commended a religion's involvement in rituals, social services and charitable work.
	Contributing to a just cause or development of other institutions	Commended a religion's active role in pursuing social or political justices (e.g. promoting world peace, nuclear disarmament; fight against apartheid, colonialism, fascism, etc.), or in the development of institutions that benefit humanity (e.g. modern medicine, modern sports, music theater, art, painting, etc.).
	Pluralism and common cultural origin	Commended religious diversity and the benefits of shared religious tradition.
	Universality	Commended universal values such as love, compassion, and tolerance, etc. found in religions.
Negative Frames	A factor in war, violence and intolerance	Reported religion's involvement in war and conflicts, or persecutions out of intolerance.

Table 5.1. continued

Negative Frames	Atheistic impugment	Denounced religion in Marxist atheist terminologies (e.g. opium of the people, delusion, instruments of exploitation, etc.)
	Averse to CCP's rule	Denounced a religion's defiance of the CCP's rule, intention to infiltrate China; criticized a religion's political involvement.
	Inferior to secularism or Chinese secular culture	Criticized a religion for declining, or losing out to Chinese secular culture, especially Confucianism.
	Criminality	Religious individuals or organizations committed crimes such as embezzlement, human trafficking or subversion of the state.

In the event that multiple positive or negative frames were used in one article, the most prominent frame was selected. When an article contained both negative and positive undertones, the most salient positive frame and negative frame were selected

## 5.5 Results

### 5.5.1 Articles by General Topical Areas

China-related articles (1,888, 59.1%) dominate Buddhism coverage; only 410 articles (12.8%) are about Buddhism in other countries. By contrast, most of the Christianity articles (1,113, 66.9%) are about the religion in other countries, with the remaining 550 articles (33.1%) related to China. Over time, domestic coverage has been consistently greater in number for Buddhism than for Christianity, as is seen in Figure 5.1. Extensive coverage of the Lebanese

Table 5.2. General Topical Areas: Buddhism vs. Christianity (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

General Topical Areas				
	China-related	Tibetan	International	Total
Buddhism	1,888 (59.1%)	897 (28.1%)	410 (12.8%)	3,195 (100%)
Christianity	550 (33.1%)	--	1,113 (66.9%)	1,663 (100%)

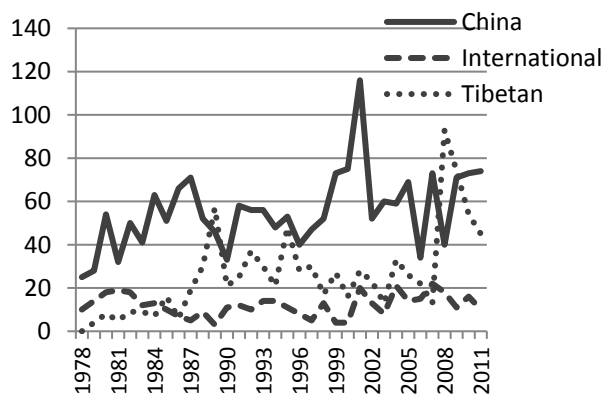


Figure 5.1A. Buddhism

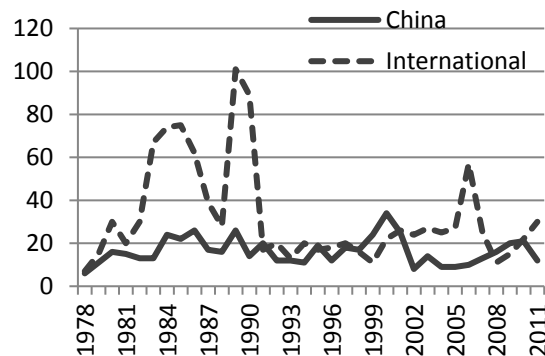


Figure 5.1B. Christianity

Figure 5.1. Articles of Buddhism and Christianity over Time by Topical Areas

Civil War (1975-1990), which often refers to the rivaling forces by their religious affiliations, accounts for the majority of international articles on Christianity prior to the early 1990s. These contrasting numbers and patterns suggest that the official Chinese media work, through varying extent of coverage, to project the image that Buddhism is more important to the Chinese than Christianity and that Christianity exerts significant influence in some other countries. While this image certainly has bearing on reality, it may nonetheless reinforce the alienating position which insists on Christianity's unassimilable and problematic foreignness.

Notably, 897 articles (28.1%) are about Tibetan Buddhism, surpassing both the quantity of international articles on Buddhism and China-related Christianity articles. Given that only about 5.5 million ethnic Tibetans, or less than 0.5% of the Chinese population, reside in the minority autonomous regions of southwestern China (based on 2000 census data, Ma 2010), the political importance of the "Tibetan problem" drives official Chinese media to give disproportionate coverage of Tibetan Buddhism.

### **5.5.2 Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends: Buddhism vs. Christianity**

Figure 5.2 and Figure 5.3 show that in the representation of both Buddhism and Christianity, the deprivatizing desecularization discourse predominates over the time under study. For Buddhism, the deprivatizing desecularization line indicates a moderate upward trend, albeit with a great number of fluctuations. Modernizing secularization line shows minimum activity in most of the years, except for a minor spike in 1995 when it reaches over 20 and another spike in 2008 when it reaches 40 but goes down to below 20 in 2009. The spike in the modernizing secularization line in 1995 is caused by an increased number of articles reporting and reacting to the news of the Dalai Lama's declaration of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama and applying the negative frame of "averse to the CCP's rule." The Dalai Lama's

action is denounced as an “insidious political plot to sabotage national unity, ethnic solidarity and social stability.”<sup>45</sup> Calls are made for the Dalai Lama to immediately terminate his plot and stop meddling in matters that are in the charge of the Chinese party-state. The spike in the modernizing secularization line in 2008 registers the increased use of the same negative frame of “averse to CCP’s rule” in the coverage of the violent protests that started in the regional capital of Lhasa. The official media accused the Dalai Lama of orchestrating the unrest and instigating the protesters to demand Tibetan independence, although the latter denied it. In effects, these articles often differentiate religious groups that demand greater self-determination and autonomy from those that are loyal to the party-state and obedient to its rule. In the media representation, the latter are represented in positive frames supporting the CCP, whereas the former are said to need to be secularized, not in the atheistic sense which would entail negating Tibetan Buddhism as a whole, but rather in the modernizing sense which pushes for keeping religion from meddling in the political affairs of the state.

For the Christianity articles, the deprivatizing desecularization line is especially prominent in the 1980s. It is the result of framing the coverage of the Lebanese Civil War negatively as contributing to war and violence. This negative frame is included as part of the deprivatizing desecularization discourse because news and commentaries using this frame neither argue for using the atheistic secularization measures to impair and eventually eliminate religion, nor advocate the modernizing secularization position of leaving religion out of politics and instituting the separation of church and state. Rather, this frame stresses the fact that all

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<sup>45</sup> Shoudu zongjiaojie renshi zuotan zhichu, dalai shanli banchan lingtong yizai fenlie zuguo (Religious leaders point it out at a meeting in the Capital City of Beijing that behind the Dalai Lama’s unauthorized declaration of the Panchen Lama lies the intention to split the mother land), Liu Zhenying & Suo Yan, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), May 20, 1995, 1.

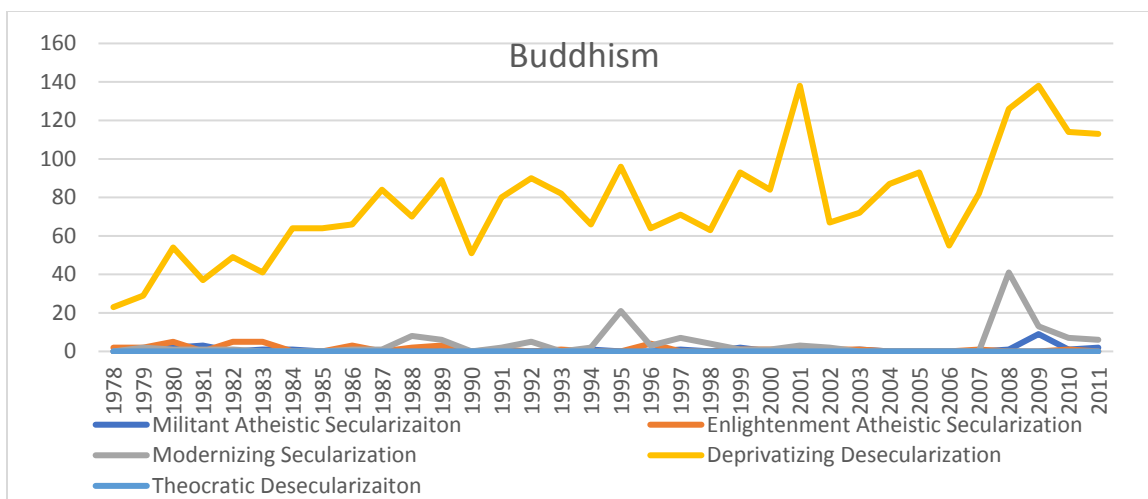


Figure 5.2. Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends: Buddhism (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

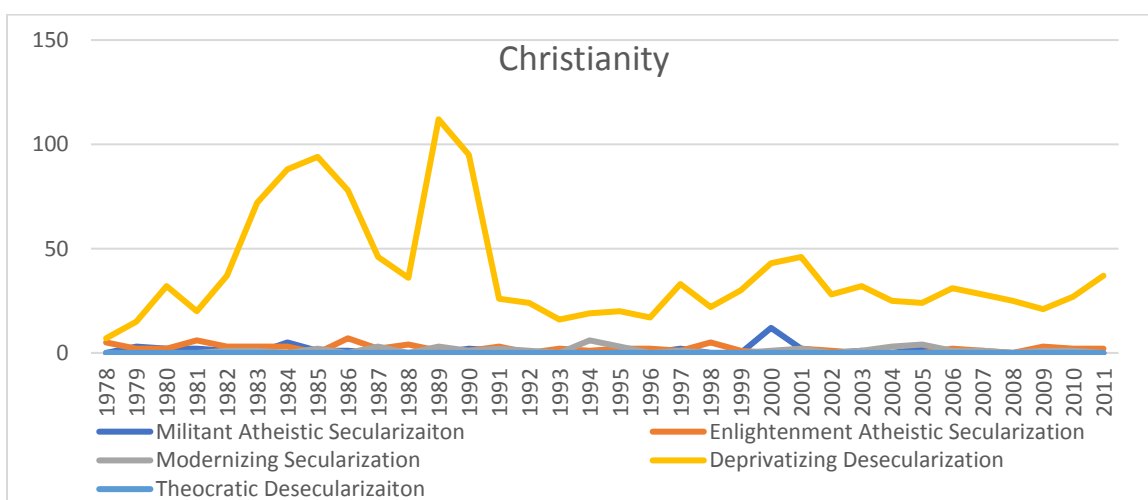


Figure 5.3. Secularization vs. Desecularization Trends: Christianity (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)

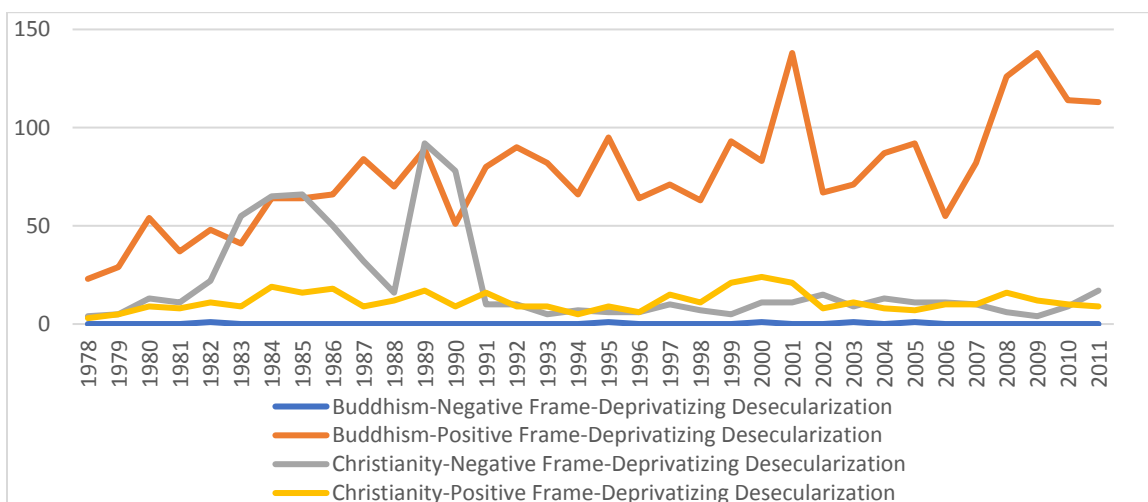


Figure 5.4. Positive vs. Negative Frames in Deprivatizing Desecularization Trend: Buddhism vs. Christianity (*People's Daily* 1978-2011)



religions value peace and all religious people long for peace, a universal value that does not deny the ontological status of the supernatural. Figure 5.4 further pinpoints the composition of the deprivatizing desecularization lines of Buddhism and Christianity by differentiating between positive frames and negative frames. The negative frames line on Buddhism barely has any activity, whereas the corresponding line on Christianity has heightened levels of activity in the 1980s but drops to a level that is relatively the same as the positive frames line on Christianity.

Although both Buddhism and Christianity are predominantly represented in the deprivatizing desecularization discourse. However, closer examination reveals that positive and negative frames are applied to the two religions differently. In what follows, I zoom in on the use of frames in the representation of these two religions to show the official media circumscribes the desecularization discourse in particular ways so that Buddhism is favored over Christianity.

### **5.5.3 Tonal Use in Representation: Buddhism vs. Christianity**

As is seen in Table 5.3, 86.5% of Buddhism articles are positive, comparing to less than 34% of Christianity articles. Conversely, only about 2% of Buddhism articles are negative; by sharp contrast, nearly 49% of Christianity articles are negative. Breaking it down by topical areas, we see that positive representation constitutes the great majority of domestic coverage, with 1,707 of Chinese Buddhism reports, 722 of Tibetan Buddhism articles, and 369 of China-related Christianity reports containing a positive tone. With 715 (43.0%) articles, negative representation finds a strong presence among international reports on Christianity. On the one hand, these patterns tend to reflect the official media guideline in general, and on religion in particular, which stresses representing what happens inside China in positive light and leaving negative reports to international news. On the other hand, much stronger negativity found in the coverage of Christianity than Buddhism in both domestic and international coverage suggest bias

Table 5.3. Evaluative Undertones of News Reports: Buddhism vs. Christianity

	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Both</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Buddhism</b>					
China-related	1,707 (53.4%)	37 (1.2%)	122 (3.8%)	22 (0.7%)	1,888 (59.1%)
International	333 (10.4%)	9 (0.3%)	65 (2.0%)	3 (0.1%)	410 (12.8%)
Tibetan	722 (22.6%)	15 (0.5%)	22 (0.7%)	138 (4.3%)	897 (28.1%)
Total	2,763 (86.5%)	61 (1.9%)	209 (6.5%)	162 (5.1%)	3,195 (100.0%)
<b>Christianity</b>					
China-related	369 (22.2%)	93 (5.6%)	65 (3.9%)	23 (1.4%)	550 (33.1%)
International	193 (11.6%)	715 (43.0%)	187 (11.2%)	18 (1.1%)	1,113 (66.9%)
Total	562 (33.8%)	808 (48.6%)	252 (15.2%)	41 (2.5%)	1,663 (100.0%)

†Cell percentages are reported in the parentheses.

against the former in official Chinese media.

Zooming in on the long-term trend, we can detect a slight upward trend over time in the numbers of Tibetan Buddhism, albeit with a large amount of fluctuation (Figure 5.1A). Figure 5.5C shows that the positive representation line largely coincides with the overall line of Tibetan Buddhism representation, where we also see a slight upward trend over time.

With regard to China-related Buddhism articles, the solid line in Figure 5.5A has a peak around the turn of the twenty-first century. Other than this peak, the line does not show any detectable trend. Figure 5.5A also show that the line indicating positive representation of Chinese Buddhism articles almost coincides with the overall line of China-related Han Buddhism. We can say there is no clear trend in the positive representation on domestic Han Buddhism. Figure 5.5B and Figure 5.5C indicate that there is no clear trend of either increase or decrease in positive representation—the dominant tone used—among the China-related Christianity data and the Tibetan Buddhism data.

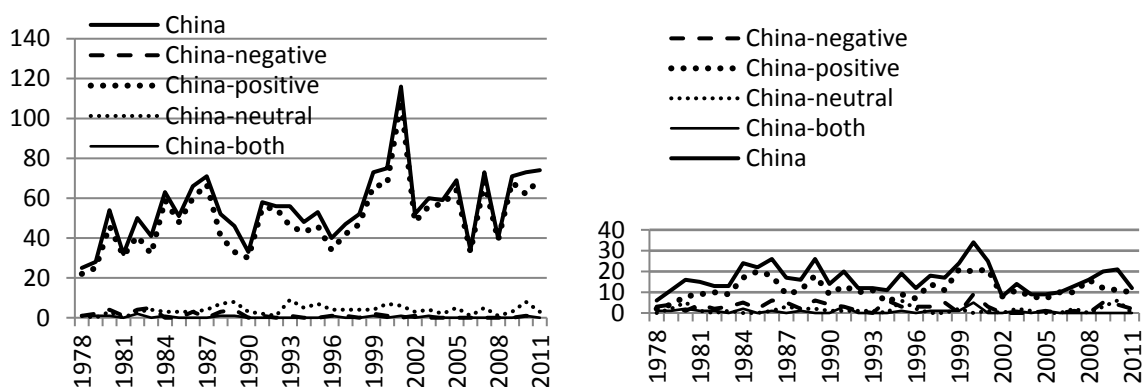


Figure 5.5A. China-Related Han Buddhism    Figure 5.5B. China-Related Christianity

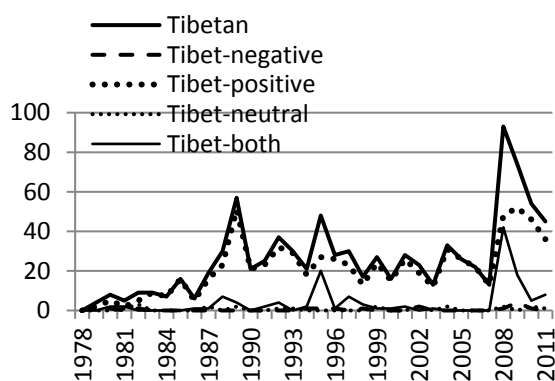


Figure 5.5C. Tibetan Buddhism

Figure 5.5. Tonal Use over Time: China-related Buddhism vs. Christianity

## 5.5.4 Positive Frames

### *Religion as Culture Frame*

Articles categorized into the “religion as culture” frame contain expressions that associate religion with culture<sup>46</sup>. As is shown in Table his frame is the most prominent positive frame used among Chinese Buddhism reports (966, 30.2%). One remarkable feature among many of these articles is the high level of abstraction used in the representation of Chinese Buddhism vis-a-vis

<sup>46</sup> In the context of official Chinese media, the term “culture” (*wenhua*) has strong positive connotations. A term like “culture of violence” would be an oxymoron.

culture. Repeatedly Buddhism is said to have gradually assimilated into Chinese culture over the millennia, despite its origin in India, and made positive impact on various aspects of Chinese culture such as art, poetry, music, philosophy, and even the Chinese language, etc.; Buddhism is said to have developed into several distinct schools of thought through absorbing indigenous Chinese culture and religion. The terminologies used are so high-flown that readers are left inadequately informed about what were the enabling historical factors that made the mutual fertilization between Buddhism and its host culture happen and how beliefs, ideas and practices evolved and diffused among the Chinese populace over time. Without discussions of the concrete historical processes of power struggles, symbolic contestations, resource mobilization, and mass dissemination, etc. which cultural assimilation inevitably entails, catchphrases such as “Buddhism has fully assimilated into Chinese culture,” “Buddhism, together with Confucianism and Daoism, forms the three pillars of Chinese culture,” and “Buddhism has made profound impact on Chinese culture” reinforce one another to decontextualize Buddhism and naturalize the idea that Buddhism has become an integral part of the Chinese national culture.

When an article does provide something concrete, Chinese Buddhism is mostly valued as being part of material culture, rather than spiritual culture. Events at major Buddhist historical sites and important archeological discoveries receive extensive coverage with detailed descriptions of Buddhist artifacts, architecture, sculptures, mural, and archeological finds, etc. The articles often use elaborate language to express marvelment at the grandeur, vividness and artistic precision of the artifacts, admiration for the outstanding ingenuity and craftsmanship of the cultural predecessors who created them, and appreciation for how much they have enriched national art history and culture. Buddhist artifacts are also commended because they are useful for the study of the historical development of science, technology, culture, art and architecture of

a society. Buddhism represented as material culture, drained of religious and spiritual meanings, becomes objectified and museumized mainly to entertain the spectator's senses, satisfy their intellectual curiosity, invoke the imagining of the nation, and boost national pride.

The incorporation of Buddhism into the tourism industry packages Buddhism just like that. As many as 233 articles represent Chinese Buddhism as an important resource for cultural tourism.

In some of these reports, local Chinese governments turning Buddhist sites into successful tourist attractions are praised for their business acumen; religious activities such as monks chanting sutras, prayer meetings, and Buddhist music events, etc. are reported approvingly as effective business gimmicks to lure more visitors. The cultural tourism economy seems to have such a big leveling effect that ideologically heterogeneous elements were juxtaposed, apparently without unease. Sightseeing tours of communist revolutionary sites, as well as science and technology tours, are promoted together with Buddhist pilgrimage tours (e.g. February 1, 1995<sup>47</sup>; September 1, 2000<sup>48</sup>). No reports of discontents from Buddhist practitioners, clergy and laity alike, are found. Indeed, very little voice from Buddhists is allowed in these articles, except for a few rare cases where Buddhist monks are reported to be happy that they can contribute to the construction of the socialist economy and be part of the grand nation-building project, presumably by lending support to the commercialization and commodification of their religion.

In 71 articles Chinese Buddhism is portrayed as a cultural liaison between China and other Asian countries such as Nepal, Thailand, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia, especially Japan and India. These articles often reminisce fondly the eastbound trips to Japan by

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<sup>47</sup> Jiangxi tuichu duoxiang lvyou huodong (Jiangxi Province has rolled out multiple tourist activities), Wu Huaguo & Han Huilan, Renmin ribao (*People's Daily*), February 1, 1995, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Disanjie Beijing guoji lvyou wenhuajie: Beijing tui xinxian, yaoni wangegou (Third Beijing International Tourist Culture Festival: Beijing has rolled out new tourist lines, inviting you to have a great time), Renmin ribao (*People's Daily*), September 1, 2000.

the High Monk Jianzhen of Tang Dynasty and westbound travels to India by the prominent Monk Xuanzhang of Tang Dynasty and Monk Faxian of Eastern Jin Dynasty, lauding them as pioneering “cultural ambassadors” who brought the peoples together into a strong and long-lasting bond of friendship. The narratives tend to downplay their contributions to the development and dissemination of Buddhism. Instead, they accentuate the roles these historical figures played in the development of other cultural arenas.

Over half of international articles on Buddhism (213, 6.7%) also use the “religion as culture” frame. Representation of Buddhism in Japan, Thailand, South Korea and other Asian countries largely follow the same lines of framing as Chinese Buddhism. The “religion as culture” frame is the second most frequently used frame among Tibetan Buddhism articles (192, 6.0%). One distinguishing feature is that Tibetan Buddhism is represented as the defining feature of a unique ethnic culture, “a shiny jewel in the treasury of ethnic cultures of China.” Unlike Chinese Buddhism, no narrative of cultural assimilation is applied to Tibetan Buddhism.

By contrast, only 129 (7.8%) Christianity articles use the “religion as culture” frame, and 48 (2.9%) of them are reports about China. Christianity is excluded from representing the Chinese national culture—not a single article makes a positive connection between the two. Only three articles mention in passing Christianity in relation to material culture. As few as two articles acknowledge that foreign missionaries made contributions to Sino-Western cross-cultural communication. However, Christian missionaries are never elevated to the same level of cultural significance as their Buddhist counterparts.

Eighty-two articles report on Christianity in other countries. Christian culture tend to be associated with the West as a civilizational block mainly consisted of Europe and the United States, rather than the national culture of individual countries. Nine out of 11 articles on

Christian tourism are about places in the Middle East (Bethlehem, Yafa of Israel, Maaloula of Syria, Cappadocia of Turkey) where many of the holy sites of Christianity are found. These sites are represented more for their historical significance than for artistic achievements. The religious origins of those places, often based on stories from the Bible, and the historical vicissitudes they have experienced are sketched to elicit wonderment at history itself. The language used is often much less flowery, more sober and restrained than it is in Buddhism articles.

### ***Frame of Supporting the Government***

Articles grouped into this frame contain expressions that demonstrate appreciation for and support of the government and its policies that may or may not have to do with religion. Falling into this category are 789 (24.7%) Buddhism articles, including 301 on Chinese Buddhism and 464 on Tibetan Buddhism, and 159 (9.6%) Christianity reports, with 150 on China and 9 on other countries.

In China-related Buddhism and Christianity articles alike, the frame of supporting the CCP is constructed with catchphrases and ideological slogans that shower praises on the party-state's religion policies and the progresses the Chinese government has reportedly made in religion work. In reporting on important official events related to religion, speeches delivered by top government officials are recapitulated, formulaically calling on Chinese religious believers to embrace the CCP's leadership, adhere to socialism, strengthen patriotic feelings, comply with policies and laws, and actively devote themselves to the construction of socialist China, etc.

Chinese Buddhist and Christian circles are reported to proclaim support for the government in matters that may or may not have to do with their respective religions. For instance, Chinese Buddhist and Christian leaders are said to have joined hands in protesting NATO's bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade (1999) and denouncing Pope John Paul II's

canonizations of 120 Roman Catholics killed in China as martyrs (2000), etc., ostentatiously playing the ventriloquist's dummy the party-state makes them into.

The number of articles on Tibetan Buddhism that use the frame of supporting the CCP surpasses that of Chinese Buddhism by over 50%. In these reports the Chinese party-state is often praised for having made tireless efforts to fortify the solidarity among ethnic groups through integrating ethnic minority and religious patriots into the larger Chinese family. Gratitude toward the CCP's leadership and guidance is expressed frequently. Notably, the great majority of articles using both negative and positive frames are reports of Tibetan Buddhism employing this particular positive frame (124 out of 163 articles). Among these 124 articles 104 also use the negative frame of "being averse to CCP's rule." These articles put Tibetan Buddhist adherents in two contrasting positions, those that are for the government and those against it, and stress the stand that the Chinese government and the Chinese people would not tolerate separatist attempt to break up the motherland and to sabotage the solidarity among ethnic groups.

Seventeen articles on Tibetan Buddhism using the frame of supporting the CCP also deploy the "atheistic impugment" negative frame. These articles tend to follow a historiography that contrasts the present-day Tibet to the "dark age" before 1951 when the Chinese army "liberated" Tibet. The dark age is characterized as a time when Tibetan people were oppressed and exploited under a ruthless theocracy and led a wretched, fettered life. The present is described as having seen drastic improvements in all aspects of life in Tibet—religious freedom being one of them—thanks to the CCP's leadership.

### ***Religious Development Frame***

Articles using this frame demonstrate an affirmative attitude toward religious development of various sorts, including cross-national or cross-strait religious exchanges,



publication of religious magazines, establishment or expansion of religious venues, and decennial celebration of the Three-Self Movement, etc. What distinguishes this frame from the “supporting the CCP” frame is that the narrative emphasis tends to be placed on religion itself, rather than the government and its policies.

The religious development frame is found in 252 (7.9%) reports on Chinese Buddhism and 139 (5.3%) on Tibetan Buddhism. Together with 24 (0.8%) international Buddhist reports, a total of 415 (13.0%) articles falls into this category. Reports of foreign Buddhist delegations visiting China and being received by Chinese top officials or vice versa readily acknowledge the historical friendship that Chinese Buddhism has helped establish between China and the other countries. Buddhism is often said to have mediated relationship and facilitated cooperation in political, social, economic and cultural arenas between peoples and countries.

In Tibetan Buddhism coverage, news reports on the renovation of renowned monasteries, publication of important scriptures, consecration ceremonies, and annual Lhasa prayer meetings in commemoration of the Buddha, etc. are proudly presented, often with a brief note specifying how much money and manpower the Chinese government generously injected into these projects in an effort to preserve and pay homage to Tibetan Buddhist customs and traditions.

Of the 77 (4.6%) Christianity articles that use religious development frame, 70 (4.2%) are related to China. Most of the articles of cross-national Christian exchanges are very succinct. Some of them give lukewarm acknowledgement of the significance of such exchanges as “hopefully help advance the mutual understanding of the two countries.” For the desired outcome of Christian exchanges strengthening friendship is secondary to understanding the Chinese government’s religious policies.

### ***Frame of Social Services, Moral Foundation, Values***

A report is coded as using this frame if it considers a religion the source of morality, values, spirituality and wisdom, or commends its involvement in rituals, social services and charitable work. Much more Buddhism articles (217, 6.8%) fall into this frame than Christianity articles (67, 4.0%).

Chinese Buddhism (70) is more likely than Christianity (15 China-related) to be represented as engaging in social service and charitable works. Neither Chinese Buddhism (11 articles) nor Christianity (6 articles) is portrayed as frequently as Tibetan Buddhism (43 articles) in reports of rituals and spiritual services such as funerals, consecration ceremonies, and prayer assemblies. Moreover, reports on Tibetan Buddhist rituals tend to offer relatively detailed depictions of what the rituals are like, including the attendees' attire, conducts, movements, and utterances, and the general ambiance. Notably, the *People's Daily* has published a number of reports on to rituals headed by the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Erdini Gyancain Norbu. These reports serve the state's purpose of establishing legitimacy and manufacturing consent of the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen lama as the true spiritual heir and leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Some articles feature individual Han Chinese writers and artists touring Tibet and finding their creative inspirations. Tibet is poetically romanticized as a land of pristine purity where the sacred resides, where one's heart and soul fulfills its nostalgic longing for a spiritual home, and where one undergoes something akin to religious revelation.

The number of Chinese Buddhism articles (42) using the frame of religion as the basis of morality, values and wisdom is more than twice that of China-related Christianity articles (20). Buddhist proverbs or snippets of Buddhist legends are inserted into lengthy articles on topics that usually have little to do with Buddhism, or religion for that matter. Sometimes Buddhist

allusions help convey the gist of the moral lessons that the reports intend to impart in a way that might better resonate with the Chinese reader who are presumably quite familiar with Buddhist adages such as letting-go-of-the-self (*wuwo*), no-killing-of-sentient-beings (*bu shasheng*), compassion (*shan*), and karma (*yebao*), etc. At other times, however, the connection between Buddhist wisdom and the thrust of the reports is tangential at best. Brief and loose usage of Buddhist verbiage indicates the *People's Daily* has to speak the time-honored Buddhist idioms prevalent in popular parlance, appropriating Buddhism as a credible source of values and wisdom in order to lend moral weight to the purport of the articles.

In the manner of grand narratives, Christianity is said to be the moral foundation of the West, integrally linked to Western individualism and modern institutions of the free market and rule of law. Weber's thesis on the affinity between Protestant ethics and capitalist spirit is often quoted as a summary of historical facts, rather than a tentative theoretical construct.

Acknowledging Christianity's high status in Western civilization serves the purpose of exclusion. That is, while the articles stress the point that ethics and morality should be a necessary component in the construction of China's socialist economy, just like Christianity provides the moral foundation for the capitalist West, by aligning Christianity with the West, they preclude Christianity's candidacy for possible moral resources to draw from for the construction of Chinese socialist morality.

### ***Frame of Religion Contributing to a Just Cause or Development of Other Institutions***

This is one of two positive frames where more Christianity articles are found than Buddhism ones, both in terms of number and percentage. In 55 China-related and 60 international articles on Christianity religion is framed as contributing to a just cause, as do 33 articles on Chinese Buddhism, 18 on international Buddhism, and 3 on Tibetan Buddhism. Both

religions are represented in a number of common causes such as world peace, nuclear disarmament, and commemoration of the victory over fascism.

A patent difference is that no contemporary cases of Buddhists or Christians acting independently and challenging the Chinese government and its policies are reported in a positive light. By contrast, international news on both religions report on believers fighting for a just cause and challenging perceived abuses and injustice committed by the governments or other political bodies.

Interestingly, 12 Christianity articles offer portrayals of how some Christians assisted the CCP before 1949 as contributing to a just cause. For instance, two stories feature Talitha Gerlach (1896-1995),<sup>49</sup> an American YWCA worker who spent the better half of her life in Shanghai, China, and recounted how she assisted the Chinese Communists in various ways before and after 1949. However, her Christian identity was muffled. The reader was only told that she was the daughter of a minister and was sent to Shanghai by the American YWCA to aid the work of its China chapter. What motivated her endeavor, as the story goes, changed from “Christian piety and her innate kindness” at the beginning of her work in China to a new level of political consciousness which transcended her “religious prejudice.” This political consciousness she acquired through attending political study groups where revolutionary ideas were disseminated by the communists and through anti-Japanese activism. All the 12 Christianity articles followed similar framing patterns, downplaying the religious faith of the activists who helped the CCP before 1949 and foregrounding the righteousness of the CCP’s political ideology.

For reports that use the frame of religion contributing to the development of other institutions, the focus is more on the institutions that religion makes impact on than the religion

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<sup>49</sup> Meiji zhuanjia Geng Lishu de zhongguo qingjie (The China complex of American expert Talitha Gerlach), Jiang Wei & Zhao Lanying, Renmin ribao (*People’s Daily*), February 22, 1995, 4.

itself. Thirty-five Buddhism articles and 25 Christianity articles are framed this way. However, a noticeable difference is that Christianity is much more likely to be linked with the development of modern institutions than Buddhism. In China-related reports, the readers are informed that Christianity contributes to the introduction, establishment and development in China of modern hospitals, higher education, physical education, and modern sports, and even to the publication of the first book on Marxism. However, these facts are often mentioned fleetingly without due acknowledgment of their historical significance.

By contrast, the institutions that Buddhism makes contributions to can hardly be related to modernity. Rather, Buddhism is shown to have contributed to traditional institutions such as ancient Chinese music theater, painting, poetry, Qigong techniques, tea culture, and funeral rites, etc. at a time long past. International reports utilizing this frame also tend to focus on Buddhism's contributions to pre-modern institutions.

### ***Frame of Pluralism and Common Cultural Origin***

Buddhism finds 34 (1.0%) reports using the frame of pluralism and common cultural origin. Notably none of them is about Tibetan Buddhism, which echoes the practice of portraying Tibetan Buddhism as a unique ethnic culture and religion. Christianity has 17 (1.0%) articles in this category, most of which (13, 0.8%) are international reports.

Buddhism is often depicted as a religion that has transcended the national and ethnic borders of many Asian countries and existed as part of a common traditional culture of the East, in contrast to the West or the Mediterranean civilization consisting of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Such cultural consanguinity among Asian countries was said to be of tremendous help in furthering mutual understanding, cultural exchange, and economic cooperation and maintaining regional stability. Manifestation of religious diversity in historical sites,

neighborhoods, or even cities such as Macau, Quanzhou, and Guizhou, etc. are praised in the reports. Such diversity, it is said, shows how receptive, tolerant and magnanimous China is.

Christianity is portrayed as a defining feature of Europe, the West, or Western civilization. Switzerland, the Republic of Mauritius in Africa, Istanbul of Turkey, Eritrea, even places like Syria, Indonesia and Jerusalem are often represented as places where diverse religious groups live together peacefully. Absence of inter-religious strife is said to give these countries and cities peace, unity and political stability for economic development.

### ***Frame of Universality***

The frame of universality is the least used positive frame in both Buddhism (10, 0.3%) and Christianity (11, 0.7%) reports, all of which came out after the mid-1990s. Two features are remarkable about this frame. First, universal values such as love, compassion, longing for peace, and tolerance, etc. found in the major religions and cultural value systems are used as evidence to counter Huntington's theory of the "clash of civilizations." Huntington, it is argued, erred on exaggerating conflicts. Secondly, starting in the 2000s, a number of articles was printed in the *People's Daily* on the topic of universal values vs. national particularities. They argue that universal values should not be the exclusive export from the West; religions of non-Western civilizations can offer universal values, too. That said, the reports emphatically point it out that the interpretation and configuration of human rights, freedom, and democracy are context-specific and must be particularized. The exportation of Western styles of these political institutions in the name of universal values is resisted as impositions on other countries' political sovereignty.

### 5.5.5 Negative Frames

#### *Frame of Religion Being a Factor in War, Violence and Intolerance*

Of Christianity articles 41.9% (696) use this negative frame, the overwhelming majority of which are international news reports (689, 41.4%). The *People's Daily* chose to run extensive coverage on the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) from 1980 onward until it ended in 1990. The reports acknowledge that deep-seated animosity exists among different religious sects and is hard to overcome, contributing to the fact that the war is fought along sectarian lines, with the Maronite Christians, Jews, Druzes, Shia and Sunni Muslims engaging in hot warfare with one another. Nonetheless, the articles tend to give a Marxist political-economic interpretation of war and conflict related to religion and frame the conflicts as fundamentally driven by political and economic self-interest cloaked under religious excuses. Unequivocally taking side with the Arabs, the *People's Daily* places the blame on Israel for the instability of the Middle East. The two superpowers of the time, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, are also criticized for competing for influence in the region through both puppeteering and direct intervention. After the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990, the *People's Daily* continued to cover the Middle East problem surrounding Jerusalem and Lebanon, using the same frame. The way this frame is constructed falls in line with the Chinese party-state's Marxist ideology in general and its relations with the two superpowers at the time in particular.

Most of the reports of war and violence taking place elsewhere in the world (e.g. Chad, Sudan, Nigeria, Egypt, Iraq, Indonesia, Pakistan, Somalia) that involve Christianity have Christians pitted against Muslims. While Islamic fundamentalists are often condemned for atrocities committed to Christians, the United States is reprimanded for its aggressive actions in the post-9/11 era that are said to have aggravated the anti-American and anti-Western sentiments in the Muslim world. As a result, Westerners and symbols of Western values such as Christian

churches have become targets of terrorist attacks. These articles attribute the fundamental obstacle in the resolution of ethnic and religious tensions around the world to the old, unfair and unjust world order where hegemonic powers use ethnic and religious problems as excuses to intervene in other countries' domestic affairs, escalating the conflicts and creating more of the same problems.

### ***Frame of Atheistic Impugnment***

The CCP has espoused Marxist atheism since its inception in 1921. At the philosophical level, Marx's famed saying of "religion is the opium of the people" and Feuerbach's idea of religion as the product of human self-alienation form the cornerstones of Marxist atheist ideology on which polemics against the ontological and epistemological validity of religion are based. In political historiography, the atheist ideology pushes strongly the idea that religion has been used as a powerful instrument of oppression by the ruling classes throughout human history. Contextualizing it to Chinese history, the CCP believes Buddhism, Daoism and Islam are closely associated with China's feudalistic past, while Christianity is inextricable from foreign colonialism and imperialism in the past and infiltration by "overseas hostile forces" at present.

The party-state has oscillated between militant atheism and enlightenment atheism at different points of time (Yang 2012). According to Yang (2012), militant atheism urges for active elimination of religion or religious influence using coercive force, whereas enlightenment atheism advocates the use of atheist propaganda and education to facilitate the eventual demise of religion. Yang's analytical distinction helps further differentiate the framing of Christianity and Buddhism in the *People's Daily*.

Thirty-two Christianity articles use the militant atheistic impugnment frame. Among them, the international reports berate Christianity for aiding the feudalist ruling class to exploit



people during the Middle Ages in Europe, thus validating forceful resistance against feudalism and the medieval church. Domestic reports excoriate Christian missionaries for acting as the lackey of colonialists and imperialists who tried to deceive and bully the Chinese people, valorizing resistance to Christian mission efforts at both the grassroot and governmental levels. Nineteen articles on Tibetan Buddhism also use the militant atheistic impugment frame, chastising the oppressive theocracy for allegedly terrorizing the Tibetan people before the CCP came to the rescue and toppled the regime. As discussed above, seventeen of these articles use the positive frame of supporting the CCP at the same time, highlighting the Tibetans' indebtedness to the CCP. Only eight Chinese Buddhism articles use this frame.

Forty-seven Buddhism articles and 69 Christianity reports use the enlightenment atheism frame. In these reports, Buddhism or Christianity is depicted as fetters of the mind, being inferior to Marxist materialism, atheism, and communism, and as having lost to science, rationality, progress and other markers of modernity.

### ***Frame of Being Averse to CCP's Rule and Meddling in Politics***

As many as 126 (3.9%) reports on Tibetan Buddhism use the frame of religion being averse to the CCP's rule, whereas Chinese Buddhism had only 1 article in this category. The Tibetan Buddhism articles lambast the Tibetan independence movement for instigating riots and violence in Tibet. Tibetan separatists are accused of beating up innocent bystanders and the police, burning down cars, and disrupting normal religious activities and social order. As discussed above, one hundred and four of these articles also use the positive frame of supporting the CCP that glorifies the CCP's leadership and beneficence.

Christianity has 16 (1.0%) articles using this frame. Of the 9 China-related Christianity reports, four warns of forces from inside China engaging in anti-revolutionary activities and

outside China plotting of infiltration. Another four articles are critical of the active involvement of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan in the pro-independence movement. Internationally, several articles came out in the late 2000s and assert that ring-wing Christian groups meddling in politics do not bode well for the countries where they operate.

### ***Frame of Religion Being Inferior to Secularism or Chinese Secular Culture***

Of the 22 (1.3%) Christianity articles that use this frame, two features stand out. First, reports of the decline of religion in the West do not express frustration over the situation. Instead, they confirm the trend of secularization as a necessary part of the historical trajectory of modernity. Second, some reports represent Christianity as being inferior to Chinese secular culture, especially Confucian culture. For proof Christianity is said to be so alien to the Chinese mentality, which has had a strong propensity toward secularity, that it is unsurprising that Christian missionary work bore few fruits in China during pre-modern times. Christianity is also said to have lost its moral authority and relevance to modern society because it conflicts irreconcilably with modern science and is helpless in resolving the cultural crisis that has engulfed Western societies. By contrast, Confucianism, as a humanistic system of ideas that is unencumbered by supernatural beliefs, is said to be apt to offer the moral foundation compatible with modern science.

Buddhism has 13 (0.4%) articles falling into this category. The negative attitude toward Buddhism in these articles tends to be mild and often indirect.

### ***Frame of Criminality***

Seven (0.4%) international Christianity articles use this frame, reporting on Christian individuals or charitable organizations committing crimes such as embezzlement of disaster

relief funds, human trafficking, and plotting to subvert foreign government. Four Buddhist reports use this frame where the connection between faith and immorality is merely incidental.

## 5.6 Conclusion

From 1978 to 2011 the *People's Daily* has consistently represented Buddhism in a more favorable light than Christianity. The differences in the amount of coverage, evaluative undertones and topical focus between Buddhism and Christianity reporting suggest Buddhism is considered as a religion of the Chinese, or “Our” religion, whereas Christianity belongs to the “Other.”

Religious oligopoly is also manifest in how the *People's Daily* frames Buddhism and Christianity differently. First of all, Chinese Buddhism is heavily culturalized. Through being variously framed as an integral part of the Chinese national culture, a highly marketable resource for the cultural tourism industry, a cultural liaison between China and other Asian countries throughout history, and a component of traditional Chinese culture, Buddhism is integrated into discourses of Chinese nationalism, diplomatic relations, and economic reform and marketization. Similar to what Ji (2011) has observed as a secularized revival of Buddhism in the arenas of intellectual inquiry and popular cultural consumption, culturalization of Buddhism by the official media can help circumvent the state's restrictions on religion and disseminate Buddhism into public discourse, popular imagination and narratives of national identity, contributing to increasing its positive salience in contemporary Chinese society. Second, the official media rarely frames Chinese Buddhism as being averse to the CCP's rule, meddling in politics, or being a factor in violence and intolerance, thus promoting an image of Chinese Buddhism as being apolitical and pacifistic, an image that the party-state finds palatable. Third, through the religious development frame, Chinese Buddhism is favorably reported for engaging in religious exchanges

that are conducive to expanding multidimensional cooperation between China and other Asian countries. Overall, it is as if the Chinese official media is presenting Chinese Buddhism as a model religion, one that makes no political trouble and at the same time can contribute to China's economic development and social stability.

Coverage of Christianity is much less favorable. First, the official media is less inclined to framing Christianity as culture. Christianity is carefully excluded from representing Chinese national culture or identity. Second, the *People's Daily* "Otherizes" Christianity through consistently framing it as a defining feature of the "West." Christianity is represented as a religion that belongs to the "Other," with whom China has a complicated and markedly ambivalent relationship. Third, similar to the representation of Islam in Swiss news (Dahinden et al. 2011), the *People's Daily* presents Christianity in international reports mostly as a political force that is often involved in conflicts, war, and, in the new century, terrorism and other forms of violence. The coverage tends to provide a Marxist political-economic interpretation of the strife, claiming that religion is just an excuse to cover up political and economic interest. Thus, the official Chinese media strongly politicizes Christianity in negative light in international reporting. Fourth, domestic coverage is also more likely to politicize Christianity than Buddhism. The alleged historical connection to Western imperialism and current linkage with overseas enemy forces, as is seen in the use of militant atheistic impugment frame and of the "religion being averse to CCP's rule" frame, justifies the party-state's perpetual wariness of Christianity becoming a political force that challenges its legitimacy. The image of Christianity's messy political and military entanglement outside of China may lend credibility to the party-state's wariness that this religion may bring trouble and instability to China. Fifth, more overt silencing, erasure and alteration is found in Christianity coverage than that of Buddhism. Silencing and

erasure is put to work perhaps because full disclosure and acknowledgement would run against the carefully crafted and maintained caricaturization of Christians as imperialists' agents who only did harm to the Chinese society.

The official media's representation of Tibetan Buddhism uses both strongly favorable and intensely negative frames. As the "Tibetan problem" is politicized and internationalized, the official media serves as the party-state's mouthpiece to, for one thing, demonize both the Dalai Lama-inspired Tibetan independence movement<sup>50</sup> and the pre-1950 Tibet as a time of theocratic despotism, and for another, glorify the CCP's leadership in Tibet and benevolence and generosity toward Tibetans. Along the way, Tibetan Buddhism is romanticized as the embodiment of sacredness and purity. Detailed depictions of rituals and festivals not only serve to present Tibetan Buddhism as a unique ethnic culture and to showcase the party-state's respect and support for the religion, but may also unwittingly exoticize it so much that it may have contributed to the growing popularity of Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese. As more Han Chinese are converting to Tibetan Buddhism and new Tibetan Buddhist monasteries appearing at a fast pace in the Han Chinese areas of China, the government is growing more and more uneasy with Tibetan Buddhism's unexpected expansion among the Han Chinese. However, the *People's Daily* has had no report on either the expansion or the government's concern over it up to 2011.

Religious oligopoly in China also manifests itself in the capability of the party-state to reinforce its regulation of religious affairs through the official media's role as the mouthpiece for the government in the symbolic realm. This study shows that the most frequently used frame on both domestic coverages of Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism is the positive frame of

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<sup>50</sup> The Tibetan Question is framed differently by the parties involved. Among other things, the Dalai Lama has reversed course and repeatedly announced his position that what he wants for Tibet is genuine political autonomy, rather than independence from the Chinese state. Contrarily, the Chinese government frames the Dalai Lama as the mastermind behind a separatist movement that intends to instate Tibet as an independent nation-state.

supporting the CCP and its policies. For Chinese Buddhism it is the second most used frame. Adding it to the fact that not a single article reports positively on religious individuals or groups explicitly challenging the state and its policies, the official media works to manufacture legitimacy and legitimation for the party-state and to shut out dissent.

Furthermore, the party-state tries to accommodate its espousal of Marxist atheism and the toleration of religions through both explicitly framing religion negatively in terms of atheistic impugment and generally desacralizing religion in its representation in the official media. With respect to Christianity and non-Tibetan Buddhism, positive and negative frames alike strongly sanitize religion by censoring out the supernatural elements, leaving it disenchanted and secularized. Regarding Chinese Buddhism in particular, on the one hand, the *People's Daily* allows reports using Buddhist allusions and adages to capture the moral lessons of stories being told, making Buddhism a credible and even authoritative source of morality and wisdom. On the other hand, moralization without faith depreciates religion. Furthermore, as Chen and Yorgason (1999) has pointed out, even positive images can have a downside. Portrayals of Buddhism as material culture, rather than spiritual culture, may alienate Buddhism from its religious traditions. Desacralization as such risks rendering Buddhism superficial and irrelevant for the spiritual well-being of Chinese Buddhists (Fisher 2011; Laliberté 2011b).

Another way to look at the strictly regulatory role the party-state and its official media plays vis-à-vis religion is to think about what is not covered. Local Buddhist or Christian communities are invisible. Subjective experiences of religious practitioners, theological and liturgical differences among various groups and their ideological propensities, gender relations, and critical issues that are fundamental to a religion's identity, etc. are never touched upon. The

list could go on and on. The official media has clearly demarcated what gets represented and what is off-limits.

Journalistic objectivity achieved through incorporating multiple perspectives and voices is conspicuously lacking in the *People's Daily's* representation. Only 6.5% of Buddhist articles and 15.3% of Christianity reports bear a neutral undertone. However, neutrality here is not to be confused with journalistic objectivity, because articles are coded as neutral mostly because they are too brief to convey any evaluative information. When genuine journalist neutrality is lacking, no “symbolic contestation” is present (Gamson 1992). As Lee notes (1981), unanimity and appealing to authority is what the official media in an authoritarian state like China sets out to achieve. In sum, as far as the framing of religion news is concerned, the official Chinese media operates much more as a propaganda machine that manufactures legitimacy and consent than a platform for authentic journalism and for constructing the public sphere of a civil society. The differential treatment of Buddhism and Christianity in the discursive practices of official media undermines the religious pluralism legalized in China's constitution and does injustice to the religions discriminated against. Journalistic practices like this pose obstacles to the development of religious pluralism at the societal level.

It needs to be stressed that this study neither claims nor intends to offer what the representation of religion is like in the entire Chinese mediascape. As media reform has been under way for two decades and new technologies have enabled new media forms in China, the party-state is finding it increasingly hard to monitor the symbolic realm of mass communication (Cheng 2006). Future studies can identify similarities and differences in frames on religion across media outlets, examine variations across media types, or investigate changes over time to further explicate the relationship between state and religion. Future research can also use

findings from this study as stepping stones to further investigate the interaction between media credibility and audience reception of media messages (Chong and Druckman 2007).



## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I make connections among the four substantive chapters of this dissertation to illuminate on how they accomplish the objectives I set out in the Introduction chapter. To reiterate these objectives, I first aim to fill in the lacuna left by previous research of empirical and systematic examination of atheism vis-à-vis religion in China. Moreover, I intend to reckon with the puzzling discrepancy between high proportion of self-identified atheists and high percentage of religious believers and practitioners among mainland Chinese. Through quantitative content analysis of the representation of atheism and religion in the official newspaper, the *People's Daily*, and the commercialized newspaper, *Southern Weekend*, and comparing and contrasting the representation of two particular religions, namely, Buddhism and Christianity in the *People's Daily*, I demonstrate that as the tonal uses, interplay of secularization and desecularization trends over time, and framing of religions and atheism effectuate the configuration and reconfiguration of the relative meanings and locations of atheism and religion in the symbolic realm of media representation in reform-era China, the transfiguration reveals to the audience the discursive instability and fluidity underlying the concepts of “atheism” and “religion.” I argue that the Chinese party-state’s pragmatism and commercialized media’s commitment to the modern journalism are among the major enabling factors for the discursive practices of the news media that we see. As atheism and religion are both embraced and contested in the symbolic representation of the news media, it facilitates the Chinese’s self-identification as an atheist and simultaneously believing/behaving as a religionist, in spite of the apparent logical incongruity in the double-identity.

## 6.1 Atheism in Media Representation

I examine the status of atheism as an official ideology of the party-state by looking at two related forms of its appearance in the discursive practices of media representation. The first is atheism *per se* where I focus my analysis on articles that contain the key word “atheism.” The second is trends of atheistic secularization over time.

### 6.1.1 Representation of Atheism *Per Se*

In Chapter Two, I demonstrate that the official newspaper has been lethargic to include atheism *per se* in its pages for the most part of the time under study, but vigorously animated it at times of political campaigns against heterodox religiousities deemed a menace to the party-state. In the commercialized newspaper, I similarly find that atheism *per se* has little visibility. This chapter also provides evidence to show that overt debate and challenge of atheism *per se* is off limits for both the official and commercialized newspapers, although a larger number (in terms of the percentage of the total atheism *per se* articles each newspaper has) of softly-worded remarks of reflection that put atheism *per se* in negative or neutral light did get through in the commercialized newspaper than in the official newspaper. Atheism *per se*, whether it is the Marxist version or the “primitive materialist” version from ancient Greek philosophy, is thus not to be questioned or discredited through polemic debate. This helps upkeep its status and legitimacy as an ideological resource ready to ascend from low-key presence to high-profile performance to serve political purposes.

Such discursive restriction can be interpreted as an indicator of the pragmatism that media censors adopt when it comes to the representation of atheism *per se*. Out of the consideration that for one thing, wanton propagation of atheism would offend religious believers and provoke hard feelings that may lead to social unrest, and for another, ditching atheism by

opening up debates over its merits and demerits would do damage to the plausibility of CCP's theoretical structure, keeping atheism low-key and reverse course when political necessity calls is the more desirable path to follow.

### **6.1.2 Trends of the Use of Atheistic Secularization Discourses**

As Chapters Three and Four demonstrate, the use of the discourses of both militant and enlightenment atheistic secularization over time, which show a continuous presence in the official newspaper but concentrates in the period prior to the new century in the commercialized newspaper, has “superstition” and “evil cult” for their main target. This discursive practice effectively relegates these alternative forms of religiosity to the marginal positions of heterodoxy and undesirability in the symbolic realm of representation, leaving the six religions relatively safe from atheistic secularization attempt. In this regard, it is not hard to think such practice would make those who claim faith in the five officially recognized religions and Confucianism feel well at ease with their religious identity.

Meanwhile, Chapter Four shows that the commercialized newspaper, after acquiring the identity as one of the most outspoken watchdog media in the late 1990s, has decreased the use of atheistic secularization discourse to the extent that militant-atheistic secularization discourse virtually disappeared from its pages and enlightenment-atheistic secularization discourse is in sharp decline. It is not because *Southern Weekend* stopped publishing anything that has to do with alternative religiosity. Rather, *Southern Weekend* shows much greater tendency than the *People's Daily* to redefine “superstitions” by portraying them in positive light and framing them as part of Chinese culture in the new millennium, thus desecularizing these beliefs and practices and bringing them to the inside of symbolic boundaries in the name of tradition and culture. It suggests that the symbolic realm is not monopolized by monolithic representations from the

official media, but rather pluralized by contending definitions. By the same token, the instability and fluidity of meaning inscription is easy for those on the receiving side of symbolic representation to discern. In effect, people who adhere to certain “superstitious” beliefs or behaviors may no longer feel stigmatized. Indeed, for many people “superstition” has become a neutral term that has shed the onus of negativity and stigma and they have no qualms admitting to believing or doing it.

Moreover, as I discussed in the conclusion section of Chapter Three, in the official newspaper the use of atheistic secularization discourses is largely confined to domestic coverage. The same tendency is also evident in the commercialized newspaper during the 1980s and 90s when it self-identified with the mouthpiece role in the representation of religion. This discursive practice thus provincializes Marxist atheism, despite its theoretical claim to a universal trajectory of historical progress and religious decline. Provincialization of Marxist atheism to the conceptualization and representation of the historical, political and cultural specifics of Chinese religiosity, rather than that of other countries, can be seen as another indicator of the party-state’s pragmatism. Theoretically, the party-state and its media gatekeepers never deny the applicability of Marxist atheism to different societies where religion is variously configured vis-à-vis political and social power. In practice, however, the news media refrains from actually doing it, taking it as at least a good-will gesture to show respect for the sovereignty of other countries. In turn, the party-state expects reciprocal courtesy from other countries and does not hesitate to express indignation when it perceives “interference in China’s domestic affairs” from those who criticize the Chinese government’s treatment of religion. From the perspective of the recipients of media messages, the media gatekeepers’ pragmatic moves to provincialize atheistic secularization discourses may make people realize the relative validity of religiosity to the sociopolitical

context it is embedded in, which more or less undermines the universalist, absolutist foundation of atheistic secularization discourses.

## **6.2 Predominance of the Desecularization Trend**

A major finding of my dissertation research is that in both the official and commercialized newspapers, the desecularization trend is predominate over time. As it was defined in the theoretical discussion in Chapter One, desecularization discourse accepts religion's claim to the ontological status of the supernatural claimed by religion and acknowledges, even encourages religious resurgence, rapprochement of formerly secularized institutions and religious norms, and return of religion to public life. The coding schemes set out in Chapter One can be categories into three groups: the first has to do with the relation between religion and the Chinese party-state (religion adapting to the party-state's pragmatism, rallying for its policies, and answering to the call to co-exist harmoniously in socialist China). The second considers religion as part of national culture or the defining feature of cultural identity and membership. The third couches their reasoning on universal values (e.g. peace, justice, religious pluralism and commonality, tolerance of difference, social service, morality).

The first group of frames delineate what is politically correct for religion vis-à-vis the party-state in reform-era China, which amounts to a particularistic relationship between church and state where the state takes the reins over religion. Chapter Five demonstrates that in the official newspaper this group of frames are among the most frequently used frames in domestic coverage on Chinese and monotheistic religions. Moreover, Chinese religions in domestic coverage also tends to use the second group of frames frequently. Chapter Five indicates that as Chinese religion is culturalized and portrayed as part and parcel of Chinese national culture, the party-state tries to harness the religious energy under the banner of nationalism and borrow

legitimacy from it by posing as its facilitator and promoter. Articulating religion to nationalism is another move toward particularism. Thus, these two groups of frames, both of which are heavily used in the domestic coverage by the official newspaper, present to the audience the particularistic nature of the political and cultural boundaries of religion in China as they are demarcated by the party-state via its mouthpiece newspaper.

In the commercialized newspaper, however, the first group of frames are barely used, especially in the new century, and the second group of frames does align Chinese religions with national culture but does not include the party-state as the intermediary in the connection. The additional coding schemes that *Southern Weekend* uses, as are seen in Chapter Four, tend to focus more on religion itself (e.g. as personal faith, critical of conducts of religious individuals or organizations that fall out of line with religious values, etc.). The analysis of *yulun jiandu* reports in Chapter Four shows that while the commercialized newspaper does not seem to cover religion in this type of reporting a lot, it does go above and beyond the top-down, obscurant way the official paper would report on the same topics, offering thoughtful commentaries about the spiritual dimension of human existence and critical investigation of the enablers of what goes awry in the desecularization of religion.

Furthermore, in the official newspaper monotheistic religions in international coverage are more likely to be represented by the third group of frames that resort to universal values to gauge the positive or negative impact of religion. Coupled with the finding that monotheistic religions in domestic coverage are framed frequently in terms of their relationship with the party-state, we see another indication of the party-state's pragmatism in the intersection of particularism and universalism moored on the representation of monotheistic religions along the fault line of the nation-state.

Chapter Five also shows the official newspaper's differential treatment of Chinese vs. monotheistic religions in symbolic representation through total use and framing and reveals the oligopolistic dynamics in the relationship between state and religion in reform-era China. However, the discursive strategy of otherizing Christianity and promoting Buddhism as representative of Chinese national culture in order to stem the growth of Christianity among the Chinese and keep it in line politically has not worked favorably for the party-state, as Christianity has seen exponential growth in recent decades in China and Christian activists have been particularly willing and equipped to engage and challenge various local governments for their power abuse and violation of people's rights. As the culturalization, commodification, and desacralization of Chinese Buddhism is duly questioned in the commercialized paper.

### **6.3 Limitations of this Study**

This study bears several limitations. First, the coding schemes are my own. Although the coding attributes and instruments I came up with were informed by previous studies of media representation of religion, due to limited availability of resources, I did not hire a research assistant to test intercoder reliability. As I intend to turn several chapters of this dissertation into journal publications, or better still, into a book, I will be sure to make up this want.

Second, the absence of four years of data (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002) from *Southern Weekend* is a loud reminder that this project is not yet complete. The reasons for the unavailability of digital archives of these years for the public are not clear. Nor is when they will be made available. However, I should be on the lookout for them and examine the data when they become available to obtain a complete picture of the secularization vs. desecularization trends in the representation of atheism and religion in this paper.

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