

# Naming New Religions

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## Abstract

There is ongoing contention in the naming of new religions, especially between governmental bodies and scholars in New Religious Movements (NRMs). One such contention is in China, with the common use of the term *Xie Jiao* and the appropriate English translation. Here we look at the historical context of the mistrust of emergent religions in China, discuss the reasons for the disagreement in the suggested ‘evil cults’ term, and propose a new term without theological connotations while also delineating a benign emergent religion from a harmful one.

## Keywords:

Anti-cult movement, Cultic Studies, emergent religions, xie jiao, New Age Movement, NRM, shin shukyo

As with every complex civilization, China has seen its share of emergent religions. The numerous rebellions that for centuries have characterized Chinese history were often led by religious societies. For these millennialist groups, the ultimate ideal was frequently represented as a restoration of an ancient golden age in which virtuous sage-kings reigned.

The first large-scale rebellion of this sort on record was led by a Taoist group, the *Taiping Tao* or Way of Highest Peace – better known as the Yellow Turbans – who rebelled against the Han dynasty in the second century.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, although there was in fact “no self-conscious ‘White Lotus tradition’ outside the paranoid imagination of the Chinese imperial state,”<sup>2</sup> “White Lotus Tradition” nevertheless remains a useful designation for the folk Buddhist tradition out of which numerous politically-charged millenarian movements emerged during the Ming Dynasty and down to the present.

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<sup>1</sup>Michaud, Paul. 1958. “The Yellow Turbans.” *Monumenta Serica* 17, no. 1, 47-127; Chen, Chi-yun. 1988. “Who Were The Yellow Turbans? A Revisionist View.” *Cina* 21, 57-68.

<sup>2</sup>Ownby, David. 1999. “Chinese Millenarian Traditions: The Formative Age.” *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 5, 1514. Ownby here refers to Barend J. ter Haar’s important study, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (1998).

Two relatively recent rebellions in which religion played a role were the Taiping Rebellion<sup>3</sup> in the mid-nineteenth century and the Boxer Rebellion<sup>4</sup> in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. The former was a large-scale rebellion led by Hong Xiuquan, who claimed to be the brother of Jesus, and who taught a Sinicized version of Christianity that combined Protestant Christianity with Chinese folk religion. The latter was a proto-nationalist, anti-Christian, anti-Western rebellion that received its name because many of its members were practitioners of Chinese martial arts.<sup>5</sup>

This history explains, in part, why contemporary Chinese authorities insist on controlling religious bodies within the country's borders. It also helps to explain why the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been so quick to respond to perceived threats from religious bodies.

The traditional Chinese term for new religious movements, *Xie Jiao*, has no exact equivalent in Western languages. Chinese authorities have encouraged English speakers to translate *Xie Jiao* as "evil cults," but this translation is flawed, and for several different reasons. In the first place *Xie Jiao* literally means something like "heretical teachings," which harkens back to prior Imperial periods when all new religions were viewed as potential political threats. Additionally, "heresy" is a value judgement rather than a scientifically-neutral term, implying that there is some religious (as opposed to sociological) standard against which to distinguish between orthodoxy and heresy.

From a scientific standpoint, "evil cults" is even worse. Once again, "evil" is a theological term, which evaluates particular groups as "bad." "Cult," on the other hand, has been adopted from a blending of Western anticult discourse with Christian heresiological polemics,<sup>6</sup> which thus similarly carries with it connotations of moral censure. While authorities might wish to retain *Xie Jiao* precisely because of these connotations, it is just as obvious that any researcher interested in doing science rather than in propagating negative PR must reject such terms as unscientific.

In fact, some leaders of the Chinese Anti-*Xie-Jiao* Association "gradually came to realize that the notion of 'cult' they had tried to borrow from American and European anti-cultists was widely criticized by Western academia, and adopting it as a definition of *xie jiao* would not defuse international criticism of what many see as the Chinese repression of religious liberty."<sup>7</sup> This perception eventually prompted the Anti-*Xie-Jiao* Association to invite a group of mainstream Western scholars to China for dialog in 2017. However, no "meeting of minds" (no agreement) emerged from these conferences - if anything, just the opposite.

Law enforcement officials are actually less interested in these terminological disputes than they are in focusing their resources on socially disruptive groups. In response to this interest, there has been some effort to utilize the anti-cult movement's designation "destructive cult," an expression which implies that not all groups are "destructive"; Like certain tumors, there

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<sup>3</sup>Reilly, Thomas H. 2011. *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire*. University of Washington Press.

<sup>4</sup>Silbey, David J. 2012. *The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China: A History*. Hill and Wang.

<sup>5</sup>Julia Ching, 2001. "The Falun Gong: Religious and political implications." *American Asian Review* 19:4, 1-18.

<sup>6</sup>Goossaert, Vincent, and David A. Palmer. 2011. *The religious question in modern China*. University of Chicago Press, 339.

<sup>7</sup>Introvigne, Massimo. 2018. "*Xie Jiao* as 'Criminal Religious Movements': A New Look at Cult Controversies in China and Around the World." *The Journal of CESNUR* 2, no. 1, 14-15.

can be “benign” cults. Not a little ironically, destructive cults are sometimes defined as groups that use “brainwashing,”<sup>8</sup> a term that was originally coined by U.S. Intelligence agencies during the cold war to describe what Chinese communists did.<sup>9</sup> Instead of criminalizing less tangible activities such as “spreading superstitions” and “brainwashing,” law enforcement authorities should focus on more general, tangible crimes such as homicide, rape, child abuse and beating people to death in Macdonald’s restaurants.

It should also be noted that the term “cult” occupies a place in the sociology of religion as a designation for a particular category of religious organization.<sup>10</sup> While, unlike a church or a denomination, a “sect” is a morally and theologically strict group which thus sets itself apart from the larger society.<sup>11</sup> A “cult,” on the other hand, is a more diffuse kind of group, gathered around a charismatic leader.<sup>12</sup> This sense of the term “cult” was not originally intended to be pejorative.

In the mid-twentieth century, the denomination-sect-cult typology was the standard point of reference in American sociology of religion. One gets a clear sense of this from a reading of such works as Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity*.<sup>13</sup> However, new subcategories quickly proliferated, such as “Established Sect,” which was proposed by Milton Yinger to describe the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>14</sup> In a classic article originally published in 1972, Colin Campbell also described a “cultic milieu,” as a subculture out of which cults (in the sociological sense) emerged and into which cults were re-absorbed.<sup>15</sup> Focusing on the structure of the “cultic milieu,” by 1979 William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark furthermore constructed a threefold sub-categorization, consisting of audience cults, client cults and cult movements.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, it should be pointed out that the term “cult” can refer to the ritual or set of rituals associated with a particular saint or divinity, as in the cult of the Virgin Mary. This usage is rooted in Cicero’s definition of religion as the “cultivation of the gods.”<sup>17</sup> Thus the term “cultic” or “cultus” refers to the ritual aspect of worship. As if to confuse things even more, anti-cultists have adopted the designation “cultic studies” to refer to their critical approach to alternative religions.

Back in the late 1990s when the first author of the present paper was residing in California, Michael Langone approached him with this newly-minted neologism, requesting feedback. At

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<sup>8</sup>Giambalvo, Carol, Michael Kropveld and Michael Langone. 2013, “Changes in North American Cult Awareness Organizations.” *Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movements*, ed. Eileen Barker. Surry, UK: Ashgate, 229.

<sup>9</sup>Anthony, Dick, and Thomas Robbins. 2004. “Conversion and ‘brainwashing’ in new religious movements.” *The Oxford handbook of new religious movements*, 317-332.

<sup>10</sup>Weber, Max. 1906. “Kirchen und Sekten.” *Frankfurter Zeitung*, April 13 and April 15.

<sup>11</sup>Troeltsch, Ernst. 1912. *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*. Tübingen: J.G.B. Mohr.

<sup>12</sup>Becker, Howard. 1932. *Systematic Sociology*. New York: Wiley.

<sup>13</sup>Stark, Rodney. 1996. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>14</sup>Yinger, J. Milton. 1970. *The Scientific Study of Religion*. New York: Collier Macmillan.

<sup>15</sup>Campbell, Colin. 1972. “The cult, the cultic milieu and secularization.” *Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5, 119–136.

<sup>16</sup>Stark, Rodney, and William Sims Bainbridge. 1979. “Of churches, sects, and cults: Preliminary concepts for a theory of religious movements.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 117-131.

<sup>17</sup>Cicero. *De Natura Deorum*. 1933. Transl. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library.

the time, Lewis pointed out to him that, in religious studies, “cultic” referred to the ritual aspect of a religious practice, so that, to avoid confusion, he would be better advised to adopt an alternate label. However, in 2003, as the American Family Foundation debated an organizational name change, the new board of directors decided to retain “cult” in their new name as a way of reflecting some continuity with the past.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Lewis’s advice was ignored.

Given these convoluted appropriations and misappropriations of the term “cult,” it is little wonder that this field of study has dropped “cult” altogether and has instead adopted the self-designation “new religious movements” (NRMs). As a field of scholarly endeavor, NRM studies emerged in Japan in the wake of the explosion of religious innovation following the Second World War. Even the name “new religions” is a direct translation of the expression *shin shukyo* that Japanese sociologists coined to refer to this phenomenon.<sup>19</sup>

But where, one might ask, did “movements” come from? It appears that many of the early scholars to turn their attention to new religions were sociologists from the field of social movements. Thus, adding the term “movements” seemed to transform this phenomenon into a topic amenable to their particular approach. A similar transformation took place with regard to the “New Age,” which became the “New Age Movement.”

Although the emergence of new religious groups has been an ongoing process in Western countries (not to mention in the world as a whole) for millennia, the study of such groups and movements was the province of several preexisting academic specializations in the West until the seventies. Thus, to cite a few examples, the Pentecostal movement (which did not begin until the early twentieth century) was studied as part of church history, and phenomena like cargo cults were researched by anthropologists.

However, when a wave of nontraditional religiosity exploded out of the declining counterculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, academics perceived it (correctly or incorrectly) as representing a different phenomenon from prior cycles of religious innovation. Not only did most of these new religions represent radical theological departures from the traditionally dominant Christian tradition, but—in contrast to movements like Pentecostalism—they also tended to recruit their adherents from the offspring of the middle class. Such characteristics caused these emergent religions to be regarded as categorical departures from the past, and they initially attracted scholars from a wide variety of disciplines. It was at this juncture that NRMs began to develop as a distinct field of scholarship in Western countries. And it should be noted that this development took place shortly *before* the cult controversy had begun to heat up. Two academic compilations representative of this era are Glock and Bellah’s *The New Religious Consciousness* and Needleman’s *Understanding the New Religions*.<sup>20</sup> As reflected in many of the articles in the first collection, the overall focus at the time was to attempt to assess the broader social significance of the newest wave of NRMs.

This academic landscape changed over the course of the seventies. By the latter part of the decade, it had become clear that new religions were *not* indicative of a broader social transformation—or at least not the kind of transformation observers had anticipated. Also,

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<sup>18</sup>Giambalvo et al. “Changes,” 239.

<sup>19</sup>Lewis, James R., and Inga B. Tollefsen, eds. 2016. *The Oxford handbook of new religious movements*. Vol. 2. Oxford University Press, 1.

<sup>20</sup>Glock, Charles Y., and Robert N. Bellah, eds. 1976. *The new religious consciousness*. University of California Press; Needleman, Jacob. 1978. *Understanding the new religions*. Seabury.

during the seventies, issues raised by the cult controversy gradually came to dominate the field. Because social conflict is a bread-and-butter issue for sociology, more and more sociologists were drawn to the study of new religions. By the time of the Jonestown tragedy in 1978, NRMs was a recognized specialization within the sociology of religion.

It took much longer for new religions to achieve recognition as a legitimate specialization within religious studies (in contrast to sociology of religion). This was partially the result of the expansion of religious studies and its own quest for legitimacy within a mostly secular university system. During the early 1970s—precisely the same time period when new religions were becoming a public issue—religious studies was busy establishing itself as an academic discipline. As members of a discipline sometimes perceived as marginal, most religion scholars were reluctant to further marginalize themselves by giving serious attention to what at the time seemed a transitory social phenomenon, and as a consequence left the study of new religions to sociologists.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, it was not until a series of major tragedies that took place in the 1990s—specifically, the Branch Davidian debacle, the Solar Temple suicide/ murders, the AUM Shinrikyo gas attack, and the Heaven’s Gate suicides—that the field of NRMs was truly embraced by the religious studies establishment.

It should also be acknowledged that the designation “New Religious Movements” is not without its problems either. Most emergent religions are contemporary expressions of much older religious traditions. Thus, for example, Soka Gakkai, Japan’s largest new religion, traces its roots to the thirteenth century. And there are parallel issues with other movements. Despite these issues, internationally the great majority of scholars seem to have reached a consensus that our field of study should be referred to as New Religious Movements. That consensus is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

To further confuse this issue – and as many observers within China are not aware – the body of researchers who study new religions outside of China can be subdivided into two broad categories, namely anti-cultists and everyone else. The “cult critics,” as anti-cultists prefer to self-designate, are interested in new religions as social problems and tend to highlight issues of social influence. As a consequence, their studies of NRMs tend to portray involvement in such groups as indicative of pathology. In contrast, studies by mainstream scholars of new religious movements tend to reflect a broader interest in the social significance of such movements.

Especially in Western countries, one can distinguish between at least two distinct sub-categories of NRM counter-movements. In line with historically-earlier groups denouncing religious deviance, one finds critics whose primary objection to religious innovation is theological. In North America and Europe, one especially finds organizations of Evangelical Protestants who censure “cults” on the basis of their perceived doctrinal divergence from a particular tradition of biblical orthodoxy. For analytic clarity, such groups of contemporary critics are referred to the “counter-cult movement” to distinguish them from the secular anti-cult movement.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, the frequently one-sidedly negative portrayal of emergent new religions –

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<sup>21</sup>Lewis, James R. 2003. *Legitimizing New Religions*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>22</sup>Cowan, Douglas E. 2003. *Bearing False Witness? An Introduction to the Christian Countercult*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

combined with anti-cult efforts to legally destroy such groups – has evoked a counter-counter response from a consensus of mainstream sociologists of religion, who are critical of the perceived extremes of the anti-cult movement.<sup>23</sup> They have also been especially dismissive of the unscientific theories of coercive persuasion put forward by anti-cultists. Although these same academicians have also been quite critical of the anti-social traits of certain new religions, the anti-cult movement has misleadingly labeled such scholars as “cult apologists.”

“Cultic studies” – which, as mentioned earlier, is the designation anti-cult approaches to new religions has come to be called – emerged as the “academic wing” of the secular anti-cult movement, which viewed itself as a kind of religious consumer advocate group. In North America, this movement came into being not long after a rash of new religions arose out of the ashes of the counterculture of the 1960s. Parents of converts, unable to comprehend the religious choices of their adult children and frustrated by authorities’ refusal to address the issue, began banding together in organizations such as Free the Children of God (FREECOG) and, later, the Citizens’ Freedom Foundation (which became the Cult Awareness Network). Initially, their purpose was to share information and agitate for government intervention, but later they became support networks for deprogrammers – individuals who forcibly abducted individuals from non-traditional religions, and then attempted to convince her or him to defect.

In North America, the Cult Awareness Network (CAN), the largest anti-cult organization in the Americas, was sued out of existence in 1996 by a legal team supported by the Church of Scientology.<sup>24</sup> CAN’s legal problem arose out of their role as a referral service for deprogramming (which involved the illegal practice of kidnapping). Since that time, 1970s-style anti-cult activity has been significantly reduced, though research on new religions continued under the umbrella of the ICSA – the International Cultic Studies Association, originally founded in the United States as the American Family Foundation.

Concluding Remarks: Whatever one might think about the expression “New Religious Movements,” the fact is that it has established itself as the preferred term for emergent spiritual groups, in the academic arenas that matter most. No amount of criticism will dislodge “New Religious Movements” from its pride of place, despite the omnipresence of “cults” in popular discourse.

As for *Xie Jiao*, perhaps the best solution is to purpose a new English equivalent that can satisfy the Chinese concern for harm without the theological connotations. “Deleterious Cultic Groups” can convey the harm to either person or community and provides a widely understood term for a religious sect. An emergent harmful religious movement is also a new religious movement, and on first impression it seemed like bad science to segregate one class of NRMs from the larger field of NRMs simply because they were deleterious organizations. However, upon further reflection, we can see that it recommends itself as a suitable translation of *Xie Jiao*. It gives law enforcement authorities a clear point of focus in a way that “evil cults” never will. Thus, authorities need not puzzle over whether a religion is spreading “superstitious” teachings or simply propagating traditional religious teachings, but rather they can focus on a group’s harmful or unlawful behavior.

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<sup>23</sup>Lewis, James R. 2005. *Cults: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 9.

<sup>24</sup>Lewis, *Cults*, 219-220.

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