

# **Chinese Singaporeans who are Buddhists or Taoists**

**Religious Identity as a Framework to  
Understand Them**

# The Motivation

- ❖ Growth of both communities – 1990 - 2000 and 2000 - 2010\* (cf Census of the Population 2000 & 2010).
- 2000 Census – Buddhists exponentially increased. 2010 – Buddhists numbers dipped but Taoists numbers grew.
- ❖ Studies emerged from Singapore: Rationalization/Intellectualization of religions (i.e. modernization); Ethnicity (Chinese = Buddhists and/or Taoists).

# The Motivation

## THE KEY QUESTIONS:

- Why are they Buddhists or Taoists?
- Why do they want to continue as Buddhists or Taoists?

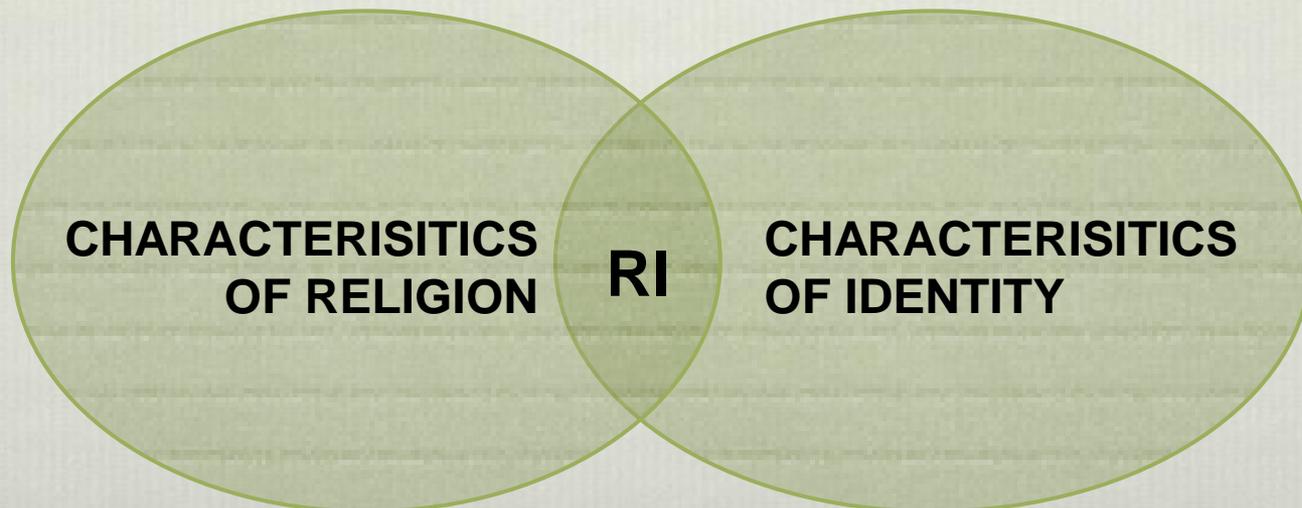
Ethnicity/Racial Identity? Social/Group Identity?  
Rationalization/Intellectualization? Others?

# The Framework

- ❖ Religious Identity = Racial Identity, Religiosity, Religious Identification, ... .

???

- ❖ Religious Identity =



# The Framework

- ❖ Characteristics of Identity: *Sense of invigorating continuity and wellbeing amidst the various transformations experienced by an individual such that identity functions as a personal referent system (cf Erik Erikson)*
- ❖ Characteristics of Religion: *Experiences with one or more of the following metaphysical or divine realities: sacred beings, texts, community, and actions or forms.*

# The Framework

Religious Identity = Individual's **awareness of** and **commitment to**: (a) a **continuous** and **invigorating inner wellbeing** and (b) a **sense of belonging** and **desire to extend the wellbeing to the socio-cultural community associated with the divine.**

**Awareness** and **Commitment** arise out of an individual's reciprocal interactions with the divine and the socio-cultural community associated with the divine.

=> What factors-dimensions establish and sustain the religious identity of Buddhists or Taoists?

# The Field Work & Analysis

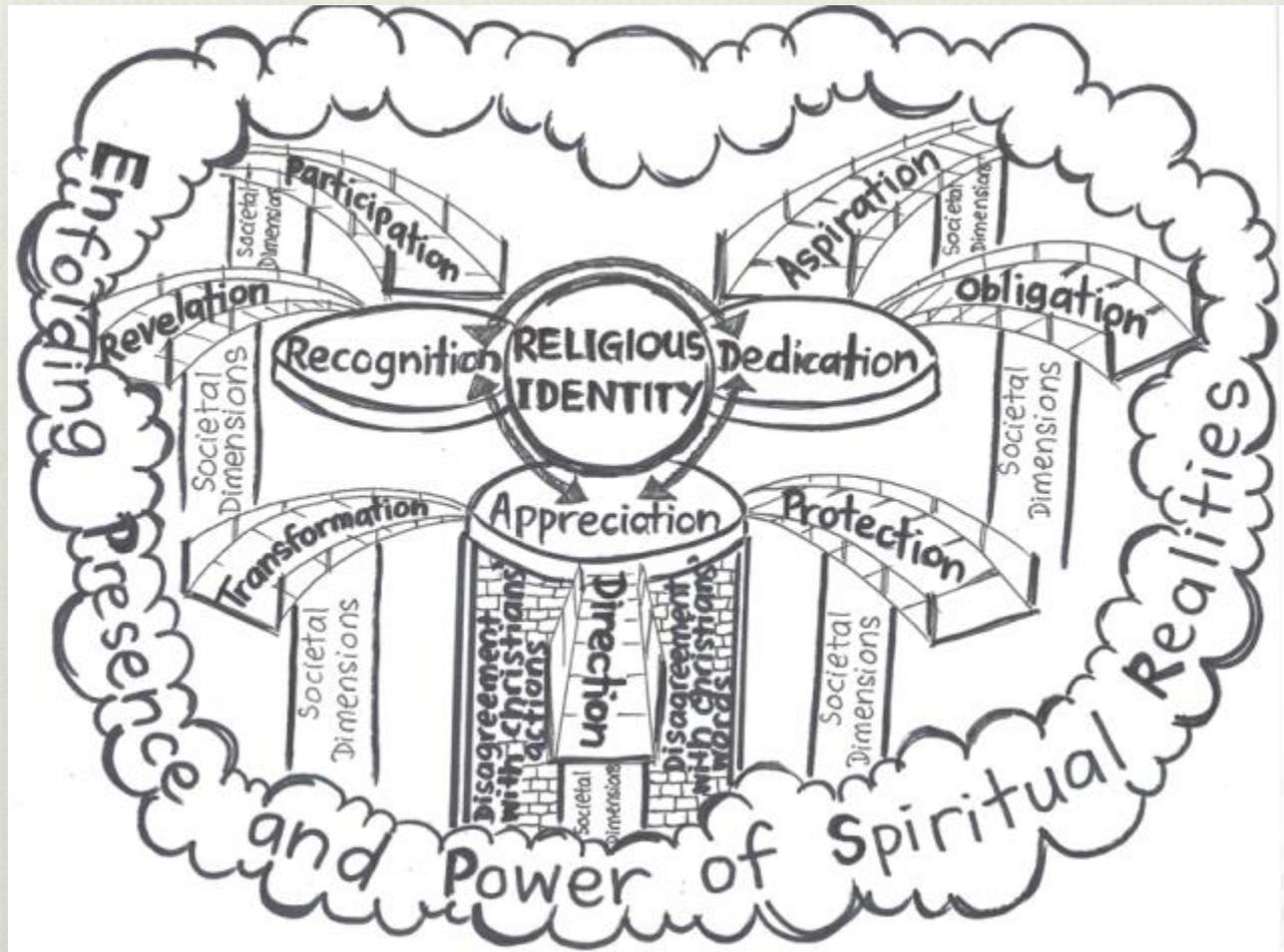
## The Voices & Experiences of Adherents!

- ❖ Theoretical Review: Sociology, Psychology, History.
- ❖ Number: 32 Chinese Singaporeans (born & raised in Singapore) – 16 Buddhists, 16 Taoists.
- ❖ Profile: **Gender** (Females and Males); **Years as Adherent** (recent <5 years and long-time >5 years); **Education** (higher education and non-higher education); **Relationship** (introduced by temples/organizations, friends/former colleagues, randomly approached at temples/organizations).

# The Field Work & Analysis

- ❖ Qualitative Study -Etic: F2F interviews, Observations/Field Notes (dhamma class, rituals/services, temples/organizations), Grounded Theory.
- ❖ Disclaimer: NOT an attempt to validate the veracity of the spiritual or metaphysical constituents, despite the fact that these constituents have contributed significantly to the religious identity of the participants.

# The Findings



# The Findings

## ❖ The Enfolding Presence and Power of Spiritual Realities

*“... sacred beings or forces able to dispense spiritual health to humans and to whom humans can respond in a variety of ways, as well as sacred texts and acts that cater to spiritual needs by providing insights to enable the transcendence of the biological selves, and unity and meaning to human existence ... these metaphysical constituents or realities surround them and continuously ...*

# The Findings

- ❖ 3 Key Domains & Subdomains:
  1. Recognition (being aware): Participation and Revelation.
  2. Appreciation (being grateful): Transformation, Direction, & Protection. \* Appreciation via Disagreement with Christian Practices.
  3. Dedication (being committed): Aspiration & Obligation.

# Domain 1: Recognition

## Participation

- Family
- Friends: *kalyana mitras* (spiritual friends), 佛友 (friends in Buddha), and 恩人 (benefactors).

# Immersed in the environment of rituals & deities – 拜拜, 念佛, meditation, 大伯公, 关帝.

# Moved beyond initial practices of Taoism as being confined to 神坛 altars built for gods, 庙宇 territorial temples, the ritual of 跳童 or shamanic dances performed by divining youths, and the use of 咒 *zhou* or mantra-like chants.

# Domain 1: Recognition

## Revelation

- Destiny 缘分: Positive guiding force that led them to come into contact with Buddhism or Taoism — 随缘; looked after them (enabling understanding).
- Manifestation: dreams (哪吒), force (emitted from 高僧), stimulus and response (感应), and miraculous acts (eviction of evil spirits, change of taste in food offered to ancestors).

# Domain 2: Appreciation

## Transformation

“joy,” “awoke,” “being enlightened,” “fulfillment,” “happier every day,” and “wellbeing” – participants engaging in the practices that provided a channel to access the help readily rendered by spiritual realities – such as meditation, 念佛绕佛, gleaning insights from the teachings.

- Overcoming Personal Crises (depression/suicidal tendencies, unhappy marriage).
- Renewing Negative Attitudes (joyful, less ill-tempered).

# Domain 2: Appreciation

## Direction

Sacred texts in Buddhism and Taoism: insights are “practical,” “holistic,” “logical,” and “helpful,” and thus they became a stable niche of values that provided the direction for them to live right in this life in preparation for the life hereafter.

- Insights: understanding the participants gleaned from the teachings that pertain to realities beyond what is observable in the physical world.
- Ethics: teachings of both religions is “it is a form of education philosophy” – i.e., these texts provide ethical guidelines for the participants to “know yourself”, live harmoniously, & 做人.

# Domain 2: Appreciation

## Protection

Physical + Internal: Through specific petitions to the gods and deities for help and the performance of rituals, the participants experienced different forms of protection.

- Daily Protection: daily ritual of *bai bai* and the occasional specific visits to the temples to seek the help of the deities or gods, she found refuge, sustenance, and an inherent sense of peace.
- Special Protection: Emergency (malevolent spirit), from physical harm.

# Domain 2: Appreciation

## Appreciation via Disagreement

With how Christians in Singapore (a) responded towards these realities and (b) expressed the teachings that are recorded in the Bible.

- Insensitivity: mockery/insult/lack of respect towards Taoism and Buddhism – 淨身, via pulpit/evangelism, burning ancestral altars.
- Inconsistency: ways Christians presented their spiritual realities, which are inconsistent with what they perceive to be logical and helpful (e.g. over-emphasis on the removal of the consequences of an individual's sins or wrongdoing simply by asking for Jesus' forgiveness without talking about personal responsibility; the lack of emphasis by Christians on personal cultivation).

# Domain 3: Dedication

“Why Buddhism or Taoism in the days ahead?”

## Aspiration

- Personal Oriented: Personal wellbeing, both for this life and future ones (free from re-birth) through personal cultivation (mindfulness, being upright person, detachment, abstinence-adherence to Five Precepts).
- Others Oriented: Extend spiritual wellness brought about by spiritual realities for the benefit of others (son/daughter, parent, member of society), e.g. being a role model, creating harmonious relationships, chanting, & aspiring to be nun (燃身供佛), bodhisattva, and a life-long assistant to a divining youth.

# Domain 3: Dedication

## Obligation

... responsibility to allay the anxieties arising from the life hereafter through dedicating themselves to continuously seek the wellbeing dispensed by the spiritual realities for their parents and ancestors ...

Note: Filial Piety – both physical & spiritual.

- Present Life: 回報 (brought Mum to take Triple Refuge, encouraged Father to chant *Amitabha*, copy *suttas*, accumulate and transfer merit – 回向)
- After Life: 回向 – to living and deceased (lessen suffering and time spent in cyclical rebirths); care for ancestral tablets (feeding them)

# Discussion

- ❖ The centrality of spiritual realities to establish and sustain religious identity.
- ❖ Sensitivity to these realities ≠ Study sought to validate these realities.
- ❖ Societal factors mentioned by participants – relationships, structures (temples, organizations), ethnicity, familial & cultural values = align with research.

# Conclusion

❖ Implications for Research: Voices of adherents/participants.

❖ Implications for Practice:

Elmer (Cross-Cultural Servanthood): Learn about others, Learn from others, Learn with others.

- Learn about: basic, from a distance, taking in information
- Learn from: asking questions, seeking understanding, probing the thoughts of others = Listening!
- Learn with: in relationship, in mutuality, in partnership where neither side is above or beneath = Being Humble & Inquisitive to explore and understand!

# Conclusion

❖ 至心皈命，无上主宰，创造诸有，万德慈父

With all my heart I take refuge, In God Most High, Who created all things, The Merciful God, Source of all goodness.

❖ 至心皈命，赎罪基督，复我性明，圆满妙道

With all my heart I take refuge, In Christ the Redeemer of sin, Who restores my true nature, The Perfect and the Wonderful Word.

❖ 至心皈命，清静圣灵，随机应感，充满子民

With all my heart I take refuge, In the Pure and Tranquil Holy Spirit, Who at all times and in all places responds to our needs, Who fills God's people.

# Conclusion

## The Eight-fold Path:

### Wisdom

1. Right Understanding
2. Right Intention

### Morality

3. Right Speech
4. Right Conduct
5. Right Occupation

### Concentration

6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

## The Eight Beatitudes

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit.
2. Blessed are those who mourn.
3. Blessed are the meek.
4. Blessed are those who thirst and hunger for righteousness.
5. Blessed are the merciful.
6. Blessed are the pure in heart.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers.
8. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness.

# Discussion

Questions? Comments? Feedback?