

# The Development of Chinese Popular Religions

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The topics of popular religions in China have long been neglected. When scholars talk about Chinese religious traditions, they tended to discuss the impact of the three major traditions: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism or they were more interested in discussing the development of foreign religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Manichaeism. Owing to the limitation of sources, they seldom raised the issues of popular religions. It was not until 1990s that Chinese scholars began their research in this field after a long period of suspension.

What are popular religions? Different from orthodoxy and institutional religions, popular religions have close ties with the main traditions. In fact, they have borrowed many doctrines and practices from orthodoxy religions. Many popular religions have evolved from orthodoxy religions, for instance, the Five Bushels of Grain Sect and Great Peace Sect in Daoism in the Latter Han Dynasty (25 – 220), the Maitreya Sect in the Tang (618 – 907) and Song (960 – 1279) dynasties and so on.

Although it is difficult to capture the characteristics of all popular religions in China, we can see the shared characteristics of these religious sects. Here let me explore this area by dividing the development of popular religions into a number of periods.

## I. The Early Development

The popular religions were simple in their institutions and ceremonies. They were also simple in their doctrines and scriptures so that scriptures were easy to understand and attractive to illiterate folks. To some extent, Confucianism was an elite tradition and did not appeal to the masses. Its stress on scholarship, government service, and the maintenance of a rigidly hierarchical social structure kept any popular Confucianism from developing.<sup>1</sup> Many ethic Confucian teachings have deeply rooted in the Chinese people, such as filial piety and the respect for the old. The organizers of popular religions merged doctrines of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism into their newly established teachings. Sometimes, they even incorporated teachings of Islam and Christianity. Therefore, their teachings addressed many issues, including the spirituality, the ultimate goal, the cause-effect, and social sufferings.

In their early period of establishment, leaders of popular religions usually supported the rulers in order to gain official recognition. They tried to get along with the rulers and authorities in order to seek their support. They would claim that their doctrines were beneficial to the Court and common people.

Popular religions were usually led by charismatic and hereditary leaders who were good at curing diseases. They claimed that their teachings and practice aimed at protection of life and property. They taught followers how to keep good health and longevity. They would cure the patients who suffered from diseases by magic skills, talismans. Many leaders of the religious group were good doctors. A Yiguandao (一贯道) leader in Chengdu before 1940s was known for his skills in curing polio disease. He was sentenced death penalty but was pardoned when common people appealed to the authorities in early 1950s. He was even released after three years' imprisonment for his special skills in curing the disease. Almost all popular religions in China claimed to have this function.

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<sup>1</sup> John Y. Fenton, et al. *Religions of Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), pp.186 – 187.

Usually, the leaders of popular religions had certain knowledge of various religions. They were eloquent in denouncing the social evils and pointing out the causes of suffering of the people. These leaders might be fortune-tellers, fengshui masters (風水 geomancers), astrologers, claiming that they could predict what would happen in the future, especially during the time of natural disasters and social unrest. They would use apocrypha words in their ceremonies.

## 2. The Period of Flourishing Development

Chinese religious traditions are characterized by syncretism. It is easy to find interactions and mixture of three traditions. Popular religion crosses the lines of demarcation between Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> The leaders borrowed concepts, doctrines and methods of practices from the mainstream traditions. The followers, who were illiterate peasants, handicraft workers, miners, urban poor, were not able to make a distinction between Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. However, they were attracted by the way that the leaders of popular religion preached. When capable leaders gathered more followers, they raised funds for their institutions for various purposes, including the relief for the poor. As their religions developed and expanded, the orthodox Buddhists and Daoists felt that their interests were threatened because more folks left their religions to join the charismatic leaders of the popular religions. When Buddhists and Daoists found that the doctrines and practices of popular religions were borrowed from the major traditions, they would issue statements denouncing the popular religions as “heretics,” and criticizing the doctrines and practices of popular religions as neither fish nor fowl – a mixture of Buddhist and Daoist doctrines and practices into their new religions.

All orthodox religions in China have been under the government control since 401 CE. The Court appointed directors of Buddhist Registry Office (僧录司) and Office of Daoist Worship (崇玄署). When a popular religion grew, the Buddhists and Daoists felt it a potential competitor. Many illiterate people joined the popular religion, causing a decrease of donations in Buddhist or Daoist temples. Thus, both Buddhist monks and Daoists considered popular religion a trouble maker. They would send memorials of complaint about the popular religion to officers in charge of Buddhist affairs or Daoist affairs in the court. In many cases, the emperor tended to believe what they said. The rulers would issue decrees to condemn the popular religions and ban them. We can find many legal records banning these religions in the court documents of the Ming (1368 – 1644) and Qing (1644 – 1912) dynasties. However, these popular religions seemed to be favored by folks in localities. Full of vitality, they tenaciously survived in the midst of hunting, suppression, and persecution. “Heath fire cannot burn the wild grasses up, again they rise when the vernal winds blow.”<sup>3</sup> They were good in their resistance and adaptability to the situations. In many cases, when rulers went all out to eliminate these “heretics,” the followers of popular religions went underground to keep themselves safe.

## 3. The Popular Religions Becoming Rebellious

A number of reasons may account for the rebellious character of popular religions. First, the leaders of orthodox religions felt the growth of popular religion to be a threat to them both politically and economically. They submitted reports to the Court to denounce what popular religions were doing. When the court decided to ban these popular religions, then they became rebellious.

Secondly, popular religions usually developed rapidly when common people suffered more from natural disasters and witnessed the evil corruption in society. The charismatic leaders usually made apocryphal predictions on what would happen when strange natural phenomenon occurred, such as comet,

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (New York: Maryknoll, 1995), p.206.

<sup>3</sup> Poem by Bai Juyi.

earthquakes, eclipse of the sun and the moon, etc. They would predict the fall of the dynasty and call the suffering people to rise against the rulers. For instance, the Supreme Peace Sect established in 184 CE by three brothers Zhang Jiao, Zhang Bao and Zhang Liang marked the beginning of religious Daoism in rebellion. Zhang Jiao treated patients with fushui (符水), a technique by which the practitioner empowered a piece of paper by using charmed stamps, or a bowl of water by chanting spells. He fabricated the apocryphal that predicted the fall of the Han dynasty and the establishment of the new dynasty. He was responsible for the Yellow Turban Uprising in the year 184 when he claimed that the Blue Heaven (referring to the Latter Han Dynasty) had already passed away and it was time for the Yellow Heaven (referring to the Yellow Turbans) to take over.

Thirdly, the leaders of popular religions were ambitious – they managed their sects hereditarily. Some leaders wanted to become emperors themselves. For instance, Xu Hongru, a native of Shandong Province, became the godfather of Dacheng Jiao (大乘教). He claimed to be the Emperor Zhongxing Fulie (中兴福烈帝) in 1622. Zhao Gaoming, head of Wenxiang Jiao (闻香教), also wanted to ascend the throne. These people were considered trouble-makers by the court. More such instance could be found in government records about these popular religion.

#### 4. The End of Popular Religions

The popular religions were active in the Ming, Qing dynasties and early Republican period in the twentieth century. To disseminate their religions, they organized masses who were disappointed at the corruption in society. The leaders usually prayed gods or the Buddha for a better future. They believe that only by joining the popular religion could one avoid dangers. They invented Eternal Mother, who was considered Creator or Savior. They also claimed that they were reincarnations of Maitreya Buddha who would come down to the world to save the suffering people.

Chinese history has witnessed many rebellions led by leaders of popular religions in the chaotic period in society. When a new dynasty was established, the ruler would consolidate the reign by banning popular religions. The popular religions would grow when the society became corrupt. Such growth was usually followed by suppression and abolition.

Unlike orthodox religious traditions, popular religions were comparatively short-lived. They disintegrated when the charismatic leaders died or were jailed. They changed the names of their sects. History has showed that they have great capability to survive.

It is difficult to make an in-depth study in the popular religions. This is because that most of the sources are kept in the First Historical Records Archive in Beijing. This archive has kept many memorials from local governors to the emperors, the emperors' decrees, cases of Justice Department and other records. The second source can be found in the *Baojuan* (Precious Scrolls), and the third source includes official historical records, unofficial documents, notes, thesis, reports and research works. With the opening and publication of these records, we can gain a better understanding of popular religions in China.