

## CHAPTER 9

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### *Their Separate Ways: Cults and Sects*

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We now turn our attention to a significant form of religious life not comprehended under ancestor worship, community religion, the well-defined Three Ways, or religion of the State. We refer to cults, centered on charismatic leaders and often filled with messianic expectations. These were usually low-profile groups in the Chinese religion, but on occasion they developed into widespread sectarian movements. Such cults and sects were considered by the Chinese State as at best "unorthodox," and presumptively as "heterodox." But it has become increasingly apparent to scholars that large numbers of Chinese throughout history were drawn into such cultic groups. Even the Literati would sometimes become active in them, particularly those devoted to receiving communications from the gods through "spirit-writing" on the planchette. In this chapter, we shall briefly characterize the cults and sects.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF LAY RELIGION

The number of persons of pious inclinations who were able to "leave the home" and take up the career of professional religious was, of course, always small. For a very much larger number, the satisfaction of religious needs was a matter of devotions practiced privately in the home or in the company of other like-minded householders. (The reader will keep in mind that we are now speaking of a level of religious concern beyond that of customary participation in communal activities.) Because the organized religions with which the Chinese were familiar were Buddhism and Taoism, those furnished the model for "nonprofessional" religion. The religion of devout laypeople thus tended to be a mixture in some proportion of Buddhist and Taoist beliefs and practices, of the universal ancestral cult, and of the persisting, age-old traditions of the peasantry. Literati influences were present in this mixture also, spread abroad by the ubiquitous

storyteller, the popular drama, morality tracts, and a rich repertoire of proverbial sayings.

Because we are already somewhat familiar with these ingredients, it will not be necessary to spell out in detail the characteristics of lay religion. It is obvious that the degree of devotion would vary from individual to individual. Some, particularly among the old, perhaps, who had both fewer social responsibilities and more personal concern because of the imminence of death, would go as far as to retire completely from normal life and spend most of their time at their devotions, praying, chanting sacred texts, burning incense before their favored icons, and, in general, cultivating a sanctity calculated to win salvation in the coming existence. Others, with less leisure and more worldly responsibilities, would try to accumulate merit through good deeds and economic support of Buddhist and Taoist institutions. Vegetarianism was commonly practiced in the belief that all life was sacred and the killing of animals a cause of "bad karma." Many laypeople regularly performed some variety of yogic meditation, whether for religious advancement or simply as a measure for promoting personal health and longevity.

## RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES AND SECTS

Laypeople frequently banded together in religious societies, which would sometimes become identifiable as sects. Societies might have as their objective some limited purpose such as accumulating a joint fund to support group pilgrimages to famous holy mountains or to give special service in a temple of choice. Sometimes societies would be cultish in nature, centering about the worship of a particular deity or growing up around the charismatic personality of some self-proclaimed seer or healer. Most such cults were local and would have remained quite unknown in the historical record. Some were recorded by officials because they were considered to be dangerous to the State. Sects of this sort were usually persecuted ruthlessly.

In the Chinese polity there were few institutions standing between the State and the lineage with its families. Those that did exist, such as local communities, guilds, and Buddhist and Taoist monasteries, functioned only with permission from the State and were always responsible to the State. The imperial government interfered as little as possible with existing institutions, but institutional leaders were answerable for the behavior of members, and the government always held in reserve its absolute authority to intervene as it might see fit.

Any group of persons coming together privately to hold meetings, to celebrate rites and ceremonies, and to promote beliefs and practices not sanctioned by recognized precedent was automatically suspect in the eyes of the State. Such sub-rosa organizations were guilty of heresy in the official view, no matter how innocuous, or even benevolent, their beliefs and practices actually were. Even worse than heresy was the presumption that the true motives of an extralegal group were revolutionary. It was a fact, in this vast country, poorly connected by arteries of transportation, where

premodern communications were measured in days, weeks, or even months, that a revolutionary movement could develop to dangerous proportions before the government could suppress it—or even learn of its existence. This suspicious and sometimes even paranoid attitude on the part of government was responsible for the secrecy of many groups. That government's attitude was not entirely unjustified can be seen from historical cases such as the so-called Yellow Turban insurrection of late Han, the activities of the White Lotus Society during Ming and Ch'ing times, and the devastating Taiping Revolution of the mid-nineteenth century. These were all cases where purely religious concerns eventuated in insurrectionist political aims. Religion cannot be discounted as a strong factor in Chinese secular history.

A point of special note in this regard is the intimate connection, in the Chinese tradition, between natural calamities, the sufferings of the people, and the holding of the imperial sovereignty. Major disasters called into question the Mandate of Heaven and gave plausibility to the claims of messianic leaders that Heaven was about to dethrone the ruling house and institute the reign of peace and prosperity so ardently hoped for by the people. Texts were found and produced that were interpreted as foretelling such events, even to the arrival of the Millennium and the concomitant descent of a Buddha. It was Buddhism, in particular, that seems to have provided such popular, millenarian ideas, and in evaluating the nature of Chinese Buddhism, we should take note of this aspect. Such popular, sectarian forms of Buddhism were, of course, aberrant from the "orthodox" Buddhist tradition of the Saṅgha, but they were nevertheless genuinely Buddhist in inspiration and iconography.

Despite the secrecy of most unorthodox groups and the frequent connection of religion and political rebellion, we should also note the interesting fact that some religious sects were bold enough to operate openly and to propagandize their beliefs both orally and in writing. In this lies one feature that distinguishes religious sects from the well-known secret societies of China, whose activities were antidynastic and, in modern times, often criminal. It is worth remarking, in other words, that religious sects and secret societies had different motivations, at least when they started out.<sup>1</sup>

The religious teachings of societies and sects would range from lay devotees' vows of Buddhism or Taoism to the most novel and ludicrous rantings of self-proclaimed prophets. The range is comparable to that familiar in the West, where the layperson may belong to an old, established, conservative denomination; may be caught up in the emotionalism of a fundamentalist revival; or may be drawn to the peculiar doctrines of an extremist cult. Whatever the case, the widespread occurrence of cults and sects is ample testimony to the universal longing for material and spiritual salvation shared by the Chinese people.

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# Chinese Religion

## *An Introduction*

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**Laurence G. Thompson**

*Professor Emeritus  
East Asian Languages and Cultures  
University of Southern California*



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