The Birth of a New Religion

The Development of The Confucian Congregation in Southeast China

CHEN Na, FAN Lizhu and CHEN Jinguo

---

1 The authors want to express their special thanks to Dr. James Whitehead and Dr. Sébastien Billioud for their help with an earlier version of this paper. This paper is a revised and much enlarged version of an earlier paper "Confucianism as an 'Organized Religion': An Ethnographic Study of the Confucian Congregation" coauthored by Na Chen and Lizhu Fan and published in Nova Religio, Vol 21, No 1 (August 2017), 5-30.
I. Introduction

This chapter is an ethnographic report on an emerging religious group in China. It focuses on a specific case of Confucian revival at the grassroots level, the newly established Confucian Congregation in Mintong County\(^2\) Fujian Province.

The revival of Confucianism has been a general and gradual trend since the post-Mao reform started in December 1978. During the 1980s, many people resumed the practice of traditional customs.\(^3\) In academia, scholars began a cautious

\(^2\) The name of the county is fictitious. In this paper, most proper names of places as well as names of our informants are fictitious in order to protect the identity of the informants.

\(^3\) Here “traditional customs” mainly refer to the customs of the Confucian tradition. Though both Daoism and Buddhism are important elements of traditional Chinese culture, it is generally accepted that Confucianism is the core of it. This is controversial and John Makeham has analyzed
reevaluation of Confucian tradition. But the prevailing trend remained anti-Confucianism, in the vein of the dominant social ideology that prevailed since the New Culture Movement in the early 20th century. The 1990s saw the rise of an increasingly positive attitude toward Confucian tradition, with more instances of its revival coming to light. Yet the revival of Confucianism did not emerge as a broad societal trend until the 21st century. Promoted personally by the top leaders of the party state, especially President Xi Jinping, Confucianism is now understood as an essential component of the Chinese cultural heritage. For the first time in over one hundred years, Confucianism seems to gain a solid positive position in China.

Before turning to a detailed discussion, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of Confucianism. According to Tu Wei-ming, “Confucianism, a generic Western term that has no counterpart in Chinese, is a worldview, a social ethic, a political ideology, a scholarly tradition, and a way of life.” In this study we take Confucianism as a term that covers at least three concepts related to Confucian tradition in Chinese—ruxue (儒学), rujia (儒家), and rujiao (儒教). Roughly speaking, Ruxue—which literally means “Confucian studies”—is chiefly used to refer to Confucianism as a philosophy or academic field. Rujia, which literally means the “Confucian school of thought,” often refers to the sociopolitical theory that supports the traditional imperial system; this term is also used to designate “institutional Confucianism”; Rujiao—which literally means “Confucian teaching”—refers to the education and cultivation aspects of Confucian tradition and is often used to identify the religious dimension of Confucianism (or “diffused religion” as identified by C. K. Yang). For thousands of years, these three

the importance of this kind of narrative in Confucian circles. See Makeham, John. Lost Soul: “Confucianism” in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). In this paper, when we talk about the Chinese tradition, we are mainly talking about the Confucian tradition.


5 To a great extent, the documentary movie The River Elegy (heshang 河殤) released in 1988 was the epitome of an anti-tradition trend and marked a turning point of the general trend of attitude with regard to tradition.

6 The 1990s saw the rapid development of academic studies of Confucianism and other traditional Chinese learning. As a key indicator, a range of academic journals were regularly published in the area of Confucian studies and traditional Chinese learning. For a list of these journals, see Note 7 on p. 61 in Makeham (2008).

7 Hu Jintao, the former Chinese President (2003-2013), initiated in 2004 the proposition to build a “harmonious socialist society” in China, thus vaguely alluding to the Confucian value of harmony. Xi Jinping who succeeded Hu as the Chinese President proposed at many public occasions to promote Chinese cultural heritage of which Confucianism is an important part.


10 This is a very rough conceptualization of Ruxue, Rujia and Rujiao, which is of significance in the current study as the development of the Confucian Congregation involves all the three aspects of
aspects were organically bound together as the dominant Chinese tradition, which in the late 16th century in the west came to be identified by the general term *Confucianism*. With the collapse of the imperial system in 1911, institutional Confucianism lost its political support, but the related values and ideas remained. Confucianism was harshly criticized as a feudalist residue and suffered “death sentences” by advocates of the New Culture Movement and later during the Communist revolution. Nevertheless, it is our contention that Confucianism remained as the core of China’s cultural tradition and has been functioning, consciously or unconsciously, positively or negatively, throughout the history of modern China. In our discussion of the revival of Confucianism, it is to this renaissance of Confucian tradition that we refer: the rediscovery—under the influence of both a positive and a critical attitude—of Confucianism as China’s cultural heritage.

To this point, most studies of the revival of Confucianism in China focus on *ruxue* and *rujiao*. In the research literature on *rujiao*, there are case studies on a range of topics. Some examine the revival of folk religion, often tracking the overlap of the Confucian tradition with Daoism. Other investigations trace the revival of family-clan tradition and ancestor worship; in these studies Confucianism is most often considered an expression of culture rather than religion. There are also studies focusing on ritualistic aspects of Confucianism, such as those practiced at the Temple of Confucius.

Confucianism. This trichotomy definition of Confucianism has been used by many scholars though there are limited variances in the details from one person to another. For an extensive discussion of the three aspects of Confucianism, see Yao, Xinzhong. *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16-47.


13 See, for example, Billioud, Sébastien and Joël Thoraval. “Lijiao: The Return of Ceremonies Honoring Confucius in Mainland China.” *China Perspectives*, No. 4 (2009) 82-100. For an overview, see Billioud, Sébastien and Joël Thoraval. *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). This book covers a number of issues including education, self-cultivation, religion, rituals, politics as well as the development of redemptive societies (such as Yiguandao, wanguo daoehui, etc). See also Sun, Anna. “The Revival of Confucian Rites in Contemporary China.” In *Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern...
Our current study is unique in its focus on the metamorphosis of Confucianism in a “Confucian Congregation.” Initially a folk religion providing shamanistic healing services, this tradition might understandably be identified as *mixin* (迷信) or “superstition”\(^\text{14}\) by the authorities. Early in its evolution, it merged with the Confucian tradition, thus functioning as a system of both healing and moral cultivation. Gradually this movement adopted popular Confucian classics as its scripts and designed its own rituals of worship of Confucius. With time, this popular tradition developed into an “organized religion”\(^\text{15}\) with its own “institutional organization” and House of Dao (*Daotan* 道壇). In 2013, this Confucian Congregation achieved legal status as the “practice base” of a so-called “Research Council of Confucianism”, which was officially registered in the county government as a civil organization.

Since 2010, the authors have made four field trips to investigate the situation of the Confucian Congregation. In addition, we had long interviews with the Congregation leaders on two occasions away from the field site. Our research methodology has included participatory observation, personal interviews, and archival studies. In this report, we give an account of the metamorphosis of the Confucian Congregation -- how this initially illegitimate group has struggled against the odds in its negotiation for survival, development and legalization -- and discuss the implications for its uncertain future.

The introduction (I) is followed by six sections: After a presentation of Mintong and its historical background (II), we introduce the origin and the early development of the Confucian Congregation (III), its sets of beliefs and rituals (IV), the way the Congregation is organized (V) and its development strategy (VI). A final discussion focuses on specific features of the Congregation within the broader context of the Confucian revival and on possible implications for the long run.

\(^\text{14}\) The word “迷信” ("mixin") in modern Chinese was an imported Japanese neologism at the turn of the 20\(^\text{th}\) century. In late 19\(^\text{th}\) century the Japanese translated the Western concept of “superstition” into “迷信”. When the term was adopted in the Chinese language, its connotation further developed and became a politically-charged label, which may refer to almost anything “backward” or “unscientific”. Therefore, the Chinese word *mixin* is much different from the English term "superstition." Yet they are generally treated as “equivalents” in translation and intercultural communication. One way to solve this problem is to use the transliteration of “*mixin*” in specific Chinese contexts. It takes time to develop such a coinage.

\(^\text{15}\) The term “organized religion” is used here versus the “unorganized” *rujiao*. We believe it is a more appropriate term than the “institutionalized religion” for the description of Confucian Congregation. Of course, we are aware that there have been numerous attempts to organize and structure *rujiao* throughout the last one hundred years or so.
II. Mintong and Its Historical Background

Mintong, a county in the northeast part of Fujian Province, is situated in southeast China, facing the Taiwan Strait and the island of Taiwan. In 2013 the population of Mintong reached 530,000. As a coastal county, Mintong has been famous for its sea products. Local tradition holds that a large percentage of the population, especially those in the coastal area, makes a living directly or indirectly from fishing and other businesses related to the sea. In fact, today there are more people in fishing villages working on farms to raise fish and grow kelp than fishing on the high sea.

Geographically Mintong area is high in the west inland area with a range of mountains which peaks at more than 1,000 meters; the landscape descends eastward to the sea level within a span of 60 kilometers. On the whole, Mintong’s mountainous terrain makes transportation difficult. Traditionally, boating, either in the rivers or by sea along the coast, was the major means of transportation. Over the last twenty years or so the local transportation system has drastically improved, due to the recent development of highway networks and high-speed railways.

Although it remains a relatively remote and isolated area, Mintong has a long history as an administrative district. According to the local County Gazetteer, Mintong was first established as a county in the third year of the Taikang Era of the Jin Dynasty (晉太康三年, 282 CE). The county also has a long history of religious development, especially regarding traditional Chinese religions. A local legend suggests that the famous Daoist master Ge Hong (葛洪, 284-364 CE) once practiced alchemy in the local mountains, initiating the local tradition of Daoism in the fourth century. By the 1990s, as recorded in the Gazetteer, there were twenty-two professional Daoist priests of the Quanzhen Daoist School (全真道教). As early as the Jianyuan years of the Southern Qi Dynasty (南齊建元年間, 480-482 CE), Buddhism spread in the Mintong area. In the 1990s, there were 109 Buddhist temples with 161 ordained monks and nuns. Since the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), Mazu (媽祖) worship has been popular in Mintong. Today Mintong is proud to be the seat of the second largest Mazu temple in Fujian Province, as well as of more than 30 other Mazu temples.

In addition to the officially recorded religions, Mintong has a rich tradition of folk religions and other local belief systems. As in most of China, the rujiao aspect of Confucianism has been the most widely spread popular belief system (described by C. K. Yang as “diffused religion” 16) in everyday life among the people in Mintong.

---

16 Yang, C. K. Religion in Chinese Society (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961). It is true that the popular belief system at the grassroots level is almost always a mixture of the “three teachings”, but the core of it is generally Confucian.
grassroots level communities. The “Three in One” Religion (sanyijiao 三一教), a belief system based on the “three teachings” of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, had earlier been an important part of local religious tradition. Today the reconstruction of ancestral halls and recompilation of the lineage books are very common in this area as in other areas of southern China (see the chapter by Chen Bisheng in this volume). Local deities of different origins are worshipped regularly by people and on the specified dates in their religious calendar. In many rural communities, the belief in miracle workers or spirit mediums (wushi shenhan zhi lei 巫師神漢之類) is an institutionalized tradition, allowing for smooth transfer of mysterious spiritual power between generations, through long established rituals and ceremonies. One of the major informants in our study told us a story about his own brother, who competed with another person for the position as the local spirit medium through mysterious rituals in late 1990s. His brother finally won and became an honored spirit medium providing “professional service” in the community. Despite of decades of efforts by the authorities to wipe out “superstition”, the majority of the local people resort to deities and supernatural power, as a normal practice, to solve a wide range of personal problems—from the cure of disease to avoidance of a threatening event. As a matter of fact, Mintong is a place where religious symbols and codes are frequently observed both in the county seat and in the countryside. Walking through the streets, especially in a side street, one may often see small shrines, fengshui (風水) symbols or religious tablets set up at the street corner or by the roadside. When one enters a village, the temple of the local land god and shrines for other deities are also an inseparable part of the landscape.

Compared with many other areas in China, Mintong appears to possess an unusually fertile soil for religion. Mr. Lu, a self-made religious ritual expert, told us, “People in this area are particularly religious. If you do not have a religion, you have to find one. One has to believe in one thing or another. Otherwise one would feel uneasy. That is the way of life.” This seems to go against the general trend in China, where most people would claim no religious affiliation at all.

17 According to our informants, the “Three in One” religion has never been really wiped out in Mintong area since the government crackdown in the 1950s, though at a relatively small scale.

18 The informant’s brother is a self-made spirit medium. In Mintong, people claim “medium capacity” either through apprenticeship or self-inspiration. This is different from the report by Jean DeBernardi where “[one] foundation that ensures the conventionality of spirit mediumship is its transmission within small family groups.” See DeBernardi, Jean. The Way That Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 167-8.

19 What Mr. Lu means by “this area” is an area that covers both northern Fujian and southern Zhejiang Provinces. Mr. Lu was a self-made “rural intellectual” from southern Zhejiang and had been invited over to Mintong to help with the development of Confucian Congregation.

The post-Mao reform has brought about a substantial “big leap forward” in the local economy and the recent improvement of transportation has greatly shortened the distance between Mintong and the rest of the country. Yet, in terms of social ideology and way of thinking, the gap remains wide between Mintong and more developed regions where marketization and commercialization have drastically undermined the traditional beliefs and values. When we first visited Mintong in 2010, we experienced some “culture shock.” Arriving at the county seat of Mintong after six hours of high-speed train from Shanghai, we experienced the slowed rhythm almost immediately. Looking down from the hotel window, we saw two lines of colored advertisement banners fixed on the lampposts along the streets, on which were the words, “The Xianghe Pharmacist’s Provides Pharmaceutical Products with Conscience.” Then, on the wall in a supermarket at the street corner, we read a poster warning people not to steal — “Stealing means self-destruction and crime, which equals demoralization. For your future and family please reserve your moral integrity.” In both cases, either to advertise oneself or to warn others, the authors directly resort to the Confucian tradition — to do business with conscience, self-cultivation, family values and moral integrity. Coming from Shanghai, we did not expect to find such public announcements — resorting to conscience and moral integrity for legal issues — surviving as a normal practice ten years into the 21st century. Based on this first impression we could not draw any conclusion at that time. But upon further reflection, we recognize this early experience contributed to our understanding of the sociocultural environment in this county seat city and in the Confucian Congregation.

III. The Origin and Early Development of The Confucian Congregation

At the time of our first visit to Mintong in 2010, the Confucian Congregation had already developed into a systematically organized religious group, with its headquarters in the county seat of Mintong city and six other branches in nearby townships and villages. The head of the Congregation, Mr. Li Yusheng (李玉生) known as Master Li, was not only the leading organizer of the group; he was worshipped by the members as a deity with supernatural power. His composed and relaxed manner impressed people, who credited him to be an enlightened person with great confidence. After we had earned his confidence, Master Li accepted to answer our questions about the Congregation’s history and its plan for future development. It became clear to us that Master Li had come a long way to reach his current status as a mature leader with charismatic personality.

Tracing the origin of the Confucian Congregation takes us back to 1976, when the Cultural Revolution was moving toward its end and China was turning a new page

21 The poster is in both Chinese and English languages. The English quoted here is directly from the poster with slight editing.
in her history. In this year a 45-year-old man named Hai, living in the neighboring Nante County, experienced a serious mental disturbance. Suffering from what the local people believed to be a kind of “bewitched illness”, Mr. Hai initially could find no cure. Later in the year, however, he met a folk healer named Tao. Mr. Tao observed that Hai was not an ordinary person but a possessed man with supernatural potential. Mr. Tao conferred on him a divine title as “True Man of Linshanshui” (“林山水真君”). Soon afterward, Hai recovered and was even able to provide service to treat others who were suffering from illness. Then, as a man with supernatural power, “Master Linshanshui” started to recruit apprentices. Since the late 1970s, Mr. Hai has been preaching and practicing the Way or the Dao (道) of “Xindejiao” (“心德教”, the “Teaching of Heart and Morality” or the “Religion of Heart and Morality”), which is supposed to have been personally founded by the God Shennong (Shennong shangdi 神農上帝).22

The original teaching of the Xindejiao is based on Confucian values and ideas. The general principle of “Heart and Morality,” which emphasizes the ethics of parents-children relationship, aims to teach and cultivate the masses. People would approach Mr. Hai to receive the teachings. A belief prevailed that those who had suffered from miseries would recover by acting according to the teachings. Hai himself was illiterate; his oral preaching was considered as a “Heavenly Book without Written Words” (wuzi tianshu 無字天書), which emerged through inspiration. Since late 1970s this “Xindejiao” has spread to more than ten counties and cities, guided by Master True Man of Linshanshui and his followers. Some of the followers later became independent practitioners themselves, starting to take their own followers. Among these followers in a later generation was a man named Li Yusheng (李玉生), who subsequently became the founder of the Confucian Congregation.

Li Yusheng was born in 1965 in a peasant family in Gelingcun Village of Mintong County. He received junior middle school education in the countryside. At the age of 26, Li moved to the Mintong county seat in order to look for better life opportunities. For a while he drove a three-wheeled pedicab to make a living. But this work exhausted him, leaving him in serious ill health at the age of 31. After many medical interventions unable to cure him, Li returned to his home village where he was treated by Master Han, a disciple of Master True Man of Linshanshui. Over the course of five months, Li experienced miraculous healing and eventually recovered totally. During this same period, a woman named Wan Aiping (萬愛平), who suffered from severe mental and physical problems, also came to Master Han for treatment. But she left in less than a month without being cured.

---

22 Shennong (神農 or 神農上帝) is a legendary figure in prehistoric China. Two major inventions are attributed to him: agriculture and medicine. Therefore, Shennong has been worshipped as the god in charge of agriculture and medicine, two basic aspects in human life. The Dao or Xindejiao (心德教) is a mixture of Confucian moral cultivation and supernatural healing.
After being cured by Master Han, Mr. Li became his disciple and learned how to practice the Teaching of Heart and Morality. Soon, he felt that he was called to preach this teaching. In 1998, he rented a house in the Westmont Village in the suburbs of Mintong. There he made a pledge to God in the name of all his family members (eight people) and started his own business to provide teaching and healing as a master of the Teaching of Heart and Morality. By this time Ms. Wan Aiping’s condition had worsened. She suffered from three serious conditions -- paralysis, epilepsy, and metrocarcinoma -- and had made several suicide attempts. In a desperate move, her family carried her to Master Li for treatment, soon after the Chinese New Year. After being treated by Master Li for 24 days, she was able to make her first step out of bed. In seven months, she was cured from all conditions.

On the day that she felt fully recovered, Ms. Wan made seven vows to the Gods -- the God Shennong, the God and Goddess of the Land, and other deities, immortals and Buddha -- pledging to give up her family life and to follow Master Li wholeheartedly in the service of the Dao. Thus, Ms. Wan became Master Li’s first follower. A few months later in October, Ms. Wan suddenly said to herself, “I am Pan Yu (潘雨). I am Lan Xiang (嵐香).” This was considered a divine omen and she took “Pan Yu” and “Lan Xiang” as her sacred titles. Meanwhile she also became empowered with supernatural capacity -- unusually energetic and eloquent.

Master Li’s group continued to grow, expanding over a year into a group of 13 followers. But a series of misfortunes followed. First, a fire destroyed Li’s House of Dao and put him in debt of over 10,000 Yuan. Then, in 1999, Mr. Li fell seriously ill to the point where he even spit blood. Subsequently, he was arrested by the police, first in the year 2000 and then in 2002. A Chinese saying suggests that “when the tree falls all monkeys on it will scatter (shudao husunsan 樹倒猢猻散).” And in fact, experiencing the deteriorating situation, one after another his followers left Mr. Li. In the end, only Pan Yu remained. In the face of such a misfortune, Pan Yu and Master Li formed a close relationship dedicated to the further development of the Dao.

In 2003 Pan Yu helped to raise 40,000 Yuan, which provided funds to purchase a house in the Mintong county seat. This became the first establishment, and later the headquarters of the forthcoming Confucian Congregation. At the same time, Master Li started to refocus the mission of promoting the Dao. When he was a

---

23 Ms. Wan made very serious vows to put the Dao in the priority of her life; in her seventh vow, she said, “If I leave Master (Li), I would not die a good death” and “so far as my life lasts, I will be dedicated to the Dao.”

24 Like other proper names in this article, both Pan Yu (潘雨) and Lan Xiang (嵐香) are pseudonyms. We tried to retain their original meanings of the real names when we made up the pseudonyms. The basic meaning of Pan Yu is raining and water, which would quench one’s thirstiness, and that of Lan Xiang is fragrance of mountain mist, which sounds feminine and somewhat mystic.

25 The first time, Li was arrested on the accusation of maltreatment of a dying girl who suffered from leukemia. But later Li was cleared of the accusation based on forensic examination. The second time, Li was arrested by mistake as a leader of the illegal cult of Falungong.
follower of Master Han, Li learned about the doctrines of “Three Principles and Eight Points” and “The Twelve Rules to Observe the Teaching of Heart and Morality.” These commandment-like statements for moral discipline and self-cultivation were first established and passed down by Master True Man of Linshanshui. Li had adopted these doctrines in his earlier practice. Now he added some popular Confucian classics, including the *Three-Character Classic* (*Sanzijing* 三字經), *The Rules of the Disciple* (*Dizigui* 弟子規), and *The Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經). In addition, the local folk verse *The Classic of the Saints* (*Shengrenjing* 聖人經) is also added to the list. This new assemblage of texts, which was much more directly linked to the Confucian tradition than before, laid a foundation for the development of the Confucian Congregation. Compared with the earlier practice of the Dao, which emphasized both supernatural healing power and ethical cultivation, the new practice based on the new literature package seemed to pay more attention to self-cultivation and Confucian values as a whole though the supernatural healing power nevertheless remained an inseparable part of the practice of the Dao in the Confucian Congregation.

Another important person in the organization and development of the Confucian Congregation was Mr. Chang Shibiao. In 2004, Mr. Chang’s wife suffered from severe back pain. They went for medical treatment in the local hospital but the symptom did not seem to improve. One day, on the way back from the hospital, they met a relative who suggested they try the Confucian Congregation. They went to the Congregation for treatment and in about a month Chang’s wife totally recovered. The efficaciousness of the treatment gave Mr. Chang enough reason to be interested in the Confucian Congregation. In time, he became an active member working together with Master Li and Pan Yu. Mr. Chang and his family used to go to the local Christian church as some locals did in the area since the 1990s. After he joined the Congregation, he stopped in spite of the invitation of some of his Christian friends.

In the Confucian Congregation, Mr. Chang was considered a well-educated person as he had received a high school diploma. After graduation, he returned to his home village and for quite a few years, he was the Secretary of the Communist Party Branch at the village. As an experienced cadre in the local administration, Mr:

---

26 The “Three Principles and Eight Points” is a set of commandment-like rules for behavior. On the whole they reflect Confucian ethics and moral principles but some of them specifically target contemporary social issues, e.g. the last one of the Eight Point goes like this: [if you work as an official] you shall not hoodwink those above and bully those below, and you shall not false official documents (瞒上欺下, 篡改文件).

27 The Twelve Rules are detailed codes for behavior in personal, family and social life. They promote major Confucian values such as filial piety and family harmony, and also ban cursing, stealing, using violence, or practicing sectarianism within the group, etc.

28 *The Classic of the Saints* (*Shengrenjing* 聖人經) is a short popular verse with a mixture of Confucian and Daoist ideas and less than 400 Chinese characters. It has been popular in many places in Fujian Province. See Zheng, Lisheng (*Essays of Zheng Lisheng* (Zheng Lisheng wenshi congiao) (Fuzhou: Haifeng Publishing House, 2009), 72-73.)
Chang was familiar with the bureaucratic system and knew well how to deal with the government officials and break the red tape. Mr. Chang was very much attracted by the religious piety of the Confucian Congregation and he sincerely believed that both Master Li and Pan Yu were Deities (*shenming* 神明) endowed with supernatural power or at least empowered by some divine being.

“If they had not been Deities, how could they know so much and how could they talk so eloquently?” Mr. Chang asked us on several occasions. He also emphasized that “they did not have much education.”

Through these developments a “triumvirate” was formed and became the core leadership of the Confucian Congregation. Master Li is a man with charismatic personality. He looks calm and well composed. With a controlled and unhurried manner; he talks with persuasive eloquence, without having to pause often to search for words or expressions. He does not pretend to be sophisticated, thus his simple style gives people an impression of sincerity and trustfulness. Among the three, Li appears to be more reserved; he does not often initiate discussion with others. When asked, he claims to be inspired by divine power and to act according to the will of the divine beyond his own control. He does not hesitate to express his deep belief in the gods and the supernatural, and to state his understanding of the Dao.

Pan Yu is a woman of medium height in her early forties. She is in good physical condition and does not look her age. The first impression of Pan Yu is her shining eyes and energetic presence. There is in sharp contrast between Master Li, whose general manner is relaxed but dignified, and Pan Yu, whose inner energy is visible. At times she may burst into laughter and when that happens she becomes visibly shy -- at least while in the presence of outsiders. She speaks more often than the other two at the Congregation gatherings and tends to express herself emotionally and passionately. There is no doubt that she is an experienced organizer. It is Pan Yu who initiates and leads the group chanting sessions of popular Confucian classics, the major ritual of the Congregation. She attributes her energy and passion to the divine being. “I used to be a shy person,” she would say. And she is ready to speak about the tremendous changes the Dao has brought for her.

Compared with the two other members of the triumvirate, Mr. Chang is a this-worldly person. In fact, he never claims to possess any supernatural capacity. He is often our main informant about the development of the Congregation. This is perhaps because he is more experienced in communicating with people from other institutions, whether governmental or academic. But when talking about the details of the Dao and the Congregation, Chang would often turn unconsciously toward Master Li, as if to seek for his opinion or consent. Meanwhile Li himself would often sit still, assuming the role of a good listener. For us as observers, this confirmed the authoritative status of Master Li in the Congregation. But in
handling external affairs, especially when dealing with local officials and
government bureaucracy, Chang is definitely a competent expert. His knowledge
of the social structure and his pious belief in the Dao make him a valuable diplomat
for the Congregation.

In learning about the development of the Congregation, we were told that it was
the will of the divine and their own yuanfen (緣分)\(^{29}\) that led the members of the
triumvirate to meet each other and form such a competent team. Based on what
we have learned about the group, this is a close-knit triad based both on religious
devotion and complementary personalities. Over the last ten years, this
triumvirate managed to develop the Confucian Congregation from its early
reputation as a sorcerer group composed of a master preacher with some
apprentices into a systematically organized religious organization.

IV. Beliefs and Rituals at the Confucian Congregation

Today’s Confucian Congregation has benefitted from more than ten years of
development. When we first visited the Dadao Branch of Confucian Congregation
in the fall of 2010, we entered the building through a front gate, on top of which
was a signboard with the words rujia daotan 儒家道壇 ("Confucian
Congregation")\(^{30}\). But once inside the building, there was evidence that the title of
"Confucian Congregation" was only about two years old. On one of the award
banners hanging on the wall were the following words:

Awarded to Brothers and Sisters of the Dadao Shennong Temple
For Outstanding Performance in the Competition of Chanting The Rules of the
Disciple
The Mintong County Headquarters
Spring of 2008

So, at least as late as in the spring of 2008, the members of the Dadao Branch were
still addressed as “Brothers and Sisters of the Dadao Shennong Temple” (Dadao
shennong guan zhong xiongdi jiemei 大島神農觀衆兄弟姐妹). Here the Chinese

---

\(^{29}\) The Chinese term “緣分” (yuanfen or yuan fen) can be roughly understood as chance or fateful
coincidences. The notion of yuanfen is most directly rooted in the Buddhist faith in karma; in a
karmic view of reality there are no pure coincidences. The term is often used as a rough
equivalent to the English phrase “luck” with an emphasis on certain potential relationship.
Chinese are likely to describe any happy coincidence --- the chance meeting, for example, of a
good friend at a foreign airport --- as yuanfen. There is, of course, also “bad yuanfen” --- what in
English one might name “an unlucky break.” For a detailed discussion of yuanfen, see Fan, Lizhu,

\(^{30}\) Here the “Confucian Congregation” stands for the Chinese name rujia daotan 儒家道壇, that is,
the “Rujia House of Dao”. Later the Chinese name changed to rujiao daotan 儒教道壇, that is, the
“Rujiao House of Dao” though the English remains “Confucian Congregation.”
word for “Temple” is “觀”, which usually stands for the Daoist temple. In academic settings many researchers tend to make clear distinction between beliefs of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. But in the tradition of China’s folk religion, these three traditions are often interwoven, along with beliefs in certain local gods and deified beings. This inclusive nature of syncretism is the basic, if not the universal, characteristic of the folk religions among the Han ethnic. The Dadao Shennong Temple is not an exception. While Shennong is the major god of the temple, many other gods and deities are also worshipped.

Even after the group has been renamed the Confucian Congregation – which implies that primacy is now ascribed to Confucius – the figure of Shennong remains important, both for his historical importance for the development of the group and as a major god for worship in the Congregation. In fact, the organizational development of the group includes many gods. When the group changed from the Teaching of Heart and Morality to the Shennong Temple, it carried the beliefs and doctrines from the former to the latter; and when it further evolved into the Confucian Congregation, it incorporated the old beliefs and rituals into the new establishment. As a result, a long list of gods and deities exists, whose birthdays are officially observed in the Confucian Congregation.

**Table 1. Gods and Deities Whose Birthdays Are Celebrated in the Confucian Congregation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sacred Title (Chinese)</th>
<th>Sacred Title (English)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>神農上帝</td>
<td>Shennong God</td>
<td>a folk religion god</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>太上老君</td>
<td>The Supreme God of Daoism</td>
<td>i.e. Laozi, legendary founder of Daoism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>観世音菩薩</td>
<td>Arya Avalokitesvara a.k.a. The Mercy Bodhisattva or Guanyin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>韓元帥</td>
<td>Marshal Han</td>
<td>a Daoist deity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>南山老君</td>
<td>Lord of Southern Mountain</td>
<td>i.e. Master Li</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>潘雨</td>
<td>Pan Yu</td>
<td>i.e. Wan Aiping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>嵐香</td>
<td>Lan Xiang</td>
<td>i.e. Wan Aiping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>至聖先師</td>
<td>The Greatest Sage and Teacher</td>
<td>i.e. Confucius</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 provides a very good example of syncretism: The list includes sacred figures of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, as well as those of folk religion and deified figures of the Congregation. Members treat them all as divine beings with supernatural power. They pay tribute to these deities and celebrate them on particular days and occasions, such as certain festivals and the birthday of a particular deity. They pray to them for blessings and protections. This syncretism
also translates into an accumulation of scriptures and texts originating from various sources and adopted by the Confucian Congregation.

**INSERT TABLE 2**

Table 2. Major Literature of the Confucian Congregation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title (Chinese)</th>
<th>Title (English)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>《三從八德》</td>
<td><em>Three Principles and Eight Moral Issues</em></td>
<td>Originally set up by Master Hai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《遵守心德十二條例》</td>
<td><em>Twelve Points for Observing the Teaching of Heart and Morality</em></td>
<td>Originally set up by Master Hai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《弟子規》</td>
<td><em>The Rules of the Disciple</em></td>
<td>Popular Confucian literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《三字經》</td>
<td><em>The Three-Character Classic</em></td>
<td>Popular Confucian literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《孝經》</td>
<td><em>The Classic of Filial Piety</em></td>
<td>Popular Confucian literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《聖人經》</td>
<td><em>The Classic of the Saints</em></td>
<td>Folk religion literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《八榮八恥》</td>
<td><em>Eight Glories and Eight Shames</em></td>
<td>Principles of socialist values put forward by the government31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《修心八法》</td>
<td><em>Eight Points for Self Cultivation</em></td>
<td>Folk mottos for self-cultivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All these listed pieces are printed in large characters and posted on the walls in the main hall of the House of Dao or other Congregation buildings. Although the listed literature is highly syncretistic, it is not simply borrowed from the “three teachings” -- Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism -- as is the case in the list of gods and deities in Table One. Rather, it consists mainly of pieces drawn from popular Confucian classics, in addition to short texts and sets of maxims produced by the masters of the group or drawn from folk tradition and government documents.32 When asked, the Congregation leaders would claim that the Daoist classic *Daodejing (道德经)* by Laozi is also part of their religious literature. However, *Daodejing* is not printed and posted on any of the walls in the Congregation buildings; nor are any Buddhist sutras posted on the walls. On the whole the general orientation of the listed literature is Confucian, with an emphasis on Confucian ethics and values. This is also the basic theme of preaching in the Congregation -- how to honor the Confucian values, how to be a decent

---

31 “The Eight Glories and Eight Shames” first appeared in a 2006 speech by Hu Jintao, the top leader of China from 2003 to 2013. It was then set up by the government as the principle for moral development in the framework of socialist cultural construction.

32 Later, in our analysis of the development strategy of the Congregation, we will discuss the significance of including government slogans in the literature.
person through self-cultivation and self-discipline, etc.

The items in this literature package are presented in relatively simple style. Some of them, such as *Three Principles and Eight Moral Issues*, and *Twelve Points for Observing the Teaching of Heart and Morality* are short texts of less than twenty lines. Some others, such as *The Three-Character Classic* and *The Rules of the Disciple* are traditional Confucian literature of about three or four printed pages each. But these popular Confucian classics are written in such a way that they are rhymed and very musical, easy to chant and easy to memorize. Traditionally they were used as reading materials for beginners to develop literacy and learn about Confucian core values. Now in the Confucian Congregation, members are required to learn these popular classics off by heart. In fact, group chanting of these classics (as well as other listed literature on the walls), either in the form of reciting or singing, is a very important, if not the most important, collective ritual in the Congregation. When a group of about thirty people dressed up in uniforms are chanting the classics in chorus, it is impressively musical and highly ritualistic.

Such collective chanting rituals, very much like the practice in Buddhist temples, as well as other collective activities distinguish Confucian Congregation from many other traditional folk religion gatherings. Other folk religions are typically localized within one village or a few neighboring villages. Visits to folk religion temples tend to be individual and instrumental. In contrast, the Confucian Congregation operates branches in different villages and even in different counties. It forms a highly organized religious group with a much wider network. The collective activities, including the common divinity and shared literature, unified dress code for collective activities, chanting in chorus, and interactions between branches, all contribute to the formation of a common identity. Such an identity emphasizes collective worship and moral cultivation, and it provides a strong sense of belonging and promotes solidarity among the members. Although many Congregation members may not fully understand the whole meaning of these classics, group chanting nevertheless generates a feeling of unity and of a shared access to some sort of mysterious power. We were told by some members that “such collective chanting made them [makes me] more relaxed and also more energetic.” As the Congregation leaders admit, they do try to learn from other religious groups, including local Christian churches, in organizational development, rituals and other activities. In a way, then, they are engaged in an enterprise of revival and reinvention of fragments of the Chinese religious tradition. In Chinese history, there were some religious groups or “redemptive societies” that developed cross-regional networks and managed to assert strong collective identity (see discussion on this topic in the introduction). *Yiguan Dao* (一貫道, The Way of Pervading Unity) is an example of these groups. But they have been largely suppressed by the Communist authorities in mainland China.

On the other hand, the Confucian Congregation is also a sacred space for
traditional individual rituals. The Huishan Branch provides a good example. The House of Dao in Huishan, that is, the building of the Confucian Congregation in Huishan, is a three-storied building. The first floor provides a big hall, in which there is a shrine containing a life-sized statue of Confucius sitting on a chair accompanied by two disciples standing next to him on each side. This is where the Congregation meetings and rituals like collective chanting take place. On the second floor are a meeting room, an office and a storeroom. On the third floor there are two sections. The northern section is roofed and functions as a temple where the icons of the listed gods and deities plus some other immortals are situated on a platform facing south toward the space for worship. For Master Li and Pan Yu there are no statues, but their respective sacred titles and birth times are inscribed on two tablets. For example, on the tablet of Master Li is written “Lord of Southern Mountain,” “The Second Date of the Second Month” and “Sacred Birthday.” The southern section of the third floor, outside the door of the temple, is a railed open space that allows scores of people to gather for ceremony. People with specific personal issues would visit the third-floor temple, behaving just as people would in any other folk religion temple -- burning incense sticks, kneeling down to the gods and deities to pray for blessings, etc.

Insert Picture 1.
Legend: In the third floor temple
© Chen Na

In addition, people often come to Master Li (or Pan Yu) for personal services. The most frequent cases are those who suffer from miseries either emotionally or mentally or physically. Supplicants include both members of the Congregation and those who are not. As is the case for many other religious groups in history or even today, providing healing services to cure patients or relieve miseries is an important approach for the development of the Congregation. A complicated ritual process is often involved. First, Master Li checks with the person to be treated about his/her birth time, lineage, and personal sufferings. Then, after calling upon the Gods for help, Master Li functions as the Lord of Southern Mountain. Healing takes place through the interaction between the Lord of Southern Mountain and the treated person. The role of Master Li is to make certain mysterious revelations, raise moral challenges, and preach Confucian moral teachings. As for the person being treated, he/she would undertake self-examination of his/her moral behavior and confess any wrong doings. To some extent, this interaction echoes a session of psychoanalysis or psychiatric treatment. Master Li acknowledges that many who come for help are suffering from emotional and mental disorder. But he emphasizes the importance of supernatural power and Confucian ethics in his treatment.

Like Master Li, Ms. Wan (Pan Yu) also receives clients and provide counseling and healing services. But there is one thing particular with Pan Yu. From time to time,
when Pan Yu enters into a state of trance she becomes inspired and starts to articulate words in versed lines, similar to lines from a *shanshu* (善書 morality book) that teaches Confucian morality. Sometimes, the versed articulation could last for dozens of lines. Some of the lines are so good that they are copied on the paper and put on the wall in the House of Dao. The fact that Pan Yu is a charismatic female healer provides an alternative for the client to choose between a male and female healer. This contributes immensely to the development of the Confucian Congregation as the majority of the members are female.

Apart from personal counseling sessions, there are two more rituals in the treatment. One is the magic drawing (or the talisman drawing). Master Li completes a drawing on a piece of paper, which would be kept by the client or be burned and put in a cup of water to be drunk by the client. In some cases, Master Li will simply bless the water without providing any visible talisman, and the client would drink it. This practice can be traced to the tradition of Daoism or other spirit mediumship. Another ritual is a physical exercise that seems to be a kind of Qigong. The client is asked to sit straight on a chair and repeat two simple movements in turn -- using his/her own palms to clap on the lap and raising the feet to step on the floor. The mechanism for this physical exercise is supposed to promote and regulate the circulation of *qi* (vital energy). It is believed that the regular and balanced circulation of the *qi* is fundamental for a healthy body. Any experienced misery is understood to be accompanied with irregularity of *qi*. In this sense, this physical ritual can be considered as a kind of Qigong exercise.

In many ways, the beliefs and rituals of Confucian Congregation are similar to those of other traditional folk religions. What distinguishes the Confucian Congregation from others is its emphasis on the Dao of Confucianism and its collective rituals; this makes the Congregation more of a group for moral cultivation rather than a group for instrumental worship. In fact, when the Congregation is introduced to visitors or researchers like us, local informants always try to highlight its Confucian dimension and downplay its sets of mysterious practices that could remind of traditional folk religion. The focus on Confucianism is an important part of the Congregation’s development strategy, which we will discuss later in this chapter.

**V. The Confucian Congregation as an Organization**

For all religious organizations based on esoteric beliefs, the initial development depends on the claimed supernatural power of a charismatic personality. In the case of the Confucian Congregation, this personality is Master Li. It is through Li’s charisma, his eloquence, and the miracles worked by him that the earliest believers and followers were attracted. But the success of the Confucian Congregation in its expansion into a systematically organized group with
hundreds of followers\textsuperscript{33} is due to the team effort of the triumvirate -- Master Li, Pan Yu and Mr. Chang. By 2013, the Confucian Congregation had not only established seven different branches but was also officially registered as a legally recognized civil organization: Mintong County Research Council for the Practice of Confucianism (Mintong xian ruxue shijian yanjiuhui 民同縣儒學實踐研究會). We will offer here an overview of the establishment of the Huishan branch, as an example of the organizational growth of the Confucian Congregation.

November 3, 2010 was an unusual day in the Huishan Village of Mintong County. A recently constructed three-storied house was colorfully decorated--streamers and banners were hung to reach the ground from the third floor railing. In front of the house, to the left of the porch, a band of six musicians played loudly on Chinese suona horns (嗩呐) and other instruments; to the right of the porch a makeshift stage had been set up for this special occasion. The road leading from the entrance of the village to the new building was decorated with banners and signboards. Many people, including teenagers from the local school, lined along both sides of the road to welcome guests coming from different places. High above the road banners were fixed on lampposts and stretched across the road, with messages welcoming the VIP guests. This celebration marked a special event in this small community of Huishan village--the opening ceremony for the House of Dao of the Huishan Branch of the Confucian Congregation. The significance of the event was reflected in the smiling faces of the proud Congregation members, who had aspired to having a dedicated House of Dao in their own village for years.

\textbf{Insert Picture 2 here.}

\textbf{Legend:} Lining up to welcome guests for the opening ceremony.

\textcopyright{} Chen Na

Our drive from the county seat of Mintong to the consecration ceremony took about one and a half hours over the narrow country road. Several times we had to stop and move our car closer to the edge of the road so that the vehicle from the other direction could slowly pass by. It was a bit scary because next to the edge of the narrow road is a steep fall into the sea. Finally we arrived at Huishan, a small village situated on a peninsula with little access to the surrounding territory. When we asked why such an inconvenient location had been selected for the development of Confucian Congregation, we were told that although this setting of an out-of-the-way place had presented challenges, the leaders of the Confucian Congregation discerned that these challenges reflected the will of the divine. As we learned more about the village, we came to understand better the extent of the challenge. Huishan Village is a traditional fishing community with a population of

\textsuperscript{33} Mr. Chang told us that there are about 150 members in each branch of Confucian Congregation. Of the seven branches, two are not located in the rural area. One is the headquarters in the downtown of Mintong and the other in the downtown of the neighboring county seat, which are relatively small congregations. Therefore, a reasonable guess is that the total of the Confucian Congregation members ranges from eight to nine hundred.
seven hundred people. And while not as many people as before are directly engaged in fishing, the overwhelming majority of the villagers still make their living from activities related to the sea, such as sea-farming and transportation to markets. Perhaps due to the uncertainties and risks of making a living on the sea, religion has been an important and inseparable part of the community life. On the main road through the village stands a small temple of about two meters high housing the village Earth God and Goddess. Fresh ashes from the offering of incense sticks and imitation paper money\textsuperscript{34} can be seen in and out of a burner in front of the temple. About one hundred meters from the beach is the village temple of the Sea God; this facility had been shut down during the Cultural Revolution and reopened in the 1980s. In the crowded area of the main street, a Christian church seemed to have been squeezed in between the houses. Like many villages in Mintong, folk healing or shamanism has long been embedded in the local tradition. These activities regained popularity soon after the reform started. In terms of religious development, Huishan village seems to be too crowded a place to need or welcome new comers. But the leaders of the Confucian Congregation did not agree. In their opinion, many local rituals are mere \textit{mixin} (superstitions). Therefore, they considered that since the Confucian Congregation represents the Right/Genuine Dao (正道), it should guide local people to pursue the correct path of life. It was with such a sense of mission that the Confucian Congregation moved to Huishan.

In 2005 a member of the local Su family was cured by Master Li. The Su family was very grateful and asked Master Li to help invite (literally in Chinese “請” as a respectful term rather than “買”, that is, to “buy”) a statue of Guanyin to their house. Guanyin (觀音) is a Buddhist bodhisattva commonly known as the Goddess of Mercy. She has been very popular among the Chinese, either Buddhist or non-Buddhist, and especially in east and southeast China. Before long, report of the efficaciousness of this Guanyin presence and of the supernatural power of Master Li spread among the villagers. Soon they would come to Su’s house to pay tribute to Guanyin; many would also ask for help from Master Li in the face of illness or other troubles. At first Master Li would travel to the village on call. When there he would not only deliver his service but also preach the Dao of Confucianism. As many people, sick and well, came to listen to Master Li, the house of the Su family soon became a gathering place. The popular Confucian classics were distributed and people were encouraged to learn them by heart. Those who were illiterate or semi-illiterate were taught word by word. And most of them were able to learn quickly, memorizing important texts within months if not weeks. It is likely that some of the villagers could not fully understand what they had learned to chant. But they nevertheless found the learning process and the sense of togetherness to be satisfying. When a group of people chanted together, the century-old lines echoing around the house would create an impressive atmosphere, musical and

\textsuperscript{34} The “imitation paper money” is the paper, either made to resemble bank notes or just in the raw form, burned as an offering to the dead.
ritualistic. Such a collective activity had not been experienced in this community for years, that is, since the dismantlement of the people's commune in the early 1980s.

Although Mr. Li is not a well-educated person, yet his preaching appeals greatly to the members of this local community. Li shares with them a very similar socio-cultural background. He knows well the kind of life they live and the kind of problems they face. He preaches on very traditional Confucian topics, such as how to be decent person through self-cultivation and how to handle relations in the family and with other members of the community. His main teachings focus about how to encourage kindness (quanshan 勸善), including filial piety (xiaodao 孝道), tolerance and yielding (renrang 忍讓) and humbleness (qiangong 謙恭). These traditional Confucian values are often received as fresh ideas by the listeners, many of whom had been exposed during their childhood and youth to anti-traditional Maoism. With all the changes they have experienced over the last thirty years, villagers in a remote rural community like Huishan may find that these values still provide an effective approach to establish harmonious relations both at home and in the neighborhood community. The majority of the people in the audience were married female villagers. Most male villagers were busily engaged in their work away from home. Therefore, women were instrumental in introducing their husbands to the Congregation's activities and its sets of Confucian texts and teachings. In promoting the development of the Congregation, Pan Yu proved to be an excellent organizer whose collaboration with female villagers was very efficient. Quite often, she would use her own personal story of misery and enlightenment to illustrate the reality of divine power. Her easy-to-get-along personality and her passionate eloquence made her a popular and persuasive figure in the community.

Although the government has greatly loosened its social control since the post-Mao reform, gathering in any non-officially permitted assembly remains highly sensitive. The Confucian Congregation was neither a legally recognized religious group nor a registered civil organization. However, it regularly assembled scores of people for activities of preaching and chanting. It was therefore natural that the local authorities—both the villagers committee and the police substation—would become concerned. In fact, the police had the authority to give warning to Mr. Chang and even to formally ban the assembly. These delicate circumstances required that Mr. Chang deal with the authorities diplomatically. As an experienced local Party official himself, Chang knew the government policies and regulations well, and he also had the skill to deal with the bureaucracy. On the one hand, he tried to emphasize the cultural aspect rather than the religious aspect of the Congregation; this cultural focus would identify the Congregation as a legitimate response to Party's call to carry forward China's cultural heritage. On the other hand, he worked diligently to develop all the possible guanxi (關係) relations

---

35 The term guanxi is the transliteration of the Chinese word 關係, which literally means
with the local authorities. In response, local officials would often take a one-eye-open-and-one-eye-shut stance with regard to the Congregation's activities provided that some kind of justifiable reasons, mainly as an acceptable excuse, were given. Details about the development strategies of the Congregation will be discussed in the next section.

As the Congregation became more popular among the villagers, more people -- family members, relatives, neighbors and friends -- joined in the group. By 2008, the Congregation's membership had reached one hundred. At this point a private house was obviously too small to hold most gatherings; pressure increased to build a House of Dao in the village. A fundraising campaign was conducted among the members. In less than two years, the sum of more than RMB 200,000 Yuan was collected. This total fell short of the intended goal by over 100,000 Yuan. But the construction could nevertheless begin, in part on borrowed funds. Much of the labor was donated by Congregation members working as volunteers in the construction; this factor contributed greatly to a reduction in costs. The completed house was the three-storied building standing in front of us though some detailed decoration both outside and inside the building was yet to be added.

The opening ceremony began with an assembly on the makeshift stage outside the house; speeches from dignitaries, chanting of Confucian classics, and drama performances followed. An elaborate ritual of consecration was performed, with a series of announcements, sacrifice offerings, burning incense, and repeated ketou/kowtow. The unveiling of the Confucius statue marked the climax of the ceremony. This civic building had thus been transformed into the Huishan Village House of the Confucian Dao, now ascribed with a divine nature.\(^\text{36}\) Although the Congregation continues to identify itself as a secular collective learning group to promote the cultural heritage of Confucianism, its rituals and many other practices prove to be quite religious.

![Insert Picture 3](image3.png)
**Legend:** Offerings at the opening ceremony  
© Fan Lizhu

![Insert Picture 4](image4.png)
**Legend:** Ketou/kowtow at the opening ceremony  
© Fan Lizhu

A Chinese proverb states that “in a big forest, there are all kinds of birds (linzi dale, shenmeyangdeniaodouyou 林子大了，什麼樣的鳥都有).” As the Congregation connection or relationship. It refers to the social interactions between people, “in which personal relationships are considered more important than laws and written agreements.” See http://dictionaryreference.com/browse/guanxi?s=t, accessed on 3, December 2015.”

developed, people of different capabilities have become involved. In due time, the Huishan Congregation found a competent group leader—Tang Jinxia, a married woman who was forty years old at the time. Years earlier Ms. Tang had suffered from physical and emotional troubles. She suffered from severe insomnia but could not find a cure. Eventually she was introduced to Master Li, who helped her recover from these protracted miseries. Now Ms. Tang is in charge of the Huishan branch of Confucian Congregation, assisted by a group of enthusiastic activists. She organizes the regular study of the Confucian classics in the House of Dao. She leads Congregation members in volunteer efforts to clean public areas in the village. Ms. Tang does not claim any supernatural power herself. She draws instead on Confucian ideas and common sense, as well as what she has learned from Master Li, as she offers advice and counseling. She credits all she has done as part of her personal cultivation to accumulate virtue (jide 積德). Over the years, the Confucian Congregation has created a positive image in the Huishan village. Occasionally even some Christian villagers would come to the Congregation to ask for help.

That is the story of the Huishan branch of the Confucian Congregation. Since its formation in 2004, the Confucian Congregation has established seven branches, of which five were in Mintong County and two in the neighboring Shouxin County. The developmental processes of all the branches are more or less similar, though each has a unique story. Now each of these branches functions as a relatively independent unit. The three leaders from the headquarters circulate among these branches, to provide services and to help coordinate affairs.

Today when visiting these branches -- touring the Houses of Dao, observing rituals, and speaking with local members, discussing the future of the Confucian Congregation -- one can only realize that a lot has been achieved. But how could this be possible, considering the overall social and political context? Now in China even legally recognized religious organizations remain under strict government control; to build a new temple or church often requires protracted negotiation and sometimes turns to be impossible. To answer the question, we have to examine the development strategies adopted by the Confucian Congregation.

VI. Development Strategy of the Confucian Congregation

If we trace the early history of the Confucian Congregation from the time when the triumvirate was first formed, evoking a “development strategy” might understate the difficulties that had to be overcome. To a great extent, speaking of a “strategy for survival” would be more appropriate. Although China’s Constitution gives its citizens freedom of religious belief, its definition of religion is limited to five

---

37 Now in Shouxin city, the Shouxin City Research Council for the practice of Confucianism (Shouxin shi ruxue shejian yanjiuhui 壽新市儒學實踐研究會) has also been officially registered.
institutionalized groups -- Daoism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam. Under the current law, therefore, Confucianism and other belief systems are not recognized as religions. The term more generally used to identify these groups is "mixin" or "superstition." And these groups suffered under the harsh supervision of state authorities until the post-Mao reform.38 In 1982, the Communist Party Central Committee promulgated a document on religious affairs titled “The Basic Viewpoints and Policies on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period.”39 This official statement, known as Document 19, has since been the major official policy on religion in China. Though Document 19 has returned to the basic policy of pre-Cultural Revolution years and has even taken a more flexible attitude toward religion, yet its definition of religion remains the same as that in the Constitution. This means that an organization like the Confucian Congregation is not protected by the law; any gathering of the Congregation can be considered an illegal assembly and possibly have serious consequences. Therefore, the first thing for the triumvirate was and still is the very survival of their organization.

A popular Chinese saying mentions that “whenever there is a policy from above, there will be a countermeasure from below” (shang you zhengce, xia you duice 上有政策，下有对策). This may express the “typical” tug-of-war that exists between the state and society in China. Unless it is absolutely overpowered by the state -- as in the years of the Cultural Revolution -- the social sphere struggles to find a way to maintain its position. The most dangerous stance is to ignore the policy, which means to go underground and suffer from an illegal status. But more often, people would try to find a compromise; this means not fighting head on against the government policy, but finding ways to circumventing it. An euphemism for the latter is to “make full use of the policy” (yongzu zhengce 用足政策). In our case study, the local community adopted the latter stance. The strategy—to identify themselves as a Daoist group—may sound very simple. But this claim has only a marginal basis. When Master Li first assembled his own branch of The Teaching of Heart and Morality, it functioned as a “typical” sect or folk religion. In the government framework, this would identify his group as a mixin or superstition. But on the other hand Daoism in China has long been a loosely defined religion. Its traditional pantheon includes hundreds of gods, deities and immortals. Its syncretistic nature would allow for the deification of many beings, living or dead. After decades of turmoil, the whole system of Daoism suffered severe damages. Even in some traditional Daoist temples, especially those at the grassroots level, there may not be a single professionally trained Daoist. This further blurred the

38 The crackdown of the illegal "non-religions" is along the old track initiated by the Republic of China founded in 1912. In the 1950s and early 1960s, there were nationwide campaigns to wipe out the superstitions. During the Cultural Revolution, both the "legal religions" and the "superstitions" were treated as residues of feudalism and suffered immensely.

demarcation between the religion of Daoism and the “superstition” sect. As a matter of fact, one of the major approaches for the revival of popular religion in China was to take a “free ride” with the revival of Daoism, which was one of the five state-sanctioned institutional religions.40

Even though Mr. Li has never received any official Daoist training and his congregation does not refer to the “typical” Daoist canon41 or perform “typical” Daoist rituals, yet the Congregation does honor some Daoist deities and the triumvirate claimed for their congregation a Daoist identity. By doing so their congregation gained a legal or semi-legal status. These actions have thus solved the immediate problem of survival. Being identified with Daoism may prevent from being labeled a “superstitious cult.” This self-claimed identification may also offer an acceptable excuse for the local officials to offer support or give a convenient “let go” -- if they are willing to do so. But to a great extent, it is only a game of names that will probably continue in the future.

With survival no longer an immediate concern, the dedicated triumvirate could focus on their strategy of development. In reviewing decade-long development of the Congregation, we see that many of the events appear to have happened in a contingent manner, rather than as the result of a strategic plan. But underneath all the seemingly unplanned happenings we can discern a consistent principle. The Congregation leaders make use of all possible factors to justify and consolidate the development of the Confucian Congregation, always keeping in mind their long-term goal of achieving officially recognized legitimacy. For that purpose, they have been highly persistent but not without humility, patience and flexibility. Though their congregation is supposed to be “Confucian”, their strategy rather reminds of Laozi and his Daoism -- with water-like features of softness and penetration. The following points will help better understand their development strategy.

(a) Stick to the general social trend set by the authorities.

Rather than overtly confronting the political/administrative system (a strategy often suggested in the analysis state-society relationship), the Confucian Congregation prefers to avoid direct conflict with the authorities. Instead they try to take advantage of any favorable social trend set by the authorities. In 2004, the Communist Party Central Committee proposed to build socialist “harmonious society” as a strategic goal of China’s socialist development.42 The triumvirate


41 Even though it is claimed that Daodejing (道徳經) is one of the scriptures of the Confucian Congregation, there is not much evidence that this text plays any significant role. As far as we know Daodejing is neither posted on the walls of any of the Houses of the Dao nor chanted in any of the rituals. Unlike those popular Confucian classics, Daodejing is much more scholastic and may be too difficult for the Congregation.

42 Hu Jintao personally promoted the idea of “harmonious society” in his speeches and articles. In
immediately followed up and adopted “harmonious society” as a major slogan for the Congregation. After all, “harmony” is one of the fundamental values of Confucianism. While the Communist Party was vaguely alluding to China’s cultural tradition for directions in the on-going societal transformation, the slogan suited the Confucian Congregation just as well.

In 2006, China’s President Hu Jintao personally proposed the “Eight Glories and Eight Shames” as the essentials of socialist moral standard. The Confucian Congregation moved immediately to adopt the “Eight Glories and Eight Shames” as one of their own mottos. In all the Houses of Dao, the “Eight Glories and Eight Shames” are posted on the wall, in juxtaposition with their own “commandments” from Day One, the “Three Principles and Eight Points”. Both are regularly chanted in chorus as part of the congregation’s rituals.

When we participated in the opening ceremony of the House of Dao of the Huishan branch in 2010, we were impressed by the extent to which the official ideology seemed to have been internalized as an organic part of the Congregation. On the stage set up for speeches and performance, the backdrop was a huge painting of China’s motherland landscape with the Great Wall zigzagging across it. In addition, on the painting were two lines of large Chinese characters: “Carry forward Confucian Culture and Promote Social Harmony” (hongyang rujia wenhua, cujin shehui hexie 弘揚儒家文化，促進社會和諧). On the wall next to the stage these characters appeared in even larger size: “Love the Party, Love the Country and Develop the Congregation; Construct a Harmonious Society” (aidang aiguo xingjiao, goujian shehui xie 協助愛國興教，構建和諧社會). Except for the words “Develop the Congregation,” one could not tell if it might be an event sponsored by the propaganda department of the local Communist Party organization. Later we found these slogans were present in all the Congregation branches as if they were their own motto.

Insert Picture 5.

Legend: Slogan on the wall: “Love the Party, Love the Country and Develop the Congregation; Construct a Harmonious Society.”
© Chen Na

(b) Develop good guanxi with the local authorities and the community.

In dealing with the bureaucracy in China, people often say, “A higher-rank official may not be as important as a person immediately in charge” (xianguan bu ru xian


guan 程官不如現管). Since the Confucian Congregation sets its branches in villages, the head of the villagers’ council is the person immediately in charge. Though the village head has a position even lower than the lowest rank in China’s civil servant system, he is the person known as the “parent official” (fumuguan 父母官) in the village and is the one who has the final say in the local community.

“Without the support, or at least the consent, of the village cadres, we would not be able to develop the Congregation branch in a given village.” Mr. Chang told us, and he added, “This is true in any village.”

At the grassroots level, the development of a Confucian Congregation branch is almost always an issue of guanxi rather than one of principle or policy. As we discussed above, the Confucian Congregation has a fairly marginal status. Just because of such a status, however, the village head could have much leeway in making decision for its local development. “Yes or No” is at the discretion of the person in charge, and depends on guanxi. The triumvirate has to try all possible means to develop good guanxi with the villagers cadres. It is generally important that a person with established close guanxi in the village initiates contacts with local officials in order to introduce the Congregation. Detailed exchanges between the Congregation and local officials are indeed necessary to reach mutual understanding. But the fundamental point is for the Congregation to show sincere respect and humility, and be cooperative with the local authorities. After all, it is the local cadres who have to assume the responsibility and even face possible negative consequences if any problems develop in the local Congregation branch. Thus it is Mr. Chang’s task to handle the diplomatic affairs skillfully and successfully.

Another important constituent of the local authorities is the district police substation. One police district usually covers several villages. Again it is always good for someone with established guanxi with the local police or someone with sufficient “face” (面子 mianzi) to work as an introductory agent for the Congregation. On the part of the Congregation, it is important to report their activities to the police in a timely manner. “We always give the police a written report about our event beforehand,” said Mr. Chang. “And we would also invite them to come to the site and give us directions. In the first few times, they came and investigated what we were doing. But later they received our report and would not show up any more. We know the limits. We try not to create any inconvenience or troubles for the police.”

Equally important for the Congregation is to maintain good guanxi with the local communities. Since traditional culture is still influential in the rural communities,

---

44 Here “face” stands for the Chinese term “mianzi” (面子). Literally it refers to [a person’s] “face” but its connotation is recognized social status or personal influence, which can be “accepted” or “rejected” in the negotiation of guanxi.
it is therefore not difficult for villagers in general to accept the Confucian values preached in the Congregation. From a more practical standpoint, we were told that Confucian values and moral cultivation helped Congregation members improve their relationship among their own family members and in the neighborhood. On the other hand, the Congregation encourages its members to take part in activities contributing to public good, both as part of their own self-cultivation and as an approach for accumulating merits. These activities may also be seen as part of the public relations campaign of the Congregation. Related examples include cleaning public space in the village, repairing hill paths damaged by the flooding, etc. All these activities are positively valued and appreciated by the villagers and local cadres alike.

The changes in Laishui Village provide a convincing case. We first learned about Laishui from a retired official of the Mintong Public Security Bureau (see below) that Laishui used to be a village with very bad reputation because many villagers were involved in gambling, violence and crimes but the establishment of the local branch of Confucian Congregation helped change the situation. Later the village leaders of Laishui confirmed the positive changes and our interviewees shared with us lots of their personal stories of changes. Personal moral cultivation and family harmony are the main themes in our interviews. Increasingly more people in the village learned to do good things and to be good persons (好人 haoren). In the worst time, travelers would try to avoid taking roads passing through or by Laishui Village. “Nowadays, the old bad habits/behaviors are mostly gone. And our Village has become a model village in the Movement of Constructing the New Rural Society.” Mr. ZY, a male informant at the age of 46, told us.

(c) Explore any possible social capital for the development of the Confucian Congregation.

The first time we went to Mintong in 2010, we were welcomed by a group of four people at the train station. Two of them, both aged around sixty, had the manner of men with status and social experience. They proved to be two mid-level county government officials recently retired from their positions. They both worried about the declining moral standard in society and they enthusiastically supported the Confucian Congregation for its efforts to revive traditional values. One of them, extremely eloquent and persuasive in spite of his strong local accent, used to work in the county bureau of public security; the other in the government department of water management. Among the local population they belong to those who have seen much and know much of the world. Being experienced bureaucrats themselves, they know the bureaucracy inside out and are good at dealing with people from above. Though retired, they remain men with status and connections. They have helped Mr. Chang and the Congregation very much in its public relations work. At the county level they are the major “lobbyists” on behalf of the Confucian Congregation in its negotiation with the government.
The three members of the triumvirate, as well as their congregation, stem from the grassroots level in a very real sense. They have limited social capital or resources useful for the development of the Congregation. However, they are eager to reach out for any possible social capital and they are good at networking. They try to explore any guanxi network from among the local people, including retired government officials. They tend to be aggressively smart in making use of whatever social capital to which they have access. In some cases they may have stretched things beyond normal extent. The following examples illustrate this point.

As the Confucian Congregation developed rapidly, it drew the attention of scholars interested in the study of religion. In June 2010, several researchers from the Institute of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) visited the Confucian Congregation. Soon after, photos of the visitors with Congregation members were hung on the walls of the Houses of Dao with the words: “The Leaders of the Institute of Confucianism, CASS with the Congregation Members” or “Dr. XYZ from the Chinese Institute of Confucianism with Pan Yu.” CASS is the national level research institution in China; Although there is no “Institute of Confucianism” (rujiao yanjiusuo 儒教研究所) at CASS, a research center for Confucianism does exist as a subunit in the Institute of World Religions. But the leaders of the Confucian Congregation pay little attention to these details. The objective is obvious: using the title of “Institute of Confucianism” somewhat legitimates for them the very existence of a “Confucian Congregation.” Here the Chinese words for Confucianism is rujiao (儒教), that is, Confucianism as a religion. Captioned photos of scholars from Beijing together with members of the Congregation are powerful symbols on the walls of the House of Dao. Silently they make a subtle and powerful statement to anyone who visits the Congregation’s building, especially to the local cadres and police.

When we, two authors from Fudan University, initiated our research on the Confucian Congregation in November 2010, we were surprised to see members lined along the street leading to the House of Dao to welcome us. And we frowned at the red banners spanned across the street with the words “Warmly Welcome Leaders from School of Social Development, Fudan University to Give Directions!” and “Warmly Welcome Leaders from School of Journalism, Fudan University to Give Directions!” When we told the Congregation leaders that the welcome banners were inappropriate as we were neither leaders nor in a capacity to give directions here, they simply brushed it away, saying, “Oh, yes, you are leaders. You are from Fudan University, you are from the identified units there, right?”

Of course they knew what they were doing. The banners and the spectacular scenes were designed to make a show and had a double objective: on the one hand, to

---

45 At that time, Chen Na worked at the School of Journalism, Fudan University.
express their hospitality to the visitors; and on the other hand, to impress the locals, both the local cadres and villagers. Perhaps the latter goal weighed even heavier in their consideration, as it provided an occasion to demonstrate their important guanxi with national research institutions and some supposedly support from above. No doubt, this display functions as a powerful expression of their “soft power,” which is of great value in consolidating their position in the village and even in the county.

Their efforts for social capital were well rewarded. The visits of the researchers from CASS and Fudan University have not only brought the Congregation immediate “soft power” but also impact of far-reaching significance. When back in Beijing, the CASS researchers sent the Congregation books and other materials on Confucianism. They also helped arrange interactions between the Confucian Congregation and other Confucian or religious groups in China. And they helped spread the name of Confucian Congregation in the academic circles. The Fudan researchers brought more scholars into the field. And they helped arrange a visit of Dr. Tang Enjia (湯恩佳), a Hong Kong businessman and President of The Hong Kong Confucian Academy, to Confucian Congregation in October 2011. Dr. Tang enjoyed his visit and announced a donation on the spot to support Confucian Congregation. Later in the year, leaders of the Congregation were invited to Hong Kong to join in the celebration of Confucius and to exchange experience in promoting the revival of Confucianism.

(d) The game of names and the status of legitimacy.

The so-called “game of names” refers to changing names of the organization to seek status of legitimacy for the Confucian Congregations. In a sense, the development of Confucian Congregation has followed Deng Xiaoping’s (1904-1997) strategy designed for China’s post-Mao reform -- to cross the river by feeling the step-stones in the water, that is, with an attitude of tentative gradualism. Over the last ten years, the Confucian Congregation has taken many tentative steps in its move toward the status of a legitimate religious organization. In this effort, they have conducted organizational reforms resulting in structural changes. Beyond that, they have played a game of names. So far this calculated effort seems to be successful.

When Mr. Li first established himself as a master of the Teaching of Heart and Morality based on the “Three Principles and Eight Points”, he was seen as involved in the "business" of folk religion or folk healing, which was considered by the authorities as mixin or “superstition.” He could expect no recognition from the government, to say nothing about a legal status. When the triumvirate was formed in 2004 and adopted popular Confucian classics as their scriptures, a foundation was laid for the development of a congregation. Then, in 2006, the congregation vaguely claimed to be a Daoist group by naming itself “Shennong Temple”
(Shennong guan 神農觀). This shift was undertaken as a strategy to identify with one of the legally recognized religions.

Between 2008 and 2009, the group adopted a new name “Rujia Daotan” (儒家道壇). The Chinese character “道” (”Dao” or “Tao”) literally means the “Way.” As a philosophical concept it is more or less similar to the “logos” in the Greek tradition. While Daoism is the ism of Dao, each ism has its own Dao. Thus in Confucianism, there is the Confucian Dao. The phrase “道壇” literally means an altar to preach the Dao and can be simply understood as a place for the Dao; in our text, “道壇” (House of Dao) refers to both the building and the organization or congregation, similar to “church” in the Christian tradition. When the old name “Shennong Temple” (神農觀) turned Rujia Daotan (儒家道壇), the new name vaguely implied an affiliation with Daoism, which is in consistence with its Daoist claim in the earlier days. Meanwhile, the term rujia (儒家) means Confucianism as a school of thought. As a result the new name of Rujia Daotan alludes to a combination of Daoism and Confucianism. The key point is that the new name shifts toward the direction of Confucianism but the change in the name does not sound too abruptly.

In 2010, the Congregation started to adopt the name “Rujiao Daotan” (儒教道壇). The term rujiao (儒教) can be understood to identify either Confucian teachings or Confucianism as a religion. It all depends whether one takes jiao (教) as “teaching” or “religion.” Its use by the Congregation was particularly intended to strengthen its connection with Confucianism as a religion. Ever since the modern conception of zongjiao (宗教 religion) was introduced to China at the turn of the 20th century,46 many people have tried to treat Confucianism as a religion; even more, as China’s national religion.47 However, this opinion has never prevailed either academically or politically in China. This partly explains why Confucianism was not included in the five religions as defined in China’s legal system.48 This change of name makes no difference in English as both “Rujia Daotan” (儒家道壇) and “Rujiao Daotan” (儒教道壇) are translated as Confucian Congregation in English. But it makes a big difference in Chinese as the change from “Jia” (家) to “Jiao” (教) is a substantial move from non-religion to religion.

With the play of words in the game of names, the key issue is the justification for the very existence of the Confucian Congregation. The issue here is two-fold. One goal is for the Congregation to be recognized as a religious group. The other is for

47 Among those who tried to establish Confucianism as China’s national religion in the early 20th century, the most famous was Kang Youwei (康有爲); in recent years, those who propose to set Confucianism as the national religion include Kang Xiaoguang (康曉光), Jiang Qing (蔣慶), and Zhou Beichen (周北辰).
48 For another perspective on why Confucianism is not a religion in China, see Chen Na, “Why Is Confucianism Not a Religion? The Impact of Orientalism,” in *Zygon*, vol. 51, no.1 (March 2016).
the Congregation to gain a legal status as officially registered in the government. Unless there are major changes in the Chinese law, it would be impossible for a Confucian congregation to be recognized as a religious group. However, by placing the title of "Rujiao Daotan" above the gate of the House of Dao and by scheduling regular gatherings and activities, the Confucian Congregation has become a de facto religious group. Even so, its legal status remains a problem. But with an unexpectedly deft move, this problem was finally resolved.

In 2013 the triumvirate, together with their enthusiastic supporters, applied to the county government to establish the “Mintong County Research Council for the Practice of Confucianism” (Mintong xian ruxue shijian yanjiuhui 民同縣儒學實踐研究會) as a civil organization. Here the English word Confucianism stands for the Chinese term ruxue (儒學), which means Confucianism as scholarship or philosophy. The strategic phrasing of the “Practice of Confucianism” is a skillfully designed underlay for the legalization of the branches of Confucian Congregation. When they succeeded in registering the “Research Council” as a civil organization, all the branches of the Confucian Congregation were conveniently identified as the “Practice Bases” of this legally registered research organization.

In 2014, we revisited the Huishan branch of Confucian Congregation. At the House of Dao where we had witnessed its opening ceremony more than three years before, there were two signs at the gate of the building. On the top of the gate one could read “Rujiao Daotan” (儒教道壇) with the four Chinese characters laid out horizontally in bright yellow matched by a rich red background; and to the left of the gate it was referred to “The Huishan Practice Base of the Mintong County Research Council for the Practice of Confucianism” (Mintong xian ruxue shijian yanjiuhui Huishan shijian jidi 民同縣儒學實踐研究會匯山實踐基地). Sixteen black characters were laid out vertically on a piece of shining stainless steel.

VII. Discussions and Implications

Even in light of the rapid and comprehensive revival of religion in China, it is very unusual that a folk religion group could develop so rapidly, expanding into a "franchise" with half a dozen branches, and even gaining legal status from the government. The story of the Confucian Congregation provides a unique case for understanding the revival of Confucianism and the development of religion in China today.

There are many factors that contribute to the phenomenon of the Confucian Congregation. The macro social context of the reform era -- the reduced emphasis on Maoist ideology, loosened social control in general, and the religion resurgence trend nationwide -- is an important background factor, forming a favorable “socio-
political ecology” for the emergence of the Confucian Congregation. But in this specific case, the micro social context, that is, the highly religious local culture and the strong Confucian tradition in a remote area, creates a microclimate factor of decisive importance. In many other places, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to see the emergence and development of such an out-of-the-system folk religion group. Therefore, it is the local cultural tradition shared by the leaders and members of the Congregation, the retired government cadres, the village and police officials, and the villagers in general that provides the fertile local soil for the growth of the Confucian Congregation.

Given the environment, one must acknowledge the essential role played by the core members of the Congregation, that is, the charismatic personality of Mr. Li and his trio work team. This is not an easily replicable factor. While Mr. Li and his team achieved one success after another, his own former master, Mr. Han was still stuck with the old business of The Teaching of Heart and Morality and struggling to find a strategy for development or even survival. When the opening ceremony of the Huishan House of Dao ended, we were told that Mr. Han, Li’s former master, together with his current followers had been in the audience during the ceremony but had left immediately after its completion. We regretted having missed the legendary teacher of Master Li, and the opportunity this might have provided for us to gather pertinent information.

Although the Confucian Congregation may be considered as an example of a folk religion, it has many distinguishing characteristics. Several features differentiate the Confucian Congregation from other folk religions. In most cases, people gain access to folk religion, either the objects of worship, or the temple, or the master, or the rituals and performances, on an individual basis—seeking personal healing or blessing, or simply celebrating a private occasion. Even if an audience forms, most people in the group remain independent of one another. In contrast, members of Confucian Congregation come not only for immediate instrumental purposes but also for collective worship and moral self-cultivation. Participants have a strong sense of community and collectivity. Yes, there are some folk religions that form their own community groups to worship and celebrate festivals.


50 We have three other rural research sites located in Jiangsu Province, Hebei Province and Zhejiang Province respectively. In the Jiangsu site, our focus is on the rural guanxi tradition and its social impact. The Hebei site provides cases of folk religion revival in various forms. The Jiangsu and Hebei sites are unlikely to develop a religious group like Confucian Congregation. The Zhejiang site, which is about 90 kilometers to the north of Mintong in Fujian, also has a strong tradition of religion and Confucianism similar to that in Mintong but the Zhejiang site is much more open to the market and much more commercialized. In the Zhejiang site, our focus is on revival of family-clan tradition and reconstruction of ancestral halls.

51 Here the objects of worship include gods, deities and immortals, and may also include other things such as a tree (a case in the suburbs of Shanghai), a rock (a case in Sanya, Hainan), etc.
or events. These groups may meet once a year, or on several occasions a year, or once in a few years. They tend to be loosely organized and the nature of their organization tends to be *ad hoc*. In contrast, the Confucian Congregation is a long-term establishment with regular meetings and routine rituals. The House of Dao is their site of worship and serves in a sense as their community center. As a result members of the Confucian Congregation have a strong sense of belonging and solidarity as a congregation.

In some aspects, the Confucian Congregation is similar to some other “organized” folk religions or sectarianism in Chinese history such as *Luojiao* (羅教), *Sanyijiao* (三—教), and *Yiguandao* (一—道). We see, for example, the mysterious experience of the charismatic personality leading to supernatural power, an emphasis on moral issues in healing, etc. But on the whole the Confucian Congregation is relatively underdeveloped. There is no articulate and creative founder who would produce voluminous scripts far beyond the small syncretistic package of literature as presented above in Table Two. The Confucian Congregation does not claim a complex system of theology. Master Li embraces a mission to save and enlighten people, but he does not preach an end time of incoming disasters or an inexorable doom. He seems to have a more optimistic view about the future. In this sense, the Confucian Congregation is not a religion of salvation. It is possible that such a this-worldly orientation has helped the Congregation find acceptance from secular authorities.

Of reported revivals of folk religion over the last three decades in China, lots of cases have been based on previously existent religious traditions. The goal has been to revive or recreate something that had once existed in the local area but was subsequently lost in recent experience. The Confucian Congregation, especially its more advanced version, is on the whole a new system, its worship focuses on Confucius and the ritualistic chanting of popular Confucian classics. When a franchised branch starts in a village, its goal is not to revive a local religious

---


53 All of the three — *Luojiao* (羅教), *Sanyijiao* (三—教), and *Yiguandao* (一—道) — are influential Chinese folk religion sects. The *Luojiao* (aka. *Luoism*) was started by LUO Menghong (羅夢鴻 1442-1527) around 1500. Luo developed his belief system mainly from ideas of Buddhism and Daoism. The *Sanyijiao* which literally means “the Teaching of Three-in-One” was founded by LIN Zhao’en (林兆恩 1517-1598) in the mid 16th century. Lin combined the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism into his belief system but with Confucianism as the core. The *Yiguandao* literally mean the Consistent Way. It claims an origin traced back to pre-historical legendary figures and associations with many different schools of thought or religion in Chinese history. Its substantial development as an organized sect started in late 19th century and it became the most influential organized folk religion in China in the first half of 20th century. Each of the three folk religion sects went through ups and downs in history especially in the 20th century. The last few decades saw revival of them all both within and out of mainland China.

tradition but to set up a new establishment. Of course, as mentioned above, an important reason why this new organization is able to successfully enter a new site is that the setting is already steeped in the cultural tradition of Confucianism. Following this reasoning, we may say that the Confucian Congregation is essentially an organized religion or institutionalized religion based on Confucianism. No doubt the Confucian Congregation is not “purely” Confucian, since elements from Daoism and Buddhism are also evident. Yet this aspect of inclusiveness—which comes with syncretism—is an embedded feature of Chinese religion. When properly controlled, this inclusiveness may support flexibility and vitality in its development. Furthermore, this “impurity” fits well in the local cultural soil which is embedded with the tradition of the “diffused religion” of syncretism.

It is widely reported that many folk religions that revived or emerged on the mainland in the reform years are promoted by the local government for economic interest. The policy, known as “to play the drama of economy on the stage of culture” (wenhua datai, jingji changxi 文化搭台，经济唱戏), aims to develop folk religion as sites of culture (building temples, towers, museums, etc.) so as to attract tourism.55 In the case of the Confucian Congregation, however, although they do claim to carry forward traditional culture, their negotiation with the local authorities does not promise any economic interest. Of all the Congregation branches we have visited so far, none of them is positioned for tourism and there is no evidence whatsoever of religious commercialization.

Thus this new religious group embodies many adaptations and innovations. The Congregation leaders do not hesitate to admit that they have looked into other religions for examples of effective management and development. Obviously, their organizational system and franchised branch development strategy carries features of the Christian church. The group chanting ritual and the interactive style between the Congregation leader and the audience also entail a mixture of elements from both Christian and Buddhist tradition. On the other hand, there are also traces of influence from the Communist Party methodology in its work of organization, propaganda and mobilization. Mr. Chang’s personal knowledge of both the Christian church and the Communist Party may be a contributing factor in these aspects, even while the flexible and innovative thinking of the triumvirate has made these developments seem natural within the Confucian Congregation.

From the case of Confucian Congregation, we can draw some significant implications. Two immediate insights can be inferred from the spontaneous emergence and development of the Confucian Congregation. First, among the people at the grassroots level in the People’s Republic of China there exists an

innate desire for religion or, to put it more broadly, for a belief system to guide them and to give meaning to their lives. In the Mao era, the communist ideology attempted to provide such a belief system, but it proved to be superficial and ineffective. With the diminishing influence of Maoist ideology since the reform, a value vacuum or moral disorientation has been noted. In this setting it is only natural that people would investigate religions of all kinds, a societal trend that has led to religious revival. Second, there is the experience of the revival of Confucianism. It is assumed by many that the Chinese modernization, especially the New Culture Movement in the early 20th century and the subsequent emergence of communist movement, has cut all links with the Chinese tradition represented by Confucianism. But, like other studies included in this volume, the phenomenon of the Confucian Congregation suggests that this is not the case. Besides, one could also posit that even when the anti-traditional ideology prevailed during the Cultural Revolution, the basic values among the people at the grassroots level remained very much Confucian. Though often in a rather implicit or possibly unconscious way, traditional values such as the relationships among family members, the sense of community and the state, and the meaning of life, survived in what sociologist Peter Berger has identified as "vulgarized Confucianism." With the political pressure removed in the post-Mao reform, elements of the Confucian tradition returned spontaneously. The history of Confucianism in China explains in part why, against all the odds, the Confucian Congregation could develop and prosper. Therefore, it may be justified to make the statement that, since the New Culture Movement, Confucianism has been criticized and beaten but never totally wiped out in Chinese society.

We can further infer that, in a sense, the process of the revival of Confucianism has

---


57 For long time since 1950s, this has been an important view in the academic circles outside of China. See, for example, Levenson, Joseph. Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: The Problem of Historical Significance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); especially the discussion in “The Conclusion.” Even today, some scholars in the West still hold this view. A representative figure is historian Yu Yingshi. At various occasions in 2014, when he commented on the recent revival of Confucianism in China, Yu said, “in my opinion, it is kind of Kiss of Death.” See http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/gangtai/al-09192014093504.html, also http://note.youdao.com/share/?id=c1db78a2f538bf002b777c2cf16695e9&type=note&from=groupmessage&isappinstalled=0, both accessed April 20, 2015.


59 A good example of this spontaneity is seen in the rebuilding of an ancestral hall. Ancestor worship was criticized and banned during the Cultural Revolution, and many ancestral halls were destroyed or used for other purposes. Over the last twenty years, against all the government regulations, rebuilding of ancestral halls has become a trend in many places especially in southeast China. In Cangnan County, Zhejiang Province, where we did our fieldwork, the Chen family alone had rebuilt 123 Ancestral halls and temples by the year of 2006. Cf. Fan, Lizhu, Chen Na and Richard Madsen. “The Loss and Renewal of Cultural Heritage: Ethnographical Study on Lineage Traditions in Southern Zhejiang.” In Religion and Social Life in Greater Jiangnan, eds. Robert Weller and Fan Lizhu (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Press, 2015), 47-85. See also Chen Bisheng’s contribution to this volume.
served to reduce the tension or contradiction between China’s official ideology and its traditional culture. Under the theoretical framework of communism, traditional Chinese culture was labeled a residue of feudalism which should be condemned as a whole. In its place a new [cultural] system based on communist ideology should be established. But the fact is while the communist ideology provides a historical perspective and a scheme of social development, it does not provide a cultural base on which people can live their everyday life. All the efforts including the Cultural Revolution, failed to create such a sustainable revolutionary culture among the general population, meanwhile traditional culture suffered severe damages in the process. As a result, if a Chinese person wants to be considered a “normal” member of society, he or she must identify with communism ideologically and politically, and, at the same time, must follow many of the traditional cultural elements in everyday life—drawing on its basic values, ways of thinking, and principles to handle social relations. As the authorities have set these two aspects in opposition, and reinforced this tension through institutionalized rules and political pressure, a strong tension between their political and their cultural identities has been created among the people. This unhealthy situation prevailed during the Maoist era, though the ordinary Chinese people may or may not be conscious of it. While the reduced ideological and political control that has accompanied the reform has contributed to relaxing this tension, much remains to be done. In the case of the Confucian Congregation, many retired government officials were enthusiastically involved in its development. At the same time, some state and local officials were more or less hesitant to become involved in Congregation activities. In recent years, President Xi Jinping has personally promoted the revival of Confucianism, signifying a changing attitude toward traditional Chinese culture from the top. Meanwhile the spontaneous emergence of the Confucian Congregation implies there is support for such a change from the bottom. Although many details in the social and legal institutions are yet to be reformed and revised, there has already formed a general trend for the further revival and development of Confucian tradition in China.

With a history of over ten years, the Confucian Congregation represents an

---

60 In our field observation of the Confucian Congregation activities, we could still see from the face expressions of some in-office cadres the uncertainty and tension caused by political factors. Some are very subtle political issues. At different occasions, Zhu Weiqun (朱维群), a top-level official in charge of the United Front and religion affairs nationwide, made the statement that “Communist member should not believe in religion”. This kind of remarks – although they simply reflect the official ideological line— will surely increase the tension. Cf. [http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0617/c64387-21857277.html](http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0617/c64387-21857277.html), [http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_china/2014-11/5201895.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_china/2014-11/5201895.html), both accessed December 23, 2014.

61 Frequently Xi Jinping quoted from Confucius and other Confucian classics in his speeches and writings. On September 24, 2014, President Xi Jinping personally delivered a speech at the Ceremony in Celebration of the 2565th Birthday of Confucius and International Academic Conference. For the first time, the top leader of the communist party-state attended such an event. See [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-09/24/c_1112612018.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-09/24/c_1112612018.htm) accessed on January 23, 2015.
emerging religious establishment that is itself going through a series of changes. When Master Li first started to advocate the Teaching of Heart and Morality, he was simply a self-employed person making a living by providing special services. But now he is the head of a Congregation with seven branches and hundreds of members, preaching the Dao of Confucianism with the mission to save or enlighten people. Moreover, his initially illegal business has turned into an officially registered civil organization. Now the ambition of the triumvirate has gone beyond the Congregation and entered the public arena. In 2013, they applied to build a Confucius Culture Park in the county seat. They have received permission from the county government to build a large Confucian temple on a square in an old public park. While they have received this piece of land for construction, they have yet to raise the necessary fund of ten million Yuan (about US$1,600,000) to cover the other cost. Based on the information from our field interviews, it seems that the Congregation’s economic situation is still at risk, because of debts generated from building the Houses of Dao.

Ever since our initial research trip, we have been asking ourselves: “What would be the future of the Confucian Congregation?” Having witnessed the unexpected happenings that occurred one after another over the last few years, we are very cautious in making any predictions. As researchers we will continue our observation with an open mind, filled with enquiring curiosity. The following are some of the questions we will continue to explore.

1. The Confucian Congregation is a religious group based on the initial leader’s personal charisma. If this charismatic person is gone or the triumvirate collapses, will the Congregation survive? And how?
2. The Confucian Congregation is a rural religious group and almost all members are local villagers with a relatively low level of education and limited experience beyond their own community. But the younger generation is much better educated as well as more open to urban life experience. Will they carry on this tradition of Confucian Congregation? As the rural population declines with the rapid urbanization in China, will there be enough members to sustain the Congregation and guide its further development?
3. Though the Confucian Congregation has been successful in developing its ritualization, organization and institutionalization, yet the membership tends to be largely rural. Considering that official discourses seem to open a new space for the development of Confucianism, is it possible for the Congregation to expand beyond its base in the countryside, in a move toward urban development?
4. The Confucius Culture Park is not an easy project to sustain. In addition to the funding issue, there are unexpected risks and pitfalls in this more complicated urban environment. Any mismanagement could be negatively and seriously consequential. Will this culture park project prove to be a
stillbirth or even a setback in the development of the Congregation, or will it be another success leading the Congregation to a new horizon?