Editorial

Folk, Popular, or Minjian Religion?

This issue brings together a collection of articles on various dimensions of what is often referred to as “popular religion” or “folk religion” in the field of studies of religion in China. Empirical case studies presented here include Pan Junliang’s ethnography of spirit mediums in Wenzhou, Andrew Kipnis’s study of the transformations of funeral rites in contemporary China, and Selina Chan’s study on the local politics of heritage and ethnic community surrounding the “ghost festival” in Hong Kong. David Ownby offers an overview of recent developments in the scholarship on the salvationist movements called “redemptive societies.” All of these different forms of popular religion are expressions of a common cosmology that is intimately tied to the historical formation of state and religion over more than two thousand years of Chinese history. John Lagerwey offers a sweeping overview of the evolution of this cosmology, while I explore, through the work of the French sociologist and sinologist Marcel Granet, what the study of this cosmology in social practice can offer to anthropological and sociological theory.

Earlier drafts of these contributions were presented at a workshop held at the University of Hong Kong and sponsored by the Purdue University Center on Religion and Chinese Society, on May 5, 2018. At the time, different views were expressed on the type of religion being discussed: in the sociology of religion, the term “folk religion” is preferred, while in the field of research on Chinese religion, in which historians and anthropologists are predominant, the term “popular religion” enjoys broad currency. And why not speak of *minjian* 民間 religion, following the Chinese convention? Scholars in the field know that all of these terms are problematic, and few would bother arguing about how to name a type of religion that is precisely nameless.

But perhaps it’s worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the terms that are most often used to name this residual category that encompasses all that doesn’t fit into the “institutionalized” religions, but often ends up englobing

almost all of Chinese religion. C. K. Yang, with his concept of “diffused religion,” had tried to give sociological substance to the category as early as 1961, while more recently, Fenggang Yang and Anning Hu (2012) have proposed a typology of individual, communal, and sectarian types of folk religion. In the past two decades, much research has unpacked how, throughout the twentieth century, the dominant discourse in both China and the West did not recognize this realm as “religion” but as “superstition.” By now, the consensus, at least in academia, is to include it within the category of religion (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). But the opening of this academic field has taken place primarily in conversation with dominant intellectual discourses in and about China, without much reference to scholarship about the rest of the world.

As it happens, “folk religion” and “popular religion” are notions with long genealogies in Western intellectual history and have been debated now and then over the decades (Bock 1966; Yoder 1974; Primiano 1985; Kapaló 2013). The terms trace their ancestry to the work of the Italian philosopher Giovanni Battista Vico (1668–1744) and the German thinker Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), both of whom advocated a view of the *popolari* or the *Volk* as the prime movers of history rather than the abstract rationality of the Enlightenment. By the nineteenth century, the “folk” in Europe and the “primitives” abroad had become subjects for exploring an authentic or organic form of community, distinct from the increasingly rationalized, bureaucratic, and differentiated modern industrial society—in the words of the early sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), the community of *Gemeinschaft* as opposed to the *Gesellschaft* of negotiated instrumental interests (Tönnies 2001). Among the “folk,” rituals, festivals, myths and beliefs are expressions of a “folk culture” taken as a whole rather than a distinct organization on the model of a religious institution. And thus, the genealogy of the concepts of “folk religion” or “popular religion,” understood as the religious expression of folk culture, is inherently in tension with the genealogy of the concept of “religion” as an independent institution.

This tension is expressed in the many different subsequent conceptualizations of folk or popular religion, of which Charles Long, in a very useful summative article (1987), lists seven:

1. Popular religion is virtually identical to peasant culture, characterized by orality as opposed to a literate elite.
2. Popular religion is the religion of the laity as opposed to the religion of the educated clergy.
3. Popular religion refers to the pervasive beliefs and rituals of a society and its public institutions, as in the notion of “civil religion.”

4. Popular religion is an amalgam of esoteric practices different from the common religion, often practiced in the lower strata of society.
5. Popular religion is the religion of a subclass or minority group.
6. Popular religion is the religion of the masses as opposed to the religion of the highly cultured.
7. Popular religion is an ideological creation of elites, promoted through folklore societies, museums, historical and ethnographic research, and so on.

Most statements in this list posit the existence of a cultural field in which “popular religion” is identified with the lower or marginal positions in a hierarchy of power and knowledge, while the seventh definition argues that popular religion itself is the knowledge production of those at the top of the cultural field, looking downwards at the “people” and organizing, classifying, and inscribing what they see within the framework of ideological, state-building, or identity-building projects.

Any of the above definitions can easily be applied in China—although the scholar of Chinese society would be quick to point out that each of the dichotomies listed above represents a dynamic interaction between the higher and lower, the center and the periphery, the orthodox and the heterodox, between which there are no fixed boundaries and in which there is a constant exchange and circulation of religious practices, ideas, and people between the two. The tension between the two may be described in the manner of a *yin-yang* dyad, with the “popular” being the *yin* to the “orthodox” *yang*—the more obscure, chaotic, ecstatic, localized, dispersed, marginal, feminine, and embodied religion, in contrast to the more public, ordered, central, masculine, civil, and government-oriented religion; each is always simultaneously opposed to but dependent and complementary to the other (see Palmer and Tse forthcoming). And seen in such a light, “popular religion” is a category defined only by context: a county deity cult patronized by local elites might be “popular” in relation to the central state, but “orthodox” in relation to local female spirit-mediums. But these *yin* and *yang*—or, as Ken Dean (1998) puts it, *ling* 靈 and *sheng* 聖—forms of religion, will usually combine in a single festival.

Or perhaps we should use the term “*minjian* religion” in English. This term, which is usually taken as the Chinese equivalent of “folk,” literally means “among the people.” Writing about contemporary China, Sebastian Veg (2019:7–8) notes that “the term *minjian* takes its meaning from the historical dichotomy of *min* (people) and *guan* (officials)”; thus, in the contemporary Peoples’ Republic, it is associated with what is “outside the system” (*tizhi wai* 體制外) of official work units. While the term tends to refer to varying degrees of unofficial,

self-funded, and grassroots behavior, it is possible for people to be “inside the system” (*tizhi nei* 體制內) by virtue of their official position but to participate in activities and networks that are “outside the system.”

Minjian evokes specifically the horizontal relationships between people within the interstices of a hierarchical structure. Mayfair Yang (1994) and Daan F. Oostveen (2019), drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), have theorized about the “rhizomatic” nature of *minjian*, in contrast to the “arborescent” structure of formal institutions. *Minjian* suggests a sociological meaning that is not tied to the dichotomies between popular and elite: where the vertical grid of political and institutional organization covers the entire society from the center to the periphery and from top to bottom, *minjian* relations can take place between people at any location within the social system; they are not necessarily defined by rurality, orality, ethnicity, gender or poverty. Elite intellectuals as well as peasants, middle-class consumers as well as migrant laborers, can all become part of *minjian* networks. Nor are they defined by notions of an organic community that is outside of or opposed to instrumental structures: *minjian* networks can be loose and open-ended, they can aggregate, they can fissure, they can organize and they can dissipate; they can traverse, bypass, shortcut, subvert, or strengthen hierarchical structures. They are perhaps the inevitable shadow and corollary to the authoritarian structures of Chinese society, both in dynastic times and today. In the religious sphere, using this definition, they are not exclusively derived from indigenous Chinese cosmologies and traditions: there are many Christian and other networks in the *minjian*. What, then, if we take the terms *minjian zongjiao* 民間宗教 or *minjian xinyang* 民間信仰 not as mere translations of the English “folk religion” and “folk beliefs,” but as categories with their own meanings, with potentially new and rich sociological implications? I only raise this question here, as food for future reflection and discussion.

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