



## The Types of Popular Religions in China and Their Internal Relationships

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**Abstract:** There are many types of popular religions in China, and there is an internal logical structural relationship between them. From the perspective of social cooperation and its equilibriums, folk beliefs originate from specific social cooperation ethics or functional expressions of local equilibriums, and do not deliberately construct the “overall equilibrium of social cooperation ethics”. Here, “rampant worship” (淫祀) refers to the superabundance of functional beliefs. While both the universal popular god beliefs and folk sects aim to cover all types of social cooperation ethics and clearly have construction of “overall equilibrium”, the universal popular gods have an affinity with the three mainstream religions, and the “horizontal cooperation ethics” is regarded as its superior ethics, so that it can further build “pluralistic unity” (多元一体) religious pattern with the three mainstream religions; at the same time folk religious sects are institutional religions that are heterogeneous to mainstream religions and have been subjected to continuous and severe official suppression.

**Keywords:** Social Cooperation, Popular Religion, Folk Belief, Rampant Worship, Universal Popular God, Folk Religious Sect

*Published by JSRH | DOI: [https://doi.org/10.30250/JSRH.202506\\_\(1\).0010](https://doi.org/10.30250/JSRH.202506_(1).0010)*

*Received Date: 05-01-2025; Published Date: 07-02-2025*

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## Introduction: Problems and Methods

### 1. Problem Statement

Unlike the single religious structure (or religious form) of Western society, the religious structure of Chinese society is characterized as “pluralism and harmony” (多元通和), “harmony of the three religions” (三教圆融) or “pluralistic unity” (多元一体).<sup>1</sup> In addition to the three mainstream orthodox religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism<sup>2</sup>, China also has many types of popular religions (or folk religions) and countless folk gods. In this regard, Mr. Ma Xisha once made a brilliant statement: “China not only has a history of Taoism and Buddhism, but also a history of the development of folk religions that is unpredictable, confusing, intricate and long-standing..... In terms of religious significance, there is no insurmountable trench between folk religions and orthodox religions.” (Ma and Han 2004, p.2)

Western scholars have a process of understanding Chinese popular religion. Early Western scholars who adopted the classification framework of classical religious studies believed that Chinese folk beliefs did not have complete classics and gods, and rituals did not manifest as church congregational worship, so they could not be regarded as religions. Later, influenced by the analysis of the relationship between classical texts and rituals by Sinologist De Groot, especially impacted by the functionalism since the 20th century, social anthropologists who have been engaged in the study of Chinese folk culture since the 1960s all agreed that Chinese folk beliefs and worship rituals can be regarded as a complete religious system, constituting a “folk religion” or “popular religion” (Wang 2005, pp.135-140).

In addition, Chinese popular religion is complex and has many types within it, so Chinese and Western scholars have different definitions of Chinese popular religion. The “folk religion” in China mainland academia usually refers to various folk religious sects or schools, which are also called “folk sects (schools)” or “folk secret religions” (Ma 2004, pp.127-138). While “folk religion” or “popular religion” used by Western and Hong Kong and Taiwan scholars includes both the “folk religion” of mainland academia and various folk worship and sacrificial rituals. The two different definitions reflect the complexity of China's popular religious forms and the difficulty of studying them. But no matter which definition is used, the research perspective is

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<sup>1</sup> For “pluralism and harmony”, we can refer to Mou (2018). “Pluralistic unity” is usually in the sense of ethnicity (Fei 2003). We use it in the field of religion, meaning a religious pattern that integrates Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and diverse popular religions.

<sup>2</sup> There is some debate in the academic community as to whether Confucianism is a religion. This article regards Confucianism as an official religion that combines politics and religion (Ren 1999, pp.1-7).

obviously influenced by Robert Redfield's theoretical paradigm of the relationship between "great traditions" and "small traditions" (Redfield 1956), and tends to treat popular religion as a small tradition, which is the daily belief of local society and folk people (Feuchtwang 2001; Jin 2002, 2020; Zhang 2016; Li 2017). Therefore, related research focuses on the relationship between popular religion and "great traditions", social and cultural analysis of popular religion, popular religion and society in regional history, popular religion and modernization theory, etc. (Wang 2005, pp.140-160)

However, in Chinese society, some popular religions have long existed in all social classes, without distinguishing between urban and rural areas, elites and the lower classes. They are no longer "small traditions" in the general sense. For example, the beliefs in Guandi (Guan Yu, 关帝/关羽) and Mazu (妈祖), recognized and supported by the official and mainstream three religions, are national worship that transcends local and regional levels. Of course, more popular religions are denounced by the official and elite classes as "rampant worship" or "rampant temples." In particular, the official authorities of all dynasties have spared no effort to severely suppress folk sects. Therefore, different types of popular religions have individual connections with mainstream society (and orthodox religions). It is difficult to explain effectively by simply appealing to great and small traditions.

In fact, as far as China's "great tradition" is concerned, the three mainstream religions have formed a religious pattern of "three religions in harmony" in the long-term competition and integration, and the three mainstream religions have also been constantly absorbing some gods from popular religions. Therefore, when studying popular religions and their relationship with mainstream religions, we should also fully consider the construction and evolution of China's unique and complex overall religious pattern. In this way, we raise some important questions: Why can various types of popular religions exist for a long time in Chinese society when the three mainstream religions already exist and have achieved the pattern of "three religions in harmony"? What is the internal logic of the emergence and development of various types of popular religions? Why do the official and mainstream religions have very different attitudes towards different types of popular religions? And do various types of popular religions have different impacts on the construction and development of China's overall religious pattern?

## **2. Research methods and preliminary applications**

We have previously used modern economics to try to develop analytical

tools of “social cooperation” and “social cooperation ethics” for religious sociology research (Peng 2016, pp.282-319). <sup>3</sup>With the help of this tool, we have attempted to explain how the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism formed their own dominant ethics in the long-term competition and integration, and constructed the pattern of “three religions in harmony”. That is, the dominant ethics of Confucianism is “intergenerational cooperation” (filial piety and teacher's virtue), “vertical cooperation” (loyalty) and “individual self-cooperation” from a collective perspective (becoming a saint and glorifying the ancestors); Taoism is “man-nature cooperation” (Taoist rites and praying for blessings), and Buddhism is “individual self-cooperation” from an individual perspective (becoming a Buddha and Nirvana) (Peng 2018, 2019, 2022). As a result, Chinese society during the Tang and Song dynasties formed a “menu-style” cooperation ethics provided by the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and under official Confucianism’s organization and leadership, the dominant ethics of the three religions were constructed into “the overall equilibrium of social cooperation ethics” in the form of “three religions in harmony”. That is, the so-called “Confucianism governs the world, Taoism governs the body, and Buddhism governs the mind”.

We have also discussed the inevitability and internal logic in forming the beliefs of Guan Yu (关羽) and Mazu (妈祖) since the Tang dynasty and especially Song dynasties. That is, the two beliefs, formed to adapt to the needs of Chinese society and to integrate the superior ethics of the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, are simple or low-cost beliefs that can cover all social cooperation ethics, including the universal “horizontal cooperation ethics”, and then are symbol of faith that can simultaneously express the individual well-being and the collective well-being (or collective rationality) of local communities, groups, and countries<sup>4</sup>. The potential for

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<sup>3</sup> In short, from the perspective of social cooperation (ethics), human activities include several types of social cooperation of synchronicity and diachronicity, namely, man-nature cooperation, intergenerational cooperation, vertical cooperation, horizontal cooperation and individual self-cooperation. In a social cooperation community, these types of social cooperation will reach “the overall equilibrium of social cooperation” due to the existence of transaction costs (transaction costs), that is, to obtain Pareto Optimality or social optimality, which is reflected in the overall system and form of society. Here, the meaning and function of religion is to provide ethical interpretation and support for “social cooperation and its overall equilibrium” to reduce transaction costs in various social cooperation and stabilize the overall equilibrium.

<sup>4</sup> As collective well-being or collective rationality, group well-being refers to the “partial equilibrium of social cooperation” in the sense of social systems (social organizations) such as marriage, family, economy, and politics, rather than the “overall equilibrium” of the overall society; local well-being refers to the “overall equilibrium of social cooperation” in the local area or community, but compared with the “overall equilibrium” at the national level (national well-being), the “overall equilibrium” of the local area and community is still a “partial equilibrium” in the sense of geographical space.

building a universal “horizontal cooperation ethics” is the decisive factor for Guan Yu and Mazu to develop from community gods to national beliefs. Therefore, the “horizontal cooperation ethics” is ultimately regarded as their superior ethics. Therefore, since the Song Dynasty, on the basis of the “three religions in harmony”, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and diverse popular religions have provided Chinese society with a more complete “menu-style” cooperation ethics and jointly built a “pluralistic unity” religious pattern (Peng 2020a, 2020b).

However, besides the popular belief in Guandi and Mazu, other types of popular religions have long existed in Chinese society. There are countless folk worships and sacrificial rituals for gods and goddesses, as well as a variety of folk sects (schools), most of which are denounced by official and mainstream religions as “rampant worship”, “rampant temples” or “cults”. Therefore, from the perspective of social cooperation and its equilibrium, this article continues to try to explore: What are the reasons for so many types of popular religions’ long-time existence and evolutionary logic in China’s society? What are their internal differences? How do these differences affect their relationship with official and mainstream religions, and then determine their various status in the overall religious landscape of China?

It should be noted that, based on the perspective of social cooperation ethics, the popular religion in this article refers to various types of folk beliefs and folk denominations (sects), mainly including: (1) Folk beliefs in the general sense, mainly various folk deity worship and worship rituals, among which worship rituals also include the worship of wizards or witchcraft rituals. (2) Folk denominations (sects), which are equivalent to the “folk religion” in mainland academia. (3) since popular belief in universal gods is a special type of folk deity worship, we list it separately. “universal gods” means that individual gods have multiple or even all types of social cooperation ethical functions at the same time, which distinguishes them from general folk gods with only a single or specific function. “universal gods” are also called “general gods” or “almighty gods”, but they are not “supreme gods”.

## **Part I: Folk Beliefs from the Perspective of Social Cooperation**

### **1. The Origin of Folk Beliefs**

Primitive religions generally include various types of nature worship, ghost worship, fertility worship, ancestor worship and totem worship (Mou and Zhang 2007, p.3). It is not difficult to see that various primitive worships focus on “man-nature cooperation ethics”, “intergenerational cooperation ethics” or both, which correspond exactly to the two types of most obvious

social cooperation and their (overall) equilibriums in primitive society.

Later, as the scale and scope of the social community continued to expand, the types of social cooperation and the overall equilibrium in the community continued to enrich, and the corresponding religious and sacrificial systems should also be developed and enriched. By the Zhou Dynasty, the early religious and sacrificial systems had reached a considerable height after a long period of development and sedimentation. Later, Confucianism systematically sorted, inherited and developed them, so Confucianism was acknowledged as the official religion in Han dynasty. Since then, the overall structure and principles of the official worship system (or sacrifice ceremony) of successive dynasties have not changed much, but only have some adjustments to the specific content and form (Li 1999).

However, the official Confucian worship (deity) system focuses on the “vertical cooperation ethics” and “intergenerational cooperation ethics”, and its “individual self-cooperation” also tends to be collective, which leaves Taoism and Buddhism with a huge space for development. In the end, Taoism and Buddhism formed their own superior ethics in “man-nature cooperation” and “individual self-cooperation” from an individual perspective. Therefore, the official and mainstream society during the Tang and Song dynasties constructed the “overall equilibrium of social cooperation ethics” based on the respective dominant ethics of the three religions. This is the “harmony of the three religions”.

The three mainstream religions provide a relatively complete “menu-style” cooperative ethics and achieve the “overall equilibrium” construction of the “harmony of the three religions”, which is obviously conducive to the stability of the “great unification” social structure. However, with the stability of the great unification, the three mainstream religions and their “harmony of the three religions” could not satisfied the growing social cooperation ethics needs of the people.

First, with the development of the “great unification” society and economy, the universal “horizontal cooperation” that transcends local and blood relationship has become increasingly prominent, but the three religions have all neglected the “horizontal cooperation ethics”. Second, with the enrichment of social cooperation types and the prominence of individual consciousness, the “individual self-cooperation” of Confucianism and Buddhism is increasingly unable to meet people's increasingly diverse demands for individual well-being in reality. Third, with the increasing importance of non-blood cooperation, not only does the connotation of “regional well-being” need to be updated, but the rise of new groups such as non-blood and cross-regional

business and military has also pushed up people's strong demands for emerging "group well-being". However, the "overall equilibrium" construction of "harmony of the three religions" often focuses on "national well-being" and cannot effectively promote (non-blood) regional well-being and group well-being. In this regard, Weber once argued: "China's official national ceremonies, like other countries' ones, are held only for the benefit of the whole community; while ancestor worship is for the benefit of the clan. Both have nothing to do with personal interests. ... This is the work done by the educated intellectual class, who completely ignore the typical religious needs of the common people." (Weber 2010, p.237).

In addition, although the supreme gods of the three mainstream religions all metaphysically govern all social cooperation ethics and overall equilibrium interpretation, their role are not so clear in demonstrating actual ethical functions, and there is a certain gap between them and the general public. This is true for the metaphysical supreme god "Heaven" or "God" of Confucianism, the "Tao" of Taoism and its supreme god embodied as the "Three Pure Deities" (三清神), and the highest god "Buddha" of Buddhism and its philosophy of "emptiness". Therefore, the three religions need to construct a relatively open functional system of gods to better explain to believers the various social cooperation ethics and various partial equilibrium in real society. The latter includes "partial equilibrium" in the sense of social system and geographical space, that is, the well-being of various groups and local communities.

The above characteristics of the three mainstream religions also reserve space for the survival and development of local folk deity worship and sacrificial rituals. People can still retain or even create a variety of gods and rituals to meet the demands of diverse individuals, places and groups for various social cooperation ethics and various partial equilibrium. This is especially true when the above demands cannot be met in the "menu-style" ethics of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism and their "harmony of the three religions" system.

At this time, there are two main resources available for folk beliefs (worship of gods and sacrificial rituals): one is the legacy from ancient religions, or the creation of various gods and rituals based on practical functional needs in accordance with ancient religious traditions; the other is to borrow gods from sacrificial ceremonies of past dynasties (such as gods of heaven and earth, gods of nature and mountains and rivers, saints and famous officials, etc.) or gods of Buddhism and Taoism (such as Buddha, Bodhisattva and immortals) and their rituals. Therefore, there is a saying that "folk beliefs are accumulated from relics and fragments" (Li, Liu, and Xu 2011, pp.188-189).

## 2. Formal Rituals and Rampant Rituals

Although the continuous preservation, creation and development of folk beliefs (gods and rituals) are reasonable, they are prone to disorder, which has become a headache for rulers of all dynasties. Therefore, folk beliefs are often labeled as “rampant rituals”(淫祀) or “rampant temples” (淫祠) by the official (even the three mainstream religions).

It was clearly regulated at least from the late Warring States period to the Qin and Han dynasties that “Rampant rituals” was separated from the formal sacrificial rituals. The definition of formal rituals/temples (official rituals/temples, 正祀/正祠) and rampant rituals/temples includes two aspects: first, whether the object of worship is officially recognized by the worship classics, that is, the official god, otherwise “it does not belong to this clan without appearing in classics” (*Sacrificial Law in Classics of Rites*); second, whether the object and rituals of worship are consistent with the status of the ritualist, that is, “sacrificing to something that is not what it is supposed to be, it is called rampant rituals” (*Qulixia in Classics of Rites*). Therefore, the so-called “rampant worship” is actually a kind of sacrificial activity, but it is a sacrifice outside the sacrifices that are officially recognized by the state and have certain rituals to be held (Jia 2002, pp.158-159; Rui 2005, p.124). If folk beliefs can be officially recognized and included in the national sacrificial rites, they become official rituals; if they are not officially recognized, then they are rampant rituals and will face destruction or prohibition (Zhou 2008, p.3).

Of course, the definition of formal worship and rampant worship in classics of successive dynasties has changed. This change is mainly affected by two factors: first, the Confucianization and ritualization of the national sacrificial system; second, the change in the strength of centralization of authority. Since the reign of Wang Mang (王莽) in the Western Han Dynasty, along with the Confucianization process of national sacrifice, the state began to crack down on the so-called “rampant worship”. During the Tang and Song dynasties, with the deepening of centralization and the establishment of the Confucianized and ritualized “sacrificial ceremonial” system, the belief system of regional society (i.e. folk beliefs) gradually came under the direct control of the court. (Lei 2009, pp.250-252, p.291). After the Song Dynasty, the official definition of “rampant worship” and the changes of the central government's worship policy on folk beliefs can be divided into four stages. In the first stage, the Song and Yuan dynasties adopted the policy of granting titles to temples and gods. In the second stage, the early Ming Dynasty formulated a worship policy based on Confucianism Fundamentalism, promulgated the “Edict on the official god's title” and the “regulation for Prohibiting rampant Temples”, but

in real world, it was not strictly enforced soon, resulting in a deviation between policy and reality. In the third stage, the Confucianism Fundamentalism was revived in the middle of the Ming Dynasty, and many campaigns to destroy rampant temples were carried out. The fourth stage, from the middle of the Wanli period to the end of the Qing Dynasty, was a period in which the Confucianism fundamentalist worship policy was in name only, and the phenomenon of granting and bestowing titles on folk gods was very active (Zhu 2008, pp.4-10).

## **Part II: Universal Popular Gods from the Perspective of Social Cooperation**

From the perspective of social cooperation, folk beliefs are the functional expressions of various social cooperation ethics and various partial equilibriums (even “overall equilibrium” in the national sense) in the context of many individuals, local communities, and groups in Chinese society. Here, folk beliefs can also be regarded as a personalized and contextualized reflection and amplification of the “menu-style” functional deity system (and rituals) of the three mainstream religions. It goes without saying that with the complexity of social cooperation and the diversification of collective well-being, the types and number of folk gods will increase dramatically. The excessive and uncontrolled spread of folk beliefs is detrimental to both society and individuals, which will inevitably lead to the three mainstream religions to restrict or absorb them. Especially for official Confucianism, given the endless emergence of folk beliefs, “prohibiting rampant worship” often become a mere formality. Therefore, selectively incorporating some folk gods into official sacrificial rites or granting them imperial titles can be regarded as a proactive approach to restricting “rampant worship” (Zhu 2008, pp.4-10).

In this way, whether folk beliefs can survive and develop in mainstream society depends on whether they can be recognized or supported by mainstream religions (especially official Confucianism) in the short term; but in the long term, it depends on whether they can effectively expand or supplement the “menu-style” cooperative ethics of the three mainstream religions, and whether they can contribute to the improvement and stability of the “overall equilibrium” of the “harmony of the three religions”. Therefore, the interaction between folk beliefs and mainstream religions actually involves the further construction and improvement of China's overall religious pattern. In this sense, after experiencing the religious policies of several dynasties, those local folk gods that can gradually develop from unknown to national universal gods highly recognized by the three mainstream religions, the official and the folk will be the most important window for understanding the dynamic changes of Chinese folk beliefs and overall religious pattern.

There are not many gods of this type, and Guandi and Mazu are typical representatives (Peng 2020a, 2020b, 2018, 2019, 2022).

### 1. The Origin of Universal Popular Gods

In terms of the type of “social cooperation ethics”, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, as mature scriptural religions, all attempted to provide believers with a complete explanation of social cooperation ethics, but in the long competition and integration, the three religions gradually established their own relatively dominant ethics. At this time, if folk beliefs simply expressed the superior ethics of the three religions (even if they were contextualized), they would easily overlap with the three religions. Therefore, in order to maintain and strengthen their own advantages, the three religions either selectively absorbed them or regarded them as “rampant worship” or “rampant temples” and suppressed them.

However, none of the three mainstream religions has given special support to the “horizontal cooperation ethics”. Perhaps to adapt to the needs of the traditional settled agricultural society and the blood-related “differential mode of association”, Confucianism's explanation of the horizontal “friendship” in the Five Relationships (五伦) is the weakest. Taoism holds an attitude of active protection towards “horizontal relationships” (between strangers). This is fully reflected in Taoist rituals such as praying and exorcising ghosts (the soul of a stranger), which is also not conducive to constructing a strong universal horizontal cooperation ethics. Buddhism advocates equality for all, which is in a universal horizontal cooperation ethics' favor and even promoted the prosperity of the temple economy in the Tang Dynasty. However, due to the excessive impact of the temple economy on traditional society and order, its reaction force eventually made Buddhism give up its efforts to build a horizontal cooperation ethics for secular society. Therefore, those folk gods with horizontal cooperation ethical functions, such as various wealth gods and industry gods, are relatively easy to be allowed (or tacitly accepted) by the three mainstream religions to exist independently because they have the least conflict with the orthodox three religions.

From the perspective of “social cooperation ethics equilibrium”, whether it is the earlier “exclusive admiration of Confucianism” (独尊儒术) or the later “harmony of the three religions”, the “overall equilibrium” of official and mainstream society usually focuses on the national narrative, which often cannot effectively meet people's realistic demands for “partial equilibrium” of local community well-being and various groups' well-being. In addition, the “overall equilibrium” of the “harmony of the three religions” in mainstream

society is directly constructed based on the dominant ethics of the three religions, and does not significantly include “horizontal cooperation ethics”. Therefore, the transaction cost of constructing and maintaining the overall equilibrium is very high, and it needs to be highly dependent on the organization and maintenance of the Confucian government (imperial politics). Such high transaction costs are obviously difficult (and unnecessary) for local society and civil groups to bear. Therefore, in real life, people are more willing to seek a simple and low-cost collective belief symbol that can cover all types of cooperation ethics including the universal “horizontal cooperation ethics” and express individual well-being, local well-being, groups’ well-being and even national well-being at the same time. As a result, the universal god (or general god) of the masses came into being.

The folk belief in universal gods, which contains horizontal cooperation ethics, first appeared in local communities, especially in the form of local community gods represented by the city god (城隍) or land god (土地神). In the Zhou Dynasty, the gods of Sheji (社稷) were gradually endowed with a certain blood relationship with local feudal lords, and they were a symbol of the overall equilibrium of the local (feudal lords) and an important part of national official worship. After the Qin and Han dynasties, the blood relationship between the gods of Sheji (also the gods of mountains and rivers) and the local society was dissolved, and they returned to the early attributes of natural gods (Li 1999, p.37). Afterwards, the personified city god (or community god) who could express a variety of social cooperation ethics gradually became a symbol of local well-being. The city god originally belonged to local beliefs and was originally a natural god. In the Han Dynasty, it was gradually played by human ghosts (some believe it started in the Sui and Tang Dynasties). Its functions also expanded to include protecting local residents, eliminating disasters, punishing evil ghosts, appeasing fierce ghosts, punishing evil and promoting good, supervising officials and deterring the people, etc. The city god was included in the official worship ritual in the Song Dynasty, and was further determined as a national sacrificial system in the Ming Dynasty (Zheng and Wang 1994, pp.28-50).

Official Confucianism manages the city gods nationwide in a hierarchical manner, aiming to integrate the “overall equilibrium” at the community and local levels (i.e., “partial equilibrium” in the sense of geographical space) into the “overall equilibrium” at the national level, in order to maintain the stability of imperial politics and the great unification pattern. However, “great unification” also promoted the rise of emerging groups such as business groups and (mercenary system) armies. The well-being demands of these emerging groups broke through the limitations of region and blood relationship, and

were very different from the traditional local well-being and family (clan) well-being. At this time, since the community gods (city gods) had no necessary blood relationship with local officials and people, the national popular universal gods stemming from them were about to emerge.

## 2. Characteristics of a Nationwide Beliefs in Universal Gods

Guandi and Mazu are two of the most famous national universal popular gods in China. James L. Watson used the term “standardizing the gods” (Watson, 1985, 292-324) and Prasenjit Duara once explained their historical construction by “superscribing symbols” (Duara, 1988, 778-795). We further explored the specific characteristics of this type of deity from the perspective of social cooperation ethics:

(1). The origin of the universal popular gods is from local folk beliefs. Initially, they originated from a certain worship psychology and worship rituals, especially the worship of “evil ghosts” (unnatural deaths). Soon after, or even at the same time, they were regarded as local (community) gods similar to the city god, with a variety of local ethical functions, and a symbol of the overall equilibrium of the local community. After that, they obtained various social cooperation ethical support or theological resources from the orthodox three religions (actively or passively), making the expansion of their ethical functions stable and spreadable. In the end, they combined the dominant ethics of the three religions, realized the construction of “harmony of the three religions” in their own image, became universal gods and omnipotent gods, and gradually moved from local worship to regional and then national worship.

(2). In the “menu-style” ethical environment where Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism all relatively ignore the “horizontal cooperation ethics”, the potential for building a universal “horizontal cooperation ethics” is the decisive factor for the rise and prosperity of popular gods after the Song Dynasty. However, the ultimate theological and philosophical support for their “horizontal cooperation ethics” still comes from mainstream religions. For example, Guan Yu's “righteousness”(义) comes from Confucianism, and Mazu's “kindness”(慈) comes from Buddhism. In this sense, popular gods use their own deity images to specifically highlight and apply the “horizontal cooperation ethics” that was originally implicit but habitually ignored in the orthodox three religions.

(3). The universal popular gods realize the “overall equilibrium” construction of the “harmony of the three religions”, but unlike construction of “harmony of the three religions” in the official and mainstream society, they are a simple and low-cost “overall equilibrium” construction that combines all

cooperative ethics. As individual omnipotent gods, they can not only embody various social cooperative ethics, but also reflect diverse individual well-being and multi-level collective well-being at the same time. They are not only the objects of personal prayer, but also the patron saints of local communities and various groups, and the patron saints of the empire, thus connecting individuals and society, folk and official, local and national.

(4). The universal popular gods are usually incorporated into the respective pantheon of the three religions, but the official Confucianism has always been the leader and confirmer in the construction of the “harmony of the three religions” of the popular gods. Through officially granted titles by successive dynasties for long time, the final titles of these universal gods can reach “Emperor”(帝), “Saint”(圣) or “Queen of Heaven”(天后), enjoying a very high official sacrificial level. However, they are not metaphysically supreme gods, their theology is lacking, and they do not have their own religious organizations. Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, groups such as chambers of commerce, guilds, and the military, individuals and families, and even folk sects and secret societies can organize worship.

(5). The universal popular gods are diverse. First, their different initial characteristics, creation regions and times determine that the paths and methods they use to construct their own images using the resources of the three mainstream religions are not exactly the same. Second, in the “overall equilibrium” that they construct, the weights of various social cooperation ethics vary greatly, which reflects the different demands of different regions and societies. For example, the “horizontal cooperation ethics” of Mazu belief has the highest weight and is more popular in coastal areas; while the “vertical cooperation ethics” of Guandi belief has the highest weight and is more popular in the inland areas. Third, as mentioned above, their most distinctive “horizontal cooperation ethics”, although initially originated from a certain character of their own, was ultimately shaped and confirmed by different orthodox religions.

(6). Since none of the three mainstream religions particularly highlights the “horizontal cooperation ethics”, people tend to regard the “horizontal cooperation ethics” as the superior ethics of the universal popular gods. Therefore, although the popular gods are fully functional and powerful, their most popular classic images are industry gods, guild gods, business gods and wealth gods, and their dissemination paths are also closely related to commercial activities (Hansen, 1999, 2, 72-75). Then are war gods or army gods, which are related to the army group.

Finally, from the perspective of China's overall religious structure, basing on the "menu-style" cooperative ethics of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism and the "harmony of the three religions", the diverse popular gods, together with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, provide Chinese society with a more complete "menu-style" cooperative ethics and build a larger "overall equilibrium of social cooperative ethics". This is the "pluralistic unity" religious structure of China.

### **Part III: Folk Religious Sects from the Perspective of Social Cooperation**

#### **1. Folk Religious Sects and Their Characteristics**

Folk sects (religious schools) can be traced back to folk Taoism in the Han Dynasty. In the context of Confucianism being established as the official religion in the Han Dynasty, early Taoism (namely the Five Pecks of Rice Sect (五斗米道) and the Taiping Dao (太平道) developed from Taoism was a folk sect. As Taoism gradually became orthodox and officially accepted, its branches continued to spread among the people (Ma and Han 2004, p.3). During the Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, there were still folk uprisings organized in the form of Taoism, among which the "Li Hong Uprising" (李弘起义) was the most frequent and the most extensive (Zhang 2012, p.506). Similarly, Buddhism was also regarded as a kind of Taoism when it was first introduced into China in the Han Dynasty (Tang 2015, p.81, p.95). The mainstreams of Buddhism afterwards tried to adapt to Chinese society and integrate into the mainstream society through Sinicization. However, there were also a small number of sects that spread among the people or were not recognized by the official and mainstream Buddhism, such as the Mahayana Sect in the Northern Wei Dynasty (Zhang 2012, p.562) and the Three-stage School in the Sui and Tang Dynasties (Lai 2010, pp.328-391).

Since the Song Dynasty, when Buddhism and Taoism were orthodoxized and achieved the "harmony of the three religions" with Confucianism, some Buddhist and Taoist sects began to move toward the folk and the grassroots, and developed towards secularization. This process is also the process of the confluence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism spreading to the lower classes of society and combining with folk beliefs, which has promoted the increasing activity of folk sects and formed a larger scale of sects (Mou and Zhang 2007, p.562). In the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, folk sects became a continuous force for the grassroots people, involving all parts of the country, with many schools and one after another.

Official documents of the Ming and Qing dynasties often denounced folk sects as "rampant worship", "heresy" (异端) or "evil cults" (邪教). However,

from the perspective of social cooperation, there is a significant difference between folk sects (after the Song Dynasty) and “rampant worship” in the sense of folk beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

1. Folk sects originated from the secularization movement of orthodox religions targeting the grassroots people.

In the process of completing Buddhism’s and Taoism’s orthodoxy, some sects turned to the folks and tried to develop secularization by combining with real life. Among them, the White Lotus Zong(白蓮宗) founded by Mao Ziyuan(茅子元) in the Southern Song Dynasty, which combined the Pure Land Sect of Amitabha(弥勒淨土宗) and the Tiantai Sect(天台宗) of Buddhism, had the greatest influence on later generations, leading to later generations often mistakenly referring to folk sects as the White Lotus Sect(白蓮教) (Ma 1998, pp.158-168). So much so that Overmayer once mistakenly used “folk Buddhist sects” to refer to “folk sects” (Overmayer 1993, p.3). In fact, the orthodox Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism all have secularization movements. For example, the Huangya Sect(黄崖教), which originated from the Confucian Taigu School(太谷学派), Lin Zhaoen's Trinity Sect(三一教) and Sichuan Liumen Sect(刘门教) are all secular sects based on Confucianism; Hongyang Sect(华阳教) and Yizhuxiang Sect(一炷香教) are secular sects based on Taoism. “The secularization movement of the three religions usually includes the following main contents: advocating that daily secular life is the most suitable environment for obtaining salvation, advocating that priests can start a family, emphasizing the equality of believers, giving women a higher status than in the general social environment, and the means of conversion of the sects are simplified rituals, short prayers and popular sermons based on scriptures written in dialect (vernacular), etc. (Overmayer 1993, pp.76-77).

2. Maitreyaism and Manichaeism had a huge influence on folk religions and formed the concept of salvation.

The idea of salvation in Maitreya Pure Land belief is that Maitreya Buddha will “come to the world” at the end of the catastrophe, perform the three assemblies of Longhua(龙华三会), change the world, save the people, and return to the other shore. On the one hand, it satisfies the needs of the world to reach the other shore of Bodhi Nirvana from the shore of life and death, and on

<sup>5</sup> The following analysis of folk sects is mainly based on research of Ma and Han (2004), Overmayer (1993), Mou and Zhang (2007, pp.653-656).

<sup>6</sup> For the research on Huangya Sect, Sanyi Sect, Liumen Sect, Hongyang Sect, Yizhuxiang Sect and other sects, please refer to Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang: History of Chinese Folk Religion, Chapters 22, 13, 23, 9 and 15 respectively.

the other hand, it does not completely abandon human desires. Therefore, it has great temptation and motivation for the lower classes. The idea of Maitreya saving the world in the face of catastrophe not only gave rise to slogans such as “Maitreya’s birth”, “Prince of Buddha”, “New Buddha is born, and the old demon is eliminated” to resist the existing order, but also merged with the teachings of Chinese Taoism, forming the “Three Yang Tribulation Transformation” (三阳劫变) theory in later folk sects (Ma and Han 2004, pp.36-61).

Manichaeism (Ming Jiao, 摩尼教/明教) was introduced to China in the Tang Dynasty, but was later banned and went underground, integrating into folk sects. The main doctrine of Manichaeism is the “Two Substances and Three Eras Theory”. The two substances refer to light and darkness, that is, good and evil; the three eras refer to the initial era, the middle era, and the final era. The two substances of light and darkness are irreconcilable and fight against each other. The prophecy of “Maitreya is born, and the Ming King is born” reflects the combination of Maitreyaism and Manichaeism. (Ma and Han 2004, pp.62-85).

3. Most folk sects are the product of the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism or the blending of multiple sects. There are many schools and the evolution is extremely complex.

According to incomplete statistics, there are more than 100 sects in the Qing Palace archives alone (Liang 2004, p.8). In general, “there are many folk religions in China, which are growing more and more, relying on each other, interweaving, and forming their own entities. Each has its own religious rules and regulations, and spreads secretly. It is too numerous to remember and difficult to classify.” However, “they are mostly derived from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in terms of doctrine and organization, among which Buddhism and Taoism have the greatest influence.” (Mou and Zhang 2007, pp.653-654).

4. Belief in the Wusheng Laomu (the Eternal Venerable Mother, 无生老母) and the eight-character mantra “The Native Land of True Emptiness, the Eternal Venerable Mother” (真空家乡, 无生老母).

Influenced by Manichaeism, many folk sects have a female supreme god: Wusheng Laomu. She is regarded as the creator of the world and the savior who saves mankind from the sea of suffering, and has supreme authority. As a result, the eight-character mantra--“the Native Land of True Emptiness, the Eternal Venerable Mother” --has become the unique concept of many folk

sects.<sup>7</sup>

5. Most folk sects have their own religious classics – Baojuan(宝卷).

Baojuan is an art form in which folk religions use popular language to write doctrines, ethics and stories based on popular Buddhist literary forms, such as Bianwen(变文) and Shuojing(说经) (Ma and Han 2004, p.6-7). Different from the classics of the three mainstream religions, Baojuan of folk sects uses popular language (vernacular or colloquial), mainly in rhyme, supplemented by prose, and expressed in the form of storytelling and art such as gathas(偈子), singing poems, and qupai(曲牌). It is simple and vivid, and very much in line with the needs of the lower classes of society (Mou and Zhang 2007, p.654).

6. Folk sects have their own religious organizations and rituals.

First, the leaders of most folk sects generally form a special “sacred family” through hereditary religious power, which is opposed to secular families; through the way of becoming a disciple, a personal dependence relationship network based on the master-disciple relationship is formed within the sect organization, which is opposed to the secular guild organization. Secondly, folk sects are not composed of monks, but of secular believers. The members mainly come from the lower class, such as farmers, handicraftsmen, tax collectors, urban poor and refugees, etc. Most of them join folk sects due to poverty, isolation, and disasters, in order to seek spiritual and life relief. Third, there is no unified form of folk sect rituals. Most folk sects are centered on the belief in the Wusheng Laomu, also are mixed with different gods of other religions, often including Maitreya, Guanyin, Laozi, the founder of the sect and subsequent leaders, and even Guandi, etc. Because they are not officially recognized, the gatherings of folk sects are always “gathering at night and dispersing at dawn” and “mixed with men and women”, which is also taboo in traditional society. In addition to worshipping and repenting, folk sects mostly emphasize physical and mental training, practicing qigong, practicing martial arts, and curing diseases and strengthening the body. Fourth, they attach importance to the role of women in worship objects and religious activities. The worship of female gods in folk sects is relatively prominent. In addition to the Wusheng Laomu, there are also Guanyin, Queen Mother(王母娘娘), Lishan Mother(骊山老母), Seven Fairies(七仙姑), etc. There are many female leaders among the sects, such as Lü Bodhisattva(吕菩萨), the nuns Guiyuan(女尼归圆) and Zhang Cuijie(张翠姐) of the Mahayana Sect(大乘教), and Mi Grandma(米奶奶) of the Longmen Sect(龙门教). There are also many

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the Eight-Character Mantra, see Ma and Han (2004, pp.751-758), Cai (1998, pp.182-193) and Zhuang (2002, pp.428-448).

women among the general believers. (Zhou and Xia 1998, pp.215-225; Mou and Zhang 2007, pp.654-655).

## **2. Explanation of folk religious sects from the perspective of social cooperation**

In terms of not being included in sacrificial rites and not having legitimacy, the “rampant worship” of folk sects and folk beliefs do have similarities. However, folk sects have religious scriptures, doctrines, organizations and rituals, and are obviously a relatively mature institutional religion, which is significantly different from general folk beliefs. <sup>8</sup>Therefore, we still need to carefully clarify the internal differences between the two, especially the difference from the universal popular gods.

From the perspective of social cooperation and its overall equilibrium, folk sects, like the beliefs in universal popular gods, also cover all types of social cooperation ethics and have a construction process of “overall equilibrium”. First, the doctrines of folk sects cover all types of cooperation ethics and also highlight the “horizontal cooperation ethics”. This is prominently reflected in the idea of relative equality between men and women, as well as social functions such as mutual assistance, relief and charity among the grassroots people. Second, the long-term survival and development of folk sects among the grassroots people is largely due to the reason that these sects are also a simple and low-cost “overall equilibrium of social cooperation ethics” construction, which can greatly reduce transaction costs. This is reflected in the fact that folk sects can provide believers with a set of cooperative ethics system that is simple but holistic, with their own supreme gods (such as Wusheng Laomu) as well as religious organizations and rituals. Third, the sources of cooperation ethics of folk sects are also diverse, and generally it is also a fusion of the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism (sometimes a fusion of two religions) (Ma and Han 2004, pp.1031-1033).

However, unlike the “harmony of the three religions” constructed by beliefs in universal popular Gods, the one constructed by folk sects is seriously different from the official and mainstream society.

First, the carrier of the “overall equilibrium of social cooperation ethics” of folk sects is often a personified supreme god. Different from the supreme gods of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, the supreme gods of folk sects usually directly express various cooperative ethical functions, especially “horizontal

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<sup>8</sup> C. K. Yang believes that the worship of professional wizards is also a kind of institutional religion (Yang 1961, pp.294-295). We believe that wizard worship is an immature institutional religion that originated in early society.

cooperation ethics" (mutual assistance and relief) and "individual self-cooperation ethics" (salvation). This model of constructing a supreme god with clear substantive functions should be mainly influenced by Manichaeism. Although it did not prevent folk sects from absorbing and integrating the ethical resources of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism into themselves, it obviously increased the difficulty of folk sects to achieve integration with the three mainstream religions.

Secondly, although folk sects originated from the secularization movement of the mainstream three religions, they usually have clear founders and have created their own religious classics, doctrines, organizations and rituals. They are an independent institutional religion. Therefore, folk sects generally have a "sacred family". They are independent and heterogeneous from imperial politics and secular society. They do not regard the Confucian government as their leader, and thus have a natural tendency to rebel. In particular, the salvation thought of folk sects is a great comfort and attraction to the grassroots people, and it is very easy to cause rebellion against the real society and become a millennial thought and movement (Naquin 1976).

Third, due to their heterogeneity from mainstream society, although folk sects can provide believers with a relatively complete explanation of "social cooperation ethics and its overall equilibrium", it is difficult for them to add value to the "menu-style" ethics and "three-religion harmony" pattern of the mainstream religions in terms of cooperation ethics types and various partial equilibrium. Usually, people do not regard "horizontal cooperation ethics" as the dominant ethics of folk sects. Therefore, the diverse folk sects are unlikely to become an organic part of the "menu-style" ethics, nor can they be further constructed into a "pluralistic unity" religious pattern with the three religions. Ultimately, folk sects often do not contribute to the local communities' well-being, but only to specific groups' well-being. Therefore, they are always associated with secret societies (gangs, 秘密结社/会党) (Dai 1980).

The above characteristics of folk sects determined that they were subjected to continuous and severe official suppression soon after their inception in the Song Dynasty. Therefore, folk sects can only exist in secret or underground states, so they are also called folk secret religions. The fact that folk sects have been in an underground state for a long time has further strengthened their above characteristics, and thus restricted their full development. For example, folk sects cannot establish an independent group of professional monks, and thus, the closed theocracy system without open education will inevitably curb the improvement and rationalization of their theological and philosophical systems (Overmayer 1993, p.76). Therefore, folk sects have always been unable

to break away from witchcraft and mysticism.

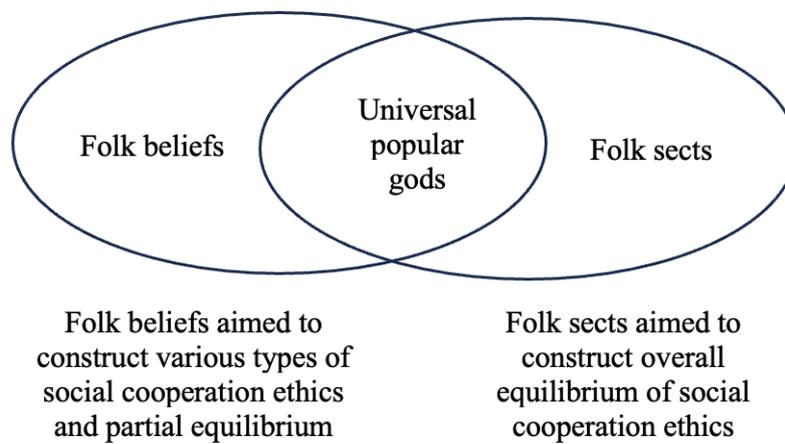
#### **Part IV: The Inner Relationships among Three Types of Popular Religions**

Popular religion is relative to orthodox or mainstream religion. Before the establishment of official Confucianism in the Han Dynasty, popular religion mainly referred to folk beliefs that were opposite to official sacrificial rites, referring to folk deity worship and sacrificial rituals with specific functions. From the Han Dynasty to the Sui and Tang Dynasties, that is, after the establishment of official Confucianism and before the completion of the “Harmony of the three religions”, popular religion refers to both general folk beliefs and non-orthodox Buddhist and Taoist sects that are not recognized by the official and elite society. Since the Tang and Song Dynasties, that is, after the mainstream three religions achieved the “Harmony of the three religions”, the form of popular religion has become more complex, including a variety of folk beliefs and folk sects.

It is not difficult to conclude that Chinese popular religion is a historical construction. The development of popular religious types is highly related to the development of the mainstream religious pattern, and then to the development of China’s overall religious pattern. Therefore, if we simply apply western religious theories and the paradigm of great and small traditions, it will be difficult to clarify the internal structural relationship of various types within the mass religious form and its relationship with mainstream religion, which will bring a lot of confusion and controversy to researchers. For example, Arthur P. Wolf and Maurice Freedman and others have had a fierce debate on whether Chinese religion has unity and holism. (wolf 1974).

From the perspective of social cooperation and its equilibrium, the vast genealogy of popular religions after the Song Dynasty clearly has an internal logical structure and internal relationship (see Figure 1). Among them, the construction of gods and worship rituals of folk beliefs usually originate from and focus on specific functions, namely various types of social cooperation ethics and various partial equilibrium (collective well-being); folk sects originate from and are committed to the overall equilibrium construction covering all social cooperation ethics; universal popular gods (especially national universal popular gods) are between the two. Not only that, in the mainstream society's Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism “menu-style” cooperation ethics and “harmony of the three religions” religious pattern, the above-mentioned internal differences of the three types of popular religions also determine their different relationships with mainstream religions, and thus determine their different functions and status in the overall map of Chinese religions (overall pattern and overall form).

Figure 1: Types of popular religions and their internal relationships



1. Folk beliefs originate from the functional construction of individual, local, and diverse social cooperation ethics and various partial equilibrium by folk individuals, local communities, and various groups. This construction is usually random and accidental, and can also be regarded as a reflection and amplification of the “menu-style” and open deity system of the mainstream three religions. Therefore, they rarely actively or deliberately build to provide the “overall equilibrium” (at the overall social level). It is not difficult to understand that in order to maintain their own power and avoid losing control, the orthodox three religions will suppress or constrain and guide folk beliefs. In particular, for official Confucianism, the rampant worship of folk beliefs has always been the opposite pole of the official worship of the official rituals. It is only with the passage of time that when the mainstream three religions have become increasingly mature and have achieved the “overall equilibrium” construction of the “harmony of the three religions”, the threat of folk beliefs that only point to specific functional construction to the three religions has become smaller and smaller. Even to a certain extent, folk beliefs are still a beneficial supplement to mainstream religions, which can make up for the shortcomings of the three religions in personalized and contextualized application. Therefore, the boundary between the so-called official worship and the rampant worship has changed in history, and there are often a large number of folk gods that are tacitly approved by the government, such as the industry gods in various industries (Li 2013). In fact, after the mid-Ming Dynasty, the official prohibition of folk beliefs has basically become a mere formality; in general local chronicles, “official temples” are placed in sacrificial records (祀典志) or ritual and music records (礼乐志), while “rampant temples” are also recorded in miscellaneous notes (杂志). This reflects that local

governments have adopted a more flexible approach to “rampant worship”, neither positively affirming nor completely denying it.

2. Folk sects are at the other extreme of the mass religion type. They are initiated by civil society and deliberately oriented towards the construction of “overall equilibrium of social cooperation ethics”. They are a kind of man-made institutional religion. On the one hand, folk sects draw on the worship of professional wizards in folk beliefs (an institutional religion that originated in early society). This is prominently reflected in the fact that the founders and subsequent leaders of folk sects often have “charisma” (extraordinary gifts) characteristics, and folk sects use a lot of witchcraft and mysticism. On the other hand, in the context of the harmony of the three religions, folk sects also blend the dominant ethics of the three religions, but they are often concentrated on a personified supreme god, and develop their own religious classics, doctrines, organizations, systems and rituals. However, the most attractive “horizontal cooperation ethics” (mutual assistance and relief) and “individual self-cooperation ethics” (salvation) in folk sects do not come from the orthodox three religions, but often come from Manichaeism or Maitreyaism. These characteristics of folk sects make them very different from the mainstream three religions and their harmony, and also make it difficult for them to be recognized by the official and elite classes, and the official Confucianism even less likely to be their organizer and leader. In this way, it is difficult for people to regard the “horizontal cooperation ethics” as the dominant ethics of folk sects, and folk sects will not help expand the “menu-style” ethics of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and thus cannot work with the three religions to build a “pluralistic unity” religious pattern. In addition, due to the lack of affinity between folk sects and the mainstream three religions, it is difficult for them to serve local and national well-being, and they can only focus on the well-being of specific groups (communities and parties). Therefore, they are usually difficult to be recognized by non-believers. This means that in terms of the type of social cooperation ethics, partial equilibrium and overall equilibrium, there is a big gap between folk sects and the mainstream three religions, and it is inevitable that they will be suppressed by the official for a long time.

3. The universal popular gods are between folk beliefs and folk sects, and have some characteristics of both. They are a very special type of popular religion. The popular gods originated from local folk gods. Their initial creation was accidental and random, but the subsequent process of regional and especially national worship was quite artificial. In the case of Guandi and Mazu, the initial form of national popular gods usually originated from “evil ghosts”, that is, “abnormal death”. In the context of traditional society, “evil ghosts” are

“strangers” (strange deities), and most of them are plain civilian personalities, so they have great potential for the construction of “horizontal cooperation ethics”. With the blessing of the advantages of “horizontal cooperation ethics”, they can quickly expand various cooperative ethical functions and become the universal gods of local communities and the symbols of faith of emerging groups. In this and subsequent processes, they have also been recognized, participated in and supported by the orthodox three religions (actively or passively). The superior ethics of the three religions are all gathered in the image of the universal gods. In particular, their “horizontal cooperation ethics” ultimately comes from the three religions. In the end, they covered all social cooperation ethics and achieved overall equilibrium, and truly became the symbol of overall equilibrium in the sense of geographical space and social system, that is, the imperial patron god and the national universal god. It can be said that in the types of social cooperation ethics, the construction of various partial equilibrium and overall equilibriums, the popular universal gods are directly or ultimately derived from the three mainstream religions. In particular, the official Confucianism has become the real organizer and leader in the construction of the universal popular gods through continuous imperial decrees from successive dynasties, which greatly ensures their affinity with the mainstream society. In this way, the universal popular gods can use the “horizontal cooperation ethics” as their dominant ethics, further enrich the “menu-style” ethics of Chinese society, and effectively meet people's needs for various partial equilibrium, and then organically construct a “pluralistic unity” religious pattern with the three mainstream religions.

### Conclusion

In short, in the religious structure constructed by the “menu-style” ethics of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism and the “overall equilibrium” of the “the harmony of the three religions”, various folk beliefs and folk sects still have room for existence and development. Among them, the popular belief in universal gods between general folk beliefs and folk sects is the most typical type of popular religion.

The universal popular gods originated from the functional gods of folk beliefs and eventually became intensive gods. From the perspective of social cooperation ethics and its equilibrium, the universal popular god belief and folk sects are two religious explorations and practices carried out by the folk and local society since the Song Dynasty in order to save transaction costs. Both aim to build an “overall equilibrium” covering all social cooperation ethics (including horizontal cooperation ethics). However, the development of the universal popular gods has always maintained full interaction and integration

with the three mainstream religions. It can even be said that they themselves are the product of the interaction and integration between folk society and elite society.

It should also be pointed out that although rampant worship and folk sects have been rejected and suppressed by the official and mainstream society, they are not without significance to the religious pattern of “harmony of the three religions” and “pluralistic unity”. rampant worship not only provided many gods for the orthodox three religions, but also provided soil for the emergence of popular gods. Without the local folk society taking the lead in constructing community universal gods, it would be impossible to give birth to the national universal popular gods promoted by the folk and the official later, and it would be difficult for the pattern of “harmony of the three religions” to move towards a larger pattern of “pluralistic unity”. Folk sects gave birth to orthodox Buddhism and Taoism in the early days, and in the later days they were an important reference force for promoting the official canonization of popular gods. For example, Zhu Yuanzhang(朱元璋), the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, who came from a folk sect, was extremely wary of folk religions. Soon after he ascended the throne, he issued the Decree on the Correction of God Titles(神号改正诏) and the System of Prohibiting Rampant Temples(禁淫祀制), abolishing the titles of gods except Confucius, but soon discovered that popular religions such as Guan Yu and Mazu were an indispensable part of society and needed to be restored; What he really need to focus on and guard against are folk sects.

In the above sense, the rise and prosperity of popular gods has the effect of curbing the proliferation of rampant worship and folk sects.

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