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**"Belief, Practice, and the Category of Religion in China:
Narratives of Non-Religious College Students"**

Abstract

Less than 30% of the Chinese population identifies as a religious, but the majority hold religious beliefs and the vast majority take part in religious activity yearly. Unfortunately, nearly all contemporary social scientific work on religion in China focuses only on religious identifiers and often relies on implicit privileging of Western understandings of religion. This study raises questions about this gap between identification, belief and practice by looking at a specific population of urban, educated, non-religious Chinese people studying in the US. It explores their narrative understandings of religion, and of their own beliefs and practices. The students see religion as a particularly strict combination of belief and practice; an activity that is inherently not Chinese. These students' internalization of the category leaves no room for integrating their own beliefs and practices into something called religion. Instead, the students reveal an alternative narrative that places much religious belief and practice into a category related to Chinese cultural heritage. The narrative experience of these students further gives evidence that the sociology of religion must seek to take a wide view of religious life in China and avoid limiting study to self-identifying respondents and institutional religion.