

Conflict and interchange between religious orthodoxies and heterodoxies in China –
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The paper starts with a discussion of the terms “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy”. As so many concepts in the study of religion, orthodoxy and heterodoxy can be defined from different perspectives. Understanding “orthodoxy” as “right beliefs”, it can be observed that all religious groups and traditions claim to be orthodox. The label “heterodox” is usually applied to competing or deviant religious views and groups. Thus, the terms “orthodox” and “heterodox” may be part of the religious language used to maintain one’s own claim to superiority and to denounce other forms of religion as false beliefs. However, if we use the terms as theoretical concepts, we cannot simply transfer them from religious language to scientific language. We rather have to develop a terminology that allows us to define “orthodox” and “heterodox” from the perspective of the scientific observer. Taking Chinese religions as an example, it is argued that competing claims to orthodoxy have to be supported by political power in order to attain social significance. What is orthodox in one political context might be heterodox in another.

In the main part of the paper the relationship between religious orthodoxies and heterodoxies in traditional China is analyzed giving particular attention to their distribution in various spaces. In this context, the concept of cultural or symbolic space will be developed. While different forms of orthodoxies and heterodoxies in China are condensed around different centres of gravitation, they still are being part of the same cultural space and in this way interact with each other. The same applies if we consider the social and political spaces and, finally, the geographical space. In all cases, the distinction between orthodoxies and heterodoxies does not imply a clear-cut separation but allows for various forms of contact and exchange.