



The Salvation of Religion? Public charity and the new religions of the early Republic

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The political and social changes of the early twentieth century fundamentally transformed the practice of religion in China, creating the conditions for a wave of “new religions” to emerge. This article identifies three such changes. First, the promise of religious freedom under the Republic allowed a mix of scholarly, political and commercial elites to resurrect the long-persecuted synergetic tradition in a more respectable form. But apart from eschewing the apocalyptic longings that had made earlier teachings so politically dangerous, new religions such as Daoyuan offered surprisingly few theological or intellectual innovations. Second, the fall of the Qing decoupled Confucianism from the decaying imperial system, recasting it in a civic setting. This is new initiative of public service merged with the deregulation of the charitable sector. Numerous new charities were formed, and many new religions established charitable initiatives of their own. The rise of public charities changed the new religions: the World Red Swastika Society was founded as the charitable arm of Daoyuan, but quickly moved from sideline to primary focus. The third element was militarization. Although the optimistic internationalism of the 1920s had allowed Daoyuan to form ties overseas, particularly with the Japanese Ōmotokyō, it was the practical need to conduct relief operations in militarily contested territory that led the Red Swastika Society to adopt its characteristic stance of principled neutrality. Japanese aggression in 1931 and the formation of client regimes in Manchuria and occupied China raised the stakes further, prompting the Daoyuan-Red Swastika Society to define itself as strictly apolitical in order to justify its continued operation behind Japanese lines. Even now, the legacy of this period continues to shape the ideology and operation of both religions and charities in Asia.