

**Chinese Redemptive Societies and Salvationist Religion:
Historical Phenomenon or Sociological Category?**

David A. Palmer

Assistant Professor

University of Hong Kong

Dept. of Sociology and Centre for Anthropological Research¹

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Abstract

This paper outlines a conceptual framework for research on Chinese redemptive societies and salvationist religion. I begin with a review of past scholarship on Republican-era salvationist movements and their contemporary communities, comparing their treatment in three bodies of scholarly literature dealing with the history and scriptures of “sectarianism” in the late imperial era, the history of “secret societies” of the republican period, and the ethnography of “popular religion” in the contemporary Chinese world. I then assess Prasenjit Duara’s formulation of “redemptive societies” as a label for a constellation of religious groups active in the republican period, and, after comparing the characteristics of the main groups in question (such as the Tongshanshe, Daoyuan, Yiguandao and others), argue that an analytical distinction needs to be made between “salvationist movements” as a sociological category, which have appeared throughout Chinese history and until today, and redemptive societies as one historical instance of a wave of salvationist movements, which appeared in the republican period and bear the imprint of the socio-cultural conditions and concerns of that period. Finally, I discuss issues for future research and the significance of redemptive societies in the social, political and intellectual history of modern China, and in the modern history of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

Keywords:

Redemptive societies, salvationism, sectarianism, new religious movements, Chinese religion.

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Introduction

In the confused political atmosphere of the first two decades of the Chinese Republic (1911-1949), a wave of religious groups which, under the Qing, would have been banned as ‘White Lotus’ 白蓮教 or ‘heterodox sects’ 邪教 emerged from obscurity or formed themselves anew, openly expanding and even dominating the religious landscape in some cities and regions.² Shortly after the first generation of formally registered religious associations was established in China in 1912,³ several of these groups also founded national modern-style organizations which registered with the state as religious, philanthropic, or public interest associations, with a head office, a national organization with provincial and municipal branches, and a doctrine which attempted to modernise the traditional notion of the Union of the Three Teachings 三教合一 with the aid of a more modern, academic language and by incorporating Christianity and Islam to the traditional Three. They revered the founders of the Five Teachings (Laozi, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammad), and held rituals to avert the world apocalypse of the end of the Three Kalpas 三期末劫. These groups often had their own scriptures, philosophical systems, liturgies (simplified from Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist sources), congregational modes of participation, and hierarchical national organizations. As such, they actually conformed as much, if not more, to the model of the Christian church which had become the new paradigm of ‘religion’ in China, than the traditional Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian institutions: it is not surprising, then, that several of them officially registered as religious associations in the first years of the Republic, and were rarely targeted in the polemics against superstition before the Nanking decade (1929-1939).

² For a historical discussion of redemptive societies in the context of the political and religious changes of Republican China, see Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, chapter 4; see also Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 56-66.

³ Vincent Goossaert, “Republican Church Engineering. The National Religious Associations in 1912 China.” in *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, ed., Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008, pp. 209-232.

The largest and most sophisticated of these groups⁴ – which have been designated as “redemptive societies” in the recent scholarship discussed in this article -- included the Zailijiao 在理教 (Teaching of the Abiding Principle), incorporated in 1913 as the All-China Association for Promoting Abstention from Opium and Alcohol;⁵ followed by the Daode xueshe 道德學社 (Moral Studies Society) in 1916,⁶ the Tongshanshe 同善社 (Fellowship of Goodness) in 1917,⁷ the Wushanshe 悟善社 (Society of Awakening to Goodness, later renamed the Jiushi xinjiaohui 救世新教會, New Religion to Save the World) in 1919; the Wanguo daodehui 萬國道德會 (World Ethical Society)⁸ and the Daoyuan 道院 (School of the Tao) in 1921,⁹ the Xiantiandao (Way of Anterior Heaven), which registered as the Zhongguo sanjiao shengdao zonghui 中國三教聖道總會 (General Association of the Sagely Way of the Three Teachings) in 1924,¹⁰ the

⁴ See Shao Yong 邵雍, *Zhongguo huidaomen* 中國會道門, Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1997, pp. 165-194.

⁵ On Zailijiao, see Vincent Goossaert, *The Taoists of Peking, 1800-1949. A Social History of Urban Clerics*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Asia Center, 2007, pp. 297-317; “Taoists in the Modern Self-cultivation Market : the Case of Peking, 1850-1949,” in David A. Palmer and Xun Liu, *Daoism in the 20th Century: Between Eternity and Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming 2011; Thomas David DuBois, *Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005.

⁶ See Fan Chun-wu’s contribution to this issue, also his “Confucian ‘Religion’ in the Early Republican Period: Historical Questions Concerning Duan Zhengyuan and the Morality Society”, *Chinese Studies in History* 44:1-2 (2010-2011), pp 132-155.

⁷ On the Tongshanshe, see Wang Chien-chuan’s contribution to this issue, as well as his “Tongshanshe de zaoqi lishi (1912-1945) chutan 同善社的早期歷史(1912-1945)初探, *Minjian zongjiao* 1 (1995) pp. 57-82, translated in *Chinese Studies in History* 44:1-2 (2010-2011), pp. 121-131; also De Korne, John Cornelius, “The Fellowship of Goodness: A Study in Contemporary Chinese Religion,” Ph.D. Diss., Kennedy School of Missions and Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1934.

⁸ On the Wanguo daodehui, see Xia Mingyu 夏明玉, “Minguo xinxing zongjiao jieshe: Wanguo daodehui zhi sixiang yu bianqian (1921-1949)” 民國新興宗教結社：萬國道德會之思維與變遷 (1921-1949), MA thesis, Donghai daxue lishi yanjiusuo, 2001; Tian Hailin 田海林, “Wanguo daodehui de lishi kaocha” 万国道德会的历史考察, MA Thesis, Shandong Normal University, 2008.

⁹ On the Daoyuan and Red Swastika Society, see Thomas DuBois’ contribution to this issue; also Sakai Tadao 酒井忠夫, “Daoyuan de yange” 道院的沿革, *Minjian zongjiao* 3 (1997): 93-150; Du Jingzhen 杜景珍, “Luelun Daoyuan jin (1928) hou de dongxiang” 略論道院遭禁 (1928) 後的動向, *Minjian zongjiao* 3 (1997): 227-233; three articles by Song Guangyu 宋光宇 in *Song Guangyu zongjiao wenhua lunwenji* 宋光宇宗教文化論文集, Yilan: Foguang renwen shehuixueyuan, 2002, pp. 487-618; Richard Fox Young, “Sanctuary of the Tao: The Place of Christianity in a Sino-Japanese Unity Sect (Tao Yüan)” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 17 (1989): 1-26; Li Guangwei 李光伟, *Daoyuan, Daodeshe Shijie hongwanzi hui—xinxing zongjiao cishan zuzhi de lishi kaocha (1916-1954)* 道院·道德社·世界红卍字会——新兴民间宗教慈善组织的历史考察 (1916—1954), MA thesis, Shandong Normal University, 2008.

¹⁰ On Xiantiandao, see the forthcoming contributions by Shiga Ichiko, Yau Chi-on and Wei Dingming to issue 173 of this journal; see also J. J. M. De Groot, *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China: A Page in the History of Religions* (Reprinted by Ch’eng Wen Publishing Co. Taipei, 1976), vol. 1, pp. 176-196; Marjorie Topley, “Chinese Womens’ Vegetarian Houses in Singapore”, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Society*, vol. XXVI (pt. 1, 1954): 51-69; Maurice Freedman and Marjorie Topley, “Religion and Social Realignment among the Chinese in Singapore” *Journal of Asian*

Jiugongdao 九宮道 (Way of Nine Palaces), which registered as the Jingshi puji fojiaohui 京師普濟佛教會 (Buddhist Association for Universal Salvation)¹¹ in 1926, the Guiyi daoyuan 皈依道院 (Court of the Way of Initiation) in 1927, the Tiande shengjiao 天德聖教 (Sagely Teachings of Heavenly Virtue), registered as the Zongjiao zhexue yanjiushe 宗教哲學研究社 (Society for the Study of Religious Philosophy) in 1930;¹² the Yixin tiandao longhua shengjiaohui 一心天道龍華聖教會 (Holy Dragon Flower Assembly of the Heavenly Way of the One Heart), registered as the Puhua jiushi fojiaohui 普化救世佛教會 (Buddhist Association for Universal Salvation and Transformation) in 1932, Yiguandao 一貫道 (Way of Pervasive Unity), which, after extraordinary growth in the 1930's and 40's, registered as the Zhonghua daode cishanhui 中華道德慈善會 (Chinese Society for Morality and Charity) in 1947,¹³ the Zhenkongjiao 真空教 (Teachings of

Studies vol. XXI no. 1: 3-23 (1963); 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* v. 26, part 2, 1963, pp. 363-392 translated in *Minjian zongjiao* 2 (1996): 19-50; 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* v.8 (1968): 135-148; Lin Wanchuan 林萬傳, *Xiantiandao xitong yanjiu* 先天大道系統研究, 台南, 青蘊書局, 1986.

¹¹ See Kong Simeng 孔思孟 and Lu Zhongwei 陸仲偉, "Wanqing shidai jiugongdao yanjiu" 晚清時代九宮道研究, *Minjian zongjiao* 3 (1997): 1-25; Wang Chien-chuan 王見川, "Qingmo-Minchu Wutaishan de Puji ji qi jiaotuan" 清末民初五台山的普濟及其教團, in Wang Chien-chuan, *Hanren zongjiao, minjian xinyang yu yuyanshu de tansuo* 漢人宗教、民間信仰與預言書的探索. Taipei, Boyang wenhua, 2008, pp. 127-169.

¹² On Tiande shengjiao, see Holmes Welch and Chün-Fang Yü, "The Tradition of Innovation: A Chinese New Religion" *Numen* XXVII, 2 (1980): 222-246; Yu Hui ren 葉惠仁, "Tiandejiao zai Taiwan de fazhan (1926-2001) 天德教在台灣的發展 (1926-2001)", MA Thesis, Danjiang University, 2003; Pan Shuren 潘樹仁, *Lihai shengge - Xiao da zongshi Changming chuanqi yisheng* 歷海笙歌—一篇大宗師昌明傳奇一生, Hong Kong: Boxue chubanshe, 2007; David A. Palmer, "Tao and Nation. Li Yujie: May Fourth Activist, Daoist Reformer and Redemptive Society Patriarch in Mainland China and Taiwan," in David A. Palmer and Xun Liu, eds., *Daoism in the 20th Century: Between Eternity and Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

¹³ On Yiguandao, the first ethnographic reports were published in 1945 by Li Shiyu, *Xiandai huabei mimi zongjiao* 現代華北祕密宗教, Taipei: Guting shuwu, 1975; David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, combines ethnographic research on Yiguandao and local spirit-writing groups with textual research on "sectarian" scriptures and history; Thomas David DuBois, *Sacred Village*, includes valuable historical data on Yiguandao in Hebei villages until and including the CCP repression of the 1950's; Lu Yunfeng, *The Transformation of Yiguandao in Taiwan: Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008, based on participant observation, uses religious economy theory to analyse the growth and changes of Yiguandao. Lu Zhongwei 陸仲偉, *Yiguandao neimu* 一貫道內幕, Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1998, contains a wealth of historical data on the Yiguandao organization in republican China; Song Guanyu 宋光宇, *Tiandao chuanzheng - Yiguandao yu xiandai shehui* 天道傳證——一貫道與現代社會, Taipei: Zhengyi shanshu chubanshe, 1996 – one of several works by Song Guangyu on Yiguandao – contains several essays analysing the development of Yiguandao in Taiwan in the context of socio-economic changes; for an overview in English, see his "The Heavenly Way Transmits the Light: The Yiguandao and

True Emptiness), which registered as the Zhenkong Cishanhui 真空慈善會 (True Emptiness Charity Society) in 1948,¹⁴ and the Dejiao 德教 (Morality Teachings), which began in 1945 and spread to Southeast Asia shortly before being eradicated in the Peoples' Republic of China.¹⁵ Another group which shares the same origins, structure and characteristics is the Vietnamese new religion Caodai 高臺教, which registered with the French colonial government of Cochinchina in 1926.¹⁶

The size of the phenomenon can be judged by the fact that the first mass political campaign launched by the new CCP regime after 1949 was the movement to stamp out the “reactionary sects and secret societies” 反動會道門. According to police reports, a total of 13 million followers (2% of China's population) were counted and 820,000 sect leaders and activists were arrested or turned themselves in, in all of China's counties.¹⁷ These figures can be compared to the 500,000 Buddhist monks, the 1 million Protestants and the 3 million Catholics in China at the time. Redemptive societies thus constituted, by far, the largest group of organized religious congregations in Republican China.¹⁸ Lin Rongze has estimated, based on an analysis of reports on the campaign in local gazeteers

Contemporary Society”, *Chinese Studies in History* 44:1-2 (2010-2011), pp. 76-90 On Yiguandao in Southeast Asia, see Song Guangyu, “Religious Propagation, Commercial Activities, and Cultural Identity: The Spread and Development of the Yiguandao in Singapore,” *Chinese Studies in History* 44:1-2 (2010-2011), pp. 91-120; Soo Khin Wah, “A Study of the Yiguan Dao (Unity Sect) and Its Development in Peninsular Malaysia.” Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1997, and “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. Sébastien Billioud is currently conducting extensive field research on Yiguandao in Hong Kong. For an initial report, see Bi Yousai 畢游塞 (Sébastien Billioud), “Lun daochang jiaoyu zai Yiguandao jiushi shiming zhong de jiaose” 論道場教育在一貫道救世使命中的角色. In China Academy of Social Sciences Institute of World Religions ed., *Xinxing zongjiao fazhan qushi xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 新興宗教發展趨勢學術研討會論文集, 6-7 Dec. 2010, pp. 132-144.

¹⁴ See Tetsuro Noguchi 野口鐵郎, “Dongnanya liuchuan de liangge Zhongguo ren zongjiao” 東南亞流傳的兩個中國人宗教, *Minjian zongjiao* 2 (1996): 51-91.

¹⁵ On Dejiao, see Tan Chee-beng, *The Development and Distribution of Dejiao Associations in Malaysia and Singapore*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985; Yoshihara Kazuo. “Dejiao: A Chinese Religion in Southeast Asia”. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 15 (1988): 199-221; Zheng Zhiming 鄭志明, “Dongma Dejiao de fazhan” 東馬德教會的發展 *Shijie zongjiao xuekan* 3 (2004): 87—113; Bernard Formoso, “Chinese Temples and Philanthropic Associations in Thailand.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27(2), 1996, pp. 245-260, and *De Jiao: A Religious Movement In Contemporary China And Overseas: Purple Qi From the East*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2010..

¹⁶ 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; V. L. Oliver, *Caodai Spiritism: A Study of Religion in Vietnamese Society*, Leiden: Brill 1976.

¹⁷ Shao Yong, *Huidaomen*, 452-453. Lu Zhongwei 陸仲偉, *Minguo huidaomen* 民國會道門, Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2002, p. 1, estimates the number of followers at 30 million.

¹⁸ The practitioners of Chinese communal or popular religion were far more numerous, and included almost the entire Chinese population, but Chinese communal religion does not have voluntary congregational membership in the way that Christian churches and redemptive societies do.

published in mainland China since 1980, that membership in popular sects (excluding gangs and militias such as the Green Gang 青幫, Red Spears 紅槍會 and so on) in the early 1950's amounted to over 18 million, most of whom were affiliated to one of the groups listed above.¹⁹ While these figures need to be taken with caution, they do give some idea of the considerable size of the phenomenon.²⁰

Though the CCP campaigns did successfully eradicate most redemptive societies on the mainland, they expanded in Taiwan where, led by Yiguandao, they also grew into some of the largest religious organizations on the island, and were a major matrix for the emergence of several new religious movements such as the True Buddha School 真佛宗, Haizidao 亥子道 and the Mile dadao 彌勒大道. In overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, redemptive societies (notably Dejiao, Zhenkongjiao and Yiguandao) became and remain as one of the most important forms of religious, social and philanthropic association. As shown in the contributions by Fan Chun-wu, Wang Chien-ch'uan, Li Shiwei, Wei Dingming and Yau Chi-on to this double issue, groups such as the Xiantian dao, Tongshanshe and Daode xueshe were active in promoting Confucian revivalism in Republican China, in Hong Kong and in post-war Taiwan. Republican-era redemptive societies were the precursors of the post-Mao *qigong* movement, and bear analogies with some aspects of the early 21st-century popular Confucian revival in the Chinese mainland. Some of the earliest activists of the *qigong* movement in the Chinese military in 1978 became enthusiasts after they were treated with external *qi* emission by an old master who, in the 1930's, had been a leading disciple of Xiao Changming 蕭昌明 (1895-1943), the founder of Tiande shengjiao and a famous *qi* healer.²¹ During recent fieldwork, I have found that some contemporary Confucian groups have been republishing and studying texts by redemptive society leaders such as Duan Zhengyuan 段正元 (1864-1940), founder of the Daode xueshe, and Wang Fengyi 王鳳儀 (1864-1937), a healer, popular educator and leading member of the Wanguo daodehui in

¹⁹ Lin Rongze 林容澤, *Yiguandao lishi – dalu zhi bu* 一貫道歷史—大陸之部, Taipei: Mingde chubanshe, 2008, pp. 58-62. For detailed local data on *huidaomen* in the late 1940s, gleaned from PRC gazeteers, see Zhao Jiazhu 趙嘉珠, comp., *Zhongguo huidaomen shiliao jicheng: jin bainian lai huidaomen de zuzhi yu fenbu*. 中國會道門史料集成: 近百年来會道門的組織與分布. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004.

²⁰ The figures could be inflated by zealous local officials trying to meet or surpass the targets of political campaigns; on the other hand, they could also be underreporting the possibly large numbers of members who didn't turn themselves in or otherwise avoided detection.

²¹ David A. Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 50.

Manchuria.²² In Taiwan and Malaysia, Yiguandao is the largest and most active promoter of the scripture-recitation movement 讀經運動 which is the basic expression of Confucian revivalism of all stripes.

No study of religion in the modern Chinese world, or of traditional revivals and reinventions in contemporary China, can thus afford to ignore this wave of groups. The phenomenon was noticed and amply reported in the 1920's by the missionary press.²³ In his book *Revolution and Religion in Modern China*, Frank Rawlinson, editor of the *Chinese Recorder*, wrote in 1929 that two movements were shaking China at the time: the secularist New Culture movement, and the religious response to it, taking shape in what he termed the "Eclectic Societies", which he termed a "revolutionary religious movement" – revolutionary in that it attempted to fully absorb, into the hearts and religious culture of the people, the consequences of the 1911 revolution.²⁴ The first movement, which he called the "intellectual renaissance" was led by young, modern-educated intellectuals, while the second was led by older, Confucian-trained literati. The one launched an anti-Christian campaign while the other attempted to integrate Christianity into its syncretistic outlook – both approaches, claimed Rawlinson, were proofs of the "virility" of Christianity and its growing influence in China.²⁵

Wing-tsit Chan, in his 1953 book on *Religious Trends in Modern China*, dismissed these "new religious societies" as "negative in outlook, utilitarian in purpose, and superstitious in belief ... They deserve the attack of intellectuals and are already being suppressed by

²² On Wang Fengyi, see Song Guangyu 宋光宇, "Wang fengyi de xingli jiangbing" 王鳳儀的性理講病, in *Song Guangyu zongjiao wenhua lunwenji*, pp. 215-244.

²³ A partial list of references includes Paul de Witt Twinem, "Modern Syncretic Religious Societies in China." *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (1925): 463-482 and Vol. 5, no. 6 (1925): 595-606; Clarence Day, "A Unique Buddhist-Taoist Union Prayer Conference," *Chinese Recorder* 56:5 (1925): 366-369; Frederick Sequier Drake, "The Tao Yuan: A New Religious and Spiritualistic Movement," *Chinese Recorder* 54:3 (1923): 133-144; Donald Fay, "The International Union of Religions," *Chinese Recorder* 55:3 (1924): 155-159; Lewis Hodous, "Non-Christian Religious Movements in China," in Milton Theobald Stauffer, ed., *The Christian Occupation of China*, Shanghai: China Continuation Committee, 1922, pp. 27-31; "The Chinese Church of the Five Religions," *Journal of Religion* Vol. 4, No. 1 (1924): 71-76; "A Chinese Premillenarian," *Journal of Religion* Vol. 4, No. 6 (1924): 592-599; Spencer Lewis, "A New Religion," *West China Missionary News* 26 (1924): 22-26; Karl Ludvig Reichelt, "Trends in China's Non-Christian Religions," *Chinese Recorder* 65:11 (1934), 707-714; Gilbert Reid, "Recent Religious Movements in China," *China Mission Year Book, 1924*, Shanghai: Christian Literature Society, 1924: 59-66; "New Religious Movements in China," *Church Missionary review* vol. 76, no. 849 (1925): 15-26; "Trends in China's Religious Life," *China Christian Year Book, 1926*, Shanghai: Christian Literature Society, 1926, 71-79; G. W. Sparling, "China's New Religious Sects," *West China Missionary News* 26 (1924): 17-22; Y.Y. Tsu, "Spiritual Tendencies of the Chinese People as Shown Outside of the Christian Church To-day," *Chinese Recorder* 56:12 (1925): 777-781; "Religion in China: Toward a Greater Synthesis," *Chinese Recorder* 59:10 (1928): 622-629.

²⁴ Rawlinson, Frank. *Revolution and Religion in China*. Shanghai: Oriental Press, 1929, pp. 1, 14.

²⁵ Rawlinson, *Ibid.*, p. 86.

the new government in China”,²⁶ -- although in the following sentence, he mentioned that “This is not the first time they have been banished, but each time they have survived under cover only to emerge stronger later on”, and went on to describe some tendencies of these religious societies, some of which were praiseworthy, and which could give an indication of the future of Chinese religion: patriotism, revolt, this-worldliness, an ethical emphasis, lay leadership, and syncretism.²⁷ But since then, redemptive societies have been almost completely ignored by scholars of modern China and religion, until the turn of the 21st century when Chinese historians such as Shao Yong published historical overviews of the *huidaomen*,²⁸ and Prasenjit Duara coined the term ‘redemptive societies’ to draw attention to their common project of saving both individuals and the world as a whole.

The “redemptive societies” category and its significance

Duara introduced the category of the “redemptive society” in his article “The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism”.²⁹ Although he doesn’t define the category, he lists “the more famous” as the Wanguo daodehui, the Daoyuan/Hong wanzihui, the Tongshanshe, the Shijie zongjiao datonghui, the Wushanshe and the Yiguandao. He then states that

“These societies have to be understood in terms of the complex interplay between the particular historical tradition of their derivation and the contemporary global context of the 1910s. The societies clearly emerged out of the Chinese historical tradition of sectarianism and syncretism. While some were closely associated with the sectarian tradition and involved the worship of Buddhist and folk deities like the Eternal Mother, they also represented the late imperial syncretic tradition (*sanjiaobeyi*) that combined the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism into a single universal faith. Late imperial syncretism, which urged the extinguishing of worldly desires and engagement in moral action, gained popularity among the Confucian gentry and the Buddhist and Daoist laity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The modern redemptive societies inherited the mission of universalism and moral self-transformation from this syncretism. At the same time, these societies also

²⁶ Chan, Wing-Tsit. *Religious Trends in Modern China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1953, p. 167.

²⁷ Chan, *ibid.*, pp. 168-185.

²⁸ Shao Yong, *Huidaomen*, *op. cit.*, Lu Zhongwei, *Minguo huidaomen*, *op. cit.*, Tan Songlin 譚松林 and Peng Bangfu 彭邦富, *Dangdai huidaomen, dangdai hei shehui zuzhi* 當代會道門、當代黑社會組織, Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2002.

²⁹ Prasenjit Duara, “The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism,” *Journal of World History*, 12:1 (2001), pp. 99–130, reprinted in *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003, pp. 89-129.

retained the association of the older syncretic societies with sectarian traditions, popular gods, and practices such as divination, planchette, and spirit writing. In this way they continued to remain organically connected to Chinese popular society. Hence, while it might appear confused to associate these movements with secret societies, their connections to popular culture and local concerns indeed caused several of them to blur with secret societies at their rural edges.”³⁰

Duara then stresses how the moral project of these groups was affected by the new global context of the early 20th century. They inscribed themselves into a new civilizational discourse which, in a variety of forms throughout Asia, advocated “an Eastern solution to the problems of the modern world”, all the while integrating Christianity, Islam and even evolutionary theories into their cosmology, and adopting forms of organization and social engagement which “resembled other modern religious and morality societies around the world”.³¹ This engagement included hospitals, orphanages, refugee centres, schools, newspapers, libraries, factories and farms for the poor, disaster relief, Esperanto classes, and drug rehabilitation projects. But this social engagement was motivated by a profoundly religious programme of self-cultivation.

The focus of Duara’s study is how the civilizational discourse of the redemptive societies interacted with the broader modern discourse of an Asian-centred universal civilization – a discourse which was actively promoted by Japanese imperialism in order to legitimize its domination by uniting Asian cultures in a common civilizational project opposed to Western colonialism and materialism. It was this shared discourse which foregrounded the highly ambiguous relationship between the Japanese puppet regimes in Manchuria and in North and Central China, and the Chinese redemptive societies, many of which flourished in the Japanese-occupied regions.

The purpose of this article is to pursue Duara’s idea by examining the category of “redemptive societies” as an object of study and its usefulness for the study of Chinese religion, for the history of modern China, and for the sociology of religion in general. Through a quick overview of the emergence, evolution and characteristics of the groups labelled “redemptive societies” in the context of 20th century Chinese history, we immediately see the usefulness of this category in bringing into focus an enormously significant but previously ignored wave of religious movements. At the same time, a closer look at the position of these groups within the broader Chinese religious field raises important questions as to the analytical nature of this category: is it simply a new

³⁰ Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity*, 103-104.

³¹ Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity*, 104.

and value-neutral label for what historians of Chinese religion have long called the “sectarian tradition” and/or what sociologists of religion call “New Religious Movements”? Is it a label for a modern Chinese subset of sects or NRMs, and in that case which ones? Or is it best to avoid reifying the groups into a single category and treat “redemptive societies” merely as a label for a unique and ephemeral historical phenomenon which is best understood on its own terms in relation to its immediate social context?

Sectarian rebels, secret societies, folk religious cults, new religious movements

My own interest in redemptive societies arose out of my earlier work on the *qigong* movement. I had begun looking into the sociological homologies and historical connections between *qigong* and the late-imperial “sectarian” tradition.³² David Ownby was led to the same question in his work on Falungong, and it was the search for the “missing link” between the two that led us to the republican-era redemptive societies, and to the conferences leading to this special issue of *Minsu quyi*.³³ We wanted to find how such a link could be analysed from a *religious* and *sociological* angle, rather than follow the *political* discourse of a heretical tradition of secret sects of incipient rebels, always waiting for the opportunity to launch a revolt against society and its established institutions, and throw China into chaos.³⁴ Academic historiography, both in China and the West, has traditionally followed this paradigm of state-sect conflict, led on by the fact that the state, and scholarly discourse, tends to pay attention to these groups only when such instances of conflict occur, whether sectarian rebellions in the past or Falungong today, and ignores the vast majority of cases when such conflicts don’t occur. In 1992, Barend ter Haar permanently discredited the notion of the “White Lotus teachings” as a single tradition, showing that since the Ming the term White Lotus was merely a stigmatising label used by the state to ban groups it deemed heterodox.³⁵ By using the term “sect” and “sectarian tradition” (albeit usually as a matter of convention and convenience) however, Western historiography has continued to unconsciously replicate the political categories of the imperial and socialist Chinese state.

³² David A. Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-290.

³³ See also the special issue of *Chinese Studies in History* 44:1-2 (2010-2011), edited by David Ownby, on “Recent Chinese Scholarship on the History of ‘Redemptive Societies’”.

³⁴ David Ownby, “Imperial Fantasies: The Chinese Communists and Peasant Rebellions”. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43:1 (2001): 65-91.

³⁵ Barend ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.

The value of the category of “redemptive societies” is that it brings into focus the unique features of these groups at a crucial moment in Chinese history, without getting locked into old scholarly categorizations which had obscured them in the blind spots of other narratives typically found in four bodies of literature. The first such body of literature concerns the history of Chinese sectarianism, millennialism and heterodoxy, called “popular religious sects” (*minjian zongjiao* 民間宗教, *minjian jiaomen* 民間教門, *minjian jiaopai* 民間教派) in the Chinese scholarship, often inextricable from debates on the exact nature of the so-called “White Lotus” tradition. This literature has attempted to reconstruct the genealogies and linkages between scriptures, groups, religious leaders and subtraditions, going back as far as the Han, but with a focus on the Ming and Qing.³⁶ Within this literature, the blind spot is the 20th-century groups derived from that tradition, which have typically been treated as an afterthought, considered primarily in terms of how they carry over earlier sectarian teachings and practices. C. K. Yang, in his classic *Religion in Chinese Society*, briefly discusses Yiguandao, but only as an illustration of the use of apocalyptic prophecy by White Lotus sects.³⁷ Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang, in their mammoth history of Chinese popular sects, make a point of limiting their study to “feudal China”. Their chapter on Yiguandao notes that in the late Qing, Yiguandao and the constellation of groups out of which it emerged, including the Dachengjiao 大成教, Qianglianjiao 青蓮教, Denghuajiao 燈花教, and the Mohou Yizhujiao 末後一著教 of Yiguandao founder Wang Jueyi 王覺一, were all anti-Qing sects. But, in a footnote, they state clearly that they do not discuss groups such as the Xiantiandao and Tongshanshe, since their book is limited to the “feudal period”.³⁸

The second body of literature concerns the history of secret societies (祕密社會, 祕密結社) and their role in modern Chinese revolutions.³⁹ This narrative focuses on the

³⁶ Standard overviews include Daniel Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976; Ma Xisha 馬西沙 and Han Bingfang 韓秉方, *Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi* 中國民間宗教史, Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1992; Hubert Seiwert (in collaboration with Ma Xisha), *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History*, Leiden: Brill, 2003.

³⁷ “Religion and Political Rebellion,” in C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, University of California Press, 1961, pp. 218-243.

³⁸ Ma Xisha & Han Bingfang, *Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi*, 1164.

³⁹ Standard overviews include Qin Baoqi 秦寶琦, *Qingmo minchu mimi shehui de tuibian* 清末民初祕密社會的蛻變, Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2001; Shao Yong, *Zhongguo huidaomen*; Lu Zhongwei, *Minguo huidaomen*; Tan Songlin & Peng Bangfu, *Dangdai huidaomen*; Gong'an bu yiju ed. 公安部一局編, *Fandong huidaomen jianjie* 反動會道門簡介, Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 1985; Robin Munro, ed. and trans.: *Syncretic Sects and Secret Societies: Revival in the 1980s*. Special issue of

relations between these groups and the warlords, the KMT, the Japanese, and the CCP, but makes little or no analytical distinction between salvationist groups (the redemptive societies), rural militias such as the Red Spears 紅槍會 and Big Knives 大刀會, and underworld gangs and fraternal associations such as the Green Gangs 青幫 and Elders' Societies 哥老會. Although this literature stresses the massive growth of these groups and highlights their deep ties with Republican-era political and military elites, its blind spot is the religious dimension of the redemptive societies, which is typically ignored, downplayed, or categorically denied. When the religious dimension is mentioned, it is never placed in the broader context of the contemporary Chinese religious landscape, but only linked to the history of heterodoxy and superstition, such as when one author states that “Chinese *huidaomen* are a form of popular secret society with a colouration of religion and feudal superstition which appeared in the late period of Chinese feudalism.” Further, he defines the *daomen* 道門 as synonymous with religious heresy 宗教異端, while *huimen* 會門 are defined as armed groups.⁴⁰

Much of the Chinese scholarship on both sectarian history and secret societies fits them into an analytical framework which sees them as the superstitious ideology of anti-feudal peasant rebellions which, when they become Republican-era secret societies, suddenly change their function to become instruments of feudal counter-revolutionary forces. Lu Zhongwei quite explicitly states that the reason the term *huidaomen* is used is to distinguish them from the “secret sects” 祕密教門 of the Yuan, Ming and Qing, simply because the latter had a positive dimension of peasant rebellion, which was entirely lacking in the *huidaomen*.⁴¹ While this literature contains a wealth of meticulously researched historical data, its analytical framework is weakened by its constant oscillation between the structurally identical but ideologically opposite positions of Qing and socialist political orthodoxy.⁴²

A third body of literature is primarily based on anthropological field studies in Taiwan (but also in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, and increasingly in the mainland as well) in which “sectarian” groups are demonstrated to be part of the local fabric of popular religion. Whereas the “sectarian history” and “secret society” literature

Chinese Sociology and Anthropology 21:4 (1989). See also Lu Zhongwei, “*Huidaomen* in the Republican Period,” *Chinese Studies in History* 44:1-2 (2010-2011), pp. 10-37.

⁴⁰ Shao Yong, *Huidaomen*, 1.

⁴¹ Lu Zhongwei, *Minguo huidaomen*, 1.

⁴² 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. 113-134.

stresses the heterodox and political dimension of these groups, and pays little or no attention to their links with local religious life, the works of ethnography and local history show how deeply embedded they can be into the “orthodox” religious culture of local communities.⁴³ It becomes difficult to draw a clear line between redemptive societies and local temple cults, spirit-writing halls, or vegetarian groups. Studies of different sectarian groups operating in the same localities have also provided a window into the sometimes quite different dynamics of groups which have varying levels of integration into local ritual life.⁴⁴ In some areas of North China, for instance, the merging of “sectarian” religion and the communal religion during the Qing can be observed through the dissemination of vegetarian practices, the inclusion of salvationist deities and saints (such as the Unborn Mother 無生老母 or the founders of salvationist movements) within the local pantheon of deities worshiped in temples, and the common incidence of religious specialists such as Daoist priests, Buddhist monks, diviners, or fengshui masters either joining or even establishing salvational groups.⁴⁵

The local and anthropological focus of these studies, and their undermining of rigid distinctions between “sectarian” groups and other forms of local religiosity, tends to draw them into the category of “popular religion” 民間信仰. While not incorrect, such a categorization risks dissolving the specificity of redemptive societies into the soil of a folk religion which is generally seen as irrelevant to Chinese history (except when it bursts into popular rebellions) and inconsequential to the history of China’s main religious traditions. In the case of redemptive societies, however, we see groups which transcended local concerns and were important participants in the process of defining China’s modern national identity and recasting its traditions.

A final body of literature which has largely neglected the case of redemptive societies is the sociological study of new religious movements. The sociology of religion has only recently taken an interest in China, and many works already treat Falungong as a standard

⁴³ See Joseph Bosco, “Yiguan Dao: ‘Heterodoxy’ and Popular Religion in Taiwan.” In Murray A. Rubinstein, ed., *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the Present*, pp. 423-444. Armonk, N.Y.: Sharpe, 1994; Li Shiwei, “A Survey and Evaluation of Postwar Scholarship of Popular Religion in Taiwan (1950-2000),” *Chinese Studies in History* 44:1-2 (2010-2011), 38-75; Cao Xinyu, “From Famine History to Crisis Metaphor: Social Memory and Cultural Identity in Chinese Rural Society,” *Chinese Studies in History* 44:1-2 (2010-2011), pp. 156-171

⁴⁴ See notably Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, *op. cit.*; Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One. The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998; DuBois, *The Sacred Village*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Liang Jingzhi 梁景之, *Qingdai minjian zongjiao yu xiangtu shehui* 清代民間宗教與鄉土社會, Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2004, pp. 283-298.

example of a contemporary NRM.⁴⁶ Falungong is in fact virtually the only Chinese case discussed in the English-language literature on NRMs.⁴⁷ Taiwanese scholars have debated about NRMs since the 1990's, but with a focus on recently-emergent groups such as the True Buddha School 真佛宗 and Supreme Master Qinghai 青海無上師.⁴⁸ In the mainland, the most comprehensive book-length introduction to NRMs is almost entirely devoted to non-Chinese cases and, in its single sentence which refers to the *huidaomen*, there is no mention of their history in the Republican era: "Actually, NRMs in China have 400 years of history. Since the Ming-Qing, the desperate masses of the lower classes often organized religious groups, and often used them as instruments of rebellion, as is commonly known. Of the 300-odd "huidaomen" which were disbanded in the 1950s, many were NRMs of the Ming-Qing".⁴⁹

Groups from the early 20th century are rarely mentioned in discussions of NRMs, presumably because they already look "old", or have already entered the mainstream of Taiwanese religion.⁵⁰ And yet, redemptive societies constitute a major wave of new religious movements emerging in the first half of the 20th century, and contributed to the spawning of subsequent waves of religious innovation in Taiwan and mainland China. Precisely because this specific wave has subsided, and its various groups have followed different trajectories, the redemptive societies provide an excellent case to understand the entire course of religious innovation in a non-Western, Chinese context, from the emergence of a wave of new groups to its climax and final outcomes.

⁴⁶ See for example Elijah Siegler, *New Religious Movements*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007; James R. Lewis and Jesper Aagard Petersen, *Controversial New Religions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁴⁷ Cheris Chan, "The Falungong in China: A Sociological Perspective", *China Quarterly*, 179 (2004): 665–83; Lu Yunfeng, "Entrepreneurial Logics and the Evolution of Falungong", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44:2 (2005): 173–85; see also the special issue on Falungong in *Nova Religio* (2003, vol. 6 no. 2).

⁴⁸ See Ding Renjie 丁仁傑, *Shehui fenhua yu zongjiao zhidu bianqian – Dangdai Taiwan xinxing zongjiao xianxiang de shehuixue kaocha* 社會分化與宗教制度變遷—當代台灣新興宗教現象的社會學考察, Taipei: Lianjing chuban shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2004; Zheng Zhiming 鄭志明, *Taiwan dangdai xinxing zongjiao* 台灣當代新興宗教, Lingjiushan wenjiao jijinhui guiji foxue yanjiu zhongxin, 1997; Zhang Jiaqi 張家麒, "Dangdai Taiwan xinxing zongjiao yanjiu qushi fenxi" 當代臺灣新興宗教研究趨勢分析, in Zhonghua fazhan jijin guanli weiyuanhui ed. 中華發展基金管理委員會 主編, *Haixia liang'an zongjiao yu shehui xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 海峽兩岸宗教與社會學術研討會論文集, 2004, pp. 237-281.

⁴⁹ Gao Shining 高師寧, *Xinxing zongjiao chutan* 新興宗教初談, Beijing: Zongjiao shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006, p. 282.

⁵⁰ One exception is Siegler, *New Religious Movements*, 68, which presents Yiguandao following a discussion of the Chinese sectarian tradition as a long history of NRMs in China. Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, uses Rodney Stark's NRM theory to analyse the dynamics of late imperial sects. Lu Yunfeng, *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-45, applies Stark's model of successful NRMs to the expansion of Yiguandao in mainland China from 1930 to 1953.,.

When we look at the broad picture of redemptive societies, a question comes to mind: are we looking at a unique historical phenomenon or at one expression of a longer, less historically determined type of religion? And if the latter, are we speaking of an almost eternal category of Chinese religion (the “sectarian tradition”) or of an eternal sociological category (“new religious movements”) – the one emphasizing traditional continuity, the other emphasizing innovation?

David Ownby has argued against the “sectarian tradition” category, stressing that the term “sect” and its sociological conceptualizations are grounded in the logic of Western religious experience, which place groups on a church-sect polarity, with sects breaking off from the Church, aiming to create a community of the elect, and thus finding themselves in tension with the surrounding society, and condemned as heretical by the Church. Such a construct clearly does not fit easily with the Chinese context, where there is no Church in the Weberian sense; the “sects” have not broken off from a church-style institution; their teachings are typically highly inclusive and syncretistic, rather than “sectarian” in an ascetic, dogmatic sense; and the whole range of levels of tension can be observed, with low or no tension as probably most common at the local level.⁵¹

As a solution to this quandary, Ownby proposes to use the term “redemptive societies” as a category for all the groups heretofore designated as “White Lotus” or “sectarian”, as well as the republican-era groups under discussion here, and *qigong* and Falungong as well. This semantic shift allows us to focus on their intrinsic characteristics and move away from orthodoxy/heterodoxy and levels of social tension as the (explicit or implicit) defining criteria of these groups. By Ownby’s definition, a redemptive society is characterized by a charismatic master who claims independence from other religious groups, preaches a message of salvation experienced through the body and grounded in morality, which is often given urgency through apocalyptic teachings, and typically consigned in scriptures.⁵² This definition aims to create a broad sociological category which could conceivably include groups from any historical period, and indeed from anywhere in the world.

⁵¹ David Ownby, “Sect and Secularism in Reading the Modern Chinese Religious Experience.” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 144, 2008, pp. 13-29.

⁵² David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 23-26.

Should the term “redemptive societies” designate only the republican-era groups, or the entire range of groups spanning different historical periods? In my view, the actual choice of terms is of secondary importance, but Ownby’s proposition needs to be refined by distinguishing between (1) labels for *distinct historical waves* of groups that have appeared in distinct circumstances and have their own characteristics – so that we can identify, for example, the redemptive societies of the republican era, the post-Mao *qigong* movement, as well as different waves of groups at earlier historical periods as well as in the present, each with its distinct characteristics; and (2) another, more *sociological* category which describes the common structural features of these groups and the dynamics of their relations with the broader society and religious field. In the remaining sections of this paper, I will propose to use the term “salvationist religion” 救度宗教 as the latter *sociological category*, and “redemptive societies” 救世團體 as a *specific wave* of salvationist groups which occurred in the first decades of the 20th century.

The label “redemptive societies” has been criticized as carrying Christian connotations of redemption which are out of place in the study of Chinese religion.⁵³ My personal opinion is that the use of Christian terminology is not entirely unfounded in the case of these groups, since several of these groups were, consciously or not, partly inspired by Christian models of religiosity and organization and that, even within their own Chinese eschatological framework (Confucian utopianism and/or Unborn Mother millennialism), they sought to redeem the Chinese people, and even all of humanity, from its state of corruption and moral degradation. The influence of Christianity on redemptive societies deserves further investigation⁵⁴ (and Christianity would need to be included in the history and sociology of salvationist religion in China, as conceptualized below).

In discussions held with Chinese colleagues at the two conferences at Foguang University which led to this double issue of *Minsu qiyi*, however, the literal Chinese translation of redemptive societies as *jiushu tuanti* 救贖團體 was considered to be too exclusively Christian and foreign in connotation to be appropriate, and after much discussion, the term *jiushi tuanti* 救世團體 was felt to be a more suitable Chinese

⁵³ Jacques Gernet, personal communication, Paris, April 2006.

⁵⁴ On the inclusion of Christianity in the Daoyuan, see Richard F. Young, “Sanctuary of the Tao,” *op. cit.*, on Yiguandao’s appropriation of Christianity, see Philip Clart, “The Image of Jesus Christ in a Chinese Inclusivist Context: I-kuan Tao’s Christology and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Zongjiao, wenxue yu rensheng* 宗教·文學與人生, ed. Chung Yun-Ying 鍾雲鶯 (Chungli 中壢: Yuanzhi Daxue Zhongwenxi 元智大學中文系, 2006), 279-313.

equivalent (other terms such as *dushi tuanti* 渡世團體 and *jishi tuanti* 濟世團體 were also considered). *Jiushi tuanti* literally means “salvation society” – but, as Chen Jinguo later noted, this term has more secular, this-worldly connotations than other Chinese terms for salvation which have more connotations of inner self-cultivation. He proposed the term *jiudu* 救度 (渡) as having a more comprehensive meaning, encompassing both inner cultivation and outer merit.⁵⁵ In this paper, I adopt his suggested term for the broader sociological category of “salvationist religion,” which I render in Chinese as *jiudu zongjiao* 救度宗教, while retaining *jiushi tuanti* as the Chinese term for the wave of groups designated in English as “redemptive societies.” As Thomas DuBois’ contribution to this issue demonstrates, the this-worldly, philanthropic *jiushi* orientation of redemptive societies contains in it the seeds of a secularizing tendency which may come into tension with their teachings on inner spiritual cultivation. In the final analysis, however, whether “redemptive societies” in English or “*jiushi tuanti*” in Chinese, or any other term, the purpose is to find a moniker to identify a specific wave of Republican-era religious movements, rather than to engage in hair-splitting debates on the literal meaning of the name itself.

Salvationist religion as sociological category

Perhaps the first scholar to apply the term “salvationist” to Chinese religious groups was the anthropologist Myron Cohen, who, in his article on “Souls and Salvation,” emphasized that the distinguishing feature of the so-called “sectarian” groups in contrast to the “popular orthodoxy” of communal religion is their focus on individual salvation. This is most obvious when we compare their attitudes to death. The main death-related concerns in communal religion are continued interaction with the living through acquiring the status of ancestor; surviving the “purgatory” of dealing with the underworld bureaucracy; and the possibility of return to this world through reincarnation. Salvationist movements, however, promise “the immediate passage at death from earth to paradise.”⁵⁶ While notions of universal salvation are certainly present in popular

⁵⁵ Chen Jinguo 陈进国, “Zoujin zongjiao xianchang” 走进宗教现场, *Zongjiao renleixue* 宗教人类学 vol. 1 (2009), p. 4 n. 1, accessed online on 15 Dec. 2010 at <http://www.chinesefolklore.org.cn/web/index.php?Page=3&NewsID=6556>

⁵⁶ Myron Cohen, “Souls and Salvation,” in James L. Watson & Evelyn S. Rawski, eds. *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p. 197.

religion, for the most part they remain embedded in a social orthodoxy in which those who who enjoy a privileged position in life are precisely those who are successful in death: “Those who in life had married virilocally, produced male offspring, bequeathed to them property of some significance, and died at a reasonably advanced age certainly were in the best position to receive proper ritual attention after death.”⁵⁷ In salvationist religion, on the other hand, paradise – the Western Heaven or the Return to the Origin -- was promised to all who turned to compassionate deities such as the Unborn Mother, regardless of their social station. Though the religious worldview of most people may have included all of these views, not making distinctions between them, and though salvationist groups often provided death rituals according to popular orthodoxy, what defines the so-called “sectarian” groups is the salvationist teachings out of which they originated.

The specific contents of Chinese salvationist religion vary at different periods, but typically share a number of interconnected features: a foundational charismatic figure and/or direct divine revelations; a millenarian eschatology; moral teachings; a non-ascriptive, voluntary path of salvation; an embodied experience through healing and/or body cultivation; and an outward, expansive orientation through good deeds, evangelism, or philanthropy.⁵⁸ All of these elements are interconnected and mutually reinforcing: the millenarian cosmology posits both calamity and the possibility of salvation, and provides a framework of meaning for present-day suffering and disorder, as well as an imagined other world of bliss, morality and justice. When activated through prophecies of imminent catastrophe, it provides an impetus for missionizing expansion, as well as ritual and philanthropic actions to save the world. The charismatic master and/or spirit-writing revelations provide a sense of direct connection with divine authority, which can attract adherents and move them to follow the path of salvation, which includes one or a combination of moral conduct, body cultivation and scripture recitation. The healing and body cultivation experiences provide a visceral, embodied confirmation of the path of salvation. A congregation or community of followers is the product of these teachings and practices.⁵⁹ Salvationist groups are thus, *at their origin*, distinct from the ascriptive communities and ritual spheres of much of Chinese religion: they are neither the

⁵⁷ Cohen, “Souls and Salvation,” 190.

⁵⁸ These characteristics are expanded from Ownby, *Falun Gong*, 25-26.

⁵⁹ See David A. Palmer, “Embodying Utopia: Charisma in the Post-Mao *Qigong* Craze,” *Nova Religio* 12:2 (2008): 69-89, and the other articles in the same special issue of *Nova Religio* on “Mapping Charisma in Chinese Societies.”

domestic and lineage cult of ancestors, nor the communal-liturgical religion of local villages, neighbourhoods and corporations, nor the state cults.

The proportions of these elements may vary among salvationist groups, as will their specific contents. Some draw on a single tradition, such as Buddhism or Daoism, while many others will combine several.⁶⁰ However, to the extent that a limited number of cultural contents and modalities readily exist in the popular religious culture,⁶¹ we will observe similar contents and modalities, simply combined in different ways and modified in different historical contexts, throughout the range of groups.

Variations in this basic architecture, however, can lead to a great diversity of group formations. Some of these, but not all, will be *sectarian* in the sociological sense, with relatively high levels of tension with their cultural and social environment. The sociological definition of the sect has been the subject of endless debates since Weber and Troeltsch; perhaps the most succinct and heuristic formulation is that proposed by Stark and Finke:

“All religious groups can be located along an axis of **tension** between the group and its sociocultural environment. [...]

Tension refers to the degree of distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism between a religious group and the ‘outside’ world.

At the high end of the tension axis, serious antagonism exists, sometimes erupting into bloody conflict. At the low end, there exists such compatibility between a group and its environment that it is hard to distinguish between the two. [...]

Sects are religious bodies in relatively higher tension with their surroundings.”⁶²

The very notion of salvation and millennialism implies that there is something wrong with the present condition of life, and the desire to progress to the “other side” implies some degree of tension with the current state of society – a tension which Max Weber expanded on through his concept of asceticism, whether world-rejecting or inner-worldly.⁶³ By definition, the idea of salvation implies that we need to be saved from this

⁶⁰ On forms of Chinese syncretism, see the conclusion to Clart’s contribution to this issue.

⁶¹ See Adam Chau, “Modalities of Doing Religion,” in David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive and Philip Wickeri eds., *Chinese Religious Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, chap. 4.

⁶² Rodney Stark & Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p. 143.

⁶³ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, section H.1, accessed online on 15 Dec 2010 at http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/society/socio_relig/socio_relig_frame.html. The

world, and a path of salvation involves adopting practices which differ from the customs of the average person. But there is a difference in levels of tension between, say, trying to uphold higher moral standards than others but otherwise being fully integrated into social life; partaking of a vegetarian diet on the first and fifteenth of each month; becoming a full vegetarian, and thereby cutting oneself off from many forms of common sociality; and living an extremely ascetic life of voluntary poverty such as eating only gruel, growing long hair, and handing all one's property to the sect, as in the case of the Yixin tiandao longhua shengjiao hui 一心天道龍華聖教會.⁶⁴

Depending on the group, salvationist behaviour can thus range from mere lip service to moral ideals and acts of philanthropic generosity, to significant deviance from social norms. Within the salvationist structure, it is possible, but not inevitable, for a group to reach a high level of salvationist intensity, apocalyptic urgency, or ascetic severity, all of which would lead a group to become more sectarian. Similarly, the appearance of a new charismatic figure, or an entrepreneurial leader, can lead to a group breaking off from another, and such breaking away can occur under conditions of higher or lower tension, leading to more or less sectarian relationships and competition between groups.

Sectarianism will thus appear in varying degrees among the range of salvationist groups. No matter how sectarian a group at one moment in time, however, we know that groups can evolve from lower to higher levels of tension, and vice versa. Many paths of traditionalization can be observed, in which the practices, teachings and participation in a salvationist group gradually blend into the local religious culture, removing any tension with the sociocultural environment. Such a process can be seen repeating itself in Chinese religious history, following wave after wave of salvationism. While salvationist groups evolve to play low-tension functions in the religious ecology – such as temple cults, ritual specialists or monastic enclaves -- new charismatic leaders or divine revelations stimulate fresh salvationist impulses and the emergence of new groups.

concept of salvationist religion as discussed in this article was constructed inductively through the comparison of Chinese cases and the insight provided by Myron Cohen, "Souls and Salvation", rather than through the application of Weber's theory. As it happens, it seems to correspond neatly with much of Weber's discussion of salvation, offering promise for fruitful insights and comparative studies between Chinese and other cultural and religious traditions – but many potential pitfalls as well, given Weber's often erroneous analysis of Chinese religion. A detailed treatment of these issues is beyond the scope of this article.

⁶⁴ Li Shiyu, *Xiandai Huabei mimi zongjiao*, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-175.

The Heavenly Masters 天師道 of the Later Han (25-220), for example, began as a new salvationist movement in Sichuan, with clear elements of tension with the surrounding religious culture (condemning animal sacrifice, for example), but evolved in the mediaeval period into the leading specialized providers of liturgical services for the communal religion. The salvationist and millenarian aspects of the Maitreya cult were among the most popular forms of early Chinese Buddhism during the Six Dynasties, until Buddhism was domesticated through imperial patronage and encapsulated through institutionalized monasticism, in which high-tension forms of spiritual asceticism are clearly delineated from the mainstream culture – a process that also occurred with Quanzhen Daoism 全真道 in the Jin (1115-1271) and Yuan (1277-1367). The Pure Land lay Buddhist movement, the White Lotus Society, the Unborn Mother cult and the Patriarch Luo 羅教 teachings represent subsequent waves of salvationism, elements of which merged into the many strands of salvationist religion common in the Ming (1367-1644) and Qing (1644-1911). Among the latter strands, groups such as the Hongyangjiao 弘陽教, Huangtianjiao 黃天教, Taishangmen 太上門 and Tiandimen 天地門 gradually merged into the local religious culture of North China, their founders worshiped as gods in local temples, or their members operating as ritual specialists, as observed by contemporary ethnographers.⁶⁵ In Hong Kong, many of the salvationist Xiantiandao 先天道 congregations have gradually become local Daoist temples. On the other hand, Yiguandao, itself a Xiantiandao offshoot, after over five decades of history as a rapidly expanding movement on the mainland before 1949 and, subsequently, in Taiwan, is now in a far lower state of tension since the Taiwanese ban on Yiguandao was lifted in 1987,⁶⁶ even as new higher-tension salvationist groups, such as Haizidao and Mile dadao, have split off from it. In the same period, a wave of new salvationist movements appeared in the Taiwanese Buddhist milieu, such as the Ciji gongdehui 慈濟功德會.⁶⁷ In the mainland post-Mao *qigong* movement, several groups showed salvationist tendencies; some remained as low-tension providers of morning exercises and health regimens, while others, such as Falungong, evolved into relatively high levels of tension with the surrounding sociocultural environment.

⁶⁵ See the recent field research by Thomas DuBois, Cao Xinyu, Daniel Overmyer, Fan Lizhu, and Yang Der-Ruey, among others.

⁶⁶ Lu Yunfeng, *The Transformation of Yiguandao in Taiwan*, 113-135.

⁶⁷ See Julia C. Huang, *Charisma and Compassion: Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Movement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

These Chinese cases, however, may lead us to reconsider the sources of tension as described in the sociological literature, which tends to assume that the state is neutral toward religious groups, and that sects voluntarily break off from the dominant, low-tension churches to offer a more demanding path to salvation: tension is between the sect and its socio-cultural environment, or between the sect and the dominant Church. But the Chinese case alerts us to the dynamics of tension between salvationist groups and the state. Such tension may originate in the religious group itself -- a combination of charisma and apocalypticism may conflate with notions of divine emperorship and the mandate of heaven, and from there stimulate or legitimate political rebellion. But it may be state itself which, fearful of such a scenario, stigmatises and bans salvationist groups, causing them to be in high levels of tension. Tension may thus come from internal sources (the group itself) or external ones (the state), and changes in the overall level of tension will result from the interplay between the internal and external factors. Further complicating the picture, groups may be at a high level of tension with the state, but at a lower level of tension with the local sociocultural environment – a situation which may have been common in the Ming and Qing when salvationist movements thrived in local contexts but were banned as “heretical doctrines” 邪教. The early 20th century offers opens a useful window for comparing the effects of internal and external sources of tension: the suppression of “heretical doctrines” ended with the fall of the Qing, beginning a period during which Chinese salvationist movements enjoyed an unprecedented level of freedom, with changing and inconsistent levels of government regulation under various regimes, until they were once again repressed as *huidaomen* in 1949.

The structure and inner dynamics of salvationism thus produces wave upon wave of new groups at each generation. To use the Western sociological terminology, these are NRMs. But since they always recombine pre-existing elements of the Chinese religious culture, they always seem familiar, not quite so “new”. At the same time, since each wave appears in a specific political and historical context, and since the groups are young and not constrained by a rigid orthodoxy, they are highly reactive and responsive to the unique conditions and cultural crises of their time. As such, they are fascinating prisms for studying the religious productions of social change at any historical period.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Elijah Siegler’s textbook *New Religious Movements, op. cit.*, is the first work on NRM’s to take both a historical and global view, looking beyond the usual list of NRMs appearing in the post-war West to look at NRMs in different cultural traditions including Western esotericism, missionizing Asian

Redemptive Societies as Historical Phenomenon

The Redemptive societies of Republican China represent a wave of salvational movements, a unique product of a specific set of historical circumstances. Although they directly descend from late imperial traditions, they also represent a specific response to the challenges and opportunities afforded by the collapse of the imperial order and the irruption of modernity. Redemptive societies have a distinctive imprint which makes them almost immediately recognizable, and distinct from both late imperial salvationist groups as well as from more recent movements, whether *qigong*, mainland Confucian revivalist groups, or other NRMs. They raise several questions about the religiosity of business, military, and former gentry elites in Republican China;⁶⁹ about the formulation of alternative Chinese discourses of civilization, tradition and modernity; about the interplay between traditional and modern forms of charity and rescue;⁷⁰ and about the ideological and political relationships between redemptive societies and emerging modern states, from the early Republic to the KMT regime and Japanese puppet states.

One way of identifying the redemptive societies of the Republican era can be according to a set of clear criteria which are not based on the content of their teachings or practices (which do vary from group to group, making generalizations problematic), but on four organizational characteristics: (1) although they freely drew on the Three Teachings, they were not affiliated to the orthodox institutions of the latter, whether Confucian academies, Buddhist or Daoist monasticism, or the Zhengyi Daoist ordination system for liturgical masters (even though some individual members of redemptive societies sometimes had some training or affiliation with an orthodox institution). (2) membership was voluntary: they were distinct from the ascriptive communities of local religion; (3) they 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

religions, NRMs in East Asia, new religions of Africa and the African diaspora, and Islamic new religions.

⁶⁹ See Paul R. Katz, "It is Difficult to be Indifferent to One's Roots'. Taizhou Sojourners and Flood Relief during the 1920s." *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica* 54, 2006, pp. 1-58; and his forthcoming article on Wang Yiting 王一亭.

⁷⁰ See DuBois' contribution to this issue.

hierarchy of halls or branches which spanned several regions if not the whole country; (4) these associations were first established in Republican China between 1912 and 1949. While many redemptive societies directly derived from late-imperial heterodox groups – such as the Zailijiao, Xiantiandao, Tongshanshe and Yiguandao -- it was under the impulsion of a charismatic leader or spirit-writing communications during the Republican period that they modified their traditional organizational structure, aiming (with varying degrees of success) to turn them into integrated national organizations with a legal status.

Using these criteria, all of the groups listed at the beginning of this paper can be categorized as redemptive societies; while there are no other types of Chinese religious groups which, to my knowledge, fit those criteria. However, we cannot ignore the organic relationship between redemptive societies -- of which there were at most only a few dozen having, according to the criteria listed above, trans-regional or national organizations – and the *thousands* of smaller groups, lodges, halls and sects, whether spirit-writing halls,⁷¹ vegetarian groups,⁷² benevolent societies,⁷³ and morality societies, which are the immediate cultural and religious matrix out of which redemptive societies grew and which thus need to be considered in any study of redemptive societies, but which do not, owing to their small, local scale, fit into the category. Many redemptive societies grew out of such smaller groups, were in fact attempts to organize networks of such groups, or merely spawned new generations of increasingly autonomous lineages and local chapters. Looking at China as a whole, we see a small number of redemptive societies which were, or aspired to be, actors in the history of the nation (or of the

⁷¹ On spirit-writing groups, see Gary Seaman, *Temple Organization in a Chinese Village*. Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service, 1978; Laurence G. Thompson, "The Moving Finger Writes: A Note on Revelation and Renewal in Chinese Religion," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 10 (Fall 1982); Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*; Wang Chien-ch'uan, *Taiwan de zhajiao yu luntang* 台灣的齋教與鸞堂, Taipei: Xin wenfeng chubanshe, 1996; Philip Clart, "The Ritual Context of Morality Books: A Case-Study of a Taiwanese Spirit-Writing Cult," Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1997; "Confucius and the Mediums: Is there a 'Popular Confucianism'?" *T'oung Pao* LXXXIX(1-3), 2003, pp. 1-38; "Moral Mediums: Spirit-Writing and the Cultural Construction of Chinese Spirit-Mediumship," *Ethnologies* 25(1): 153-190; Graeme Lang and Lars Ragvald, "Spirit-Writing and the Development of Chinese Cults," *Sociology of Religion* 59:4 (1998): 309-328.

⁷² On the "vegetarian sects" *zhajiao* 齋教 in Taiwan, see Wang Chien-ch'uan 王見川 and Jiang Canteng 江燦騰, eds. *Taiwan zhajiao de lishi guancha yu zhanwang* 台灣齋教的歷史觀察與展望, Taipei: Xin wenfeng chubanshe, 1995; Wang Chien-ch'uan, *Taiwan de zhajiao yu luntang*.

⁷³ See Joanna F. Handlin Smith. "Benevolent Societies: The Reshaping of Charity During the Late Ming and Early Ch'ing." *Journal of Asian Studies*, 2 (1987): 309-337; Angela Leung 梁其姿, *Shishan yu jiaohua – Ming-qing de cishan zuzhi* 施善与教化: 明清的慈善组织, Taipei: Lianjing chuban shiye gongsi, 1997; Vivienne Shue, "The Quality of Mercy: Confucian Charity and the Mixed Metaphors of Modernity in Tianjin" *Modern China* 32.4 (2006): 411-452; Yau Chi-on (You Zi'an) 游子安. *Shan yu ren tong: Ming Qing yilai de cishan yu jiaohua* 善與人同: 明清以來的慈善與教化. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005.

world), but if we focus on a single town or neighbourhood, we see a complicated dynamic of relations between nationwide redemptive society networks and more local groups. At one extreme, Thomas DuBois' work clearly demonstrates that of the four "sectarian" (i.e., salvationist) traditions present in the villages he studied, the two groups we would call redemptive societies – Zailijiao and Yiguandao – had branches but shallow roots in village ritual life, and so could be fully eradicated by the CCP campaigns, while the two older traditions – Taishangmen 太上門 and Tiandimen 天地門 -- had become integral to local culture and ritual life, and re-appeared in the post-Mao era.⁷⁴ On the other hand, studies in Taiwan, notably by Philip Clart, show the local tractations and competition between Yiguandao and local spirit-writing cults, and how pre-existing halls could actually join or split off from Yiguandao.⁷⁵

In my own field research in Hong Kong and Macau, I have come across one case which illustrates the dense links which can exist at the local level between redemptive societies and all other forms of Chinese religion. The Dejiao 德教 redemptive society is one of the largest networks of Chinese religious and social organizations in Southeast Asia, with several temples in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. The Macau temple was established in the late 1990s by a charismatic healer and philanthropist, Lin Dong 林東, who is revered by his followers as the incarnation of Jigong 濟公. Jigong is one of the main deities appearing in Dejiao spirit-writing seances; several Dejiao temples have received revelations from Jigong, advising Dejiao members to turn to Lin Dong for guidance and healing. Lin Dong and his own organization, the Dongjingyuan fohui 東井圓佛會, have thus become very influential among the Dejiao communities throughout Southeast Asia, in addition to controlling the Macau temple. The latter is a member of the Macau Daoist Association, of which Lin Dong is honorary chairman. He also sponsors festivals and processions for the Tianhou 天后 birthday festivals at local communal temples in Hong Kong, successfully lobbied to have Jigong canonized as a national-level intangible heritage in China, and sits on the boards of dozens of state-sponsored philanthropic societies in the PRC! What this case shows is that, while it can be analytically useful to make distinctions between redemptive societies and other forms

⁷⁴ DuBois, *The Sacred Village*.

⁷⁵ See Jordan & Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*; and Clart, "The Phoenix and the Mother: The Interaction of Spirit-Writing Cults and Popular Sects in Taiwan," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25 (1997): 1-32.

of Chinese religion, the local reality may be far more complex, revealing intense links and circulations between them.

Redemptive societies and the modern history of Daoism and Confucianism

As recent research has made increasingly evident, the story of redemptive societies is crucial to understanding the modern development of each of China's major religious traditions. In the case of Daoism, studies have only begun to explore how redemptive societies were among the chief propagators of Daoist self-cultivation practices in the early 20th century, on a scale which would only be surpassed by the *qigong* movement of the 1980's and 1990's. During the Qing, spirit-writing groups were very active in revealing *neidan* 內丹 (inner alchemy) texts attributed to Daoist immortals such as Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, Zhang Sanfeng 張三丰 and Chen Tuan 陳搏. This trend continued in the republican period, including through the spirit-writing texts of the larger redemptive societies. One of the core practices of the Tongshanshe was a meditation method directly derived from the *neidan* methods of the Xiantiandao. The core scripture of the Daoyuan, the *Taiyi beiji zhenjing* 《太乙北極真經》, revealed by Lü Dongbin in 1917, was one such text; other alchemical texts were published by the Daoyuan in the following decades. One of the leading 20th century authors of *neidan* manuals, Zhao Bichen 趙避塵 (1860-1942), was active in the Zailijiao and used its network to disseminate his teachings. The heads of Zaili lodges, the *dangjia* 當家, imitated the appearance of Quanzhen Daoists, claimed a Quanzhen genealogy, and practiced Daoist self-cultivation methods. The politician Jiang Chaozong 江朝宗, the leader of the Wushanshe (which later became the Jiushi xinjiao), was a major patron of the Baiyunguan, Beijing's leading Daoist monastery, and was also one of the sponsors of the republication of the Daoist Canon.⁷⁶ The KMT official Li Yujie 李玉階 (1901-1994), who was a leading figure of the Tiande shengjiao in the 1930s (and, in 1979, would found the Tiandijiao 天帝教 in Taiwan), spent eight years at Huashan during the Sino-Japanese war, where he lived alongside Quanzhen monks, studied Daoist scriptures, and through a

⁷⁶ For a detailed discussion of these examples, see Vincent Goossaert, *The Taoists of Peking, op. cit.*, pp. 297-317.

form of spirit-writing, composed his major work, basically a reformulation of Daoist cosmology using scientific terms.⁷⁷

Drawing on the Daoist tradition can be seen as a natural expression of the syncretism of the redemptive societies. But, according to Goossaert, many of the texts that they produced “evinced a thorough knowledge of the Taoist canonical legacy and a strict adherence to Quanzhen historiography.”⁷⁸ And in fact, he argues, the expansionist redemptive societies played a larger role than Quanzhen clerics – who usually only had a small handful of disciples – in disseminating Daoist self-cultivation methods in Republican China.

In the case of Confucianism, an argument could be made that redemptive societies were the *main* organized expression of Confucianism in Republican China – even if scholarship on Confucianism seems to be completely unaware of their very existence. Indeed, looking at their original sources of inspiration, the redemptive societies can be classified into two main groups. Some derived from earlier salvationist traditions, notably through the Xiantiandao, and carried on the Unborn Mother cult and the three-stage eschatology. Others, however, notably the Daode xueshe and the Wanguo daodedui, maintained a strong Confucian identity, to which they added, however, a universalist tendency, honouring the founders of all major religions and advocating the realization, on a global scale, of the ‘Great Commonwealth’ (*datong* 大同) dreamt of in the *Book of Rites*, and elaborated on in the utopian mode by Kang Youwei and others.

In spite of their different origins, these two types of redemptive society evolved in similar directions, blurring the distinction between the two. Both practiced spirit-writing and drew their activists from the remnants of the old class of literati; both adopted Three-in-One or Five-in-One syncretism; both launched philanthropic projects. The Confucian groups, which adopted more modern organizational forms, also taught meditation and healing practices; while the traditional salvationist groups also emphasized the study of the Confucian classics. The Tongshanshe, for instance, which was a direct offshoot of the Xiantiandao tradition, was very active in promoting “National learning” 國學 in its many branches.⁷⁹ This merging of the two strands was a product of the times: expelled from the Republican ideology, Confucianism had lost its orthodox privileges and was on a par with the groups derived from the Ming-Qing

⁷⁷ See David A. Palmer, “Tao and Nation.”

⁷⁸ Goossaert, *The Taoists of Peking*, 315.

⁷⁹ See Wang Chien-ch’uan’s contribution to this issue.

salvationist traditions. At the same time, the latter could take advantage of the political confusion and modern forms of communication and organization, to raise their public profile and organizational capacity, while their syncretism allowed them to aspire to become repositories of the totality of Chinese tradition in the face of Western modernism.

The role of the Confucian associations, and of the old-style, Confucian-educated literati, in this configuration was the result of the downfall of Confucianism as the official ideology and the sudden disbanding of its Mandarinate with the end of the Empire. Following the abolition of the imperial cult and of the traditional examination system, several associations were formed advocating the designation of Confucianism as the state religion of the new Republic, notably the Kongjiaohui 孔教會. With the failure of this campaign, the Confucian associations became religious or philosophical societies like any other, detached from official orthodoxy and obliged to compete with all manner of other groups, providing a broader range of spiritual services, blurring the distinction between themselves and salvationist traditions — evolving in the process from a yearning for a national religion to an universalist ideal of a world religion. At the same time, the abrupt end of the imperial system and its Confucian ritual and culture had left around five million⁸⁰ traditionally-educated literati (as per around 1900), who were of an earlier generation than the younger graduates of the modern-style and overseas schools, suddenly bereft of a ritual and organizational outlet for their values and identity. This role was largely taken over by the redemptive societies, which aimed to transmit the classical scriptural legacy and traditional morality, but within a social organization adapted to new, Western-inspired models of a ‘religion’ (with a church hierarchy, Sunday prayers and choirs, missions, journals, and even, in some cases, baptism). One example was the Xixinshe 洗心社 (Heart-cleansing society), which literally carried out Kang Youwei’s project of a Confucian church in the cities and large towns of Shanxi. The society met every Sunday in local Confucius temples or public halls. Sermons by local notables and, sometimes, Christians, were assorted with the burning of incense before a tablet of Confucius and ceremonial bows by the audience.⁸¹ Similarly, the Daode xueshe held weekly gatherings which began with a sermon, with prayers led by a lecturer, followed

⁸⁰ David Johnson, “Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China.” In David Johnson, Andrew Nathan & Evelyn S. Rawski, eds. *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 58-59.

⁸¹ Rawlinson, *Revolution and Religion*, 39-40.

by congregational meditation. The society's objective was to unify the world and the world's religions, which all revolved around the basic teachings of Confucianism.⁸²

The Wanguo daodedui was first established in Jinan (Shandong) by Jiang Shoufeng 江壽峰 (1875-1926), who had been deeply involved in the Kongjiao 孔教 movement, sending frequent petitions to various government departments calling for the establishment of Confucianism as the national religion and for the compulsory teaching of the classics in all schools. His support for other religions marginalized him among the hardline Confucians, but he gained an audience after his son, Jiang Xizhang 江希張 (1907-?), was found to be a child prodigy, able to write commentaries on the classics before the age of 10, as well as a pacifist tract, the *Xizhanlun* 《息戰論》, which drew on the scriptures of the five main religions, and called for the establishment of the Wanguo daodehui, called “Worldwide Ethical Society” in English.⁸³ Father and son began to organize the group in 1916. They sent commentaries to scholars and political and military notables of the Beiyang regime, earning the enthusiastic support of some, and registered with the national government in 1921.⁸⁴ The Society, which worshiped the founders of the Five Teachings, was officially inaugurated on the birthday of Confucius at Tai'an, Shandong, on 28 September 1921; its honorary presidents included the politician Wang Shizhen 王士珍, the governor and military commander of Shanxi, Yan Xishan 閻錫山, and the American missionary Gilbert Reid 李佳白,⁸⁵ while the head of the lineage of the descendants of Confucius, Kong Decheng 孔德成 (1920-, 77th generation heir of Confucius, who was still a child) was appointed as honorary chairman.

The above discussion of the role of redemptive societies in the modern history of Daoism and Confucianism presents only fragmentary and preliminary data based on very recent research by a small handful of scholars. In the case of Buddhism, the possible connections and overlaps between redemptive societies and the reformed lay Buddhist movements of the republican period, remain completely uncharted terrain for future studies.

⁸² On the Daode xueshe, see Fan Chun-wu's contribution to this issue.

⁸³ Lu Zhongwei, *Huidaomen*, 131.

⁸⁴ Xia Mingyu, “Minguo xinxing zongjiao jieshe,” pp. 8-13.

⁸⁵ On Gilbert Reid, see Tsou Mingteh, “Christian Missionary as Confucian Intellectual: Gilbert Reid (1857-1927) and the Reform Movement in the Late Qing”, in Daniel Bays ed. *Christianity in China: from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 73-90.

Conclusion

The study of Chinese religion has long been hampered by the use of inappropriate categories derived from the Western Christian/secular experience and/or from the political-ideological agenda of the Qing empire and its modernist successors. After a few decades of debates between sinologists, historians, anthropologists and sociologists, a set of categories more useful than the old label of “superstition” has begun to emerge to describe and understand traditional “Chinese religion,” primarily in its local, communal expression through its territorial temples, lineage organizations, ritual traditions and symbolic and administrative relations with the imperial state. But the work has only begun in relation to the salvationist and millenarian strands of Chinese religion. While textual and historical sources have been amply studied, the categories used to describe and compare these movements, such as “sectarian,” remain little more than labels of convenience whose potential overlap or contrast with the Western sociology of Christian sectarianism, or the Chinese discourse on sectarian rebellion, have not always been fully accounted for. This article has proposed some preliminary elements of an analytical framework for studying these religious movements. The notion of *salvationist religion* refers to a sociological category of religious groups whose teachings and practices engender a dynamic which can be contrasted to ascriptive communal religion and can engender varying degrees of tension with the surrounding sociocultural environment. In the historical trajectory of a salvationist group, tension can increase or decrease; it may become sectarian, may merge into the local religious culture, or may be institutionalized. Changes in levels of tension will be a factor of the attitudes of the state as much as those of the group itself. The dynamic of salvationist religion is a universal sociological construct which can be usefully applied to any period of Chinese history, including the contemporary period, and to movements drawing on any set of teachings, be they Daoist, Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, or other. It also lends itself well to engagement with the study of Western church-sect dynamics and new religious movements in the sociology of religion.

Seen within this framework, the Republican-era redemptive societies represent an important and fascinating historical wave of Chinese salvationist groups. This wave appeared at a time when the old imperial order had collapsed, and religion, society and culture were in a state of extreme flux. Modern, Western (and Japanese) worldviews, forms of social organization and institutionalization were on the ascendant, while nationalist and universalist responses and reformulations of Chinese culture were in

active ferment. Such a context not only opened a wide space for the growth of salvationist groups, but also for innovation in their teachings, practices and organizational forms. Redemptive societies were quick to integrate modern forms of national association, scientism, universalism, philanthropy and public engagement into traditional models of salvationism. At a time when the very notions of “religion,” “superstition” and “Chinese tradition” were the subject of heated debates, redemptive societies consciously attempted to formulate alternative syntheses of spirituality, tradition and modernity. Some of these attempts positioned themselves squarely as “religion” (such as the “New religion to save the world”) while others claimed to be a “Way” that transcends all religions (such as the Daoyuan and Yiguandao). Some were elite-dominated expressions of ethical universalism (such as the Wanguo daodehui) while others were more intensely apocalyptic with a more popular following (such as Jiugongdao). Official policy toward these groups shifted between the warlord regimes of the Beiyang period, the KMT state, Japanese puppet states and communist liberated areas, and redemptive societies adopted a range of strategies to navigate the unstable political landscape, ranging from underground avoidance to active collaboration or armed resistance.

Redemptive societies are thus a unique product of Republican China, which needs to be studied in relation to the political, ideological and cultural conflicts of that period of Chinese history (they also continued to play an important role in postwar Taiwan and in the Chinese diaspora of Southeast Asia, and need to be studied in those regional contexts as well); at the same time, they are organically connected to a much larger landscape of smaller groups, as well as to other waves of groups that preceded them in late imperial China, and that followed them in post-Mao China and Taiwan after martial law. This paper has proposed a preliminary framework for situating redemptive societies within the broader history and sociology of Chinese religion. Future research will undoubtedly lead to further elaborations and refinements of this framework, and reveal further dimensions of the role of redemptive societies in the construction of Chinese religious modernity.

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Redemptive Societies: Historical Phenomenon or Sociological Category?

民國救世團體與中國救度宗教：歷史現象還是社會學類別？

宗樹人

香港大學社會學系助理教授