

Original Paper

Scattered Notes on Reading Mr. C. K. Yang's Religion in Chinese Society

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Abstract

Why C. K. Yang's classic work Religion in Chinese Society is considered a "biblical"-level sociological classic in the study of Chinese religion stems mainly from its three core contributions: First, a unique dynamic research perspective. Unlike previous studies that focused on historical textual criticism or philosophical speculation, C. K. Yang viewed religion as a dynamic, functional component within Chinese social life, vividly depicting the complex interactive relationships between religion and secular institutions such as the family, socio-economic groups, and state politics. Second, profound historical consciousness and methodological innovation. Yang's research is permeated with a clear historical awareness, treating tradition and modernity as interconnected wholes rather than ruptures. He creatively employed the conceptual pair of "institutional religion" and "diffused religion" to effectively explain the characteristic integration of Chinese religion into the secular social order, avoiding the barriers and misunderstandings inherent in models based on Western institutional religion. Third, academic practice that actively responds to issues of the era. Set against the historical backdrop of the "impact-response" model in Western Sinology, Yang's research was not only a scholarly refutation of claims like Liang Qichao's that "China has no religion", but also embodied how that generation of intellectuals, amidst epochal changes, used academic research to explore the fundamental question of "Whither China?" It reflects a deep sense of "scholarly concern for the world". In conclusion, Yang's work transcends the mere study of religion; its ultimate goal is to use religion as a method to profoundly understand Chinese society itself. This broad vision ensures the enduring relevance of his academic legacy.

Keywords

C. K. Yang, Religion in Chinese Society, Comparison of Chinese and Western Cultures, Institutional Religion, Diffused Religion

1. A Vivid Scroll of Research on Chinese Religion

The book market in the era of marketization has brought us several times more bestsellers than the traditional book market. These bestsellers are not only popular everywhere but also represent a kind of fashion, especially those on success studies and spiritual inspiration, which are extremely popular. However, popularity does not equate to classic status; most fashionable books cannot withstand the test of time. Time is truly merciless and fair, the best judge, just like the tide of history: though vast and mighty, it is only after “blowing away the wild sand that gold is found.” Therefore, unlike bestsellers, for an academic work to be constantly reread and renewed by later scholars and to become an academic classic is far more difficult than becoming a bestseller, though its academic value is undeniable. In the long twentieth century, among works on the sociological study of Chinese religion, Mr. C. K. Yang’s great work *Religion in Chinese Society* is absolutely one that can be called a classic of the sociology of religion, constantly offering new insights upon rereading and possessing extremely high academic value. The renowned Western sinologist Daniel L. Overmyer praised it as the “bible” for studying Chinese religion.

Compared to other works on Chinese religion from the twentieth century, Mr. Yang’s work presents us with a completely new angle and perspective. Before the publication of Mr. Yang’s work, scholars studying Chinese religion generally took historical documents as their starting and ending points, focusing on identifying and correcting historical materials and facts, clarifying texts, and textual criticism, primarily leaning towards the fields of history and historical documentology. Secondly, there was research on religious philosophy, mainly concerning metaphysical speculation, further exploring the field of theology. Thirdly, there was research on religious art, such as the history of religious art, archaeological studies of religious art, etc. Research on these aspects of religion is, of course, very important and necessary; but if research remains only at this level, it inevitably tends to make the study of religion rigid, fragmented, or suspect of having only grand narratives without solid foundation. All these can be said to be both the advantages of their research orientation, but their shortcomings and various drawbacks probably lie here as well.

However, when one sees Mr. C. K. Yang’s *Religion in Chinese Society*, one’s eyes light up. This book discusses religion in Chinese society as a dynamic, practical religious condition. It talks about the customs of religious belief within specific social life spheres such as the family, socio-economic groups, and state politics, and their complex relationships with imperial power, local government, and folk society. The historical materials used are extremely rich, applied precisely, with vivid examples and reasoning that is meticulously analyzed and detailed. In the book, Mr. Yang provides us with a colorful and extremely fresh picture scroll of religion in Chinese society. Reading it is like having an outstanding commentator standing by the scroll, eloquently pointing out the infinite subtleties that ordinary people can hardly discern, truly evoking the sigh of being “overwhelmed” as if “walking on the mountain shade path.” This feeling is vastly different from the works on Chinese religion I had read before.

2. The Intellectual's Worldly Concern and Historical Consciousness from a Sociological Perspective

Recalling modern history slightly, we know that the environment Mr. Yang and his contemporaries faced was one where China was in a great transformation unseen in a millennium. Poverty and backwardness, blood and tears, and a series of crises surged towards the ancient land of China like a tide. As intellectuals in this great transformation, their “worldly concern” was a strong complex for “governing the world”, that is, the complex of “regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world” mentioned in the Doctrine of the Mean. Given their special environment at that time, this strong complex for “governing the world” naturally manifested as a strong sentiment for “saving the nation”. The various academic activities and research of scholars were inadvertently, consciously, and voluntarily tinged with a strong color of “saving the nation.” This sentiment of “saving the nation” was both the starting point and the destination of scholars’ academic research, and the source of inexhaustible motivation for their studies. Western learning provided them with theoretical basis and methodological perspectives different from traditional Chinese learning for explaining ancient Chinese problems.

Mr. C. K. Yang and his generation of scholars experienced both old learning and new knowledge, blending Chinese and Western learning. Mr. Yang studied at a traditional private school in his hometown in his early years, gaining a deep understanding of Chinese classics; in university, he attended the then-famous missionary university—Yenching University, and later studied abroad in the Department of Sociology at the University of Michigan, earning his doctorate and receiving systematic training in Western learning (sociology). On the other hand, Mr. Yang’s generation of intellectuals can be said to be a generation transitioning from traditional scholar-officials to modern intellectuals, embodying the qualities of both. Therefore, whether during the Republican era or after the founding of New China, whether those who remained on the mainland or those who went to Hong Kong region, Taiwan region, or overseas, they all possessed a strong Chinese consciousness and sentiment. Especially those residing in Hong Kong region, Taiwan region, or overseas, they had an intense, even indelible, local consciousness and nostalgia. They possessed a unique intellectual worldly concern, which is precisely what a true intellectual should have.

Therefore, on one hand, due to the strong local consciousness and nostalgia that formed the unique worldly concern of this generation of intellectuals, and on the other hand, due to their deep comprehension and grasp of Chinese cultural classics, and their personal experience and understanding of Chinese social life, all these gave them an understanding of Chinese society and culture that outsiders could hardly match. Such understanding and appreciation are far deeper and more genuine compared to the superficial, guesswork approaches of foreigners discussing related issues in China. Of course, this is also because Mr. Yang and his generation not only had full command and profound insight into historical materials but also possessed an empathetic understanding that is difficult for outsiders to achieve. Perhaps precisely because Mr. C. K. Yang, as an insider, could fully grasp and

deeply insight into historical materials and have an empathetic understanding, this made Mr. Yang's sociological study of Chinese religion a successful Chinese case with historical consciousness and credibility.

In the sociological study of Chinese issues, much previous research lacked sufficient historical consciousness, or was even quite deficient. The subtitle of Mr. Yang's book is "A Study of the Modern Social Functions of Religion and Their Historical Factors." From this, we can see that Mr. Yang's study of Chinese religion starts from a historical beginning and moves towards modernity; tradition and modernity are connected, not ruptured, in Mr. Yang's view. As Mr. Yang states in the introduction of his book, although his study "temporally focuses mainly on the late Qing and Republican periods, especially the 19th and 20th centuries," he actually possesses a clear historical consciousness. Thus, he also says, "The roots of Chinese culture extend deep into the past. To understand the present structural and functional positions requires tracing historical origins and developmental contexts". Today, China uses many social science methods introduced from abroad to explore practical problems, but sometimes they don't fit well, often because of a lack of necessary historical consciousness. This is because many problems China faces today are not merely legacies of the past forty or seventy years. Many problems are inheritances from two thousand years and the legacy of the past two centuries. Therefore, to solve many of China's problems today, ignoring two thousand or two hundred years of history will often lead to inconvenience.

Mr. C. K. Yang's use of Western sociological methods to explore Chinese religion is superior to previous research works precisely because of the integration of historical thinking and historical consciousness throughout the entire writing process. China's five thousand years of social development differ from that of Western Europe in that these five thousand years are an uninterrupted, continuous whole. Any social problem must first confront this five-thousand-year continuous whole; otherwise, the exploration will inevitably be superficial. At the same time, when facing Chinese problems, there is also the legacy of the past two hundred years, because since the Opium War, we have faced a Western world completely different from before, gradually moving the ancient Chinese empire from its concept of "All-under-Heaven" into the world. Therefore, the issues between five thousand years and two hundred years, between ancient and modern, Chinese and Western, are intertwined and extremely complex.

Today, many people use various social science methods to analyze the numerous and complex practical problems in China. But most of them either pursue the investigation of the current situation or are eager to analyze individual cases, showing little interest in the historical origins of various problems, even looking down upon or ignoring them. I think it is necessary to remind this state: for any practical problem in China, if we lack the tracing back, investigation, and discussion of its historical origins and development, if we do not have a consistent historical consciousness and a relatively deep understanding in a historical sense, it will probably be quite difficult to grasp the aspects, richness, and depth of the many problems in contemporary Chinese society. Also because of this, the consistent

historical consciousness is an important aspect of the great success of Mr. C. K. Yang's sociological study of Chinese religion. At the same time, Mr. Yang has set a good methodological example for us. These brilliant moments in academic history are also worthy of later scholars' continuous contemplation and prolonged reflection.

3. Understanding Chinese Religion under the "Impact-Response" Model

Since 1840, Chinese modern society has undergone a "great transformation unseen in a millennium". As Mr. Lu Xun said, it is a "great era," meaning "one may not necessarily gain life from it, but may also gain death," thus "only an era where it's either death or life can be called a great era." In the long history of five thousand years, we have experienced four great eras: the Pre-Qin period, the Wei-Jin period, the late Ming-early Qing period, and from the Opium War in 1840 to the present. Compared to the first three great eras, the great era from the Opium War in 1840 to the present is particularly thrilling.

Beneath the prosperity of the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns lay an unavoidable decline. "When autumn air pervades the world, it's hard for one room to maintain spring." The whole of China went from prosperity to decline, from decline to transformation, and from transformation to crisis, all within less than a century. The changes during this period were intense and profound, huge and widespread, with wars shedding blood and peace negotiations shedding tears. Decades of drastic changes turned Chinese modern society upside down. Ancient Chinese culture, transitioning from tradition to modernity, was hanging by a thread. Under the pressure of Western influence, China began its faltering modernization process.

However, since modern times, ancient and modern, Chinese and Western, old and new learning fiercely clashed and also integrated. Particularly, Western Christianity entered with its cultural strength. Under such pressure, traditional culture had to respond in a modernized way, especially Chinese religion. This situation is what the famous American sinologist John K. Fairbank later called the "impact-response" model.

Therefore, in a sense, Mr. C. K. Yang's painstaking research on Chinese religion in the mid-20th century, resulting in the book *Religion in Chinese Society*, was a response, or even a counterattack, to the invasion of strong Western culture. However, in terms of the internal logic of history, regarding many Chinese issues, including religion, the accumulated drawbacks from our five-thousand-year history had already overwhelmed us before the Western invasion. It was just that before we had time to reflect on ourselves, Western cannons were already at our national door. The roar of the Opium War gradually blasted open the country's gates. This caused historical accumulated drawbacks and Sino-Western contradictions and conflicts to gradually merge, dragging the sleeping Chinese lion into a deep, bottomless predicament and crisis. The century-long nightmare of Chinese society thus gradually unfolded.

Focusing solely on religion, the Opium War of 1840 ended with Britain's victory and China's defeat.

Missionaries seized the opportunity, riding on gunboats, and came to China again, starting the fourth wave of Christian missionary work in China. Relying on the various unequal treaties signed through power and the various rights and interests seized thereby, missionaries wishfully expected to transform the traditional customs, lifestyle, and ideological world of so-called “heathens” and “savages”. On the other hand, using their acquired rights, Their tentacles have extended to every corner of traditional Chinese grassroots society, deeply affecting the ordinary lives of the common people. However, the various actions of missionaries in China did not lead to mutual understanding; on the contrary, mutual friction and estrangement often occurred, like a square peg in a round hole, making communication difficult. Against this background, missionary cases from the late Qing to the Republican period erupted one after another, incessantly, affecting the nerves of millions in the East and West. Therefore, in a sense, the history of the fourth wave of Christian missionary work in China is a history of missionary cases that both sides found painful, indignant, and incomprehensible.

It was precisely under the invasion of strong Christian culture that by the late 19th century, Kang Youwei and others put forward the slogan “Protect the Nation, Protect the Race, Protect the Religion,” even establishing the “Confucian Church” in the early Republic, although Liang Qichao later called it “counterfeit.” But its embodiment of a response to the invasion of strong Western culture is undeniable. Unlike Kang Youwei and others who revered Confucianism as a state religion to oppose Western Christianity, Liang Qichao believed that “writing a pure history of religion in China is still questionable.” Because, in Liang’s view, “in religious history, doctrine is one part, the changes in the church is another. Doctrine must transcend the real world, talking about either heaven or the soul after death; no religion departs from these two conditions. Secondly, religion must have a church; without the organization of a church, the nature of religion does not exist.” Therefore, “based on these two points, it is worth studying whether China is a country with religion.” At the same time, Liang Qichao was critical of his teacher Kang Youwei’s extreme effort to “the worship of Confucius, and trying to make Confucianism into a religion.” He believed that Confucianism was very rational and also lacked a church. Therefore, in Liang’s view, Confucianism could not be a religion. Of course, Liang’s understanding was clearly produced under the theoretical system of Western religious studies. However, looking at Chinese religion with this new method and perspective could reveal some problems previously unnoticed. In Liang’s view, the most interesting aspect of Chinese religion research lies in “sacrifice.” Although “Confucius did not talk about strange phenomena, physical strength, disorder, and spirits,” said “How can you serve the dead when you cannot even serve the living?” and “Not yet understanding life, how can you understand death?”, Confucius valued sacrifice greatly. The Analects say, “When sacrificing, act as if the ancestors are present; when sacrificing to the spirits, act as if the spirits are present.” Liang Qichao also quoted from the Analects: “To sacrifice to a spirit not one’s own is flattery.” He explained: The distinction between “its ghost” and “not its ghost” is different from the Western view. It simply means that spirits and gods cannot control our fortune or misfortune; we sacrifice to them to honor virtue and repay kindness. We sacrifice to parents because they gave us life

and raised us; we sacrifice to heaven and earth because they give us many conveniences. Parents must be sacrificed to; heaven, earth, mountains, rivers, sun, and moon must also be sacrificed to. Extending this to people, then those who defend the country and locality against calamities and build enterprises should also be sacrificed to; extending to things, then the spirits of cats, dogs, oxen, and horses should also be sacrificed to. Here alone, the concept of “repayment” permeates the entire part of sacrifice. This method of sacrifice is different from the worship of heaven and objects in Greece and Egypt. They believed there was some mystery within, that it was a symbol of a certain god, and did not sacrifice because it had shown kindness to people. Frankly speaking, all Chinese sacrifices originate from this idea, except for the deceptive worship of Daoism. Listing the names of the gods worshipped throughout history, classifying and studying their nature and transition, is really very interesting. In Liang Qichao’s view, Westerners’ worship of heaven and objects is guided by something transcendent, while Chinese sacrifice stems from a cultural psychology of repaying kindness within our nation; it does not possess the same transcendence as in the West. Therefore, most of the gods enshrined in the vast temples of China were transformed from humans. So Liang Qichao said, “Studying the breadth of their worship scope, the duration of their worship, and the psychology of the general populace worshipping them, and making specialized chapters, would be a very wonderful part of religious history. So it can be said that the Chinese people actually have no religion, only the concept of honoring virtue and repaying kindness.” Of course, the proposal of Liang Qichao’s series of views on Chinese religion research has a very obvious background of Western religious studies discourse. But against this background, facing the complex religious issues of Chinese society, it still shows much helplessness, because it often unwillingly breaks out of this discourse framework. Also because of this, Liang Qichao seized upon “folk sacrifice”—something extremely common in Chinese society, resembling both custom and religion. This illustrates the awkward dilemma faced by the discourse system of religious studies based on Western institutional religion in China.

Roughly contemporaneous with or slightly later than Liang Qichao, Chen Duxiu wrote in *New Youth*, proposing “replacing religion with science.” Soon after, Cai Yuanpei, president of Peking University, proposed “replacing religion with aesthetic education” in a speech. By the 1940s, Mr. Feng Youlan proposed “replacing religion with philosophy” in his *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, and almost simultaneously, Mr. Liang Shuming proposed “replacing religion with morality (ethics)” in his *The Essential Meaning of Chinese Culture*. Messrs. Chen, Cai, Feng, and Liang, based on their own needs or learning, proposed their respective substitutes for religion, which also made the issue of Chinese religion in the 20th century suddenly flare up. At the same time, it is undeniable that these were the strong responses of 20th-century Chinese intellectuals to the incoming strong Christian culture, but this is also an unfinished problem of modernity.

Therefore, in this sense, Mr. C. K. Yang’s *Religion in Chinese Society*, completed in the mid-20th century, can be said to be not only a new advancement and deepening of the research on Chinese religion by previous scholars, a new understanding of Chinese religion, but also a refutation of those

who, since Liang Qichao, claimed that China has no religion, and an active response to Christian civilization.

In this work, Mr. C. K. Yang, by creatively applying the concepts of diffuseness and specificity proposed by Parsons, explores religion in Chinese society from a sociological perspective to answer the question: “What functions does religion perform in Chinese social life and organization, thereby becoming the basis for the development and existence of social life and organization, and in what structural forms are these functions realized?” At the same time, he introduces concepts such as Joachim Wach’s structural perspective and Paul Tillich’s functional perspective, particularly introducing Wach’s distinction in his work *Sociology of Religion* between two types of religious organizations, namely “natural groups” and “specifically religious” groups, redefining what religion in Chinese society is. Therefore, on this basis, using a structural-functional method to analyze Chinese society, Mr. Yang demarcates two different structures of religion: one is institutional religion, which has its own theology, rituals, and organizational system, independent of other secular social organizations. It forms a social institution itself, with its own basic concepts and structure. The other is diffused religion, whose theology, rituals, and organization are closely integrated with the concepts and structures of secular institutions and other aspects of the social order. In Mr. Yang’s view, an institutional religion is easily observed in its independent existence, but the role it plays in social organization may not be very important; on the other hand, as an independent factor, diffused religion may not be so conspicuous, but as a grassroots supporting force, it may be very significant for secular institutions and the overall social order. Therefore, using this pair of highly tension-filled concepts, what exactly are the characteristics of religion in Chinese society? And what is the relationship between the two?

Regarding this, Mr. Yang also has quite incisive discussions. Mr. Yang believes: In many cases, institutional religion and diffused religion are interdependent and mutually complementary. Diffused religion relies on institutional religion to develop its mythological or theological concepts, provide deities, spirits, or other symbols of worship, create rituals and offering methods, and provide specialized training for believers and clergy. Therefore, the belief systems, deities, rituals, and clergy of Buddhism and Daoism are borrowed in various forms of diffused religion, such as ancestor worship, folk deities, and moral-political worship rituals. On the other hand, institutional religion relies on providing the aforementioned services to secular institutions to maintain its own existence and development. Therefore, in the religious life of Chinese society, these two forms of religious structure are functionally interrelated and influential. However, overall, the biggest characteristic of religion in Chinese society, different from Western institutional religion, is that there is no clear demarcation between the sacred and the secular, and at the same time, the sacred and the secular are not completely binary opposites. As far as religion in Chinese society is concerned, the sacred and the secular blend and penetrate each other. It can be said that the two had a long period of confuse. This often makes the sacred and the secular in Chinese religion exhibit an ambiguous characteristic, which is difficult for

Westerners to understand. Therefore, trying to clearly distinguish the sacred and the secular in Chinese religion is a very difficult task, and also a thankless one.

Furthermore, from the perspective of Chinese cultural tradition, although it considers and acknowledges binary opposition—for example, Laozi contains dialectical views of binary opposition such as “Being and non-being produce each other; Difficult and easy complete each other; Long and short contrast each other; High and low distinguish each other; Sound and voice harmonize each other; Front and back follow each other”—most of the time, its focus is on the unity and harmony of the two. To achieve this goal, many ambiguous things appear in Chinese culture. Those who have read the *Analects* will have this experience: in the *Analects*, Confucius rarely defines or standardizes things, but instead instructs according to aptitude, flexibility. This characteristic can also be glimpsed from the ambiguity and polysemy of Chinese vocabulary. However, the ambiguity and polysemy of Chinese vocabulary actually demonstrate the breadth, richness, and vastness of Chinese culture. From this point of view, although Western language vocabulary is concise and precise, and while concise things have their detailed and clear aspects, they lose in richness and breadth; in the process of refinement, they filter out many meaningful things. As far as Chinese religion is concerned, although its sacred and secular boundaries are unclear and fused together, its value and significance also lie here. Mr. Liang Shuming said in *The Essential Meaning of Chinese Culture*, “Religion is actually the watershed between Eastern and Western cultures.” I believe that Mr. Liang Shuming’s above judgment must also include this point, and I have no doubt about it. In the study of Chinese and Western religions today, this point should be unavoidable. Clarifying this will remove one obstacle from Sino-Western cultural exchange.

In fact, even regarding the interpretation of the term “religion”, the differences are obvious under the context of heterogeneous Chinese and Western cultures: In terms of traditional Chinese culture, The term “religion” should actually be broken down into two words, namely “clan (or ancestor, clan)” and “education”. The former is a social relationship network formed under the “hierarchical pattern” mentioned by Mr. Fei Xiaotong, based on the basic criteria of blood relationship, from oneself to others, from kinship to distance, and from proximity to distance, with equal differences in groups; The latter can be implemented and realized under the premise of “human nature is inherently good”. Under the Christian cultural tradition and system, “religion” refers to the network of relationships between people formed in the context of a “group structure”, which in turn constitutes its overall social relationship network. Therefore, in Western society, the state as a group is an obvious and unique boundary between oneself and the group. Those who are the people in the state have nowhere to escape from this group, like a bundle of firewood tied together. They cannot help but make the state an institution that seeks the interests of every individual, so they have revolution, constitution, law, parliament, and so on. In our tradition, the limit of the group is the vague “world”, and the state is the emperor’s house. The boundary is always unclear, just a circle of social forces pushed out from their own center. “Secondly, under the cultural tradition and system of Christianity, “religion” is also based on Jesus’ basic judgment

of human “original sin” and his profound understanding of the evil of human nature, forming the discipline and punishment of human beings. Mr. Yang Qingkun said in the introduction of his book that Chinese chiao, Tao, tsung, and men are similar to Western religions, which is worth discussing. Because the term “chiao” understood by Confucianism mostly means “education”, and the chiao, tsung, and men formed by the people cannot be regarded as true religions in the true sense. These chiao, tsung, and men are only remnants of primitive religions, without metaphysical meaning, and are extremely vulgar things. The so-called “chiao” in the West emphasizes more on the meaning of “discipline” and “punishment”.

Therefore, it can be said that the mainstream of Chinese culture is a culture of influence, while Western culture is a culture of discipline. Under heterogeneous cultures, different understandings of life and death and different religious views have formed. However, no one can categorically deny the existence of religion in Chinese society because of these differences. But for a relatively long historical period, whether Western sinologists, such as James Legge, Herbert Allen Giles, etc., who placed Chinese religion in a relatively unimportant position and also neglected comprehensive explanations of religious influence, or Chinese cultural elites, such as Hu Shi, Liang Qichao, etc., who believed that China is a country without religion and the Chinese people are non-religious. Mr. C. K. Yang specifically pointed out: Liang Qichao was very frank, he regarded the mystical Daoism as a national disgrace. As for the reason, Mr. Yang hit the nail on the head: The only reason was that in the age of the supremacy of rationalism, people generally despised religion, especially shamanistic worship. However, mysticism is not unique to China. The views of Chinese and Western intellectuals on the issue of Chinese religion were basically similar. This had its contemporary reasons, such as the prevalence of scientism, rationalism, and Social Darwinism at the time, and Christianity in the West was also greatly impacted. But on the other hand, it was even more caused by the invasion of a strong culture. Whether Chinese or Western intellectuals, they wanted to find something in China equivalent to Christianity, but often cultures do not appear equivalently; in some places, they are even incommunicable.

In addition, although the concepts of institutional religion and diffuse religion proposed by Mr. Yang Qingkun still have distinct Western contextual characteristics, their Chinese characteristics are still evident. This pair of creative concepts still has great tension in explaining religion in Chinese society. However, the profoundness of any theory cannot conceal a certain degree of one sidedness. For Mr. Yang Qingkun’s theory, the same applies. Because Chinese religions and beliefs are often not simply religions and beliefs, they are often embedded in power and order and difficult to obtain a pure form of presentation. Therefore, in order to clarify the religious and belief issues or phenomena of the Chinese people, it is necessary to first clarify the relationships and structure of Chinese society, and then explain the power order of the Chinese state, its formation process, and the methods of proving its legitimacy. Only in this way can the religion and beliefs of Chinese people be expressed and interpreted. [Preface to Li Xiangping’s book “Faith, Revolution, and Power Order: A Study of Chinese Religious Sociology”, Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 1st edition, 2006.] Because there are a large number of

private belief phenomena in Chinese society, and this private belief is individualized, it is not limited by the system or identity, and is popular among the Chinese people; Religion, on the other hand, is collectivized and often highly institutionalized, while private beliefs are mostly based on individual spiritual care. In the Western context, speaking of faith definitely refers to religious belief, while in the Chinese context, speaking of faith does not necessarily specifically refer to religious belief. This also reflects the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Although Mr. Yang Qingkun's views have shortcomings, the flaws do not overshadow the strengths. Half a century after his publication, Mr. Yang Qingkun's works are still a classic book that scholars studying Chinese religion must refer to today, and no one can escape from them. Of course, the shortcomings of its theory need to be supplemented and enhanced by future studies. Academic research, like accumulating salary, will always come from behind.

4. Religion as Method and China as Goal

Mr. C. K. Yang and his generation of intellectuals lived in a very special environment, a great transformation unseen in a millennium. At the same time, they were also intellectuals of a transitional era, a generation connecting the past and the future. They possessed both the temperament of traditional scholar-officials and the fresh air brought by modernity. In terms of Chinese tradition, Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and Yangming's philosophy of mind had a profound influence on later generations; after the Song Dynasty, no scholar was unaffected by them. At the same time, traditional Chinese society was a society of four classes (simin), namely scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Scholars, the intellectuals of traditional society, were the models for the other three classes. In traditional society, intellectuals had both a sense of concern for the times and a sense of being the first to know. "The trouble of life begins with literacy"; "The duck knows first when the spring river warms." Traditional intellectuals aimed to "establish the heart for Heaven and Earth, establish the destiny for the people, continue the lost teachings for past sages, and open peace for all future generations." Their sentiments were very broad, and their sense of responsibility and mission were quite strong. These were passed down from generation to generation. Mr. Yang and his generation of scholars encountered troubled times, caught in transformation and crisis, and this sentiment became even stronger.

Therefore, although Mr. Yang's book *Religion in Chinese Society* unfolds gradually using religion as a bridge, its stopover is not on Chinese religion itself, but on the entire Chinese people and Chinese society. The question Mr. Yang wants to answer is not what to do with Chinese religion, but what to do with the Chinese people and Chinese society. So, in a sense, the intellectual's worldly concern, complex for governing the world, historical consciousness, and the sociological methods used throughout the book, as well as the active response to Chinese and Western intellectuals, are not aimed at Chinese religion, but take China as the overall object of concern. Mr. Yang's profound and unique thoughts and insights into the various aspects of religion in Chinese society are aimed at better answering the

question of China. Mr. Yang's research on Chinese religion transcends Chinese religion itself; he uses it as a method to engage in dialogue with China and the world. Using religion as a method and China and the world as the goal is a masterstroke from a commanding height, and this also contributed to the great success of Mr. Yang's research on Chinese religion.

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