Abstract

The medieval period in China, the Tang-Song era in particular, marks an important watershed in the development of Chinese popular religion. It was during this period that many local cults within the popular religious pantheon underwent important transformations, whereby deities were being transfigured and their cults being subsumed under Buddhist or Taoist liturgical traditions. More often than not, popular cults then were being consciously redefined in a more positive light and, as a result, many popular deities of diabolical nature succeeded in cleansing themselves of any demonic origin to become cults of popular veneration in later history.

One of the few cults that however stood out in the context of such a cult-transformation process was the cult of Wutong. The cult of Wutong had flourished in China since the late medieval period, particularly in the Song dynasty (960-1279) during which it attracted widespread following in South China (Jiangnan). A survey of Song literary texts would reveal that Wu-tong was without doubt a deity (or deities) of extremely diabolical character, with a penchant for debauching women and wanton mischief, often using ill-gotten forms of riches as bait for sustained worship amongst its devotees. But the fact that the cult of Wu-tong had failed to cleanse itself of such diabolical traits like other popular cults, despite its having certain factors favouring such a process, presents an intriguing phenomenon worthy of in-depth study.

This study sets forth to provide some possible explanations for why the cult of Wutong had apparently failed to achieve successful cult-transformation in its history of development. An examination of the socio-cultural context in which this general cult-transformation had taken place is in order here, with the underlying notion being, a popular cult is in itself a socio-cultural entity that is constantly shaped by the interaction of various social dynamics. In this study, four such dynamics will be identified. More specifically, this study will illustrate how different social groups
consciously re-interpreted the cult of Wutong to their own ends, and how such interpretation by some literati revealed a certain moral consciousness that had in part influenced the cult-transformation of Wutong and, in general, of other cults as well.

The larger aim of this study is to bring forth the concept of a cult-transformation process in China, an important phenomenon that has previously gone unnoticed by most Chinese academics in their studies on Chinese religion. As this study will show, this cult-transformation process carries in itself certain socio-cultural significance that deserves further comprehensive study. In a broader sense as well, this work hopes to address the longstanding need to approach the study of Chinese religion in a way that could reveal greater relevance to our understanding of the Chinese society and culture at large.