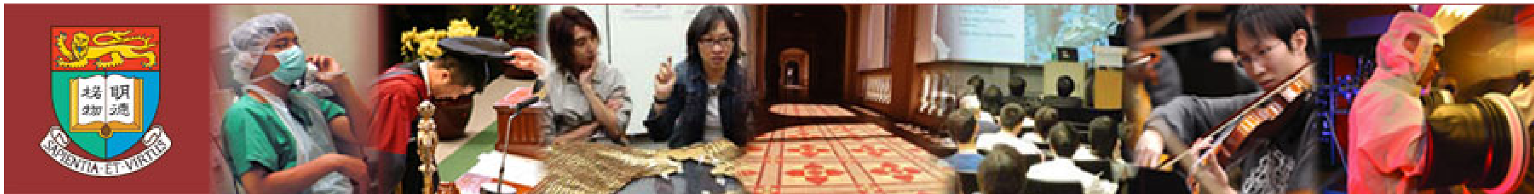
View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by HKU Scholars Hub



Title	Introduction: redemptive societies as Confucian NRMs?
Author(s)	Palmer, DA; Katz, PR; Wang, CC
Citation	Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore, 2011, v. 172, p. 1-12
Issued Date	2011
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10722/139686
Rights	Creative Commons: Attribution 3.0 Hong Kong License

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

Introduction to issue 172:

Redemptive Societies as Confucian NRMs?

David A. Palmer
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology and Centre for Anthropological Research
University of Hong Kong
Paul R. Katz
Research Fellow
Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica
Wang Chien-chuan
Assistant Professor
Center for General Education
Southern Taiwan University

PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION
Published in *Journal of Chinese Theatre, Ritual and Folklore / Minsu Quyi* 172 (2011): 1-12.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

65 were launched following instructions received in spirit-writing revelations, others,
66 including the Tongshanshe, the Daode xueshe 道德學社, the Wanguo daodedui 萬國
67 道德會, the Tiande shengjiao 天德聖教 and Yiguandao, were founded or expanded by
68 such charismatic figures as Peng Huilong 彭迴龍 (1873-1950, a.k.a Peng Tairong 彭泰
69 榮, Peng Ruzun 彭汝尊), Duan Zhengyuan 段正元 (1864-1940), Jiang Xizhang 江希
70 張 (1907-2004), Wang Fengyi 王鳳儀 (1864-1937), Xiao Changming 蕭昌明
71 (1895-1943), Li Yujie 李玉階 (1901-1994) and Zhang Guangbi 張光璧 (1889-1947,
72 a.k.a. Zhang Tianran 張天然). Their followers included a large number of military and
73 political leaders, as well as Confucian activists. Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927),
74 instigator of the Hundred Days' Reform 戊戌變法 of 1898, was chairman of the
75 Wanguo daodehui in the last years of his life. Several premiers, ministers and generals of
76 the Beiyang, Kuomintang and Japanese puppet regimes were also associated with various
77 redemptive societies, which maintained deep and complex relations with the political
78 realm and played an active role in society. The World Red Swastika Society 世界紅卍字
79 會, for example, which was the charitable arm of the Daoyuan, was possibly China's
80 largest charitable relief organization in the 1930s. Yiguandao recruited millions of
81 followers in the 1940s, in the midst of civil war and just as China was coming under
82 communist control; in the early 1950s, the enemy regimes in Beijing and Taipei both
83 launched campaigns to eradicate it. While the campaigns largely succeeded in the PRC,
84 Yiguandao continued to grow as an underground movement in KMT-controlled Taiwan
85 until, by the time it was legalized in 1987, it had become one of the island's main
86 religions and promoters of the Confucian scripture-recitation movement, sending
87 missionaries to Southeast Asia, South Africa and South America. Also in Taiwan,
88 Tiandijiao 天帝教, an offshoot of the Tiande shengjiao, became one of the main
89 organizations practicing *qigong* on the island, while also hosting congregational rituals and
90 daily prayers for the reunification of China and Taiwan. In Malaysia, Thailand and
91 elsewhere in Southeast Asia, groups such as the Dejiao have become one of the main
92 forms of association for diasporic Chinese communities.[7] All of these groups now have
93 their sights on the Chinese mainland, where some of them have already been expanding.[8]
94 This double issue of *Min-su chü-i* is the outcome of two conferences held in June

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

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

95 2007 and 2009 at the Department of History of Fo Guang University 佛光大學歷史系,
96 part of a larger project on "Redemptive Societies and Religious Movements in Modern
97 China," funded by the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China, with
98 additional support from the École française d'Extrême-Orient 法國遠東學院, the
99 Centre for East Asian Studies of the Université de Montréal, the Institute of Qing
100 History of Renmin University of China 中國人民大學清史研究所, and the National
101 University of Singapore. This project supported field research by historians and
102 anthropologists based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China, Japan and Canada.[9] A
103 starting hypothesis of this project was that redemptive societies could be seen as an
104 *identifiable set* of groups, with comparable doctrines, practices and organizational forms, a
105 circulation of followers between groups, successive waves of groups appearing with, in
106 most cases, rapid cycles of growth and decline, and an overall evolution in phase with
107 socio-political and ideological changes in Chinese society. Thus, by tracing the history
108 and social dynamics of this set of groups, we may observe a dialectic which is not so
109 much that of a conflict between tradition and modernity, but one of the religious
110 productions of Chinese modernity.[10]

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

[9] We would like to especially thank Fan Chun-wu 范純武 and his colleagues for his great efforts in organizing both conferences, and David Ownby, co-investigator of this project, for his constant support and encouragement. Besides the participants whose contributions appear in this and the next issue of this journal, we would also like to acknowledge the precious contributions of other scholars who attended one or both conferences: Prasenjit Duara, Cao Xinyu 曹新宇, Chen Jinguo 陳進國, Gao Zhihua 高致華, Vincent Goossaert, Komukai Sakurako 小武海櫻子, Lin Guoping 林國平, Lin Wanfu 林萬傳, Liu Wenxing 劉文星, Lu Yunfeng 盧雲峰, Lu Zhongwei 陸仲偉, Shao Yong 邵雍, Sung Kuang-yu 宋光宇, Tong Chee Kiong 唐志強, Yang Nianqun 楊念群 and Chung Yun-ying 鍾雲鶯.

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

119 context of its appearance.[11]
120 These groups can all be considered as "New religious movements" (NRMs) 新興
121 宗教運動. There is no scholarly consensus on a definition of NRMs, except that they are
122 "new" at the time of their appearance in a particular place. How long do they stay "new"?
123 According to one view, the novelty of NRMs is a function of their being exotic foreign
124 implants[12] – a conception which is too coloured by the Western experience of
125 Asian-originated NRMs (and hence exotic to Westerners), to be of any comparative
126 analytical value. By another perspective, an NRM is a group whose membership consists
127 entirely of new converts, without second-generation believers.[13] On the other hand,
128 groups almost 200 years old, such as the Mormons, are still often considered as NRMs.
129 Most Western NRM scholarship has focused on groups that appeared in the West after
130 World War II;[14] the term "NRM," however, is derived from the Japanese *shinshūkyō* 新
131 宗教, or *shinkō shūkyō* 新興宗教 which, in Japanese scholarship, refers to religious
132 groups which have emerged since the mid 19th century.[15] Chinese cases have only
133 recently entered academic discussions of NRMs, referring to studies of groups such as
134 Yiguandao, the *qigong* movement and Falungong.[16] Redemptive societies represent one
135 wave of new religious movements that appeared in China in the first half of the 20th
136 century. As noted by DuBois in his contribution to this issue, one could argue that there
137 is often little uniquely "new" about these groups; what is new is rather their innovative
138 recombinations of elements of older traditions in a new social context. Palmer, in his
139 contribution to this issue, tries to elaborate an analytical framework for squaring the
140 continuities and innovations of these groups, by developing a sociological concept of
141 "salvationist religion" -- successive waves of which have appeared throughout Chinese
142 history -- and then considering "redemptive societies" as one such wave, which is marked

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

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

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

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

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

[16] See the references in note 3.

143 by the socio-political environment of republican China.

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

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

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

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

177 the subject of Fan Chun-wu's article, were also active promoters of Confucian learning,
178 having a discernible impact on the "national studies" 國學 movement of the period.
179 Fan quotes contemporary observer Cao Juren 曹聚仁 who noted three types of
180 "national studies" – a more "scientific" approach exemplified by the National Studies
181 Institute of Peking University 北京大學國學研究所; a more traditional approach
182 typified by the Wuxi National Studies Training Institute 無錫國學專修館; and what he
183 dismissively called the "hocus-pocus" 神怪的 approach exemplified by the
184 Tongshanshe's National Studies Institute in Shanghai. However, as Fan stresses, this
185 more religious form had a far deeper and lively social base than Hu Shi's project of
186 casting National Studies into the museums.
187 In Li Shyh-wei's article on post-war Taiwanese Confucian groups, we see how
188 redemptive societies fit into the broader "Confucian" milieu of the time, which included,
189 in addition to the Tongshanshe, various spirit-writing halls and poetry societies. In all the
190 papers, we thus see how redemptive societies were deeply connected with a broader and
191 multifaceted movement to reform and revitalise Confucianism, which ranged from small
192 spirit-writing cults to more secular tendencies associated with the "national essence" 國
193 粹 intellectual movement. Redemptive societies were organized, religious actors which
194 simultaneously occupied several positions on this spectrum, often growing out of
195 spirit-writing halls but partaking in more modern formulations of National Studies and
196 civic engagement. As Wang Chien-chuan notes in his article, even the Wuxi National
197 Studies Training Institute (contrasted by Cao Juren to the "hocus-pocus" type) was
198 founded by a member of the Tongshanshe. And all three papers by DuBois, Wang and
199 Fan mention the connections between their case studies and the Confucian Religion
200 Society 孔教會, founded at Qufu in 1913 and which was attended by the child prodigy
201 Jiang Xizhang, himself a future founder of the Universal Morality Society, another one of
202 the largest redemptive societies. Later, Yiguandao would also carry the Confucian mantle;
203 today, it identifies itself as primarily Confucian, and is a leading promoter of the
204 Confucian classics-recitation movement on Taiwan.
205 The scholarship on Confucianism has almost completely ignored these redemptive
206 societies, and is only beginning to recognize the religious dimensions of the tradition.
207 The case studies presented here offer evidence for what might be called a wave of
208 Confucian NRMs in the Republican period, some of which continue to grow today. This
209 is but one of many potential implications of recent research on redemptive societies –
210 implications which will undoubtedly open a host of new questions for debate and issues
211 for further research.