

## INTRODUCTION

Robert J. Antony, Joseph Tse–Hei Lee

# Chinese Secret Societies and Popular Religions Revisited: An Introduction

It has been over forty years since Jean Chesneaux published his edited volume *Popular Movements and Secret Societies in China*, and some twenty years since David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues published their edited volume *Secret Societies Reconsidered*. On popular religions, both Daniel Overmyer's *Folk Buddhist Religion* and Susan Naquin's *Millenarian Rebellion in China* were also published almost forty years ago.<sup>1</sup> Although there have been a number of important studies published both inside and outside of China on secret societies and popular religions since the 1990s, in recent years there has been a surge in new research, much of it still unpublished, on this important subject in Chinese history.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Chesneaux, ed., *Popular Movements and Secret Societies in China, 1840–1950*; David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues, eds., *'Secret Societies' Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia*; Daniel Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China*; and Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813*.

<sup>2</sup> On the historiography of Chinese secret societies see Dian Murray and Qin Baoqi, *The Origins of the Tiandihui: The Chinese Triads in Legend and History*; and David Ownby, "Recent Chinese Scholarship on the History of Chinese Secret Societies"; and on popular religion see Man Kam Leung, "The Relations Between Religion and Peasant Rebellions in China: A Review of the Interpretations by Chinese Historians"; and David Ownby, "Chinese Millenarian Traditions: The Formative Years." Representative recent studies since the 1990s include Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang, *Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi*; Barend ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*; David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret*

Robert J. Antony (✉)

Canton's Thirteen Hongs Research Center, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou 510006, China  
E-mail: rjantony2015@outlook.com

Joseph Tse–Hei Lee

Department of History and Confucius Institute, Pace University, New York, NY 10038, USA  
E-mail: jlee@pace.edu

Therefore there is a need to revisit the topic. This special issue offers five new studies in the hope that they will stimulate further research and debate.

Previously, studies on secret societies and popular religions in China and Southeast Asia have concentrated on origins, purposes and functions. Most scholars, in fact, have focused almost exclusively on the Heaven and Earth Society (Tiandihui), the White Lotus sects (Bailianjiao), and their close affiliates, giving scant attention to similar types of organization. This special issue of *Frontiers of History in China* builds on the considerable literature that has often depicted secret societies and religious sects as sources for rebellions, revolutionary movements, mutual-aid and salvationist fraternities, or as criminal organizations, in order to provide a fresh discussion about the relevant meanings and functions as seen across regions and cultures, and from north and south China to North America and to Malaysia, taking place between the eighteenth and late twentieth centuries.

What made these organizations both secret and popular? A number of scholars, including David Ownby and David Faure, have suggested that, in fact, they were not secret because in many cases they were well known in local communities. Nonetheless, because they were outlawed by the state, they had to keep a low profile and in this sense remained clandestine so as not to be persecuted by the authorities. They were popular in the sense that they were for the most part voluntary associations that operated at the grass-roots or community level. They were popular also in the sense that they developed their own modes of organization, leadership, and ideological traditions outside the framework of mainstream legitimate social organizations, such as lineages and trade guilds. Because such associations were illegal, individuals took great risks in joining; if discovered, they would likely be arrested, convicted and put in jail, or sent to exile, or even executed as criminals. So why did people join; why were these organizations so popular and prolific? In many cases individuals joined, despite their illegality, because these organizations provided social and/or religious support not obtainable in mainstream ones. Speaking about sworn brotherhoods, but also

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*Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China: The Formation of a Tradition*, Barend ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity*, Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, and Hubert Seiwert, and Ma Xisha, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History*. As for recent unpublished research, over the previous two years there have been two international conferences, one in Macao on “Secret Societies and Popular Movements in Chinese and Southeast Asian History” (December 17–19, 2014), and the other in Beijing, in honor of Professor Qin Baoqi’s 80th Birthday, on “Popular Sources and Chinese Societies” (December 12–13, 2015). The five articles in this special issue are from the Macao conference.

applicable to popular religions, David Ownby has explained that they “provided a form of social organization and a language of identity that facilitated the cooperation of unrelated individuals in achieving mutual goals.” As widespread social and religious associations they serve as important “windows into popular culture.”<sup>3</sup>

It is with these thematic and methodological concerns in mind that this special issue explores “Secret Societies and Popular Religions” as an analytical category in Chinese historiography. The various articles draw on new source materials (e.g., unpublished genealogies, diaries, ritual and religious texts, stone inscriptions, and oral histories) and new interpretative frameworks to rethink the transmission and appropriation of socio-religious rituals, networks, and organizations among ordinary Chinese in rural, urban and diasporic environments from the late imperial era to the present. In particular, the authors demonstrate the importance of fieldwork in historical research. The latter not only allows us to complement and fill in the gaps missing from other more conventional written sources, but also gives voice to those non-elite, voiceless individuals normally underrepresented in the historical literature.<sup>4</sup> As Ownby notes, fieldwork is an indispensable tool to understand the inner workings and experiences of popular associations. This of course goes right to the heart of one of the most enduring historiographic questions—how to give voice and describe agency in relation to the non-elite and subaltern whom one studies?

This special issue begins with David Faure’s and He Xi’s critical assessment of the incorporation of Tiandihui ritual practices into the Chinese religious landscape at the turn of the nineteenth century. Focusing on local investigations of Tiandihui activities in central Jiangxi province, Faure and He argue that shortly after Lin Shuangwen’s rebellion in Taiwan, there was a tendency for the imperial bureaucracy to label the membership, sworn brotherhood rituals, and networks of popular social and religious associations as seditious secret societies. Although the Tiandihui was nothing more than a type of sworn brotherhood, the authors suggest it was the “brotherhood of brotherhoods,” whose vibrant ceremonies created a new imagined reality, one assumed to be real by members, Qing officials, and historians. Despite official predilections and biases, the resilience of the Tiandihui lay in its liturgical tradition, as shown through the colorful ceremonies and theatrical performances, the written texts, and the repetitive responses to questions surrounding the legend of its origin. Such ceremonial practices were

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<sup>3</sup> David Ownby, “Introduction: Secret Societies Reconsidered,” 16.

<sup>4</sup> More specifically, the introduction of new “popular” or local sources (*minjian wenxian*) for studies of Chinese secret societies and popular religions was the focus of the above mentioned Beijing conference in October 2015 (see note 2).

designed to engage the practitioners and inspire them to see beyond the harsh reality, rather than instigate rebellion against the powerful Manchu state. Therefore, the Tiandihui tradition represented a mode of comradeship, through which ordinary men participated in and internalized the sworn brotherhood ceremonies; they saw themselves as part of a universal family beyond kinship, lineage and territorial ties.

Robert J. Antony employs a similar framework in order to contextualize the widely-recorded Tiandihui uprising in the mountains of Huizhou prefecture near Canton in 1802. By consulting locally based documents and ethnographic data, he investigates the actual mobilization tactics by various rebel factions, their ethnic origins and social networks, and the recorded battles. The uprising took place in a predominantly Hakka region with a long history of ethnic violence against earlier settlers called Punti. Both sides opposed each other over control of scarce resources, and thus developed paramilitary units along ethnolinguistic and territorial lines. Subsequently, the local Hakka Tiandihui groups joined a broader alliance of similar secret society and lay Buddhist associations along the Jiangxi, Fujian, and Guangdong provincial borders to empower themselves against their Punti rivals. As a socially marginalized group, the author argues, Hakkas formed secret societies and religious associations in order to construct new identities to offset the negative ascriptions and prejudices imposed by mainstream society. Membership in such illegal associations provided individuals with increased agency and power, as well as being an important vehicle for articulating Hakka identity and ethnicity.

Antony's article supplements Faure and He's conceptual insights on text and context. It is necessary to study particular temporal and spatial contexts in order to interpret official documentation and ethnographic evidence about secret societies and popular uprisings in the late imperial period. However, applying the same approach to the present is equally complicated. David Ownby challenges us to rethink the post-1949 chronological divide and to assert the existence of a distinctly autonomous agency among popular religious practitioners in twentieth-century China. Studying the life history of Li Yujie 李玉階 (1901–94), founder of the redemptive society Tiandijiao 天帝教 and advocate of independent journalism in Nationalist Taiwan, he moves beyond the theoretical dichotomy between “subversive” and “redemptive” to highlight the competing narratives of state-building and individual religious experience. The redemptive societies, such as Yiguandao 一貫道 and Tiandijiao, that developed in the twentieth century, with their emphasis on healing techniques, cultivation of traditional Chinese culture, and salvation in the face of an impending apocalypse, were the heirs of earlier popular religious associations, such as the Dachengjiao 大乘教, which is discussed by Antony in this special issue.

Christie Chui-Shan Chow and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee continue the same line of reasoning by historicizing the ongoing tensions between Communist officials and autonomous Christian groups in the coastal regions of Shantou (Guangdong province) and Wenzhou (Zhejiang province) throughout the Maoist period (1949–76). The conventional label of “sects and secret societies” in the post-1949 Chinese archival documents reveals the official biases toward the notion of oppositional house churches and popular sectarians and against the notion of any spirituality among religious practitioners. The antireligious sentiment of the rulers had to do with the fact that “there has never been a period in China’s historical past in which the government of the state, in imperial and post-imperial form, has pursued a neutral policy toward religion.” What is more, “The impetus to engage religion, on the part of the central government, is for the purpose of regulation, control and exploitation whenever it is deemed feasible and beneficial to the state.”<sup>5</sup> The imperial dynasties of the past and modern Republican and Communist states have continuously pursued a policy of engaging religions as long as they supported the state, or of demonizing them as subversive sects. According to Chow and Lee, the various Christian denominations in Shantou and Wenzhou launched clandestine house gatherings to resist the antireligious campaigns, and reinvented their congregational, kinship and cross-regional networks as conduits for facilitating and strengthening church agendas. The proliferation of “house churches,” much like the “redemptive societies” studied by Ownby, is best understood as reactions to the statist efforts to reshape China’s religious landscape in the twentieth century. Their covert and overt activism require us to combine archival research and ethnographic observations so as to reevaluate the revival of Christianity and other religious traditions in today’s China.

Yee Tuan Wong looks at similar ritual and organizational practices among diaspora Chinese in colonial Southeast Asia. In line with the other articles in this special issue, Wong employs an emic approach to explore the inner workings and experiences of the Kian Teik Tong 建德堂 secret society in Penang. Formed among the Baba Hokkien merchants in the late nineteenth century, members appropriated the Tiandihui legend to found the Kian Teik Tong, which became a powerful transnational organization that monopolized the coolie, opium, tin, and rice trades, and exerted much political influence in the colonial and indigenous milieus of Penang, southern Burma, northern Sumatra, and southwestern Siam. As the author demonstrates, the Kian Teik Tong operated as a state within the state, thus creating an alternative political, economic, and social order that paralleled but was outside the regular indigenous and colonial structures of power. Evidently, the constant reinvention of so-called Chinese secret societies was a local, national, and

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony C. Yu, “On State and Religion in China: A Brief Historical Reflection.”

transnational phenomenon in China and beyond.

The vast array of topics explored in this special issue resists easy generalization. Taken together, the articles vividly reveal a world of pragmatism as seen in the frequent encounters between different state authorities and popular socio-religious groupings. One refreshing feature concerns the efforts of several contributors, especially Faure and He, Antony, and Ownby, to view the subject matter not merely from the perspective of state officials, but also from the perspectives of ordinary religious practitioners and voluntary association members. Another strength of this essay collection is the balance of local, national, and transnational concerns. The articles of Ownby, Chow and Lee, and Wong elucidate the multiplicity of grass-roots experiences and interests, and their role in shaping the course of interaction with various political regimes over societal and religious matters.

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