The Commonalities and Formation Mechanisms of Popular Beliefs in China and the West

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Abstract. Popular beliefs reflect how the public copes with uncertainty and sustains society beyond official religious institutions. This paper offers a comparative analysis of the formation, persistence, and functions of popular beliefs in China and the West. Drawing on anthropological and historical scholarship, it argues that folk religion is not a peripheral phenomenon but a pragmatic system of meaning embedded in local communities and material culture. Using a theoretical framework that traces the shift from rationalist to functionalist explanations of religion, the study examines how popular beliefs arose in response to the limitations of orthodox traditions—Daoism and Buddhism in China, and Christianity in Europe—and fulfilled the practical needs of ordinary people. Case studies include agrarian rituals such as the Chinese cult of the earth god and the Italian Benandanti, as well as crisis phenomena like the 1768 soul-stealing panic in Qing China and the early modern European witch hunts. These examples highlight common mechanisms of adaptation and psychological reassurance, while also revealing differences in institutional integration and elite responses. By demonstrating that popular religion functioned as a "technology of assurance" rather than an abstract theology, this paper underscores its enduring social force.

Keywords: Folk belief, religion, China and Europe, agrarian rituals, functionalist theory of religion.

1. Introduction

Folk belief occupies an important yet often overlooked position within the traditional study of religious life. Existing alongside and beyond formal institutions, folk belief developed not as a peripheral phenomenon but as a dynamic complement, addressing the practical and emotional gaps left by formal doctrines and institutions, especially in times of crisis.

It was increasingly recognised that these practices cannot be reduced to mere superstition or residual "primitive" religion; rather, they constitute adaptive systems of meaning deeply embedded in everyday life. For instance, Scribner investigated popular belief in Europe, especially its relationship with official institutions and the wider society [1]; while Hiebert worked on the Christian perspective of folk belief [2]. Similar works were done in the study of Chinese folk belief, such as Wong's methodological attempt to redefine Chinese folk religion [3], Lin's study of popular religion in cities and villages based on a case study of Wannian [4]. While individual studies have examined folk religion within specific cultural contexts, there is a lack of comparative analyses that explore the universal patterns and unique adaptations in folk religious practices from different regions.

In short, this essay contributes to the field in two ways. First, by identifying the mechanisms underlying the formation, continuity, and functions of folk religion, it offers a structured framework that moves beyond purely descriptive accounts of history. Second, through a comparative analysis of China and the West, this essay demonstrates that folk beliefs are utilitarian and socially embedded, challenging Eurocentric interpretations that have historically framed them as merely irrational or marginal.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Definition

Western scholarship generally defined folk religion as the religious practices that operate outside and alongside the structured theological doctrines of institutionalized faith [5]. Such a definition

highlights the marginal nature of folk beliefs, distinguishing them from the hierarchical and doctrinal structures characteristic of organized religions.

Over time, this conceptualization has been further refined, particularly through the contributions of Asian scholars. Building upon previous definitions, Anesaki emphasized that folk beliefs are marked by the absence of authoritative leaders, formal doctrines, or centralized institutions, which allows them to emerge spontaneously within communities, and could adapt to local conditions flexibly [6]. In this sense, folk belief could be understood as a dynamic and socially embedded system that reflects the lived experiences of ordinary people.

2.2. Theory

Explanations of how popular beliefs originate have shifted significantly across anthropological theory, moving from rationalist accounts to functionalist perspectives. Tylor defined animism as the earliest stage of religion, rooted in the belief that the world is inhabited by spirits. He traced its origins to early humans' reflections on death, dreams, and the soul, which were later extended to animals, plants, objects, and ultimately to notions of an afterlife, spirit possession, and high gods [7]. Although foundational, this framework has been criticized for portraying people as excessively rationalistic, reducing religion to mistaken explanations of natural phenomena. Later thinkers such as Malinowski argued that magic and religion should be understood as a distinctive "mode of behavior, a pragmatic attitude built up of reason, feeling, and will alike", emphasizing their integrative and functional roles in human life [8]. Durkheim further advanced this functionalist approach, contending that "there are no false religions," since all belief systems are shaped by and respond to specific social and historical conditions. He believed that the diversity of religious forms all serve common objectives, meanings, and functions in sustaining social cohesion [9]. Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, this essay argues that the formation mechanisms of popular beliefs in both China and the West can be traced to their practical and utilitarian dimensions [10]. Beliefs did not emerge merely as speculative explanations, but as responses to social, emotional, and material needs. Folk beliefs in China and the West will be compared from the dimensions of how they originate, how they persist, and what functions they serve, aiming to identify their commonalities and formation mechanisms across these dimensions.

3. Analysis of the Commonalities and Mechanisms in the Formation of Folk Beliefs in China and the West

This section mainly explores how folk beliefs in China and the West developed. This paper contends that their shared formation process is driven by the combined influence of "push" and "pull" factors—specifically, the shortcomings of orthodox religions and the additional beliefs that address the public's needs.

3.1. Background of China

Although there was no official religion comparable to the West in China, Buddhism and Daoism functioned as the principal orthodox religions [6]. However, these religions had limitations in addressing the everyday spiritual needs of the general population. Firstly, the doctrines of Daoism and Buddhism were often abstract, rendering them difficult for ordinary people to comprehend fully, let alone to practically apply them in daily life. Secondly, participation in Buddhist or Daoist practices typically required access to temples or monasteries, which posed significant spatial and temporal constraints for those in rural areas. Thus, while orthodox religions could provide spiritual guidance and symbolic support for social order, their utility in everyday life remained relatively limited. As such, folk beliefs emerged as supplements that could fill the gap of addressing concrete everyday-life concerns. Additionally, these folk beliefs could flexibly adapt to local customs and cultural practices, enabling them to offer contextually relevant spiritual support across different regions and social strata.

As a result, a complementary coexistence of orthodox and popular religious traditions was established, forming a complex religious ecology.

3.2. Background of Europe

In comparison, the situation in the West demanded a classified discussion. Firstly, the influence of Christianity varied considerably across different areas. In regions where Christianity was particularly entrenched, institutional support was correspondingly stronger. For instance, in early modern Europe, the French and Spanish kingdoms had more than 20000 parish churches, while England had only 9500, and Scotland with just 1100 [11]. This implies that the laity in areas with higher access to churches could access substantial spiritual and, at times, direct practical support, thereby reducing the necessity of resorting to popular beliefs to sustain daily life. Secondly, Christianity itself exhibited certain ambiguities and limitations in explaining everyday phenomena. While its theological frameworks provided overarching moral and cosmological guidance, they were often ill-equipped to address localized or immediate concerns, such as specific illnesses, agricultural or personal misfortunes, which demanded more pragmatic forms of spiritual intervention. Therefore, popular beliefs—including local saints' cults, folk rituals, and practices associated with household spirits—remained socially and culturally necessary, complementing formal Christian practice by filling these explanatory and functional gaps.

4. Analysis of the Commonalities and Mechanisms in the Continuity of Folk Beliefs in China and the West

This section primarily explores how folk beliefs in China and the West have persisted. This paper argues that their commonality in continuity lies in being deeply rooted within social structures and material culture. In addition, one of the most enduring aspects of religious life is its capacity to leave behind cultural legacies that persist across centuries, often outliving the original political or theological structures in which they arose. In both the Chinese and European contexts, popular belief practices illustrate how folk beliefs were woven into the fabric of everyday life, creating traditions that are as much social as they are spiritual.

4.1. Case of China

In China, the worship of local gods and the veneration of ancestors together formed a distinctive pattern that bound individuals to their kinship groups and to the communities in which they lived. The cult of the earth god, city god, or water deities like Mazu localized divine power within familiar environments, offering a sense of protection and order at the scale of village life. Ancestor worship, meanwhile, reinforced the lineage system, ensuring that kinship was not only a matter of blood but also of shared ritual responsibility. Local deities that possessed multiple extendable divine powers, such as healing, rainmaking, fertility, flood control, and epidemic prevention, provided worshippers with a direct channel to contact the divine, bypassing the previous necessity of relying on scriptures or human intermediaries [12]. For instance, the Chengtang temple responded to prayers for rain since 1116, and its role extended for over 200 years, with records showing its activity even in 1338 [13]. This dynamic is also evident in the Putian Plain of Fujian, where temple networks and lineage structures were interwoven through ritual alliances. These alliances not only reinforced communal cohesion but also underpinned local governance, demonstrating that local concerns were often addressed more effectively through this system than through official administrative channels [14]. These practices thus created a cultural legacy by which religion became a living institution rooted in kinship, territory, and collective memory.

4.2. Case of Europe

In Europe, a similar role was played by the cults of saints. Since the medieval period, saints served as mediators between God and local communities, often associated with specific local contents.

Pilgrimages to local holy sites further created networks of sacred geography that bound communities together in ways similar to Chinese temple networks. To avoid persecution, saint cults often preserve older conceptions of local spirits within a Christian framework [1]. For example, wells and trees in Medieval England often received offerings when people required assistance. This was because among Celtic communities, water was attributed with sacred qualities, and the tradition of holy wells can be traced back to pre-English periods as part of a long-standing collective memory. With the advent of Christianity, the pagan deities once associated with these wells were supplanted by Christian saints, who inherited their cultic significance and became the new patrons of these sacred sites. This phenomenon could be demonstrated through the Court Well in Oxfordshire, originally linked to the Germanic-Norse deity Odin. The well was venerated with offerings for its reputed powers to heal eye diseases. Similar ritual pits and shafts with sacrificial remains were found across Britain, stretching as far as Scotland [15]. Thus, the continued rituals performed in sacred sites demonstrated how folk beliefs were able to continue and played central roles in supporting people's spiritual needs within a larger religious framework.

4.3. Short Conclusion

In short, a comparative perspective highlights both shared tendencies and significant divergences. In both China and Europe, folk beliefs coexisted alongside official religions, with local sacred sites serving as focal points for addressing the spiritual needs of communities. The difference lay in institutional integration: in China, ancestor worship and local deity cults were often tolerated, if not their independence supported by officials; whereas in Europe, the cult of saints was mediated through the authority of the Church, which sought to merge them into the larger framework of Christianity. Nonetheless, both illustrate how cultural legacies of folk beliefs were preserved not only in texts and doctrines but also in the everyday practices that communities performed through generations.

5. Analysis of the Commonalities and Mechanisms in the Functions of Folk Beliefs in China and the West

This section primarily examines the functions of folk beliefs in China and the West, arguing that their common functionalality lies in addressing everyday uncertainties and responding to social crises. By providing explanatory frameworks for inexplicable events and offering practical rituals or guidance, these beliefs help individuals navigate the unpredictability of daily life. Moreover, they serve to reinforce social cohesion and collective resilience during periods of upheaval, offering both psychological comfort and a sense of communal stability.

5.1. Addressing Everyday Uncertainties: Utilitarianism in Agrarian Rituals

When considering how different societies have historically approached the uncertainties of agricultural life, commonality emerges in their reliance on agrarian rituals that aimed at securing fertility. For the lower strata of society, the key concern of belief was not doctrinal purity, but the immediate efficacy of ritual acts. Folk belief was fundamentally utilitarian, bound up with concrete personal and communal interests rather than metaphysical speculation [1, 10]. The recurring theme across the following cases is that religion functioned, at the level of the peasantry, as a technology of assurance: it addressed the elemental fear of instability through rituals designed to bend supernatural powers toward human welfare.

5.1.1 Case of Benandanti

Reconstructed from inquisitorial records in 16th-century Friuli, Italy, the Benandanti were a group of individuals who claimed to leave their bodies at night in spirit form to engage in ritual battles against malevolent witches and wizards, whose actions threatened the fertility of the fields. They resisted being subsumed into the demonological framework of Christianity, presenting themselves instead as defenders of the community and protectors of the harvest. Armed with fennel stalks, which

were a symbol of fertility, they fought on the side of God, believing that the success of their struggles against the evil sorcerers directly determined the fertility of the soil and the abundance of crops [16]. Sato further suggested that the origin of Benandanti was non-Christian, which was proved by its different understanding of "the other world" [17]. Benandanti believed that spirits continued to exist in the normal world, wandering around in hills and mountains, while Christian doctrines believed that spirits could only go to heaven or hell [14]. This distinctive worldview, which allowed spirits to operate within the earthly realm, reinforced the Benandanti's practical focus on safeguarding the fertility of the fields. What is most significant here was the underlying utilitarian concern: the ultimate objective of these contests was not about orthodoxy, but rather about the fertility of the fields and, by extension, the survival of the community. This is evidenced by how the Benandanti fought mainly during Ember days, which were key points of change in agricultural calendars, roughly corresponding to the change of seasons [16]. Thus, ritualized engagements at the local level of peasantry often served as a technology of assurance to safeguard the fertility of land, again highlighting the utilitarian nature of folk belief.

5.1.2 Case of China

In a parallel vein, the Chinese cult of the earth god functioned as a localized means of securing agricultural protection. By the time of the Han dynasty, Chinese religious practice largely revolved around local community groups known as *shè*, which can be translated as "associations" or "community altars." Offerings and rituals would be made in honor of the god and goddesses of earth in the temple and altar, which was believed to grant protection over the harvest. Similar to the Benandanti's visionary battles, the veneration of the earth god was not primarily about cosmological speculation, but about aligning supernatural power with the rhythms of agrarian life. This is demonstrated in Peng Shao's letter to the Prefect Lord Zheng Yue during the early Chenghua period (1465-1487), which talked about the establishment of such community altars by the Confucian scholar Lin Bangjun. He demanded that residents make sacrifices during appropriate seasons to the earth gods in prayers for fertility [14]. The demand for spiritual support over land productivity could be seen from the number of gods that oversee the agricultural sector. For instance, most villages on the plain worshipped *Mingzhu zunwang* (the Shining Ruler, Revered King), and the tutelary deity of earth that could be found in every household, enshrined in a little shrine set in the courtyard. There were also *Shèzhu* and Lady *Houtu*, who both offered protection over soil and harvest. Additionally, there was *Fude zhengshen*, which was also an earth god that shared a similar role as the above deities [14]. The multiplicity and ubiquity of these deities underscore the utilitarian logic of folk belief: far from being abstract or purely devotional, these beliefs operated as practical tools for communities to navigate the uncertainties of agrarian existence.

5.1.3 Comparison

Both agrarian-oriented examples illustrate the pragmatic nature of folk belief. The difference lies in the larger religious context and institutional framing. On the one hand, Christianity stressed salvation and moral conduct. Its ritual technologies, like sacraments and liturgy, were not always efficacious in the material sphere. This left a gap, one that groups like the Benandanti sought to fill with visionary rites that translated communal agricultural anxieties into concrete ritual action. On the other hand, the case of Chinese deities reveals a religious landscape in which such pragmatic concerns were embedded in the larger structure. Unlike the Christian Church, which sought to monopolize spiritual authority, the Chinese state recognizes the stabilisation function of such folk belief. Religion was not stretched to meet demands, but was rather shaped by the needs of peasants, with the pantheon of local deities being explicitly tied to the cycle of nature. In this sense, the cult of the earth god was neither marginal nor heterodox, but central to the lived experience of Chinese peasants, precisely because it delivered concrete benefits in the domain of agrarian concerns.

In short, the core of agrarian religiosity was efficacy. When confronted with the needs of the plantation, farmers in all cultures usually turned to rites that promised to make the earth fertile.

Whether these rites were tolerated or condemned, however, depended entirely on the broader institutional framework in which they were embedded.

5.2. Responding to Social Crises: Psychological Reassurance in Mass Panics

This section will analyse the recurring phenomenon of mass panic as a reaction to folk belief. Such a perspective offers an insightful angle that reveals the limitations of orthodox religion in providing psychological reassurance in times of crisis. It is precisely this limitation that paved the way for folk beliefs. Two illustrative cases are the "soul-stealing" panic that erupted in China in 1768 and the European witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Both demonstrate how, when facing a perceived threat to individual or communal well-being, people turn to popular explanatory models that offer concrete explanations for the misfortune. In both contexts, mass hysteria revealed the fragility of orthodox religion as a source of reassurance, while emphasising the psychological power of folk belief.

5.2.1 Case of China: Soul-stealing of 1768

The Chinese soul-stealing panic erupted during the Qianlong reign, when rumors spread that sorcerers were cutting off people's queues or stealing parts of their clothing to seize their souls. The threat of such actions originated from the ancient Chinese understanding of the soul. It was believed that the soul was composed of the spiritual soul, which governs the mind and heart, and the bodily soul, which governs physical functions [18]. The loss of one's soul was associated with negative notions, especially with the illness of children, which was reflected in the duality function of healing and death of shamanistic rituals of "recalling" lost souls [19]. Therefore, once the rumor of "involuntary soul-loss" gained traction, fear proliferated across the country.

The panic should also be understood within the broader historical context: the eighteenth century was a period of demographic expansion and mounting fiscal strains upon the rural society. Anxieties about vulnerability in controlling one's own fate thus resonated deeply. Such a mental crisis produced fear that neither Confucian orthodoxy nor state ritual frameworks could fully address. On the one hand, Confucian teachings emphasized moral cultivation and social harmony, but offered mere support against "magical" threats such as soul-stealing. On the other hand, the elaborate rituals of state religion, centered on cosmic order and imperial legitimacy, could not reassure commoners immediately. The inability of orthodox frameworks to absorb or neutralize the rumors ultimately resulted in widespread panic across the country.

5.2.2 Case of Europe: Witch hunt of the 16th to 17th century

A parallel dynamic can be observed in the European witch hunts, which reached their peak between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Popular belief in witchcraft was not new, but it intensified under conditions of social and economic tension: Religious wars, climatic collapses during the Little Ice Age, recurring famines and epidemics, and much more. As in the case of the Salem Witch Hunt in 1692, witch trials were apparently used to dispose of those considered disorderly and dangerous by the community [20, 21]. Popular cosmology attributed the misfortune to the malicious activity of the witches, who were said to have dealt with the devil. Christianity, which focused on omnipotence and salvation by God, was intended to calm the fears of the population. In practice, however, the theological elaborations of demonology, which associated witches with Satan, heresy, and cosmic disorder, often intensified the fears. Interpersonal conflicts were extended to the community level, and in some cases even beyond, and exacerbated by institutionalised persecutions that led to thousands of executions. This created a self-reinforcing cycle of fear in which the feeling of misfortune became visible.

5.2.3 Comparison

The common thread between these two cases lies in the inadequacy of orthodoxy during times of crisis. Both Confucianism in Qing China and Christianity in early modern Europe sought to monopolize legitimacy and to provide universal frameworks for cosmological understanding. Yet

when confronted with deeply visceral anxieties, neither could offer ritual mechanisms or psychological assurances capable of containing panic. In both contexts, the gap between the lofty ideals of orthodoxy and the lived fears of ordinary people created space for popular beliefs to rush in, filling the vacuum of reassurance. This dynamic also suggests why authorities so often reacted with severity. In both Europe and China, the ruling elite recognized that mass panic threatened social stability, which in turn undermined political legitimacy. In Qing China, Qianlong himself took a personal interest in quelling the soul-stealing panic, framing it as a threat not only to individual safety but also to imperial authority, since attacks on the queue carried political overtones [18]. By punishing alleged sorcerers, the state attempted to reassert control and reaffirm orthodoxy, even though this very process tacitly acknowledged the potency of popular belief. In Europe, ecclesiastical and secular courts staged dramatic trials and executions of witches, partly as a way of demonstrating institutional power and reinforcing Christian orthodoxy [21]. Yet these spectacles of control often perpetuated the very anxieties they sought to dispel, since each conviction confirmed the reality of soul-stealing and witchcraft in the popular imagination.

A further point of comparison lies in the dialectical relationship between elite discourse and popular fears. In China, literati officials frequently dismissed soul-stealing beliefs as irrational superstition, yet their reports to the throne reveal a deep unease about their inability to contain the rumors. In Europe, demonological treatises written by theologians and jurists both shaped and were shaped by local witchcraft accusations, providing a learned framework that legitimated and magnified village-level suspicions. In both cases, the division between "popular" and "orthodox" was not absolute. Orthodoxy could not entirely ignore or suppress popular belief, as it was embedded within the same social fabric. The very act of reacting shows that elite institutions were forced into a dialogue, however reluctant, with popular cosmologies.

To summarise, the large-scale panics surrounding soul-stealing in Qing-era China and the witch hunts in early modern Europe showed that while orthodoxy could legitimise political authority and offer universal narratives, it proved weak when it came to confronting local fears. Folk belief grew precisely at those moments when orthodoxy could not provide effective explanations. These cases, therefore, highlighted the boundary between orthodoxy and popular religion, which was always contested and renegotiated in times of crisis.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparative study of popular beliefs in China and the West reveals the commonalities and divergences in how communities historically responded to spiritual needs. At the core of both traditions lies the recognition that religion cannot be reduced to abstract theology. It should also be the pragmatic system of meaning and action, forged in response to everyday uncertainties. Whether in agrarian rituals safeguarding the harvest or in protection against illness and misfortune, popular beliefs functioned as technologies of assurance, embedding supernatural power into the routines of communal life. This practical and utilitarianistic orientation explains why popular beliefs continued to exist even during times challenged by orthodox religions. Precisely because these folk beliefs carried immense social force, authorities in both contexts sought to suppress or co-opt them, revealing a contested but unavoidable dialogue between elite religion and popular cosmology. Ultimately, the formation mechanisms of popular belief across cultures point to a shared demand of humans: the search for practical efficacy and emotional security in the face of uncertainty.

Last but not least, this study contributes to a comparative understanding of popular beliefs by emphasising their common mechanisms of emergence, functional roles, and continuity in different cultural contexts. By examining China and the West side by side, it shows that folk religion is not just a remnant or a fringe phenomenon, but an adaptable system that responds to practical, social, and emotional needs. However, this analysis has certain limitations. The focus on specific case studies—such as the cult of the earth god and the Benandanti, or the soul-stealing panic and European witch hunts—may not fully capture the broader diversity and regional variations of folk beliefs within each

society. Additionally, the reliance on historical and textual sources constrains the investigation of lived practices and contemporary continuities of folk religiosity. Future research could expand this comparative framework by incorporating ethnographic fieldwork, cross-temporal analyses, and a wider range of geographic and social contexts. Such studies would enable a deeper understanding of how popular beliefs evolve, interact with institutional religions, and continue to shape communal life in both historical and contemporary settings.

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