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## 迷信

## Superstition

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**S**uperstition' (*mixin*) and 'heterodoxy' (*xiejiao*) are related concepts in contemporary Chinese political discourse, although the terms' scope has continued to fluctuate from the time of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the early 1920s through the present. As in the West, the notion of superstition in China emerged from earlier antecedents to assume a central role in the discourse of modernity. Like many other terms associated with modernity—including *xianfa* (constitution), *kexue* (science), and even the term *xiandai* (modern) itself—*mixin* (literally 'confused belief') was probably a Japanese loanword, as was 'religion' (*zongjiao*), another neologism with which superstition has a complicated relationship.<sup>1</sup> Although the earliest cited usages of *mixin* appear during the last decades of the Qing, the word was in common use by 1920. By 1930 the eradication of superstition was an essential component of the revolutionary programmes of both the Nationalist Party (*guomindang*, hereafter GMD) and the CCP.

*Imperial Antecedents*

The term from late imperial political usage that provides the clearest discursive antecedent for *mixin* is *xiejiao*, literally 'heterodox teaching.' *Xie* can also be rendered as perverse, evil, or heretical, and thus the state's preferred translation for the heterodox organisations (*xiejiao zuzhi*) banned today is 'heretical cult.' Legal codes from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) established statutes criminalising 'sorcerers and black magic' (*xieshu*, literally 'heterodox arts') and became the precedent for legislation under the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), which adopted them verbatim. The codes banned 'fraudulent summoning of evil spirits' (*jia jiang xie shen*), creation and use of charms, spirit writing, membership in illegal groups like the millenarian Buddhist sect of the White Lotus, and secret meetings of worshippers organised by those who 'feign

virtuous deeds to incite the people' (*yang xiu shanshi, shanhua renmin*). Conducting or organising any of these activities was a capital offense, and adherents were punishable with 100 blows of the heavy bamboo.<sup>2</sup> Though the word superstition was not yet in use, its core concept is reflected in the discourse of fraudulence that the codes' architects used to frame these crimes. The gods were always false, leaders always charlatans, and believers always deluded. These assumptions remain central to superstition discourse in the People's Republic of China (PRC), though today they are articulated in a way consonant with Marxist theory.

Even before the fall of the Qing, however, superstition in the form of popular religion was targeted by reformers who saw it as antithetical to the construction of a modern state. The first campaign against popular religion was mounted in north China under the auspices of Yuan Shikai, Governor-general of Zhili. Forcible transformation of local temples into schools and other measures curtailed ostensibly malignant forms of religious practice, and reformers also discovered the fiscal advantages to be gained from confiscating real estate and other material resources. Though many of the targeted practices resembled the illicit behaviour labelled as '*xie*' in the Qing code, the early campaigns eschewed the terminology of heterodoxy in favour of superstition. This reflected more than semantics, for the discourse of heterodoxy left space for many popular religious practices that, however unseemly from the point of view of Confucian orthodoxy, remained acceptable, or least legal. Superstition, by contrast, encompassed virtually *all* forms of religion, popular or otherwise, and pointed to a fundamental distinction between the scientific and modern on the one hand, and the primitive and irrational on the other. As a pejorative, superstition was less sinister than heterodoxy and, for the time being, had fewer criminal implications; but its use signified a fundamental epistemological shift in the thinking of early twentieth-century political elites. Discursively, superstition was a far more categorical and absolutist term than heterodoxy, and its deployment signalled the unprecedented and eventually permanent intrusion of the state into local society.<sup>3</sup>

### *Superstition in the Republican Era*

As the discourse of superstition came into wide use in the first decade of the Republic, intellectuals, revolutionaries, and state-builders used it to attack elements of traditional belief systems seen to impede the modernisation of the state, in particular those linked to popular religion and the mantic arts. New Culture Movement (*xin wenhua yundong*) intellectuals made superstition a main target. For example, Chen Duxiu wrote in 1918 that standing at the crossroads of modernity, China had to choose between the 'path of light that leads toward republicanism, science, and atheism,' or the less attractive 'path of darkness leading toward autocracy, superstition, and theism.'<sup>4</sup> Though socialism would soon replace republicanism in Chen's hierarchy of values, science and atheism remained indispensable components—and superstition was the enemy of both.

By the end of the 1920s, positive scientism had become the dominant epistemological paradigm of revolutionaries and intellectuals, and the legitimacy of any new political order depended on its ability to mobilise the cognitive and moral truth claims of scientific modernity in service of nation-building. In this context, superstition's modern associations with backwardness, irrationality, and political ignorance combined with

traditional connotations of crime and disorder to make it a fundamental oppositional category against which the modern Chinese state—and in particular the then newly-founded CCP—defined itself.<sup>5</sup>

Superstition was also a distinctly political problem for GMD and CCP cadres in the 1920s. In the north China countryside, loosely organised, religiously inspired rural militias had arisen in response to the depredations of militarist forces, demonstrating an ability to coalesce into ever larger confederations—as happened in 1926 when an uprising in northern Henan threatened the control of militarist Wu Peifu. The CCP's mobilisation efforts in rural north China depended on the cooperation or tolerance of these groups, called 'spear societies' (*qianghui*) after the long pikes with red tassels that were their trademark weapon. Though in communist iconography the tasselled spear came to symbolise rural uprisings in general, their actual use reflected the poverty of the poorly armed militias, who made up for lack of firepower with rituals believed to grant invulnerability from the bullets of more heavily armed warlord troops. These ranged from spirit possessions to the ingestion of written charms, taught by itinerant and often charismatic martial arts masters.<sup>6</sup> Heterodox, in other words, had outlived the imperial state and now posed a distinct challenge for those vying to succeed it. Indeed, Republican news media continued to describe such movements in just these terms. For instance, one article in Beijing's *Morning Post* (*chenbao*)—one of the most widely read Chinese language newspapers of that time—called the invulnerability rituals 'heterodox arts' (*xieshu*), while another decried the 'heterodox language' militia leaders used to dupe ignorant commoners.<sup>7</sup>

Though all agreed the militias represented a 'stubborn and chronic superstition' (*wanjiu mixin*) that was, in the words of Chen Duxiu, part of the 'intrinsic nature of primeval rebellion among a backward peasantry,' opinions varied on whether and how to mobilise them.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the CCP issued a resolution at its July 1926 Plenum recognising that the infiltration of rural society might require cadres to 'go along with the superstitions of the masses in order to further develop our work.'<sup>9</sup>

### *Mao's Early Views on Superstition*

It was in this context that Mao equated superstition and popular religion in his 1927 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan.' In it, he posited four meshed systems of authority that oppressed Chinese society and thus needed to be overthrown: the state, the clan, religion, and patriarchy. Elites exercised religious authority (*shenquan*) via the system of ghosts and spirits (*guishen xitong*), the panoply of popular deities spanning the overlapping pantheons of Buddhism, Daoism, and local popular religion. Mao reported that nascent peasant associations had appropriated local temples for offices and income, terming the seizures 'public revenue from superstition' (*mixin gongkuan*); Liling county was particularly notable for the popularity of icon-smashing and proscriptions on superstition (*jin mixin*). Mao's analysis operated in a materialist-functional frame: it was not so much that peasants were liberating their minds from irrational religious beliefs—although their political awakening certainly implied that too—but rather seizing the means of religious cultural production (and thus the income it produced) from local elites who used it to maintain the class system.

It was in keeping with Mao's theme of rural awakening that the peasant associations became the architects of these campaigns, but the *modus operandi* he described and the discursive frame he employed actually resembled the Nationalist government's campaigns against superstition in the lower Yangzi delta in 1928 and 1929. The latter also sought to seize revenue streams—in this case to aid the fiscal consolidation of the Nanjing regime—but the agency lay with the Nationalist government, whose modernising reformers held that peasants must be shown the way to demolish the religious authority that obstructed progress, since a 'religious society' was incompatible with a 'new society based on the Three People's Principles.'<sup>10</sup>

Contemporaneous with the anti-superstition campaigns, the GMD suppressed the Red Spears and similar groups with varying degrees of success. Spear societies became active again during the War of Resistance against Japan, along with other popular salvific movements like the Way of Pervading Unity (*yiguandao*). All were outlawed with the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Though superstition in all its guises remained anathema to the Party-state, the mode and target of discussion (and suppression) shifted over the course of the Maoist and reform eras.

### *The Fight against Superstition in Maoist China*

Anti-superstition efforts in the early PRC employed activist cadres and mass campaigns to limit or eradicate local religious practices. Combat Superstition Teams dispatched to the village in the 1950s represented the first wave.<sup>11</sup> Their targets most often were local religious customs associated with annual festivals and rites of passage. Theoretically, this brand of superstition represented the persistence of a false consciousness that stymied political awareness in the countryside. As a vestige of the sociocultural structures underlying class exploitation in the old society, such customs remained a threat to the new one. More concretely, they represented an economic drain on local society—a misallocation of resources badly needed for industrial development and poverty alleviation, which was a view that had much in common with the classic Confucian and Mohist critique of extravagant funerals.

In the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward and accompanying famine, media reports of 'superstitious rumours' proliferated. In 1962, for example, talking toads in Jilin were said to prophesy widespread death among the elderly; in 1963, tales of chinless ghosts roaming the streets of Shanghai allegedly kept nervous textile workers from leaving the mill at night. These disturbing phenomena, along with the apparently limited success of earlier anti-superstition efforts, contributed to the inclusion of 'feudal superstition' (*fengjian mixin*) in the list of corrupt practices targeted by the Socialist Education Movement.<sup>12</sup>

The height of the Cultural Revolution brought widespread attacks on all forms of religious practice. Superstition was, of course, a central characteristic of the Four Olds (*si jiu*)—customs, culture, habits, and ideas—first enunciated in Chen Boda's 1966 *People's Daily* editorial 'Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons' (*hengsao yiqie niugui sheshen*).<sup>13</sup> The 'monsters and demons' of Chen's title, in fact, derived from traditional Buddhist demonology, and the rhetorical potency of the metaphor itself demonstrated

the ways in which superstition remained the Party's cultural bogeyman. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than the designation of Mao's personality cult as a 'modern superstition' in the early reform era.<sup>14</sup>

### *Superstitious Revivals in the Reform Era*

The reform era transformed superstition discourse in a number of ways. The loosening of control over religious and economic life permitted the revival of folk religious customs while increasing opportunities for charlatanism. In the early 1980s, the state recognised three broad categories of superstition. 'Religious superstition' (*zongjiao mixin*) referred to all forms of religious belief, in particular those of the universal organised religions practiced in China: Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. 'Common superstitions' (*yiban mixin*) were those conducted at the individual or household level, such as ancestor worship or the eudaemonic practices associated with holidays and festivals. 'Feudal superstitions' (*fengjian mixin*), on the other hand, were those related to traditional mantic practices such as divination, geomancy, exorcism, and healing, or unauthorised forms of communal popular religion that were often distinguished by charismatic leadership and seen as threatening to social order.<sup>15</sup> This formula retained an overall theoretical consistency with earlier understandings, while essentially narrowing the range of activities to be actively suppressed as feudal superstition to those covered under the late imperial rubric of heterodoxy.

Current PRC criminal law reflects this shift. The three times superstition appears in the criminal code, it is accompanied by the term 'heterodoxy.' These all occur in Article 300, one of 27 provisions in the section on 'Crimes of Disrupting Public Order' (*raoluan gonggong zhixu zui*). Article 300 prohibits the organisation and utilisation of 'superstitious sects, secret societies, and heterodox organisations,' but distinguishes between acts that 'sabotage the implementation of the state's laws, that result in death; or that defraud money, property or result in sex crimes.' The first two instances are punishable by up to life in prison, while sexual exploitation through the use of superstition is punished according to the article on rape (Article 236, *qiangjian zui*), and the illegal procurement of property or funds is prosecuted according to the article on fraud (Article 266, *zhapian zui*).

Expanding upon these laws, on 30 October 1999 the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress adopted a 'Resolution on the Suppression of Heterodox Organisations, and the Prevention and Punishment of Heterodox Activities' in order to facilitate the suppression of the increasingly popular spiritual movement Falun Gong, whose rapid growth the state found threatening.<sup>16</sup> This resolution resembled the late imperial legal codes in terminology and approach. The measure also emphasised the distinction between organisers and adherents, ordering that the former be prosecuted harshly. Followers, on the other hand, were assumed to be unwitting dupes and thus should be 'differentiated from the criminal elements' leading heterodox organisations or activities. Article 300's distinction between activities that threaten the state and those that materially defraud its citizens, moreover, is analogous to that made in the two statutes appended to the law on heterodoxy in the Ming and Qing codes.

Nevertheless, the resolution was thoroughly couched in the discourse of socialist modernity, and reflected social and cultural dynamics unique to late twentieth-century China. It ordered 'all corners of society' to mobilise against the illegal sects in a manner reminiscent of the mass campaigns of the Maoist era (see Li's essay in the present volume). It also emphasised ideological work, stipulating a long-term educational and propaganda effort to raise awareness about illegal cults while at the same time promoting scientific and technological literacy. One result was the Campaign to Revere Science, Leave Heterodoxy Behind (*chongshang kexue, yuanli xiejiao yundong*). As a 2005 reader issued by the Shanxi provincial anti-heterodoxy association explained, even though Falun Gong had been soundly defeated, 'various heterodox cults acting in the name of false religion have reappeared in certain parts of the country, particularly the countryside.'<sup>17</sup>

The reader laid out ten major differences between proper religion and heterodox cults, ranging from millenarian theory to supernatural belief to social function. Not surprisingly, these differences establish *xiejiao* as a negative category of religion: everything that religion does, *xiejiao* perverts. More remarkable is the construction of religion as a positive category in which the word superstition does not appear once. Though the tract concedes that there are negative aspects that require correct government policy to control, orthodox religion in general serves a positive social function by promoting social order and harmony in interpersonal relationships, and by 'upholding the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system.' It serves as a 'spiritual support and expression of the people's respect and reverence of supernatural forces'—in wholesome contrast to the fraudulence of heterodox teachings.<sup>18</sup>

The absence of superstition in this discussion reflects the ironic truth that there is currently more tolerance for popular religious belief and practice than at any other time in the history of the PRC. Returning to the formula of the early reform era cited above, 'common superstition' is often criticised in the media but is no longer recognised—at least publicly—as false consciousness signifying the reemergence of the class system or a threat to New China. 'Religious superstition' is not only tolerated but, if the Shanxi tract is any indication, openly endorsed as beneficial to social and political order. 'Feudal superstition,' a category whose definition had already narrowed substantially in the early 1980s, is now largely limited to the illegal religious organisations that the late imperial and modern Chinese states have endeavoured, with varied success, to eradicate.

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