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FOLK BUDDHIST RELIGION: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China.
By Daniel L. Overmyer. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass.
and London, England, 1976, 299 pp. with notes, bibliography, glossary,
and index.

Daniel L. Overmyer, professor of Chinese religion at the University of British Columbia and a specialist in Chinese popular religion, has written a highly informative and challenging book about a much discussed yet little understood area of Chinese religious history, the ideology and structure of popular religious sects in China since the Southern Sung. His main concern is with those sects "most strongly influenced by Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly its emphasis on universal deliverance through compassionate bodhisattvas" (p. 2): Maitreya, White Lotus, White Cloud, and Lo 羅 or Wu-wei 無為 sects. Overmyer insists upon the necessity of clearly differentiating these sects from other forms of voluntary associations such as secret societies, sporadic peasant uprisings, and "banditry" with which they are often classified in official sources. For while some of the sects (Maitreya, White Lotus) did carry out military activities, others (White Cloud, Lo) were primarily non-violent. Even in the former case, he argues convincingly that the military activities must be seen in the total context of sectarian religious intentionality: their intention "to save all beings by a variety of interrelated means. These means could include preaching, the reading of scriptures, reciting mantras, distribution of healing charms, the invocation of divine assistance in the form of supernatural armies, or open eschatological warfare to place a pious emperor on the throne who would prepare the way for the advent of Maitreya" (p. 19).

Overmyer's thesis is hereby forcefully stated: that the Chinese folk religious sects emerge out of authentic religious consciousness, possess continuous cultic traditions driven by an articulated eschatological vision, and offer alternate paths to salvation from the "Great Traditions." He deplores that the traditional interpreters of sectarian movements (from the nineteenth century Confucian

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official Huang Yü-p'ien 黃育榘 to the Republican, Communist, as well as Western-trained scholars) have failed to treat the religious dimension seriously. For his own part, he has taken "an approach which accepts the 'thusness' of these complex movements in their own world." He hopes that "perhaps through such an approach we can treat eschatology as seriously as famine and political chaos, rites of salvation as seriously as economic cooperation, and charismatic healing as seriously as military leadership" (p. 13).

The book can be conveniently divided into three parts. In the first part (chaps. 1-4, pp. 1-72), Overmyer marshals his considerable knowledge of history of religions, Reformation history, and sociology to supply a necessary theoretical framework to his discussion of Chinese sects. He ably demonstrates that the Chinese sects are typologically distinct from primitive secret societies, secret societies in more complex cultures, mystery cults, or peasant rebellions. The Chinese sects do not stress ordeal in their initiations, are openly evangelical in their missionary work, use simple and exoteric texts and rituals, and hold membership open to both men and women. Overmyer sees an essential similarity between these Chinese sects and the denominations in Reformist Europe and Kamakura Japan. Even though the Chinese sects failed to develop a church structure and an independent professional priesthood due to government persecution, they, like their counterparts, "are essentially a quest for more immediate and personal assurance of salvation at the popular level. Though the sect is a new type, it sees itself as an attempt to restore the original vitality of its mother tradition through congregational cult, charismatic leadership, and popularization of scripture" (p. 63).

The second part of the book (chaps. 5-6, pp. 73-129) deals with the history of the White Lotus, White Cloud, and Lo (or Wu-wei) sects. Overmyer makes it clear that these sects are inheritors of a long and rich religious tradition which is at once Taoist, Buddhist, Confucian, and folk in origin. From the Taoist groups such as the Way of Great Peace (*T'ai-p'ing tao* 太平道) and the Heavenly Master sect (*T'ien-shin tao* 天師道) at the end of the second century A.D., there came down models of theocracy, eschatological warfare, and emphasis on healing and magic charms (p. 75). Manichaeism might have provided the antecedent for the practice of full-time lay vegetarianism which was a sectarian characteristic, but Overmyer contends that the Manichaean influence on the White Lotus was indirect and peripheral (p. 80). On the other hand, Maitreyan and Pure Land Buddhism played decisive roles in the formation of the White Lotus movement. Specifically, Maitreyan Buddhism provided an eschatology

of the Three Ages (p. 83), and Pure Land *nien-fo* 念仏 associations contributed a concern for universal salvation, a "combination of T'ien-t'ai philosophy with Amitābhist piety, lay leadership and the mass involvement of ordinary people, congregational worship, simplified ritual, and the use of vernacular scriptures and ritual for evangelistic purposes" (p. 88).

Mao Tzu-yüan 茅子元 (1086–1166), the alleged founder of the White Lotus, was an ordained monk, as was K'ung Ch'ing-chüeh 孔清覺 (d. 1121), who had founded the White Cloud sect some twenty-five years earlier. Yet despite their Buddhist connections, both sects later introduced practices equally condemned by the Confucian state and the Buddhist sangha. The White Lotus had a married clergy, incorporated rituals of Taoist origin, and developed its own unique cosmogonic and eschatological myth: the creation of the world by the Eternal Mother (Wu-shêng lao-mu 無生老母) and her plan of salvation for all her children. The White Cloud members, on the other hand, were celibate. Like the members of the Lo sect (founded by Lo Ch'ing 羅清, who was a layman; active during the first quarter of the sixteenth century), they did not share the Eternal Mother myth or Maitreyan messianism. K'ung and Lo, the founders of the two sects, were venerated as incarnate deities or bodhisattvas. The complexity and inner dynamism of sectarianism are well brought out in these pages. It should be noted that while all the sects were declared "heretical" by the state and the sangha, similar distinctions were made by members of one sect against others, using the same categories of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Thus, as Overmyer points out, the Lo texts are self-righteous and have a "reformist" flavor; they state that "the White Lotus . . . is a heretical school" (p. 125). This is evidence that at least since the Sung, the orthodoxy/heterodoxy issue has always been as much an intra-religious affair as an infra-religious one. Overmyer rightly argues that Confucianism, as a political ideology as well as a holistic religious world view, could not tolerate another contending system of values (pp. 22–23). Organized Buddhism and Taoism likewise condemned folk sects in order to clear themselves from incrimination by association. However, we must also remember that the charge of heterodoxy was as often directed at one's fellow traveller (sometimes with even more vehemence) as at one's enemy. For this we need only recall the controversy between the Lu-Wang and Ch'eng-Chu schools of Neo-Confucianism, or between Pure Land and Ch'an Buddhism—or within Ch'an tradition itself, the disagreement between the "silent illuminators" (*mo-chao* 默照) and the "*kuang-an* introspectors" (*k'an-hua* 看話).

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The third part of the book (chaps. 7–8, pp. 130–192), which in my view is the most fascinating, deals with beliefs, myths, leadership, scriptures, and ritual of folk Buddhist sects. Citing widely from the *pao-chuan* 寶卷 (“precious scrolls”, i.e. sectarian scriptures), Overmyer analyzes the creation myth of the Eternal Mother (Lao-mu) and its relationship to the idea of paradise and a three-stage eschatology. He states that “the primary emphasis in these scriptures is on the promise of deliverance for which the creation story appears as prelude . . . the theme of return to the Mother and to the Native Land is a constant refrain in sectarian texts” (p. 137). Overmyer suggests that the Lao-mu might be a composite deity created by the popular religious consciousness, possessing the characteristics of the Taoist Hsi Wang-mu 西王母 (Mother Queen of the West) who grants immortality, and Amitabha Buddha and the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin who deliver men to Paradise. He says, “. . . historically she herself is a later manifestation of Hsi Wang-mu” (p. 139). And further on, “Wu-shéng lao-mu’s usual function parallels Amitabha’s as a saving being in paradise who sends down intermediaries, and to whom men pray for grace. However . . . the Eternal Mother was also believed to have appeared on earth herself, in this resembling more the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin, who manifests herself in many forms in order to rescue the lost” (p. 142).

Since the sixteenth century, Lao-mu has held sway over numberless sectarian followers, from the White Lotus in the Ming dynasty down to the I-kuan tao in present-day Taiwan. To them, the supreme deity is a Mother Goddess, who is at once the creator and saviour of mankind. Overmyer informs us that by the Ming, female deities had a dominant role in popular vernacular novels such as *Féng-shén yan-i* 封神演義 (“Investiture of the Gods”) and *Shui-hu chuan* 水滸傳 (“Water Margin”) (p. 140). In this sense, then, Lao-mu might reflect the general religious imagination of the time. But I cannot help wondering, which Overmyer refrains from doing, why female deities and Mother Goddesses emerge in the Ming. Is it perhaps because the concepts of *T'ai-chi* 太極 (Great Ultimate), *Li* 理 (Principle), or Mind (*Hsin* 心) had become too abstract and bloodless? Or perhaps a “counter-culture” (Overmyer prefers “subculture”) like the White Lotus needed a counter-symbol to challenge the male iconography of Confucianism and Buddhism (even Kuan-yin was a Chinese transformation of a male bodhisattva!).

However that may be, I believe that Lao-mu is an excellent example of the truly creative function of syncretism. All the sects discussed in the book are frankly syncretic, drawing freely from various religious traditions. For too

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long syncretism has had a pejorative connotation. It is now high time that we start treating syncretism as a distinct and authentic religious phenomenon. Recently, Raimundo Pannikar used the imagery of "growth" to characterize the syncretic process, a simile which would apply to the Chinese experience.¹ Professor Overmyer is clearly sympathetic to the sectarian movements, but I wish he had been more positive about their syncretic enterprise. Early in his book he quotes with approval a statement by C. K. Yang who says, "The third form of institutional religion was that of syncretic religious societies" (p. 6). Why not then call these sects simply "syncretic" and leave out "Buddhist"? Overmyer seems to regard these sects as Buddhist-oriented mainly for two reasons: first, their expectancy of a messiah figure who would renew the cosmos as well as create an ideal state, and secondly, their commitment to universal salvation. But surely these are also Confucian and Taoist beliefs. Overmyer mentions that the Han Taoist groups expected "the return of a messianic figure who would establish an ideal state on earth. Such a figure . . . evidently developed out of the old Chinese belief in sages who descend from the mountains to assist rulers in time of need" (p. 75). As for universal salvation, whether it was defined as the achievement of sagehood or the attainment of the Tao, it was theoretically, at least, open to all.

My final comment regards the relationship between the sects and the Buddhist sangha, which is also one of Overmyer's chief concerns (pp. 2, 203). Orthodox Buddhism has long maintained a tradition of lay participation from which, as Overmyer shows, sectarian movements derived their original impetus. Many Buddhist monks, such as Chu-hung 株宏 in the late Ming, wrote popular pamphlets and tracts for their lay followers and taught them a regimen of vegetarianism, *nian-fo*, collective and individual worship, and performance of good deeds, which in many ways are not dissimilar from the sectarian practices.² The question is then: who remains a lay Buddhist and who becomes a sectarian? Orthodox Buddhism, whether Ch'an or Pure Land, is interested in the radical transformation of the self, rather than building a paradise on earth. The ideology

¹ Raimundo Panikkar, "Some Notes on Syncretism and Eclecticism Related to the Growth of Human Consciousness" in Birger A. Pearson, ed., *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity* (Montana, 1975), p. 57.

² Kristin Yü Greenblatt, "Chu-hung and Lay Buddhism in the Late Ming," in Wm. Theodore de Bary (editor) and the Conference on Seventeenth-Century Chinese Thought, *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975), pp. 93-132.

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of *mo-fa* 末法 (the Age of Degenerate Law) is used to emphasize the urgency of religious commitment, but does not serve as a battle cry for millenarian revolution. This understanding is faithful to the Buddha's own vision of mankind which sees the basic problem of man's suffering as ignorance, a congenital blindness to the reality of things, not the imperfection of a man-made socio-politico-economic system. I would suppose that ultimately the question boils down to: who could (or would) not be satisfied with the status-quo. Perhaps the exhortation to change one's own view of life, adequate for a lay Buddhist, is insufficient to the would-be sectarian whose sufferings are material, not merely the result of existential anxiety. Overmyer tells us that "while many sectarian leaders come from poor backgrounds, there is enough evidence of economically well-off leaders to make one hesitate to interpret their origin as one of 'social deprivation' " (p. 173). What then, about their followers? Are there any sources on the social composition of sects' membership? Is there any way we can find out why a person would join sects which were persecuted instead of turning to the more conventional and respectable lay Buddhist associations?

Overmyer's book is a masterful combination of painstaking sinological research and a firm and sophisticated grounding in social scientific literature. He has ably demonstrated the rich heritage of late traditional Chinese religious history and raised many important and challenging questions which future researchers can ill afford not to consider seriously.

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