The relative opening up of China following the “Ten Lost Years” of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) has offered Western sociologists of religion an unprecedented opportunity to observe and study new (to the West) ways of being religious (and non-religious) within a particular kind of atheistic regime.¹ Those most likely to benefit from this opportunity are, obviously, sinologists with an understanding of the languages and cultures of China. This does not, however, mean that scholars with little or no knowledge of China cannot learn much from studying, either directly or indirectly, the Chinese population and their religions. An exploration of its people and its religions may, moreover, serve to enrich Western scholars’ perceptions of the religions with which they are more familiar by providing valuable insights into what these religions are not—which can, perhaps paradoxically, help them to obtain a deeper understanding of what they are.

As Rudyard Kipling (1891) once wrote: “And what should they know of England who only England know?”

As a Western sociologist of religion, I claim no expertise on the topic of Chinese religions. Rather, as one who does not speak the Chinese language and has visited China on no more than eight, relatively-brief occasions, I have found myself on a steep learning curve, becoming aware of some of the issues related to China and its culture that might be taken for granted by those better acquainted with the scene. Hence, it is from this perspective as a non-expert that I shall attempt provide other Western scholars, possibly even less familiar with China, a context within which to understand the practice of religion in China. The chapter begins by presenting some introductory background information on China’s historical and cultural development and then goes on

¹ In this chapter, “religion” will be used very loosely to refer to almost any phenomenon that might be considered “religious” by either Westerners or Chinese.
to discuss several basic methodological points regarding comparative approaches to the concept of religion.

I. The Diversity of China’s History and Culture

Essential to an understanding of China (and its religions) is the recognition of its enormous diversity and remarkable cultural history, in contradistinction to frequent Western depictions of Chinese conformity. In the Western mind, China is most often symbolized by such popular images as Confucian scholars, the Great Wall, the giant panda, Mao Zedong, and more recently, the defiant students who faced down tanks in Tiananmen Square, the looming skyscrapers and smog of Beijing, and the peasants in coolie hats toiling in the fields. But there is, of course, far more to China than these images could possibly convey.

The immense size of the Chinese population alone should alert us to the great variety to be found within the People’s Republic of China (PRC): China’s 1.3 billion inhabitants account for approximately one fifth of the world’s population. Whilst the Han comprise by far the largest ethnic group (or 92% of the population), China’s 55 ethnic minorities total over 100 million individuals. Although Mandarin is the official national language (except in Hong Kong and Macau), approximately 100 different indigenous languages belonging to six language families are currently in use across China, most of which are mutually unintelligible. Introducing an element of further complexity are the largely self-governing “special administrative” territories of Hong Kong\(^2\) and Macau\(^3\) and the existence of the Republic of China (ROC)\(^4\).

The vibrancy of China’s demographic composition is matched by the richness of its history. Contemporary China is descended from one of the world’s oldest continuous civilizations. According to some archaeologists, Peking man was using tools and fire half a million years ago. China’s written history dates back to the Shang Dynasty, with the introduction of one of the world’s oldest writing systems in the second millennium BCE. The Terracotta Army bears witness to

\(^2\) England returned Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997.
\(^3\) Macau was restored to the Chinese by Portugal in 1999.
\(^4\) The ROC consists of Taiwan (formerly known as Formosa) and several additional small islands to the southeast of mainland China.