An Introduction to Three New Religious Movements of East Asia

Massimo Introvigne (CESNUR)
Parliament of World's Religions
Toronto, 6 November 2018

Three Religions Together

- On June 2018, the leaders of three East Asian new religions, Daesoon Jinrihoe from Korea, Cao Dai from Vietnam, and Weixin Shengjiao from Taiwan, signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Taiwan during the yearly CESNUR conference taking place there

Thirty Years of CESNUR

- CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, was established in Italy in 1988 to offer a professional association to international scholars of new religions and to document the global religious pluralism. It has organized 31 yearly international conferences throughout the world, has published more than 100 books, and operates four different large Web sites

A rare image of CESNUR's first conference, 1988

Bad Timing?

- When CESNUR was started, new religions were not taken seriously and dismissed as mere curiosities. The prevailing orthodoxy among European scholars of religion was that religion was declining, and – in the famous words of anthropologist Anthony Wallace (1923-2015, left) – "the evolutionary future of religion is extinction"

The Myth of the Declining Religion

- Today, most scholars of religion would agree that *some* forms of religion may actually decline, while others grow. For some, *spirituality* replaces religion, although how to define spirituality is also a matter of controversy. And, while some *old* religions decline (but not all: Islam is still growing), *new global* religions arise

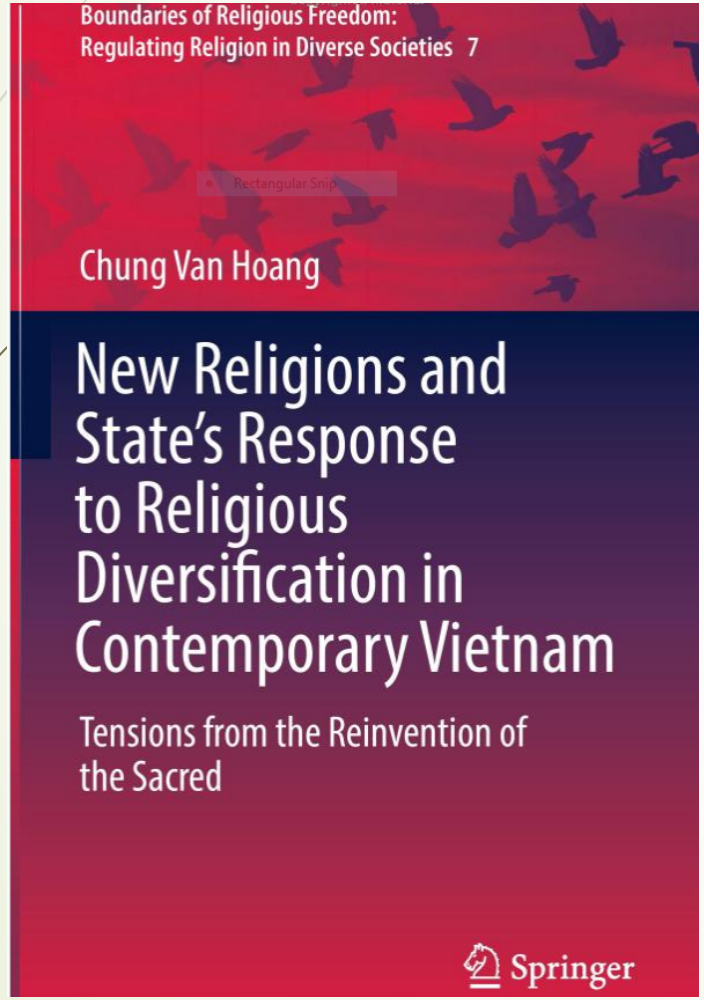
Why New Religions?

- There are literally hundreds of theories why new global religions started appearing in the 19th and 20th century. What several theories have in common is the idea that, after the French and the Industrial Revolutions, the world was confronted by unprecedently rapid changes and the feeling of an "accelerated history." Although older religions tried to adapt to such changes, some of them successfully, many believed that they were no longer adequate to the new times

New Religions: Where?

- In some areas, the change was even more rapid than elsewhere. It is not coincidental that several new religions, including Spiritualism and Mormonism, appeared in the 19th century in the U.S., and particularly in the State of New York. And it is not coincidental that some Asian countries, faced with imperialism, colonization-decolonization processes, wars, and sudden economic development produced an astonishing number of successful new religions. They include South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam

Case Studies: Vietnam, Taiwan, South Korea



- In his 2017 book, Chung Van Hoang mentions dozens of Vietnamese new religions. Most of them grew after the 1986 "Renovation" policy was introduced, but some, such as Cao Dai and Hòa Hảo, date back to the early 20th century and represent a distinctive Vietnamese way of coping with colonialism and the encounter between traditional and European cultures

Cao Dai's Uniqueness

- Countless new religions (thousands in Africa alone) tried to put together local traditions and missionary Christianity. The uniqueness of Cao Dai was that it included a third element. It is rooted in local Vietnamese-Asian Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism) and influenced by vernacular missionary Catholicism. But it also includes crucial elements from *Western Esotericism*, as its founders interacted with cultivated French colonialists who were not necessarily Catholic and often followed alternatives to Catholicism, including Spiritualism and Theosophy

Cao Dai's Success

- There is little doubt that Cao Dai has been phenomenally successful (6 million members, if one counts all the different rival branches). Why? I personally believe that its success is precisely due to its **ability to integrate Western esotericism** in its religious synthesis.

Integrating Esotericism

- Integrating esotericism offered two distinct cultural advantages to Vietnamese members: they came to share a language with the French colonial upper class, and their traditional beliefs in spirits and divine revelations, dismissed as superstitious by Catholic missionaries, were legitimized through the Spiritualism and occultism that coexisted with science in the culture of the (largely anticlerical) French elite

Cao Dai's Great Intuition

- The genius of the founders of Cao Dai was to understand what Western scholars would discover only much later, i.e. that Western esotericism and beliefs such as Spiritualism were central rather than peripheral in the modernist project. They coexisted among Western elites with both confidence in science and criticism of traditional Christianity. Cao Dai's "canonization" of French modernist, anticlerical and Spiritualist writer Victor Hugo (1802-1885) epitomized this intuition

Taiwan's Context: 1. Religious Effervescence

- It is argued that Taiwan generated the largest number of new religions per capita in the world, due to its special context. Its first feature was religious effervescence in post-World-War-II Taiwan, with a flourishing of both traditional temples and new religious movements (although the latter's activities were limited by the government). They integrated the traditional Three Teachings and folk religion, and offered hope to the Taiwanese in a difficult political situation

2. The End of Martial Law

- In 1987, the end of the long Martial Law period (which had started in 1949) allowed several new religions to be legally recognized and registered

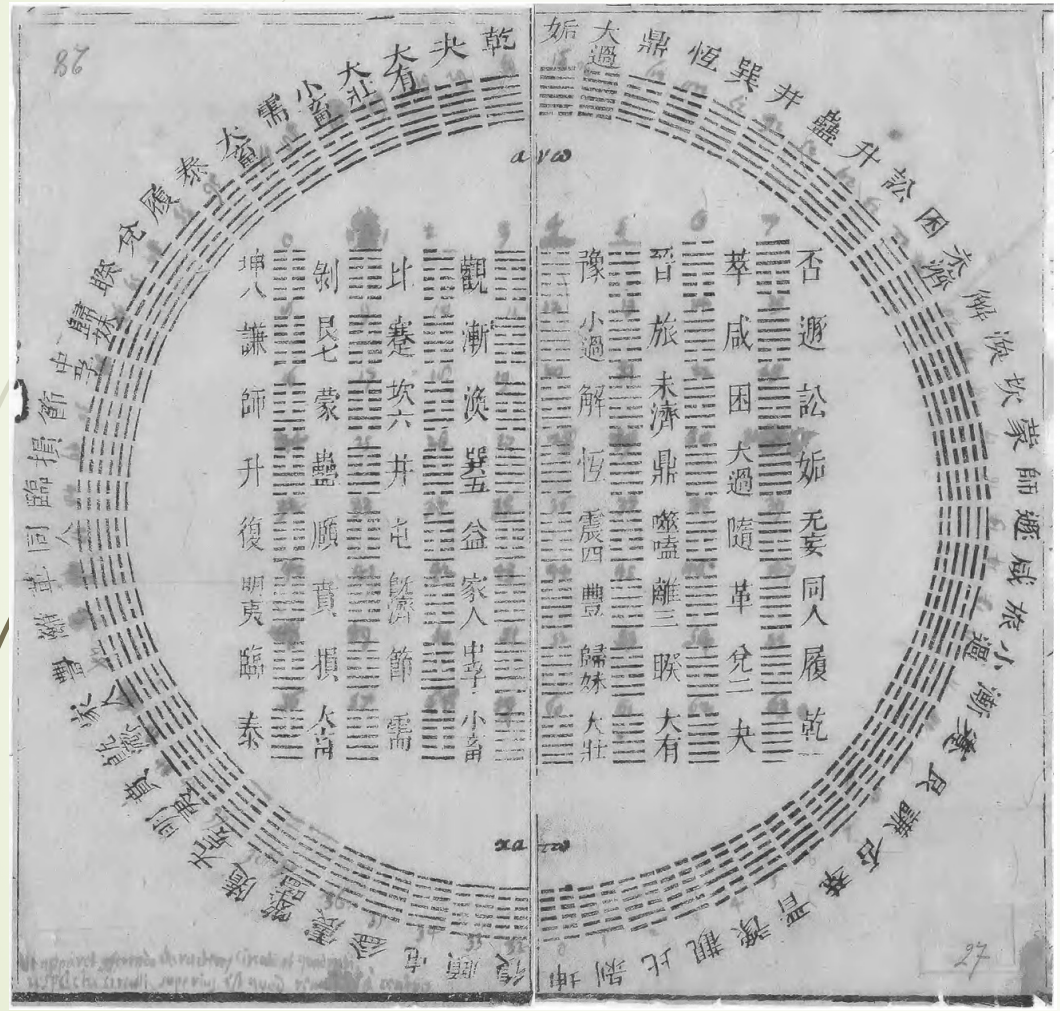
3. The Cultural Revolution in Mainland China

- The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) led to the destruction of thousands of libraries, temples, and other cultural and religious memories. Taiwanese authorities felt that the island should act as the guardian of the endangered Chinese cultural heritage, preserving it for future generations. The Taiwanese started looking with favor at new religions offering "Chinese orthodoxy," i.e. authentic Chinese religion and culture

What is Weixin Shengjiao?

- Weixin Shengjiao is one of Taiwan's newest new religions, as it was founded in 1984 by Chang Yi-Jui, later known as Grand Master Hun Yuan, born in Zhongliao Township, Nantou County, Taiwan, in 1944. It grew very rapidly, to some 300,000 members.

Why Weixin Shengjiao Is Successful



- Surveys in Taiwan confirm that the majority of the population is interested in the *I Ching* and Feng Shui, of which Grand Master Hun Yuan is recognized as an authoritative teacher
- *I Ching* is the venerable "Classic of Changes," both a philosophical and cosmological treatise and a manual for divination
- Feng Shui is one of the classical Five Arts of Chinese Metaphysics, whose aim is to harmonize human beings with their environment, including the land. It is widely used to orient buildings and furniture in an auspicious way

Korea's Religious Revival

- In Korea, social unrest, confrontation with Japanese, Chinese, Russian, and Western imperialism, and the persuasion that the traditional Three Teachings had been unable to criticize dramatic social injustice opened the way in the 19th and early 20th century to two different phenomena: the success of Christianity, and the birth of both Christian and non-Christian Korean new religions

Choi Je-u and Donghak

- At the origins of the flourishing of Korean new religions is Choi Je-u (1824-1864), who in 1860 claimed to have received a revelation from *Sangje* (the Supreme God). He founded a new religion called Donghak ("Eastern Learning," as opposed to "Western Learning," i.e. Christianity), criticizing at the same time the corruption of State Confucianism

Donghak's Failure

- Choi was executed in 1864, but Donghak continued and played a major role in the peasant rebellion of 1894. The Donghak rebels came to control a significant part of the Korean territory, before being defeated by the Korean government, supported first by Chinese and then by Japanese troops

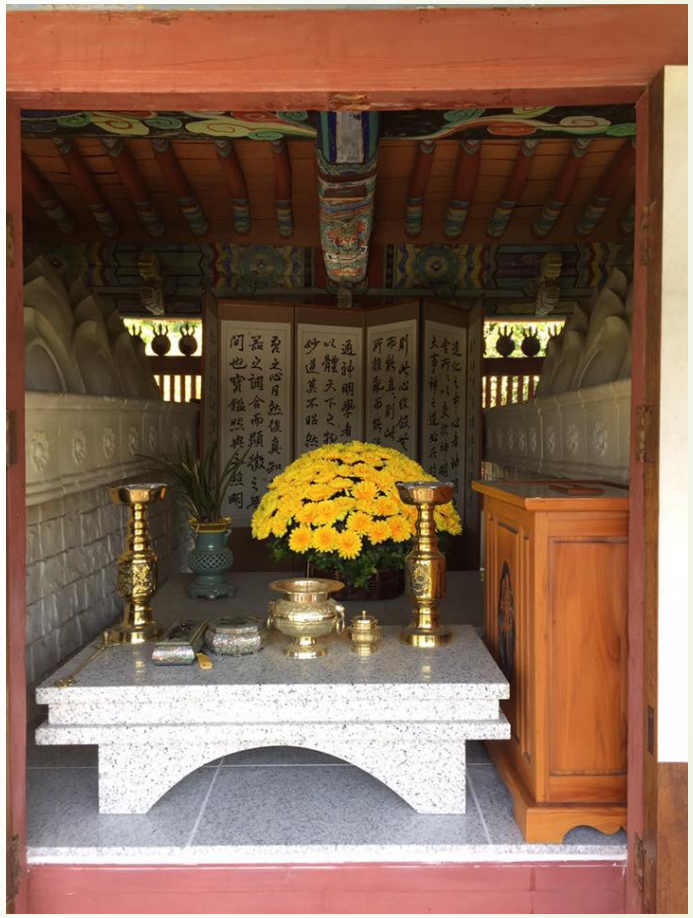
Kang Jeungsan

Kang (left) as played by senior Korean actor Jeon Un (1938-2005) in the 1984 movie *The Road to Peace and Harmony*

- The context of the Donghak revolution is crucial to understand Kang Il-Sun, known to his disciples as Kang Jeungsan (1871-1909)
- Kang predicted that the 1894 Donghak rebellion would fail, and persuaded his followers not to participate in the fighting. He insisted that the renewal of the world would be achieved by peaceful means only

From Kang to Jo Jeongsan

- Jo Cheol-Je, known to his disciples as Jo Jeongsan (1895-1958), was not a direct disciple of Kang Jeungsan but claimed to have received a revelation from him. He was recognized by Kang's sister, mother, and daughter (although the daughter, Sun-Im, 1904-1959, later started a separate branch) as the future leader Kang had announced in his prophecies



The remains of Kang and his wife, said to be currently at the headquarters of Jeungsan-beopjongkyo, Sun-Im's branch

From Mugeukdo to Daesoon Jinrihoe

Jeongup, area where the first headquarters of Mugeukdo were once located

- Jo incorporated a new religious order in 1925 in Jeongup, with the name Mugeukdo. Because of the Japanese campaign against new religions, Jo was forced to dissolve Mugeukdo in 1941. After the war, he reconstituted the movement and in 1950 gave it the name Tageukdo. His successor Park Wudang (1917-1995 [lunar calendar], or 1918-1996 according to the solar calendar), after further schisms, established Daesoon Jinrihoe in 1969

Daesoon Jinrihoe: A Success Story

- Statistics are controversial, but Daesoon Jinrihoe claims some six million members and may well be the largest Korean new religions today. The educational and charitable activities of Daesoon Jinrihoe greatly benefited the public image of the movement, which is increasingly regarded in Korea as a legitimate part of the country's religious pluralism

Haewon Sangsaeng

- Why is Daesoon Jinrihoe successful? I believe many Koreans are attracted by its practical, this-worldly spirituality, expressed in its central principle of "the resolution of grievances for mutual beneficence" (*Haewon sangsaeng,* 解冤相生). Korea experiences both social unrest, with problems for coping with rapid transformation, and tensions with North Korea. *Haewon sangsaeng* promises to heal old enmities, promote peace, and open the road to a millenarian Later World

Peace and Cross-Strait Dialogue

- All three religions share a concern for world peace. Weixin Shengjiao insists that there will be no world peace without Cross-Strait peace between Taiwan and Mainland China and has promoted both spiritual and scholarly dialogue between Taiwan and Mainland China

Social Welfare Work

- Weixin Shengjiao also maintains that it is not enough to talk about peace in academic conferences. It is also necessary to show solidarity in the time of need. When the 921 earthquake hit Taiwan in 1999, Grand Master Hun Yuan launched the I Ching and Feng Shui Interest Circle. Its members taught Feng Shui as a useful tool in guiding the reconstruction after the earthquake, but also offered relief and assistance to the homeless

The organization evolved into the Feng Shui Interest Circle Service Team, which helps needy families in both Taiwan and Mainland China

Cao Dai's Benevolent Activities

- According to Russian scholar Sergei Blagov, the early Cao Dai Holy See of Tay Ninh included institutions for "social work and charity services," which functioned as "a true welfare and social agency." Although the social context of Vietnam has changed, charity and social welfare remain important for Cao Dai
- The three religions await an earthly paradise, but **in the meantime they work to make the lives of their fellow human beings better**

New Large Religions? Yes

Paul Spella / The Atlantic

Why Are There No New Major Religions?

- In August 2017, *The Atlantic* asked this question. But the question was in itself wrong. There are indeed large new religions: only, Western public opinion, and even most Western scholars, do not know about them

But Do They Have a Global Future?

- A different question, however, makes sense. Do religions such as Weixin Shengjiao, Cao Dai, and Daesoon Jinrihoe, with so many followers in their home country, have a global future? The fact that only a few texts are translated into Western languages, and only a handful of leaders speak English, remains a significant obstacle. Globalization, at any rate, seems to be in the movements' future

Weixin Shengjiao, Cao Dai, and Daesoon Jinrihoe's delegates at the Turin, Italy, Book Fair 2017

For further information: maxintrovigne@gmail.com