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New Religious Movements in Modern China

Introduction to issue 172:

Redemptive Societies as Confucian NRMs?

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"Redemptive societies" is a term coined by Prasenjit Duara in his article "The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism" in 2001, referring to a wave of religious movements which appeared in Republican China, including the Tongshanshe 同善社, Daoyuan 道院, Yiguandao 一貫道 and so on, which combined the Chinese tradition of "syncretic sects" with philanthropy, social engagement, and aspirations to build a new universal civilization.[1] These groups arguably constituted the largest wave of religious revival in Republican China. The destruction or confiscation of local temples opened a space for their deterritorialised networks, while elaboration of new formulations of sovereignty, modernity and civic duty gave them cultural and social significance as providers of charity and as mediators between Chinese spiritual tradition and modern constructions of nationhood and universal civilization.[2] Redemptive societies were precursors of the *qigong* 氣功 movement in the post-Mao People's Republic and of the

[1] Prasenjit Duara, "The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism," *Journal of World History*, 12:1 (2001), pp. 99–130; also in *Sovereignty and Authenticity*: *Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003, pp. 89-129.

[2] See Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, pp. 91-122.

popular Confucian revival of the early 21st century; and they continue to occupy an important place in the religious landscapes of Taiwan, Vietnam, and among Chinese diaspora communities in Southeast Asia.[3]

In spite of their significant role and impact, they remain relatively ignored in scholarship on religion in modern China, appearing primarily in the mainland historiography of "reactionary sects and secret societies" 反動會道門 and in ethnographic works on religion in post-war Taiwan.[4] This special double issue (nos. 172 and 173) of *Min-su chü-i* 民俗曲藝 *(Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore)* represents an initial attempt to fill that gap through a selection of articles which critically examine the category of redemptive societies, present case studies, and explore their interactions with their socio-political environment and with other types of religious groups.

Redemptive societies were inheritors of the salvationist and millenarian traditions of the so-called "sectarian" or "White Lotus" movements of late imperial China;[5] at the same time, they demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to adapt to modern social changes, consciously trying to renew Chinese tradition by appropriating and reinventing discourses of science, civilization and philanthropy. These groups, which typically had their own scriptures, a simplified liturgy, a lay congregational mode of association, and national (or regional) organizations and hierarchies, were closer than the traditional Buddhist, Daoist or Confucian institutions to the Christian model of the "church" which had become the paradigm for "religion" in 20th century China.[6] Practicing spirit-writing and/or the breathing and meditation techniques which would later be called *qigong*, redemptive societies formed an ideological and spiritual alternative to the anti-traditional New Culture movement.

While some redemptive societies, such as the Daoyuan and the Dejiao 德教,

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[3] See David A. Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007; David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Lu Yunfeng, *The Transformation of Yiguandao in Taiwan: Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008; Bernard Formoso, *De Jiao: A Religious Movement in Contemporary China and Overseas*: *Purple Qi from the East*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2010.

[4] For a review of this literature, see Palmer, "Chinese Redemptive Societies" in this issue. For translations of representative works, see the special issue on "Recent Chinese Scholarship on the History of 'Redemptive Societies'" edited by David Ownby, *Chinese Studies in History* vol. 44, no. 1-2 (2010-2011).

[5] For classic studies, see Daniel Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976; Susan Naquin, "The Transmission of White Lotus Sectarianism in Late Imperial China," in David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan and Evelyn S. Rawski eds. *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 255-291**;** Barend ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*. Leiden: Brill, 1992; Hubert Seiwert (in collaboration with Ma Xisha), *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

[6] Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China,* chapters 3 and 4.

were launched following instructions received in spirit-writing revelations, others, including the Tongshanshe, the Daode xueshe 道德學社, the Wanguo daodedui 萬國道德會, the Tiande shengjiao 天德聖教 and Yiguandao, were founded or expanded by such charismatic figures as Peng Huilong 彭迴龍 (1873-1950, a.k.a Peng Tairong 彭泰榮, Peng Ruzun 彭汝尊), Duan Zhengyuan 段正元 (1864-1940), Jiang Xizhang 江希張 (1907-2004), Wang Fengyi 王鳳儀 (1864-1937), Xiao Changming 蕭昌明 (1895-1943), Li Yujie 李玉階 (1901-1994) and Zhang Guangbi 張光璧 (1889-1947, a.k.a. Zhang Tianran 張天然). Their followers included a large number of military and political leaders, as well as Confucian activists. Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927), instigator of the Hundred Days' Reform 戊戌變法 of 1898, was chairman of the Wanguo daodehui in the last years of his life. Several premiers, ministers and generals of the Beiyang, Kuomintang and Japanese puppet regimes were also associated with various redemptive societies, which maintained deep and complex relations with the political realm and played an active role in society. The World Red Swastika Society 世界紅卍字會, for example, which was the charitable arm of the Daoyuan, was possibly China's largest charitable relief organization in the 1930s. Yiguandao recruited millions of followers in the 1940s, in the midst of civil war and just as China was coming under communist control; in the early 1950s, the enemy regimes in Beijing and Taipei both launched campaigns to eradicate it. While the campaigns largely succeeded in the PRC, Yiguandao continued to grow as an underground movement in KMT-controlled Taiwan until, by the time it was legalized in 1987, it had become one of the island's main religions and promoters of the Confucian scripture-recitation movement, sending missionaries to Southeast Asia, South Africa and South America. Also in Taiwan, Tiandijiao 天帝教, an offshoot of the Tiande shengjiao, became one of the main organizations practicing *qigong* on the island, while also hosting congregational rituals and daily prayers for the reunification of China and Taiwan. In Malaysia, Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, groups such as the Dejiao have become one of the main forms of association for diasporic Chinese communities.[7] All of these groups now have their sights on the Chinese mainland, where some of them have already been expanding.[8]

This double issue of *Min-su chü-i* is the outcome of two conferences held in June

[7] Formoso, *De Jiao* and "Chinese Temples and Philanthropic Associations in Thailand." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27.2 (1996): 245-260; Tan Chee-beng. *The Development and Distribution of Dejiao Associations in Malaysia and Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985; Soo Khin Wah, "The Recent Developments of the Yiguan Dao Fayi Chongde Branch in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand," *in* Philip Clart and Paul Crowe (ed.), *The People and the Dao, New Studies in Chinese Religions in Honour of Daniel L. Overmyer*, Sankt Augustin, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series LX, 2009, pp. 109-125.

[8] See the forthcoming studies by Sébastien Billioud on Yiguandao.

2007 and 2009 at the Department of History of Fo Guang University 佛光大學歷史系, part of a larger project on "Redemptive Societies and Religious Movements in Modern China," funded by the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China, with additional support from the École française d'Extrême-Orient 法國遠東學院, the Centre for East Asian Studies of the Université de Montréal, the Institute of Qing History of Renmin University of China 中國人民大學清史研究所, and the National University of Singapore. This project supported field research by historians and anthropologists based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China, Japan and Canada.[9] A starting hypothesis of this project was that redemptive societies could be seen as an *identifiable set* of groups, with comparable doctrines, practices and organizational forms, a circulation of followers between groups, successive waves of groups appearing with, in most cases, rapid cycles of growth and decline, and an overall evolution in phase with socio-political and ideological changes in Chinese society. Thus, by tracing the history and social dynamics of this set of groups, we may observe a dialectic which is not so much that of a conflict between tradition and modernity, but one of the religious productions of Chinese modernity.[10]

Redemptive societies are also of great comparative interest, showing remarkable similarities with other early 20th century new universalist religious movements and ethical societies in Asia and the West. These similarities were not lost on the redemptive societies themselves, which combined spirit-writing with European-inspired spiritism, and which, in the case of the Daoyuan, merged with the Japanese Ômoto 大本教 movement (see the contribution by DuBois to this issue). The Vietnamese Cao Dai religion 高臺教 emerged out of a very similar religious culture as China's, and can be considered as a redemptive society with a unique inflection related to the French colonial

[9] We would like to especially thank Fan Chun-wu 范純武 and his colleagues for his great efforts in organizing both conferences, and David Ownby, co-investigator of this project, for his constant support and encouragement. Besides the participants whose contributions appear in this and the next issue of this journal, we would also like to acknowledge the precious contributions of other scholars who attended one or both conferences: Prasenjit Duara, Cao Xinyu 曹新宇, Chen Jinguo 陳進國, Gao Zhihua 高致華, Vincent Goossaert, Komukai Sakurako 小武海櫻子, Lin Guoping 林國平, Lin Wanfu 林萬傅, Liu Wenxing 劉文星, Lu Yunfeng 盧雲峰, Lu Zhongwei 陸仲偉, Shao Yong 邵雍, Sung Kuang-yu 宋光宇, Tong Chee Kiong 唐志強, Yang Nianqun 楊念群 and Chung Yun-ying 鍾雲鶯.

[10] For discussions of this theme, see Adam Chau, "Introduction: revitalizing and innovating religious traditions in contemporary China", in *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011; Mayfair Yang ed., *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008; and Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China.*

context of its appearance.[11]

These groups can all be considered as "New religious movements" (NRMs) 新興宗教運動. There is no scholarly consensus on a definition of NRMs, except that they are "new" at the time of their appearance in a particular place. How long do they stay "new"? According to one view, the novelty of NRMs is a function of their being exotic foreign implants[12] – a conception which is too coloured by the Western experience of Asian-originated NRMs (and hence exotic to Westerners), to be of any comparative analytical value. By another perspective, an NRM is a group whose membership consists entirely of new converts, without second-generation believers.[13] On the other hand, groups almost 200 years old, such as the Mormons, are still often considered as NRMs. Most Western NRM scholarship has focused on groups that appeared in the West after World War II;[14] the term "NRM," however, is derived from the Japanese *shinshūkyō* 新宗教, or *shinkō shūkyō* 新興宗教 which, in Japanese scholarship, refers to religious groups which have emerged since the mid 19th century.[15] Chinese cases have only recently entered academic discussions of NRMs, referring to studies of groups such as Yiguandao, the *qigong* movement and Falungong.[16] Redemptive societies represent one wave of new religious movements that appeared in China in the first half of the 20th century. As noted by DuBois in his contribution to this issue, one could argue that there is often little uniquely "new" about these groups; what is new is rather their innovative recombinations of elements of older traditions in a new social context. Palmer, in his contribution to this issue, tries to elaborate an analytical framework for squaring the continuities and innovations of these groups, by developing a sociological concept of "salvationist religion" -- successive waves of which have appeared throughout Chinese history -- and then considering "redemptive societies" as one such wave, which is marked

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[11] On Cao Dai, see Jeremy Jammes, "Le caodaïsme: rituels médiumniques, oracles et exégèses : approche ethnologique d'un mouvement religieux vietnamien et de ses réseaux." Ph.D. diss., Université Paris-10, 2006.

[12] Gordon Melton, "The Rise of the Study of New Religions," paper presented at CESNUR 1999, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, http://www.cesnur.org/testi/bryn/br_melton.htm; see also Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 24-26.

[13] Eileen Barker, oral comments at the conference on "Religion and Social Integration in Chinese Societies: Exploring Sociological Approaches to Religion in the Chinese World", Chinese University of Hong Kong, June 29-30, 2007.

[14] See Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction*, London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1989; Timothy Miller, ed., *America's Alternative Religions*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995; Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998.

[15] See Helen Hardacre, *Kurozumikyo and the New Religions of Japan.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988; Peter B. Clarke, *Japanese New Religions: In Global Perspective.* Richmond: Curzon, 2000.

[16] See the references in note 3.

by the socio-political environment of republican China.

Redemptive societies are known for their syncretism of the Three-in-One (Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism) or even Five-in-One (adding Christianity and Islam to the mix); however, some groups place more stress on one tradition over others. This is especially the case for Confucianism, which is central to the three case studies presented in this issue, on the Daoyuan (by Thomas DuBois), the Tongshanshe (by Wang Chien-chuan), and the Daode xueshe (by Fan Chun-wu). These represent three of the largest and most influential of the redemptive societies. DuBois notes how, although the collapse of the imperial state brought down with it the institutional and ritual structure of the Confucian tradition, this was seen by many intellectuals as an opportunity to renew Confucianism for the modern era. One notable avenue was through a greater civic engagement: in the case of the Daoyuan, this found expression through the charitable works of the Red Swastika Society. The core of redemptive society organizers were members of the traditionally trained literati whose Confucian identity was reinforced by what they perceived as the moral corruption of the Western values and institutions being imported by the younger generation of intellectuals trained overseas.[17] For them, the social chaos and suffering of China under the new regime was evidence of the failure of Western models, and proof that Confucianism provided a universalistic faith and philosophy which could subsume the common moral teachings of all the world's religions.

In Wang Chien-chuan's article, we see the challenges faced by Tongshanshe organizers in Yunnan as they tried to open a new space in the local intellectual landscape: more traditionally minded literati accused them of being Daoists and Buddhists, straying from the "orthodox way," while modernists attacked them for propagating "superstition." Perhaps to avoid such a label, Tongshanshe circulars banned the spreading of apocalyptic rumours and the practice of spirit-writing – but, as Wang demonstrates, local chapters were too deeply embedded in the religious milieu, and there was too much circulation between members of different redemptive societies, spirit-writing halls and Confucian associations to prevent these practices from occurring and influencing each other. Tongshanshe emphasized that it was "primarily Confucian" 以儒家為主 and opened National Studies Training Institutes 國學專修館 in several cities.

Other redemptive societies such as the Wanguo daodehui 萬國道德會 (Universal Morality Society) and the Daode xueshe 道德學社 (Moral Studies Society), which are

[17] See Henrietta Harrison, *The Man Awakened from Dreams: One Man's Life in a North China Village 1857-1942,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

the subject of Fan Chun-wu's article, were also active promoters of Confucian learning, having a discernible impact on the "national studies" 國學 movement of the period. Fan quotes contemporary observer Cao Juren 曹聚仁 who noted three types of "national studies" – a more "scientific" approach exemplified by the National Studies Institute of Peking University 北京大學國學研究所; a more traditional approach typified by the Wuxi National Studies Training Institute 無錫國學專修館; and what he dismissively called the "hocus-pocus" 神怪的 approach exemplified by the Tongshanshe's National Studies Institute in Shanghai. However, as Fan stresses, this more religious form had a far deeper and lively social base than Hu Shi's project of casting National Studies into the museums.

In Li Shyh-wei's article on post-war Taiwanese Confucian groups, we see how redemptive societies fit into the broader "Confucian" milieu of the time, which included, in addition to the Tongshanshe, various spirit-writing halls and poetry societies. In all the papers, we thus see how redemptive societies were deeply connected with a broader and multifaceted movement to reform and revitalise Confucianism, which ranged from small spirit-writing cults to more secular tendencies associated with the "national essence" 國粹 intellectual movement. Redemptive societies were organized, religious actors which simultaneously occupied several positions on this spectrum, often growing out of spirit-writing halls but partaking in more modern formulations of National Studies and civic engagement. As Wang Chien-chuan notes in his article, even the Wuxi National Studies Training Institute (contrasted by Cao Juren to the "hocus-pocus" type) was founded by a member of the Tongshanshe. And all three papers by DuBois, Wang and Fan mention the connections between their case studies and the Confucian Religion Society 孔教會, founded at Qufu in 1913 and which was attended by the child prodigy Jiang Xizhang, himself a future founder of the Universal Morality Society, another one of the largest redemptive societies. Later, Yiguandao would also carry the Confucian mantle; today, it identifies itself as primarily Confucian, and is a leading promoter of the Confucian classics-recitation movement on Taiwan.

The scholarship on Confucianism has almost completely ignored these redemptive societies, and is only beginning to recognize the religious dimensions of the tradition. The case studies presented here offer evidence for what might be called a wave of Confucian NRMs in the Republican period, some of which continue to grow today. This is but one of many potential implications of recent research on redemptive societies – implications which will undoubtedly open a host of new questions for debate and issues for further research.