

# Confucianism as an “Organized Religion”

## An Ethnographic Study of the Confucian Congregation

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**ABSTRACT:** This is an ethnographic study of the Confucian Congregation—an emerging religious group in Fujian Province, southeast China—with an account of the Congregation’s origin, belief and rituals, organization, and development strategy. The Congregation started with one person providing supernatural healings, and it developed into an “organized religion” with hundreds of members in seven franchised branches. Furthermore, by taking advantage of the contemporary trend of the revival of Confucianism in China, Congregation leaders were even able to achieve a seemingly impossible feat—a legitimate status for their “superstitious” group.

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese religion, Confucianism, Confucian Congregation, folk religion

This is an ethnographic and preliminary study of an emerging religious group in China, the newly established Confucian Congregation in Mintong County,<sup>1</sup> Fujian Province, southeast China. It is a grassroots-level case of the ongoing revival of Confucianism.

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In this study, we take Confucianism as a term that covers three related concepts in Chinese—*Ruxue* (儒学), *Rujia* (儒家), and *Rujiao* (儒教). Roughly speaking, *Ruxue* (lit., “Confucian studies”) is chiefly used to refer to Confucianism as a philosophy or scholarship; *Rujia* (lit., “Confucian school of thought”) often refers to the sociopolitical theory that supports the traditional imperial system, also known as “institutional Confucianism;” and *Rujiao* (lit., “Confucian teachings”) is often used to identify the folk religion (or “diffused religion”<sup>2</sup> as identified by C. K. YANG) based on the Confucian tradition. To date, most studies of the revival of Confucianism in China focus on *Ruxue* and *Rujia*. In the research literature on *Rujiao*, case studies on a range of topics include examinations of the revival of folk religion, often tracking the overlap of Confucian tradition with Daoism.<sup>3</sup> Others trace the revival of family-clan tradition and ancestor worship; in these studies, the literature most often considers Confucianism to be an expression of culture rather than religion.<sup>4</sup> There are also studies focusing on ritual aspects of Confucianism, such as those practiced at the Temple of Confucius.<sup>5</sup>

Our current study is unique in its focus on the metamorphosis of Confucianism in an officially registered incarnation of organized religion known as the “Confucian Congregation.” From its beginning, the Confucian Congregation was rooted in folk religion, providing shamanistic healing services that might understandably be identified as *mixin* (迷信) or “superstition”<sup>6</sup> by government authorities. Over time, this folk religious tradition merged with the Confucian philosophical and ethical tradition, thus functioning as a system of both healing and moral cultivation. Gradually this movement adopted popular Confucian classics as its divine texts and designed its own rituals of worship of Confucius. In time, this popular tradition developed into an “organized religion”<sup>7</sup> with its own House of Dao (道坛).<sup>8</sup> In 2013, the Confucian Congregation achieved legal status as the “practice base” of the Research Council of Confucianism, officially registered by the county government as a civil organization.

Since 2010, we have made three field trips and conducted extensive interviews with Congregation leaders on two occasions away from the field site. Our research methodology includes participant observation, personal interviews, and archival studies. In this report, we describe how the Confucian Congregation, an initially “illegitimate” group, has struggled against the odds in its negotiation for survival, development, and legalization. The history of the Confucian Congregation illustrates that some important concepts in Chinese society, such as religion, “superstition,” and cultural tradition, have undergone *de facto* redefinition in ongoing state-society interactions in the People’s Republic of China.

## THE CONFUCIAN CONGREGATION

### Origin and Early Development

Mintong is a coastal county in northeast Fujian Province in southeast China. Traditionally, a large percentage of the population has made a living directly or indirectly from fishing and other businesses related to the sea. According to the *Mintong County Gazetteer* (《民同县志》),<sup>9</sup> Mintong was established as a county in the third year of the Taikang Era of the Jin Dynasty (282 C.E.). A local legend suggests that the famous Daoist master GE Hong (葛洪, 284–364 C.E.) once practiced alchemy in the local mountains, initiating the local tradition of Daoism. By the 1990s, there were 22 professional Daoist priests in Mintong. During the Jianyuan years of the Southern Qi Dynasty (480–482 C.E.), Buddhism started to spread in Mintong. In the 1990s, there were 109 Buddhist temples with 161 ordained monks and nuns. Since the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127 C.E.), Mazu (妈祖) worship<sup>10</sup> has been popular in Mintong, which today is the proud seat of the second largest Mazu temple in Fujian Province.

In addition to officially recorded religions, Mintong has a rich tradition of folk religions and other local belief systems, with Confucianism the most widespread belief system at the grassroots level. The reconstruction of ancestral halls and recompilation of lineage books are now very common in this area.<sup>11</sup> In many rural communities, belief in folk-healers and miracle workers is an institutionalized tradition, allowing for smooth transfer of mysterious spiritual power between generations through established rituals and ceremonies. Despite decades of government effort to wipe out “superstition,” most local people resort to deities and supernatural power, as a normal practice, to solve a wide range of personal problems, from cure of disease to avoidance of threatening events. Compared with many other areas in China, Mintong appears to possess unusually fertile soil for religion.

At the time of our first visit to Mintong in 2010, the Confucian Congregation had already developed into a systematically organized religious group. The head of the Congregation, LI Yusheng (李玉生), known as Master Li, was not only the leading organizer but also worshiped by the members as a deity with supernatural power. After we had earned his confidence, Master Li was ready to answer our questions about the Congregation’s history and plans for future development.

Tracing the origin of the Confucian Congregation takes us back to 1976, when the Cultural Revolution was moving toward its end. That year, a 45-year-old man named HAI experienced a serious mental disturbance that local people believed to be a kind of “bewitched illness” and for which he initially could find no cure. Later that year, he met

a folk-healer named TAO, who observed that Hai was not an ordinary person but a possessed man with supernatural potential. Tao conferred upon him the divine title “True Man of Linshanshui” (林山水真君). Hai soon recovered and was even able to treat others suffering from illness. As a man with supernatural power, “Master Linshanshui” started to recruit apprentices. Since the late 1970s, Hai has been preaching and practicing his “Dao” (道) of “Xindejiao” (心德教, “Teaching of Heart and Morality”), which he claimed to be founded by the God of Shennong (神农), a mythological emperor, culture hero, and reputed founder of agriculture and Chinese medicine.<sup>12</sup> Xindejiao emphasizes family ethics and aims to teach and cultivate the masses. Hai himself was illiterate; his oral preaching was considered divinely inspired, a “Heavenly Book without Written Words” (《无字天书》). Xindejiao has spread to more than ten counties, guided by Master Hai and his followers. Some early followers later became independent practitioners themselves, with their own followers. Among these in a later generation was a man named LI Yusheng, who subsequently became the founder of the Confucian Congregation.

Li Yusheng (b. 1965) was born into a peasant family in Geling Village of Mintong. With only a junior middle school education in the countryside, he moved at age 26 to the county seat for better life opportunities. For a while, he drove a three-wheeled pedicab, but this work exhausted him, leaving him in serious ill-health by age 31. After many medical interventions failed to achieve a cure, Li returned to his home village, where he was treated by Master Han, a disciple of True Man of Linshanshui. Over the course of five months, Li experienced miraculous healing and recovered totally. During this same period, a woman named WAN Aiping (万爱平), who suffered severe mental and physical problems, also came to Master Han for treatment. But she left in less than a month without being cured.

After being cured by Master Han, Li became his disciple and learned to practice the *Teaching of Heart and Morality*, then soon felt called to this work himself. In 1998, he rented a house in the suburb of Mintong, made a pledge to the God of Shennong, and started his own business as a master of the *Teaching of Heart and Morality*. By this time, Wan Aiping’s condition had worsened and she had made several suicide attempts. In a desperate move, her family carried her to Master Li for treatment. After 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 she felt fully recovered, Wan made seven vows to the God of Shennong and the local earth god and goddess to give up family life and follow Master Li wholeheartedly to serve the Dao. Thus Wan became Master Li’s first follower. One day in October, Wan suddenly said to herself, “I am Pan Yu (潘雨). I am Lan Xiang (岚香).”<sup>13</sup> This revelation was considered by both Master Li and Wan as a divine omen. Wan later took

these as her divine titles and became empowered with the “supernatural” capacity of being unusually energetic and eloquent. Pan Yu and Master Li thus formed a close relationship dedicated to the further development of the Dao.

In 2003, Pan Yu helped raise 40,000 yuan and purchased 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 the Dao. When he was a follower of Master Han, Li had learned about the doctrines of *Three Principles and Eight Moral Issues* and *Twelve Rules for Observing the Teaching of Heart and Morality*—commandment-like statements for moral discipline and self-cultivation established and passed down by Master True Man of Linshanshui. Having adopted these doctrines in his earlier practice, Li now added some popular Confucian classics, including the *Three-Character Classic* (《三字经》), *Rules of the Disciple* (《弟子规》), and *The Classic of Filial Piety* (《孝经》). This assemblage of texts, which was much more directly related 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 and ethical teaching, the new practice seemed to pay more attention to self-cultivation and Confucian values as a whole, even as supernatural healing power remained an inseparable part of the practice.

Another important person in the development of the Confucian Congregation was CHANG Shibiao (常世标). When, in 2004, Chang’s wife suffered severe back pain, they went for medical treatment in the local hospital, but the symptoms did not seem to improve. One day, a relative suggested they try the Confucian Congregation.<sup>14</sup> They went to the Congregation for treatment and in about a month Chang’s wife totally recovered. The efficaciousness of the treatment gave Chang enough reason to be interested in the Confucian Congregation, and in time he became an active member working together with Master Li and Pan Yu. In the Congregation, Chang was considered well-educated with his high school education. He had returned to his home village after graduating high school and for quite a few years was the village Secretary of the Communist Party Branch. With his experience in local administration, Chang was familiar with the bureaucratic system and knew well how to deal with authorities and cut through red tape.

A “triumvirate” was thus formed as the core leadership in the Confucian Congregation. Master Li, calm and composed, is a man with a charismatic personality. In a controlled and unhurried manner, he talks with persuasive eloquence, seldom pausing to search for words or expressions. He does not pretend to be sophisticated, and his simple style gives people an impression of his sincerity and trustworthiness. Pan Yu, in her early forties, has shining eyes and an energetic presence,

and at times bursts into laughter. She speaks more often than the other two at Congregation gatherings and tends to do so emotionally and passionately. And, there is no doubt she is an experienced organizer. Chang is a this-worldly person among the three leaders and in fact has never claimed to possess any supernatural capacity. But in handling external affairs, especially dealing with local officials and government bureaucracy, he definitely is competent. His knowledge of the social structure and his pious belief in the Dao make him a valuable diplomat for the Congregation.

In learning the development of the Congregation, we were told that it was the will of the divine and their own *Yuanfen* (缘分),<sup>15</sup> or fateful coincidence, which led the three to meet each other and form such a competent team. They appear to be a close-knit leadership team based both on religious devotion and complementary personalities. Over the last ten years, they have managed to develop the Confucian Congregation into a systematically organized religious entity.

### **Beliefs and Rituals**

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 reading “Confucian Congregation” (儒家道坛).<sup>16</sup> Once inside, we saw evidence that the title “Confucian Congregation” was only about two years old. On one of the award banners hanging on the wall were the 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

As late as the spring of 2008, then, members of the Dadao Branch were still addressed as “Brothers and Sisters of the Dadao Shennong Temple” (大岛神农观众兄弟姐妹). Here the Chinese word for “Temple”—观—usually refers to Daoist temples.

Although the group has changed its name to Confucian Congregation and the major god from Shennong to Confucius, the figure of Shennong nevertheless remains important, both for his historical impact in the development of the group and as a major god for worship. In fact, the group’s organizational development has included 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 changed to the Confucian Congregation, it carried the old beliefs and rituals into the

TABLE 1. Gods and Deities in the Confucian Congregation

<i>Sacred Title (Chinese)</i>	<i>Sacred Title (English)</i>	<i>Notes</i>
神农上帝	Shennong God	a folk religion god
太上老君	The Supreme God of Daoism	i.e. Laozi, legendary founder of Daoism
观世音菩萨	Arya Avalokiteshvara	a.k.a. The Mercy Bodhisattva or Guanyin of Buddhism
韩元帅	Marshal Han	a Daoist deity
南山老君	Lord of Southern Mountain	i.e. Master Li
潘雨	Pan Yu	i.e. Wan Aiping
岚香	Lan Xiang	i.e. Wan Aiping
至圣先师	The Greatest Sage and Teacher	i.e. Confucius

new establishment. As a result, there is a long list of gods and deities the group reveres.

Table 1 provides a good example of syncretism, with a list including sacred figures of Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and folk religion, as well as deified persons of this group. Master Li’s divine title “Lord of Southern Mountain” (南山老君) sounds very Daoist. In that tradition, *laojun* (老君) [lit., “old lord”] is often used to entitle a deity; for instance, Laozi (老子) is entitled “Supreme Lord” or “Supreme God” (太上老君). Some other Daoist deities or immortals also bear this title. Congregation members treat the divine beings listed above as having supernatural power, paying tribute to and celebrating them on particular occasions, and praying to them for blessings and protection.

Meanwhile, the Confucian Congregation has adopted various texts (listed in Table 2) that are printed in large characters and posted on the walls in the main hall of the House of Dao. Although the literature is highly syncretistic, it is not a mixture from the “three teachings”<sup>17</sup>—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—as is the case with the gods and deities in Table 1. Rather, it consists mainly of pieces drawn from popular Confucian classics, in addition to dozens of lines set up by the group’s masters or drawn from folk tradition and government documents. For example, the *Eight Glories and Eight Shames* first appeared in a 2006 speech by Hu Jintao, China’s “paramount leader” from 2003–2013, and was then established by the government as the principle for moral development in the program of “socialist cultural construction.” On the whole, the theme of the list in Table 2 is Confucian, with an emphasis on ethics and values. This is also the basic theme of preaching in the Congregation, such as how to honor the Confucian values or how to be a decent person through self-cultivation and self-discipline.

TABLE 2. Major Texts of the Confucian Congregation

<i>Title (Chinese)</i>	<i>Title (English)</i>	<i>Notes</i>
《三从八德》	<i>Three Principles and Eight Moral Issues</i>	Originally set up by Master Hai
《遵守心德十二条例》	<i>Twelve Rules for Observing the Teaching of Heart and Morality</i>	Originally set up by Master Hai
《弟子规》	<i>The Rules of the Disciple</i>	Popular Confucian literature
《三字经》	<i>The Three-Character Classic</i>	Popular Confucian literature
《孝经》	<i>The Classic of Filial Piety</i>	Popular Confucian literature
《圣人经》	<i>The Classic of the Saints</i>	Folk religion literature
《八荣八耻》	<i>Eight Glories and Eight Shames</i>	Principles of socialist values put forward by the government
《修心八法》	<i>Eight Points for Self-Cultivation</i>	Folk mottos for self-cultivation

These texts have a relatively simple style. Some of them, such as *Three Principles and Eight Moral Issues* and *Twelve Rules for Observing the Teaching of Heart and Morality*, are each fewer than twenty lines. Others, such as the *Three-Character Classic* and *Rules of the Disciple*, are traditional Confucian texts of about three to five printed pages each, without annotations. But these popular versions of Confucian classics are written in such a way that they are rhymed and very musical, easy to chant and memorize. Traditionally they were used for beginning readers to develop literacy. In the Confucian Congregation, members are required to learn these popular classics. In fact, group chanting of these classics (and listed literature) is a very important collective ritual in the Congregation. When some thirty uniformed people chant the classics in chorus, it is impressively musical and highly ritualistic.

Such chanting rituals, much like the practice in Buddhist temples, and other collective activities distinguish the Confucian Congregation from many other traditional folk religion gatherings. Folk religions are typically localized within one village or a few neighboring villages, and visits to temples tend to be individual and instrumental. In contrast, the Confucian Congregation has franchised its branches in different villages and even different counties. It forms a highly organized religious group with a much wider network. Collective activities (with their unified dress code), a common divinity, shared literature, 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, providing a strong sense of belonging and thus promoting solidarity among the members. Although many Congregation members may not fully understand all the lines in these classics, they experience the mysterious power in such chanting. Some

members told us that collective chanting made them more relaxed and energetic.

On the other hand, the Confucian Congregation also provides a sacred space for traditional individual rituals. The Huishan Branch provides a good example. The House of Dao in Huishan is a three-storyed building. The first floor is a big hall containing a shrine with a life-sized statue of Confucius sitting on a chair with two disciples standing next to him, one on each side. This is where the Congregation meetings and rituals such as collective chanting take place. On the second floor are a meeting room, an office, and a storeroom. The third floor is a temple where statues of gods and deities (see Table 1) plus other Daoist immortals are situated on a platform. 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.” People with specific issues visit the third-floor temple behaving just as people would in any other Chinese temple—burning incense sticks and kneeling to the gods and deities to pray for blessings.

Often, people come to Master Li or Pan Yu for personal services, most frequently for relief from emotional, mental or physical miseries. A complicated ritual process is involved. First, Master Li checks with the person about their birth time, lineage, and personal sufferings. Then, after calling upon the gods for help, he functions as the Lord of Southern Mountain, and healing takes place through the Lord’s interaction with the treated person. Master Li may make certain mysterious revelations, raise moral challenges, and preach Confucian moral teachings, while the person being treated undertakes personal self-examination of moral behavior and confesses any wrong-doing. This interaction seems similar to a session of psychoanalysis or psychiatric treatment. Master Li acknowledges that many who come for help are suffering from emotional and mental disorders, but he emphasizes the importance of supernatural power and Confucian ethics in his treatment.

In addition to personal counseling sessions, there are two rituals in the treatment. One is the magic (or talisman) drawing. Master Li completes a drawing on a slip of paper to be kept by the client or burned and put in a cup of water to be drunk by the client. In some cases, Master Li simply blesses the water without providing any visible talisman, and the client drinks it. This practice can be traced to Daoist traditions. The other ritual is a physical exercise which seems to be a kind of *Qigong* (气功).<sup>18</sup> The client is asked to sit straight on a chair and repeat two simple movements in turn—using the palms to clap on the lap and then raising the feet and stepping back down on the floor. These exercises are said to promote and regulate the circulation of *Qi*, fundamental for a healthy body. Any misery is understood to be accompanied by an irregularity of *Qi*.

In many ways, the beliefs and rituals of Confucian Congregation are similar to those of other Chinese traditional folk religions. What distinguishes 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 than for instrumental worship.

## **Organization**

For many religious organizations based on mysterious beliefs, initial development depends upon the perceived supernatural power of a charismatic personality. In the case of the Confucian Congregation, this personality is Master Li, whose earliest followers were attracted by his charisma, eloquence, and miracles. But the success of Confucian Congregation in its expansion into a systematically organized group with hundreds of followers is due to the team efforts of the three leaders—Master Li, Pan Yu, and Chang. By 2013, the Confucian Congregation not only had established seven branches but also was officially registered as a legally recognized civil organization: Mintong County Research Council for the Practice of Confucianism (民同县儒学实践研究会). We offer here an overview of the establishment of the Huishan branch as an example of the organizational growth of the Confucian Congregation.

The third of November 2010 was an unusual day in the Huishan Village of Mintong County. A recently constructed three-story house was colorfully decorated, with streamers reaching 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 (唢呐) and other instruments; to the right of the porch a makeshift stage was set up for this special occasion. The road leading from the village entrance to the new building was decorated with banners and signboards. Many people, including teens from the local school, lined 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 to welcome the VIP guests. The celebration marked a special event in this small community of Huishan—the opening ceremony for the Huishan House of Dao of the Confucian Congregation. The significance of the event was reflected in the smiling faces of proud Congregation members, who for years had aspired to having a dedicated House of Dao in their own village.

Our drive along the country road from the county seat to the consecration ceremony took more than an hour. Finally we arrived at Huishan, a village situated on a peninsula with little access to the surrounding territory. When we asked why such an inconvenient location had been selected, we were told that although this setting presented challenges,



**Photo 1.** *Congregation members and school children lined up to welcome guests to the opening ceremony of the Huishan Confucian House of Dao. Courtesy of Na CHEN.*

Confucian Congregation leaders had discerned in the process of its development that this was the will of the divine. As we learned more about the village, we came to better understand the extent of the challenges. Huishan Village is a traditional fishing community with a population of seven hundred. While today fewer people are directly engaged in fishing, the overwhelming majority of villagers still make their living from activities related to the sea. Perhaps due to the uncertainties and risks of such work, religion has been an important and inseparable part of community life. On the main road through the village stands a small temple, about 6.5 feet high, housing the earth god and goddess. Fresh ashes from incense sticks and imitation paper money are scattered in and around a burner in front of the temple. About 300 feet from the beach is the Sea God Temple, which had been shut down during the Cultural Revolution and reopened in the 1980s. On the main street, a Protestant church is situated among the houses. Like many villages in Mintong, magic or shamanism has long been embedded in the local tradition. These activities regained popularity soon after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. In terms of religious ecology, Huishan Village seems too crowded to welcome any newcomers, but Confucian Congregation leaders do not agree. Identifying many local rituals as simple superstition (迷信), they insist that the Confucian Congregation represents the Right/Genuine Dao (正道) and will help the local people pursue the correct path of life. It was with such a sense of mission that the Confucian Congregation expanded to Huishan more than ten years ago.

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 place in their house a statue of Guanyin (观音), a Buddhist bodhisattva commonly known as the Goddess of Mercy, very popular among the Chinese, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, especially in east and south-east China. Reports of this Guanyin's effectiveness and Master Li's supernatural power spread among the villagers, who began going to Su's house to pay tribute to Guanyin. Many also asked Master Li for help. At first, he would travel to the village on call, not only delivering his services but also preaching the Dao of Confucianism. 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 were able to learn quickly, memorizing important texts within months or even weeks. Perhaps not all the villagers fully understood what they had learned to chant, but they found the learning process and the sense of togetherness satisfying.

Although Li is not well-educated, his preaching appeals greatly to the villagers. He comes from a background very similar to theirs, and he knows well the kind of lives they live and problems they face. He preaches traditional Confucian topics, such as how to be a decent person through self-cultivation and how to handle relations in the family and community. His main themes encourage kindness (劝善), filial piety (孝道), tolerance and yielding (忍让), and humility (谦恭). These traditional Confucian values are often received as fresh ideas by persons whose childhoods and youth were more or less spent under the shadow of anti-traditionalist Maoism. With all the changes they have experienced over the last 35 years, villagers in a remote rural community such as Huishan may find that these values still provide an effective approach to harmonious relations both at home and in the neighborhood. During our visit, the majority of Li's listeners were married female villagers, as most male villagers were busily engaged in their work outside the home. When a husband returned home, his wife might insist that he accompany her to the Congregation's activities. In this way, many husbands have been introduced to the Confucian texts and teachings. Pan Yu proved to be an excellent organizer, especially among the female villagers.

As the Congregation became more popular, more villagers—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, and pressure increased to build a House of Dao. In less than two years, a fundraising campaign among the members raised more than 200,000 yuan. While this fell more than 100,000 yuan short of the goal, construction nevertheless was begun, in part on borrowed funds and with much of the labor donated by Congregation members.



**Photo 2.** *The audience waiting for the start of the opening ceremony of the Huishan Confucian House of Dao. Courtesy of Na CHEN.*

The Congregation’s opening ceremony began with an assembly on the makeshift stage outside the house, followed by speeches from dignitaries, chanting of Confucian classics, and drama performances. The assembly then moved inside the house, where an elaborate ritual of consecration was performed, with a series of announcements, sacrifice offerings, burning incense, and repeated bowing and kneeling. The unveiling of the Confucius statue signified the climax of the ceremony. This civic building thus was transformed into the Huishan Village House of the Confucian Dao, now ascribed with a divine nature.<sup>19</sup>

In due time, the Huishan Congregation found a group leader—TANG Jinxia, a 40-year-old married woman who years earlier had suffered physical and emotional troubles. Eventually she was introduced to Master Li, who helped her recover from protracted miseries. Now, Tang is in charge of the Huishan branch of Confucian Congregation, assisted by a group of enthusiastic activists. She organizes regular study of Confucian classics in the House of Dao and leads members in volunteer efforts to clean public areas in the village. Tang does not claim any supernatural power herself, and in offering advice and counsel she draws on Confucian ideas, common sense, and what she has learned from Master Li. She credits all she has done as part of her personal cultivation to accumulate merit or virtue (积德).

That is the story of the Huishan branch of the Confucian Congregation. Since its formation in 2004, the Congregation has established seven branches, of which five are in Mintong County and two in



**Photo 3.** Kowtow (磕头 ketou) at the consecration ceremony for the unveiling of the statue of Confucius. Courtesy of Lizhu FAN.



**Photo 4.** Ritual burning at the consecration ceremony for the unveiling of the Confucius statue. On the table are offerings. Courtesy of Lizhu FAN.

neighboring Shouxin County. The developmental processes of all the branches are similar, though each has a unique story. Each branch functions as a relatively independent unit, while the three leaders circulate among them to provide services and help coordinate affairs.

## Development Strategy

If we trace the early history of the Confucian Congregation from the time the leadership team was first formed, focusing on a “development strategy” would risk understating the difficult situations the members faced. To a great extent, speaking of their “survival strategy” would be more appropriate. Although China’s constitution gives citizens freedom of religious belief, its definition of religion is limited to five institutionalized groupings—Daoism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam. Under current law, Confucianism and other belief systems would not be recognized as religion. The term more generally used to identify such groups is “superstition.” In 1982, the Communist Party promulgated a document on religious affairs entitled “The Basic Viewpoints and Policies on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period,” known as *Document 19*.<sup>20</sup> This official statement has since been the major official policy on religion in China. Though *Document 19* takes a more flexible attitude toward religion, its definition of religion remains the same. This means that an organization such as the Confucian Congregation is not protected by the law; any gathering of the Congregation can be labeled an illegal assembly and possibly suffer serious consequences. Therefore, the first thing for group leaders is the very survival of their organization.

There is a popular Chinese saying: “Whenever there is a policy from above, there will be the countermeasure from below” (上有政策，下有对策). This may express the “typical” tug-of-war between state and society in China. Unless it is absolutely overpowered by the state—as in the Cultural Revolution—society struggles to find a way, quite often marginally justified, to maintain its position. A common practice is to find a compromise that achieves possible results; this means not fighting government policy head-on but rather finding ways to circumvent it. A euphemism for the latter is to “make full use of the policy” (用足政策). In this case study, the local community adopted the latter stance. The following points will help explain this development strategy.

First, follow the general social trend set by the authorities. Rather than fight the political/administrative system, the Confucian Congregation would try to avoid direct conflict with the authorities and instead try to take advantage of any favorable authoritarian social trend. In 2004, the Communist Party Central Committee proposed “harmonious society” as a strategic goal of China’s socialist development. Group leaders immediately 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 turning to China’s cultural tradition for directions for on-going societal transformation,<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> The Confucian Congregation moved immediately to adopt the phrase as one of its own mottos. In all the Houses of Dao, it is posted on the wall, along with the motto from Day One of the *Three Principles and Eight Moral Issues*. 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. The backdrop of the makeshift stage was a huge painting of China's motherland landscape with the Great Wall zigzagging across it. On the painting were two lines of large Chinese characters: "Carry forward Confucian Culture and Promote Social Harmony" (弘扬儒家文化, 促进社会和谐). On the wall next to the stage was "Love the Party, Love the Country and Develop the Congregation; Construct a Harmonious Society" (爱党爱国兴教, 构建和谐社会). Except for the words "Develop the Congregation," one could not tell if the gathering might be sponsored by the propaganda department of the local Communist Party. Later, we discovered these slogans were displayed in all the Congregation branches as if they were their own.

Second, develop good *guanxi* with the local authorities and community. The term *guanxi* is the transliteration of the Chinese word 关系 (lit., "connection" or "relationship") and refers to social interactions "in which personal relationships are considered more important than laws and written agreements."<sup>23</sup> At the grassroots level, the development of a Confucian Congregation branch is almost always an issue of *guanxi* rather than of principle or policy. As we discussed above, the Confucian Congregation has a fairly marginal status that allows the village head much leeway in making decisions for local development. "Yes or No" is at the discretion of the person in charge and depends on *guanxi*, and the Congregation might try all possible means to develop good *guanxi* with the village cadres. Quite often, it would be important for a person with established close *guanxi* in the village to initiate contact with the local officials and help to introduce the Congregation, but the fundamental point is for the Congregation to show sincere respect and humility, and cooperate with local authorities. After all, it is the local cadres who must assume responsibility and even face possible negative consequences if a problem develops in the local Congregation branch.

Another local authority is the district police. Again, it is always good for someone with established *guanxi* with the local police or with sufficient "face" to work as an introductory agent for the Congregation, and it is important for the Congregation to report its activities to the police in a timely manner. "We always give the police a written report about our event beforehand as to time, place, and how many people," said

Chang. “And we would also invite them to come to the site and give us directions. At first, they did come and see what we were doing. But later they received our report and would not show up anymore. We know the limits. We try not to create any inconvenience or troubles for the police.”<sup>24</sup>

Equally important for the Congregation is to maintain good *guanxi* with the local community. Fortunately, there is still much traditional cultural soil in the rural communities and it is generally not difficult for villagers to accept the Confucian values preached in the Congregation. From a more practical standpoint, we have learned from personal interviews that Confucian values and moral cultivation have helped Congregation members improve their relationships among their own family members and in the neighborhood. In addition, the Congregation would also organize its members in activities for the public good, both as part of their own self-cultivation and as an approach for accumulating merit.<sup>25</sup> Examples include cleaning public spaces and repairing hill paths damaged by flooding. Such activities are positively valued and appreciated by villagers and local cadres alike.

Third, explore any possible social capital. The first time we went to Mintong, we were met by four people at the train station. Two of them, around age 60, had the manner of men with status. They proved to be mid-level county government officials, recently retired. They worried about declining moral standards in society and enthusiastically supported the Confucian Congregation for its efforts to revive traditional values. Among the local population they belong to those who have seen and know much of the world. Being experienced bureaucrats themselves, they know the bureaucracy inside-out and are good at dealing with people above their level. Though retired, they retain their status and connections, and they have very much helped Chang and the Congregation in its public relations. At the county level, they are major “lobbyists” on behalf of the Confucian Congregation in its negotiation with the government.

The three members of the leadership team, as well as their congregation, are from the grassroots level in a very real sense. They have limited social capital or resources, but they are eager to reach out for any possible social capital and are good at networking. They try to explore any *guanxi* networks from among the local people, such as the retired government officials, and they tend to be aggressively smart in making use of whatever social capital they can access.

Here is an example. As the Confucian Congregation developed rapidly, it drew the attention of scholars interested in religious studies. 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



**Photo 5.** *Two VIP visitors at the Confucian House of Dao. Courtesy of Na CHEN.*

with the words “The Leaders of the Institute of Confucianism, CASS with the Congregation Members,” and “Dr. ‘XYZ’ from the Chinese Institute of Confucianism with Pan Yu.” CASS is the national-level research institute in China, but there is no “Institute of Confucianism.” A research center for Confucianism does exist as a subunit in the Institute of World Religions at CASS, but Confucian Congregation leaders retain these misleading captions on the photos anyway. The significance is obvious—using “Institute of Confucianism” suggests some justification for the title “Congregation of Confucianism.” Here the Chinese word for Confucianism is *Rujiao* (儒教), that is, Confucianism as a religion. These captioned photos of Beijing scholars together with Congregation members are powerful symbols. Silently, they make a powerful statement to anyone who visits the Congregation, especially local cadres and police.

And fourth, the “game of names.” This refers to changing names to seek the status of legitimacy for the Congregation. In a sense, the development of the Confucian Congregation has followed the paramount leader DENG Xiaoping’s (1904–1997) strategy for China’s post-Mao reform—to cross the river by feeling the stepping stones in the water; that is, with an attitude of tentative gradualism. Over the last ten years, the Congregation has taken many tentative steps toward the status of legitimate religious organization and conducted organizational reforms resulting in structural changes. Moreover, it has played a game of names.

When Li first established himself as a master of the *Teaching of Heart and Morality* based on *Three Principles and Eight Moral Issues*, he was seen

as being involved in the “business” of folk religion: “superstition.” He could expect no recognition from the authorities, much less a legal status. When the leadership team formed in 2004 and adopted popular Confucian classics as its divine texts, a foundation was laid for the development of a congregation. Then in 2006, the congregation claimed to be a Daoist group. This shift was undertaken as a legalization strategy, as Daoism is one of the legally recognized religions.

In 2008–2009, the group adopted a new name—*Rujia Daotan* (儒家道坛). The term *Daotan* (道坛) [lit., House of Dao] may imply an affiliate of Daoism, which is consistent with its claim of Daoism. The term *Rujia* (儒家) means Confucianism as a school of thought. The new name *Rujia Daotan*, therefore, can be explained as a combination of Daoism and Confucianism.

In 2010, the Congregation adopted the name *Rujiao Daotan* (儒教道坛). *Rujiao* can identify either Confucian teachings or Confucianism as a religion, and its use by the Congregation was particularly intended to strengthen its connection with the latter. While the term *Daotan* means House of Dao, the character “Dao” (道) can also be understood as the Dao of Confucianism rather than the Dao of Daoism. In a Chinese tradition of syncretism, this kind of vagueness or implicitness is not uncommon, but here this vagueness is an important and intentional strategy in the game of names.

In the game of names, the key issue is the justification for the very existence of the Confucian Congregation. The goal here is two-fold: recognition of the Congregation as a religious group and legal status as officially registered with the government. Unless there are major changes in Chinese law it would be impossible for a Confucian congregation to be recognized as a religious group; but, by placing the title *Rujiao Daotan* above the gate of the House of Dao and scheduling regular gatherings and activities, Confucian Congregation has become a *de facto* religious group. Its legal status remains a problem, but this unexpectedly deft move resolved a large part of the problem.

In 2013, Congregation leaders and their enthusiastic supporters applied to the county government to establish the “Mintong County Research Council for the Practice of Confucianism” (民同县儒学实践研究会) as a civil organization. Here the English word “Confucianism” refers to the Chinese *Ruxue* (儒学), which means Confucianism as scholarship or philosophy. The strategic phrase “Practice of Confucianism” was a skillfully designed underlay for the legalization of Confucian Congregation branches. When they succeeded in registering the “Research Council,” the Congregation’s branches were conveniently identified as “Practice Bases” of the 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: at the top was “*Rujiao Daotan*” (儒教道坛) laid out horizontally, with the four Chinese characters in bright yellow against a rich red background; and to the left was the sign “The Huishan Practice Base of the Mintong County Research Council for the Practice of Confucianism” (民同县儒学实践研究会汇山实践基地) laid out vertically, with the sixteen characters in black on a piece of shining stainless steel.

## DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

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

Many factors have contributed 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—the highly religious local culture and the strong Confucian tradition in a remote area—creates a microclimate factor of decisive importance. It is the local cultural tradition shared by Congregation leaders and members, retired government cadres, village and police officials, and villagers themselves that provides fertile local soil for the growth of the Confucian Congregation. Given the environment, one must acknowledge the essential role played by the three core members of the Congregation—the charismatic Master Li, the accomplished organizer Pan Yu, and the well-educated Chang Shibiao. This is not an easily replicable factor.

Although the Confucian Congregation may be considered an example of a folk religion, it has many distinctive characteristics. In most cases, people gain access to folk religion on a personal 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, the Confucian Congregation members come not only for immediate instrumental purposes but also for collective worship and moral self-cultivation. As a result, members have a strong sense of belonging and solidarity as a congregation. In some aspects, the Confucian Congregation is similar to other “organized” folk religions in history such as Luojiao (罗教), Sanyijiao (三一教), and Yiguandao (一贯道).<sup>26</sup> But in the Confucian Congregation there are not

voluminous divine texts originated by or about the charismatic leader. The 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 disaster or inexorable doom. He seems to have a more optimistic view about the future. It is possible that such a this-worldly orientation has helped the Congregation find acceptance from secular authorities.

It is widely reported that many folk religions that revived or emerged in the post-Mao reform years are promoted by local government for economic reasons. The policy, known as "to play the drama of economy on the stage of culture" (文化搭台, 经济唱戏), aims to develop folk religion as a site of culture to attract tourism.<sup>27</sup> In the case of Confucian Congregation, members do claim to carry forward traditional culture, but their negotiation with local authorities does not promise any economic interest. Of all the Congregation branches we visited, none is positioned for tourism, nor are there any signs of religious commercialization.

This new religious group, the Confucian Congregation, embodies many adaptations and innovations. Congregation leaders do not hesitate to admit they have looked to other religions for examples of effective management and development. Obviously, their organizational system and franchised branch development strategy are similar to those of Christian churches in China. The group chanting ritual and the interactive style between Congregation leader and audience embrace a mixture of elements from both Christian and Buddhist traditions. But the ritual as a whole presents an atmosphere that is impressively more secular than sacred. In addition, there are traces of influence from the Communist Party methodology in its work of organization, propaganda, and mobilization.

## CONCLUSION

In the case of the Confucian Congregation, we can identify some significant implications. First, 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 belief systems to guide and give meaning to lives. In the Mao era, 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.<sup>28</sup> 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 revival of the tradition of Confucianism. It is assumed by many that Chinese modernization, beginning with the 1911 Revolution and the emergence of Communism, cut all links with the Chinese tradition represented by Confucianism, but the

Confucian Congregation phenomenon suggests this is not the case. Though often in a rather implicit or possibly unconscious way, traditional values—such as relationships among family members, the sense of community and state, and the meaning of life—survived in what sociologist Peter Berger has identified as “vulgarized Confucianism.”<sup>29</sup> With political pressure removed by post-Mao reforms, Confucian traditions have returned spontaneously. The history of Confucianism in China explains *in part* why, against all odds, the Confucian Congregation could develop and prosper.

We can further infer that in a sense the revival of Confucianism has helped relax the tension between China’s official ideology and its traditional culture. Under the theoretical framework of Communism, traditional Chinese culture is labeled a residue of feudalism that should be condemned as a whole. In its place a new system based on Communist ideology should be established. But while Communist ideology provides a historical perspective and scheme of social development, it does not provide a cultural base on which people can live their everyday lives. All efforts to create such a revolutionary culture, including the Cultural Revolution, have failed. As a result, Chinese persons wanting to be considered “normal” members of society must identify with Communism ideologically and politically while following the cultural tradition in everyday life—drawing on its basic values, ways of thinking, and principles of social relations. When the authorities set these two realities in opposition and reinforced this tension through institutionalized rules and political pressure, they created a strong tension between people’s political and cultural identities. While the reduced ideological and political control accompanying the reform has contributed to relaxing this tension, much remains to be done. 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 Confucian Congregation implies support for such change from the bottom.

To sum up, the Confucian Congregation, a Chinese new religious movement, has skillfully negotiated a respectable, secure position within China’s heavily regulated religious landscape by positioning itself in ways that appear to support the government and cater to the interests of the ruling party, while in fact engaging in the sort of practices that would ordinarily be condemned as “迷信” or “superstition.” Whether and how the Confucian Congregation would try to whitewash the negative image of superstition remains a question. Maybe because of such an intention, the leadership team has pushed its ambition beyond the Congregation and entered the public arena. In 2013, the team 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

been making efforts to reach that goal, whether and how they will raise the funds to accomplish such a big project remains in question. No matter what its future may be, the Confucian Congregation has provided a unique and vivid case in the trend of Confucian revival in China today.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The county name is fictitious. In this article, most proper names of places and informants are fictitious.

<sup>2</sup> C. K. YANG, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Adam Yuet CHAU, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); GAO Bingzhong, “One Museum: Ethnography of Temple Construction—On Double Names as a Political Art,” in *Rural Culture and New Rural Construction in China*, ed. LI Xiaoyun, ZHAO Xudong, and YE Jingzhong (Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2008), 182–98.

<sup>4</sup> For sample cases, see JING Jun, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); and FAN Lizhu, CHEN Na, and Richard Madsen, “The Recovery of Cultural Heritage: Ethnographic Studies of Lineage Traditions in Southern Zhejiang,” in *Religious and Social Life in Greater Jiangnan*, ed. Robert Weller and Fan Lizhu (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Press, 2015), 47–85.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, “*Lijiao*: The Return of Ceremonies Honoring Confucius in Mainland China,” *China Perspectives* 4 (2009): 82–100; and Anna SUN, “The Revival of Confucian Rites in Contemporary China,” in *Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern China and Beyond*, ed. Fenggang YANG and Joseph B. Tamney (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 309–28. In her recent book, Anna Sun extends her study of Confucian revival to include Confucianism as ritual practice, cultural identity, political identity, possible foundation of morality, and possible source of civil religion; see *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 183.

<sup>6</sup> The modern Chinese word 迷信 (*mixin*) was a Japanese neologism imported at the turn of the twentieth century. In the late nineteenth 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 that 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.

<sup>7</sup> The term “organized religion” is widely used to refer to Buddhism and Daoism but not Confucianism. See Tu Weiming, “The Confucian Tradition in Chinese History,” in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspective on Chinese Civilization*, ed. Paul Ropp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 112.

<sup>8</sup> The Chinese word 道 (Dao or Tao) literally means the “Way.” While Daoism is the ism of Dao, each ism has its own Dao. Thus in Confucianism, there is the Confucian Dao. The phrase 道坛 literally means an altar to preach the Dao and can be simply understood as a place for the Dao; in our text, 道坛 (House of Dao) refers to both the building and the organization, similar to “church” in the Christian tradition.

<sup>9</sup> The Compiling Committee of the Mintong County Gazetteer (民同县地方志编纂委员会编纂), *The Mintong County Gazetteer* (《民同县志》) (Beijing: Local Gazetteer Publishing House, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Mazu (also spelled Matsu, 妈祖) is the Chinese patron goddess of seafarers. Mazu worship started in southeast China during the Song dynasty and later spread along China’s coastal areas, including Taiwan.

<sup>11</sup> An ancestral hall, shrine or temple (祠堂 or 宗祠) is a building dedicated to ancestors of a family or surname lineages. Tablets that embody the ancestral spirits are kept in the hall. The building styles and details may differ from place to place, but the halls are used for collective rituals to honor the ancestors at festivals and special occasions. Many ancestral halls were destroyed or converted to other uses during the turmoil of the twentieth century, especially during the Cultural Revolution. There is a trend of rebuilding ancestral halls since the post-Mao reform, especially over the last two decades, often using them for public activities or events that may involve people other than those sharing the same surname. A lineage book or genealogy book (家谱, 宗谱 or 族谱) is a historical record of family members and important events, mainly in the form of a family tree. Most lineage books keep detailed records that trace back dozens of generations. The books are supposed to be recompiled every few decades, but in the revolutionary twentieth century many such books were destroyed, and recompilation was discontinued. The last two decades have seen a revival of recompiling these books. Both ancestral halls and lineage books are important in Confucian tradition, which is particularly strong in southeast China.

<sup>12</sup> Shennong, often called the God of Shennong (神农上帝) or Shennong God, is one of the major deities worshiped in the Confucian Congregation, where Shennong enjoys a much higher position of respect than in the general tradition of China.

<sup>13</sup> Like other proper names in this article, both Pan Yu (潘雨) and Lan Xiang (岚香) are pseudonyms. We tried to choose pseudonyms that retain the original meanings of the real names. The basic meaning of Pan Yu is raining and water, which would quench one’s thirst, and that of Lan Xiang is fragrance of mountain mist, which sounds feminine and somewhat mystical.

<sup>14</sup> The name Confucian Congregation had not been adopted by 2004, but in his accounts Chang used “Confucian Congregation” to refer to Master Li’s group anyway.

<sup>15</sup> The Chinese term 缘分 (*yuanfen* or *yuan fen*) can be roughly understood as chance or fateful coincidences, a notion rooted most directly in the Buddhist belief in karma, in which there are no pure coincidences. The term is often used as a rough equivalent to the English phrase “luck” with an emphasis on causal relationship. The 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 also, of course, “bad *yuanfen*.”) For a detailed discussion of *yuanfen*, see Lizhu Fan, James Whitehead, and Evelyn Whitehead, “Fate and Fortune: Popular Religion and Moral Capital in Shenzhen,” *Journal of Chinese Religion* 32 (2004): 83–100.

<sup>16</sup> Here, “Confucian Congregation” stands for the Chinese name 儒家道坛, that is, the *Rujia* House of Dao; it was later changed to 儒教道坛, the *Rujiao* House of Dao.

<sup>17</sup> The Chinese term 三教 (lit., “three teachings”) refers to the three major belief systems—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—that were primary sources of ethical teachings and spiritual practices in traditional Chinese society. Since the Song Dynasty (960–1279) the three systems have generally been harmoniously integrated with Confucianism as the core. The concept of “religion” was introduced to Chinese language at the turn of the twentieth century. In the course of China’s modernization, however, Buddhism and Daoism—but not Confucianism—were legally recognized as religions. In recent years, the revival of Confucianism as a cultural tradition has been strong. See Chen Na, “Why is Confucianism Not a Religion? Impact of Orientalism,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 51, no. 1 (2016): 21–42.

<sup>18</sup> The Chinese term 气功 (*qigong*) refers to a traditional Chinese practice of meditation, breathing, and physical movement to cultivate and balance 气 (*qi* or *chi*, often translated as “life energy”) to strengthen mental and physical health or gain mental and physical power.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26.

<sup>20</sup> For an English translation of “Document 19,” see Donald E. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 8–26.

<sup>21</sup> The Communist Party’s turn to China’s cultural tradition for the development of social values can be understood from two aspects. On one hand, it is a reaction to Maoism’s promotion of class struggle and harsh criticism of Confucian tradition. On the other, it forms part of China’s general social trend of Confucian revival initiated at the grassroots level since post-Mao reform and gradually supported by the party-state, especially since the new millennium. For a detailed discussion, see for example Chen, “Why Is Confucianism Not a Religion?”; John Makeham, *Lost Soul: “Confucianism” in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Hu Jintao, “Develop Solid Socialist Values on Glory and Shame” (“牢固树立社会主义荣辱观”), 4 March 2006, available in Chinese at <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/4336318.html>, accessed 9 December 2016.

<sup>23</sup> See “guanxi,” at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/guanxi?s=t>, accessed 9 December 2016. For detailed discussions about guanxi, see Mayfair Mei-hui YANG, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Chang, Mintong County, 13 July 2011.

<sup>25</sup> The basic idea of “accumulating merit” is reciprocity or *bao* (报), an ancient indigenous Chinese belief in which a good deed (“merit”) is rewarded with something good. The introduction of Buddhism about two thousand years ago brought to China the concept of karmic cause and effect through reincarnation. In time, the concept was Sinicized and addressed events both within one’s lifetime and beyond. Karma has become the belief—now shared by Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism—that those who accumulate merit will harvest something good in the future. As a matter of fact, accumulating merit by good deeds has been an important part of self-cultivation in Confucian tradition.

<sup>26</sup> All three—Luojiao (罗教), Sanyijiao (三一教), and Yiguandao (一贯道)—are influential Chinese folk religions. The Luo jiao (aka Luoism) was started around 1500 by LUO Menghong (罗梦鸿 1442–1527), who developed his belief system mainly from Buddhism and Daoism. The Sanyijiao (lit., Teaching of Three-in-One) was founded in the mid-sixteenth century by LIN Zhao’en (林兆恩 1517–1598), who combined Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism into his belief system, with Confucianism as the core. The Yiguandao (lit., Consistent Way) claims its origins in prehistorical legendary figures and associations with many different Chinese schools of thought or religion. With substantial development as an organized sect starting in the late nineteenth century, it became the most influential organized folk religion in China in the first half of the twentieth century. While all three folk religions have waxed and waned, especially in the twentieth century, the last few decades have seen a revival of each, both within and outside mainland China.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, YANG Fenggang, “Market Economy and the Revival of Religions,” in *Chinese Religious Life*, ed. David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive, and Philip L. Wickeri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13–29.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion, see LUO Xu, *Searching for Life’s Meaning: Changes and Tensions in the Worldviews of Chinese Youth in the 1980s*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Peter Berger, “An East Asian Development Model?” in *In Search of an East Asian Development Model*, ed. Peter L. Berger and Hsin Huang Michael HSIAO (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 7–8.