

Pre-service teachers' interpretations of religious policy in citizenship education in China

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Abstract

Studies about religion and education in post-Mao China have become more common in recent years, but very few have touched on teacher and religious education at the basic education level. This study adopted a mixed methodology approach (questionnaire, interview, and lesson design analysis) to report Chinese pre-service teachers' interpretations of religious policy in citizenship education. The analyses of the findings reveal that pre-service teachers actively constructed their understandings of religion-citizenship, rather than passively adopting the officially-promoted religion-citizenship relationship.

Keywords

Pre-service teacher, religious policy, citizenship education, China

Introduction

In recent years, due to increased interest in religion and education in post-Mao China, studies on both subjects have become more common (e.g. Zhao, 2017). However, because of the Chinese government's strict separation of religion and education, very few have touched on the role of teachers in relation to religious education, especially at the basic education level.

Many studies have pointed out the importance of studying teachers' approaches as a complement to the study of such official texts as policy documents and national syllabi, given that teachers are important socialization agents and significant parts of the lived, enacted curriculum. McCreery (2005) viewed teachers' attitudes as directly affecting how they taught religious education, while Liljestrand (2015) noted that religious education teachers' approaches to cultural religious traditions can contribute to how citizenship in a plural society is constructed in school. A sub-group of the REDCo study (Want, Bakker, ter Avest, & Everington, 2009) studied religious education teachers from different countries, and pointed out that their approaches to religion in their own classes relate to their individual biographies. Moreover, teachers' lack of knowledge about religion, along with government and school policies on religion, may cause them to avoid addressing religion in their classroom teaching (Anderson et al., 2015).

In the context of China, teachers, including pre-service teachers, have long faced challenges to teaching religion. First, teachers themselves have very little introduction to religion. While religion is purportedly included in such basic education subjects in China as geography and history, it is mainly treated as a cultural artefact. The most

direct (and only) appearance of religion and religious policy in Chinese schools is in high school citizenship education, as part of the moral-political education subject. The high school moral-political curriculum guidelines¹ cover four compulsory courses (*Politics and life*, *Economy and life*, *Life and philosophy*, and *Culture and life*). In the *Politics and Life* course, religious policy is addressed in the section on minority autonomous management policy to enhance social cohesion; students are expected to be able to “understand China’s basic religious policy,” to “correctly understand and master the freedom of religion in the *Constitution*.” Some introductory religion courses have begun to be offered at the higher education level in recent decades (Zhuo, 2003), but mainly in non-teacher education universities, where few pre-service teachers can access them.

Second, China’s citizenship education has taken a contradictory approach to the introduction of religious policy. The People’s Education Press² (PEP) moral-political textbook (2014, 6th edition), for example, includes only one lesson on religious policy, consisting of three sections: a brief review of religions in China; an overview of official religious policies (i.e., freedom of religious belief; the subordination of religion to law and principles of independence, self-support, and self-government; and, guiding religion to fit socialism); and the promotion of the scientific spirit. In addition, after studying religious policy in *Politics and Life*, students next study *Life and Philosophy*, which is based on Marxist atheism. These conflicting introductions cause confusion for both teachers and students.

Third, pre-service teachers who entered teacher education programmes with prior religious experience faced additional challenges. Since 2007, China’s Free Normal Education Policy (involving six leading normal universities located in developed, Han-dominant urban areas) has recruited students from minority areas, and required them to return to their hometowns to teach, after graduating. This has brought more ethnic minority students and students with religious experience to Han-dominated, highly secular areas to study teaching religious policy, before returning to their ethnic minority areas to teach.

In the following section, this article first reviews the literature on citizenship and religion in education, and its impact on the religion and citizenship education pre-service teachers experienced as students and need to teach in their future classrooms. Second, the article describes the design and implementation of the study. Third, it presents its major findings. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the pattern of pre-service citizenship education teachers’ interpretations of religious policy in China.

The literature: Citizenship and religion in education

The relationship between citizenship and religion in education is complex, and has long been contested. Some scholars have argued modern national societies are inherently

¹ China is working on the revision of high school citizenship education curriculum guideline. The final version of the high school citizenship education curriculum guideline had not been issued at the time this article was written. The textbook provided for pre-service teachers to analyze was based on the 2004 curriculum guideline.

² Which is the only high school citizenship education textbook used throughout China, except Shanghai city.

secular, and depend on the disappearance or marginalization of religious worldviews and communities (Gellner, 1983). Similarly, an important distinction has been made between civic identity, which is based on citizenship in a territorially-defined nation-state, and primordial identity, which is based on shared kinship, language, religion, or a combination thereof (Geertz, 1973). From this perspective, civic identity should replace primordial identity in modern nation-building. The historical process of producing modernity by replacing religious identity with civic identity is called secularization. Following the European Enlightenment's critique of religion, the harbinger of modernity (Israel, 2001), nationalism was regarded as modern, and religion as ancient, or as transcending history.

Other studies, however, have noted the value of religion in education (Crook, Freathy, Wright, 2011). In addition, it has been empirically shown that religiosity and spirituality, as hypothesized traits, have a mixed relationship (both negative and positive) with mental health outcomes and other societal issues; indeed, a growing body of research has reinforced their beneficial effects. For example, an increase in personal religiosity has been shown to ameliorate such negative outcomes as depression, serious illness, and delinquent behaviour, among others (Cited in Plummer & Hilton, 2014). Moreover, Jackson (2014) noted many Western publicly-funded education systems have recently become more accepting of religious diversity in education, reflecting the need to promote communication between people of different religious and non-religious backgrounds, to promote social cohesion.

Therefore, as Crook et al. (2011) summarized, such factors as national variance in the historical relationship between the state and faith-based communities, the nature and degree of multiculturalism, socio-political structures, and international influences may impact the extent to which citizenship and religion should be a part of education and educational institutions.

The relationship between citizenship and religion in education in China is not an exception. Dynastic China did not have the concept of "citizen"; it was an empire unified by its Confucian moral order and civilization, and was in no way a nation state until the 20th century. Since the Western Han Dynasty, through the "Ban the hundred schools of thought except Confucianism" movement, Confucianism was taken as state-sanctioned ideological orthodoxy. "Education" in ancient China was the equivalent of citizenship education, and was called *jiao xing ye*, which means, to teach Confucian ethics describing the social hierarchy of interpersonal and citizen-nation relationships. Religion in ancient China, as Guo and Zhang (2015) suggested, was a follower, while the state was the dominant leader.

In the late 19th century, Chinese people were obliged to cultivate a modern understanding of nationhood and citizenship, due to a string of humiliating military defeats and the resultant unequal treaties forced upon China by the victorious Western powers. Chinese started to reflect on the traditional influence of Confucianism³ which define the moral/ethical relationships between the emperor and people, husband and wife, and parents and children, particularly the role each was expected to play to ensure

³ While there are debates as to whether Confucianism is a religion, in contemporary China, it was not viewed as one.

social harmony, and viewed itself as the world's dominant culture. China's transformation toward modernization began as an effort to learn from the West, and to adapt those lessons to suit Chinese realities. This introduced, for the first time, the concept of citizenship, which changed the millennia-old relationship between the Chinese nation and its people. During the early 20th century, citizenship education was deemed essential to staving off China's national collapse (Peterson & Hayhoe, 2001); to that end, it focused on modernizing the nation, largely by fostering a modern citizenry.

Religion in the modern world, as Veer (2015) argued, is in important ways shaped and framed by nationalism. Chinese elites in the late-nineteenth century blamed China's inability to modernize on the prevalence of communal religions in the countryside, thereby triggering a quest for a "modern" approach to religion that differentiated between "(modern and acceptable) religions" and "(backward and sometimes barely-legal) superstitions" (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011).

The Western concept of religion – i.e., as a structured system of beliefs and practices that exists separate from society, and that concentrates believers in a church-like organization – was introduced into China during that time. Some Chinese intellectuals of the time claimed religion was an obstacle to the development of science and democracy in China. Marx's characterization of religion as "the opium of the people," which was introduced into China during the Republican era (1911– 49), amplified this.

The 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) ushered in an age of communist political education. Confucian ideals and citizenship education curricula developed during the early 20th century were replaced by Marxist philosophy, based on Marxist theories of dialectical and historical materialism, political economy, and scientific socialism. In the early years of the PRC, China's political education curriculum consisted mainly of the transmission of political ideology. After the introduction of economic and social reforms in 1978, changes were made, including an increased emphasis on citizenship education and moral development.

However, though the PRC has highlighted the modern constitutional principle of religious freedom, the influence of Marx's opium thesis remains salient. Tao (2008) argued that contemporary Chinese attitudes towards religion have been deeply influenced by Marx's three-part rejection of religion; for Marx,

Religion is an opiate used by internal reactionaries and foreign imperialists to anesthetize the people. Believers are victims who have been anesthetized by the drug... Religion is only a transitional phenomenon and will gradually decline and finally disappear.

Although religion in the PRC has always been under strict state control, the social changes stemming from the 1978 economic reforms have left people, particularly young people, looking for new beliefs, leading to increased interest in religion. Although education and religion are separated by Article 16 of the PRC's *Compulsory Education Law*, this change poses a potential challenge to China's citizenship education, which is based on Marxism (Zhao, 2017).

This study

Using the case of preservice citizenship education teachers (majoring in middle school Moral-Political Education) from East China Normal University (ECNU), this study explored the religion-citizenship relationship reflected in pre-service teachers' understanding and presentation of religious policy in China. It adopted a mixed methodology of questionnaire, lesson design analysis, and interview to collect data to answer the following three research questions:

1. How do pre-service teachers understand and present religion and religious policy in citizenship education in China?
2. How do their personal experience with religion impact their understanding and presentation of religious policy in citizenship education?
3. What kinds of religion-citizenship relationships are reflected in these understandings and presentations?

A questionnaire was designed, based on related existing studies, to gather data about how pre-service teachers' experience with religion (ethnicity, parents' and grandparents' religious beliefs, channels to learn religions) influenced their perceptions of religion (religion and me, religion and god, religion and socialist China), religious policy (religion and school education, three levels of China's religious policy), and two statements (What's your opinion about Marx's statement "religion is the opium of people"; Do you think the statement "promoting freedom of religious belief, to promote scientific spirit" is contradictory). The questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS 18.0 software. The Cronbach alpha of the questionnaire was .815. Sixty-five pre-service student teachers from Classes of 2014 and 2015 completed the questionnaire, including 46 Han (70.8%), five Tibetan (7.7%), four Uygur (6.2%), two Hui (3.1%), two Mongolian (3.1%), two Tujia (3.1%), one Kazak (1.5%), one Yi (1.5%), one Zhuang (1.5%), and one Ge Lao (1.5%) student. Eight students clearly stated their belief in either Tibetan Buddhism (two) or Islam (six). Table 1 shows the questionnaire respondents' personal information.

Table 1 Questionnaire respondents personal information

Gender	Male	3.1%	Grandparents believe in religion	0 person	58.5%
	Female	96.9%		1 person	4.6%
Hometown location	East	18.5%		2 persons	16.8%
	Central	12.3%		all	18.5%
	West	32.3%	Rural/urban	Rural	44.6%
	West (MAR ⁴)	29.2%		urban	55.4%
	Central (MAR)	7.7%	In-land class	Junior middle	4.6%
Ethnicity	Han	70.8%		No	80%
	Minority	29.2%		High school	10.8%
Believe in Religion	Yes	13.8%		Junior, high schools	4.6%
	No	75.4%	How did you	Media	50.8%

Minority Autonomous Region. China had five minority autonomous regions, four in west (Xinjiang, Tibet, Ningxia and Guangxi) and one in central China (Inner Mongolia).

	Perhaps in future	9.2%	learn about religion	School	38.5%
Political affiliation	CCP	21.5%		Family	32.3%
	Youth League	78.5%		Religious ceremony	32.3%
Parents believe in religion	0 person	73.8%		Religious book	24.6%
	Mother	4.6%		Friend	21.5%
	Father	1.5%		Religion believers	10.8%
	both	20%		Other	7.7%
				Teachers believe in religion	6.2%

Pre-service teachers from the Class of 2014 were invited to design a high school citizenship education lesson introducing religious policy, based on the PEP⁵ Moral-Political Education textbook (2014, 6th edition). Specifically, they were asked to analyse the foci and most challenging parts of the lesson, design the teaching steps, add appropriate teaching materials, and explain their design intentions. In ECNU, as in most Chinese teacher education programmes, pre-service teachers mainly study subject knowledge in their first two years, before starting to learn lesson design, pedagogy, and instruction in their third; therefore, the students were capable of designing such a lesson.

Per the PEP requirements, the lesson included three sections: a brief review of religions in China; religious policy; and, promoting the scientific spirit. All 39 students finished the lesson design. Two were male (5%), 10 were ethnic minorities (26%, including two each Tibetans and Mongolians, and one each Uyгур, Tu jia, Kazakh, Hui, Ge lao, and Yi). All minority pre-service teachers professed religious beliefs, while no Han pre-service teachers did.

Subsequently, 10 students were interviewed to explore how their experience with religion influenced their understanding of religion and religious policy in China – three from the Class of 2015, and seven from the Class of 2014. Each interview took about 25 minutes. The data analysed in this study were collected between October and December, 2016. Due to the small sample, and the large number of female preservice teachers in the teacher education programme (unbalanced gender distribution is increasingly common in teacher education in China), this study makes no attempts to generalize its findings.

Pre-service teachers' perceptions of religion and religious policy: Data from the questionnaire

Generally, pre-service teachers showed positive attitudes toward religion. They agreed people with religious beliefs were more joyful (Mean, $M = 3.13$, with 3 and 4, respectively, representing “no preference” and “agree”), were more inclined to seek help from religion (3.33), behaved more ethically and morally (3.65), got along better with others (3.33), and had more hope (3.38). They were willing to read some religious books (3.17), and agreed religion had a positive influence (3.83) when compared to

⁵ Which is the only high school citizenship education textbook used in whole China, except Shanghai city.

school education, helped shape one's world views and values (3.03), and would benefit school citizenship education if incorporated (3.40). They also believed that, in a socialist nation, religion does not conflict with communism (3.20), nor with socialist core values (3.31). They agreed they know China's religious policy well (3.20), and were familiar with at least one of the five major religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism) in China (3.11). They would also be very considerate when interacting with peers who believed in religion ($M = 4.12$, with 4 and 5, respectively, representing "agree" and "strongly agree"). Only 8.5% agreed with Marx's statement that "Religion is the opium of the people," while 40.7% disagreed, and 47.5% saw both the benefit and potential harm of religion. Similarly, only 3.15% of respondents agreed that religion conflicts with science, while 86.2% disagreed.

Pre-service teachers highly agreed that China is a nation with guaranteed freedom of religious belief (4.08), and in the separation of religion and state (4.05). They also agreed with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) requirements that religion should: stop criminal uses of religion (4.69); stop foreign forces from suborning religion (4.62); resist heresy (4.67); guide religion forces to be patriotic (4.28); support the CCP's leadership (4.38), support socialism (4.38); and, obey national laws and rules (4.6).

The pre-service teachers also indicated they experienced religious influences through channels other than family (e.g., religious book reading, propagators, etc.), showed two levels of understanding toward religion, and were more concerned with "religion and me" (individual level), whether there were a god, than with "religion and the nation". They also indicated that being religiously influenced by a propagator was correlated with their perceptions of religion and me (e.g. "When I feel confused, I would seek helps from religion," $\eta = .296$, $p = .017$; that religious believers are more ethical, $\eta = .285$, $p = .021$; that religious believers know how to get along with others better, $\eta = .278$, $p = .031$), and whether there were a god (there is a god, $\eta = .352$, $p = .004$). All items had η values above 0.2 and p values below 0.05, indicating all were correlated. Pre-service teachers who had been influenced by a propagator were more likely to agree there is a god (71% vs 28%), and that religious believers are more ethical (100% vs 69%), than those who had not.

Pre-service teachers who had religious influence from their families showed a deeper degree of acceptance of religion (See Table 2). All the items in Table 2, $p < 0.05$, $\eta > 0.3$, showing correlation. Besides, preservice teachers with both parents believe in religion, showed deeper degree of acceptance of religion in more levels: in addition to considering "religion and me" and whether there is a god, they also reflected on the relationship between religion and the nation.

Table 2 Parents religious belief status and preservice teachers' perceptions of religion

Domain	Items	Both parents believe	Neither parents believe
Religion and me	when I feel confused, I would seek help from religion	23%	6%
	I may believe in a certain religion in the future	42%	13%
	religion has a positive influence on one's life	100%	65%

	religion has a deep influence on my life	54%	10%
Whether there is a god	there is a god	54%	23%
	religion conflicts with science	0%	23%
Religion and the nation	religion is not suitable for modern society	8%	0%
	religion has a positive influence on human society	100%	65%
	religion and state should be separate	50%	89%

Pre-service teachers' presentation of religion and religious policy: Data from the lesson design and interview

When interpreting the lesson goals, the participating pre-service teachers all followed the textbook's logic. Most Han students expected students to master the policy, and to use scientific spirit to guide them to become good citizens. Many religious-background students emphasized cultivating students' respect for and understanding of people with religious beliefs.

In terms of lesson design, the minority pre-service teachers generally designed sections to present religion in greater depth than their Han peers. For example, most Han students introduced religions in China by showing pictures/videos of religious architecture, and ethnic minority festivals and cultures; one Han pre-service teacher stated that "in daily life, Han students may have very little opportunity to know religion" (PS01). In contrast, religious-background pre-service teachers suggested showing short video of typical religious rituals to start the introduction.

Han students' lesson designs included both examples drawn from reality, and various dilemmas/situations/stories to explain the three aspects of China's religious policy, while all religious-background pre-service teachers used real-life examples. For example, one Han student use this example to clarify freedom of religious belief:

The national college entrance examination was drawing near. Xiao Ming was very nervous, so he joined his grandma, who believed in Buddhism, to worship Buddha at a temple. Later, he became a Buddhist, too. However, the night before the national college entrance examination, he didn't sleep well, and thus performed poorly on the exam. Xiao Ming was not happy, so he decided to give up his religious belief.

Explaining the scientific spirit was viewed as the most challenging part of this lesson by nearly all student teachers, regardless of their religious-background, given that there are many studies which argue in favour of the compatibility of science and religion (e.g. Billingsley et, al., 2014). One student pointed out that "teaching freedom of religious belief, is about faith in god; on the other hand, it promotes the scientific spirit" (PS02). One Tibetan student suggested "this is too challenging, since all Tibetans believe in religion" (PS03), while another Tibetan pre-service teacher explained the challenge of teaching Tibetan students religion

Since all Tibetan students have experience with religion, if we try to absolutely avoid religion when talking about citizenship education... I think the effect won't be good... Moreover, most Tibetan students never leave Tibet; they know too little of the outside world. (PS04)

Some Han students suggested a solution to this problem; it is to design the lesson to cater for students' different cultural and religious backgrounds.

It is important to design the lesson by analysing students first. If most students are Han and don't believe in religion, then highlight the scientific spirit and atheism. If many students believe in religion, then focus on freedom of religious belief, and guide them to integrate and serve socialism. (PS05)

Possible explanations and discussion

First, pre-service teachers' positive attitudes toward religion can be partly explained by China's traditional tolerance of religious diversity. In Chinese culture, the society that will flourish is one that can celebrate a diversity of beliefs and rituals, including atheism (Laliberte, 2016). Exclusivity of religious belief, while common in the West, is not a part of Chinese civilization. Religious tolerance filled a need in the Confucian state by permitting a response to the ultimate questions of life (suffering, frustration, death), with which Confucianism was not concerned. Thus, Chinese sought help from the gods and spirits of any religion they felt could help them in times of need (Goldman, 1986), without threatening the underlying ideological orthodoxy of Imperial China, Confucianism. Some studies have pointed out that many Chinese nonbelievers, while not seeing themselves as religious, endorsed some of religion's positive effects (Jing, 2014).

Second, pre-service teachers' (especially religious believers') higher degree of agreement with the PRC's management of religion, and deeper thinking about the religion-state relationship reflected China's long history of managing or controlling religion (Goldman, 1986). Studies have pointed out that, in China, religion is always the follower of the state. On the other hand, their attitudes also partly reflect that, in the context of contemporary China, managing the religion-state relationship effectively means state supervision of organized religions, with some religions being deemed acceptable, and others not (Laliberte, 2016). Between 1953 and 1957, the CCP compelled all religious believers to join one of the five main religions; many of the remaining religions were labelled superstitions, and found it difficult to survive. Therefore, being in line with the state's management policy is important for a religion, which may inform believers' strong acceptance thereof.

Pre-service teachers' higher degree of agreement with PRC's management of religion also partly explains their adherence to official curriculum requirements and textbooks' teaching content, as shown in the lesson design data. One religious believer suggested in her interview that, in her future teaching, she would follow closely the textbook.

I shall mainly repeat the textbook, since most students in [her] future classrooms may not be familiar or agree with the content... while the school and policy have very strict requirements for teachers' teaching (PS06)

Third, Han pre-service teachers' selection of more superficial examples (e.g. showing religious architecture, rather typical religious rituals) to introduce religion, and unreal stories to explain freedom of religious belief, can be explained by China's strict separation of religion and education, and by Han students' limited access to religion. Family is the only agent through which non-adults are legally allowed to receive religious education, and it is illegal to involve minors in public religious activities. Students from religious families have access to family-based religious education, while students from nonreligious families have limited means of accessing religion. Students are not given the means to expand their understanding of religion during their primary and middle school education, and teacher education programmes avoid the topic. One Han student responded to the question, "What's your opinion of Marx's statement that 'religion is the opium of people?'" by saying, "I think both were able to make people ecstatic" (PS07), showing she had little knowledge of either Marx's statement or religion. All pre-service teachers in this study were required to take 27 compulsory courses at ECNU, none of which was related to religion. This is consistent with the survey data, which shows only 35% of Han pre-service teachers knew of at least one of the five major religions in China, compared to 78% of their minority peers.

Fourth, Han pre-service teachers' responses to the science-religion conflict in their designed lessons reflect the decline of Marxism's influence, and the pragmatic nature of Chinese youth. The conflict between science and religion in China peaked during the Cultural Revolution, and since 1978, Chinese youth have been reportedly gradually losing interest in Marxism. One secular-background student commented that "it is miserable if one even doesn't have a belief system" (PS08), tacitly assuming that Marxism is not a belief system. One Han pre-service teacher's designed lesson even included a debate on "whether Marxism is a religion." Since the founding of the PRC, Marxism has always been officially viewed as a science, not a religion. Moreover, per Kong's (2013), Chinese youth, under great pressure due to the social and economic changes of modern China, are very practical and flexible. For instance, many Han pre-service teachers suggested in their lesson designs that they will decide what should be emphasized in their teaching depend on their students' religious backgrounds. If most students were Han, they would highlight the principle of scientific spirit. If most students were minorities with religious backgrounds, they would highlight the freedom of religious belief.

Fifth, religious-background pre-service teachers' emphases on cultivating students' respect for believers can be viewed as an indirect response to the textbook view that science and religion are incompatible, and as arising from their previous learning experience. As many studies pointed out, the tension between what is taught in textbooks, and how ethnic minority students evaluate their own ethnic culture may affect their feelings about that knowledge (e.g. Zhu, 2007). Thirteen of the 19 minority students in this study had study experience in inland boarding schools, in which certain minority students study away from home, in Han-dominated inland provinces, to receive a better education. As one minority interviewee complained, they "dislike teachers' attitudes to religion in these schools" (PS09). The *Constitution* only states "citizens in PRC have freedom of religion," while the PEP textbook explains that

“citizens have the freedom to believe, or not to believe in religion; to believe in any schools in any religion; to decide to stop/start believing in religion.” Both touch on individual religious freedom, without mentioning the social level (e.g. the relationship between believers and nonbelievers, or believers in different religions, etc.). Pre-service teachers with religious-background noted that gap in designing their lessons.

Conclusion: A framework for understanding pre-service teachers’ interpretation of religious policy in China

This article has reported citizenship education pre-service teachers’ understandings and presentations of religion and religious policy in China. Most of the surveyed students generally held positive attitudes toward religion, and followed the logic in the curriculum guideline and textbooks when introducing China’s religious policy and the scientific spirit. However, this study found a pre-service teachers’ understanding of the Chinese government’s management of religion and the religion-state relationship differed significantly based on their previous experience with religion. This article has also proposed possible explanations for these patterns, including China’s traditional tolerance of religious diversity, its long history of state management/control of religion, Han pre-service teachers’ limited experience with religion, the decline of Marxism’s influence on and the pragmatic nature of Chinese youth, and the impact of religious-background pre-service teachers’ life experience.

In addition, this study supplements the extant literature by suggesting pre-service teachers are not passive followers of the officially-promoted religion-citizenship relationship, but are active “constructors of a religion-citizenship relationship” in a separate system. The officially-promoted religion-citizenship relationship strictly separates non-adults and religion, religion and education, and teachers and religion, thus causing challenges to and opportunities for pre-service teachers constructing their understanding of religion-citizenship.

First, pre-service teachers have been raised in two major, separate family environments – religious- and nonreligious-background families – which are the main legal agent for providing them with religious experience as minors. All pre-service teachers’ formal education was fully separate from religion, including their previous family religious education experience. Moreover, school teachers, regardless of their religious-background, are not allowed to let religion influence their work.

These separations have created very special situation for pre-service teacher education. In the teacher education literature, prior learning experience and previous teachers’ influences are viewed as vital in shaping pre-service teachers’ attitudes toward teacher education programmes and future teaching (Cochran-Smith, et., al., 2015). In China’s case, due to the separation between religious education in families and formal education, and between teachers and religion, when constructing their understandings of religion-citizenship relationship, pre-service teachers must bridge the gap between their family and school education experiences about religion, and may have difficulty finding teachers they respect and can teach them to teach religion. Teachers with religious beliefs must be very cautious when touching on religion-related teaching

topics; not many teachers are believers, and those who are can annoy their students.

Second, upon graduating and returning home to teach, Han and minority pre-service teachers face two separate teaching contexts – an increasing number of the former’s students will be interested in a variety of religions, while almost all of the latter’s will believe in a single religion. While pre-service teachers held positive attitudes toward religion and endorsed the state’s citizenship-religion relationship, especially regarding the management of religion, they also constructed their own solutions and understandings of the religion-citizenship relationship, to respond to their teaching contexts. Han pre-service teachers created differentiated teaching solutions to present the contradictory religion-science relationship when teaching students with different religious-backgrounds; minority pre-service teachers, based on their life experience, emphasized the need “to respect religion believers” in their teaching, to address gaps in contemporary religious policy.

This “teachers as active constructors of religion-citizenship relationship” framework echoes research and practices elsewhere that explored teachers’ belief and teaching practice (e.g. McCreery, 2005) against the background which renewed interest in religious education on the assumption that it could promote much needed “social cohesion” among different religions in a strained context (Grimmitt, 2010).

This “teachers as active constructors of religion-citizenship relationship” framework also demonstrates the complexity of including religion in teacher education programmes, given China’s atheist ideological context.

As a nation based atheist communist ideology, China has strictly separated religion from minors, education, and teachers, causing pre-service teachers to lack knowledge about religion, and opportunities to learn how to teach religion teaching from their own teachers. Therefore, pre-service teachers may be less able to cultivate future generations’ understandings of religion and citizenship in their classrooms. As some studies have pointed out, teachers may avoid addressing, or be afraid to address religious topics in their classrooms, which may lead to stereotyping in classrooms (Anderson et al., 2015).

Due to changes brought by China’s economic reform since 1978, Marxism, including its understandings about religion and citizenship, has gradually become less attractive to many people, especially young people. In addition, due to the increasing number of Chinese who have religious beliefs, today’s pre-service teachers will face more complex teaching contexts than their predecessors. China’s teacher education programmes, rather than following Marx’s hypothesis that people will abandon religion in the end, must abandon their previous ignorance of religion, rethink how best to meet believers and nonbelievers’ religion-related learning needs in official curricula, how to promote a dialogue between believers and nonbelievers in pre-service teacher education programmes. Focusing on the questions, issues, and dilemmas surrounding the relationship between science and religion, and between religion and the state, may improve both their understandings of, and future teaching about religion and citizenship.

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