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**Challenges and Choices Facing Folk Faith in China**

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Folk faiths are not merely a historical phenomenon in China, but are part of the living culture. The recent revival of the topic has raised many questions in both in the theoretical and policy-making realms. For instance, how should we define “folk faiths?” What are the organizational structures? What kind of position and function do they have in China’s development strategy for the future? Is the function positive or negative? What policies should the government make for control?

### **A. The current situation of folk faith in China**

Folk faiths have a long history and deep social basis in China as well as in the world. People used to have two incorrect impressions about folk faiths. One is that folk faiths are the same as feudal superstition in nature, and should be oppressed and wiped out. The second is that folk faiths are a dead or dying cultural phenomenon. In fact, this is not the case. Folk faiths do in a sense have some superstitious features, but we cannot say that they are outdated.

Then, what is the current situation of folk faiths in China?

Folk faiths exist in many parts of China. According to some new field investigation reports, folk faiths are geographically widespread. In certain areas, the number of followers and places of worship are even bigger than the five officially acknowledged religions, which are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Roman Catholicism and Christianity.

Why has folk faith become a “hot ” issue recently, attracting more and more attention from the academic and political fields? The government has put forward new measures to include folk faiths and places of worship into its regulations. We can find several underlying reasons.

### **B. Why are academics and political leaders interested in folk faiths?**

Firstly, people have a better understanding of the long-term existence of religions and faiths. Gradually, they have understood that the socialistic society represents a very long period in history and is now just in the elementary stage, still far from the communist society. Therefore, as personal conceptions and social cultural phenomena, religions will exist for a long time. As attitudes toward religions become more objective and practical, perceptions of folk faiths also have changed from pure criticism to greater acceptance. Investigations and studies have been initiated on the nature, position, characteristic and function of folk faiths in the new socialist period.

Secondly, as a result of the process of economic reform and opening-up, China has more and more communication with international society. Westernization and cultural globalization have produced various impacts on Chinese society. After the collapse of the former Soviet Union and



organizations; they combine together with the existing social organizations. During some important times in the life of common people, such important farming times (spring plowing and autumn harvest), traditional holidays (spring festival etc.), essential ceremonies (birth, death, wedding and grown-up ceremonies) and some terrible disasters (such as plague and drought), folk faith activities will be held by families and villages. They may set up a contemporary “working groups,” but these will be dissolved after the event. Folk faiths are beliefs held by common people. Unlike state religions, they are not mixed up with or receive financial support from the state. Also unlike state religions, folk faith followers are not necessarily from the same nationality and do not share the same blood.

Loose organizational structures also differentiate folk faiths from folk religions, which have strong organizational structures. We can say that folk religions are systematic religions, while folk faiths are non-systematic. In a traditional society, there usually exist official religions, orthodox religions and non-official and non-orthodox folk religions which are widely accepted and practiced mainly among common folks. In fact, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam all started from folk religions and later evolved and developed into orthodox religions, and later still into institutionalized religions that were exported all over the world. However, not all folk religions can become mainstream religions. Some folk religions as Luo, Zhai, Huangtian, Hongyang and Bagua in the Ming and Qing Dynasties still remained in folk level after long periods of development. Folk faiths have a close relationship with folk religions and always remain in the lowest level in society. Folk religions may ascend into a higher position with some favorable conditions; they can also descend into the position of folk faith if historical conditions are unfavorable.

#### **D. The position of folk faith in the cultural system in a society**

From the point of view of social structure, irrespective of time period, folk faiths are not in a leading position in culture. They are not even mainstream religions. According to the anthropologist Robert Redfield, culture can be divided into two categories: great traditions and little traditions. Folk faiths belong to the little tradition category.

From a historical point of view however, folk faiths have a longer history than any “institutionalized” religion. Their histories can be traced back to prehistoric times, though they are not as well known and noble as Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Christianity. State religions and world religions can be viewed as reformist of “elementary” religions in nature, while folk faiths are the heirs of “elementary” religions. With the belief of “everything has a spirit,” worship of nature is very much advocated in “elementary” religions. Everything -- heaven, earth, mountains, rivers, wind and rain -- has a spirit. Later, primitive clan-tribe religions became divided. With the appearance of classes and nations, the worship of heaven, earth, sun and moon have become parts of the upper-level social construction, and were typically owned by national rulers. They functioned as psychological tools for control, and finally evolved into state religions.

Worship of other things, however, was left among the folk, and later became folk faiths.

Folk faiths come into being spontaneously, but they do not exist naturally thereafter. They are influenced by other factors in the national culture, and in turn provide spiritual sources for certain religious founders in certain periods in history. The interaction of different factors in society affects the orientation of the transition from folk faith to folk religion. Sometimes, the import of foreign religions leads to deviation of folk faiths. China recently entered the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the tendency toward globalization is not only reflected in economy. “A small government, a big society” and “obeying the rules of the game” have become the main characteristics of future development. Faced with so many folk faiths, how should we research their natures, development paths, social mechanisms, and what role should the government play in their natural life-cycles? These questions have become an important part of religious study in 21<sup>st</sup> century China. Here, I present ideas of three orientations, i.e. the religious orientation, political orientation and integration orientation, as coordinates of study.

- 1) The religious orientation of folk faith refers to the question of whether they are compatible with orthodox religions in a theological sense and what the level of compatibility is.
- 2) The political orientation refers to whether folk faith is obedient or or subversive toward government.
- 3) The integration orientation of folk faith refers to the relationship of folk faiths and mainstream religions in the cultural sense. Is the relationship characterized by polarization or conformity, and what is the level of conformity?

#### **E. Strategies of cultural development and social control related to folk faiths**

Folk faiths have a long history and will continue to exist among people. They have different characteristics in organizational structures than constitutionalized religions. First, there are no fixed clergymen in most folk faith places of worship. Believers conduct communication directly with the gods they worship, without any clergy as agent. Secondly, followers have a very loose association with the faith. The association between them is mainly spiritual. They became believers without any special initiation ceremony. They can freely drop out of the faith and have personal attachment of any kind. Thirdly, folk faiths have fixed worship places, and organize various activities at certain times of the year, as other religions do; so, some administrative organization is required. The different size of the folk faith administrative groups, whether they are permanent or not, is in accordance with the size of worship places, and the scale and frequency of worship activities.

Now, we can see that folk faiths have their own characteristic in history, nature and

organizational structure. They possess a unique position in the development of Chinese culture; therefore, the government should create a control strategy different from those for constitutionalized religions. But the unique characteristics of folk faiths are not the only factor in making strategies. The relationship between folk faith, cultural development and social control strategy is a very complicated issue which is associated with the interaction of political, economic and cultural factors, and which requires continuous research. Three particular problems that require timely treatment are:

- 1) First, how can we help folk faiths function in a positive way, through the worship of merits, personal contribution and morality?
- 2) Secondly, we should explore a new way of regulation and control of folk faiths.
- 3) And thirdly, scholars should do research and investigation into the development and organizational structure of folk faiths and try to improve theories in this field.

Some further points for your consideration are:

First, what is the functioning mechanism behind the development of folk faiths? Why have some folk faiths turned into folk religions soon after coming into being? And why have some of them not made this transformation even after hundreds and thousands of years?

Secondly, we should do research on the organizational structure of different religions to see which structures are better to keep social stability. Regulation policies should be based on the results of such research.

Last, we should also do research on the interaction between different religions, and try to build a healthier environment for all religions.

## **F. Conclusion**

It is sometimes said that we are now experiencing a great revival among folk faiths. We should know that the external environment for folk faiths is far different from the past. They are dealing with new political, economic, and cultural conditions and also the expansion of urban areas. Folk faiths' internal structures and the function they play will change with the gradual transition of society.

From a social control perspective, whether folk faiths can adjust themselves in accordance with society and play an active role in promoting social harmony depends on the quality of their leaders, the relationships between followers and leaders, and on the establishment of a democratic system of monitoring financial affairs.