

Conceptualizations of “Popular Religion” in Recent Research in the People’s Republic of China

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1. Reflections on the Cross-Cultural Use of Scholarly Terminology

I came to choose this topic for my paper as it allows me to work through some issues of terminology and theory that have accompanied or hovered in the background of my research for several years now. In my previous job as a professor in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Missouri-Columbia in the USA I regularly taught a graduate seminar on “Popular Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives.” In this class we usually started out from the seven definitions of popular religion given by Charles Long in his eponymous article in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*¹ and then pursued the concept by means of major theoretical

Earlier versions of the present article were presented at the conference “Yanjiu xin shijie: Mazu yu Huaren minjian xinyang guoji yantohui 研究新視界：媽祖與華人民間信仰國際研討會” (Hsinkang 新港, Taiwan, 22-23 May 2010) and at the conference “New Trends in the Study of Chinese Popular Religion(s)” (University of Leipzig, Germany, 1-2 October 2010). My thanks go to the organizers and participants of these meetings.

¹ “Popular Religion,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol.11, pp.442-452. This article appears substantially unchanged in the *Encyclopedia’s* second edition, ed. by Lindsay Jones (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), vol.11, pp.7324-7333.

formulations (such as Robert Redfield's Great and Little Tradition model)² and through case-studies drawn from different cultures: Reformation-period Europe,³ the modern USA⁴ and Japan,⁵ as well as India,⁶ Sri Lanka,⁷ Nepal/Tibet,⁸ and China/Taiwan. For the last-named area I utilized mostly ethnographic field studies from post-WWII Taiwan.

My own area of research being various forms of “popular religion” in the Chinese past and the Taiwanese present, I eventually decided to utilize the insights derived from the discussions with my graduate students and address the role of this concept (and its close cognates such as “folk religion”) in past Western scholarship on Chinese religions. This resulted in a paper which I presented at a conference on “Research on Religions in China: Status quo and Perspectives,” held at Fu Jen University 輔仁大學 in Taiwan in November of 2006. The revised paper eventually appeared in

² Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

³ E.g., Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1994).

⁴ E.g., Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Peter W. Williams, *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

⁵ Ian Reader & George J. Tanabe Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998).

⁶ E.g., C.J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁷ Gananath Obeyesekere, “The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 22 (1963): 139-153.

⁸ Geoff Childs, *Tibetan Diary: From Birth to Death and Beyond in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

the conference’s proceedings volume in 2007.⁹ The conference organizer and proceedings editor, Zbigniew Wesolowski 魏思齊 of Fu Jen University, did a marvellous job in having all papers and discussants’ reports translated so that every item was available in both English and Chinese, his intention being to facilitate intellectual exchanges between Western and Chinese-speaking scholars. While this intention is to be praised, this procedure also sensitized me to a basic problem in such cross-language exchanges: namely, the limited commensurability of the respective scholarly vocabularies. Even within Western scholarship the term “popular religion” has many referents and can easily become a source of misunderstandings among scholars of different disciplines, or even within the same disciplinary framework (witness Long’s seven definitions mentioned above). The danger of a concept getting “lost in translation” increases exponentially when it is not just a matter of different usages in different disciplines, but of translating a term into a non-cognate language and a culturally distinct realm of academic discourse. The problem started when the Taiwanese translator of my paper chose to render “popular religion” literally as *minjian zongjiao* 民間宗教. The immediate association this term caused in the minds of many Taiwanese and practically all mainland Chinese participants in the conference was of popular sects (*minjian jiaopai* 民間教派), rather than the local and communal religious life that was the main focus of my paper. A better translation would have been *minjian xinyang* 民間信仰, which retranslates literally as “popular belief.” This gave me my first inkling that the path of cross-cultural scholarly exchange of ideas may not be as straight and easy to chart as I had

⁹ “The Concept of ‘Popular Religion’ in the Study of Chinese Religions: Retrospect and Prospects,” in *The Fourth Fu Jen University Sinological Symposium: Research on Religions in China: Status quo and Perspectives*, ed. Zbigniew Wesolowski, SVD (Xinzhuan: Furen Daxue chubanshe, 2007), 166-203.

naively assumed. I made a mental note that I should produce a parallel study of the Chinese terminology for the study of popular religion, but had to put this project off in favour of more urgent tasks.

The topic came back to my mind in 2009 when I attended a workshop in Bielefeld, Germany, organized by Dr. Xiaobing Wang-Riese 王霄冰.¹⁰ The papers presented dealt with various aspects of what I would regard as “popular religious revival” in various parts of China, with an emphasis on the Wenzhou region of Zhejiang province.¹¹ I was surprised that several papers looked at local temple rebuilding projects almost exclusively in terms of local or popular culture (*minjian wenhua* 民間文化) and largely ignored or even denied what I would have termed “religious” components. Temples are sites of local culture, are important for the development of tourism, are material manifestations of “non-material cultural heritage” (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物質文化遺產) –but one thing they are not: they are not religious sites. Some scholars were willing to admit that in the past they served as foci of “popular belief” (*minjian xinyang*) or “superstitious activities” (*mixin huodong* 迷信活動) and that some (usually elderly) local inhabitants may still use them in that function today. However, most present-day temple building and rebuilding supposedly is a thoroughly secular cultural phenomenon devoid of religious significance. At the time I could not push the discussion far enough, but I suspect the crucial point here was not whether or not what a Western observer would call “religious activity” was happening at these temples, but that any such activity is simply not labelled “religious.” The term “religion” (*zongjiao*)

¹⁰ Interdisciplinary Workshop “The Revitalization and Invention of Tradition: Destruction und Reconstruction of Religious Sites and Rites in Post-Socialist China,” Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Forschung, Universität Bielefeld, 6-7 March 2009.

¹¹ The papers have since been published in *Wenzhou Daxue xuebao* 溫州大學學報 (Shehui kexue ban 社會科學版) 22.5 (2009).

as employed by most PRC academics implies a socio-cultural structure with a high degree of institutional differentiation, clearly stated beliefs, a clergy, and sacred texts. By contrast, most Western Religious Studies scholars tend to employ minimalist definitions of religion along the line of Melford Spiro’s “institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.”¹² Thus, looking at the same phenomenon, say, a granny offering incense in a village temple, a Western observer is likely to see religion being practised, while a PRC scholar might see a local custom or perhaps superstitious behaviour. The issue is not to decide which usage is correct or more appropriate, but to become aware of these semantic differences that bedevil literal translations of concepts and complicate the exchange of ideas that is so crucial to all scholarship.

I was once again poignantly reminded of these issues at another conference I had the privilege to attend, this time at Fo Guang University 佛光大學 in Taiwan.¹³ One of the aims of the conference was to discuss terminological choices when dealing with the Chinese popular sectarian tradition. In the West it has been customary for a long time to speak of “popular sects,” a usage that is not quite satisfactory as it carries with it the cultural baggage of the church/sect distinction, which was propounded most famously by Ernst Troeltsch, but is not easily applicable to the Chinese cultural and historical context. Prasenjit Duara 杜贊奇 has recently proposed the term “redemptive societies” as an alternative,¹⁴ which was rendered

¹² Quoted approvingly by Jonathan Z. Smith in his article, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 281.

¹³ International Conference on “Popular Confucianism and Redemptive Societies / 民間儒教與救世團體國際學術研討會,” 9-10 June 2009.

¹⁴ Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*

into Chinese as *jiushi tuanti* 救世團體 . *Jiushi tuanti* is already the second improved version, after a first translation attempt at a previous conference was rejected as too Christian in its connotations: *jiushu tuanti* 救贖團體 .¹⁵ However, in spite of the sophisticated case made for the new term by David Palmer 宗樹人 , one of the conference's organizers,¹⁶ this attempt at creating a new bilingual vocabulary acceptable to Western, Chinese- and Japanese-speaking scholars garnered only lukewarm assent at the meeting. Most Chinese-speaking participants (from the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) preferred to hold on to the existing Chinese terms, which include *minjian zongjiao*, *huidaomen* 會道門 , *jiaomen* 教門 , *mimi shehui* 祕密社會 , and *jiaopai* 教派 . Western participants had reservations in particular concerning the term *huidaomen*, which is burdened by its past role in Communist propaganda (“reactionary sects and secret societies,” *fandong huidaomen* 反動會道門), yet is still widely used in academic discourse.¹⁷ Still, even though the conference did not result in a generally agreed upon terminology, at least we all reflected on the different usages and got a better sense of the bilingual semantic field in whose context we need to place our research.

2. Trends in Research on Popular Religion in the PRC

(Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

¹⁵ That earlier conference was held June 12-13, 2007, at Fo Guang University and was titled “Religious Movements and Redemptive Societies in the 20th Century Chinese World / 二十世紀中國宗教運動與救贖團體國際學術研討會 .”

¹⁶ David Palmer, “Chinese Redemptive Societies: Historical Phenomenon or Sociological Category?” in *Minjian Rujiao yu jiushi tuanti guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 民間儒教與救世團體國際學術研討會論文集 , pp. 1-60.

¹⁷ See for example Shao Yong 邵雍 , *Zhongguo huidaomen* 中國會道門 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1997).

In the present article, I would like to present my reading of some recent developments in the PRC study of what I term “popular religion” and what most of my PRC colleagues would probably call *minjian xinyang*, that is, the religious aspects of kinship and territorial groups (families, lineages, villages, etc.), but also certain groups whose membership is defined by other criteria, such as personal piety (e.g., pilgrimage associations, *xiangshe* 香社). What follows is a very preliminary sketch with no claim to comprehensive coverage, as I am only beginning to work my way into the relevant and voluminous literature.

After early studies of popular religion in the Republican period as “popular customs” (*minsu* 民俗), “superstitions” (*mixin*), and also *minjian xinyang* (a technical term adopted from Japanese usage), this line of enquiry slowly petered out among Chinese social scientists and folklorists during the 1950s and ceased completely during the Cultural Revolution, to be taken up again only after the inauguration of the Reform Period in 1978.¹⁸ A recently published retrospective of research on religions in China over the thirty years of the Reform Period¹⁹ gives us an interesting clue as to the role of studies on popular religion. The book is divided into nine chapters with the following headings:

¹⁸ Evaluations of the early stages of this research include Stephan Feuchtwang, “The Study of Chinese Popular Religion in the PRC,” *Cahiers Vilfredo Pareto - Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, No.84 (1989): 69-86; Daniel L. Overmyer, “From ‘Feudal Superstition’ to ‘Popular Beliefs’: New Directions in Mainland Chinese Studies of Chinese Popular Religion,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 12 (2001): 103-126; Zhu Haibin 朱海濱, “Zhongguo zui zhongyao de zongjiao chuantong: minjian xinyang 中國最重要的宗教傳統：民間信仰,” in “*Minjian hezai, shei zhi ‘xinyang’*” “民間 何在，誰之 “信仰” (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 44-56.

¹⁹ Zhuo Xinping 卓新平 (ed.), *Zhongguo zongjiaoxue 30 nian (1978-2008)* 中國宗教學 30 年 (1978-2008) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2008).

1. Theory of Religious Studies 宗教學理論研究
2. Contemporary Religions 當代宗教研究
3. Buddhism 佛教研究
4. Daoism 道教研究
5. Confucianism 儒教研究
6. Popular Sects 中國民間宗教研究
7. Christianity 基督教研究
8. Islam 伊斯蘭教研究
9. Other Religions 其他宗教研究

We notice immediately the absence of a category of “popular religion” (*minjian xinyang*), which is not surprising in an overview of research on religions, given our earlier finding that *minjian xinyang* does not qualify as “religious.” However, let’s not be fooled by appearances. Perhaps studies of popular religion are hidden under another heading. How about chapter 6 on *minjian zongjiao*? No, this turns out to deal with sects (redemptive societies?) exclusively. How about chapter 9 on “other religions”? No, here we find information on Judaism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Manicheism, new religious movements, as well as a (tellingly grouped) subsection on mythology, ancient religions, and the religions of ethnic minorities. However, chapter 1 (authored by Jin Ze 金澤) contains a fervent call to bring phenomena previously outside the purview of religious studies inside it (將“語外”之物變成“語內”之物); this refers explicitly to the study of China’s popular religion which “has a pervasive presence in society, has great powers of revitalization, and is a religious [!] phenomenon that highly deserves to be studied.”²⁰ While this is a call to put popular religion on the research agenda for the future, elsewhere in chapter 1 we do discover a

²⁰ *Zhongguo zongjiaoxue 30 nian*, p.27.

lengthy list of already published works on popular religion under the heading “anthropology of religion.”²¹ Furthermore, chapter 2 on “contemporary religions” (authored by Huang Kui 黃奎) contains an evaluation of the issues involved in the study of popular religion. Huang points out the great practical importance of popular religion reflected in the recent addition of a department for popular religion to the State Administration of Religious Affairs. However, the religious quality of popular religion varies greatly and may in some sectors diminish so much that it becomes mere “popular custom” (*minsu*); on the other hand, its “religiousness” (*zongjiaoxing* 宗教性) may intensify, leading to the emergence of new popular sects (*minjian zongjiao*). The author calls for a recognition of the religious quality of popular religion, and for the extension of constitutional guarantees of religious freedom to it so that popular religion may contribute to the construction of a harmonious society and harmonious world. At the same time the authorities and scholars have the right and duty to identify and if possible reform “superstitious” elements within popular religion. Scholarship thus should not adopt a value-neutral stance towards popular religion, but assist in guiding its development in such a way that it is conducive to social harmony.²²

This call for renewed attention to be given to popular religion is also heard elsewhere in recent years, making this field of study suddenly quite “hot” (*remen* 熱門). The two most recent issues of the “Blue Book of Religions” (*zongjiao lanpishu* 宗教藍皮書), published by the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, each contained articles taking stock of the study of Chinese popular religion (*minjian xinyang*) as a new conceptual

²¹ *Zhongguo zongjiaoxue 30 nian*, pp.20-23.

²² *Zhongguo zongjiaoxue 30 nian*, pp.74-76.

field and research specialization—a sure sign that a new area of research and discourse is taking shape whose participants are now reflecting upon that field’s terminology and its relationship with other scholarly and political spheres of influence. The vice-director of the Institute of World Religions, Jin Ze 金澤, calls for taking the emergence of popular religion as a new field of study as a challenge to come up with new “mid-level” theorizations, especially as a way to tackle the combination of “folklorics” and “religious” elements (*minsuxing* 民俗性 / *zongjiaoxing* 宗教性) in popular religion—a perennial question in the debate about the religious nature of *minjian xinyang*.²³ In the 2009 Blue Book we find a very useful state of the field article on the study of popular religion during the reform period. The author, Wu Zhen 吳真, addresses the terminological shift from *mixin* to *minjian xinyang* (and from *fandong huidaomen* etc. to *minjian zongjiao*) and traces the political strategies used by practitioners to revive and legitimize local temples and religious activities (most recently by labelling them as “intangible cultural heritage” 非物質文化遺產 in the sense established by the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage).²⁴

The recognition of the importance of popular religion is not limited to academia narrowly conceived. As we had seen already, Huang Kui calls for an upgrade in the legal status of popular religion. On the one hand, this is

²³ Jin Ze 金澤, “Minjian xinyang: tuidong zongjiaoxue lilun yanjiu 民間信仰：推動宗教學理論研究,” in *Zhongguo zongjiao baogao (2008)* 中國宗教報告 (2008), ed. by Jin Ze and Qiu Yonghui 邱永輝 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2008), 192-207.

²⁴ Wu Zhen 吳真, “Cong fengjian mixin dao fei wuzhi wenhua yichan: minjian xinyang de hexing licheng 從封建迷信到非物質文化遺產：民間信仰的合法性歷程,” in *Zhongguo zongjiao baogao (2009)* 中國宗教報告 (2009), ed. by Jin Ze and Qiu Yonghui 邱永輝 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2009), 161-180.

of course motivated by concerns to control this burgeoning and widespread socio-cultural phenomenon. However, at the same time formalizing the legal status of *minjian xinyang* would also give it protection and access to public resources and thus put it on more of an equal footing with the five recognized religions. Some of that concern for both control and recognition is echoed in a recent statement by the Beijing University philosopher of religion Zhao Dunhua 趙敦華：

There is nothing wrong with our research on religions taking the major world religions as its focus, but if we think that religion is limited only to the Five Great Religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam) and that popular religion (*minjian xinyang*) does not belong in the category of religion, surely that would be narrow-minded and would not meet the practical needs of the religion administration. In fact, already in 1892 the Dutch sinologist De Groot published a work entitled *The Religious System of China*, which was based on his investigation of popular practices in Fujian. A few years ago the vice-director of the Institute of World Religions in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Cao Zhongjian 曹中建, as well as Zhang Xinying 張新鷹 and others conducted investigations in Fujian and composed a report on popular religion, coming to the conclusion that popular religion should be included both in religious studies research and the religion administration. Their report was given much attention by the government agencies charged with the administration of religions, and the State Administration of Religious Affairs established a Popular Religion Department.

我們的宗教學研究以視界主要宗教為重點，這本無可非議，但

如果以為宗教只限於五大宗教（佛教、道教、基督教、天主教和伊斯蘭教），民間信仰不屬於宗教範疇，那就未免太狹隘了，而且不能適應宗教管理實踐的需要。其實，早在 1892 年，荷蘭籍的漢學家德格儒特發表的《中國宗教體系》一書，就是依據他在福建民間所做的調查寫成的。幾年前，中國社會科學院世界宗教研究所副所長曹中建、張新鷹等人在福建做調研，寫了關於民間信仰的調查報告，得出了應該把民間信仰列入宗教學研究和宗教管理範圍的結論。他們的報告得到了政府宗教管理部門的重視，國家宗教局增設了民間信仰司。²⁵

If the religious quality of popular religion is recognized, if it is administered by its own department in the State Administration of Religious Affairs, and if it is officially placed on the research agenda for the whole discipline of Religious Studies, one would think that a new name for that religious thing to be studied and administered is not far off. *Minjian xinyang* was definitely a step forward from the previously employed designation, “feudal superstition” (*fengjian mixin* 封建迷信), but one wonders whether a term that actually includes the word “religion” (*zongjiao*) might be in the offing. And indeed such a term has been proposed and is being cautiously adopted by a few scholars. The term is *minsu zongjiao* 民俗宗教. As far as I can tell at the current stage of my research, it is a Japanese import (*minzoku shūkyō*) and was probably first introduced through a Chinese translation of a work by the Japanese anthropologist Watanabe Yoshio 渡邊欣雄,²⁶ who

²⁵ “Xu 序,” in Zhang Yudong 張禹東, Liu Sumin 劉素民 et al., *Zongjiao yu shehui: Huaqiao Huaren zongjiao, minjian xinyang yu quyu zongjiao wenhua* 宗教與社會：華僑華人宗教、民間信仰與區域宗教文化 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2008), p.1.

²⁶ *Hanzu de minsu zongjiao: shehui renleixue de yanjiu* 漢族的民俗宗教：社會人類學的研究 (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1998). I was provided with a copy of this work by the

aimed to provide a systematic description and analysis of Chinese popular religion using that term. His Chinese translator, Zhou Xing 周星, currently a professor at Aichi University 愛知大學 in Japan, has been one of the most vocal supporters of formally adopting *minsu zongjiao* as the standard for “popular religion.” In a programmatic article he writes:

Specifically, the present author is of the opinion that we could consider taking those popular beliefs (*minjian xinyang*), which include the ancestor cult, the popular polytheism expressed in temple festivals (e.g., for Guandi, Mazu, the Dragon Kings, Niangniang, the Venerable Mother, Wangye, Liu Mengjiang, Jiazhai Liushen, and others), all kinds of popular Daoism and popular Buddhism, as well as the animist worship of nature spirits and ghosts, and comprehensively define them as “popular religions” (*minsu zongjiao*). Furthermore, we could take all phenomena of belief and worship within the societies of national minorities that are equivalent to popular religion, but cannot be subsumed under the official categorizations of religions, and call them “ethnic religions” (*minzu zongjiao* 民族宗教). Afterwards, in a further step, we could revise the official categorization of religions and bring these popular and ethnic religions under the protection of national religious policies, laws, and regulations.

具體而言，筆者認為，可以考慮把包括祖先祭祀、表現為各種廟會形態的民間雜神崇拜（如關帝、媽祖、龍王、娘娘、老母、王爺、劉猛將、家宅六神等）、各種形態的民間道教、民間佛教以及基於泛靈論的自然精靈崇拜和鬼魂崇拜等在內的民間信

仰，概括地定義為“民俗宗教”，進而對相當於“民俗宗教”的上述少數民族社會中各種不能為官方宗教分類所包羅或容納的信仰和崇拜現象，則可以對應地稱之為“民族宗教”。然後，再進一步修訂官方現行的宗教分類體系，把此類“民俗宗教”和“民族宗教”均納入國家宗教政策和法規的切實保護之下。²⁷

He cites three primary reasons for the necessity of this terminological switch:

1. The vast body of field research by anthropologists and folklorists has shown that *minsu zongjiao* form the basis of the religious life of the vast majority of Chinese;
2. The great diversity of *minsu zongjiao* cannot be encompassed by the officially recognized Daoism or Buddhism.
3. Although they may not be the most refined and systematized traditions, they possess religious substance just like those imported religions recognized by the government, i.e., Christianity and Islam.²⁸

A few things should be noted about Zhou Xing's argument:

1. He intends to use *minsu zongjiao* as a term exclusively for Han-Chinese popular religion (distinguishing it from the *minzu zongjiao* of the minorities);
2. He uses the term in the plural, not the singular.

²⁷ Zhou Xing 周星, “‘Minsu zongjiao’ yu guojia de zongjiao zhengce ‘民俗宗教’ 與國家的宗教政策,” *Kaifang shidai* 開放時代 2006/3: 129. I would like to thank Prof. Zhou Xing for making his article available to me.

²⁸ Zhou Xing, “‘Minsu zongjiao’ yu guojia de zongjiao zhengce,” pp.130-131.

3. *Minsu zongjiao* are not reducible to a subset within Daoism or Buddhism.
4. *Minsu zongjiao* shape the religious life of the vast majority of Chinese.
5. There is nativist sentiment in claiming the same religious character for China’s own tradition as the government accords foreign religions.

So far, this perspective has been adopted most systematically by a young anthropologist named Chen Xiaoyi 陳曉毅, whose doctoral field study of the religious life of a township in Guizhou utilizes the concept of *minsu zongjiao* to claim a uniquely harmonizing and crucial function for popular religion in the local “religious ecology” (*zongjiao shengtai* 宗教生態).²⁹ Religious ecology refers here to the state of balance among religious communities, which Chen regards as a major Chinese achievement. Every local religious system seeks to reduce internal conflict and maintain a state of balance; this balance may be lost temporarily, but is always eventually re-established. In the past and present, key culprits in the destabilization of the local religious system have usually been Christians (both Catholic and Protestant), whose exclusivism does not harmonize easily with the other locally present traditions. Chen’s field research locale of Qingyan was in the 19th century the site of a violent persecution of Catholics (the Qingyan *jiao’an* 青岩教案 of 1861), which in his estimation, however, the Catholics largely brought upon themselves by their disharmonious behaviour. A key role in healing such breaches in the local religious-ecological system is played

²⁹ Chen Xiaoyi 陳曉毅, *Zhongguoshi zongjiao shengtai: Qingyan zongjiao duoyangxing ge’an yanjiu* 中國式宗教生態：青岩宗教多樣性個案研究 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2008).

by popular religion (*minsu zongjiao*). He conceptualizes a three-tiered hierarchy in the religious system of Qingyan in terms of institutional and doctrinal differentiation: the bottom layer is made up of the popular religions of the Han 漢, Miao 苗, and Buyi 布依 ethnic groups; the middle layer by Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism; the top layer by Catholicism and Protestantism. As the substratum of the whole system, the popular religions play a key role in maintaining its harmonious balance. We note that Chen Xiaoyi does not adopt Zhou Xing's differentiation between (Han-) popular religion and (minority-) ethnic religions. However, we can perceive similar nativist sentiments in his arguments for special attention and protection to be extended to popular religion(s):

The current religious policies of China fundamentally do not provide any protection to the indigenous “popular religions,” which have the broadest social basis and greatest “mass character.” Not only that, but they even mistreat them by applying to them names such as “feudal superstition” and “stupid and backward”—this is culturally masochistic behaviour.

中國現行宗教政策對本土的、最具有廣大社會基礎的、最具有“群眾性”的“民俗宗教”基本上不予保護，甚或冠之以“封建迷信”、“愚昧落後”之名而加以擄伐，這是一種文化上的自虐行為。³⁰

He demands that popular religion be put on an equal footing with the officially recognized five religions. The government should utilize the inherent stability of popular religion and its ability to meet many individual, social, psychological, and cultural needs to further the construction of a

³⁰ Chen, *Zhongguoshi zongjiao shengtai*, p.38.

unified and harmonious society and world.³¹

This call is taken up with vigour and enthusiasm by one of the PRC pioneers in the study of Chinese popular religions, Prof. Han Bingfang 韓秉芳. In a recent publication, he makes an impassioned plea to correct the distorted names (*zhengming* 正名) introduced by leftist policies and recognize popular religion for what it really is, namely, “the core and soul of popular culture” (*suwenhua de hexin yu linghun* 俗文化的核心與靈魂). He strongly argues for the constructive functions of popular religion in the building of a harmonious society and for the cultural unification of China with Taiwan and the overseas Chinese.³² Talk of “souls” and “cores” tends to lend itself to essentialist discourses trying to construct representations of national identities. It seems to me that a certain undercurrent of cultural and national self-assertion is present in debates about the status of popular religion, a concern to define a uniquely and authentically Chinese religious tradition that is able to withstand religious competition (especially from Christianity). A certain angst concerning a perceived cultural takeover of the countryside by Christianity and a concomitant perception of the growth of Christianity as a new form of cultural colonialism are addressed most explicitly in the work of Chen Jinguo 陳進國, a young scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In an important contribution to the *2010 Blue Book on Religions* he provides a thoughtful overview of the current debate surrounding the status and value of popular religion. While promoting a new respect for China’s own religious tradition and evincing a strong scepticism towards the culturally hegemonic and intolerant tendencies of Christianity in rural China,

³¹ Chen, *Zhongguoshi zongjiao shengtai*, pp.38-39.

³² Han Bingfang 韓秉芳, “Zhongguo minjian xinyang zhi hexie yinsu 中國民間信仰之和諧因素,” in *Zongjiao zhe he, he zhi zongjiao* 宗教之和、和之宗教, by Han Bingfang et al. (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2009), 1-43.

he rejects the label “nativist” (*mincui zhuyi* 民粹主義) that has been applied to his position by some critics. In his view, popular religion is a core element in the process of recovering a Chinese cultural and religious self-awareness (*wenhua zijue* 文化自覺, *xinyang zijue* 信仰自覺) that is crucial if China wants to find its place in a globalizing world. Only on the basis of critical reflection on its own tradition can China be open to outside influences and at the same time make a positive contribution to the world. Therefore he rejects both the old denigration of popular religion as “feudal superstition” (a label that interestingly has also been adopted by Christian missionaries to undermine popular religion as a religious competitor) and the newer conception of a “free religious marketplace.” Concerning the latter proposal, he argues that there exists no level playing field for Chinese popular religion, which is being squeezed by both old leftist and new Christian discourses of backwardness and superstition. A more constructive approach is needed to restore and protect popular religion; the alternative would be the Christianization (“gospelization,” *fuyinhua* 福音化) of the countryside and as a result massive cultural disruption (*wenhua zhongduan* 文化中斷) and culture loss (*wenhua siwang* 文化死亡).³³ Searching for such a more constructive and supportive approach, Chen gives a positive assessment of the “intangible cultural heritage” movement as a way to safeguard tradition, but is critical of its inbuilt tendency to reduce popular religion to popular custom. It is no solution to ignore the “religiousness” (*zongjiaoxing* 宗教性) of popular religion if the ultimate aim is the recovery of a national religious self-awareness. A new policy towards popular religion should take into account that popular religion has three inseparable attributes (*sanwei yiti* 三

³³ Chen points out on the basis of recent field research in Jiangxi province that in areas where popular religion flourishes again, the spread of Christianity (and the concomitant socio-cultural disruption and conflict) is actually limited.

位一體): religiousness, folkloricity, and Chineseness (*zongjiaoxing* 宗教性, *minsuxing* 民俗性, *zhonghuaxing* 中華性). The first is the substance of popular religion (*ti* 體), the second its function (*yong* 用), the third its quality (*xiang* 相).³⁴ Quite in keeping with such a view, Chen has elsewhere proposed “Zhonghuajiao 中華教” as a formal name for popular religion as a uniquely Chinese religious system.³⁵

3. Preliminary Conclusions and Further Questions

In 2001, Daniel L. Overmyer 歐大年 published an article on PRC popular religion scholarship entitled “From ‘Feudal Superstition’ to ‘Popular Beliefs’: New Directions in Mainland Chinese Studies of Chinese Popular Religion.”³⁶ After the first major shift from the language of “feudal superstition” (*fengjian mixin*) to that of “popular beliefs” (*minjian xinyang*),

³⁴ Chen does not give a source for this tripartite model, but it would seem to be inspired by Tang Junyi’s 唐君毅 thought. Chen Jinguo 陳進國, “Chuantong fuxing yu xinyang zijue: Zhongguo minjian xinyang de xin shiji guan cha 傳統復興與信仰自覺 — 中國民間信仰的新世紀觀察,” in *Zhongguo zongjiao baogao (Zongjiao lanpishu) 2010* 中國宗教報告 (宗教藍皮書) 2010, ed. by Jin Ze 金澤 and Qiu Yonghui 邱永輝 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2010), 152-189.

³⁵ Chen Jinguo 陳進國, “Minsuxue huorenleixue? Zhongguo dalu minjian xinyang yanjiu de xueshu quxiang 民俗學或人類學? 中國大陸民間信仰研究的學術取向,” undated MS. It is both ironic and significant that all attempts to label that Han-Chinese religious essence need to draw on imported terminology, be it the above-mentioned Japanese-derived *minsu zongjiao* or more recent creations such as “Shenxianjiao 神仙教” (partly inspired by Elliott’s “Shenism” that still has some currency in the Southeast Asian Chinese context), or “Zhonghuajiao 中華教” (“Chinese Religion,” derived from the English term and viewed as comparable to the usage of “Hinduism”). For the term Shenxianjiao, see Shi Yilong 石奕龍, “Zhongguo Hanren zifa de zongjiao shijian: Shenxianjiao 中國漢人自發的宗教實踐: 神仙教,” *Zhongnan Minzu Daxue xuebao (Renwen shehui kexue ban)* 中南民族大學學報 (人文社會科學版) 28.3. (2008): 146-150; Alan J.A. Elliott, *Chinese Spirit-Medium Cults in Singapore* (London: Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1955).

³⁶ See above, footnote 18.

are we now on the cusp of another terminological (and conceptual!) move towards an explicit acceptance of the religiousness of popular religion,

expressed in the term *minsu zongjiao*? Or is this just a minority opinion among PRC scholars? The previous section represents a minute slice of the currently ongoing debate; informal conversations that I have conducted with religion scholars from the PRC indicate a certain degree of scepticism towards this push for a new terminological, conceptual, and ultimately legal and political status for popular religion. A lot of further research is needed before I can present a more balanced picture and assessment of this discourse. At this point I will just list a few preliminary conclusions:

1. Western and PRC academic discourses in the study of popular religion take place within separate conceptual frameworks that are not amenable to simple transposition or literal translation.

2. This not just a linguistic problem, but is connected with key differences in the way research on religious matters is embedded in the respective academic and political settings.

3. The popular religion discourse of PRC scholars shows a strong consciousness of the political ramifications of scholarly endeavours, including scholarly language. According popular religion fully or quasi-religious status brings with it a host of political and legal consequences, which some scholars seek to actively shape as positive contributions to the building of a harmonious and unified Chinese nation, while others are chary of depriving popular religion of the legal and administrative grey areas in which it has flourished so abundantly in the last three decades. Regarding the latter perspective, it is interesting to note that up until very recently

minjian xinyang (as distinct from *minjian zongjiao*, popular sects) barely appeared on the radar screens of religious policy makers. Monographs and research collections on religious policy-making hardly mention it.³⁷ This is changing, however, as Religious Affairs officials start paying attention and even writing policy articles on popular religion.³⁸ This kind of official concern may well turn out to be a mixed blessing for local temples.

4. However, both groups of scholars (i.e., those for and those against a more formal status for popular religion) operate with a sense of political responsibility, which lends political dimensions to conceptual and terminological issues that Western scholars tend to treat as purely a matter of academic discourse. For many PRC researchers, the roles of scholar and policy adviser cannot be separated; and indeed, the government expects them to combine the two functions. This adds a dimension to which Western scholars are not naturally attuned and which they need give their special attention.³⁹

5. Finally, we may also speculate whether popular religion’s newly found favour in the halls of PRC academia and government has to do with the mounting concern about the rapid spread of Christian and Christian-inspired movements in many rural areas. A comparative look at Chinese

³⁷ See, for example, Wang Zuo’an 王作安, *Zhongguo de zongjiao wenti he zongjiao zhengce* 中國的宗教問題和宗教政策 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2002); Xiong Kunxin 熊坤新, ed., *Zongjiao lilun yu zongjiao zhengce* 宗教理論與宗教政策 (Beijing: Zhongyang Minzu Daxue chubanshe, 2008).

³⁸ See, for example, Zhang Jian 張劍, “Guanyu woguo minjian xinyang wenti de lilun zhengce sikao 關於我國民間信仰問題的理論政策思考,” *Zhongguo zongjiao* 中國宗教 2007/7: 20-23.

³⁹ Which is not to say that this double function is unknown in Western religious studies or social sciences. However, it tends to be regarded as problematic and potentially compromising of scholarly integrity; it is certainly not an expected part of the scholar’s social role.

societies with strong and unbroken traditions of popular religion (such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Southeast Asian Chinese) would seem to suggest that such intact religious structures make it harder for Christian missions to gain a foothold in rural society. Chen Xiaoyi's study of the religious ecology of Qingyan sets much stock by the ability of popular religions to counteract Christian excesses and maintain a harmonious and pluralistic religious system—an insight he is eager to present as a key argument for an improved legal status of popular religion. A similar point is made by Chen Jinguo in his new article. Here again, the question arises whether this is a minority viewpoint or whether it resonates with current political debates in Beijing.