



# Syncretic Sects and Redemptive Societies

## Toward a New Understanding of “Sectarianism” in the Study of Chinese Religions

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### Abstract

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that “sectarian religion” can be regarded as one of the most important strands in China’s religious landscape. Notwithstanding the consensus about the religious, political, and social significance of sectarian religion in Chinese history, academics disagree sharply over questions of both definition and terminology. Building on the theories of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu, this article defines a new approach for the understanding of sectarian religion in imperial and modern China. In the first part, I discuss four primary assumptions that have led to many misunderstandings and distortions in previous research. In the second part, I demonstrate the shortcomings of the recently introduced concept of “redemptive societies,” which implies a discontinuity between premodern sects and modern redemptive societies. In the last part, I construct a novel approach that aims to understand the workings of sectarian religion in sociological terms.

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## Keywords

sects – redemptive societies – sectarianism – new religious movements – syncretism – nonconformism – Max Weber – Pierre Bourdieu

### 综摄主义教门与救世团体：中国宗教研究中的“民间教派”新解

#### 摘要

“民间教门”是中国宗教中最重要部分之一。尽管大部分学者已就民间教门的宗教、政治、社会意义达成了共识，但对于如何定义“民间教门”还莫衷一是。本文根据韦伯 (Max Weber) 与布迪厄 (Pierre Bourdieu) 的宗教社会学理论，提出一个新路径，来理解历史与当代的民间教门。第一，本文将讨论欧美学者民间教门研究中的四个引起误解的假设；第二，本文认为应放弃“救世团体”概念，因为它否定了传统社会“教门”与当代中国“救世团体”之间的连续性；第三，本文以宗教社会学为基础，提出一个新路径来促进对于“教门/教派”的跨时代、跨文化理解。

#### 关键词

民间教派，秘密教门，救世团体，新兴宗教，综摄主义，三教合一，非国教主义，韦伯，布迪厄

#### Introduction

Recent scholarship on religion in China has demonstrated that “sectarian religion” can be regarded as one of the most important strands in China’s religious landscape (Yang 1970:334–335, 362–363 and *passim*; Goossaert and Palmer 2011:31, 107, 148–150; Palmer 2011:28; Katz 2014). Some scholars consider it a single phenomenon (Yang 1970:301; Naquin 1987; Seiwert 2009), while others go as far as to label it China’s fourth religious tradition, alongside the well-established traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism (Overmyer 1999:188; Seiwert 2003a:50, 440–441). Notwithstanding the consensus about the religious, political, and social significance of sectarian religion in Chinese history, academics disagree sharply over questions of both definition and terminology.

In recent years, a number of scholars have come to criticize the use of the term “sect” in the Chinese context on the grounds that it is more convenient than accurate (ter Haar 1999:9–10; Ownby 2008a; Goossaert and Palmer 2011:26). They consider “sect” to be misplaced and misleading in the study of Chinese religion for a number of reasons: (1) The term is a product of the Western religious experience and therefore cannot be applied to the Chinese religious landscape; (2) the Chinese “sect” has not broken off from any “church”; (3) the Chinese “sect” is not necessarily in a state of tension with its social environment; and (4) the term is freighted with negative stereotypes associated with sectarian groups in Europe and the United States such as authoritarianism, restriction of individual rights, economic exploitation, and “brainwashing” of sect members (ter Haar 1999:11–12; Ownby 2008a; Goossaert and Palmer 2011:26–27).

Drawing on Prasenjit Duara’s famous formulation of so-called “redemptive societies,” some scholars have adopted this allegedly new, more precise, and value-free terminology in order to replace the unpopular “sectarian” label. Only a few authors, however, consider “redemptive societies” an analytical category applicable to larger segments of Chinese history (Ownby 2008b:25–28; Dalby 2015:249); many other researchers in the field object to this interpretation and follow Duara in narrowing its meaning to a particular “wave of religious movements which appeared in Republican China” (Palmer 2011:42; Palmer, Katz, and Wang 2011a:1). A close reading of a few writings on the subject, however, reveals that most authors do not clearly distinguish between the two usages. For instance, scholars who claim to designate only the Republican-era phenomenon also apply the term “redemptive society” to religious groups that emerged in post–World War II Taiwan (Goossaert and Palmer 2011:294) and to Qing-period groups such as Zhenkongjiao 真空教 (Pure Emptiness Sect, nineteenth century), Zailijiao 在理教 (Li Sect, seventeenth century) and Xiantiandao 先天道 (Sect of Former Heaven, seventeenth century) (Goossaert and Palmer 2011:98, 209; Palmer 2011:42; Palmer, Katz, and Wang 2011b:4–5). Furthermore, the term is applied basically to all sectarian groups that were banned in the early People’s Republic as “reactionary secret societies” (*fandong huidaomen* 反動會道門) (Palmer and Liu 2012:163), although many of these secret societies have not been individually categorized as “redemptive societies” by these authors. This imprecision is exacerbated by some authors who discuss Taiwanese phoenix halls and Falun Gong as being situated “somewhere along the blurry edges of the redemptive societies *category*” (Palmer, Katz, and Wang 2011b:4, my emphasis). The persistent inconsistency of *calling* the redemptive societies a “historical phenomenon” but simultaneously *using* them as an analytical category may also result from the imprecise definition of

the so-called “wave” of these movements in Republican China; there appears to be an implicit scholarly assumption that redemptive societies are limited to those religious groups that are understood to have successfully adapted to “modernization.” This reading, however, misses so many less well-known traditions and smaller groups that may not fit the modernization narrative so neatly.

Proposing yet another nomenclature and borrowing from anthropologist Myron Cohen, David Palmer prefers to use the term “salvationist religion,” which denotes voluntary participation, a focus on individual salvation regardless of social status, a foundational charismatic leader, a millenarian eschatology, moral teachings, an outward orientation towards evangelism and philanthropy, and an embodied experience through healing or body cultivation (Palmer 2011:43–44; Goossaert and Palmer 2011:27). However, many if not most of these distinctive features can be found in ordinary popular nonmonastic Buddhist communities as early as medieval China (Seiwert 2003a:154–157, also ter Haar 2001) that are not the types of religion Palmer or I have in mind. Furthermore, on a semantic level the wording is tremendously unfortunate. First, it wrongly implies that without exception all adherents of “salvationist religions” are intrinsically and exclusively focused on their individual salvation—a claim that cannot be verified empirically (in the same way that we cannot verify whether all believers are not concerned with their individual salvation). Although one could easily show the prominence of “salvational” symbols and representations in the teachings of these religious groups, one has to admit that this observation can equally be made in many other Chinese religious traditions (e.g., Buddhism or Chinese Manichaeism) as well. However, Palmer does not mention these two traditions as examples of his category of “salvationist religion”—he merely states that some “salvationist religions” may *“draw on a single tradition, such as Buddhism or Daoism”* (Palmer 2011:45, 59, my emphasis) but which is totally different from postulating that Buddhism and Daoism in fact *are* “salvationist religions.” This leads to my second objection to the term, because precisely this emphasis on “salvation” implies that other religious traditions may not be concerned with individual salvation at all, or to a much lesser extent (a similar point is raised by Katz [2014:184n72]). This critique follows the logic of the law of identity, which tells us that if “salvationist” is the distinguishing characteristic of one type of religion, it cannot apply to other types of religion at the same time. This interpretation would be a serious distortion of China’s religious landscape and would exclude Buddhism and Daoism from the picture.

Although recognizing its inherent problems, yet other studies prefer “new religious group” as a provisional solution to the terminological debate (ter Haar 2013). The term may be utilized to denote “a broad variety of groups or loose networks that have come into being since the late sixteenth century and have

since been persecuted and stigmatized to varying degrees" (ter Haar 2013:243). As other scholars have previously mentioned, however, the question remains what to label as "new" and why (Palmer, Katz, and Wang 2011a:5–6). What might justify a terminological distinction between religious groups that emerged since the sixteenth century and those that came into being during earlier periods but are otherwise very similar? Furthermore, the definition cited above appears to be too loose to be of valid analytical value. It sounds to me like a catch-all term for whatever forms of religious articulation emerged during the past four hundred years, even though they may not have very much in common.

This brief sketch of the inappropriateness of three recently postulated alternatives to the category of "sectarianism" demonstrates the need for a fresh approach to the problem of how to define sects, both in the Chinese context and in general. The present article will follow a tripartite plan. In the first section, I will discuss the shortcomings and misconceptions of previous research on Chinese sects. I will separately address four premises about the nature of sects that are (or were) prevalent in both Western and East Asian academia. According to most studies, Chinese sects can be characterized as (1) deviant and nonconformist; (2) secret and socially exclusive; (3) syncretic; and (4) under lay leadership. Particularly the first three features were mentioned most frequently as *conditiones sine qua non* of Chinese sects up to the end of the twentieth century (cf. Harrel and Perry 1982:285–293). Whereas the first and second assumptions have been discarded in most Western scholarship, they are still omnipresent in the scholarly literature in mainland China and to some extent in Taiwan and Japan (Ownby 2001; Qin and Tan 2003; Meng 2009:23–30 and passim). Therefore, I think it is important to incorporate them in my discussion. In section two, I will address the shortcomings of the recently introduced concept of "redemptive societies," and in particular its assumed discontinuity between premodern "sects" and modern "redemptive societies." In the last part of the article, I will use the insights that I have drawn from the previous discussions in order to develop a sociological understanding of "sectarianism" that claims to be applicable to all of Chinese history—and to all of human history, for that matter.

Building on the classical theories of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu, I pursue the goal of social scientific theorizing, which aims at understanding human behavior across variations in space, time, and cultural background (cf. Yang 2012:10–11). I prefer a purely sociological approach to sectarianism because an *a priori* emphasis on certain aspects of religious teachings and practices (such as millenarian eschatology, healing, body cultivation; cf. Palmer 2011:44) may result in ignoring *similar but different* phenomena as well as *religious change* (in teachings and practices), both of which could have an impact on the definition. By looking for certain symbols, teachings, and

practices in the religious landscape, I will find only those religious groups that already fit my definition. Thus, a definition of sectarianism on the grounds of religious beliefs and practices becomes somewhat circular. Furthermore, such a definition would lead to the exclusion of religious groups that otherwise could be classified as a “sect.” An example may be provided by the Sect of the Most Supreme (Taishangmen 太上門) and the Heaven and Earth Sect (Tiandimen 天地門) discovered by Thomas DuBois in rural Cang county 滄縣 in Hebei Province. Although historical writings of the sects are punctuated with millenarian symbols and references to healing practices, present-day sectarians show no sign of these teachings and practices (DuBois 2005:152–185). Does this mean, however, that these two groups are not “sects” anymore? Therefore, I prefer to postpone the characterization of teachings and practices to a later stage of the definition process.

I will illustrate my critiques as well as my own definition with empirical evidence wherever needed, but a detailed discussion of historical or ethnographic material is beyond the scope of this article.

## Sectarian Religion in China

### *Deviance and Nonconformism*

Although the assessment of Chinese sects as deviant and heterodox has been criticized before (for an overview, see Ownby 2008a:14–20), I think it is important to take up this crucial issue again. According to this interpretation of sectarianism, which used to be the prevalent reading for most twentieth-century scholarship, Chinese sects are characterized preferably by the alternative and to some extent deviant nature of their religious beliefs and practices. For this reason, they happened to be outlawed or at least stigmatized by the Chinese state—a connection most visibly portrayed in the title of de Groot's pioneering work *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China* (1903). In his footsteps, scholars made use of categories such as “dissenting sects” or “heterodoxy” to describe Chinese sectarianism (cf. Overmyer 1976; Seiwert 2003a; Liu and Shek 2004). Some authors even went as far as to presume conscious nonconformism and rebellious deviance against the carriers of the dominant religious beliefs and practices on the part of the sectarians. Browsing through the historical sources one actually will find countless references to persecutions of sectarian religions. Most often, accounts of crushed rebellions, the names of imprisoned sect leaders, and their perceived heretic religious beliefs are the only information we have about many sectarian traditions.

As Barend ter Haar (1999:9; cf. Ownby 2008a:20) has argued most convincingly, this is exactly what stands at the center of the problem. Almost without exception, most of the sources employed for the study of late imperial sectarianism originated from the pen of ministers, officeholders, and other political or cultural elites and are deeply pervaded by Confucian resentment toward and stereotypes about popular religion and sectarian movements. Moreover, these writings follow particular discursive rules that were intended to exclude certain topoi and noncanonical opinions about certain issues (such as popular or sectarian religion) in order to control the powers and dangers of discourses—and to limit access to them (cf. Foucault 2003; Seiwert 2003a:494–498). Additionally, memorials, petitions, and other archival materials from the Ming and Qing courts that account for the majority of these sources are products of official surveillance and persecution. Thus, the impression of conscious nonconformism generated by these sources can be attributed to a large extent to the nature and aim of these writings and their authors (ter Haar 1999:13ff, 44–63). The imaginary nature of most sectarian deviance and nonconformism becomes even more obvious if we take a look at other parts of “Greater China” with no tradition of persecuting sectarian religion as “heterodox sects” (*xiejiao* 邪教). Take the example of the aforementioned Sect of Former Heaven (Xiantiandao), which used to be one of the main targets of the antisectarian campaigns initiated by the Communist Party in the early 1950s (Hung 2011:173). In Hong Kong, however, it played a major and well-recognized role in the local Daoist Association, which was founded in 1961 and approved by the government in 1967 (You 2005:78).

But even if some descriptions of sects deployed in these official writings appear to be true, this does not necessarily tell us anything about sects in general (cf. ter Haar 2013:248). Rather, it is quite plausible that consciously deviant and nonconformist sects merely happened to be noticed more easily than sects that were not and therefore did not attract the attention of the state. Taiwanese scholar Lin Rongze’s counting, according to which 57 percent (74 percent including double entries) of the 196 sects mentioned in the archival documents of the Ming and Qing periods practiced vegetarianism, falls prey to this very methodological problem (Lin 2004a:190–199; 2004b:291–327). Strictly speaking, Lin merely shows that vegetarian sects appear more frequently in the sources than nonvegetarian ones. This observation, however, may be due to the fact that vegetarian sects were easier to spot because a strict vegetarian diet pursued by nonclerical agents (Buddhist monks, Daoist priests) served as a means for officials to distinguish sect members from ordinary villagers who usually did not refuse to eat meat per se. Furthermore, in some cases the “vegetarian diet” mentioned in the sources may not have been a conscious act of refusal

but a consequence of the sectarians' poverty (cf. Liang 2003:62–63). Therefore, the frequent naming of vegetarian sects does not necessarily support a conclusion about their qualitative and quantitative relevance.

The employment of nonofficial sources such as sectarian scriptures as well as fieldwork conducted in mainland China and Taiwan especially since the 1980s has done much to free the study of sectarianism from the dictum of *a priori* deviance (Jordan and Overmyer 1986; Dean 1998; ter Haar 1999; DuBois 2005). This should not, however, mislead us to advocate the equally false assumption that sectarian nonconformism is nothing but a construct without any trace of empirical evidence. Browsing through the “precious scrolls” literature of the Ming and Qing dynasties one will actually find a large number of alternative symbols and beliefs (Shek and Noguchi 2004:241; Shek 2004; a slightly contrary view is held by Overmyer 1984:356–377; 1987; 1999:206–215). Some of these alternatives were heavily criticized and even ridiculed by members of the official elite such as county magistrate Huang Yupian 黃育樞, author of the famous antisectarian tractate *A Detailed Refutation of Heresy* (*Poxie xiangbian* 破邪詳辯), published in 1834 (Sawada 1972:52–56, 61–62, 72; see also Scott 2005:50–65, 85–103). Although we cannot know for sure how certain religious symbols and scriptures have been interpreted in different times by different actors, the large number of apocalyptic prophecies and eschatologies documented in the historical sources are proof enough that some sectarian traditions have been consciously deviant and nonconformist (Suzuki 1982). Nevertheless, it might be that any form of resistance against the cosmic order of imperial rule had to be legitimized apocalyptically, as can be demonstrated in sectarian writings about cosmic revolution brought by saviors such as Li Hong 李弘 and Maitreya Buddha in the medieval period or the Eternal Mother (Wusheng Laomu 無生老母) and her envoys in the late imperial and modern era (Seiwert 2003a:80–93, 123–154; Broy 2012:301–305; DuBois 2005:146–148; cf. ter Haar 2013:247). It is thus quite reasonable to argue that resistance against the present ruler could possibly find a unique expression in sectarian contexts because sects had the power to mobilize people and they did not operate in the sight of the state's watchful eyes. This, however, does not necessarily mean that this sort of “political-revolutionary nonconformism” can be considered an inherent quality of sectarian religion in general. As I will discuss in the third part of this article, there is another but much less explicit and political form of religious nonconformism that can be observed in all sects. An explicit and religiously grounded motivation toward the establishment of an alternative order or what I have termed “political-revolutionary nonconformism” (borrowing from scholar of religion Christoph Kleine [2015:14–16]), however, cannot be considered a defining feature of sectarian religion in general.

### *Secrecy and Social Exclusivity*

The secrecy and social exclusivity of sectarianism is the second premise underlying the study of Chinese sectarian religion I want to discuss here. This premise is directly deduced from the assumption of an *a priori* “political-revolutionary nonconformism.” Whereas Western-language research has come to scrap it for reasons discussed above, some Chinese- and Japanese-language scholarship still reiterates this alleged feature of Chinese sects (ter Haar 1999: 2–11; Ownby 2001:144–150; Li and Liu 2012:56–57). This is not the place to discuss these understandings in great detail, but indeed the very categories employed in this scholarship such as *mimi zongjiao* 秘密宗教 (secret religion) and *mimi jiaomen* 秘密教門 (secret sect) paint a vivid picture of sectarianism as a hotbed of secrecy and social isolation similar to the category of “secret societies” (*mimi jieshe* 秘密結社). In a way they are quite similar to Western definitions of sects as “communities of conscious dissenters” that pervade sociological writings from classic scholars of the field such as Ernst Troeltsch to contemporary market theorists such as Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (Troeltsch 1919:362; Stark and Finke 2000:142–146). Although they are only rarely stated explicitly, most Chinese and Japanese scholarship shares the following three basic assumptions (cf. Qin and Tan 2003; Meng 2009; Li and Liu 2012:57):

1. Social tension: Sect members share beliefs and practices different from those of their social environment, for which they are regarded as more or less deviant and are thus in a certain degree of tension with this environment.
2. Secrecy: In order to avoid an increase of tension or even persecution, sect members are forced to sustain a certain degree of secrecy.
3. Social exclusivity: The promise of secrecy necessarily leads to the confinement of social interaction to other sect members and thus to a certain degree of exclusivity of social interaction.

As I have argued above, deviance and nonconformism cannot be considered a *conditio sine qua non* of sectarian religion. With the dictum of *a priori* deviance debunked, the second and third premises have to be challenged too. Likewise, recent scholarship has shown that on the level of local society many sectarian traditions show no trace of secrecy or social exclusivity but have been well integrated into their respective social environment (ter Haar 1999: 9–10; Jordan and Overmyer 1986; Dean 1998; DuBois 2005; Broy 2014). In his research in rural Hebei Province, Thomas DuBois found that sectarian traditions such as the aforementioned Taishangmen and Tiandimen are an important and well-recognized factor in local religious life. Far from being a restricted community of dissenters, they represent a “relative orthodoxy” which is so

powerful that even local cadres rely on this orthodoxy to exercise their own moral authority (DuBois 2005:185). Annual sectarian festivals have an important place in the religious calendar of the village and they are attended and financially supported in the same way ascriptive festivals are. Furthermore, sectarians freely offer religious services such as funeral rituals, healings, and exorcisms to fellow villagers. In cases of drought, they also perform prayers for rain (DuBois 2005:51–52, 61, 153). This has much to do with the fact that these sectarians are first and foremost farmers and fellow villagers. Most of them do not charge any fee for their religious services except the running costs. Therefore, they possess a high reputation and moral profile among their fellow villagers (DuBois 2005:183–184).

Following in the footsteps of the eminent scholar Li Shiyu and thereby reexamining his field study of the Yellow Heaven Sect (Huangtiandao 黃天道) in Wanquan County 萬全縣 in 1940s rural Hebei Province (Li 1990:10–31), mainland scholar Cao Xinyu asserts that this sectarian tradition too has taken deep roots into local society since its founding in the late Ming. Textual evidence and locals' memories show that during the Republican period, inhabitants of altogether eighteen villages participated in two annual religious festivals celebrated by the head temple, Pufosi 普佛寺. Ordinary villagers came to the temple to pray for health or other commodities, to give thanks for petitions granted, and to donate money, grain, and oil to the temple. In cases of drought villagers were also found to direct prayers for rain to the founding patriarch Li Bin 李賓 (?–1562) (Cao 2013:20–21).

In my own research on the Vegetarian Sects (Zhajiao 齋教) in Taiwan, I also found them to work smoothly within their respective local societies (Broy 2012:333–340; 2014). First and foremost, their temples, known as “vegetarian halls,” are not hidden from the eyes of the public but rather located in ordinary residential areas and sometimes even in the vicinity of places of late imperial official worship. It would have been rather difficult to keep ritual events a secret anyhow since traditional residential areas are densely constructed and Zhajiao rituals usually include extensive chanting and singing. Furthermore, the founding and reconstruction of many vegetarian halls as well as the publishing of religious texts have gained support from local and official elites (Broy 2012:337). Although the scarcity of source material does not allow discussing pre-Japanese Taiwan in detail, the attendance of sectarian festivals and rituals by nonmembers is well documented since the early twentieth century. Members of the sect can even be hired by individuals to perform rituals the same way Daoist priests or Buddhist monks can be (Broy 2014:188–190). Members of the Sound of Mercy Temple (Ciyinsi 慈音寺) in Tanzi township 潭子鄉 in central Taiwan, for instance, participated in a ritual feast (*jiao* 醇)

dedicated to the reconstruction of the local community temple in 2008 (Broy 2014:189–190). Furthermore, some temples offer classes in calligraphy, *erhu* 二胡 (a traditional Chinese two-stringed instrument), and even English (field trip by the author, April 15, 2010). Yves Menheere was told that during Chinese New Year the Dehuatang 德化堂 (Hall of the Transformation by Virtue) in Tainan may sell about five hundred handwritten New Year's couplets (*duilian* 對聯) per day, which is in itself a powerful testimony to the sect's popularity (Menheere 2008:57). Furthermore, Zhaijiao communities are well known for their philanthropic work and welfare activities (Broy 2012:338–339).

Even though this observation may not account for all sectarian movements to the same extent, since some groups may have been less well integrated in certain areas and better in others, and yet other sects may have been much more morally alternative than others (cf. DuBois 2005:113–117; 187ff), the examples given above have demonstrated that sectarian religion may be considered a vibrant part of local life. In many cases it provided not only religious services, but also education, leisure, public spaces,<sup>1</sup> and philanthropic activities—very much like other religious sites such as community or guild temples (Katz 2014:2–7).

Nevertheless, we can distinguish two forms of “secrecy” or “social exclusivity” which appear to have been misinterpreted by previous research. The first one refers to the limitation of the transmission of religious expert knowledge, ritual formula, and other “esoteric” aspects to initiated members of the sect. This, however, is not different from the specialists of other religious traditions (monks, priests), who similarly do not teach everything to just anyone but only to the circle of those proven worthy by the standards of initiation or ordination. What is being labeled “secret knowledge” could therefore likewise be understood in terms of “religious expert knowledge.” The second form of secrecy results from the political label of “heterodoxy” assigned by the ruling elites, which made a certain amount of secrecy a matter of survival, particularly in times of increased attention by the imperial state.

### *Syncretism*

The third premise to be discussed in this paper is probably the most persistent one. According to this assumption, which is repeated throughout the academic world to this day, Chinese sectarian religion is to be understood as essentially “syncretic” (de Groot 1903:155–156; Yang 1970:230; Berling 1980:4–5, 9–10; Harrel

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<sup>1</sup> In one instance I watched as the forecourt of the Chaotiantang 朝天堂 (Audience with Heaven Hall) in Zhanghua city was transformed into a dancing arena by neighborhood women (field trip, November 22, 2010). As it appears, this is not an unusual usage of temple space in the Dragon Flower Sect; cf. Chen 1982, no. 101139.

and Perry 1982:286–287; Jordan and Overmyer 1986:8ff; Munro 1989; Ownby 2008a). Besides discussing several normative aspects of the term that I consider problematic, I will show that most accounts erroneously mistake “synthesis” for “syncretism.”

First of all, I consider the term itself a problem because it falsely implies that religions can be separated into “mixed” or “adulterated” religions on one side, and “pure” or “unadulterated” ones on the other. This judgmental interpretation grew out of a Christian fundamentalist perception of the world in which only “pure” religions are considered the “real” and therefore better ones (Stolz 2004:85–86). Besides its highly normative quality, this assessment ignores the common and rather trivial insight that mutual influencing or borrowing can be observed at any time and any place but the attribute “syncretic” usually is not applied to such exchanges. Second, this assessment equally implies that nonsectarian forms of religion are not syncretic or if so, to a much lesser degree. Walking through a random Chinese temple, however, one will easily encounter symbols, gods, scriptures, and practices that scholars are accustomed to classify as belonging to distinct religious traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and others but are nevertheless brought together in one place of worship.

How is this form of “mixing” supposed to be different from the sectarian one? Some scholars have argued that “sectarian syncretism” has to be understood as a conscious, rational, and visible act of harmonizing older elements in a new and coherent system that stands in sharp contrast to the supposedly random “mingle-mangle” that is deemed an essential feature of Chinese “popular religion” (Berling 1980:4–5, 9–10; Jordan and Overmyer 1986:9–10). According to my understanding, this distinction is problematic for the following three reasons: First, it falsely overemphasizes consciously fixed theologies written by a small number of “religious virtuosos” (borrowing Max Weber’s term) such as sectarian leaders, and at the same time neglects the religious worldviews of countless ordinary practitioners who did not leave any written account of their beliefs or practices. Even though many “popular religious” practitioners may not verbalize and theologize their thoughts in the same complex and stringent way as the “virtuosos,” this does not necessarily mean that they do not place the many different sets of symbols and practices around them in a meaningful context so that they become relevant to their lives (a point most powerfully demonstrated by Ginzburg’s famous study of the worldview of the sixteenth-century Italian miller Menocchio [1993]). Why should theological treatises written by a small number of “religious virtuosos” (Buddhist monks, Daoist priests, sectarian leaders) therefore be of higher value than the worldview of any other practitioner—which is what the distinction between “conscious and rational

harmonizing of older elements” and “random mingle-mangle” means? Although one may argue that written theologies have a much higher impact on the group than nontextualized beliefs, I think that most nonprofessional practitioners (and perhaps some if not many religious specialists too) get their religious knowledge not from *texts* but from *practice* (going to the temple, talking to people, listening to stories, recitations, and operas, representing and embodying religious and moral values in rituals, etc.). For instance, many members of Taiwan’s Dragon Flower Sect have rarely or never read theological treatises such as Patriarch Luo’s *Five Books in Six Volumes* (*Wubu liuce* 五部六冊) and other Buddhist scriptures that are analyzed by scholars in order to reconstruct the sect’s belief system (interview by Yves Menheere, Dehuatang, Tainan, April 16, 2006; interview by the author, Dehuatang, Tainan, September 6, 2010).<sup>2</sup> Second, the characterization of popular religious practice as a random “mingle-mangle” is a very normative statement and a strong disparagement that makes “popular religion” appear as the “religion of the ignorant masses”—a picture that has been perpetuated by imperial Chinese officials and literati for centuries.

Third, and following an illuminating article by scholar of religion Michael Pye, it is obvious that most previous accounts that understand “sectarian syncretism” as a conscious and visible act of harmonizing elements of different origin in a new and coherent system erroneously mistake “synthesis” for “syncretism” (Pye 1994:220–221). According to Pye and other scholars from the field of comparative religion, syncretism describes a dynamically open process that may tend to different resolutions such as assimilation (of weaker elements by a dominant tradition), dissolution (the reassertion of the separate identity or divergent meaning of disparate elements), or synthesis (which means the emergence of a new religion). Synthesis, therefore, represents the conclusion to such a process, which is thereby completed (Pye 1994:220–222). Applying this interpretation to the present object of study, one may understand that what happens in sectarian religion is not the dynamically open process of “syncretism” but the conclusion of this process in the form of a “synthesis.”

Sectarian teachings aim at bringing together disparate elements into a novel, specific, and relatively stable web of symbols and beliefs. However numerous, alternative, and meaningful these elements might be, they are always woven into a single narrative dominated by certain sets of symbols and beliefs. These dominant sets are generally considered the characteristic traits of a given tradition. Their dominance has, of course, nothing to do with any inherent qualities, but with the power of their carriers within the specific group—a network of power we may identify as the “clergy” (Bourdieu 2009:44–51, 59–63). Dominated

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Yves Menheere for sharing his interview transcripts with me.

by these sets, other symbols and beliefs are assigned particular positions within the entire web of symbols and beliefs. There may occur slight changes to the countless subplots, but the main storyline will follow the route prescribed by the dominant sets of symbols and beliefs. The dominated elements will not see their position within this web *fundamentally altered*—and if they will, it is only at the price of schism.

Let me illustrate this issue by taking the example of the Unity Sect (Yiguandao 一貫道), which is often thought of as prototypically “syncretic” since it not only incorporates the traditional Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism) into its web of symbols, it also fuses the “non-Chinese” religious figures of Muhammad and Jesus into its narrative of salvation. However novel, integrative, and transformative this “incorporation” might appear, it is still only a synthesis produced under the aegis of a dominant set of symbols and beliefs such as the Eternal Mother, the three cosmic cycles, or individual and collective salvation. Although Yiguandao’s image of Jesus Christ has improved over the course of time from insufficient savior to one of the sages sent by Heaven or even toward Jesus as a gateway to the sect’s message of salvation (Clart 2007), he will never obtain a more dominant position within the sect’s web of symbols. His position, meaning, and importance will never approach his status in any Christian community. Yiguandao followers will not pray to him the way Christians would do; he will not become a central object of worship, and his message will not dissolve the sect’s own message of salvation. Therefore, the position of the symbol of “Jesus Christ” remains dominated and relatively fixed within the sect’s web of symbols.

In summary, I see no alternative but to refute the premise of “sectarian syncretism” altogether. Rather, Chinese sects have to be considered “synthetic” in the sense that they consciously and visibly bring together disparate elements into a novel and coherent system that at the same time is integrated into a web of relatively stable positions assigned by a dominant set of symbols and beliefs.

### *Laity*

The last premise to be discussed here is the assessment of sects as congregations of religious laypeople (Chan 1953:168–185; Overmyer 1976:2; 1999:1; DuBois 2005:33; Palmer, Katz, and Wang 2011a:3). First of all, this *a priori* understanding would have to come to terms with the reverse fact that some popular Buddhist sects during the medieval period, as well as the early White Cloud and White Lotus sects during the Song Dynasty, were led by clerics of the established Buddhist tradition (Seiwert 2003a:106–123, 174–186). On a more theoretical level, this interpretation has to be refuted because it borrows emic categories and

naïvely adopts them into the analytical framework of scholarly terminology. It erroneously takes the actors' self-understanding at face value and accepts it as the sole criterion of etic categorization.

According to the conception developed in linguistics, a "metalanguage"—in our case academic terminology—is a language that is used to make statements *about* statements in other languages (the "object languages")—in our case the perspective of the actors (sectarians, officials, clerics of other religious traditions, etc.) (cf. Seiwert 1981:76–77). Of course, on the object level anyone who does not belong to any clergy of the established and officially recognized religious traditions (e.g., Buddhism and Daoism) *ipso facto* may be considered a lay follower. This, however, does not necessarily mean that these people have to be regarded as "laity" on the meta level. On the one hand, the view of sectarian laity is held by clerical agents of the established religious traditions as well as by the authors of most of our sources, who deemed all actors outside these religious traditions to be laypeople. This is quite comparable to the way how everyone not deployed by the official and state-sanctioned armed forces is considered a civilian both by members of the army and by official elites. On the other hand, this interpretation is further corroborated by the self-perception of sect members who, for instance, regard themselves as "lay Buddhists" (*zaijia Fojiao* 在家佛教)—as is the case with Taiwan's Vegetarian Sects (Seiwert 1985:196–197; Jones 1999:14–15).

Although I have already argued against this interpretation of the Vegetarian Sects as "lay Buddhist communities" in another article (Broy 2012:345–351), I want to summarize this particular argument in order to refute the premise of "sectarian laity" in general. It can be easily demonstrated that from the very start sects such as the Zhaijiao develop their own autonomous class of religious specialists who organize, bureaucratize, and monopolize worship, theology, and leadership in their particular group (for the Zhaijiao, see Broy 2012:345–351; 2014). Therefore, they are distinct from the actual lay adherents who are excluded from this monopoly (Weber 1985:275–285; Bourdieu 2009:45, 51, 73). I follow Bourdieu in understanding "clergy" (or "priest" in his Weberian terminology) to refer to all religious specialists who organize, bureaucratize, and monopolize worship, theology, and leadership in their particular group. Note that these *particular classes of religious specialists* are not to be confused with anyone who masters religious knowledge and practice and who could be labeled a "religious specialist." These "autonomous classes of religious specialists" (Bourdieu) are not the clerics of the established traditions such as Buddhist monks and Daoist priests. Although they make use of similar symbols and practices, this does not make them "lay

adherents" of these traditions. First and foremost, they do not act within the reach of the Buddhist or Daoist clerical monopoly but instead produce their own monopoly. The Buddhist or Daoist laity, on the contrary, accepts this clerical monopoly and is thereby deprived of its religious capital (Bourdieu 2009:45). Second, sectarian specialists usually add in a significant manner symbols, meanings, and practices that are not present in the referential traditions (e.g., Buddhism and Daoism).

To take again the example of the Dragon Flower Sect, one will easily detect numerous elements that one will not find in ordinary monastic Buddhism: a hierarchical system of nine ranks, the awarding of religious names with the affiliation character *pu* 普 (universal) to all initiated members, the veneration and chanting of Patriarch Luo's *Five Books*, or the Dharma Boat Ritual (*fachuanke* 法船科), which imitates cosmic creation and collective salvation (Broy 2014:114–125, 392–397, 412–417). It is obvious that the specialists of this sect are neither Buddhist clerics nor ordinary laypeople. Even though making use of countless Buddhist symbols, beliefs, and practices, they have created an autonomous community with a distinct set of symbols, beliefs, and practices. Furthermore, sectarians organize, bureaucratize, and monopolize worship, theology, and leadership in an autonomous way without interference from Buddhist monks or other clergies. Priestly functions are assigned according to the rank of each member and they are maintained against lay followers (who are termed "flower vegetarians," *huazhai* 花齋), noninitiates, and customers of ritual services. This observation is exactly what stands at the center of the clergy-laity binary (Lusby 2005; Bourdieu 2009:45, 51, 73).

Summarizing these considerations, one will realize the inappropriateness of the premise of "sectarian laity": to regard initiated members of the Vegetarian Sects as "Buddhist laypeople" would be comparable to categorizing members of Jehovah's Witnesses as mere "lay Christians" or addressing clerics of the Protestant churches as "lay Catholics." Therefore, why should the term "clergy" be reserved for the religious specialists of the established religions only? Why not speak of these people as alternative classes of religious specialists who make use of similar sets of symbols, beliefs, and practices but are institutionally autonomous from the religious organizations in question (such as the Buddhist clergy)? I consider equally unfortunate the application of terms such as "lay monks" or "lay clergy," following the perceived mixture of clerical and lay aspects of particular religious adherents (ter Haar 1999:43; Ji 2005). Methodologically speaking, this terminology is not appropriate either, because it dissolves the primary definitional differences between the concepts of "clergy" and "laity"—which are usually defined in opposite to each other (Lusby 2005)—and thereby makes them unusable.

## Redemptive Societies

As I have outlined in the introduction, the work of the well-known historian Prasenjit Duara has made a strong impact on the recent study of Chinese sectarianism. His 2001 article “The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism” is generally acknowledged to have introduced his notion of “redemptive societies” for the first time (Duara 2001:117–126, reprinted with slight changes in Duara 2003:89–129). Parts of his argument, however, were already formulated years earlier in his book chapter about the “Critics of Modernity in India and China” (Duara 1995:205–227) and in an article entitled “Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty” (Duara 1997), as well as in many other publications (Duara 2000; 2014:174–194). Before turning to my critique, I will briefly introduce Duara’s understanding as well as the application of his ideas in later scholarship.

In discussing alternative narratives of modern China, Duara identifies two forms of conservatism in the early twentieth century that questioned the total project of modernization and westernization. Both discourses saw Asia as the source of spiritual culture that might counter the destructiveness of Western civilization. According to his understanding, their critique of Western modernity was linked to a “redemptive *universalist* model” that drove conservative politicians and intellectuals of that time such as Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) to spread “Confucian moral and spiritual teachings in order to save the world” (Duara 1995:207–208). But whereas in 1995 Duara lamented that many sectarian communities were mere “nonmodern and nonelite popular religious movements” that were unable to articulate a counternarrative to the project of Western modernity because they lacked links to the modern intelligentsia (Duara 1995:222), already in 1997 he postulated a wave of modern religious movements in the first half of the twentieth century which he termed “redemptive societies” (Duara 1997:1033–1038).

According to Duara’s (2001:118) understanding, redemptive societies are rooted in the Chinese tradition of “sectarianism and syncretism.” On the one hand, they uphold sectarian beliefs and practices such as worship of the Eternal Mother and spirit-writing. On the other hand, they inherit the mission of universalism and moral self-transformation from late imperial syncretism (his term). It is their urge to “save the world from strife, greed, and warfare” and to present an “Eastern solution to the problems of the modern world” that distinguishes them from traditional philanthropy (Duara 1997:1033–1034; 2001:117–119; 2003:104). Redemptive societies traced a path directly from the individual level of self-cultivation to the universal level of worldly redemption (Duara 2001:121). A considerable cohort of the Republican-era intelligentsia participated in

redemptive societies, some of which have been labeled “neotraditionalist” and basically did not subscribe to the “radical modernizers’ goal to cast all of Chinese tradition into the trash heap of superstition” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011:92, 95–96; Katz 2014:140–146). According to Duara (1997:1034; 2001:120), the redemptive societies’ “modern orientation” is demonstrated by their organization according to charters and by-laws, and their sponsorship of philanthropic institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, and refugee centers, as well as their reliance on “dissemination and publicity” (schools, newspapers, libraries, lectures). Furthermore, Duara (1997:1033–1034; 2001:119) claims, these movements did not only aim to formulate a “religious universalism” by incorporating the non-Chinese religions of Islam and Christianity, some of them even tried to reconcile the scientific worldview of Western materialism with Eastern spirituality.

Following Duara, the role of religion and particularly “sectarian religion” in the making of a Chinese modernity has been rethought and reevaluated (Ownby 2008b; Goossaert and Palmer 2011:90–108; Palmer 2011). Recent research has not only approved many of Duara’s initial ideas but has also shown that the redemptive societies of Republican China resemble the great wave of universalist religious and spiritual movements that occurred in both East and West from the 1870s to the 1920s (Nedostup 2009:31; Palmer, Katz, and Wang 2011a:5–6). Furthermore, some scholars did not hesitate to seize this opportunity in order to abandon the allegedly erroneous and ill-fitting concept of “sectarianism” altogether (Ownby 2008b:23–27).

Duara’s insightful discovery of modern sectarian religion notwithstanding, both concept and terminology suffer from shortcomings that have not yet been taken fully into account. Above all, the term itself is neither as innovative nor as value-free as most scholars claim. First, the notion of “redemption” is deeply entrenched in Christian discourses (cf. Palmer 2011:42). Towards the end of World War II, for instance, American theologian Elton Trueblood called for the establishment of a “redemptive society” in order to counter the unprecedented suffering during the war and to heal the sicknesses of modern society. Although the society envisioned by him somewhat resembles Duara’s redemptive societies, Trueblood clearly states that mankind may be saved “not by just any faith” but by Christianity alone or, as he puts it, “civilization needs the church” (Trueblood 1944, chap. 5). Second, sociological writings from the second half of the twentieth century employ the somewhat similar term “redemptive social movements,” which has been used to denote movements that aim at fundamentally transforming individuals and their behavior (Aberle and Moore 1991:317, 320–321; Schwartz 1970, chap. 7; Wilson 1973:14–29). Although one might argue that this definition could apply to the universalist redemptive societies as well, redemptive social movements only have a “narrow and specific”

target audience and aim merely at a “complete transformation of *certain* people,” as is the case with Alcoholics Anonymous and similar temperance movements (Locher 2002:235, my emphasis).

Besides the fact that both issues have not been taken into account properly by Duara and company, there is an even more important account in the study of religion in China that has been omitted from the discussion so far. More than fifty years ago, pioneer of the field C. K. Yang developed the notion of “salvational movements” (Yang 1970:227–232), which according to his understanding denotes syncretic popular religious sects that came into being as an answer to any form of political or societal crisis. These movements’ basic claim was their ability “to bring universal deliverance to tortured humanity” (Yang 1970:231). It was not only Buddhism and Daoism, Yang claims, but also all the “major modern sects” that have “developed the idea of personal redemption through conversion and total redemption through universal salvation” (Yang 1970:232). Clearly, almost every trait of the allegedly novel redemptive societies category can be found in C. K. Yang’s classical sociological analysis of Chinese religion.

Besides these terminological issues, I see the primary fallacy of the redemptive societies concept in *implying* and *constructing* a discontinuity between premodern sects and modern redemptive societies. In the following paragraphs I will show that none of the allegedly “modern” features of redemptive societies is actually modern, in the sense that it came into being only under the influence of Western modernity. First of all, it is often implied that redemptive societies share characteristics such as voluntary membership, active proselytizing, philanthropic activities, and lay leadership (on the object level), as well as national or regional organizations, associations, and hierarchies (Palmer, Katz, and Wang 2011a:3; Palmer 2011:50–53), but all these features can be observed as early as one millennium earlier in Mao Ziyuan’s 茅子元 (1086/1088–1160) White Lotus movement during the late Song Dynasty (960–1279) (ter Haar 1999:28–43). During the Ming and Qing dynasties too, we know of many sectarian groups that fit this definition, such as the Pure Tea Sect (Qingcha menjiao 清茶門教) based in the famous sectarian village of Shifokou 石佛口 in Hebei Province. The Tea Sect created supra-regional networks that were used to maintain control over local temples, collect membership fees, and supervise ritual festivals (Naquin 1982:349; QDDA, 65). Besides instructing adherents in individual cultivation, the teachings also nurtured the hope for the salvation of all mankind in the coming cosmic era (QDDA, 28, 65, *passim*). Needless to say, the limitations deriving from premodern ways of transportation and communication prevented the evolution of earlier networks and associations from growing to the extent of Republican or later sectarian networks. Thus, late

imperial sectarian networks are not that different from the “redemptive societies” of the Republican period.

Additionally, the zeal to save the world from strife, war, and greed, too, is nowhere near a modern phenomenon. The urgent appeal to save the world by means of moral behavior has been a topic of countless Buddhist, Daoist, and popular religious texts for almost two thousand years (Overmyer 1999:188–195). Already the putatively late Han (25–220 CE) *Scripture on Great Peace* (*Taiping jing* 太平經) paints a vivid picture of a world left in environmental destruction, war, and pestilence. The text is cluttered with urgent calls to conform to the moral ways of the Dao if the world and mankind are to be saved (Hendrischke 2006:13–16, 60–61). If mankind will not comply with the scripture's appeals, the universe will be completely annihilated (Wang 1997:221). Accordingly, from the perspective of the *Taiping jing* the salvation of the world is most intimately connected to individual moral behavior—another observation that Duara (2001:21) described as a characteristic feature of modern redemptive societies.

Furthermore, I do not subscribe to Duara's (1995:222) distinction between “non-modern and non-elite” sects and putatively modern redemptive societies. First of all, many of the groups listed to illustrate the wide appeal of the redemptive societies category, such as Zailijiao, Tongshanshe 同善社 (Fellowship of Goodness), and Yiguandao, were founded in late imperial times. Whereas the Li Sect had been founded already in mid-seventeenth century Shandong (DuBois 2005:107–110), both Tongshanshe and Yiguandao originated as offshoots of the Sect of Former Heaven (Xiantiandao) and began to depart from their mother tradition already in the 1860s and 1870s (DuBois 2005:128–129; Wang 2010:122–123). Second, existing sects with a respectable history of several hundred years were also very well able to adapt to the setting of modern society. The Taiwanese branch of the Xiantiandao, for instance, was an active promoter of modern values and social engagement during the early Japanese colonial period (1895–1945). Its modernist impetus is most visible in the ministry of supreme sect leader Huang Yujie 黃玉階 (1850–1918), who not only served as head of Taipei's Dadaocheng district 大稻埕區 (today's Datong district 大同區) from 1909 until his death, where he was part of the modern reconstruction of the city. He was also engaged in fighting the old habits of female foot-binding and the wearing of the Manchurian queue by men, serving society by constructing hospitals and halfway houses, and lecturing the people in religious matters (Lin 1950:16–18). Already in 1912 he even drafted a “Constitution of the Religious Association of the Taiwanese” (*Bendaoren zongjiaohui guize* 本島人宗教會規則), intended to be a pan-Taiwanese and pan-religious association of Buddhists, Daoists, and Vegetarian Sects. Although this organization did not

come into existence during his lifetime, his initial ideas were not only highly influential in the founding of the pan-Buddhist South Seas Buddhist Association (*Nanying Fojiaohui* 南瀛佛教會) in 1922; they also proved to be an important factor in the establishing of the Bureau of Shrines and Temples (Jap. *shajika* 社寺課) by the colonial government in 1918 (Broy 2014:262–263; Lin 1986:233; Cai 1994:67–71).

At first sight, the universalist approach of incorporating Christianity and Islam into a synthesis of “Five Teachings” by some “redemptive societies” truly appears to be a modern phenomenon. Compared to the dominant sets of symbols, beliefs, and practices of many movements, however, Christian and Islamic symbols still only played a minor role. Furthermore, their rather late incorporation may result (1) from the relative marginality of both traditions until the dawn of the modern era; and (2) from the fact that interest in as well as the global relevance and power of Christianity and Islam was something that had to be discovered step by step in the course of China’s opening to the world. Whereas initially most sectarians assumed a rather hostile attitude towards Christian symbols and beliefs because they were understood as part of Western aggression during the nineteenth century (Jansen 2014), later sects developed a much more positive view. An early and well-known example is the mid-nineteenth century Heavenly Kingdom (*taiping tianguo* 太平天國) whose supreme leader and regent Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1814–1864) considered himself the brother of Jesus Christ and was deeply convinced that he was fulfilling a biblical salvation mission assigned by the “Heavenly Father” in order to redeem the Chinese people from the oppression of the Manchu emperors, just as the Hebrews had been delivered from enslavement by Egyptian pharaohs (Bohr 2010:382 and passim; cf. Bohr 2004). The integration of Christian symbols into Chinese sects in the course of China’s modernization may very well be understood as the largely neglected reciprocal of the process that brought Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, and other forms of “oriental wisdom” from the East to the West and finally resulted in the emergence of alternative religious movements in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe and America.

In addition, and taking the notion of “religious universalism” to its very roots, one has to admit that already during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) some sects were “universal” to the extent that they tried to incorporate a large proportion of the religious symbols, beliefs, and practices that were current at that time into their religious synthesis. Some of these symbols, beliefs, and practices were also non-Chinese in origin. The most prominent example in this respect is the dualistic religion of Manichaeism that originated in third-century CE Persia. After it entered China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), it took roots in the southeastern provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian during the Song

(960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) eras. Some religious groups of that time used Manichaean, Buddhist, and/or Daoist symbols side by side. A number of Manichaean texts even found their way into the Daoist and Buddhist canons (Lieu 1992:248–304). Other groups such as the Dragon Flower Sect originated in the former stronghold of Chinese Manichaeism in Zhejiang and Fujian and therefore perhaps do not emphasize the symbolism of light by mere accident—it is, after all, one of the most prominent religious symbols of Manichaeism (cf. Ma and Han 2004:295–297). Thus, from the viewpoint of the intellectual boundaries of their respective worlds, both premodern and modern sects could occupy the full extent of both intellectual worlds.

As I have tried to demonstrate, many characteristics generally considered defining features of “redemptive societies” can be observed in sectarian religion as early as the Later Han Dynasty. It is quite reasonable to argue that the “redemptive societies” appear to be distinct from their imperial predecessors only because they had to deal with an unprecedented and radical change that meant the disruption of more than two thousand years of imperial reign and traditional cosmology. Whereas imperial-era sectarians acted within a world that used to be content with its own company, their modern counterparts were inspired and rushed alike by modernity, westernization, industrialization, political secularization, ideas of progress and religious freedom, and the twentieth-century political campaigns that aimed to eradicate all forms of perceived “superstition” (Nedostup 2009; Poon 2011; Katz 2014; Broy, forthcoming). They were forced to come to terms with an unprecedented amount of alien symbols, worldviews, and notions. But if we adopt the redemptive societies’ modern appearance—originating in modern China, looking for answers to questions of modernity, and aiming to be modern religions in an institutional sense—as their defining feature, we consequently would have to regard all religions of modern China as distinct from their imperial predecessors because they responded to the challenges of the time in a very similar way by developing church-like institutions, organizations, publications, and so on. During the Republican era, Buddhism and Daoism alike were setting up regional and national organizations, rethinking and adapting their religious and philosophical traditions, considering Western science, and trying hard to prove their benefits for the moral construction of a modern society (Hammerstrom 2010; Goossaert and Palmer 2011:66–89; Broy, forthcoming). But if we accept that the two phenomena differ merely in degree, why do we have to create a new terminology for something that faces the pressures of modernity in the same way that all other religions in China experienced them? Furthermore, the remarkable development of many redemptive societies during the Republican period can also be attributed to the relaxation of political, legal, and social restrictions

that sectarian religion faced in imperial China. Thus, the emergence of large-scale “redemptive societies” is in a way comparable to the impressive Buddhist enterprises, such as Buddha’s Light Mountain (Foguangshan 佛光山) or the Compassion Relief Foundation (Ciji gongdehui 慈濟功德會), that became highly visible only after the lifting of martial law in late 1980s Taiwan (Madsen 2007). These developments, however, have not been discussed properly by the proponents of the “redemptive societies” narrative.

My critique could perhaps be perceived as doing an injustice to the concept of “redemptive societies” since no categorical statement has ever been made that earlier “sectarian groups” (my term) were not universalist, actively proselytizing, and nationally or regionally organized at all. However, the *explicit emphasis* on these and other characteristics plus the *explicit omission* of comparison to earlier forms of sectarianism particularly in these respects (universalism, proselytization, regional organization) do indeed let them appear as distinctly modern features.

### Towards a Reconsideration of “Sects”

Having discussed previous understandings of Chinese sectarianism and the concept of “redemptive societies,” I will now develop my redefinition of “sectarian religion.” Building on the work of sociologists Max Weber (1985:29–30, 721–726) and Pierre Bourdieu (1971; 2009), I will construct a sociological category that fits the religious field of China. My definition may partially resemble Daniel Overmyer’s assessment in his 1976 classic *Folk Buddhist Religion* but it deliberately refrains from understanding sects as offshoots from a “mother tradition” from which they try to emancipate themselves and whose putatively “original vitality” they aim to regain (Overmyer 1976:62–63; cf. Broy 2014:33).

First of all, and similar to Weber’s own interpretation, I do not think that the concept of “church” is to be regarded as a necessary counterpart to sectarianism (Weber 1985:721; Riesebrodt 2001:101, 113–115). Sects do not necessarily branch off from established religious organizations; in fact, one may easily imagine many constellations of sect emergence (cf. Seiwert 2003a:445–454). Chinese history shows that many sects were founded by people who did not belong to the clergy of an established tradition. Furthermore, a considerable number of sects branched off not from “churches” but from other sectarian traditions (such as the vast network of sects belonging to Xiantiandao; cf. Palmer, Katz, and Wang 2011b:5–6; Broy 2014:249–304). Of course, sects will relate themselves to established religious organizations in a certain way, but they will also do so in regard to other relevant religious traditions as well.

In addition, I particularly object to the application of the term “church” because it is intimately connected to the specific history and reality of Christianity, whereas the term “sect” has a comparatively well-established history as an analytical term in different academic disciplines. On the other hand, and contrary to most scholars (ter Haar 1999; Ownby 2008a), I understand the negative connotations of the term to be of certain epistemological value. In contrast to alternative terms proposed by some scholars, such as “religious movement” or “religious group” (ter Haar 1999:12–13), it is particularly the connotative baggage of the notion of “sect” that helps one to get an idea of how sectarian religion is being discussed in ruling discourses. This in turn paves the way for a comparative understanding of religious groups that emerge outside officially recognized and state-sanctioned religions (cf. Seiwert 2004). Although usually a strict opponent of the term, David Ownby (2008a:21) too acknowledges the benefits of this connotative baggage in the case of modern Taiwanese sectarianism for exactly the same reason—but why not in the case of premodern China?

According to my understanding, the analytical term “sect” may be used to denote (1) *voluntary religious communities* that (2) come into being and are maintained *outside officially recognized and/or state-sanctioned religious organizations* and (3) usually create a *novel but officially contested synthesis* of religious symbols, beliefs, and practices. I will illustrate this definition in the following paragraphs but for reasons of space I will confine myself to general descriptions and only a very few examples.

(1) *Sects are voluntary religious communities whose members made a deliberate decision to participate.* As I will demonstrate below, however, individual choice may be constrained by the power of social norms. Final admission into a sectarian group is usually granted after the individual has undergone an initiation ritual or “rite of passage.” This process manifests and reinforces the distinction between inside and outside. As pointed out above, however, this does not necessarily lead to any form of social exclusivism, which usually is the case only in the event of explicit “political-revolutionary nonconformism” and actual social tension. Furthermore and in contrast to classical studies of Chinese sectarianism such as C. K. Yang’s assessment of “sects,” sectarian membership does not inevitably entail leaving the reaches of ascriptive religious communities such as village, family, and lineage; nor does it entail rejecting their theologies per se. Whereas Yang characterized sects as having an “*independent* theology or cosmic interpretation of the universe” (Yang 1970:294–295, my emphasis), the example of Taiwan’s Vegetarian Sects demonstrates the incorporation of many popular gods and practices following the rationales of family and village communities (Menheere 2010; Broy 2012:357–360; 2014:169–171, 323). The Zhaijiao also exemplify other features of sectarian religions as

well: all full-fledged members must first undergo an initiation ceremony that may last for up to seven days, as in the case of the “passing the place of light” ritual (*guoguangchang* 過光場) of the Dragon Flower Sect (Broy 2014:192–212, 376–417).

Sectarian membership is restricted to those passing the requirements of the initiation ritual, which may be thought of as ensuring a certain standard of religious qualification. According to Weber, it is particularly this characterization of the sect as *ecclesia pura* or what he termed the “visible community of saints” that is to be regarded as one of the most prominent features of sectarian religion: people who want to join a sect have to be qualified by individual virtue; this requirement helps to produce a standard of religious qualification that surpasses that of a “church” (Weber 1985:722; cf. Troeltsch 1919:372–374). In regard to this characterization, the “Religious Experience Survey Taiwan” (REST) conducted in 2009 by Tsai Yen-zen and his colleagues produced remarkable results that may confirm Weber’s initial assumption (Tsai Yen-zen 2013). According to this survey, sectarian respondents (Yiguandao and the “Buddho-Daoists,” *fodao shuangxiu* 佛道雙修) are particularly inclined to report both *religious convictions* (e.g., “I believe in karma”) and *religious experiences* (e.g., experiences of Buddha, gods, and ancestors) (Huang 2013). In many cases, their affirmation rates far surpass those of other religious communities. The Buddho-Daoists’ affirmation of the experience of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, for instance, is higher (67.8 percent) than that of the Buddhists themselves (61.8 percent) (Tsai Yi-jia 2013:71). Regarding the experience of the Dao or *qi* 氣 (pneumatic power), to cite another example, Yiguandao respondents hold affirmation rates (60 and 41.4 percent respectively) that are not only above average (19.6 and 26.2 percent) but also far surpass the self-attested Daoists (23.5 and 25.3 percent), whom one would assume to be the keenest experiencers of the Dao (Kuo 2013:88).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, one may deduce that sectarian religion indeed appears to be a congregation of “religious virtuosos” from whose midst the “black sheep” have been removed (Weber 1985:722).

(2) Sectarian groups usually emerge around charismatic leaders who resemble the Weberian “prophet” (Seiwert 2003b; Bourdieu 2009). In defining sects as *religious communities that come into being and are maintained outside officially recognized religious organizations*, I follow Bourdieu’s (2009) understanding of the religious field as a field of contest between different providers of religious goods and services. According to Bourdieu (1971:319; 2009:63), sects

3 The endonym “Daoist” refers to those respondents who identify themselves as Daoists (Kuo 2013:78). REST survey data suggest, however, that many of these self-proclaimed Daoists do not in fact show a great affinity to “authentic Daoism” (*ibid.*, 89).

are to be understood as “new enterprises of salvation” (*nouvelles entreprises de salut*) whose entry into the market is strongly opposed and even prohibited by the monopoly religion.

Whereas Bourdieu’s theory is particularly modeled on the religiously monopolistic experience of modern France, pluralistic settings may comprise more than one “monopolistic” (i.e., officially recognized) religious organization. Since the religious field of both imperial and modern China is pluralistic but access to and exercise in it is heavily regulated, I follow Yang Fenggang’s understanding and refer to the limited number of officially recognized and/or state-sanctioned religious organizations in a pluralistic religious field as “oligopolistic religious organizations.” According to Yang, “religious oligopoly” refers to the dominance of a few select religions in a society (Yang 2012: 163–164). Since religious traditions can be dominant in many layers of society without political and legal backing, I prefer to define “oligopolistic” as a state of political and cultural power that is assigned to a limited number of religions through political and/or legal backing as well as through elite patronage. Some sects may be dominant in certain social and regional contexts but they still lack approval by the political and cultural elites on a larger level. For instance, it has been shown that the Zhaijiao exercised a certain amount of dominance as the prime representative of “Buddhism” when monastic Buddhism was weak in nineteenth-century Taiwan (Seiwert 1985:196–197) or in eighteenth-century rural Fujian. Nevertheless, and despite this dominance within the religious field, the Vegetarian Sects were still considered illegitimate participants by the state.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of late imperial China, for instance, the Three Teachings of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism may be considered oligopolistic religious organizations. To some extent, official cults or what have been labeled “ethicopolitical cults” (Yang 1970:144–179), such as cults of deified men (e.g., Guan Yu) or the veneration of the city god, can also be regarded as oligopolistic religious institutions. However, “oligopolistic” is a fluid concept that is intimately connected to the recognition of religious groups by the ruling elites. As the checkered history of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in early and medieval China demonstrates, oligopolistic status is not an intrinsic quality but has much to do with particular political and social contexts (Seiwert 2003a:15–164). One may argue that “oligopolistic religion” is merely a novel name for the old sociological concept of “church.” Whereas the heart of the

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<sup>4</sup> Official hostility against the Dragon Flower Sect and its offshoots can be observed in many official documents of the late Qing period; see, for instance, the memorial by Na Sutu 那蘇圖, dated Qianlong 4/4/1 [1739], in Ha 2001:25.

church-sect binary lies in the distinction of ascriptive and voluntarism in terms of membership (Weber 1985:721–722), however, the distinction between oligopolistic religion and sect is made in regard to their *power* (i.e., political, cultural, and social dominance) within the religious field. Thus, an oligopolistic religion can be equally voluntary in regard to its membership.

In contrast to Bourdieu's definition and for reasons stated in the introduction, I prefer "autonomous" to the rather vague characterization of "new" because it particularly points to the fact that sects come into being and are maintained *outside* oligopolistic religions. Of course, all sects were "new" at some moment in time. But is it really appropriate to apply this label to religious groups that have a respectable history of hundreds of years, such as the Mormons (founded in 1830) or the Dragon Flower Sect (founded in the sixteenth century)? Sects, however, may not be the only nonoligopolistic participants in the religious field. Thus, their characterization as "autonomous" does not mean that they are isolated from other religious traditions. Rather, sects interact and compete with established religions but also with countless local Buddhist, Daoist, and even Christian traditions or ritual specialists (ter Haar 2013:247; Bays 1988). Although this could be an excellent starting point for a discussion about how this approach could be integrated into the theoretical framework of the "religious marketplace" (cf. Stark and Finke 2000; Yang 2012; Klein and Meyer 2011), such an enterprise has to be postponed until future publications due to the limited space of the present article.

(3) *Sects produce a novel but officially contested synthesis of religious symbols, beliefs, and practices.* Since sectarian groups emerge as autonomous organizations beyond the reaches of oligopolistic dominance, they are not bound to their limits (or what may be termed "orthodoxies") in the same way. Therefore, sectarians may combine both established and alternative symbols, beliefs, and practices into a novel synthesis. These syntheses tend to be contested by oligopolistic religions as well as by political and cultural elites because their claim to possess an autonomous religious monopoly means a contestation of the established religions' monopoly (Bourdieu 2009:70). Although the sectarian process of synthesizing may be very different and creative, this does not mean that there are no restrictions at all. Sectarian specialists too share a particular aim of defending *their* religious monopoly by restricting access to the means of production, reproduction, and division of the "goods of salvation" (Weber's *Heilsgüter*) (Bourdieu 2009:63, 67).

Because sects (and other alternative participants in the religious field too) are not bound to the limits of oligopolistic "orthodoxies" and "orthopraxies" in the same way (cf. Sutton 2007:6–9), they are much more free to assemble different symbols, beliefs, and practices in a new way. Therefore, Hubert Seiwert

has suggested to conceptualize sects (and other alternative participants in the religious field) as “wild religions” that stand in contrast to “domesticated religions.” According to Seiwert, religions are expected to conform to the state’s notion of political, social, and cosmological order in order to gain state sanction and patronage. Through processes of *patronage* (i.e., the promotion of symbols, beliefs and practices that conform to these orders) and *repression* (i.e., the exclusion of those that do not), religions attain what I would call a “religiously oligopolistic status” but they simultaneously become domesticated (Seiwert 2014:18–23).

Acting beyond the confines imposed on and internalized by members of the domesticated religions, it is particularly “wild” religions that develop alternative symbols, beliefs, and practices. Therefore, one may conclude that *all* sects or “wild religions” share a certain but varying degree of religious nonconformism. As has been argued above, of course not all sects were “political-revolutionary nonconformist” in the sense that they explicitly and intentionally aimed at overthrowing the existing order. Furthermore, I have shown that many sects acted well within the bounds of their respective local societies. However, from the perspectives of both the state and oligopolistic/domesticated religions, one will see that sectarians are usually oriented towards an alternative order that calls certain aspects of the existing order in question (Kleine 2015:15). Recurring to the aforementioned case of the Vegetarian Sects, one may understand the sectarian refusal to accept monastic monopoly and their incorporation of non-oligopolistic elements (e.g., the symbol of the Eternal Mother, Patriarch Luo’s *Five Books*, the awarding of specific religious affiliation names, the performance of non-Buddhist rituals, etc.) as crucial indications of their religious nonconformism. Following the theoretical framework developed by scholar of religion Christoph Kleine, I understand religious nonconformism not necessarily as something that is always explicit and intentional. On the contrary, we may imagine different modes of implicit and unintended nonconformism (Kleine 2015:14–17). However, regardless of how implicit a particular nonconformism might be, it nevertheless tends to be recognized and criticized by state officials and religiously oligopolistic elites who aim at sustaining and defending the legitimacy of their political, social, and religious orders. Therefore, one may conclude that sects are not necessarily in tension with their respective cultural and social environment (which may in fact be receptive to their religious program; cf. Sutton 2007:9–11; DuBois 2005:106–185), but particularly with the state and oligopolistic/domesticated religions that try to defend their legitimacy against possible contenders (a similar point is raised by Palmer 2011:45–49).

Readers will note the absence of any references to the actual contents of sectarian religious teachings. Previous research has usually focused on the salvational or redemptive mission of sectarian religion. Although many sects

may have religious or codified *norms* of individual and/or collective salvation, I do not think that it is helpful to characterize *all* sects and thus *all sectarian practitioners* as *a priori* salvationist. Members might participate in sectarian religion for diverse reasons, among which the aim to find salvation is but one. Furthermore, in regard to the aim of universal redemption I see no great difference between oligopolistic religions such as Chinese Buddhism and sects (such as Zhaijiao).

### Varying Degrees of Voluntarism

Sociologically speaking, “sectarian religion” as it is defined here is generally considered a type of voluntary religious congregation where practitioners participate out of an individual and deliberate choice (Weber 1985:721–722; Troeltsch 1919:372–373; Overmyer 1976:62). This form of religion is usually contrasted with ascriptive religious communities such as territorially defined communities (villages, neighborhoods), lineages, and corporations (e.g., guilds and “common origin associations”), which often defined themselves around the worship of certain gods or ancestors (Goossaert and Palmer 2011:24–27; Duara 1988:119–132). In the following paragraphs I will show that sometimes the power of social norms may lead to the diminishing of the voluntary nature of membership and participation in sectarian religion and instead help to create a degree of compulsion that is in a way comparable—albeit not identical—to the obligatory nature of ascriptive communities. Social norms comprise the expectations directed towards individual action in a group or in society at large (Seiwert 2005:15). I argue that similar to ascriptive communities, the “free choice” of sectarian participants is constrained by the power of social norms—and particularly by the extent to which these norms are internalized by an individual.<sup>5</sup> Although membership in an ascriptive community is awarded by birth and not choice, I argue that, theoretically, declared members of ascriptive communities possess the very same choice to leave their community.

5 In arguing that the internalization of social norms is imposed on individuals through the process of the “social construction of reality,” I follow the classic text on the sociology of knowledge by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (2001). Internalization enforces the logic of preexisting social norms upon individuals and thus channels their perception of the world into prestructured patterns. On the contrary, one might argue, it is difficult to assess the extent to which social norms are actually internalized by an individual. Furthermore, the boundaries of what counts as “social norms” are difficult to draw. This is, however, not the place to discuss these issues as well as the more philosophically intriguing problem regarding the question of whether a preimposed constraint is really a constraint of the “free choice” of an individual (cf. Schmidt-Salomon 1995).

The fact that this appears to be the case much less often is, however, not a question of possibility but of probability and it may be attributed to the comparatively greater power of social expectations that are at work in ascriptive communities (and which derive their power from socialization and a much tighter “plausibility structure”, i.e. a social structure that supports and reinforces certain values and behavior; cf. Berger and Luckman 2001:165–170).

I will illustrate this important point by providing a few examples. First, I will discuss the case of a man who joined the Dragon Flower Sect and took the job of temple manager of the Audience with Heaven Hall (Chaotiantang 朝天堂) in Zhanghua city 彰化市, central Taiwan, out of his willingness to conform to the familial norm of “filial piety” (*xiao* 孝). The present temple manager, Lin Purong 林普榮, took over the task after his father, then the senior leader of Taiwan’s Longhuapai Lin Puxin 林普心, passed away in 2006. He explicitly stated to me that he started to become a vegetarian and to enter the sect only after his father’s health began to decline.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, he began to follow a vegetarian diet in order to accumulate merit which then could be used to prolong his father’s life. This practice is well documented throughout late imperial China (Lin 2004b:226–227; Miles 1902:1) and is most probably connected to the popular Confucian ethic of filial piety. Whereas this practice is usually limited to three years, however, Lin Purong did not stop following a vegetarian diet after this period but rather joined his father’s sect and took his place as temple manager. As it appears, the social power of moral expectations directed at Lin Purong was so great that he had no alternative but to become a member of the Longhua sect. Yves Menheere reports similar findings from the fellow Longhua Temple in Tainan, Hall of the Transformation by Virtue (Dehuatang). According to his fieldwork, twenty-three of the forty-nine members registered as of 2008 had joined the sect during a campaign launched in 1993. Most of them had no formal affiliation with the temple previously but rather followed their deceased parents, who had been dedicated and long-term members during their lifetime (Menheere 2008:51–52). Both cases exemplify that the decision to become a member of the sect may have had much to do with the forces of social norms (filial piety) and expectations. The obvious power of such norms may explain at least partially the existence of so many sect lineages and hereditary temples.<sup>7</sup>

In other settings such as overseas Chinese communities in mid-twentieth-century Singapore, anthropologist Marjorie Topley (1954:61; 1963) found that

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<sup>6</sup> Field trip to the Chaotiantang, informal interview, August 1 and 4, 2010. For further information on the Chaotiantang, see Broy 2014.

<sup>7</sup> On sect families and hereditary temples among Taiwan’s Zhaijiao, see Zhang 1999:215–222; on other sect families, see Naquin 1982.

whole communities of women stemming from the same native place or belonging to the same worker's association joined certain "vegetarian halls" (*zhaitang* 齋堂), of which a large number belonged to the Sect of Former Heaven (Xiantiandao). Some of their female members had already been handed over to these temples during their childhood because of their family's poverty or a bad horoscope. Only at the age of sixteen were they given the choice to stay in the temple or to leave it (Topley 1954:62). Although it appears that these young women were given the chance to leave the vegetarian community, this had little to do with the question of whether to join a sectarian temple in the first place.

In a very similar way, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century eastern China many boatmen and workers on the Grand Canal were found to be members of the Luo Sect (Luojiao 羅教), which traced its origins to the famous sectarian teacher commonly known as Patriarch Luo 羅祖 (probably 1443–1527) (Kelley 1982; 1986). This strand of the Luo teaching is particularly well known because it is said to have developed into the infamous and mafia-like Green Gang (Qingbang 青幫) during the nineteenth century (Kelley 1986; Ma and Han 2004:189–260; Martin 1996:9–18). The sectarian temples provided food and shelter during the winter off-season and burial grounds, as well as other social services for boatmen who made their living far away from home. It appears that already in the eighteenth century, participation in the Luo Sect became somehow compulsory for those working on the Grand Canal. Although not all workers lodging in the temples were actually members of the sect, certain social expectations directed to them as a consequence of their common occupation gained currency over the course of time. Eventually the sect was transformed into a guild-like association with obvious ascriptive quality (Kelley 1986:155–157, 304–311). In 1825, for instance, officials reported to the throne that many if not most workers contributed financially to the sect.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Daoguang 5/6/*dingsi* 丁巳, *Xuanzong shilu* 宣宗實錄 (Veritable Records of Emperor Xuanzong [rg. 1821–1850]), j. 83, in *Qing shilu* 清實錄 (Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty), vol. 34, 338a08–13. The passage in question (各船水手聯名資助) is rather imprecise. Daniel Overmyer (1978:296) translates "The sailors on each boat unite to assist each other." I do, however, object to his translation for the following reasons: first, the expression *lianming zizhu* 聯名資助 literally means "to sign jointly and support financially"; second, the passage is embedded in a description of the sectarian networks among the boatmen. Therefore, I suspect that this passage rather points to the fact that all boatmen supported the sect financially and for that reason they had their names registered in order to prove their contribution. David Kelley's (1986:194–195) interpretation of *lianming zizhu* as "mutual-aid covenants" points in a similar direction. I do not, however, subscribe to his view that these covenants were pledged by sect members only.

Summarizing these considerations, it appears that to join a sect was socially expected or necessary in certain settings, particularly among overseas Chinese and migrant workers far away from their native social structures. The social forces behind these and related social expectations are quite similar—albeit not as powerful—to the ones that drive people not to leave ascriptive communities.

### Prospect: Sectarian Religion, Secular Societies, and Polypolistic Religious Markets

The present article has constructed a sociological category of “sectarian religion” that is applicable to monopolistic and oligopolistic religious fields. I have not yet discussed, however, how this approach would work in pluralistic religious fields and secular societies. Since this article would far exceed its proper length if I were to take this question into serious consideration, a brief prospect must suffice for the moment.

Hubert Seiwert (2015) has shown how and why some religious organizations, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, have been subject to discrimination in otherwise secular societies such as Germany. According to his interpretation, the legitimacy of modern democracies is grounded in the collective recognition of certain metaphysical dogmas as well. Therefore, to become a recognized and legally sanctioned participant within the religious field (i.e., an “oligopolistic religion”), a religion has to conform to the existing order/dogmas. Similar to the processes described above, this phenomenon can equally be interpreted as “domestication.” Accordingly, religious organizations that do not conform to the existing order and its dogmas can be considered “sects” (i.e., “wild religions”) as outlined above.

In addition, I want to briefly touch on the issue of how the present approach can be applied in “pluralistic religious fields” such as the Republic of China on Taiwan. In its 2013 Yearbook, the Ministry of Interior lists a total of twenty-six officially recognized religious traditions.<sup>9</sup> This list could easily be supplemented with many other less well-established and recognized groups. Although this situation can hardly be interpreted as an “oligopolistic market” such as that of mainland China, with only five officially recognized religious traditions (Yang 2012:159–179), I equally object to the conceptualization of a religiously pluralistic situation as a pure competition between equals. Following neoclassical

<sup>9</sup> <http://sowf.moi.gov.tw/stat/year/elists.htm>, section 1.03: 各宗教教務概況 General Conditions of Religions (accessed April 24, 2015).

economist Edward Hastings Chamberlin (1899–1967) and others (Chamberlin 1933), I understand the religious field of Taiwan as a “polypolistic religious field” in the sense that this field can be characterized by *imperfect competition between unequal participants* among which access to the market (e.g., through widespread prejudices about certain religions and their “heretical” and false teachings, the uneven distribution of all participants throughout the country, and so on), various forms of (political, financial, human, religious, etc.) resources, and power are distributed unequally.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, we can also detect elements of the aforementioned system of oligopolistic/domesticated (i.e., more powerful and officially recognized) and sectarian/wild (i.e., less powerful and perhaps negatively sanctioned by the state) religions in such a polypolistic setting. These preliminary considerations, however, have to suffice for the moment and will be taken up in a future publication.

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<sup>10</sup> I cannot address here the question of how this approach could be integrated into Adam Chau's concept of a “religious polytropy” (2011:556–560; cf. Broy 2014:327–328).

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