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David Ownby

Sect and Secularism in Reading the Modern Chinese Religious Experience

In Western studies of Chinese popular religion, the term “sectarian” has come to function as a close equivalent to the White Lotus tradition, even if there is little consensus concerning which groups belong to the tradition(s) and whether “sectarian” is an appropriate label for them. One example is Thomas Dubois’s excellent volume, *The Sacred Village* (2005), a signal contribution to our knowledge of the anthropology and local history of sectarian groups—the general term Dubois uses throughout his study—but which illustrates at the same time that the groups he studied have little to do with the stereotypical image of the White Lotus as conveyed by the imperial Chinese state over the centuries, nor with classical understandings of sects in Western sociological terms. The groups studied by Dubois are neither heterodox rebels, nor self-conscious dissenters from a recognized religious tradition, nor “suitable social structure[s] for cognitive minorities... forced to define themselves over against the surrounding world as small closed groups in order to stabilize their divergent definition of reality”.¹ Instead, most of the groups studied by Dubois appear to be well-integrated into local society, and to have served as a central focus of village identity and popular morality for centuries.

Dubois called these groups sects because “sect” or “sectarian” has simply become a convention in Western studies of Chinese popular religion. This is unfortunate, as such terms come laden with multiple layers of meaning beyond the pejorative connotations attached to sects (and cults) in popular and journalistic usage. First, the scholarly definition of sects employed in Western sociology is grounded in notions of church and belief particular to the Western experience, and the uncritical use of the term sect by scholars of Chinese religion unwittingly situates China’s “White Lotus sectarians” in a discourse on authority, orthodoxy, heterodoxy, belief and dissent, modelled on this Western historical experience. Second, and paradoxically, the same discourse seems to confirm both the imperial and the modern Chinese state’s readings of these same traditions as

1. The definition is that of Peter Berger, as summarized in Rahner and Vorgrimler, 1981, p. 469.

dangerous and heterodox. Of course, the Western and Chinese readings are only superficially similar. Western scholars cast Chinese sects in the role of Protestant dissenters and celebrate (or occasionally condemn) their willingness to challenge the status quo. The Chinese state instead sees an ignorant rabble misled by manipulative charlatans. Still, the two readings sound the common themes of opposition and rebellion, which is how the White Lotus sectarians are portrayed in most Western scholarly literature. The technical inaccuracy of the term sectarian is less important than the fact that its use obscures the function and nature of these groups within the broader context of Chinese religion and society. Indeed, I would argue that a thoroughly secular reading of the Chinese sectarian experience, one that would acknowledge its place within Chinese religion and politics without immediately assigning a label to it, has yet to emerge. The Chinese state's recent campaign against Falun Gong illustrates that the discourse on heterodoxy has survived into the twenty-first century as part of the arsenal of state weapons against religious groups it deems undesirable. Even if it is not clear precisely what label we should apply to Falun Gong, Western scholars of Chinese religion would be wise to consider the political consequences of our choice of language, particularly at a moment when scholarly exchange between China and the West is becoming more frequent—and China is becoming more adept at employing Western scholarly arguments to its own ends.

This essay will be divided into three parts: an examination of the use of the term “sect” in Western studies of Chinese popular religion; an overview of recent research on twentieth-century outgrowths of traditional sectarian movements; and concluding suggestions of an alternative way of conceptualizing the groups and traditions heretofore referred to as sectarian.

Sect and Sectarian in Studies of Chinese Popular Religion²

The Dutch sinologist J. J. M. De Groot was among the first Western scholars to examine Chinese sects in detail. De Groot's admiring early studies, such as *Les fêtes annuellement célébrées à Emoui (Amoy)* (1881) and particularly the early volumes of *The Religious System of China* (1892-1910), reflect Max Müller's universalism and the romantic embrace of all world religions which characterized much late nineteenth-century discussion of religion (Hong, 2003: 266). Later on, De Groot's admiration gave way to a Christian-inspired criticism of Chinese religion as animistic and idolatrous. At the same time, with the publication of his *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China: A Page in the History of Religions* (1903-1904), De Groot highlighted the basic intolerance of

2. In the following overview, I limit my discussion to major, book-length treatments. For more detailed discussion of a complex historiography, see: ter Haar, 1992: ch. 1; and Philip Clart, “Bibliography of Western Language Publications on Chinese Popular Religion” (1995 to present), available on-line at http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~clartp/bibliographyCPR_html (accessed 11 december 2008), among other sources.

the Confucian state toward popular religion, and in this context came to focus on White Lotus sects and sectarianism in late imperial China.

Although rich in detail—and still cited today—De Groot’s discussion of sects lends itself to ready summary. First, he portrays them as objects of state persecution (and hence worthy of sympathy), noting that “every religious corporation which is not of tested Confucian metal...is severely proscribed...no matter what it does or teaches”. (De Groot, 1974: 154). At the same time, De Groot states quite clearly that his knowledge of sects is limited to his own fieldwork, as official documents “give no information whatever concerning the beliefs, ritual and practices of the sects, nothing therefore which might help us to some solid knowledge of East Asiatic religion”. (*id.*) De Groot thus “deduces” the origin and evolution of the sects, clearly basing his interpretations on assumed parallels between Western and Chinese experiences:

just as in our Christian world the various churches...remain in principle and structure essentially Christian...so in China the sects are altogether pagan-Taoistic, and Buddhistic....the Buddhist element largely predominates in this Sectarianism, and for good reasons. Buddhism was the religion par excellence purporting to guide humanity towards the gates of salvation...and it was this salvation, that all the sects strive for, which has rendered the exotic religion so attractive, and enabled it to push Taoism and Confucianism to the background...The destruction of the [Buddhist] monasteries by the State...forced thousands to work out their salvation in secular life. These thousands, nay myriads, form the sects, persuading millions to labour with them towards the...Buddha. To-day dispersed and apparently destroyed, they shoot up again tomorrow under other names. (1974: 156-57)

De Groot further argues that all sects “must be aware of their brotherhood” and that the bewildering proliferation of names attached to various sects is only a cover for a general unity.

In sum, even if his sociological depiction of the sects largely precedes Max Weber’s broader work on the history of religion, De Groot traces near exact parallels between sect experience in Western Europe and sect experience in China. The Chinese sects are self-conscious dissenters from mainstream traditions seen as being in decline, dedicated to salvation and religious freedom, and persecuted for their pains by an intolerant state. In other words, sects were aware of the distinctions between orthodoxy and heterodoxy and consciously embraced the latter.

De Groot’s study remained the standard reference—in Western languages—on Chinese sectarians for some decades, until Daniel Overmyer published his classic *Folk Buddhist Religion* in 1976.³ In the long and complex interim, China had experienced numerous wars, revolutions, and rebellions, and was no longer the

3. Overmyer, 1976. Another classic in White Lotus studies, Naquin, 1976 appeared at the same time as Overmyer’s volume, but Naquin’s chief focus was on case studies of rebellion rather than broader narratives of the history of Chinese popular religion.

same country that De Groot had known. Chinese and Japanese scholarship on Chinese sectarian groups also began during this period, as a part of a new, nationalistic rereading and rewriting of Chinese history which created, for example, the history of secret societies as proto-nationalist rebels. Indeed, Overmyer's main task was to rescue his lay Buddhist sectarians from politics and revolution and carve out a place for their study within the realm of comparative religion. One might characterize Overmyer's approach as that of "bringing religion back in", taking seriously the beliefs and redemptive aspirations of the groups in question which had been questioned by politically-oriented Chinese and Japanese scholarship. At the same time, he felt compelled to explain the numerous violent rebellions historically associated with the sectarians by depicting violence and rebellion as elements of a broad soteriological strategy which includes a wide variety of approaches. Although he does not suggest that *all* sectarian groups, at some point in their life cycle, were both violent and peaceful, he does argue that all groups were *capable* of both stances, and that this capability grew out of their religious beliefs.

Overmyer offers his own definition of sects as "founded voluntary association[s], oriented toward personal salvation, which arise...in reaction to a larger, founded religious system, which though it is established, was itself voluntary in origin" (Overmyer, 1976: 62). He notes explicitly that certain aspects of the classic definitions often applied to sects—such as "exclusiveness and detachment from the world"—do not apply to China. If these arguments seem to grant a uniqueness to the Chinese case, Overmyer locates that uniqueness in the state posture toward sectarian groups, or more broadly, to religion in general. By contrast, Overmyer's wide-ranging comparisons of Chinese sects with similar groups in Europe and Japan clearly suggest that they all belong to the same category, and he concludes that "Though the sect is a new type, it sees itself as an attempt to restore the original vitality of its mother tradition, through congregational cult, charismatic leadership, and popularizations of scripture", (Overmyer, 1976: 63) which again stresses the overarching unity of China's sectarian tradition.

Overmyer thus views the sectarian tradition as a whole, if perhaps not a unified whole. In the space of single page he sketches its history, from its fifth-century origins in "Buddhist oriented associations separate from monasteries" through the late nineteenth century when "the Mahayanist impetus of most of these movements seems to have largely played itself out, cut off from monastic intellectual life, overwhelmed by indigenous folk tradition". (Overmyer, 1976: 2) Sect identity was shaped by two basic forces: "their relationship to the orthodox Buddhist sangha and their repeated association of piety with militant political activity" (*id.*)—in other words the Buddhist church and the Confucian state. The Buddhist church was the main source on which the sects drew even as they established lay organizations, and the Confucian state was the hostile force

which kept these lay organizations in a centuries-long limbo, at the same time nourishing the violent, millenarian side of sect beliefs. Although he uses different language than De Groot, Overmyer returns to a stance very similar to that of the Dutch scholar, at the same time adding, almost as a concession to twentieth-century Asian scholarship, an explanation of sectarian violence as having its roots in religious discourse. In making this concession, however, Overmyer endorses, if tepidly, the orthodox/heterodox vision at the core of Chinese political and scholarly views of Chinese sectarians. One might note that Overmyer wrote at a time when ideas of heterodoxy and rebellion found favor among certain Western scholars influenced by the radicalism of the 1960s.⁴

B. J. ter Haar's *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* adopted a completely different approach. Indeed, ter Haar's work stands as the sole example, at least in Western studies of traditional China, of a sustained attempt to break through the definitions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy deployed by the Chinese state through the centuries. If one accepts ter Haar's analysis, one can no longer view the White Lotus sectarians in the traditional manner, for he argues persuasively that this "tradition" had at best a shadowy existence, consisting of little more than labels employed by the state for purposes of defamation and criminalization. There did exist of course more or less organized religious groups throughout late imperial China which employed the cosmology, mythology, or other practices associated with the label "White Lotus", but such groups did not call themselves "White Lotus", were not necessarily conscious of a relationship to a religious tradition larger than that of the genealogy of their particular line of masters, and rarely understood their practices as being "heterodox". In other words, any relationship these groups had with the White Lotus label was a purely discursive relationship, invented by the Chinese state, and the supposedly unitary nature of the (fictional) White Lotus tradition would require new evidence coming from sources other than those produced by the Chinese state and their representatives.

In the same way that he eschewed Chinese categories of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, ter Haar avoided the standard language of Western sociology of religion, noting that "The use of the term [sect] in the historiography of Chinese religion is closely linked to existing views on the White Lotus Teachings, basically because of the assumption that the Teachings formed one sect and that the individual constituent groups can be considered as (sub-) sects on a similar level of sociological reality". (ter Haar, 1992: 12) Ter Haar replaces value-laden terms (such as "sect") with more neutral alternatives such as "religious group", "movement", "tradition" and "teachings". (*id.*) Indeed, one might read ter Haar's work as showing what the White Lotus *was not*, and the volume consists of a

4. See for example Chesneaux, ed., 1972; and certain essays in Weller and Gates, (eds.), 1987.

detailed illustration of his basic points, bringing together, in specific historical cases, elite discourse and sociological reality to the extent that sources allow one to depict that reality. In the conclusion to his volume, however, ter Haar suggests avenues which would allow the field to reconceptualize the genuine religious histories obscured by the use of the term White Lotus, arguing that these traditions should be viewed as positive alternatives within Chinese religion and popular religion rather than as sectarian, dissident groups defining themselves in distinction to their surroundings. The distinction is crucial to our understanding of Chinese popular religious history in general and the history of Chinese sectarianism in particular, as it engages issues of the self-understanding of masters and members of such groups, as well as their relationship to the surrounding society and the state. It matters a great deal if members were choosing heterodoxy in spite of the potential dangers of such choice, or if they were seeking salvation in ways that to them appeared to be part and parcel of the orthodox religious cultures available to them.

As a minor part of his argument, Ter Haar cites fieldwork carried out among White Lotus groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by de Groot, Li Shiyu, Willem Grootaers, and Japanese scholars working in Taiwan, which had clearly revealed that the groups were peaceful and integrated into local society, noting that the orthodoxy/heterodoxy paradigm had such a strong hold on scholarly imaginations that the significance of this fieldwork was given little weight in larger discussions of the White Lotus (ter Haar, 1992: 10ff). Ironically, much could be said about the impact of ter Haar's work, which is cited as a reference by all scholars working in the field, and then largely ignored. This is most evident in such works as the conference volume on *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China* (Liu & Shek, 2004), which continues to portray the White Lotus largely as if ter Haar's work had never been published. But even Hubert Seiwert's *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History*, a more original and substantial work which attempts to integrate important new Chinese scholarship on the topic, makes only partial use of ter Haar's argument, and seems implicitly to accept the orthodoxy/heterodoxy paradigm even as he claims that he wishes to transcend it.

Seiwert's ambivalence can be noted even in the title of his work: are popular religious movements and heterodox sects meant to be separate categories, or are heterodox sects a subset of popular religious movements? He wavers on this point throughout the volume, never taking a clear and consistent stand. He introduces his study by discussing fieldwork he had done among vegetarian religious societies in contemporary Taiwan, fieldwork which had early on led him to the realization that these were the same—or similar—groups as those condemned in late imperial written sources. This discovery led in turn to the realization that “popular religious sects were a significant part of religious culture during the Ming and Qing dynasties, in any case much more important than it appeared

in most descriptions of Chinese religious history". (Seiwert, 2003: 1) In almost the next breath, however, he signals that his approach to the topic will not be the same as that of ter Haar, asserting, somewhat puzzlingly, that while such terms as "popular religious sects", "popular religious movements", "orthodox", and "heterodox" are "open to discussion", nonetheless "in historical descriptions using these terms usually does not cause serious difficulties or misunderstandings". (*ibid.*: 2)

Seiwert does seem to offer a longer-term perspective on the history of these movements which at first glance appears potentially useful. He divides his study into two parts, the first treating essentially the establishment of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist orthodoxies in the medieval period, a process which necessarily created heterodoxies as popular groups split off from the Daoist and Buddhist churches and from the state cult as defined by Confucian scholars (Seiwert is not particularly concerned with sects *within* ecclesiastical/monastic Daoism or Buddhism). Here it seems that one can indeed speak of groups that self-consciously defined themselves in distinction to monastic Buddhism or Daoism (and I would have used the label "sect" rather than popular movement). The second part of Seiwert's book treats the Ming period popular religious revival heretofore discussed under the rubric "White Lotus". Building, among other things, on the continuation of the popular movements created during the early and medieval periods, this revival came to constitute "a fourth distinct religious tradition in addition to the three established teachings [of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism]". (Seiwert, 2003: 440) It is unclear, however, why Seiwert chooses to employ the term "sect" in this context, unless he is referring to the various groups having branched out from within this "fourth distinct religious tradition" (which, after all, did not exist in the absence of these groups).

This approach could be positive and promising, because it seems to dispense with the label of heterodoxy and seeks to ground the "fourth distinct religious tradition" firmly within Chinese religious and popular religious history. At the same time, Seiwert stops short of providing a definition or a socio-historical description or typology of the tradition which would distinguish it from the traditional "White Lotus" paradigm, creating the impression that he would be content to dignify it with a less pejorative name (which he doesn't provide) and to accord it a more important role on the late imperial Chinese religious scene—without necessarily rethinking in fundamental ways the nature of the traditions or our understanding of them. On the one hand this is understandable, for the basic ingredients of what we have long called the White Lotus—the Eternal Mother goddess, the Maitreya Buddha, the apocalyptic schema based on *kalpas*—are indeed found in many groups over the late imperial period, which is undoubtedly why ter Haar's breakthrough scholarship has often fallen on deaf ears. At the same time, retaining the White Lotus paradigm but dignifying it with another name ("fourth distinct religious tradition") is risky, for if "rectifying names" is crucial to science and history, the rectification must be more than

cosmetic. Moreover, in his final chapter, Seiwert “brings heterodoxy back in” in an innovative manner, by applying Stark and Bainbridge’s rational choice theory of religion to his “fourth distinct religious tradition”. He implicitly equates many groups associated with this tradition with the more conservative, fundamentalist American groups at the center of Stark and Bainbridge’s analysis in the sense that both were “high demand” groups competing in a pluralistic religious marketplace, and that the “high demand” character of the Chinese groups was a function of their heterodoxy. In other words, people were attracted to the groups because of the danger associated with them, which lent the groups a *cachet* which other popular religious groups did not share. To my mind, this is neither a faithful application of Stark and Bainbridge’s theory (because the “added value” of the risk of arrest, exile, and possible execution is questionable), nor an accurate portrait of the socio-historical reality in late imperial China (group members arrested by the late imperial state do not, in their confessions, mention the allure of dangerous heterodoxy as a reason for joining), and in this final chapter, Seiwert seems to undercut the argument he had been building to that point: members of the “fourth distinct religious tradition” wind up as self-consciously heterodox sectarians—even if they were present in great numbers and constitute a genuine part of popular religion.

At this point it might well seem that we have come to something of a dead end, or that we find ourselves in a Chinese version of the American “cult wars” of the 1970s and 1980s (see Melton 1999), with ter Haar and his followers defending “new religious movements” and Seiwert and company insisting on the “cultic” and heterodox nature of the groups. Indeed, the nature of our sources on the late imperial period is such that a resolution of this debate is unlikely. State-generated sources tell us *something* about the nature of the stigmatized groups, but more about the state and its discourse. Sectarian scriptures tell us *something* about those attracted to the groups, but more about the authors of the scriptures, their religious imaginations and the genre conventions of *baojuan* (“sacred scrolls”, i.e., sectarian scriptures). But the key questions relative to the utility of sectarian terminology (and to the orthodoxy/heterodoxy paradigm) have to do with the self-image and self-consciousness of group masters and members. Late imperial sources are such that we can find any number of *possible* answers to these questions, but very few *convincing, definitive* answers.

Sectarian Traditions in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Recent research on twentieth-century Chinese sectarianism, often based on fieldwork and on sources other than the Chinese security forces, offers a way out of the *cul de sac* by illustrating the ways in which such traditions have evolved over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This evolution, in turn, affords us a different perspective on what the sociohistorical reality of the traditions may have been in the late imperial period.

For years, the only book-length English-language volume treating twentieth-century examples of sectarian groups was David Jordan and Daniel Overmyer's *The Flying Phoenix*, the joint effort of an anthropologist and a historian of religion (Jordan & Overmyer; 1986). The authors carried out fieldwork among Yiguandao spirit-writing groups identified as the successors of the late imperial White Lotus sectarian tradition, in the sense that they shared many of the same deities and practices. This fieldwork allowed the authors to arrive at a new vision of sectarians and sectarian practice as grounded in an individual pietistic search for salvation through the creative manipulation and recombination of traditional religious symbols and discourses. According to the authors, the Taiwanese sectarians self-consciously mimic existing religious traditions and practices with the goal of producing something new, in part because sectarians find themselves denied meaningful access to more mainstream religious practices. The motivation of most Taiwanese sectarians is thus the desire to participate in China's great cultural traditions—even if they have to create their own mechanisms of participation. “Sectarian” is a meaningful label in this context because the groups are rejected and belittled by mainstream religions (as well as by the government, prior to the lifting of martial law) and because the groups themselves are acting against this discrimination, not by “dissenting” as one generally thinks of that term, but rather by engaging in what the authors call “sectarian syncretism”—the creative reconstruction of alternative religious possibilities through a joyful *bricolage*. Although *Flying Phoenix* came out before B. J. ter Haar published his major work on the White Lotus, Jordan and Overmyer offer a similar effort to look at sectarianism without the distorting lens of the orthodoxy/heterodoxy discourse.

The work of Thomas Dubois similarly stands as an excellent example of what fieldwork, local history, and Japanese-language sources, can add to our understanding of the questions under discussion. Dubois studies a number of sectarian groups—the *Taishang men*, *Tiandi men* and the *Zailijiao* being among the most important—in contemporary North China, more specifically in the villages of Cang County in Southeast Hebei, where he carried out fieldwork between 1997 and 2002 as part of his efforts to reconstruct their historical implication in village and regional life over time (Dubois, 2005). In terms of sources, Dubois did fieldwork among his groups during their reform-era revival in the late twentieth century, interviewed older members of such groups who had personal memories of group history, perhaps in late Republican times, but certainly under PRC rule up until the Cultural Revolution, consulted Japanese ethnographies (as well as the work of some Chinese researchers) from the 1930s and 1940s, and perused a variety of sources on the late imperial predecessors of these groups under the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Dubois demonstrates conclusively that these groups have been a fixture of the North China religious landscape for centuries, and that they have been largely

accepted as such, despite their nominal status as “heterodox”. Both the *Taishang men* and the *Tiandi men* share the cosmology and symbols of the White Lotus tradition, but both have come to function as the core of village religiosity and morality; sect leaders serve as village moral exemplars and officiate at important ritual occasions. Dubois also illustrates that if his sectarian groups ever were marginal outsiders they are not now stigmatized as such by local society. And since the sects were not closed groups of “true believers” who emphasized their separateness from non-sectarian life, villagers in villages where such groups had established an important presence were free to decide on their individual level of association with sectarian morality and votive activity.

In sum, the sectarian leaders Dubois studied enjoy the status of community leaders, respected for their knowledge and moral rectitude; from the perspective of local society they represent orthodoxy, not heterodoxy. This is why some such groups survived the suppression of “counter-revolutionary sects” (*fandong huidaomen*) in the early 1950s, and why they have managed to re-establish themselves—if not without some difficulty due to the loss of ritual specialists—in the post-Cultural Revolution period. Savvy local cadres (like savvy magistrates under the imperial order) realize that, except during moments of intense political pressure, management of rural society is much easier if carried out with the cooperation of village leaders who command the respect of village members.

Prasenjit Duara’s work on redemptive societies in the Republican period is equally pertinent (see particularly Duara, 2001 and 2003). Most of these redemptive societies were urban-based, national organizations combining religion with charity or social work, emerging in the early Republican period and evolving in various ways through the early 1950s when they were suppressed by the new Communist government; many redemptive societies can still be found in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere in the Chinese diaspora. Well known examples include the *Daodehui* (Morality Society), the *Daoyuan* (Society of the Way) and its philanthropic wing, the *Hongwanzihui* (Red Swastika Society), the *Tongshanshe* (Fellowship of Goodness); the *Zailijiao* (The Teaching of the Abiding Principle), the *Shijie Zongjiao Datonghui* (Society for the Great Unity of World Religions), and the *Yiguandao* (Way of Pervading Unity), but there were hundreds if not thousands of smaller groups. Total membership over the course of the Republican period appears to have mounted to the tens of millions: the *Tongshanshe* claimed thirty million members in 1929, the Red Swastika Society seven to ten million in 1937, the *Daodehui* eight million in Manchukuo alone (a quarter of the total population) in 1936-1937.

Duara coined the term “redemptive society”, wisely inventing a new designation for the groups rather than engaging the thicket of language surrounding their historical predecessors, but it is abundantly clear that the redemptive societies built on the “sectarian” traditions discussed in this essay. In Duara’s characterization, the redemptive societies

clearly emerged out of the Chinese historical tradition of sectarianism and syncretism. While some...were closely associated with the sectarian tradition including the worship of Buddhist and folk deities like the Eternal Mother, they also represented the late imperial syncretic tradition...which combined the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism in a single universal faith. (Duara, 2001: 118-19)

Furthermore, the groups “ranged from...‘morality cultivating’ charitable societies to...occasionally violent, secret-society-like entities”. (Duara, 2001: 117) Some groups used divination and spirit writing, thus connecting them to popular religious culture, while at the same time claiming to embrace the moral concerns of Christianity and Islam, adding them to the Chinese heritage of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Many of the groups, in their universal redemptive mission, continued to sound traditional Chinese apocalyptic themes—even as they engaged in modern charitable and philanthropic work. Although our knowledge of these groups remains rudimentary, most of the societies seem to have been organized around charismatic men (and in a few cases women) who often promised to heal the body, the soul, and/or the world.

If the redemptive societies grew out of late imperial popular religious culture, they also developed in new ways under the changing conditions of the Republican period. Many of the best known and largest were primarily urban societies and enjoyed the patronage of important political leaders and appealed to the middle-class or even the wealthy. Redemptive societies engaged in a wide variety of charitable or philanthropic work ranging from famine relief, to anti-opium or anti-alcohol programs, to educational work. Many such societies adopted a universalist posture toward religion in general, arguing that diverse faiths are at base but different expressions of the same fundamental truth; it is hard to imagine a less “sectarian” stance. At the same time one should not underestimate the importance of religious concerns to these societies. Most society founders were charismatic preachers who penned scriptures that were printed and circulated among the faithful. Most societies created a range of rituals and religious symbols, at the same time as they called upon members to live moral lives and do good works. The history of such groups is only beginning to be explored, in part one assumes because the meta-narratives of this period emphasize war, party-building, and national salvation through political and social revolution, and the activities of the popular religious groups during this period do not fit well into existing story lines.

If we define Republican Period redemptive societies as large, urban-based “new religious movements” led by charismatic masters, it is difficult not to note the manifest similarities between the Republican Period redemptive societies and the *qigong* movement of the post-Mao period. Such similarities have been little noted, first because the Republican Period redemptive societies have yet to receive the attention they merit, and second because *qigong* has been studied more in the context of the People’s Republic than in that of the *longue durée* of

the history of Chinese popular religion. Indeed, the *qigong* movement at its height was largely ignored by Western scholars and journalists, until the Falun Gong affair called attention to the movement as a whole. And since the Chinese state recycled the classic heterodoxy discourse as the major part of its justification for the anti-Falun Gong campaign, reflections on the role of history in the *qigong* movement often began from the familiar assumption that connections between *qigong* and the “sectarian” past helped to explain Falun Gong’s “heterodoxy”. (see the essays in Wei Zhihong, ed., 2000)

David Palmer’s path-breaking *Qigong Fever* (2007) traces the emergence of *qigong* in the early 1950s as part of the creation of Traditional Chinese Medicine and follows its complex evolution in the subsequent decades, allowing us to understand *qigong* in the broader context of modern Chinese history. Sifting through thousands of pages of journalistic, biographical, autobiographical and political accounts of the rise and fall of the *qigong* boom, Palmer deftly illustrates how the utopian yearnings of elite and mass came together in the 1980s under the nationalistic banner of scientism to produce the unprecedented mass movement, for it was the belief that *qi* possessed material existence which convinced China’s leaders to give the green light to the *qigong* boom. Through careful case studies of Yan Xin, Zhang Hongbao, Li Hongzhi and other charismatic grandmasters, he also shows how *qigong* traced its therapeutic discourse and its corporal technologies to traditional spiritual and religious practices, and thus should be viewed as a new religious movement despite its scientific pretensions.

Bringing Duara’s and Palmer’s studies together allows us to examine similarities—as well as differences—between the redemptive societies of the Republican Period and the various schools of the post-Mao *qigong* movement, in the hopes of establishing genealogical linkages which can lead us to promising insights. I am by no means equating redemptive societies and *qigong* schools. *Qigong* was a reinvented tradition, as David Palmer demonstrates, and the reinvention occurred under particular circumstances (i.e., the strictures of a nominally socialist state). Still, a number of similarities stand out. Both redemptive societies and *qigong* schools were utopian, salvational projects with religious overtones, even if often disguised as something else. *Qigong* cast salvation in terms of the individual, suffering body which would be made healthy and whole, but the number of larger utopian social projects which came to be attached to *qigong* is striking, ranging from military applications to meteorological interventions. Many of these applications were related to the notion that *qi* and hence *qigong* were scientific, a fiction which served the movement well for some two decades, even as various *qigong* masters described the workings of their *qigong* systems in terms which drew on China’s Buddhist, Daoist and/or popular religious heritage (including her “sectarian” heritage: Li Hongzhi’s discussion of mankind’s fall from grace and the need to “return to the origins” could have been taken with

very little modification from any number of sectarian scriptures, even as Li explicitly and emphatically denied any connection with the White Lotus⁵). Redemptive societies combined individual—as well as social, indeed universal—salvation with philanthropy and social work. Future research may well reveal that once we look more closely at Republican period redemptive societies, we will find suffering bodies seeking relief just as we do in the *qigong* context, even if redemptive societies appear at first glance to be particularly concerned with the “social body”.

Sociologically, both redemptive societies and *qigong* schools (as well as White Lotus groups, for that matter) were organized by and around charismatic masters, who generally claimed relative independence from other recognized religions (or “cultivation systems”) and from one another. These masters preached what they claimed to be a unique message of salvation often experienced first and foremost through the body—often as renewed health, sometimes in the cultivation of paranormal powers—and grounded in traditional moral practice. Moral practice is a necessary but not sufficient condition for salvation; the master’s message contains corporal techniques ranging from rituals to mantras to meditation to miracle cures and the master’s individual guidance, or presence, is often necessary to the success of the practitioner’s efforts. The master’s message was generally—but not always—consigned to scripture, and often sounded apocalyptic themes, driving home the need for repentance and moral rectitude. Although most of these groups were and are peaceful, some have encountered problems with the Chinese state, for a variety of reasons.

Conclusion

Chinese authorities have likened the Falun Gong both to sects (i.e., the White Lotus tradition) and, as David Palmer points out, to cults (the Branch Davidians, the Solar Temple, Aum Shinri kyô, etc), as part of a politically motivated discourse against heterodoxy. I would argue, by contrast, that careful, objective study of Falun Gong (and *qigong*) might afford Western scholars an opportunity to get past the “sectarian” paradigm and arrive at a clearer picture of what we have called “sectarian groups”—as well as their role in the modern history of Chinese religion.⁶ One might begin by arguing that the asserted genealogical connection between the Falun Gong and the White Lotus is correct (although

5. For his description of man’s descent from a previously higher existence, see Li Hongzhi, *Falun Dafa: Lecture in Sydney*, p. 9. For his denial of connections to the White Lotus, see Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan falun fajie* (The Law of Zhuan falun Explained), p. 101. The page references are to Li’s writings available at <http://www.falundafa.org>, in their MS Word version.

6. I develop this argument further in Ownby, 2008.

Falun Gong and *qigong* practitioners would be scandalized by such an association), but that the characterization of the White Lotus tradition is not. The characterization is part of the discourse of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, of which the labels “sect” and “sectarian” are part and parcel.

The first part of this essay was devoted to demonstrating that “sect” is not a useful term in studies of Chinese popular religion. Why not? Because the term has been largely employed as the equivalent of “White Lotus”, a label designed by the late imperial state to stigmatize and criminalize rather than to describe or analyze. Although most Western scholars recognized that the roots of imperial discourse lay in the politics of social control rather than proper sociological classification, they have continued to portray the White Lotus as an existing, unitary movement, self-consciously defining itself as dissident or heterodox vis-à-vis the imperial state, monastic Buddhism, or both. The use of the term sect grew out of this basic assumption, and is ultimately unhelpful because it provides pre-conceived answers to the questions we should have been asking (but which are admittedly difficult to answer in the absence of fieldwork) concerning the relationships between the groups and the state, mainstream religions, and the social order in which the groups found themselves. To my mind, Barend ter Haar discredited the very basis of this paradigm by illustrating its roots in state sensitivity and the demands of police work.

Luckily, the development of China’s “sectarian” traditions over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first century points us toward new ways of understanding these traditions. In a nutshell, I would suggest that there is some kinship relation between what we have called the late imperial White Lotus tradition, the redemptive societies of the Republican period, and the *qigong* groups of the post-Mao period. The extent to which one grew out of the other is to be established by future research (and the evolution was surely not singular or linear), but the similarities are too great to be ignored, as most if not all of the groups have been organized by and around charismatic masters, who preach a unique message of salvation, often experienced first and foremost through the body (and thus involving the teaching and learning of corporal technologies), and grounded in traditional moral behavior. Practitioners see this as a form of “cultivation” rather than “religion” (a term which did not exist in pre-twentieth century China and which has not taken root in modern Chinese popular culture), and I would be pleased to call all such groups “redemptive societies” while awaiting the establishment of a more precise typology or a better term.

How useful is it to refer to redemptive societies as “sectarian”? Looking at twenty and twenty-first century examples of the type, one would be forced to answer “not very”. Of course, some leaders and thus some societies, both from the Republican period and from the post-Mao *qigong* boom might be characterized as having adopted a “sectarian” stance vis-à-vis other redemptive societies

or other schools of *qigong* (indeed, Li Hongzhi's criticisms of the *qigong* movement in the early 1990s are extremely sectarian). But the movements as a whole have been generally open and syncretic, embracing the world and the future in a manner one might characterize as utopian. Of course, the groups did seek to market themselves and to attract followers, and thus were to some degree in competition with one another, but neither the redemptive societies of the Republican Period nor the *qigong* schools of post-Mao China sought to dissent from the religious mainstream (which would have made little sense, given the definition of religion in modern China), nor to set themselves up against the state. Quite the contrary: the leaders of Republican period redemptive societies and of reform-era *qigong* groups generally did their best to cultivate good relations with the state.

This does not mean of course that we should view White Lotus groups of the late imperial period in exactly the same light. There is much that is new in twentieth-century redemptive societies and which grows out of China's complex process of modernization. At the same time, it is easier to understand the long-standing appeal of persecuted groups such as the White Lotus if we stress a message of hope and redemption rather than a message of heterodoxy and dissent.

"But what about the violence?" the skeptical reader of this essay will ask. "If these groups are peaceful, why do they keep winding up in trouble?" This is a valid, complex question, and the subject for another essay. My argument, however, is not that sectarian groups were never violent or rebellious, but that their appeal was not grounded in conscious dissent or willful heterodoxy but rather in popular religious practices widely accepted throughout Chinese society. Charismatic spiritual masters offering moral instruction, apocalyptic warnings, healing and corporal technologies were part and parcel of the Chinese religious marketplace, and many, many Chinese bought into their message, forming voluntary associations which could excite official suspicions, sometimes with good reason. One can dispute anti-semitic theories about Jewish domination of world finance without arguing that there are no Jewish bankers. Similarly, we do not have to ignore the excesses of certain redemptive societies in order to question the mythology of the Chinese state as to their thoroughgoing heterodoxy.

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Résumé

Cet article examine l'historiographie occidentale des mouvements « sectaires » chinois et montre comment les chercheurs ont repris à leur compte les constructions de l'État impérial d'une tradition sectaire unifiée, décrite comme l'ennemi de l'État et de la société. Cette construction a empêché les chercheurs de voir les continuités entre les mouvements religieux populaires de l'époque impériale et les nouveaux mouvements du XX^e siècle (redemptive societies depuis les années dix, Qigong des années quatre-vingt et quatre-vingt-dix, etc.) ; cette analyse vise à repenser les catégories utilisées en sciences sociales de la religion en Chine (notamment la catégorie de « secte »), mais aussi à clarifier les rapports entre les analyses scientifiques des mouvements religieux en Chine et leur traitement politique.

Mots-clés : Chine, religion, sectes, historiographie.

Abstract

This article analyses Western historiography of so-called Chinese “sectarian” movements and shows how scholars have adopted the late imperial state’s invention of a coherent sectarian tradition, described as the enemy of state and society. Such an invention has prevented historians from seeing the continuities between popular religious movements of the late imperial period and new religions of the twentieth century, such as the redemptive societies since the 1910s or the Qigong movements of the 1980s and 90s. Against this background, the article argues that we should rethink the categories used in studying Chinese religions, beginning with “sectarian”, and clarify the connections between the social-scientific study of religion and its political treatment that such categories facilitate.

Key words: China, religion, sects, historiography.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la historiografía occidental de los movimientos “sectarios” chinos y muestra cómo los investigadores tomaron para sí las construcciones del Estado imperial de una tradición sectaria unificada, descrita como el enemigo del Estado y de la sociedad. Esta construcción impide a los investigadores ver las continuidades entre los movimientos religiosos populares de la época imperial y los nuevos movimientos del siglo XX (redemptive societies desde los años '10, Qigong de los años '80 y '90, etc.); este análisis apunta a repensar las categorías utilizadas en ciencias sociales de la religión en China (especialmente la categoría de “secta”), pero también a clarificar las relaciones entre los análisis científicos de los movimientos religiosos en China y su tratamiento político.

Palabras clave: China, religión, sectas, historiografía.