

# A Confuclesia-Forest-JiangHu-Sect Typology and its Pluralist Implication

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**Abstract:** The theories of sociology of religion have been largely based on social and religious facts in the West. In this article, I develop a sociological typology of Chinese religions with an asymmetrical concave curve, and I argue that the typology and the asymmetrical concave curve have general applicability to the religious pluralism in the contemporary society. Social forms of Chinese religions fall into four basic types: CONFUCLESIA (Confucian Assembly Hall), FOREST (the religious place with open and vague social boundary where Buddhist or Daoism activities take place), JIANGHU (gray public spheres where unfixed religious activities happen), and SECT (newly established religious group). Both confuclesia and Forest are unique social forms of institutional religion with oriental characteristics. The incompleteness of confuclesia's religious function and the heavy regulation of the Forests leave wide open space in the gray spheres of JiangHu where various unfixed religious activities and new religious groups grow and develop. Most JiangHu religions (except the sectarian movements) are not institutionalized. When sectarian movements that consist largely of secular people grow and attain maturity in the gray public spheres of JiangHu, there come the fourth type of Chinese religion: sect. There are interconnections or even transformations among the four types.

An asymmetrical concave curve is developed through the observance and analysis of the population and tension across the four basic types of Chinese religion. Then, a quick comparison is made between the asymmetrical concave curve and the bell-shaped curve, the hypothetical distribution of tension across religious niches in the West. After some minor adjustments, the asymmetrical concave curve may be applied to the religious landscape of the contemporary pluralist society.

**Key words:** Confuclesia; Forest; JiangHu; Sect; Tension; Typology

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars from both China and the West have tried to understand Chinese religions in their entirety. But the sociological nature of Chinese religions is so different from that of the Abrahamic religion that many concepts of the sociology of religion do not apply in China. To a certain degree, C. K. Yang's composite portrayal of Chinese religions and his classification of them in *Religion in Chinese Society* in 1961 were ground breaking and steered the field in the right direction (Yang 1961). However, the typology of institutional religion and diffused religion in the book was not only simple but problematic in methodology. More important in that regard, the author failed to grasp the unique structural properties of the Chinese society.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, based on the penetration of the Chinese social structure, I shall develop a specific typology so as to survey Chinese religions in their entirety and in a dynamic way. Then, I argue that the typology with its asymmetrical concave curve have general applicability to the religious pluralism in the contemporary society.

## Confuclesia

**Confuclesia was the mainline social system in traditional China, which provided a public communicative sphere regulated by Confucian principles.** The extended-family, family-group, and lineage were **primary confuclesia**, which formed a specific spatial differentiation characterized by the Confucian patriarchal consanguinity. The empire institutions of the county, eparchy, province, and royal court were **secondary confuclesia**, which made a stratified differentiation that was hinged on and reproduced by the Confucian state examination.<sup>2</sup> Both the primary and the secondary confuclesia were multi-functional and *Gemeinschaft* institution.<sup>3</sup> And as mentioned earlier, there was a manifest isomorphism between the two.

While people were born into a primary confuclesia, the membership of the secondary confuclesia was limited. One had to have qualifications such as passing the state examination, having had military exploits or having a particular inheritance to access the secondary confuclesia. It should be noted that the social status of the female in the traditional China was special. Generally speaking, they were not allowed to enter *Ci Tang*, the symbolic assembly hall of the primary confuclesia they belonged to. When they got married, they transferred their membership from the parent primary confuclesia to the next. In other words, women did not have definite rights and status in the system of confuclesia. In addition, roving people, and Buddhist or Daoist practitioners who lived in the monasteries were outside the confuclesia system.

## Forest

Forest was the legitimate meaningful communicative space outside the mainline system of confuclesia and, to a certain degree, recognized by the confuclesia. It should be noted that in traditional Chinese society, both Buddhist and Daoist communities called their own temples or monasteries as *Cong-lin* (丛林), which literally meant forest. In Forests, Confucian principles of social structure and the mechanism for the closure of communicative actions were no longer effective.

Compared with confuclesia, Forest constituted the serene retreat in the Chinese culture, which kept aloof from the bustling life and politics in and between the separated primary confuclesias. In other words, Forest was **the other** of confuclesia. As different social spaces, confuclesia was the mainline and the

center of the Chinese society, while Forest was the corner, periphery, or backyard. Of particular note is that, as a kind of religious institution, Forest had open and vague boundaries. Although the spatial boundary of Forest was made definitely by the emblematic building of *Shan Men* (山门),<sup>4</sup> and the temporal boundary was partly clear,<sup>5</sup> the social boundary, which was most important to a social institution, was open and deliberately vague. One may observe that neither Chinese Buddhism nor Daoism made religious communities, in a strict sense, for lay actors (Weber 2004: 308). The members of the Forests, or individuals that communicated with one another in the place of Forests, could be divided into three types: a) professional clergy who **belonged to Forest**. b) Laity who **partly belonged to Forest**. c) Incense burners who **temporarily belonged to Forest**.

## JiangHu

Every user of Chinese language who has common sense understands the thick implications of the common word JiangHu (江湖), but it is difficult to translate the term into other languages. Based on the penetration of the structural properties of the traditional Chinese society, I define JiangHu as **gray and dispersed public communicative spheres that are inter primary confuclesias, beyond the cybernetic range of the system of secondary confuclesia, and outside the communicative space of Forests**.

There were a variety of communicative actions that took place in JiangHu and pointed to the transcendent dimension, which I classify into five subtypes: local cults, worship of *Guan-Yu*, sectarian movements, group sacrifices, individualistic religion and the spirit medium. One may observe that most of these religious activities were unfixed in the social forms, and they had no manifest leadership, no written religious statement (the sectarian movement was the only exception).

## Sect

I apply the term, sect, to indicate the religious groups or communities in the gray spheres of JiangHu that consisted mainly in secular people with their own written religious statement (treasured scroll) and integrated leadership, and thus were actually in the process of shaping and fixing and not fully established<sup>6</sup>.

We may suppose that the tension between sects and their socio-cultural environment was very high.<sup>7</sup> For instance, *Pu Wen-qi* notices that there was a subtle distinction between the early private hand-written

copy and the public printed copy of the treasured scrolls of the White Lotus Sect (Pu 1991: 139-140). In other words, a mechanism of informative concealment existed in the printed treasured scroll. Before and behind the text, for example, were usually the figures of Buddha, and sentences like "Long Live the Emperor". Sometimes, a sign of "Royal Production" was even put on the cover and the title page in efforts to convince people that it was no dangerous at all (Noguchi 1992: 172).

Of particular note in this regard is that sects shared with the orthodox Buddhism and orthodox Daoism the idea that reciting, memorizing, printing, and circulation of scriptures were their own merits and virtues (功德 *gong-de*), which could result magically in fortune, health, and happiness, or even help people to go UP to the transcendental. It follows, then, that the orthodox scriptures of the Forests and the treasured scrolls circulated in the gray spheres of JjiangHu were analogous in a sense that both of them needed to stress the idea of the magical power of the text by itself so as to promote the circulation of the religious statements and the growth of the religious groups, which manifested the degree of tension between those religious groups, canons and their socio-cultural environments. In contrast, a religious system that had adequate rationality and played a leading role (or held the centered place) in the society, such as Confucianism, or Christianity, was not inclined to emphasize specifically the notion of the magical power of the sacred text in their religious statements (see **table 1**).

**Table 1:** Textual Features of Religious Discourse

Degree of Tension Religious Text	Zero or Very Low	Low	High
Confucian Book	Almost no tension		
Buddhist Sutra & Daoist Scripture		Notion of Magical Power of Sacred Text	
Treasured Scroll		Notion of Magical Power of Sacred Text	Argot; Phonogram; Special Expression; Concealment-Sign

## Confuclesia-Forest-JiangHu-Sect

### Four basic types: summary

In short, the religious phenomena in Chinese society can be divided into **four basic types**: a)

**Confuclesia Religion** that was multi-functional and incomplete in religious performance; b) **Forest Religion** that had open and vague boundary, and functioned as periphery or retreat backyard in the society; c) **Unfixed Religious Activities** in the grey public spheres of JiangHu, including local cults and various individualistic religion; and d) **Sect Religion**, the newly established religious groups in the gray spheres of JiangHu that consisted mainly of secular people, with popular, demotic, and rhyming religious statement (treasured scroll) and integrated leadership, and was often criticized and suppressed by the Confucian administration as well as the orthodox practitioners in the Forests. Both confuclesia and Forest are unique social forms of institutionalized religion which have manifest oriental characteristics. As social forms, they are fairly different from the forms of church, denomination, sect, or cult in the West.

There can be little doubt that traditional Chinese society (since the *Song* Dynasty) was a pluralized one in which three established and enduring religious comprehensive doctrines (Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism) waged an imperfect competition against one another, and the Confucian one held a dominant position and put Buddhism and Daoism in heavy regulation.<sup>8</sup> The incompleteness of confuclesia's religious performance and the heavy regulation of the Forests left a wide open space in the gray spheres of JiangHu for various unfixed religious activities and new religious groups to grow and to develop.

Most JiangHu religions (except the sectarian movements) were not institutionalized. One may observe that local cults in the traditional Chinese society functioned actually like “cultural resources” by which David Lyon terms one of the social forms of post-modern religions (See Lyon 2000: 9). As regards the worship of *Guan-Yu*, group sacrifices, and individualistic religion, they were, more or less, analogous to what Peter Beyer categorizes as “communitarian/individualistic religion” in his sociology of religion and religions in the contemporary global society (Beyer 2003). In addition, a plurality of interconnections existed between the confuclesia and JiangHu: varying inversely with each other; antagonism; transformation; and collaboration. Finally, the interconnection between Forests and various unfixed religious activities in JiangHu were also diversified: symbiosis, adoption, or repulsion.

When sectarian movements that consisted largely of secular people grew and attained maturity in the grey public spheres of JiangHu, there came the fourth type of Chinese religion: sect (教门 *jiao-men*). Since the idea of religious tolerance both in the system of confuclesia and in Forests was limited, and the degree of rationality in the sectarian movements was comparatively low, sects tended to be suppressed and labeled as “evil teaching” (邪教 *xie-jiao*) by the Confucian administration and the orthodox priests in the Forests.

## Distribution of population and tension

In the former sections, we have specified the degree of tension of confuclesia, Forest, and sect according to the textual features of their religious statements. I now turn to the distribution of population across the four basic types of Chinese religions, and make supplementary comments on the distribution of tension across specific religious niches.

### 1) Primary confuclesia

In traditional Chinese society, most people lived in a primary confuclesia to which they belonged. The number of roving people outside the system of primary confuclesia is hard to count. But, generally speaking, it was about ten percent of the whole population – it might be higher than ten percent in the wartime.<sup>9</sup> It follows, then, that the population of the system of primary confuclesia should count at least 80 percent of the whole population in peaceful periods.

### 2) Forest

During the *Song* Dynasty, the general number of the licensed priests in the Forests fluctuated in the range of 2‰ ~ 5‰ of the whole population in the society. In the *Yuan* Dynasty, it was 3‰ ~ 4‰; and 2‰ ~ 4‰ in both the *Ming* and *Qing* Dynasties.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that the official statistical figures of population in the traditional Chinese society were not always accurate and reliable due to poor administration and technology. Besides, apart from the licensed priests, there were often a large number of unlicensed practitioners who also led a complete religious life in the temples and monasteries. These unlicensed practitioners in the Forests included two subtypes: a) privately ordained priests who were more or less illegal (私度 *si-du*); and b) inchoate priests who were in the beginning stage of their clerical career and waited for the fully ordain and the state test (童行 *tong-xing*). The total number of the privately ordained priests and the inchoate priests ranged from 0.5 to 1.5 times of the number of licensed priests. Thus, we may suppose that the total number of the priests in Buddhist temples and Daoist monasteries fluctuated in the range of 3‰ ~ 12.5‰ of the whole population in the society.

### 3) Cultural tourist, occasional incense-burner, constant incense-burner, and amateur practitioner

First of all, there can be little doubt that almost everyone in the system of confuclesia would occasionally make a cultural tour in Forests, because even the famous Confucian scholars who openly

attacked Buddhism and Daoism such as *Si-ma Guang* (司马光) and *Cheng Hao* (程颢) sometimes visited temples for the aims of recreation and reflection.<sup>11</sup>

Next, one may suppose that a large part of the cultural tourists, except those who criticized and were repulsed by the teachings of Buddhism and Daoism, would kneel down before the gods in Forests and became an occasional incense-burner as the situation elicited; and among occasional incense-burners some might return to the Forest regularly and became a constant incense-burner.

Finally, among constant incense-burners, a number of people might even be partially ordained by the priests and transformed into amateur practitioners. It should be added here that the amateur practitioners who partly belonged to the Forests usually outnumbered the professional practitioners in the Forests.

It follows, then, that between confuclesia and Forests were a continuous series of religious niches which decreased gradually in population and ascended step by step in tension: cultural tourist, occasional incense-burner, constant incense-burner, amateur practitioner, and professional priest who completely retreated from the worldly life.

#### 4) Local cults and individualistic religion

As for the local cults and various individualistic religions in the grey public spheres of JiangHu, given that the interconnection between the unfixed religious activities and the Forests were a plurality of symbiosis, adoption, repulsion, and so on, the population involved in and the tension of should be between those of cultural tourist and constant incense-burner, with the exception of some shady or illegal magic, which have a higher degree of tension between Forests and sects.

#### 5) Sect

As we have seen, sects were newly established groups which consisted largely of secular people. Thus, it is apparent that the population involved in sects was usually far beyond the total sum of the priests in the Forests. The *Dong-Da-Cheng* sect (东大乘教 *Dong-da-cheng-jiao*) in the *Ming* Dynasty, for example, had more than 2,000,000 disciples (see Pu 1991: 57-58), whereas monks and way-men in the Forests summed up only to about 500,000 in the same period (see Mou and Zhang 2003: 764).

Three social factors were related to the population of the sects: a) population involved in the niches across occasional incense-burner and constant incense-burner; b) individualistic religion in the relevant districts; and c) the total number of the roving people in the society.

## Asymmetrical concave curve and its pluralist implication

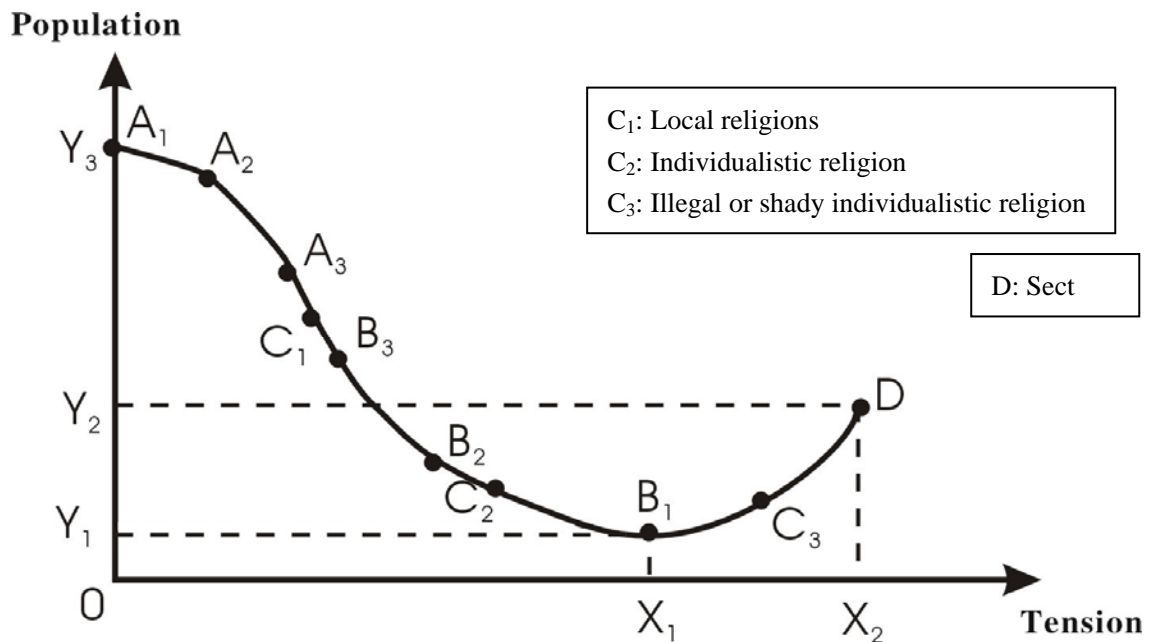
Based on the theoretical deduction and calculation in the former sections, an asymmetrical concave curve (see **Chart 1**) could be achieved. A contrast between **Chart 1** (population and tension of Chinese religions) and **Chart 2** (the bell-shaped curve of the Western religion: hypothetical distribution of tension across religious niches) would reveal sociological characters of Chinese religions.

A<sub>1</sub>: Confuclesia (Confucian assembly hall)  
 A<sub>2</sub>: Cultural tourist  
 A<sub>3</sub>: Occasional incense-burner

B<sub>1</sub>: Forest (professional practitioner)  
 B<sub>2</sub>: Amateur practitioner  
 B<sub>3</sub>: Constant incense-burner

C<sub>1</sub>: Local religions  
 C<sub>2</sub>: Individualistic religion  
 C<sub>3</sub>: Illegal or shady individualistic religion

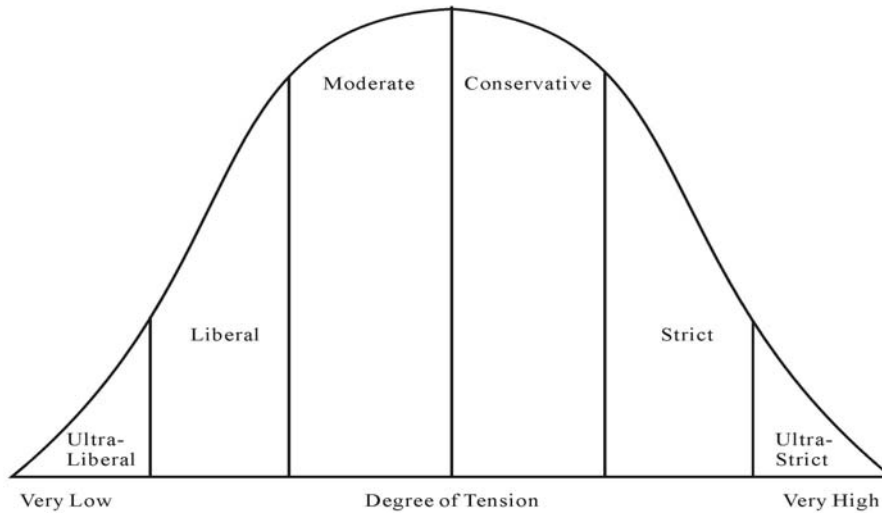
D: Sect



**Chart 1: Population and Tension of Chinese Religions**

Tension:  $X_2 > X_1 > 0$

Population:  $Y_3 > Y_2 > Y_1 > 0$



**Chart 2: Hypothetical Distribution of Tension across Religious Niches**

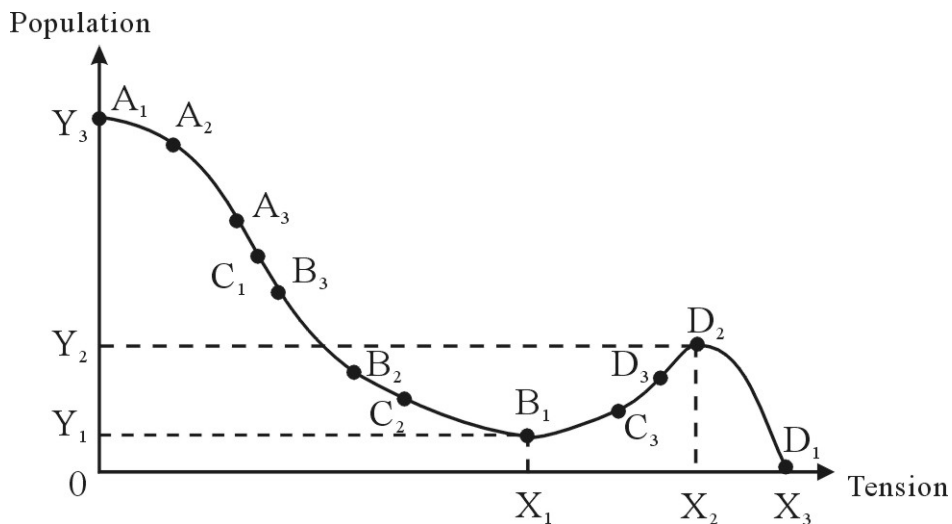
Source: Stark, Rodney, and Roger, Finke (2000, p. 197).

First, the distribution of tension across religious niches in China presents a manifest concave appearance: from the start of Confuclesia and along with the degree of tension increases, the population involved in the relevant religious communications declines step by step; and it reaches to the lowest point at Forest (professional practitioner); then, with further increase of tension, the population ascends to the critical point where the newly established religious groups (Sect) are confronted with suppression and to be labeled as *Xie-jiao* (evil teaching). Thus, it is clear that the asymmetrical concave curve is related to the heavy religious regulation. A second factor related to the asymmetrical concave curve is the overwhelmingly dominant position of the system of confuclesia in the traditional Chinese society, which is not only a secular system of life, but also a system that has religious performance.

Second, since Forest has open and vague boundaries, and the religious performance of the system of confuclesia is incomplete, thus in and between the two social systems shape a series of transitional religious niches where people can double-belong or even multiple-belong. In other words, a state of symbiosis exists, to a certain extent, among the pluralized religious groups or activities. It follows, then, that the area between the asymmetrical concave curve and the two axes of X and Y is not equal to but greater than the total sum of the population in the Chinese society.<sup>12</sup>

Third, while the sociological research of western religions could be focused on the population that **belongs to** different religious groups and the distribution of tension across them, it is important for scholars on Chinese religions or east Asian religions to substitute the concept of “belong to” with a **plurality of statistical items that are more or less inclusive with one another**: cultural tourist, occasional incense-burner, constant incense-burner, amateur practitioner, and professional practitioner. More critical in this regard is to specify the degree of the **slope** at different points – items – on the asymmetrical concave curve, in other words, to determine how many people that are related to one item would be involved in the next.

In conclusion, after some minor adjustments, the asymmetrical concave curve may have wider applicability. It may, for example, apply to the East Asian Confucianized societies: Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. In these cases, one might let A be the different mainline religious institutions in the respective societies, B the semi-structured religious retreats based on the tradition of the religious other, C the various forms of local worships and individualistic religions, and D the diversified sectarian or fundamentalist religious movements, New Religious Movements (NRMs), cults, and so on. One should notice, on the other hand, that in a modern democratic society, the asymmetrical concave curve may not end abruptly at point D. In stead, the curve will come down swiftly so long as the tension goes further beyond that point.



**Chart 3: Hypothetical Distribution of Population and Tension of the Contemporary Religious**

**Pluralism**

**Tension:  $X_3 > X_2 > X_1 > 0$**

**Population:  $Y_3 > Y_2 > Y_1 > 0$**

Moreover, the theoretical model and the asymmetrical concave curve may also be used as a tool for the quantitative study of religious pluralism in the US today, given that the interreligious activities in the country are growing. Today, in the context of globalization and high modernity, not only have the phenomena of “believing without belonging”, “doing without belonging”, and “double belonging” emerged on the religious landscape, but inter-religious events such as visiting of peoples from different religious traditions to religious or spiritual sites of the other, cultural tours, inter-religious dialogues, and other inter-religious activities like meditation and Yoga have also become increasingly popular. A number of them may even convert to the religious other. In the meantime, in a well-ordered pluralistic society, rational people with a moderate, reasonable and open-minded religious tradition, which have established themselves historically in the society, will likely continue to hold a relatively dominant position over the newcomer - the religious other - and the different sectarian religious movements. As a result, the concave curve will continue to be asymmetrical.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In essence, the concept of diffused religion can be understood as un-institutional. In other words, it is a residual category of the institutional religion. That is to say, Yang’s typology of institutional and diffused religion is not as revealing as it looks like on the surface. There are some other typologies of Chinese religion in the field, but none of them is really based on an apt and integrated understanding of social forms of different religious activities in China.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the differentiation of society, see Luhmann (1982).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, which are usually translated as community and society, see Tonnies (1963).

<sup>4</sup> In front of each Daoist or Buddhist temple (or monastery), there was surely a symbolic building that marked the division of the sacred sphere and the profane sphere, which was usually named as *Shan Men* (山门 : the mountain gate).

<sup>5</sup> As for timing of the religious practices in the Forest, there are a number of religious fete-days around the year, Day 1 and Day 15 in each lunation, some hours in each day, as well as the idea that teaching goes as the occasion elicits (教赴时机 *Jiao-fu-shi-ji*).

<sup>6</sup> In Chinese, there are two traditional words, *Xie-jiao* (邪教) and *Jiao-men* (教门), both of which are used to identify the sectarian movements in the gray spheres of JiangHu. *Xie-jiao* literally means evil teaching; and *Jiao-men* literally means school of teaching. For the purpose of academic study, I take the neutral term, *Jiao-men*, and translate it into English as sect. Although these two categories have different connotations in each language and the religious groups which they denote have different places as well as different structural properties in each society, they do parallel each other to a certain extent.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of tension, see Benton Johnson, 1963, *On Church and Sect*, *American Sociological Review* 28:539-549; see also Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, pp. 141-168, California: University of California Press, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Here I borrow the term, comprehensive doctrine, from John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 152n, 175.

<sup>9</sup> It is believed that among the population of 60,000,000 in the *Ming* Dynasty, which was an official statistic counted by the Ming administration, were about 6,000,000 that became roving people. See Zhou and Song (2000: 653). But, during the wartime, the proportion of the roving people in the society could ascend by a big margin. For instance, *Chen Gao-hua* finds that the roving people in the early *Yuan* Dynasty often counted one third of the whole population (See Chen, Gaohua 1992). Besides, it should be added here that the official population statistics in the traditional Chinese society was not always reliable. For example, some scholars assert that the population of the *Ming* Dynasty in A.D. 1600 should be 200,000,000. See Zhou and Song (2000: 272). However, it is beyond all questions that the population in the system of primary confuclesia formed the bulk of the population in the traditional Chinese society.

<sup>10</sup> For a fully discussion, see You Biao (2003: 47-48); Ge Jian-xiong (2000: 272); *Yuan-shi: Ben-ji 16: Shi-zu 13*; and Mou and Zhang (2003: 764, 888-889).

<sup>11</sup> See *Cheng-shi-wai-shu: Book 12: introduction; Fo-zu-tong-ji: Book 45*; see also Yu, Ying-shi (1992: 298-299).

<sup>12</sup> Although there is no statistical figure which can support directly my deduction, I have indirect supports. For instance, it has been proved statistically that in Japan, a confucianized country, there were 220,000,000 religious disciples in 1983, while the resident population in the country numbered 120,000,000. See Qing and Kung (1990: 248).

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