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**Forschungsprojekt**

**Text and Context**

**Redemptive Societies in the History of Religions of Modern  
and Contemporary China**

*Prof. Dr. Philip Clart*

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## Type of Project

International collaborative research project

## Institutional Affiliation and Participants

Philip Clart, University of Leipzig, Institute for East Asia Studies, Project Director

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Other Participants:

Cao Xinyu, Institute of Qing History, People's University, China

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## Description of Project

In recent years, scholars of modern and contemporary Chinese religion have turned their attention to the subject of “redemptive societies”, a term coined by Prasenjit Duara in 2001 to refer to groups such as the Yiguandao, the Daoyuan, the Tongshanshe, the Wushanshe, and others which had a major socio-religious impact during the Republican period. Most of these groups traced their roots to China's sectarian and syncretic popular religious traditions (White Lotus, Three-in-One Teachings), but in the Republican period adopted a universalist religious posture, embracing major world religions as part of a neo-traditional project advocating an Eastern solution to the problems of the modern world. Republican-period redemptive societies built nation-wide organizations and attracted millions of members who were drawn by the groups' religious activities (spirit-writing, text recitation, qigong-like cultivation, congregational life) and by their social engagement (philanthropy and social work).

These redemptive societies were a vital part of Chinese religion between 1911 and 1949, as illustrated in part by the massive campaign launched against “reactionary sects and secret societies” by PRC authorities in the early 1950s, in the course of which the Public Security Bureau estimated that members of such groups numbered at least 13 million (roughly 2% of China's population). The success of this campaign obscured for some decades the importance of redemptive societies in the context of modern Chinese history. Yet the qigong boom, part of the religious revival in reform-era China, shares many similarities with the rise of redemptive societies in the Republican period, and in the eyes of some scholars should be seen as broadly continuous with the Republican-period experience. Like redemptive societies, qigong groups built hugely popular nation-wide organizations on the basis of a neo-traditional moral message, qigong cultivation practices, and the charisma of qigong masters. Further evidence for the contemporary importance of redemptive societies is the case of the Yiguandao, which survived decades of intermittent

repression to emerge as a major religion in Taiwan with the lifting of martial law in 1987. Indeed, the Yiguandao – like qigong and Falun Gong – has become a “world religion”, and is found throughout the far-flung Chinese diaspora.

If we combine the experience of Republican-period redemptive societies with those of the more recent qigong, Falun Gong, and Yiguandao, it is clear that redemptive societies constitute a major element of China’s modern and contemporary religious life. In our view, therefore, the time has come to launch a major research project, which will take seriously the contribution of redemptive societies to the complex evolution of religion in modern and contemporary China. The project’s thematic and methodological focus will be placed on questions of the production, circulation, appropriation, and utilization of texts by redemptive societies. Texts were a major feature of virtually all redemptive societies, and were produced via spirit-writing, revelation, composition by group leaders, and transcription of oral lectures, among other means. Often seen as sacred writings that legitimize authority and guide individual and collective action, many texts have been carefully preserved by redemptive societies (some of which have their own libraries, “archives” and publishing houses).

Spiritually authoritative or sacred texts play a number of crucial roles within redemptive societies. First and foremost, of course, they record and codify a redemptive society’s beliefs and rituals and are thus key sources for the analysis of these aspects of a specific religious system. As obvious as this may appear, such analyses have not been carried out for many of these texts, which more commonly serve as quarries in which to collect data on the organizational structure or social and political history of a particular group. Research that takes the doctrinal systems encoded in modern redemptive societies’ sacred texts seriously has been fairly rare.

We have therefore put together an international team of scholars from Europe, Taiwan, Canada, China, Hong Kong, and Japan to focus on the textual and contextual histories of redemptive societies, with an eye toward giving their past – and their future – the attention they deserve.

The project consists of nine individual subprojects that are evenly distributed over three subject areas:

- 1) The flourishing of redemptive societies in the Republican period on the Chinese mainland (1911–1949): research carried out by Fan, Sun, and Wang.
- 2) The post-1949 development of redemptive societies outside the PRC, with a focus on Taiwan as well as on the globalization of societies during the last two decades: research carried out by Chung, Clart, and Ownby.
- 3) The revival of redemptive societies in the PRC: research carried out by Cao, ter Haar, and Palmer

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