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RESEARCH NOTE

# Exploring Religious Identities in 2020s China: Prevalence and Boundaries

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores religious identities in China by drawing representative samples in 2024 from two ideal-typical regions, Manchuria and Guangdong. The results show that the majority (over 50%) chose "neither atheist nor religious believer," but only 13% solely identified as atheists. At least one-third of the population identified with a religion, with Buddhism being the largest religious identity and a considerable proportion having syncretic identifications. There was a significantly higher prevalence of Christianity in Manchuria (4.5% or 11.4% depending on criteria) and a significantly higher prevalence of folk religion in Guangdong (4.7% or 7.8%). Tetrachoric correlations reveal tighter religious boundaries in Guangdong and more porous boundaries in Manchuria. In Guangdong, some religious identities were significantly associated with ethnocultural identities, whereas few such religious-ethnocultural associations exist in Manchuria. We also found an associative block among Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, and Daoism in both places, wherein individuals identifying with one of these religions were likely to have families from all four religions. In terms of identification, there is no evidence for Eastern religions being more syncretic than Christianity.

## 1 | Introduction

The religiosity in the People's Republic of China has always been an intriguing case for social scientists. Although China may not be as explicitly religious as those societies where institutional religions may organize civil and economic activities and regulate jurisprudence, various Chinese peoples and communities embrace more diffuse and amorphous types of religious identity (Chau 2010; Feuchtwang 2003; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Yang 1961). However, up-to-date estimates on this subject remain limited.

The current study provides a new opportunity to understand religious identity in China. We are interested in the simple question: What is the prevalence of religious identities in China; are there any affinities or boundaries between different identities? To answer these questions, we draw on two parallel online surveys conducted between 2024 and 2025 with stratified samples from Guangdong ($n = 1030$) and Manchuria ($n = 915$). Instead of asking respondents to tick among multiple choices, which is inadequate in a context where religions are stigmatized and identification may be syncretic or diffusive, we allowed respondents to select multiple identities. The current study explores the following: (1) How many people claim a religious identity and how many are religious nones; (2) how many claim multiple or syncretic religious identities; and (3) are there stronger boundaries and affinities between certain religious identities?

## 2 | Literature Review

### 2.1 | The Prevalence of Religious Identities

The conventional view of the Mainland Chinese society as garnered through official historical chronicles and records was that of a society without marked religious beliefs and identities. Despite the existence of religious practices among grassroots and the court patronage of institutional religions, religious orders

were seldom depicted as key players in traditional Chinese historical writings. As Scheidel (2019) put it, religion as a corporate actor was mostly too weak to swing centralized sovereignties in China's history.

In the last few decades, qualitative scholars like ethnographers and historians have critically examined the extent to which the Chinese were indifferent to religions. They revealed that temple networks and local cults often flourished outside the gaze of the Confucian patriarchy. Many bureaucrats and literati were known to practice non-Confucian traditions in private (Brook 1993; Zürcher 1997). These religious phenomena seldom appeared in court archives except for anti-heterodox (*yinci*) campaigns (Chen 2007; Feuchtwang 2003; ter Haar 2019). As a result, the perception of a secular Chinese society could be a selection bias in the official narratives of history. After all, like Sanskrit and Classical Arabic, Written Chinese functioned as a liturgical vehicle to promote orthodox worldviews (Scott 2010). The circulation of written records may have created an artificial impression of the Han Chinese secularity.

Similarly, in modern Mainland China, it is less clear to what extent Han Chinese maintain any religious identities at all. Since 1949, official atheism has pushed many religious groups either underground or abroad (Chau 2010; Yang 2006). However, scholars have shown through ethnographical works a revival of temple fairs, underground churches, local communal deities, and a variety of spiritual practices in contemporary China (Chau 2005; Dean 1998; Goossaert and Palmer 2011).

Yet, quantitative studies remain limited. Estimating religious identity through conventional survey methods faces difficulties in a society that features prevailing non-institutional forms of religions, stigma of religion, and nonexclusive religious identities (Yang and Yang 2023). Some studies have shown a low level of religious prevalence in Mainland China. The Chinese government's statement claimed that only 200 million (14%) of Chinese are religious believers (State Council 2018). On the basis of the simple choice question that asked respondents to identify with a single religion, Peking University (卢云峰 2014) claimed 89% of Chinese had no religious identity. However, a later study found over 50% of Chinese had multiple religious beliefs (Zhang et al. 2021). The divergence between low formal affiliation and widespread private belief may stem from surveys that equate religion with institutional membership. Therefore, there is a need for an update on the prevalence of religious identification in China, measured with more nuanced differentiation between religions and non-religion.

### 2.2 | The Boundary and Affinity Between Religious Identities

Early scholarship heralded by Yang (1961) argued that Eastern religions like Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are integrated into the social fabric and daily life without a clear boundary in their beliefs and practices. This claim is supported by the studies that found a strong affinity in terms of religious mobility between Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religions (Hu and Leamaster 2015; Yang et al. 2018).

However, recent scholarship found that weak boundaries between religions were not only pertaining to Eastern religions. Syncretism, which refers to the blending of various traditions in religious identity and belief, pertains to near all religions, including Christianity. Syncretism occurs when people define identities in a nonexclusive manner. Christianity in China, in some cases, can be regarded as local religions or folk religions that may not monopolize the believers' loyalty and identity (Menegon 2010). This has been observed in Chinese history among people with dual identification with Confucianism and Islam, or with Christianity and Confucianism (Benite 2004; Zürcher 1997). In modern Chinese society, the boundary between different religions may have become even more fluid and syncretic, as many Chinese adopt a non-aligned position with specific titular religions yet possess multiple religious identities (Yang and McPhail 2023).

The boundary between non-religion and religious identity is less clear in contemporary China. Lim et al. (2010) challenged the static view of non-religiosity and argued that religious none may display situational and porous identification with religion. These religious nones are termed "liminal none" or "ambivalent none" in the literature (Lee 2015; Lim et al. 2010). Some have suggested that the equivalence of ambivalent nones exists in China. For example, Communist Party members may frequently burn incense and sponsor temples while maintaining an officially atheist identity (Chau 2010; Goossaert and Palmer 2011).

One way to explore the affinity/boundary between religions is through the prevalence of syncretism; another important way is by testing how strongly a person's own religious identity aligns with family religious tradition, as well as with ethno-cultural identity. The ideal-type of strong boundary is found among ethno-religions, where one must be from certain ethnocultural background (e.g., Nakhi, Jewish) to be identified with a religion (e.g., Dongba, Judaism). In contrast, weak boundary between religions is exemplified by syncretism, where a religious identity is not particularly associated with communal membership and a family may consist of members of different religious traditions. The current study will test the association between one's own religious identity and their family religious tradition and with their ethnocultural identity.

## 3 | Methodology

### 3.1 | Sample

The survey was independently funded and conducted in late 2024. Sampling was carried out separately for two distinct regions: the Guangdong survey and the Manchuria (the Northeast and Northeastern Inner Mongolia) survey.

Due to vast cultural and economic differences, the religious landscape of China may not exhibit the more uniform patterns as expected from nation-states. Instead, Chinese daily life is organized around localized cultural regions with distinct linguistic, kinship, and market systems (Scott 2010; Skinner 1977; Wu 2022). Put simply, even the China Proper (*Handi*) is too heterogeneous and large to be analyzed as a whole. Thus, the current study took Guangdong and Manchuria as ideal-types, rather than statistical

representations. Although both regions are predominantly ethnic Han, they are located at the opposite parts of China, speaking mutually unintelligible languages, being economically unequal, and possessing quite distant heritages. As the most populous province of China, Guangdong has 127 million people and a total fertility rate of 1.36. Its largest native languages are Cantonese, Hakka, and Teochew, which are mutually unintelligible with Mandarin and among themselves. In contrast to Guangdong, the absolute majority of Manchuria's 82 million people speak only Mandarin with a total fertility rate of mere 0.74. Guangdong has the largest GDP in China with considerable urban–rural inequality, whereas Manchuria had enjoyed early modernization but has much lower GDP now.

To obtain representative samples, we implemented a stratified sampling design with quota enforcement. The design combined (1) stratified sampling and (2) quota requirement within strata. Each region was divided into three subregions. Manchuria was divided into Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang; Guangdong was divided into Eastern Guangdong (including northern Hakka counties), the Pearl River Delta, and Western Guangdong. Then, each subregion was divided into eight strata by gender, marital status (single vs. ever married), and education (college and above vs. below college). Thus, we conducted the sampling for 24 strata. The sample size for stratum $h$ is obtained by Neyman allocation:

$$n_h = n \times \frac{N_h S_h / \sqrt{C_h}}{\sum_{l=1}^{H} \left( \frac{N_l S_l}{\sqrt{C_l}} \right)}$$

In this allocation, $N_h$ is the population size of stratum $h$, $S_h$ is the standard deviation of the target estimate (assumed 0.47 for the proportion of religious population at 1/3), $C_h$ is the cost of sampling, and $n$ is the total sample size. The total sample size of 894 is calculated from $n = 1.96^2 \times p \times \frac{1-p}{e^2} \times \text{DEFF}$, where the design effect is assumed to be 2.5, meaning that we were sampling 2.5 times more samples than a simple random sampling to ensure coverage. Finally, strata-wise probability weights $w_h$ were calculated as the division of allocated sample size by obtained sample size $n_h / n'_h$.

The data collection was serviced by Tencent Survey, leveraging the extensive user base of Tencent's WeChat app. A payment of 10–15 yuan was delivered to each participant through Tencent Survey. A statement of purpose and informed consent were presented in the frontend of the questionnaire, the respondents can withdraw at any time, and no personal information was stored. The final sample size was 915 in Manchuria and 1030 in Guangdong. The average response rate across all strata was 66.1%, and the average response time was 8 min and 40 s. Figure 1 presents the sampling maps of Manchuria and Guangdong. The final sample is population-wise representative. Detailed stratified sampling estimation was provided in Supplement, which documented sample size formula, population shares, variance assumptions, cost estimates, final weights, and so forth.

### 3.2 | Measurement

The core question was religious identity. Following a statement "regardless of what you believe or practice, would you say you are," respondents were asked to select from a list of "Buddhist, Catholic, Christian/Protestant, Confucian, Daoist, Muslim, folk religion believer, atheist, neither atheist nor a religious believer."

In this survey, a respondent may select more than one identity—a feature designed to capture the syncretic and nonexclusive nature of religions in China. Although *religious identities* are nonexclusive, we also create a categorical variable that exhausts all combinations of religious identities—we call these *identification types*. Six identification types consist of those who were identified with a single (non-)religion: Buddhist, Christian, Daoist, folk religion, Atheist, and "Neither, Nor" (neither atheist, nor having any religious identity). Sole identification as Confucian or Muslim was dropped for its small size ($n < 5$). Another four identification types were constructed in this criterion: Eastern syncretic selected one or more of the Eastern religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and folk religion) but none of the others; east-west syncretic selected at least one Eastern religion in addition to Christianity or Islam; ambivalent atheist selected at least one religion in addition to atheism; ambivalent neither selected at least one religion in addition to "Neither, Nor."

For family religious tradition, respondents were asked "regardless of your own religion, what is the main religion in your family," options include Buddhism, Catholic, Christian/Protestant, Confucianism, Daoism, Islam, folk religion, no religion, not sure of it. For respondent ethno-cultural identity, Guangdong survey allowed nonexclusive multiple selection from Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, Western Guangdong, Guangxi, Northerner, Sichuanese, Hubei/Hunanese, others; for Manchuria, we collapsed the detailed checklist into Northeasterner, Manchu, Southerner, and other minorities.

### 3.3 | Statistical Analysis

Descriptive analysis on the prevalence of religious identities and identification types was conducted using weighted statistical tests (svy: mean; svy: proportion) with 95% confidence intervals calculated. Logistic regressions were conducted to assess the association between religious identities and covariates. The covariates included region, age, gender, education, income, marital status (in union vs. not in union), self-reported health, and psychological stress. In logistic regressions, significance $p$ values at 95%, 99%, and 99.9% confidence levels were reported. We also reported two pseudo-$R^2$ to evaluate the model's relative explanatory power over null model: McFadden $R^2$ calculates the improvement of the current model over null model in terms of log-likelihood, as $1 - \ln(LL_1)/\ln(LL_0)$; Mckelvey and Zavoina $R^2$ calculated the improvement over null model in terms of variance, as $\frac{\sigma^2(\widehat{y_1})}{\sigma^2(\widehat{y_1})+3.29}$. To test the strength of association between binary choices of identities, we used tetrachoric correlations with $z$-tests. We conducted all analyses in Stata 18.

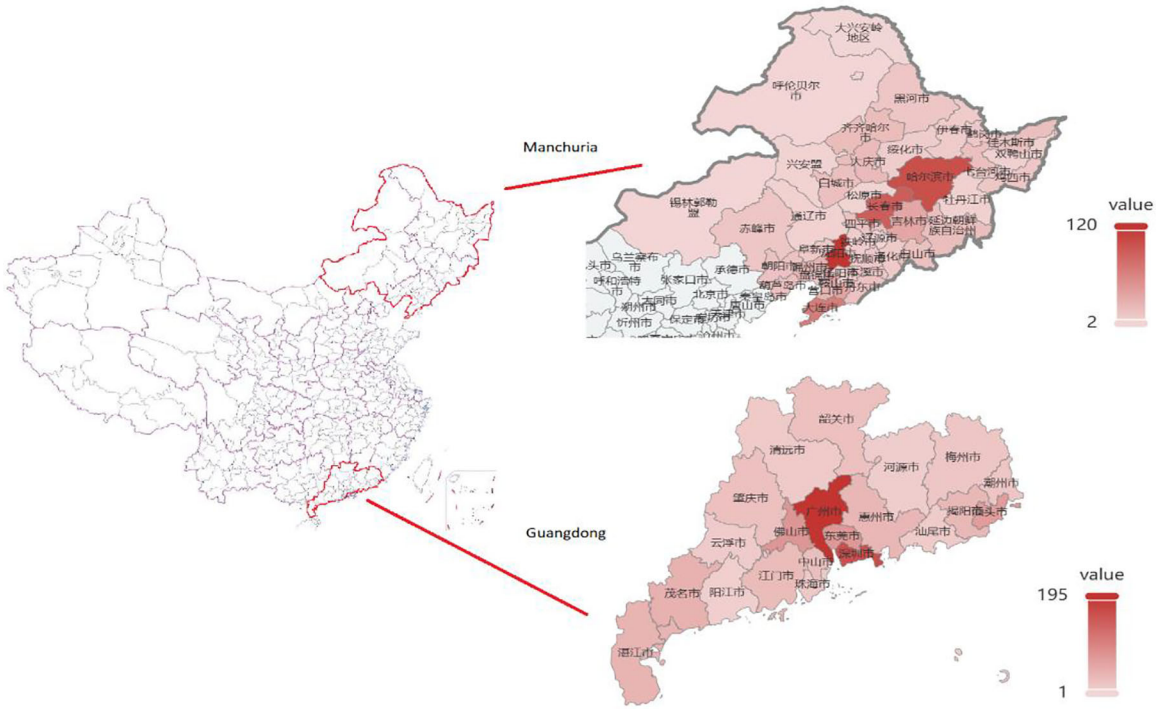


**FIGURE 1** | Inset map of sampled regions from China, shaded by sample size. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

## 4 | Results

### 4.1 | Prevalence of Religious Identities

Table 1 presents the prevalence and 95% confidence intervals for both nonexclusive selections and exclusive identification types in Guangdong and Manchuria. The majority of people in both regions claimed "neither an atheist, nor a believer of any religion." This "Neither, Nor" identity constituted 60% (56.1%–63.8%) of the respondents in Manchuria and 56.7% (51.6%–61.6%) in Guangdong. Only two nonexclusive identities were significantly different between Guangdong and Manchuria: Protestant Christian and Muslim. Manchuria has 8% Protestant Christians compared to Guangdong's 3.4%, and 2.2% Muslim compared to Guangdong's mere 0.2%. Regional differences in other nonexclusive identities may be due to randomness because they were not significant at 95% confidence level.

Looking at *exclusive identification types*, "Christian only" respondents are more than three times as prevalent in Manchuria (4.5%, 3.3%–6.0%) as in Guangdong (1.5%, 1.0%–2.4%, $p < 0.05$), whereas "folk religion only" is significantly more prevalent in Guangdong (4.7%, 3.6%–6.2%) than Manchuria (1.5%, 0.9%–2.6%, $p < 0.05$). The eastern syncretic identity (combinations of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and folk religion) is also significantly more common in Guangdong than Manchuria (6.0% vs. 3.3%, $p < 0.05$). For religious nones in both regions, the similar proportions (13.4% and 13.5%) were atheists, and over 50% were the "Neither, Nor" type. Small groups of "ambivalent atheists" and "ambivalent neither" indicate limited but non-negligible overlaps between religions and non-religions in both regions.

Table 2 presents odds ratios from logistic regressions predicting each religious identity. Increasing age raises the likelihood (OR = 1.03) of identifying as atheist but reduces the likelihood of Daoist (OR = 0.96), Muslim (OR = 0.89), and folk religion (OR = 0.96). Females are significantly more likely than men to identify as Buddhist or as "Neither/Nor," yet only half as likely to identify as atheist (OR = 0.51) and Daoist (OR = 0.67). Education is positively associated with being an atheist (OR = 1.31) and negatively associated with folk religion (OR = 0.63). Income is positively associated with all religions. Health and stress burdens tend to be higher among all religions, whereas the "Neither/Nor" group reports better self-rated health and lower stress. Finally, Manchuria had 2.6 times more Christians and 3.6 times more Muslims than Guangdong, and less than half folk religionist (OR = 0.47) than Guangdong.

The profiles of nearly all religions share two similarities: They were significantly associated with higher income and worse health, but not consistently associated with gender and age. Meanwhile, the two types of religious nones (atheist and Neither, Nor) are associated with different characteristics: Atheists were significantly associated with male gender (OR = 0.51, $p < 0.001$), but the Neither, Nor were significantly associated with being female (OR = 1.33, $p < 0.05$); they were also differently associated with education, income, and health.

The pseudo-$R^2$ values suggest that these covariates contributed much more to the prediction of Muslim, Catholic, Confucian, and Christian identities than to atheist, Neither/Nor, or Buddhist identities. We suspect that this divergence is mechanistic rather than substantive. For rare identities, such as Muslims and Catholics, the null (intercept-only) models simply would have lower log-likelihoods and smaller variance. As a result, comparable improvement in predictive accuracy can yield relatively large improvements in pseudo-$R^2$ than the models for larger identity groups.

**TABLE 1** | Prevalence of religious identity types and nonexclusive selections with 95% confidence intervals in two regions.

| | Guangdong ($n = 1025$) | | Manchuria ($n = 911$) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Proportion | 95% CI | Proportion | 95% CI |
| **Nonexclusive selection of identities** | | | | |
| Buddhist | 0.206 | 0.167, 0.253 | 0.158 | 0.132, 0.189 |
| Catholic | 0.030 | 0.015, 0.061 | 0.034 | 0.025, 0.048 |
| Christian | 0.034 | 0.018, 0.063 | 0.080 | 0.063, 0.102* |
| Confucian | 0.057 | 0.035, 0.089 | 0.026 | 0.018, 0.037 |
| Daoist | 0.086 | 0.062, 0.118 | 0.058 | 0.046, 0.075 |
| Muslim | 0.004 | 0.001, 0.007 | 0.022 | 0.015, 0.033* |
| Folk religion | 0.078 | 0.054, 0.110 | 0.043 | 0.033, 0.056 |
| Atheist | 0.199 | 0.159, 0.246 | 0.195 | 0.166, 0.228 |
| "Neither, Nor" | 0.567 | 0.516, 0.616 | 0.600 | 0.561, 0.638 |
| **Religious identification types** | | | | |
| Buddhist only | 0.101 | 0.084, 0.122 | 0.105 | 0.088, 0.125 |
| Christian only | 0.015 | 0.010, 0.024 | 0.045 | 0.033, 0.060* |
| Daoist only | 0.024 | 0.015, 0.036 | 0.026 | 0.018, 0.037 |
| Folk religion only | 0.047 | 0.036, 0.062 | 0.015 | 0.009, 0.026* |
| Atheist only | 0.135 | 0.115, 0.159 | 0.134 | 0.117, 0.155 |
| Neither, Nor | 0.523 | 0.492, 0.555 | 0.550 | 0.520, 0.579 |
| Ambivalent atheist | 0.027 | 0.019, 0.038 | 0.013 | 0.007, 0.023 |
| Ambivalent "neither" | 0.035 | 0.025, 0.048 | 0.030 | 0.021, 0.042 |
| Eastern syncretic | 0.060 | 0.046, 0.078 | 0.033 | 0.024, 0.045* |
| East-west syncretic | 0.032 | 0.023, 0.045 | 0.048 | 0.037, 0.062 |

*Significant difference at 0.05 level between regions.

### 4.2 | Boundary and Affinity Between Identities

Via tetrachoric correlation, we examined the boundary of religions. Figures 2 and 3 show one's own religious identity and the family's religion. In Guangdong (Figure 2), off-diagonal cells reveal that Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, and Islam form a cohesive cluster marked by the pink-maroon color spectrum: Christian identity is positive-significantly associated with Confucian, Muslim, and (to a lesser degree) Daoist family and vice versa. However, Buddhism and folk religion identities showed weak or nonsignificant ties to other traditions. The non-religious categories (atheist and "Neither/Nor") display consistent negative associations with all religions. Overall, there were *stronger boundaries* outside the block of Christian–Confucian–Daoist–Muslim.

By contrast, Manchuria (Figure 3) exhibits a broad affinity (and *weaker boundaries*) across almost every pair of religions except Daoism: Christians link with Buddhist, Confucian, Muslim, and folk-religion families just as strongly as Buddhist families link to non-Buddhist individuals, signifying porous boundaries and higher affinity between various religious identities. Again, religious nones maintained clear, negative boundaries with religious traditions, forming the blue ice sheet in Figure 3.

Another way of showing religious boundaries is through the association between religious identities and ethnic identities. In Guangdong (Figure 4), several religious identities displayed close relationships with specific ethnocultural communities, indicating clear boundaries along the religious–ethnic line. For example, Confucian identity is significantly associated with the Hakka (0.31, $p < 0.01$) and Guangxi communities (0.38, $p < 0.01$), and Daoist identity is most strongly associated with the Western Cantonese community (0.24, $p < 0.01$). Folk religion is most prevalent among Teochew (0.23, $p < 0.01$) and Hakka (0.15, $p < 0.05$) communities. Finally, the religious nones (both "Atheist" and "Neither/Nor") were more likely to belong to non-native ethnocultural communities (i.e., Northerners, Sichuanese, Huxiang, and others). Religious nones were less likely to belong to the native ethnocultures (i.e., Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, and Western Cantonese), suggesting a secular or indifferent stance that follows regional rather than doctrinal logic. Overall, the native ethnocultural communities of Guangdong were more likely to be associated with Eastern religions, whereas non-native communities were more likely to identify as religious nones or Christian.

In contrast, in Manchuria (Figure 4), religious identities were more diffusive and exhibit *weak boundaries* along the

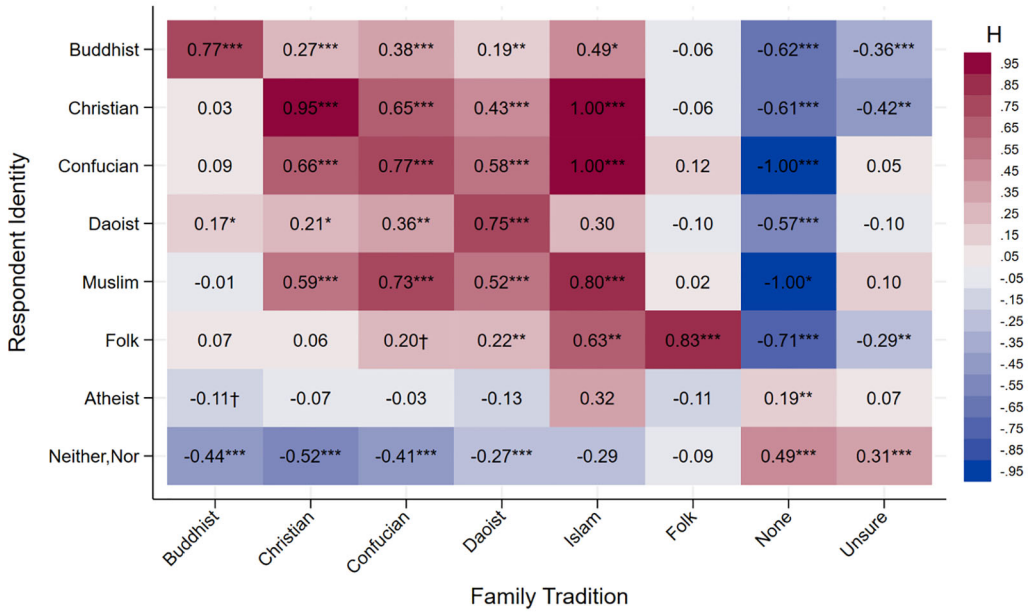


**FIGURE 2** | Tetrachoric correlation between respondent identities and family religious traditions in Guangdong. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

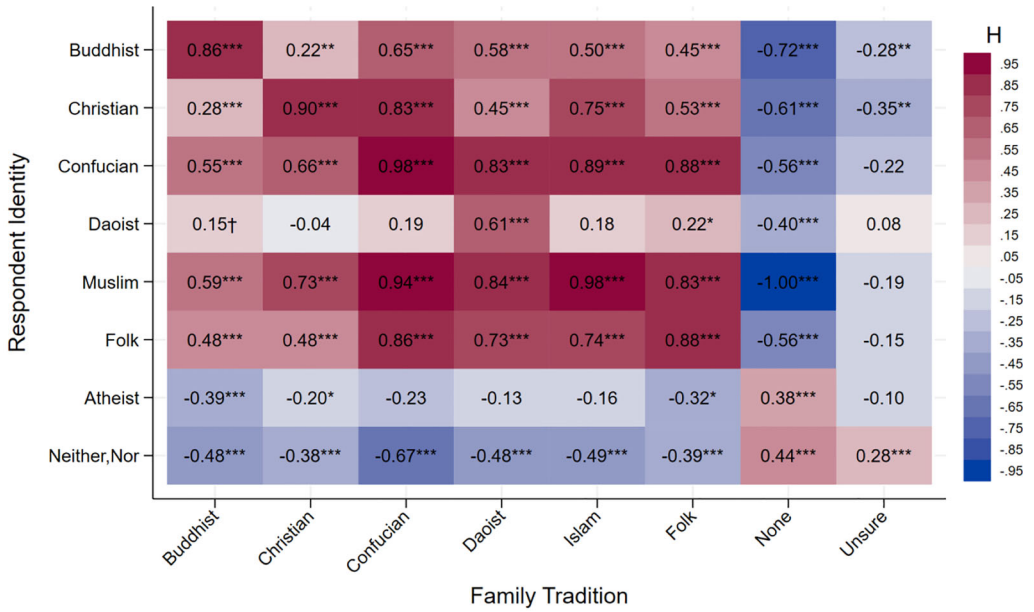


**FIGURE 3** | Tetrachoric correlation between respondent identities and family religious traditions in Manchuria. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

ethnocultural line. Apart from the positive and significant association between Christian identity and Manchu population, and between Muslim and "other minorities," there were no significant associations between any religious identities and ethnocultural communities.

## 5 | Discussion

### 5.1 | Prevalence of Religious Identities

The first research question of the current study assesses the prevalence of people identified with religions and non-religion. The official statistics from P. R. China claimed less than 14% of Chinese are religious believers (State Council 2018). But others pointed out that people often hide their religious identities or do not have a titular label for their non-institutional religions (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Yang and Yang 2017).

Through surveying two culturally distinct regions with stratified sampling, our "multi-selection and combination" approach reveals a complicated religious landscape in China. We found that, when respondents were allowed to choose multiple identities nonexclusively, over 40% of the sample included some religious elements in their identities, although their religious

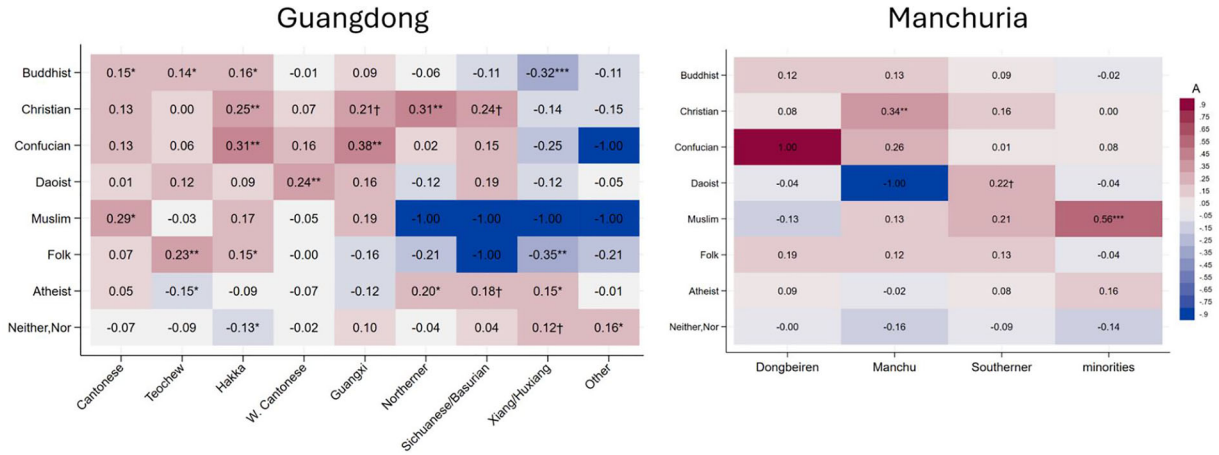


**FIGURE 4** | Tetrachoric correlation between religious identities and ethnocultural identities. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

identities may be combined with non-religion. Even in terms of the mutually exclusive identification types, about 27%–29% had claimed various religious identities. The official number of religious believers in China is 200 million, or 14% of the population (State Council 2018). This study suggests that this official figure is an underestimate, especially if we also count syncretism involving multiple religious identities.

The largest religious identity in both regions was Buddhism. About 10% belonged to the Buddhist-only identity type. If multiple selections are allowed, 15.8% in Manchuria identified as Buddhist and 20.6% in Guangdong identified as Buddhist. Manchuria had a significantly larger presence of Christianity: 4.5% if restricting to the Christian-only identity type and 11.4% if including multiple-selections. Guangdong had a significantly larger presence of folk religion: 4.7% for the exclusive identity type and 7.8% for nonexclusive identity.

The proportion of religious none in our sample is eminently higher than the world average of 24% (Hackett et al. 2025). Depending on whether we define religious none as an exclusive *identity type*, or a choice of identity that may overlap and combine with other identities, we arrived at two estimates of religious nones. As an exclusive and standalone identity type, the majority in both regions (52%–55%) identified as "neither an atheist, nor a believer of religions," and another 13% in both regions solely identified as atheist. Together, two-thirds (67%) of the population are religious nones. Alternatively, when treated as nonexclusive choices, 57%–60% of the respondents have chosen "Neither, Nor" and 20% have chosen "atheist," summing up to 80% of the respondents being religious nones.

The existence of nonexclusive religious nones opens the nonbinary perspective of religious identities. There were between 4% and 6% *ambivalent nones* in our study, who had chosen non-religion in combination with a religious identity. This last type of identification underlines the previous literature on the gray area of Chinese religion, involving people who do not subscribe to an explicit label, adopt a more pragmatic stance towards the state atheism, and find compatibility between atheism and religious identities (Chau 2010; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Yang 2006). This phenomenon also harkens back to the liminal or ambivalent religious none population documented in the western societies (Lee 2015; Lim et al. 2010).

Logistic regressions of sociodemographic characteristics showed that nearly all religious identities were associated with higher income, worse self-rated health, and higher stress. Age and gender are not significant predictors for most religious identities. With logistic regressions, we also found that atheists identity was associated with higher educated, older age, and male, whereas the "Neither, Nor" identity was associated with lower income and being female.

## 5.2 | Boundaries Between Religious Identities

The second research question explores the affinity and boundary between different religious identities. First, we asked whether Eastern religions tend to become syncretic, whereas Abrahamic religions are exclusive (Yang 1961). We found this to be true only in Guangdong, where eastern syncretism is significantly more prevalent than east-west syncretism. But in Manchuria, east-west syncretism was slightly more prevalent than eastern syncretism. Syncretism is a variable seen in all religious traditions, and its degree varies by contexts, not by religions. In history, Abrahamic religions have often been pragmatic in collaborating with local non-Abrahamic traditions (Benite 2004; Menegon 2010; Zürcher 1997), and Buddhism revealed its potential of being not less sectarian and exclusive (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010; Overmyer 1976). Contemporary fieldwork also shows that Christian missionaries and lay believers in China have absorbed many traditional Chinese element to become an integral part of the Chinese religious ecology (Cao 2010).

Next, the affinity between religious traditions, as measured by the significance and magnitude of the association between an individual's own religious identity and the family religion, showed that *not all* Eastern religions form a cohesive block. In Guangdong, the affinity between Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, and (to a lesser degree) Daoism is significant and stronger than Buddhism and folk religion. Buddhism and folk religion identities showed weak or nonsignificant ties to other religions. In Guangdong, some eastern religious identities were closely

**TABLE 2** | Logistic regression on nonexclusive identities.

| | Buddhist | Catholic | Christian | Daoist | Confucian | Muslim | Folk | Atheist | Neither, Nor |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 0.99 (0.01) | 0.98 (0.03) | 1.01 (0.01) | 0.96 (0.01)** | 0.99 (0.02) | 0.89 (0.05)* | 0.96 (0.02)* | 1.03 (0.01)*** | 0.99 (0.01) |
| Female | 1.38 (0.20)* | 1.84 (0.64) | 1.39 (0.35) | 0.67 (0.13)* | 0.63 (0.18) | 1.89 (0.96) | 1.33 (0.29) | 0.51 (0.07)*** | 1.33 (0.15)* |
| Education | 0.91 (0.07) | 0.90 (0.13) | 0.86 (0.10) | 0.91 (0.10) | 0.97 (0.15) | 0.82 (0.22) | 0.63 (0.07)*** | 1.31 (0.11)*** | 0.98 (0.06) |
| Marital status | 1.37 (0.27) | 0.71 (0.32) | 0.53 (0.17)* | 1.71 (0.50) | 1.72 (0.72) | 1.26 (1.24) | 0.73 (0.21) | 0.95 (0.19) | 0.91 (0.14) |
| Income | 1.14 (0.04)*** | 1.47 (0.08)*** | 1.43 (0.06)*** | 1.18 (0.05)*** | 1.41 (0.09)*** | 1.68 (0.11)*** | 1.31 (0.06)*** | 0.99 (0.04) | 0.88 (0.02)*** |
| Worse health | 1.31 (0.09)*** | 2.55 (0.43)*** | 1.52 (0.20)** | 1.15 (0.12) | 1.70 (0.29)** | 2.24 (0.86)* | 1.26 (0.15)* | 0.94 (0.06) | 0.82 (0.04)*** |
| Stress | 1.26 (0.10)** | 1.47 (0.23)* | 1.48 (0.19)** | 1.21 (0.15) | 1.26 (0.19) | 1.23 (0.37) | 0.96 (0.14) | 0.98 (0.09) | 0.81 (0.05)** |
| Manchuria | 0.81 (0.14) | 1.43 (0.54) | 2.61 (0.91)** | 0.91 (0.22) | 0.69 (0.22) | 3.62 (2.25)* | 0.47 (0.13)** | 1.17 (0.21) | 1.00 (0.14) |
| McFadden $R^2$ | 0.038 | 0.217 | 0.143 | 0.049 | 0.162 | 0.462 | 0.098 | 0.037 | 0.030 |
| McLelvey and Zavoina $R^2$ | 0.069 | 0.339 | 0.235 | 0.105 | 0.262 | 0.540 | 0.174 | 0.070 | 0.052 |

*Note:* Estimates are odds ratios with standard errors in bracket.
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

associated with *ethnocultural* identities, such as the association linking folk religion with Teochew community, Daoism with Guangxi community, and Confucianism with Hakka. A vein of literature argued that folk religion in China is more diffuse and inclusive (Zhang et al. 2021). This may be true for the belief system of folk religion, but we found no evidence for folk religion *identity* to be inherently boundary-crossing and inclusive. As a communal and ethnic identity marker, Chinese folk religions hold a history of facilitating inter-communal conflicts such as the Punti–Hakka war (Overmyer 1976; ter Haar 2019). At least in contexts with strong nativism (e.g., Guangdong), the boundary between folk religion identity and other identities is clear.

The situation differed in Manchuria, where the boundaries between religious identities across family traditions and ethnocultural communities were weak or nonsignificant. Eastern religious identities are as likely to be found in an eastern religious household as in Abrahamic household, and vice versa. Overall, these findings defy the presumption that Eastern religions are more syncretic or diffusive in nature. Instead, eastern religious identities in some cases were sectarian, whereas Christians and Muslims negotiated a coexistence of identities. Historically, all major religious traditions, Christianity and Islam included, have exhibited some levels of syncretism despite their seemingly strong doctrinal convictions.


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