

*Journal of Chinese Theatre, Ritual and Folklore (Minsu quyi):
Special Double Issue on Redemptive Societies and
New Religious Movements in Modern China*

Introduction to issue 173:

**Redemptive Societies in
Cultural and Historical Context**

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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 popular Confucian revival of

¹ Prasenjit Duara, “The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism,” *Journal of World History*, 12.1:99–130; also in *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*, pp. 89-129.

² See Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, pp. 91-122.

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, redemptive societies 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.

In his analytic essay in issue 172 of this special double issue, Palmer proposed a

³ See David A. Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China*; David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*; David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan*; Lu Yunfeng 盧雲峰, *The Transformation of Yiguandao in Taiwan: Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy*; Bernard Formoso, *De Jiao: A Religious Movement in Contemporary China and Overseas: Purple Qi from the East*. See also Chen Jinguo 陳進國, “Zongjiao jiduo tuanti de bentu yundong yu quanqiu kuozhan – yi Zhongguo dalu, Taiwan Yiguandao shanbian wei li” 宗教救度團體的本土運動與全球擴展——以中國大陸、臺灣一貫道嬗變為例, forthcoming.

⁴ For a review of this literature, see Palmer, “Chinese Redemptive Societies and Salvationist Religion: Historical Phenomenon or Sociological Category?” in issue 172 of this double 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* 44.1-2.

⁵ For classic studies, see Daniel Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China*; 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*, pp. 255-91; Barend ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*; Hubert Seiwert (in collaboration with Ma Xisha 馬西沙), *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History*.

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

working definition of the category of the “redemptive society,” as religious movements which drew freely on the Three Teachings 三教 but were unaffiliated to the traditional institutions of any of them, were based on voluntary membership in contrast to the ascriptive membership of local communal religion, and which, during the Republican era between 1912 and 1949, formed national or provincial associations which registered (or attempted to register) with the state as legal entities (with the status of religions, charities or civic associations) with a constitution and articles of incorporation, overseeing a hierarchy of halls or branches which spanned several regions if not the whole country. These societies were either entirely new or were derived from older groups which, through the impulsion of charismatic leadership or spirit-writing, renewed and reorganized themselves during the Republican period.⁷

If the “ideal type” of the redemptive society, perfectly matching all the criteria listed above, was represented by the Tongshanshe 同善社, Daoyuan/ Red Swastika Society 道院 / 紅卍字會, Daode xueshe 道德學社, Wanguo daodehui 萬國道德會 and Yiguandao 一貫道 – the former three being the subject of the case studies by Wang Chien-chuan, Thomas DuBois and Fan Chun-wu presented in issue 172 – these large-scale, China-wide networks and associations grew out of a thriving religious milieu consisting of thousands of local groups devoted to various combinations of self-cultivation, spirit-writing and charity. While the definition presented above puts the focus on the national, modern organizational character of the largest redemptive societies, we need to remember that, in reality, it would be impossible to draw a clear line between them and the myriads of other groups and movements to which they were organically connected, be they more local groups and spirit-writing halls which did not become fully-fledged redemptive societies, or movements arising before and after the Republican era, such as the salvationist traditions of the late imperial era or the post-Mao *qigong* movement.

It is such groups which are the subject of the four cases presented in this issue no. 173, dealing with Xiantiandao 先天道 branches in Guangdong (by Shiga Ichiko 志賀市子) and in Hong Kong (by Yau Chi On 游子安 and Ngai Ting Ming 危丁明), a contemporary Taiwanese phoenix hall (by Philip Clart), and Falun Gong 法輪功 (by David Ownby). All of them can be situated somewhere along the blurry edges of the redemptive society category – and, though one might especially question the link between the latter two cases and the category, all of them illuminate several dimensions of the religious culture which spawned the Republican era wave of redemptive societies.

⁷ David A. Palmer, “Chinese Redemptive Societies and Salvationist Religion: Historical Phenomenon or Sociological Category?” *Min-su chü-i* 民俗曲藝 172:21-72.

Xiantiandao⁸ is an essential case because the Tongshanshe and Yiguandao, not to mention other groups such as the Guiyi daoyuan 皈依道院, the Guigendao 歸根道, and the Yixin tiandao longhua shengjiao hui 一心天道龍華聖教會, all grew out of Xiantiandao branches. Groups such as the Tiande shengjiao 天德聖教 and the Vietnamese Cao Dai religion 高臺教 can also be linked to Xiantiandao antecedents. Xiantiandao emerged in Jiangxi in the late 17th century, with origins in the Dachengjiao 大乘教 and Yuandunjiao 圓頓教 traditions. In 1790, the 11th patriarch moved to Guizhou, and from there, Xiantiandao spread rapidly to Yunnan, Sichuan and Hubei, and was suppressed by the Qing authorities as the Qinglianjiao 青蓮教. The leadership regrouped in 1843, sending missionaries to several provinces. Such bursts of evangelism were frequent within the Xiantiandao movement. Active and entrepreneurial halls would send teachers to other cities, where they would found affiliated halls linked in a loose network. The originators of such expansions were often considered the newest in the line of Patriarchs, and gave a new name to their teaching, with slight modifications to the scriptures and practices. The result of this pattern was that by the late 19th century, there were several overlapping networks of Xiantiandao related congregations, some of which extended to most major cities and to diasporic communities in Southeast Asia. These networks were quite loose, however; and they would evolve in many directions in the 20th century. The Tongshanshe grew out of one such hall in central Sichuan in the early 1900s, while Yiguandao was a small Xiantiandao offshoot in Shandong until it expanded into the largest of the redemptive societies in the 1930s. But most Xiantiandao halls did not develop into such large organizations. Although several Xiantiandao groups joined forces to register the Zhongguo sanjiao shengdao zonghui 中國三教聖道總會 with the Beiyang regime in 1923, in reality Xiantiandao seems to have remained a very loose collection of independent halls and networks.

It is two such halls which are the subject of Shiga's and Yau and Ngai's studies.⁹ Both show the connection between Xiantiandao and commercial elites, and suggest that networks of Xiantiandao lodges followed the trade routes of their members. The first case, of the Feixia dong 飛霞洞 in Qingyuan County, illustrates how the lay monastic ideal of Xiantiandao provided a communal structure for unmarried women (be they divorced,

⁸ One of the earliest English-language studies of Xiantiandao halls is J. J. M. De Groot, *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China: A Page in the History of Religions*, vol. 1, pp. 176-96.

⁹ These are part of a larger study on the Xiantiandao by the afore-mentioned authors. On Xiantiandao in Vietnam and Thailand, see Yau Chi On 游子安, "Daomai nanchuan: 20 shiji cong Lingnan dao Yuenan Xiantiandao de chuancheng yu bianqian" 道脈南傳：20世紀從嶺南到越南先天道的傳承與變遷 and Ngai Ting Ming 危丁明, "Wu dao qi nan: Xiantiandao zai Taiguo de chuanbo" 吾道其南：先天道在泰國的傳播, both in Jin Ze 金澤 and Chen Jinguo 陳進國 eds., *Zongjiao renleixue* 宗教人類學, vol. 2. 請補游子安及危丁明兩篇文章的起訖頁數

widows, without children to care for them, or having made a vow never to marry), and a “retirement community” for male labourers who, owing to the vagaries of life and migration in those turbulent times, found themselves without wife or family. By joining the Feixia dong for a life of self-cultivation in retirement, they joined a supportive “surrogate family” of fellow adepts, which could also handle their funeral and burial, and tend to their ancestral tablet. This configuration offers an interesting comparison to some of the Xiantiandao halls studied several decades ago by Marjorie Topley in Hong Kong and Singapore, which played a similar function as residential communities for unmarried female migrant workers.¹⁰

In the publications of the Feixia dong, Shiga notes a critique of the moral corruption brought about by Western civilization, and the expression of a strong nationalism couched in the defense of the traditional virtues of the Three Teachings. A process of Chinese national identity construction also appears in Yau and Ngai’s article on Hong Kong, in which they describe how the Xiantiandao Fuqing tang 福慶堂 became a player in Hong Kong’s Confucian revivalist movement in the 1920s and 30s. While the “unity of the Three Teachings” 三教合一 is a core Xiantiandao belief, it is rare for a Xiantiandao lodge to accord such salience to the worship of Confucius. Yau and Ngai suggest that this could be related to the Hong Kong colonial context, in which Confucius had become a marker of Chinese identity. And indeed, Chinese identity construction, and a reaction to the Western challenge, explain the efforts made by the larger redemptive societies to promote Confucian learning and “national studies” 國學, as discussed in issue 172.¹¹

The Three-in-One or Five-in-One “syncretism” of the redemptive societies gives them the resources to emphasize one or another of the Three Teachings depending on the context and need, be it at the level of religious practice (in which Daoist and Buddhist forms of self-cultivation are central) or moral discourse and social legitimation (in which the Confucian element tends to be brought to the fore). And yet, this contextual appropriation should not be seen as merely an opportunistic mix-and-match, or as a sign of logical incoherence. Each

¹⁰ Marjorie Topley, “Chinese Womens’ Vegetarian Houses in Singapore,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 27.1:51-69; Marjorie Topley, “The Great Way of Former Heaven: A Group of Chinese Secret Religious Sects” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 26.2:363-92, translated in *Minjian zongjiao* 2 (1996): 19-50. These two articles have just been republished in Marjorie Topley, *Cantonese Society in China and Singapore: Gender, Religion, Medicine and Money*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011. See also Maurice Freedman and Marjorie Topley, “Religion and Social Realignment among the Chinese in Singapore,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 21.1:3-23; Marjorie Topley and James Hayes, “Notes on Some Vegetarian Halls in Hong Kong Belonging to the Sect of Hsien-T’ien Tao (The Way of Former Heaven),” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8:135-48.

¹¹ On “national studies,” see also the special issue on this theme edited by Arif Dirlik on “The National Learning Revival,” *China Perspectives* 2011/1. Chen Jinguo, “Zongjiao jiudu tuanti de bentu yundong yu quanqiu kuozhan” analyses this phenomenon using anthropological theories of cultural revivalism in response to external cultural threats.

case of Chinese syncretism displays a particular structure, in which one of the teachings may be given the privileged role, or each is given a unique and complementary function. Philip Clart's contribution to this issue offers an example of a phoenix hall scripture which reveals a strikingly sophisticated layering of Guanyin devotionalism around a core devoted to a cosmology of the universal Dao, in which the popular and more accessible worship of Guanyin is used as an entry point into the more esoteric points of the "marvellous Dao" 妙道 of phoenix hall doctrine. While the source of this scripture, a contemporary spirit-writing group in Taiwan, is not a redemptive society as defined above, Clart's study brings some important methodological insights for their study: most of the large redemptive society networks either grew out of spirit-writing halls, on the instructions of revealed scriptures, or incorporated spirit-writing as one of their major activities. The production, publishing and dissemination of scriptures and morality books 善書 has also been an important activity for many redemptive societies, as it has for independent phoenix halls. The structural analysis proposed by Clart potentially offers a key for understanding the articulation of syncretism in spirit-writing and redemptive societies, and his ethnographic approach to textual production, while impossible to replicate for the study of early 20th century groups, provides important insights into how spirit writing may have influenced the inner dynamics of such groups.

David Ownby's article places redemptive societies in the context of the broad sweep of Chinese religious and political history, from late imperial times until today. Ownby argues that, from the so-called "White Lotus" sects to the Republican era redemptive societies to the post-Mao *qigong* movement and Falun Gong, there has been a continuous strand of Chinese religion, which has revolved around health and healing, morality, and charismatic powers. If *qigong* and Falun Gong became so popular in the 1980's and 90's, drawing hundreds of millions of followers in the space of a few years, it is because, although the specific *qigong* groups may have been new, the practices and beliefs they expressed were so deeply rooted in Chinese religious culture that little effort was needed to re-activate them after the Mao years. And the same could be said of the Republican era wave of redemptive societies, and of earlier waves. Ownby suggests that this is a powerful, and possibly a dominant current in Chinese religion – but, in contrast to its Western equivalent, Christianity -- one that has no name, no sense of common identity: its only common denominator has always been the stigmatizing labels affixed to it by the state in its various incarnations, whether as "White Lotus" 白蓮教, "heterodox cults" 邪教 or as "reactionary sects and secret societies" 反動會道門.¹² The repressive political environment has led these groups to

¹² On the use of these labels, see David A. Palmer, "Heretical Doctrines, Reactionary Secret Societies, Evil Cults: Labeling Heterodoxy in Twentieth-Century China," in Mayfair Yang ed., *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, pp. 113-34.

keep a low profile, to splinter, to constantly change names, to deny their historical past (no group will admit to any links with the dreaded White Lotus or *buidaomen*), and prevent the emergence of a common identity. Nameless, it remains invisible, and so, when it surges forth, seemingly out of nowhere, it catches the state off guard and throws it into a panic. Seen from this angle, the rapid rise of *qigong* and the sudden appearance of Falun Gong would appear to be no surprise, and, though now suppressed, will likely be followed at some point in the future by another movement or wave.¹³

Ownby's contribution highlights how the political environment deeply shapes, and is shaped by, Chinese salvationist movements, down to their very structure, identity and evolution. Thus, the redemptive societies of the Republican era bear the deep mark of the tumultuous politics of the time – a collapse in state authority that gave the redemptive societies the space to expand on an unprecedented scale, and even to register with the government; and a sense of moral and cultural crisis brought on by the encroachment by the imperialist West. This motivated conservative activists and elites to invest themselves in redemptive societies as an organizational vehicle to unify and revive the essence of China's Three Teachings and, on that foundation, to engage with global trends in philanthropy and discourses on religion, spirituality and morality.

¹³ Ownby proposes to extend the “redemptive societies” label to this nameless current of groups rooted in Chinese cosmology, charismatic healing powers, health practices, and moral discourse, regardless of their historical period. Palmer, in his contribution to issue 172 (“Chinese Redemptive Societies and Salvationist Religion”), proposes a broader sociological category of “salvationist religion” to encompass all the historical waves of groups with the characteristics listed by Ownby, and restrict “redemptive societies” to the subset of Republican era groups as defined above.

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