CHAPTER 4

Sectarian Religions and Globalization in Nineteenth-Century China: The *Wanbao baojuan* 壽寶寶卷 (1858) and Other Examples

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Historical studies investigating the transformation of the Chinese religious sphere under the impact of globalization since 1800 have so far paid little attention to the role of sectarian religions. This neglect has a number of reasons: First, sectarian religious groups were prohibited by Ming 明 and Qing 清 law and thus were frequently subjected to persecution and a life in secrecy. When we look at the Chinese religious sphere in nineteenth century China from a global perspective, Christianity and, to a much lesser extent Islam, appear as the dominant global forces, while sectarian groups and their members easily fall from sight. Sectarian groups come into view but as targets of conversion, not as historical agents in their own right.

Secondly, being legally branded as ‘heterodox,’ sectarian groups had to keep a low public profile and thus faced particular challenges in developing or maintaining strong and lasting religious or social institutions. Often forced to split up and re-form clandestinely under new leadership in order to avoid harassment or persecution by imperial officials, sectarian groups remained in a state of constant flux, which makes it difficult for modern scholars to capture transformative social processes at the various levels (local, regional and world) linked to globalization. And yet, connections between sectarian groups and between different rebellions led by these groups certainly existed. Susan Naquin has argued that certain sectarian families like the Wang 王 family in Zhili 直隸 province or the Liu 劉 family in southwestern Shandong 山東 could "become a kind of sectarian elite, serving as religious professionals who preserved core White Lotus values over many centuries."¹ The exchange and congregational recitation of scriptures played an important part in the survival of sectarian religion and its dissemination to different constituencies.

It is only since the last quarter of the twentieth century that we are able to examine globally active Chinese popular sects, such as the Yiguandao 一貫道 (‘Way of All-Pervading Unity’) and the Daoyuan 道院 (‘Sanctuary of

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the *Dao*) or, since the 1990s, Falun Gong 法輪功. In the case of the Yiguandao, for instance, the first wave of its overseas transmission was launched in 1949, the year the Communist victory on the Chinese mainland forced members of the organization into exile in Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, where they continued to spread their teaching. Before that time, the teaching was, by and large, confined to the Chinese mainland. The nineteenth century, let alone earlier periods, does not yet boast popular sects that are truly global in the sense that their networks span across at least parts of the globe or that these groups would display a ‘global outlook’ distinct from the ‘universalist ideas’ we already find much earlier in China. For instance, Chinese migration to Southeast Asia during the nineteenth century, which peaked between 1850 and 1900, entailed the spread of Chinese religious ideas across the region and led to the creation of extensive religious networks among migrants. However, these interregional networks depended on structures based on kinship and locality, which are characteristic of earlier forms of globalization and thus, in some respects, very different from the global expansion of certain Chinese religious groups at the end of the twentieth century.

Thirdly, sectarian scriptures, ‘Precious Scrolls’ (*baojuan 宝卷*), which constitute the major, albeit not the only, source of knowledge about the self-understanding and religious beliefs of sectarian groups, have yet to be examined with regards to how sectarian groups experienced and responded to the influx of foreign religions, particularly Christianity, and the process of globalization in general.

In this paper, my aim is to address the question of sectarian responses to the Christian influx and, by extension, to globalization by looking at one particular sectarian scripture and a limited number of other texts from the popular religious milieu. I argue that the production, distribution, and consumption of religious texts can be used as an indicator of globalization, and therefore, merits careful investigation. For example, the spread of Christianity

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2 The True Jesus Church might also be mentioned in this context. While Daniel Bays interprets this group “partly in terms of the heritage of Chinese sectarian folk religion,” its classification as a ‘popular sect’ may be problematic in the light of the group’s self-understanding as Christian. See Bays (1996), p. 311.
3 See also Robert Weller’s chapter on Buddhist charitable organizations in this volume.
4 For instance, in the Mahāyāna-Buddhist tradition that had spread across East Asia since the sixth century AD. The global connections of Chinese Buddhism are described in Holcombe (2001), pp. 78–108.
5 On the importance of the links between China and Southeast Asia over many centuries, see van de Ven (2002), pp. 167–93.
6 See the article by Hildegard Diemberger in this volume.