

**Asia Research Institute  
Working Paper Series No. 155**

**A Drama of the Concepts of Religion:  
Reflecting on Some of the Issues of “Faith”  
in Contemporary China**

**Wang Mingming**  
Department of Sociology, Peking University, China

wangmm2006@gmail.com

**June 2011**



**This paper is part of the ARI ASIA TRENDS SERIES that was held on 28 April 2011.**

The **ARI Working Paper Series** is published electronically by the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each Working Paper.

ARI Working Papers cannot be republished, reprinted, or reproduced in any format without the permission of the paper's author or authors.

**Note:** The views expressed in each paper are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the Asia Research Institute, its Editorial Committee or of the National University of Singapore.

Citations of this electronic publication should be made in the following manner: Author, "Title," ARI Working Paper, No. #, Date, [www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm](http://www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm). For instance, Smith, John, "Ethnic Relations in Singapore," ARI Working Paper, No. 1, June 2003, [www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm).

#### **Asia Research Institute Editorial Committee**

Michelle Miller - Chair

Gregory Clancey

Jeremy Kingsley

Jonahan Benny

Liang Yongjia

Peter Marolt

Tim Bunnell

Valerie Yeo

#### **Asia Research Institute**

National University of Singapore

469A Tower Block #10-01,

Bukit Timah Road,

Singapore 259770

Tel: (65) 6516 3810

Fax: (65) 6779 1428

Website: [www.ari.nus.edu.sg](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg)

Email: [arisec@nus.edu.sg](mailto:arisec@nus.edu.sg)

**The Asia Research Institute (ARI)** was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

## **A Drama of the Concepts of Religion: Reflecting on Some of the Issues of “Faith” in Contemporary China**

The paper, written for a lecture<sup>1</sup>, is about the situation of religion in contemporary China. This is a complex cluster of phenomena; any accounts of it can only be partial. To be true to my own intellectual limit, here I confine my effort to the sphere of the “art” of ethnography. Instead of adding another “big picture”, I intend to present a brief decipherment of a small event that played out several of the central issues related to our concern - “religion”.

Last October, a young civil servant working in State Bureau of Religious Affairs (*guojia zongjiao ju*) called me up, passing over to me his chief’s invitation to participate in a meeting. His explanation surprised me: the meeting was named “a symposium on the work of folk beliefs” (*minjian xinyang gongzuo zuotanhui*)!

So far as I know, in Chinese-speaking academia, the concept of “folk beliefs”, roughly equivalent to “Chinese folk/popular religion” among English-speaking anthropologists<sup>2</sup>, was first used by Taiwanese scholars. But the term was not invented by Taiwanese researchers; it was borrowed through a Japanese derivative of a Western academic terminology, initially deployed to survey popular religious practices and organizations in colonial Taiwan (1895-1945).

“Folk beliefs” began to be used by mainland Chinese folklorists, anthropologists, and social historians in 1990s.<sup>3</sup> In religious studies, it was not applied until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In officially organized religious studies, some of the leading researchers at the Research Institute of World Religions, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, were the first to have systematic discussions of it. As an example, Jin Ze, the vice director of the IWR, once derived from classical anthropological narratives a definition of “folk beliefs”. He argued that “folk beliefs” were a “primordial religion” (*yuanshengxing zongjiao*), distinguishable from the “great religions”, created through priestly mobilizations and prophetic revelations.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I extend my gratitude to Asia Research Institute of National University of Singapore, the organizing institution of Asia Trends lecture series in which this lecture is included.

<sup>2</sup> For a good example of the anthropological usage of “folk/popular religion”, see P. Steven Sangrem, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community*, pp.51-60, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> For a collection of the main essays by mainland scholars such as Jin Ze, Zhao Shiyu, and Ye Tao and Taiwan scholars such as Shi Zhenmin and Lin Meirong on this subject, see Ye Tao and Zhou Shaoming eds., *Minjian Xinyang yu Quyu Shehui: Zhongguo Minjian Xinyang Yanjiu Wenxuan* (*Folk Beliefs and Regional Society: A Selection of Essays on the Study of Chinese Folk Beliefs*), Guilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Jin Ze, “Minjian xinyang de jusan xianxiang chutan (A preliminary inquiry into the integrative and dis-integrative phenomena of folk beliefs)”, in *Xibei Minzu Yanjiu* (*Northwestern Journal of Ethnology*), issue 2, pp.146-154, 2002.

At the point at which CASS researchers proposed their definitions, the concept of “folk beliefs” was not in the official language. In the official “catalogue of religions”, for quite a long time, “folk beliefs” were labelled as “superstition” (*mixin*). Religions “managed” (*guanli*) by the administrative apparatuses of the state only included “five religions” (*wuda zongjiao*), i.e., Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, and Daoism. “Folk beliefs” were seen as identifiable with sorcery, witchcraft, spirit-mediums, and heterodox cults, or as whatever had “religious pretensions” but were in fact the “non-religious” and thus worthy of no “freedom of belief” (*xinyang ziyou*). As such, “folk beliefs” was a derogative term.

Answering the call, I asked myself if such a meeting was to make a fundamental change in China’s religious policies.

Though the Reforms have so far been targeted at creating yet another period of discontinuity with the past, they have paradoxically resulted in the resurgence of some of the traditions, a major part of which has been the “revival of religions”. In the past few decades, most religions have gained new followers, and the “issue of faith” (*xiyang wenti*) has come along with the life-enriching materials, “complicating” people’s imaginaries of this and other worlds. The issue has consisted of certain reorientations of people’s life trajectories, perceived by the new official-scholars and scholar-officials as related to “the decrease of the people’s faith” in the official histories of the future.

For what we may call the mind-management apparatuses of the party-state (e.g. the Propaganda Bureau of the Party and the Bureau of Religious Affairs), among the “issues of faith”, the most serious have been the problem of heterodox cults, the expansion of Christianity, the mixing up of religions with ethnic problems. “Folk beliefs”, previously treated as part of what made China a “loose collection of sands” (*yipan sansha*), have now received new “care”. They have been seen as cultural resources for the state in balancing the uneven development of “faiths”. However, the fundamental principle of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” has been historical materialism which conceptualizes such “beliefs” as a “cultural survival” kind of the people’s “backwardness”. Thus, even in “intangible heritage” conservation projects, they have not been accepted.

Is the party-state in today’s China, obviously so capable of changing its attitudes, adopting a less self-contradictory perspective of religion? Out of curiosity, I accepted the invitation.

The event was a state-organized symposium. For me, the participant observer, it was a “drama” in which some important aspects of the “issue of faith” found their roles to play through the media of the participating persons. And the “drama” could be said to be intriguingly revealing.

**“Symposium on the Work of Folks Beliefs”, Xiamen, 4 November 2010**

Photograph by Wang Mingming

As a saying goes, “In the past, the Nationalist Party asked for many taxes, while the Communist Party asked for many meetings. But now, the Communist Party asks for both.” “Meetings” (*huiyi*) in the specific sense have been neo-traditional in mainland China. In Mao’s time, “study meetings” or “criticizing meetings” were symbolic politics, a very important part of the political ritual of “struggle” (*douzheng*).<sup>5</sup> Now, the party-state has somewhat changed its “mind”, becoming ever more pragmatic - it has asked for not only meetings but also taxes. Having already been “contaminated” by the “spirits of tax”, “meetings” have become greatly more practical, often targeted at “solving problems” (*jiejue wenti*). However, they have also continued to entertain symbolic politics.

“Old bottles contain new liquors”. Within the same tradition, the symposium I took part collected a number of hierarchically levelled persons with different ideas, whose interactions performed out something I would call “a drama of concepts”. Directly related, were different understandings of the “crisis of faith”, either derivatives of the political pragmatism, or extensions of reflections on it; indirectly related, were propositions concerning treatments of the troubling “ethnic religions” and “cross-civilizational dialogues” or “religious intolerance”, which were expressions of the fate of the bygone empire in the age of the Nation.

Considering the fact that the symposium is revealing in its own way, I will give a summarized description of it, and seek to deploy it to reflect on what I have considered to be the “core” factors of the “crisis of faith”.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*, pp.130-152, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

This description may be subjective, because partly, it will stem from my own mental travel during the meeting; it may be disorganized, because from time to time it will be “disrupted” by my own “ramblings”.

My mental travel and ramblings are to do with the following two things.

First, we no longer can blame all the confusions on the state. One of our recent social science self-criticisms has been that what we practice is partly responsible for the fallacies of modernity. About the relationship between state, nation, and religion, our forerunners made self-contradictory arguments. While they helped make race, language and civilization “religion of the nation”, they endeavoured to separate the category of religion from our social life.<sup>6</sup> The paradox limited the “choice” of the anthropologists. As the anthropologist Evans-Prichard “complained” long ago, “the choice is “between all or nothing, a choice which allows of no compromise between a Church which has stood its ground and made no concessions, and no religion at all”.”<sup>7</sup>

Second, considering “superstition” and “folk beliefs” together with the bureaucrats and scholars in the meeting, I kept asking what would be the appropriate description of the “spirit” of “Chinese modern”. Probing into a civilization where the sacred and the secular used to be quite unclearly differentiated, and where the “primordial” religious system “has no name”, but has continued beyond the age of the “invented religions” to confusingly including “some elements of both Buddhism and the imperial cults, more of Daoism”<sup>8</sup>, I have tended to accept the “hybrid reality” of old China, and to see part of the “issue of faith” in “new China” as associated not only with the transmission of Western knowledge but also with the dilemma that this particular historical reality has brought to our new categorizations.

In this regard, I will hint on the paradox of the very idea of “civil religion”, an expression of our social science “confusion” - secular sacredness or sacred secularism.

## THE SETTING

“Symposium on the Work of Folk Beliefs” was held in Xiamen (Amoy).

The place is a young city, located on an island situated between two nearby older cities, Quanzhou and Zhangzhou.

Quanzhou and Zhangzhou, together with Ningbo in Zhejiang, constituted a sequence of regional metropolises between the Song and the Ming dynasties in the Southeast macro-region<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Peter van der Veer, “The moral state: Religion, nation, and empire in Victorian Britain and British India”, in *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, edited by Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Leumann, pp. 15-43, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> E. E. Evans-Prichard, “Religion and the anthropologist”, in his *Social Anthropology and Other Essays*, pp.158-171, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.

<sup>8</sup> Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor*, p.vi, Richmond: Curzon, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> G. William Skinner, “Presidential address: The structure of Chinese history”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 44 (2), pp 271-292, 1985

Prior to the Ming, Xiamen was township level place under the jurisdiction of Tong'an County of Quanzhou Prefecture. In late Ming, it became one of the most important strategic bases of the anti-Manchurian regime of Zheng Chenggong. Xiamen began to “urbanize”. However, the urbanite was not fully advanced until the end of the first Opium War when the town was chosen as one of the five Treaty Ports.

Between the 1850s and 1910s, Xiamen gradually developed into a trade centre<sup>10</sup>, whose economic importance continued to be maintained by the state after the inauguration of New China in 1949. In the 1980s, Xiamen became a Special Economic Zone.

We met in Xiamen Hotel. As anyone who knows something about China can realize, a hotel entitled with the place name of the municipality is usually based on an older “guesthouse” for visiting officials. In Mao’s time, a guesthouse as such was better equipped for official meetings, its rooms were sized and furnished according to different ranks of different officials, and its price was set in line with the official standards of re-imbursement correspondent again to ranks. In the first decade of the Reforms, these guesthouses were turned into commercial hotels. Xiamen Hotel was perhaps one of the earliest guesthouse-turned hotels in China. It has now been graded with four stars. Though its price has been “commercially” set, and its rooms and terrace have been open to the non-official hirers especially travelling businessmen and tourists, its function as a meeting venue for officials has remained important.

## CALLING AND PETITIONING

In a spacious hall on the second floor, our meeting started in the morning of November 4. A department chief from the State Bureau of Religious Affairs chaired the meeting, but the hiding convenor was in fact Prof. Jin Ze. As mentioned above, Prof Jin is the one of those who helped secure a place for “folk beliefs” in Chinese religious studies. As leader in the national team of researchers responsible for Chinese religious studies, he has the nice ambition to moderate toward a more open state religious policy. As the mediator between the government and the academia, he was mentioned by the chair in polite words, and then turned into a tolerant listener. Mr. Zhang, the deputy director of the Bureau, assumed the most prominent role. He was a necessary symbol of the state’s presence. However, he was not a silent statue. Instead, as a sophisticated political know-how with some social science training, he behaved quite gracefully. He spoke first, saying that “folk beliefs” were so active nationwide, and growing so rapidly, that the government felt obliged to “manage it better” (*guan de genghao*). Thus, they organized this meeting to explore its advantages and avoid its drawbacks. He said a few words to encourage scholars to bring forth their thoughts, to feel free to discuss what “folk beliefs” should mean, and offer ideas as to how to govern them.

Though we were encouraged to “feel free”, we followed a well-regulated speech order. The chairperson politely invited speakers from Fujian Provincial Department of Religious Affairs and the offices under it in Quanzhou, Xiamen and Zhangzhou.

---

<sup>10</sup> Deserving mentioning is that fact that one of the pioneering historical ethnographers of Chinese religion, J. J. M. de Groot, worked here for eight years at the transition from the 19th century to the 20th century. Hartmut Walravens, *The Beaten Track of Science: The Life and Work of J.J.M de Groot*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002

The regional officials in charge of religious affairs took turns to elaborate on the positive aspects of “folk beliefs”. They especially emphasized their contributions to the forging of cultural and political economic ties with the Southeast Asia and Taiwan. In doing so, they repetitively mentioned the cult of Mazu as the primary “model” for developing cross-straight relations.

However, after praising the new advantages of “folk beliefs”, the speaking administrators pointed out that these “beliefs” in South Fujian were sometimes over-diversified and lacking order. When an event occurred, they easily entered a “ruleless state”, and became hard for to “manage”. Since 1990s, local government had helped to strengthen the Daoist associations, expecting it to co-ordinate “temples of folk beliefs”. However, not all temples listened to these semi-official organizations, and some had even accumulated much man-power and money in areas out of the sights of the government.

The regional officials, being so familiar with the “troubles” like this, strongly appealed to the State Religious Affairs Bureau that a clear regulation should be set up to strengthen the “work on regulating folk beliefs”.

### **Note1: The Use of “Superstition”**

Speeches like this were familiar to me.

I began to conduct ethnographic research in South Fujian in the late 1980s. I not only witnessed many “crazy” (*kuangre*) ritual activities like the Universal Salvation Festival (*pudu*) around the seventh lunar month but also saw the subtle change of the government’s treatment of “superstition”. In the 1980s and 1990s, while the systems of annual festivals – the very core contents of so-called “folk beliefs” – were being revitalized, the regional government were developing a certain “two way policy” toward “superstition”. While criticising it, regional officials also took advantage of it.

This delicate change had its background.

Until 1949, the so-called “superstition” was prosperous in both the South and the North, and a major part of it was a synthesis of several annual and life cycles of rituals marking the main transitions of life’s space-times. These rituals, held in local temples, ancestral halls, domestic spaces and courtyards, and public places, were closely related to the cults of heaven, gods, ancestors, and ghosts, and were full of mixtures of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist characteristics.

I take Marcel Granet’s point that what has now been called “folk beliefs” involves certain practices of popular synthetics of “Three in One Religion”.<sup>11</sup> Adding to Granet, let me say that the formations of this “religion” are regionally varied. In the South, exemplified with the South Fujian example, all village and neighbourhood cults entertained ritual and cosmological representations hierarchically related to larger Daoist, Buddhist and official ritual sites. In the North, the hierarchical order of “superstition” has more to do with secret

---

<sup>11</sup> Marcel Granet, *The Religion of the Chinese People*, translated by Maurice Freedman, pp.144-147, Oxford: Blackwell, 1975



societies<sup>12</sup>, now revived as sutra-chanting associations locally called “*xianghui*” (incense societies).

The situation experienced a major change around 1949. Many of the leaders of the major sects moved to Taiwan with the Nationalist Party at the eve of Liberation (some of which I came across when I conducted fieldwork in the Taipei County in 1995), while the remaining ones were cracked down. The “incense societies” could be understood as the silent revival of “superstitions” and the secret societies. However, as “superstition”, the “Three-in-One” in South China was never the clear target of “struggle” because it did not develop into forceful secret societies. Although the “superstitious activities” in this area were severely destroyed along other “outdated stuff”, in a time of political and ideological pressure, some temples as their “superstructure”, especially Buddhist monasteries and the Confucian Temple sponsored by the old empire, were conserved as historical relics.

South Fujian is one of the starting points of the change of religious policy. In this area, so-called “superstition” not only involves the participation of self-organized local devotees, but also forms an important cultural tie between local areas and their kinship and regional cult “extensions” in the overseas. Regarding “superstition”, in Mao’s time, no official dared to admit this “regional reality”. However, in the 1980s, some local cadres started to launch their own “reforms”. Under the silent encouragement from their superiors, they started the work of “putting economy on the stage of culture” (*jingji datai wenhua changxi*). “Culture” in this sense mainly included local operas and music, or what are currently recognized as “intangible cultural heritage”. In Deng Xiaoping’s time, these operatic and music forms returned to their old ways, becoming part of the local “superstitious activities”. “Superstition” as a cultural way rich in kinship and territorial “ties”, was re-asserted by the “folks” as the source of individual, familial, and communal well-beings. It was also re-asserted as certain deity systems connecting local well-being to the fortunes of overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) and Taiwan and Hong Kong “compatriots” (*tongbao*). The so-called “putting economy on the stage of culture” consisted in taking advantages of the “ties” of “superstition” in order to promote the “return” of the “compatriots” from Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

Officials are not logic-pursuing intellectuals. Instead, they are those who have enjoyed “practical dialectics” - they accept and reject “superstition” at the same time. In order to remake the historical ties between the local and the overseas, they have actively taken advantages of “superstition”. But their doing has also led to some unexpected consequences - the common people in many places organized many activities irrelevant to or contradictory against what the government advocates.

How to deal with these activities? So far, local officials in South Fujian have not come up with convincing answers. On the one hand, breaking “superstition” into beneficial “local traditional culture” and non-rewarding “superstition” has not brought the outcome of cutting off the ties between them. On the other hand, in terms of conceptualization, giving up the “dichotomy” and accept the reality would mean running against the Constitution of the PRC.

---

<sup>12</sup> The secret societies came into being in the Ming Dynasty, and flourished in North China and the lower Yangtze River. They had complex relations with the government, and went extinct after 1949. See Shao Yong, *Zhongguo Hui Dao Men (Religious Associations, Sects, and Organizations in China)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1997 ).

## THE SET-UP: CADRE'S SEATING

Our “Symposium” began as a drama of interactions among bureaucrats of different ranks. The space was ordered in a way that the officials from Beijing seated in the middle the North, facing the South, with his subordinates arranged at his flanks, facing scholars from CASS, Peking University, Minzu University of China, Xiamen University, and Sun Yat-sen University, who either sit at the south, East, and West of the table. The local officials, though facing us scholars too, were eager to face their superiors in the middle. Therefore, they had to turn their heads toward Mr. Zhang to create unnatural poses, petitioning him for strengthening control over “folk beliefs”.

We could assume the local officials' mind. On the one hand, they sought for praises from the superior on the new religious policy they had been experimenting since 1980s. On the other, they were afraid of the possibility that their own experiments could bring about troubles for themselves. We could also be clear that in addition to some hidden problems, these experiments had become benefit-generating sources for the local religious administrators. If their superior agreed to strengthen the measures, the local administrators would obtain more executive powers to enlarge their sphere of action.

Following the logic of the political art, probably, the leader in the middle did not respond to his subordinates' appeals, but gave only a humble smile.

This deputy minister, Mr. Zhang, with a modesty-looking face, avoided responding to the subordinate's petitions, and turned the discussion into the “academic”. With a smile always in his face, he said, “we are very concerned with how to define ‘folk beliefs?’”

### *Note2: Gossiping about “the Six Religion”*

Meanwhile, a colleague, an insider from CASS sitting next to me, whispered at my ear that the State Bureau of Religious Affairs was working on recognizing the “sixth religion” – that of the “folk beliefs”.

I thought that Russians as an ethnic group in Northeast China belonged to Eastern Orthodox, and there were numerous Neo-Confucian scholars perceiving Confucianism as a religion, so “the sixth religion” has been around. But my colleague continued to whisper that the Bureau intended to treat “folk beliefs” as the six religion but was not going to explicitly call it such. It was anxiously concerned with its political implications. My colleague continued, “the problem these leaders are faced with is: if ‘folk beliefs’ are recognized as a ‘religion’, it will contradict the principle of the ‘five religions’ laid out at the beginning of the PRC. Meanwhile, if these ‘beliefs’ do not have a ‘proper name’, it will be illegitimate for the government to officially ‘manage’ (*guanli*) it, and the executive sources will be hard to mobilize”.

As far as mainland Chinese system is concerned, things will not get right unless a department dedicated to the control of these things is established. This is also the case of the state's policy of “folk beliefs”.

My colleague's “gossip” about “the sixth religion” reminded me of many things.

Several years ago, after a certain sect was declared as a “heterodox cult”, I visited south Fujian. One local official in charge of regulating religions told me that they were assigned with a quota of cracking down the “heterodox cult”. Since it’s really hard to find any, they have to find other things to crack down. They pulled down some local tutelary temples. This official also argued that the absence of the “heterodox cult” in South Fujian could only be explained with the existence of “superstition”. While “superstition” was prosperous, such “heterodox cult” could not be so easily developed. This was simply because the people’s minds had already been preoccupied with “superstition”. In this light, “superstition” was perhaps a good thing to the government. The official said: “because when people had ‘superstition’ already, they would not need to go for the ‘heterodox cult’”.

Another thing probably matters in a similar way. A few years ago, the Mazu Temple at Meizhou of Putian was admitted into the catalogue of World Cultural Heritage. Incidentally, I paid a visit to Quanzhou. There, the collection of the relics along the so-called “Maritime Silk Road” was listed in an official application for the listing in the same catalogue. It failed to be accepted. Out of Quanzhou cultural officials’ expectation, the Mazu Temple at Meizhou, which they never considered as a qualified competitor, harvested a great success. Many local elites at Quanzhou were at pains trying to understand the situation. They thought the Mazu Temple in Meizhou was historical more recent than its counterpart, the Tianhou Temple in Quanzhou. Tianhou Temple received an endorsement directly from the emperor and has much value in terms of cultural heritage. These local elites also said, it was the government’s policy that made Meizhou Mazu Temple a World Heritage. There had been just too many pilgrimages from Taiwan to Meizhou. Therefore, the Mazu was more effective than other the work of “United Front” (*Tongyi Zhanxian*).

Replacing “superstition” with “folk beliefs” has not changed too many things. However, this concept may usher a fundamental change of strategy. “Superstition” can block the spread of “heterodox cults” and benefit the work of “United Front”. That means, it has the potential to help build a “harmonious society” within and forge “peaceful re-unification” without.

Regulating religion in South Fujian where “folk beliefs” flourish, the regional officials do not feel much about the problem of the “crisis of faith”, but the cadres from Beijing take it a serious issue. In the past few years, the state spent much money in training social scientists from universities and research institutes. The trainers were a selection of scholars-officials specialized in ideological work. Domestic and international issues form the key themes of discussion. Lectures on religious theories and religious realities often were presented as important parts of the training programs. Such lectures were oriented to the “crisis of faith” in China. But what is a “crisis of faith”? It roughly means that under the impact of materialism, the younger generation has no belief at all. One trainee told me that according to a lecturer,

“...Under the Maoist time, we believed in communism, or at least, we worshipped Mao Zedong. However, things have now become entirely different. Historical materialism replaced religions. After the opening-up policy, people become more and more prone to material and secular life, while the number of religious believers grows rapidly. In the previous time, certain heterodox cults induced serious problem. Now Christianity expands just too fast. Our core ideology and core beliefs are faced with great challenges.”

This brief paragraph says a lot about China's situation of "faith". As far as North China is concerned, the temples at the local level once cut off from regional secret societies, are now replaced by not only incense societies but also churches. The former stemmed from the grassroots, the latter are marching into the villages. Once when I rode a bus from Datong to Beijing, I noticed that in the rural areas along the roads, numerous churches were erected. I even thought of saying that these churches had become village temples!<sup>13</sup>

The so-called "crisis of faith" in official terms has double meanings: on the one hand, it refers to the invalidation of the so-called "core ideology" and "core theories"; on the other, it refers to the rapidly spreading "religions" that challenges "the core".

In order to deal with both, the state has taken some measures. As has been noted, to enhance the growth of a "harmonious society", one of the conspicuous actions the state has taken has been the promotion of Confucianism as a "state religion"<sup>14</sup>. In addition, in the past few years, the state has also extended its own scope from Confucianism to other spheres of "beliefs". A new area has been "Chinese classics (*guoxue*).". From a certain perspective, the "Chinese classics" re-invented in the turn of the Qing dynasty now seems to "kill two birds with one stone": it fills in the "vacuum of faith", and provides a channel for draining some of the members of the growing churches into the spiritual world of the Chinese tradition.

Are "folk beliefs" a part of the "classics"? Do they also "kill two birds with one stone"?

Whatever official perspectives may be, we scholars are expected to be policy explainers. As such, we are different from the scholars in the West. We are not specialized in finding faults in the policies and in offering alternatives, but are expected to be those who write to illustrate the greatness of policy. I have hated the kind of situation of knowledge in China. However, courageously considering myself as someone who knew something, I spoke out first, I said: "the questions now are not about what to do, but about how to re-conceptualize our words such as 'folk beliefs'".

I meant that if the state really wanted to admit "folk beliefs" into its catalogue of "legal religions", it should support the reflexive studies on the relations between superstition, religion, and science. In my opinion, such studies would contribute to the relaxation of the state's anxiety, as well as to the overcoming of the dilemma of ironically describing "the people's religion" as "superstition" in a socialist democracy.

Officials in the meeting were apparently unwilling to comment on my talk or confused by my narrative. They looked at me with perplexed eyes. Their eyes told me that "we officials do not want to work on the concepts, especially if they are about such things as religion; instead, we only want to 'do things' without touching on 'big issues'".

---

<sup>13</sup> One of my Ph.D. students has conducted some fieldwork on certain household churches in Beijing. According to her, influenced by "folk beliefs", the Christians believe the God is someone who can bring about miracles to their life. Qi Liu, "A close look into an immigrant workers' church in Beijing", *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Volume 12, Issue 4, pages 91–98, 2009

<sup>14</sup> Mayfair Yang, "Introduction", to her edited *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, p.28, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008

For me, however, one of the “big issues” has been that the state has been too ambiguous about the concept of “religion”. The Criminal Law was passed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> session of the 5<sup>th</sup> National Congress, in July 1, 1979, amended in March 14, 1997 in the 5<sup>th</sup> session of the 8<sup>th</sup> National Congress and issued by the 83 order of the President of the People’s Republic of China in the same day, effective in October 1, 1997. There were eight amendments between 1999 and 2011, but none of these touched upon the two Articles that emphasize the state’s obligation to protect the citizen’s right of religious freedom and to restrict the state agents’ behaviour concerning religion. For instance, Article 251 states “Any state functionary who unlawfully deprives a citizen of his freedom of religious belief or infringes upon the customs and habits of minority nationalities shall, if the circumstances are serious, be sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment of not more than two years or criminal detention”. However, Article 300 expresses the state’s hostility toward “superstition” by stating “Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or sabotages the implementation of the state’s laws and executive regulations by utilizing superstition is to be sentenced to not less than three years and not more than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment; when circumstances are particularly serious, to not less than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment.”

We therefore see that while “religions” are protected by law “superstition” is not.

The State Bureau of Religious Affairs is entitled to make suggestions regarding law amendments, but it has no power of changing any part of the Constitution. Therefore, if one working in it wants to “do things” before the law is amended, he has to keep his head down. As far as I know, though the leaders are silent to the suggestion of abandoning the concept of “superstition”, they have started to silently accept some local officials’ experiment of legalizing “folk beliefs”.

One example is the “Procedures of Registration of the Folk Belief Sites in Hunan”. It was implemented in August 20, 2009, declaring to follow the State Council’s “Regulation on the Religious Affairs”, and the “Hunan Provincial Regulations of Religious Affairs”. However, it has something new in it. It still bans on some “religious activities” related to “magic” such as exorcism, oracles or deity possession, but it allows ordinary people to engage in “folk beliefs activities” (*minjian xinyang huodong*) in registered sites according to local customs.<sup>15</sup>

This is a big deal. The regulation on folk beliefs in Hunan does not mention the abandonment of the word “superstition”, but it does apply what the state’s regulation on “religion” in its treatment of “folk beliefs activities”, allowing them to take place within registered sites for religious activities. Before this point, the official line drawn between “religion” and “superstition” was very clear: only “religions” had definite organizational forms and sites of activities, while “superstition” was “a backward customs left behind by the old society”, and it consisted of fortune-telling, geomancy, oracle-consulting performed by witches, and has no formal organization, rituals, disciplines, or canons.

---

<sup>15</sup> Chen Jinguo, “Chuantong fuxing yu xinyang zijue: Zhongguo minjian xinyang de xinshiji guancha (Revival of tradition and self-awareness of culture: an observation of Chinese folk beliefs in the new century)”, in *Zhongguo Zongjiao Baogao, 2010 (Reports of Religions in China, 2010)*, edited by Jin Ze and Qiu Yonghui, pp.152-189, Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2010.

I understand the hardship for these religious administrators in creating a consistent discourse, but I do not understand why they refuse to abandon the old concepts. Is that because they think these concepts are created by the party they belong to, so abandoning them means abandoning the “principles”? If that is so, I must say that this is not necessary at all.

The word “superstition” is invented by the Chinese Communist Party. At least in what the party-states have adopted, the creator of that word should be found in ancient Europe where the history of “superstition” is as long as the history of civilization. It is said that 1<sup>st</sup> Century before Christ, the word, often mixed with “alterity” (otherness), had already been used to describe the confused “savages”. Under the church authority, the “civilized” Europeans used this word to describe the “pagans.” In the Renaissance, philosophers used it to describe a lower stage in the evolution of knowledge. In the anthropological theories, there were systematic accounts of this word in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, James Fraser adopted “intellectualism” to account for the evolution of human history, believing that the essence of evolution is a “three stage jump” from magic-superstition to religion to science.<sup>16</sup> Even in China, the translation and spread of the word “superstition” was not carried out by the communists. As Prasenjit Duara points out, in order to turn the subjects into citizens, a whole bunch of elites from different political stands and parties had engaged in the campaign “against superstition” between 1900 to 1920<sup>17</sup>. I can second this idea with a local example. In 1908, an imperial scholar Wu Zeng published “*Quansu ciji pian*” (On the ironies of local customs in Quanzhou). He had the imperial title of “*jinshi*”, and spent some time in Southeast Asia where he made some contact with the modernity. In this paper, he criticised the ancient “feudal culture” in Quanzhou, especially on those which later on called “superstition”. He didn’t know the word “superstition”, but he used the word “*yinci*” (excessive shrines), a Neo-Confucian word describing things similar to superstition. Wu Zeng’s criticism represents the transition from an ancient intellectual’s concern of “excessive shrines” to modern elites’ effort to get rid of “superstition”<sup>18</sup>. What “*yinci*” refers to is the same set of items described by the word “superstition”, but the connotations are a little bit different. “*Yin*” (excessive) roughly refers to “*luan*” (chaos), a word describing the social order. However, “*mi*” (obsession or confusion) is an epistemological word, referring to logical disorder, irrationality, or a confused head. The “progress” of the history seems to be unavoidable. Wu Zeng’s cultural critique was turned into a political campaign in the 1920s and 1930s, when three campaigns against “superstition” took place. The first one was carried out by students from a school built by overseas Chinese, while the second, the anti-warlord soldiers. The third was conducted by the government during the Sino-Japanese War, which tried to destroy the “superstitious” Wangye Temples in order to promote new culture, eradicate the wrong belief, and enhance the people’s determination against invasion.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> George Stocking jr., *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888-1951*, pp.126-150, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995

<sup>17</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Recuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, pp.85-114, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 )

<sup>18</sup> Wu Zeng, “*Quansu jici pian* (On the customs in Quanzhou)”, in *Quanzhou Jiufengsu Ziliao Huibao* (A Collection of Materials on Old Customs in Quanzhou), compiled by Minzheng Ju, pp.97-127, Quanzhou: Quanzhou Minzheng Ju, Quanzhou Fangzhi Ban, 1985.

<sup>19</sup> Mingming Wang, *Empire and Local Worlds: A Chinese Model for Historical Anthropology*, pp.263-264, Walnut Creek: LeftCoast, 2009

A friend of mine was telling me that there had been another “root” of the word “superstition”. It was Buddhism. As he explained, the very Chinese term “*mixin*” had been a Buddhist description of “confused beliefs”, lacking awareness (*jue*). Whether the Chinese term “*mixin*” was Buddhist, it has been adopted to translate the Western word “superstition”, and it thus has carried its “anthropological meanings”. If the theorists of the party-state ever added anything new to the word “*mixin*”, it is about social evolution.

Before 1990s, official documents often put “feudal” before “superstition”. The meaning of “feudal” is complex and subject to different explanations. During the Republican Era, many scholars equated it with the “*Fengjian*” system of the Zhou Dynasty, while others gave it a Marxist explanation. After 1949, the word “*Fengjian*” has referred to a particular stage in the conjectural history of humanity - the stage between the slavery and capitalism.<sup>20</sup>

Whoever is responsible for the introduction and re-creation of the word “superstition”, I openly suggested in the “symposium” that we should abandon it. To me, what Feuchtwang suggests about “superstition” is relevant. He points out that “‘Superstition is a portmanteau condemnation of several aspects of popular culture as backward. It can contain anything that does not suit the ideals of a scientific and democratic governance and its project of modernization’”.<sup>21</sup> It means that the word has a deep cultural bias pointing to “the culture of oneself”, a bias that refuses to “let oneself go”, so that it does harm to the image of a governance that claims to “serve the people”.

## SELF-JUSTIFYING SCHOLARS

I spoke about what I pondered during the meeting. At first, most of the officials and scholars present in the meeting did not object to my reflections. However, later I questioned the concept of “folk beliefs”, and when I did so, the situation became different.

I said “no” to the attempt to replace “superstition” with “folk beliefs”. I acknowledged that “folk beliefs” was more neutral word than “superstition”. Borrowed through Japanese folklore from the Western evolutionary thought, the so-called “folk beliefs” describes the items belonging to the category it refers to, while “superstition” makes a negative judgement about them. However, as I argued, derived from the same 19<sup>th</sup> century evolutionist ideas, “folk beliefs” means basically the same as “superstition”. In addition, “folk beliefs” often refers to those items that have less to do with “beliefs” than with social activities focusing on cosmological and symbolic powers, far from being simply expressions of “beliefs”. To say that they are “beliefs” is thus to distort them once again. Moreover, if the State Bureau of Religious Affairs does create a department in charge of “folk beliefs”, the name will sound so awkward and funny: it is simply impractical to designate the task of the department as what in charge of “beliefs”.

<sup>20</sup> About the stigmatization of the word “*fengjian*”, there are many recent studies, which tell us how absurd this concept could be interpreted. See Huang Minlan, “Zhongguoren wujie he lanyong ‘*fengjian*’ de genyuan” (Exploring the reasons why Chinese misunderstand and abuse the concept of “feudalism”), in *Tansuo yu Zhengming (Exploration and Free Views)*, issue 1, pp. 30-33, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor*, p.217.

Both “superstition” and “folk beliefs” refer to the most backward stage in a “history of spiritual progress” of the historical stages of magic, religion, and science. These words were invented by Western anthropologists, and they became useful to an Eastern regime, which has engaged itself in extending “socialist democracy” to an old empire. The officials in China may not know that compared to their own minds, the anthropological minds in the West have undergone tremendous changes since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It can even be said that now most anthropologists have entirely abandoned such words as “superstition” or “beliefs”. Alternatively, they seem to have “universalize” the word of “religion” when describing what previously divided as magic, religion, and even science. The word “folk/popular religion” as widely used in Chinese anthropology in the West is bound up with such a change in conceptualization. From the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1930s, Western sociologists and ethnologists applied “the Religion of the Chinese People”, or “the Religion of China” to describe what we now call “folk/popular religion”<sup>22</sup>- they started to replace “superstition” with “religion”. Strictly speaking, “Chinese folk/popular religion” began to circulate during the 1960s and 1980s among the British and American anthropologists. What it designated was what sociologist C. K. Yang alternatively called “diffused religion”.<sup>23</sup>

During the meeting, I explained these changes, and asked if “folk/popular religion” was a better word. Let me emphasize that actually, for the reason to be explained, I was not saying that I preferred the concept of “folk/popular religion”. However, given that “religion” is better to describe the “religious forms” among the “folks” by being able to “abstract” better the varied deity cult, ritual and ideational systems, and recognize its religious validity, I think it is temporarily a good terminology. If an administrative department is created in the State Bureau of Religious Affairs, the name “Department of the Management of Folk Religions” may sound better than “Department of the Management of Folk Beliefs”. The reason is simply that the imaginary of a state apparatus managing “beliefs” is quite an awkward one.

Not to my surprise, I was immediately challenged. Although the officials were quite confused by my history of changing concepts, the participating scholars from religious studies and folklore were no longer relaxed.

Prof. Ma Xisha, specializing in the “history of Chinese folk religions”, responded to what I said with a lengthy speech.

Prof Ma is the one who co-authored with Prof Han Bingfang a 1,453-page book *History of Chinese Folk Religions*.<sup>24</sup> In this book, he makes an important comment by saying that “in addition to the history of Daoism and Buddhism, China also has a history of folk religions, which is ever-changing, mysterious, complicated, and long.”<sup>25</sup> I knew long time ago that this celebrated historian used “folk religions” to describe what foreign scholars would describe as “sectarian cult organizations” and “secret societies” (e.g., David Ownby<sup>26</sup>). Before he spoke

<sup>22</sup> Maurice Freedman, “On the Sociological Study of Chinese Religion”, in A. Wolf ed., *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, pp. 19-44, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974

<sup>23</sup> C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, Berkeley, 1961

<sup>24</sup> Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang, *Zhongguo Minjian Zongjiao Shi (The History of Chinese Popular Religions)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1992.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>26</sup> David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996



out I had postulated that the authority's acceptance of "folk beliefs" may be occasioned partly by this prominent scholar.

I do not believe that Chinese scholars should all the time simply repeat and demonstrate foreign social scientific terms. However, when Prof. Ma uses "folk religions" to describe "sectarianism" and "secret societies", it becomes hard for people like me who study "folk/popular religions" to convince myself of the usefulness of the confusion. But Prof Ma seemed to have his own thought. He talked for a long time, trying to distinguish "folk religions" from "folk beliefs". He emphasized that the former were equipped with formal organization, ritual liturgy, disciplines, and cannons, while the latter lacked these.

Though I respected Prof. Ma enormously, I could not agree with him. In my mind, such a separation of religion and belief is just to re-affirm the official separation of religion and "superstition", and it is a source of our "crisis of faith".

Before I could speak out my reaction, folklorist Prof. Ye Tao had already stepped in. He paid a great tribute to Prof. Ma. I was not surprised. A month ago, he already explained why he preferred "folk beliefs" in another conference where he brought his new book - *Folk Beliefs and Regional Society*. The book gathers some influential articles on the theme by mainland Chinese scholars since 1990s, and several earlier papers by Taiwanese scholars.<sup>27</sup> He knows that his "folk beliefs" is not a clear concept, nor does it pertain sufficient academic validity. He knows that "beliefs" cannot describe the diversity of the activities of "religion". However, engaging himself in the revival of folkloric studies, he cherishes the idea of "folk beliefs". To him, "public sanction" is the most important. Because "most have accepted the term", he declares, Prof. Ma's idea on the difference between religion and belief should be accepted.

### **Note 3: "Civil Religion"**

As I was about to argue back, Mr. Zhang, the vice director of the State Bureau of Religious Affairs intervened. He said that he wanted more to know more about the reality of "folk beliefs", and see if "folk religions" would disappear in the further development of modernization and urbanization.

I understood the question as follows: as a leader in charge of the religious affairs, Mr. Zhang is endowed with the responsibility of investigating the contemporary situation of "folk beliefs". In addition, in theory, he is also responsible for explaining why religion that according to Marxist-Lennist theories, should gradually disappear after the installation of socialist systems, is still around.

The participants were from three disciplines: religious studies, folklore, and anthropology. After they spent half of the morning on the concepts, the remaining time was devoted to a round of introducing different ways of "local knowledge". Based on what they saw and heard, the scholars emphasized the emergence of the revival of "folk beliefs". About the general picture of the current state of "folk beliefs", they seemed to reach a consensus that these are "local" "belief conditions," characteristic of "earthbound China". They did not assume that those characteristics would disappear along with modernization and urbanization. On the contrary, they placed great emphases upon what sustained the revival of "folk beliefs". They maintained that "folk beliefs" were "earthbound", and gave rural societies "organizational

---

<sup>27</sup> Ye and Zhou eds., *Minjian Xiynag yu Quyu Shehui (Folk Beliefs and Regional Society)*.

power”.

I became a listener, getting what I wanted to get from them - how they perceived “folk beliefs”, “folk religion” and “religion”. However, the “big bang of empirical facts” in my colleagues’ speech made me a little bit bored. Not that I did not enjoy considering “facts”, but that they, degrading themselves to operators of empirical facts, were somehow wasting much of the time that should have been devoted to policy suggestions.

Speechless as I was, my mind roamed across time and space, where I sought to see things closer to the issues of our time.

Let us go back to the above-mentioned questions. In fact, even if anthropologists use the concept “folk/popular religion”, they are not saying that this “religion” is entirely different and isolated from the officially recognized “institutionalized religions”. In 1990s, I published a paper in the journal *Studies in World Religions* directed and produced by CASS. This is a paper called “Chinese folk religion: A survey of foreign studies.”<sup>28</sup> In this paper, I surveyed the debates around “peasant cults”, “folk religion”, and “popular religion” started in the 1970s. So far as I know, in anthropology, scholars have different opinions: some believe that there is one “Chinese religion,” while others think though “peasant cults” or “folk religions” are inseparable from imperial bureaucracy and ceremonialism. Later on, people like Stephen Teiser studied the relationship between “Middle Age” Buddhism and “native religions”<sup>29</sup> and Kenneth Dean’s studied the relationship between Daoism and “popular cults”<sup>30</sup>, and they suggested from different perspectives that “folk religions” never was independent from “institutionalized religions”. If “folk religions” is indeed an “imperial metaphor”<sup>31</sup>, is inseparable from the “institutionalized religions” of Buddhism and Daoism, then, it is inappropriate to call it “folk”.

Then, what has made us stuck to the word “folk”? In my mind, this has something to do with the transition from emperorship to “republicanism”.

It may not be too hard to understand: If “folk religions” form an “imperial metaphor”, then, the “metaphor” is absolutely a “distorted reflection” of the two post-1911 “republics”. However, in the previous dynasties, it was the reverberation of empire.

It means that we have to admit the dual reality of so-called “folk beliefs”: on the one hand, as a system of contemporary phenomena, they are a mythical “eternal return” to the meaningful past by the “Religious Man” living in the contemporary world; on the other hand, “travelling through time”, if we can move back to the imperial times, we must be able to witness the close relation between “folk religions” and “official sacrifices”. In the imperial times, no such

---

<sup>28</sup> Wang Mingming, “Zhongguo minjian zongjiao: guowai renleixue yanjiu zongshu (Chinese folk/popular religion: a survey of foreign anthropological studies)”, in *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu* (*Studies in World Religions*), issue 2, pp.125-134, 1996.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Stephan Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor. Popular Religion in China*, London Routledge, 1991.

a court existed as what against sacrifices and “beliefs”; a court always existed by way of engaging itself in sacrificial activities that were highly painted with “religious colours”. These sacrifices could be said to stem from the customs of the people in the Neolithic Age, but they were imitated by the people. The “pre-Republican” regimes shared with the folk an ideology of non-secularism and non-atheism. This radically changed at the time of rationalism and scienticism. Only by then, the isolate category of “folk beliefs” started to become possible.

I have engaged in the study of “folk/popular religions” for quite sometime, and my overall impression of them is similar with what Marcel Granet saw when he came to China at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the places I studied, familial sacrifice are characterised by strong Confucianism, the temple festivals are arranged and performed by Daoist priests, and funeral rites involve Buddhist salvation of the dead.

I boot my laptop and began to read my student’s translation of Granet’s *The Religion of the Chinese People*.<sup>32</sup> I turned to the last chapter, enlightened again by Granet’s brilliant title: “Religious Sentiment in Modern China”.

Whether ancient or modern, the so-called “folk beliefs” are never one entity. Granet elaborates on the “three religions in one” in his *The Religion of the Chinese People*, “In fact the current formula, ‘the three religions are but one religion’, serves only to point to a basic indifference to any kind of dogma. The Chinese are not divided up into followers of one or another of the three faiths; in circumstances fixed by tradition they appeal at the same time to Buddhist or Taoist priests, even to literati or officials. Not only do they never submit to a dogmatic *parti pris*, but when they have recourse to specialists, they do not at all show towards them the veneration of the sort due to the members of a clergy.”<sup>33</sup>

Folk beliefs? Peasant cults? China from the soil? They look so similar to what Granet saw in the “towns”:

In a courtyard next to yours you hear a Buddhist mass being sung for a dead man: do not imagine that the dead man had faith in the Buddha or that someone among his kin is a Buddhist, or even that the family is more or less vaguely tied to the Buddhist faith by its traditions. You will soon hear the music and voices of a Taoist mass and, if your neighbours are the sort of people who do things on a grand scale, bonzes and tao-shih will take turns at their masses night and day. When the moment comes to *dot* the dead man’s tablet, it is a literatus who will be called in. The service asked of him is a religious service, quite different from that which we ask of a scholar in giving him the task of composing an epitaph. His stroke of the writing brush will give the tablet all that makes it a sacred object and the centre of the ancestor cult. It all happens as though the literatus, acting in the name of the body of officials, in the name of the State, authorized the family to possess an Ancestor. At the very moment when he makes the dot his is, we might say, a priest; the moment after, he is nothing but a layman: his position in society, it is true, makes him

<sup>32</sup> The translator is Wu Yinling, and her book will be published by the Joint Publishing Company (Sanlian Shudian) in Beijing.

<sup>33</sup> Granet, *The Religion of the Chinese People*, p.144

at all times respectable, but nothing would be more deprived of sense than to consider the body of literati as a clergy.<sup>34</sup>

“Folk beliefs” are exactly “non- beliefs”, as Granet goes on:

Neither dogma nor clergy presides over the religious life of the Chinese. It consists in a host of small practices—they are religious practices, for they are obligatory: but it is very difficult to know the extent to which each man describes efficacy to each of them—and in a mass of vague beliefs; they are religious beliefs, for they are collective: but it is very difficult to say what faith each of them inspires in each man.<sup>35</sup>

Witnessing the New Cultural Movement and the May Fourth Movement, Granet chose to study the old things of China, not because he was simply keenly interested in them, but because he was looking for the possibility of “the religion of the Nation”. Influenced by Rousseau and Durkheim, he was trying to discover the likeliness of “civil religion” in the East. From the hybrid “folk beliefs”, he saw what the West was looking for in the archaic history of China. To him, so-called “folk beliefs” could be called “the religion of the Nation” because they did not “separate the sacred from the profane” and they were deeply social:

There are innumerable customs in China analogous to those I have taken as examples. Religious practice is made up of the sum of these observances, which in the West seem to be worldly, for they appear to be distinguished from religious duties as these are defined by catechisms. At first sight, the distinction between the sacred and the profane is less appreciable in China than among us. Thus, according to observers, the Chinese are said to be the most practical or the most superstitious people in the world: it will rarely be said, on the other hand, that they are a religious people. In reality, almost all of them observe the sum total of customary practices out of the spirit of tradition and a taste for conformity; it is general fidelity that constitutes the national religion.<sup>36</sup>

In the end of his book, Granet mentioned the ancestor of French sociology, Comte, who was translated in Chinese as “Kong De”. The first word is the surname of Confucius, while the second means “virtue”. The translation was not done by accident; the fact made Granet optimistically argued that, though there had been many campaigns against tradition, China had kept a kind of universal loyalty for dozens of hundreds of years. This loyalty is a set of “customary activities” prone to religion, and is sufficient to lay down the foundation of a “civil religion” for a nation...

After releasing a rather radical speech, I sat in the conference room, lending one ear to the talks by my colleagues, from whom I heard nothing more interesting than what said by Granet.

---

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, 144-5.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 146-147

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* 147

## CAN BELIEFS BE MANAGED?

Present-day Chinese officials and scholars are keen to bury their heads in the sands of practical affairs. The officials talk about “society” a lot, but by “society”, they mean only the “harmonious society” or the “society to be managed” (*shehui guanli*), and they talk about “beliefs” a lot, but by “beliefs”, they mean only the “regulated beliefs”. The scholars, on the other hand, are content with playing with “facts” to re-affirm what they or the officials had already re-affirmed.

At the moment when I come up with these thoughts, the smile-wearing, vice director Zhang who sat in the middle raised another question for discussion: how to regulate well “folk beliefs”? The question pulled the example-giving scholars back to the point at which the local officials talked, the point that Prof. Ma started to digress with his bore-relieving talks. He said, things like “folk beliefs” would become more chaotic if the government tried to regulate it. In order to prove his point, Prof. Ma gave another lengthy speech about the failures the emperors encountered in seeking to “regulating beliefs” since the Han Dynasty. The speech was another history of old sects by the erudite professor, but had a new theme: a history of the failures of regulating Chinese folk religions.

To me, the most impressive part of Prof. Ma’s speech was the point about “de-regulation” and the efficacy of the emperor’s “inaction”. Including extensive vivid stories and convincing arguments, Prof. Ma’s speech could not be more amusing. However, such a speech was obviously “sensitive”. I noticed in the facial expressions of the officials sitting in the same row a shared sense of awkwardness, and I felt that most of these officials did not like such a speech. I fancied, what these officials were think were probably opposite: “how could we not regulate beliefs”?

I was entirely with Prof. Ma, but my mind still ran to another direction - a return to what may be called the “Granet question”.

## “ETHNIC RELIGIONS”

I am not over-obsessed with Granet’s sinology. I have been inspired by his major arguments. But I am not “superstitious” of him. For me, one of the major shortcomings that Granet’s works have is related to the issue of how to cope with the paradoxical situations of political unity and cultural diversity troubling both imperial and modern regimes.<sup>37</sup>

Is a “civil religion” possible when religious difference between inner-national “nationalities” has become a problem?

Granet was not ignorant of Chinese cultural and ethnic diversity. However, he was a structuralist historian of what he called “the Chinese world” or in fact “Huaxia”. He believed that in pre-history East Asian continent there were two systems of peoples residing and moving along a boundary line. He argued that in the age of the legendary, the line had already

---

<sup>37</sup> Wang Mingming: “Minzu yu guojia: cong Wu Wenzao de zaoqi lunshu chufa (1-2) (Nations and the state: departing from the early writings of Wu Wenzao, parts 1-2)”, in *Yunnan Minzu Xueyuan Xuebao* (*Bulletin of Yunnan University for Nationalities*), issue 6, pp.19-25, 1999, issue 1, pp.20-26, 2000.

been crossed, resulting in the formation of China, a kind of civilizational unity.

This idea can be supported with other ideas. Some other studies of classical China, such as Fu Sinian's "Yixia dongxi shuo" (An essay on the East-West relations between the Yi and the Xia), and Gu Xiegang's thesis on "Dongyi yu Xirong" (The East Yi and the Western Rong) have taught me the same lesson of the fusional civilization.<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, neither Granet's works nor all these Chinese "oriental sciences" explain the transition from "late imperial China" to "modern China". This is unfortunate.

Even after 1911 when China had experienced the "barbarian" rule of the Yuan and Qing dynasties, the Chinese still had to face the "Republic of the Five Nations" (Wuzu Gonghe). After 1949, China entered "an age of diversity in unity".<sup>39</sup> There are now 56 minority nationalities, among whom, the Han is but one. Though we may disagree with the government's old project of "ethnic identification work", we must accept the fact that these nationalities have become more different from one another than before. "Unity of diversity of the Chinese people" has its religious dimension. Though nobody is as foolish as to believe that one minority nationality should have one separate religion, religions have always been "felt" as one of the several important reasons for each to become an ethnic group.

Dr. Liang Yongjia has been studying in Dali on the issues of religion and ethnicity. Liang restudied Francis L. K. Hsu's *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*. Though the village Hsu studied was far away from his hometown in Northeast China and culturally was not the same as the latter, Hsu still considered it as a typical case of the "Chinese ancestor cult". This classic in Chinese anthropology that takes Minjia in the remote Dalifu of Yunnan as an example of Chinese "ancestor worship" and "familialism" was ridiculed by British anthropologist Edmund Leach.<sup>40</sup> Dr. Liang took the issue with him travelling to the field. His study shows us that though the villagers of "West Town" are extremely Hanized, the religious activities, however, bear other layers, including territorial cults and mountain pilgrimages. These rituals place West Town in the "macro-region" of Dali. A proper anthropology thus ought to consider the historical transformations of Dali. Let me take Dr. Liang's study to this point: the so-called Bai culture has a structure of historical relationships within it; what we now see in West Town or among the Bai are not only the Bai, not only the Hanized, but are syntheses of cultural factors retained in or emerging from the historical changes of Dali from relatively independent Nanzhao-Dali kingdoms to a "native chieftain" under Mongol empire, and from a "native chieftain" to a county under the Ming's "imperial civilization".<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Wang Mingming, *Xigang Zuowei Tazhe: Zhongguo Xifangxue de Puxi jiqi Yiyi (The West as the Other: A Genealogy of Chinese Occidentalism and Its Implications)*, Beijing: Shijie Tushu Chubanshe, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Fei Xiaotong, "Zhonghua minzu de duoyuan yiti geju (The unity of diversity of the Chinese nation)", in his *Lun Renleixue yu Wenhua Zijue (On Anthropology and Self-Awareness of Culture)*, pp.121-152, Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe, 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Edmund Leach, *Social Anthropology*, pp.125-126, Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1982

<sup>41</sup> Liang Yongjia, *Diyu de Dengji: Yige Dali Cunzhen de Yishi yu Wenhua (The hierarchy of Territories: Ritual and Culture in a Village of Dali)*, Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2005.

Dr. Liang told me that he has been looking at the “ethnic identification work” in the 1950s and Buddhism in Dali. I can vaguely understand what he is up to. The government’s artificial “ethnic identification work” transformed Minjia into a singular category of people, a “minority nationality”, but the study of Buddhism will show that in terms of culture, this category is quite complex, bound up with many other categories of people who have different “religious systems” residing and moving in the continuum of Southwest China-Southeast Asia-India.<sup>42</sup>

The diversity of religions is one of the important features of “the unity of diversity of the Chinese Nation” (*Zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti geju*). This concerns more than Dali.

Some minority nationalities such as Erlunchun, Erwenke, Hezhe, Manchu, Dawoer, practice Shamanism, the so-called “primitive religions”, a few are Eastern Orthodoxy believers (Russian), but more believe in Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, and Daoism, whose boundaries do not overlap with those of “minority nationalities”. Tibetan Buddhist believers include Tibetans, Mongols, Tu, Yugu, Menba, Luoba, Naxi and Pumi; Theravada Buddhist believers include Dai, Achang, Wa, Lahu and Bulang; Islamic people include Hui, Uygurs, Hasake, Dongxiang, Salar, Bao’an, Ke’erkezi, Wuzibieke, Tajike, Tatar. Catholicism and Christianity penetrate Lisu, Nu, Buyi, Jing, Koreans, Miao, Lahu, Jingpo, Achang, Dulong, and Yi. Moreover, Chinese Daoism is also popular among the Jing, Yao, She, Mulao, Bai and Yi.<sup>43</sup>

While the “trans-ethnic”, “trans-societal” characteristics of religion have continued to be as obvious as before, since the 1990s, religions in different “ethnic areas” have become a way of ethnic self-identification.

Last year, I visited the upper Yellow River valley, I found some radical changes in the area where the Salar live. The Salar are Moslems and they have lived with other Muslims (*Hui*), Tibetans, and Han neighbours for centuries, and they borrowed many words and customs from these neighbours. However, to assert their ethnic uniqueness, at present, under the leadership of their local elites, they are seeking to clear away the Tibetan, Han, and even Hui cultural factors, which not long ago, were still part and parcel of their everyday life. A whole system of creation-myths has been invented to delink the Salar from their neighbouring peoples, and re-link them to their “original home” in Turkestan.

Ironically, as the minority nationalities are seeking to establish their own “cultures” by asserting their religious uniqueness, the Han, the “owners” of the “Chinese world”, have turned their kingdom into a “religion” of atheism. The “religion of the Nation” that Granet was happy at has basically gone out of the official sacred landscapes.

About “religion”, there are butterflies in the stomach of the historians and social scientists. Separating religion from the “secular life” and conceptualizing as a distinct category is the creation of the modern West. This is a separation that anthropologists, obliged to respect

<sup>42</sup> Wang Mingming, *Zhongjianquan: “Zangyi Zoulang” yu Renleixue de Zaigousi (The Intermediaries: The “Zangyi Corridor” and the Reformation of Anthropology)*, pp.148=192, Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Qin Guangguang, “Woguo shaoshu minzu yu zongjiao”, in *Zongjiao yu Minzu YanjiuZiliao Huibian (A Collection of Materials on Ethnic Nationalities and Religions in China)*, pp.331-342, Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Minzu Yanjiusuo Minzu Lilunshi, 1986.

cultural diversity, are not freed from.<sup>44</sup> “Civil religion” anticipated by Rousseau and Durkheim as well as many others are modernity itself. Durkheim believed that “civil religion” was a new social form.<sup>45</sup> When Granet elaborated on “Chinese religions”, he assumed that the “Chinese people” was a unified “nation”, and this “unified nation” had its own religious basis, which was the “civil rites”. However, the “nation” under Granet’s depiction now has been re-divided into 56 nationalities. Even though we do not take “ethnic elements” into consideration, “Chinese religion” that Granet saw as something able to incorporate foreign religions (Islam, Christianity and Catholicism) into its own “native perspectives” (Confucianism and Daoism) has been defined as “superstition” and subjected to destruction. At present, though they receive attention from the authority, they are clearly categorized as the target of regulation, rather than as one of the state’s “spiritual pillars”. Besides, even if there is a “Chinese society”, internal divisions in this “society” also imply the problem of conflict that Durkheim foresaw. The “ethnic elements” are closely related to this issue.

With all the ponderings in mind, I decided to escape the further discussions scheduled on the second day, to leave some room for myself to imagine a shared space with my students, who, I hope, can think about the future by pay visits to the places of history. I set off from Xiamen.

## EXIT: HUMANISTICS AND RELIGION?

In the above, my “participant observation” of the symposium became central. The description may be subjective, derived much from my own mental travel, it may be disorganized, “disrupted” by my own “ramblings.” However, as I convince myself, it may still be a “reflection of reality”. It is “reflection”, so it is inevitably also a description of the describer’s mind’s activities in a specific setting. Such “inner activities” of the mind has something to do with the “outer contexts”, and as I should say, they have been an important part of the “crisis of faith” in today’s China.

Shortly after the meeting, I learnt that our “symposium on the work of folk beliefs” was not the first of the kind, but one of a series of meetings on the same agenda.

A few years ago, similar symposiums were held in Hunan, Fujian, and Shaanxi, where the “revival of superstition” was at once a “serious problem” and a new hope.

I realized that, what I learnt was extremely limited, as limited as any ethnographic account of one of the tens of thousands of Chinese villages may be. However, as a decipherment of the “drama of the concepts”, it can be said to be sufficiently illuminative.

The drama was performed in a conference room, where officials of different ranks came to interact with themselves and scholars of different ages and disciplines. This was an event because it was “temporary”. In the temporary, officials from Beijing displayed their “humbleness” toward us, the scholars, but they were not really humbled by us, they did not

<sup>44</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993

<sup>45</sup> Durkheim optimistically believes that the logic of the social space and time would be able to overcome conflicts. However, conflicts seem not to vanish even when they are “overcome”. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. 444-445, New York: The Free Press, 1995



give up their intentions. Local officials displayed some fear toward their superiors, but they were not short of their own calculations (in contemporary China, creating a new department means new financial expenses and human capital. It is a burden to the huge system but it means new benefits to the local officials.). They had envy and contempt when dealing with us, the scholars, being jealous of our new or old statuses and not convinced of our arguments. Local officials were confident persons, they believed that they knew what was going on in reality, more than the scholars. The scholars were in good terms among themselves, especially during tea breaks between sessions and banquets in the evenings. However, because they were from different disciplines, institutions, and “beliefs”, they held different opinions upon the issue as to the definition and treatment of “folk beliefs”.

However, the diversity of positions and perspectives did not comfort me. A “United Front” was being formed without the wired me, most participants were believing that “folk beliefs” was a good term, most were happy to use the imperfect language and to accept the imperfect reality.

I escaped from the meeting room because I felt a sense of boredom. Nonetheless, my “inner activities” did not end.

After the event, I encountered other closely or distantly related events, some of which have intrigued me.

Let me give one such example. This is called “Qufu church trouble (*Qufu jiaotang fengbo*)”, which took place before Christmas of 2010. At that time, the Xinhua News Agency reported on the planned rebuilding of the Qufu Evangelical Church. The piece of news was intended as showing how a local government followed closely the state’s religious policy. But it caused a big trouble.

Qufu was Confucius’ hometown. The church was a small one built by a missionary from the U.S. in 1919. After 1949, it was confiscated by the government, turned into a residential compound and destroyed later on.

According to a journalist’s report<sup>46</sup>, in September 2010, under the suggestion of the Deputy Speaker of the National Congress, Xu Jialu, a “Nishan Forum of World Civilizations” was held in Qufu, near Mt. Ni, the Hill of Confucius. It was aimed at promoting dialogues between different civilizations in the holy place of old China. The first forum was dedicated to the dialogue between Chinese civilization and Christianity. However, in Shandong, it became an excuse for the church to gain support for its reconstruction. The reconstruction was proposed as early as 2002 and was approved by the Provincial Bureau of Religious Affairs in 2006. It was inaugurated in July, 2010. The plan was to make a “Trinity Hall”, accommodating 3,000 Christians.

In the foundation-laying day of the construction, the chairman of Chinese Christian Association, came over and made a speech. In his speech, he celebrated the church as “a platform for the dialogue between Christian culture and Confucian culture”.

However, once the news of the church’s reconstruction was released, the project was strongly

---

<sup>46</sup> Tian Lei, “Qufu jiaotang fengbo (The incident of the church in Qufu)”, *Nanfengchuang (Windows of the South)*, January 15, 2011.

opposed by a great number of Confucian scholars. A petition signed by a group of such scholars requested the government to stop the project, or to relocate it out of the sight of the temples of the Three Kongs, Three Mengs, and Duke Zhou. It also argued that the church should not exceed the scale of the Confucian temple or the Mencius Temple, it should not have the capacity of accommodating 3,000 people, the very number of the disciples of Confucius'. Nor should it become the biggest Christian church in China and follow the Gothic style.

Oppositions from the scholars of Confucian studies and Confucian societies were responded by the Chinese Christian Association, whose deputy secretary mentioned this event in a meeting on “harmonious religions” in December 28, hosted by the Ethnic and Religion Commission of the People’s Consultation Congress. He said, “religious harmony” (*zongjiao hexie*) ought to be based on “mutual respect” and dialogue. No religion should over-emphasize its own distinction and generate narrow-mindedness and exclusion. One should stop using traditional mindset of “competition” to cope with the issues of mutual influence in a global age.

This speech proved to be ineffective. Under the great pressure of “public opinions”, the Qufu local government has now assumed a much lowered down profile. The one in charge of the local religious affairs said to a reporter that they “don’t know for sure when the church will be competed, and what it will look like.”<sup>47</sup>

The project of rebuilding the Christian church in Qufu can be said to be a part of the phenomenon of “religious revival”, taking place not only in Christianity, but also in Buddhism, Daoism, Islamism, Catholicism, and “folk beliefs”. A project as such signals the change of the authority’s attitude to religion from its atheist ideology to the more practical thesis of “harmonious society”<sup>48</sup>. The shift shows that the authority has changed from heavy-handed control of religions to an open policy. In the age of the “crisis of faith”, the role of religions in “moral education” of citizens has deemed important. The state has understood the historical conflict of different religions well, and taken the strategy of supporting “dialogues between different civilizations”. The kind of civilizational pluralism vested with a characteristically Chinese political pragmatism is suitable to the state’s own handling of the enduring conflicts between Confucianism and the religions. But it has not solved all the problems.

The “Qufu church trouble” led to strong opposition from the so-called “popular Confucians” (*minjian rujia*), which in turn caused a strong opposition from Christians and the “neo-liberalists” (*xin ziyoushuyizhe*). This event, escalated into a “war of internet” in the last few months, reminds me of history.

The debate is like the war between religion and humanistics conceptualized by Kang Youwei. According to him, before Confucius, China was like other places in the Eurasian Continent, it was immersed in the Way of Gods (Shen Dao). Confucius found that these rather chaotic “Ways of Gods” formed an obstacle in the way to a “harmonious society”, so he dismissed the gods and ghosts, and kept only the cults of sky, earth, mountains, river, sun, moon, and

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid..

<sup>48</sup> Yang, “Introduction”, to her edited *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, pp.1-48

stars. He created the “Way of Humanity” or simply “humanistics” (Ren Dao).<sup>49</sup>

In Modern China, what Kang Youwei praised as “civilized” religion, the Way of Humanity, was compared by European sociologists like Granet with the modern European social philosophies. Granet regarded it as something pertinent to the “gene” of “civil religion”, and he made the argument in the time when all religions or all the Ways of God - Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam - had already been established in China.

Confucians like Qian Mu certainly could insist that religions were “Ways of Gods” alien to Chinese culture<sup>50</sup>, and insist that China should run its own country with the wisdom of the Way of Humanity. However, the Ways of Gods including all five great religions and “superstition” or “folk beliefs” are prone to push China back to “pre-Confucius” time. The contemporary authority, hoping to build a “harmonious society”, approves Confucian “Way of Humanity”. However, the “society” it is faced with has become much worse than the one prior to Confucius. This “society” is full of “gods”, but what is necessary to the society- the “symbolic capital” including the tradition of “Teaching” (*jiao*), key to the “religion” or the Way of Humanity, together with its cults of sky, earth, mountains, river, sun, moon, and stars, has been thrown into the “trashcan of history.”

---

<sup>49</sup> Kang Youwei, *Ouzhou Shiyiguo Youji (Travels in the Eleven Kingdoms of Europe [1904])*, pp.82-83, Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Qian Mu, “Luelun zhongguo zongjiao (a brief essay on Chinese religions)”, in his *Zhongguo Xueshu Lunheng (Comments on Chinese Academic Disciplines)*, pp.1-19, Beijing: Sanlian Shidian, 2001.