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JDTREA
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Aims and Scope

The *Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia (JDTREA)* is the official English language journal of the Daesoon Academy of Sciences, and thus far, it is the only peer-reviewed, English language journal dedicated to not only research on the contemporary relevance of East Asia Religions, but also to research on the relatively new fields of East Asian New Religious Movements (EANRMs) and Daesoon Thought. Although there is a reasonable level of worldwide familiarity with the major religious traditions of East Asia, misunderstandings are still common, and novel research on these movements remains highly beneficial. As for EANRMs and Daesoon Thought, both are profoundly under-researched outside of East Asia. As a remedy to this, the Daesoon Academy of Science (DAOS), aims to publish *JDTREA* twice a year and hold conferences on East Asian religions and Daesoon Thought such as the World SangSaeng Forum and the *JDTREA* Conference. Daesoon Thought refers to a grouping of native Korean religious concepts best characterized by the Resolution of Grievances for Mutual Beneficence (*Haewon Sangsaeng*) and the Grateful Reciprocation of Favors for Mutual Beneficence (*Boeun Sangsaeng*); two concepts that can be traced back to the religious figure, Kang Jeungsan. The editorial board of *JDTREA* consists of active scholars from over a dozen countries including Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, China, France, Japan, Korea, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Spain, Taiwan, the UK, and the USA. *JDTREA* is published to promote global studies on East Asia religion and Daesoon Thought by encouraging wide-ranging research on these topics. The scope of *JDTREA* includes the following:

- Interpretation and analysis of religious phenomena in all fields of the humanities and social sciences
- Comparative research on the above in relation to another religion, philosophy, ideology, etc.
- Critical reviews of academic trends, mainly in the arts and humanities, that relate to East Asian religions and/or Daesoon Thought
- New interpretations of and approaches to East Asian religions and/or Daesoon Thought

The types of publications featured in *JDTREA* will include original articles, research notes, and book reviews. Other types of contributions are negotiable but subject to the approval of the editorial board. All unsolicited articles will be subject to peer review, and commissioned articles are reviewed by the Editorial Board.

About the Journal

JDTREA debuted on September 30th, 2021 with volume 1, issue 1. The journal is set to be published twice annually and special editions may also be published in the future. The number of copies printed will be 500 per publication. The full texts will be freely available at www.jdre.org. No publishing costs will be incurred by authors who submit to the journal.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Carole M. CUSACK
The University of Sydney

JDTREA

This issue completes the fifth volume of *Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia*, which is a great achievement in the East Asian religions and Korean new religions academic space. As Editor in Chief, I am really excited by the growing level of interest in *JDTREA* and the academic events hosted by Daejin University, Pocheon City, South Korea, and diversity of academic content that is showcased in this current issue.

The opening article is by Shen Yeh-Ying (Singapore University of Social Sciences), and is titled "The Transformation Development of Chinese-Attributed Religions in Indonesia: A Case Study of Yiguandao, MATAKIN, and Mile Dadao." This is the first study of religion in Indonesia that *JDTREA* has published, and it connects well with previous research on Yiguandao that has been featured in the journal. Shen establishes the political and religious context established in Indonesia after the nation emerged from Dutch colonial dominance, with a focus on Chinese Indonesian new religions. Yiguandao and Mile Dadao were introduced from Taiwan, but MATAKIN developed in the local context, focusing on Heaven, *Thian*, as sole god and Confucius as prophet. There are three levels of clergy, and the hymns and sermons were delivered in Bahasa Indonesia. The model of Islam and Christianity is seen to have profoundly influenced MATAKIN's institutional form.

The second contribution is by Li Xiaolong (Henan Normal University, China) and Su Qianwen (Henan Normal University, China), "Beyond Utilitarian Compassion: The Daoist Practice of Animal Release." This practice – the release of animals that were to be slaughtered for food, so that divine protection and blessings might be received – unites Daoist, Confucian and Buddhist ideas. Daoist love of and respect for nature includes animals, while Confucian valuing of all life includes the animal and plant categories. Buddhism has strong prohibitions against killing, and the three traditions combined form a basis for animal rights and ecological values in the contemporary world.

The third article is by Dinh Hong Hai (Vietnam National University, Hanoi City) and concerns "The Fusion of Maitreya and Messiah Symbols in East Asian New Religions: An Examination of Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam." The interactions of Jesuit missionaries and East Asian cultures from the sixteenth century onwards created a receptivity to saviour symbols that involved the rethinking of existing anticipated supernatural figures like Maitreya in Buddhism. Dinh's article shows how links between Maitreya and the Christian Messiah influenced new religions like Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism, which both emerged in the twentieth century.

The next article is by Dominik Rutana (SWPS University, Poland) and addresses "The Rationality of Myth: An Analysis of the Mythology in The Canonical Scripture through the

Lens of Bronisław Malinowski's Functional Theory of Myth." Rutana begins by considering *mythos* and *logos* as different modes of thinking, and the importance of culture as an integrated whole. Daesoon Jinrihoe is examined in terms of drawing inspiration from the past, with Sangje's personal practice offered as a model for religious excellence. The enduring value of the religious revolutions often referred to as the "Axial Age" in the present day is affirmed.

The next research included is by Ibukunolu Isaac Olodude (Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria), "Language and Identity Construction in Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity and the Korean Daesoon Jinrihoe Religious Movement." This study brings together two radically different religious traditions and demonstrates that using broad, general methodological frames like language and identity – which can be nuanced and tailored to specific situations or applied to specific themes – and results in insightful perspectives that increase new knowledge. It is argued that such linguistically mediated identities are emergent, interactional, and intersubjective, and depend upon the theological and social structures of the religions.

The final article is Trinh Ngoc Linh's (Vietnam National University at Ho Chi Minh) "Invented Traditions and the Construction of New Religious Collective Memory in Southern Vietnam: An Overview Study from a Cultural Perspective." Trinh discusses the methodological frameworks of invented traditions, proposed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, and the construction of collective memory, referring especially to Maurice Halbwachs. These ideas are applied to the new religions which developed in Vietnam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Trinh connects the landscape of the Mekong Delta and the ethnic diversity of the people to the diverse and flourishing religious and spiritual culture of South Vietnam, which exhibits syncretic and mixed qualities as a result.

The journal issue is completed by reviews supplied by the Review Editor, Professor Holly Folk (Western Washington University). As always, gratitude is due to Chairman Bae Kyuhan, Lee Gyungwon, Jason Greenberger, and Choi Wonhyuk from Daejin University, and to the authors and referees who wrote the articles and reviewed them for publication. It is a delight to continue my involvement with *Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia*. Five volumes is a great achievement, and the future is looking bright.

Carole M. Cusack
Editor of *JDTREA*
The University of Sydney

RESEARCH ARTICLES

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The Transformation Development of Chinese-Attributed Religions in Indonesia: A Case Study of Yiguandao, MATAKIN, and Mile Dadao

SHEN Yeh-Ying

Shen Yeh-Ying holds a PhD from the Chinese Studies Department at the National University of Singapore and is a social anthropologist. She is currently an adjunct lecturer at the Singapore University of Social Sciences. Her research focuses on the Chinese diaspora, Chinese folk religion, and women in Chinese religious traditions. Her primary fieldwork sites are Indonesia and Singapore. Her work has been published in journals such as *Studies in Chinese Religions*, *Journal of Chinese Religions*, and *Religions*.

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Original Articles

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Abstract

Indonesia has experienced two major anti-Chinese crises that profoundly reshaped Chinese cultural and religious life, most notably during the New Order period (1966–1998), when Chinese language and public cultural expressions were severely restricted. Under these conditions, Chinese-attributed religions were compelled to adapt in order to persist within Indonesia's political and social framework. This article examines how three such religious movements—MATAKIN (Confucianism), Mile Dadao (Chinese Sectarian Religion), and Yiguandao (Chinese Sectarian Religion)—negotiated processes of localization under shifting state policies. MATAKIN, founded by locally born Chinese Indonesians, institutionalized Confucianism as a monotheistic religion aligned with national ideological requirements. Mile Dadao, introduced from Taiwan, had already undergone substantial localization through the exclusive use of Indonesian and strong institutional embedding. By contrast, Yiguandao adopted a strategy of selective localization, balancing Indonesian public engagement with the internal preservation of Chinese language and ritual. Through comparison, this study highlights the diverse adaptive pathways through which Chinese-attributed religions secured legitimacy and continuity in Indonesia.

Keywords: MATAKIN; Mile Dadao; Yiguandao; Chinese Indonesian; Chinese religions in Indonesia

Introduction

Ethnic Chinese constitute a small minority in Indonesia. According to the 2010 national census conducted by the Indonesian Statistics Bureaucracy (Badan Pusat Statistik, BPS), ethnic Chinese accounted for approximately 1.2 percent of the population (around 2.83 million people) (Databooks 2017; Cultural Atlas 2025).[1] Historically, Chinese communities in Indonesia have experienced several severe waves of anti-Chinese violence, particularly the 30 September Movement events in 1965 and the May 1998 riots. After Suharto (1921–2008) launched a coup in 1965 and overthrew the founding president Sukarno (1901–1970), the subsequent establishment of the "New Order" (Orde Baru, 1966–1998) regime targeted Chinese people and Chinese culture, portraying them as aligned with the communist bloc. This period witnessed unprecedented suppression and restriction. Later, under the impact of the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis, Chinese Indonesians once again became scapegoats and targets of violence.

Despite these historical challenges, several religious groups with Chinese origins or attributes emerged and developed in Indonesia, they even achieving recognition at the national level. The transformation from being marginalized and unrecognized to becoming locally adapted reflects the ongoing processes of negotiation and struggle within Chinese Indonesian communities. This article examines three Chinese-attributed religions—MATAKIN (Confucianism), Mile Dadao (also known as Maitreya Great Dao, 彌勒大道) and Yiguandao (also known as I-Kuan Dao, 一貫道)—in Indonesia, analyzing the factors that enabled them to take root in Indonesian society and the extent to which their transformed forms diverge from their original Chinese cultural foundations. It is natural that Chinese immigrants brought their own religious traditions with them. In Indonesia, besides the three Chinese religious movements discussed in this article, there are also other forms of folk worship, such as the local guardian deity Tua Pek Kong (大伯公, Dabogong), and Lord Guan (關聖帝君, Guansheng Dijun) (Coconut Jakarta 2017).[2] However, when speaking of religious traditions associated with Chinese cultural heritage, Confucianism occupies a central symbolic position. Based on this, this article focuses on these three Chinese-affiliated religions precisely because they all take the promotion of Confucian ethical and moral values as one of their core teachings. Other forms of folk worship lie beyond the scope of this study and are therefore not examined here.

This article is situated within broader scholarly discussions on political transformation, state regulation of religion, and the positioning of Chinese Indonesians under shifting regimes of governance. Before turning to religion as the main analytical focus, it is therefore necessary to review studies that examine how changes in political authority, ethnic governance, and nation-building have structured the social conditions under which Chinese communities have operated in Indonesia. Early sociological work by Mely G. Tan foregrounds the structural positioning of Chinese Indonesians under colonial

and postcolonial regimes, highlighting economic differentiation, political marginalization, and state-managed assimilation. Her research demonstrates that Chinese Indonesian identity has been historically produced through state policy rather than cultural continuity alone (Tan 1991). Building on this perspective, scholars such as Leo Suryadinata, Charles Coppel, and Hoon Chang-Yau further examine how Chinese Indonesians negotiate identity, belonging, and cultural expression across different political periods. Instead of treating "Chineseness" as fixed or essential, they emphasize its relational and contingent nature, shaped by state regulation, public discourse, and everyday practices. Their analyses illuminate how anti-Chinese policies, assimilation programs, and post–New Order liberalization alternately constrained and enabled the rearticulation of Chinese identity (Suryadinata 2004; Coppel 2012; Hoon 2019). Although religion is not the primary focus of these studies, they provide essential context for understanding why Chinese cultural and religious expressions have been repeatedly reconfigured under political pressure. Robert W. Hefner's work on religion and pluralism in Indonesia further underscores the institutional power of religion within the nation-state. Hefner shows that religious affiliation functions as a key mechanism through which citizenship, morality, and social order are negotiated, helping to explain why religious movements were compelled to formalize doctrine, ritual, and organization in line with state expectations (Hefner 2021). From a more explicitly anthropological perspective, Tsuda Koji examines the construction of "Chinese Indonesian religion" (Agama Tionghoa). He shows how the Sam Kauw Hwee (三教會, Three Teachings Association), composed of Chinese folk religious traditions, underwent sustained reform during the Suharto and post-Suharto periods to conform to the state's definition of an "official religion," which requires belief in a single supreme deity, a prophet, and canonical scripture. Through the systematization of doctrine and the standardization of ritual—forms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy—these groups sought to survive amid competition with Christianity and MATAKIN (Confucianism) (Tsuda 2015). Taken together, this body of scholarship suggests that transformations within Chinese-associated religious traditions in Indonesia should be understood less as voluntary cultural innovation than as adaptive responses to structural constraint. Religious institutions did not change because they sought novelty, but because remaining unchanged often meant political invisibility or institutional disappearance.

While existing studies tend to focus on individual religious movements or broader ethnic politics, few offer a comparative analysis of how different Chinese-attributed religions adopted distinct localization strategies. This article seeks to address this gap by examining and comparing the adaptive trajectories of MATAKIN, Mile Dadao, and Yiguandao in Indonesia. The primary research materials for this study are based on my fieldwork and participant observations. Before discussing these three Chinese-attributed religions, I will first provide a basic historical overview of the suppression of Chinese culture during Suharto's regime. This context helps illuminate why Chinese-derived religious traditions in Indonesia needed to undergo transformation and adaptation.

New Order: The Consolidation of Power

Indonesia's New Order period (1966–1998), under the leadership of President Suharto, marked one of the most influential and deeply transformative eras in Indonesia's modern history. The regime emerged from the upheaval of the 1965–66 political crisis, which included the alleged 30 September Movement (G30S) coup attempt, widespread anti-communist violence, and the collapse of Sukarno's rule. Positioning itself as a response to the instability of the previous era, the New Order emphasized political order, rapid economic development, and a strong military presence in government. Through technocratic planning and closer ties to Western economies, Suharto reshaped Indonesia's political institutions and reoriented its national priorities (Roosa 2006).

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and Sukarno's increasingly close relations with Beijing contributed to suspicions that ethnic Chinese Indonesians were politically aligned with communist forces. As anti-communist sentiment intensified in 1965, Chinese Indonesians were widely suspected of supporting the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Although the mass killings of 1965–1966 primarily targeted alleged communists rather than ethnic Chinese as an ethnic group, Chinese Indonesians were disproportionately affected and became especially vulnerable to violence, surveillance, and political repression. The New Order's strong anti-communist stance, together with long-standing stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians as "outsiders," resulted in wide-ranging assimilation policies. After 1965, the government imposed strict restrictions on Chinese cultural life, including bans on Chinese-language education and media, prohibitions on the public use of Mandarin and other Chinese dialects, and the closure of Chinese organizations. Public expressions of Chinese culture—such as Lunar New Year celebrations, temple activities, and the display of Chinese characters—were restricted or closely monitored. Ethnic Chinese were also encouraged to adopt Indonesian-sounding names and obtain special citizenship documents, reinforcing their marginal position within the nation (Tsuda 2012).

At the same time, the regime maintained selective economic cooperation with a small group of wealthy Chinese Indonesian businessmen integrated into Suharto's patronage networks. This created a paradoxical situation in which Chinese culture was suppressed while certain Chinese entrepreneurs became key partners in Indonesia's high-growth economy. The regime's decline became evident in the 1990s amid rising economic inequality, growing Islamic activism, and increasing demands for democratization. The 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis triggered widespread unrest and violent anti-Chinese riots in several cities. Under mounting political pressure, Suharto resigned in May 1998, marking the end of the New Order and the beginning of the Reformasi era.

The Three Chinese-Attributed Religions and Their Transformation Development

Among the three religious movements examined in this article, MATAKIN originated locally in Indonesia, whereas the other two—Mile Dadao and Yiguandao—were introduced from Taiwan.

MATAKIN

By the late nineteenth century, Indonesia's Chinese community was mainly divided into two groups: the Peranakan, mostly of mixed heritage and born in Indonesia, who had largely adopted local customs, and the Totok, recent immigrants who still retained much of their Chinese culture. The Chinese population at that time was composed largely of Peranakan Chinese. Many of these Chinese Indonesians were no longer familiar with Chinese language or culture. Among them, several Western-educated intellectuals perceived the inequitable treatment imposed on the Chinese community by the Dutch colonial authorities. Inspired as well by the late Qing Chinese intellectual Liang Qichao's (梁啟超, 1873–1929) advocacy of Confucian teachings as a means of self-strengthening, they jointly established the Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan (中華會館, *zhonghua huiguan*, hereafter THHK) of Batavia (the Batavia Chinese Association) in 1900-1901 as an institution dedicated to the promotion of Confucian philosophy. At the time, a Confucian revival movement was also gaining momentum in Singapore and Malaya, as overseas Chinese leaders believed that the rational spirit of Confucianism could help modernize China and unify overseas Chinese communities. Hence, the initial aim of THHK was to employ Confucian thoughts to improve the cultural identity and social position of Chinese Indonesians (Coppel 1981; Kong 1989). THHK later became increasingly focused on establishing Chinese schools. As a result, other Confucian advocates stepped forward to form new organizations, such as the Khong Kauw Hwee (孔教會, the Confucian Association, kongjiao hui) founded in Solo in 1918. Similar Confucian associations soon emerged in other cities, including Surabaya, Semarang, and Bandung. In 1884, Chinese community leaders in Surabaya jointly funded the construction of a Wenchang Temple (文昌祠, wenchang ci). Wenchang is a traditional Chinese deity associated with literary talent and academic success. The temple later came to enshrine Confucius and became known as the Surabaya Boen Bio (文廟, Confucian Temple, *wenmiao*). The temple encouraged Chinese Indonesians to celebrate traditional festivals and hold religious rituals, thereby preserving Chinese cultural heritage. Over time, the Surabaya Boen Bio naturally developed into the base of the Surabaya Confucian Association (Wang 2010, 214–215).

To discourage younger generations from turning to Christianity or Islam, the Confucian associations worked to develop an institutional identity that resembled an organized religious movement. In line with this aim, the Surabaya Confucian Association

published a journal introducing Confucian teachings titled Djiep Tik Tjie Boen (入德之門, the gateway to moral cultivation, rude zhimen). In 1923, during a congress of Confucian adherents in Yogyakarta, participants decided to establish the Khong Kauw Tjong Hwee (孔教總會, Confucian General Organization, *kongjiao zonghui*, thereafter KKTH) and the office was based in Bandung. While the Organization undertook the Indonesian translation of the *Four Books* (四書, sishu), internal debates soon emerged across generations regarding how these texts should be interpreted. As Charles Coppel notes, although Chinese Indonesians at the time generally acknowledged Confucius as a figure of supreme, almost prophetic status, their interpretations of the *Four Books* diverged into three distinct approaches. The first group accepted only the traditional commentaries passed down from the Qing dynasty; the second adopted a more mythologized reading of the texts; and the third—predominantly younger members—presented the *Four Books* through dance and music, treating them as a form of classical artistic performance (Coppel 1981, 192–193). These differences reveal not only the community's limited familiarity with the original cultural context of Chinese Confucianism but also their attempts to reinterpret and integrate Confucian teachings in ways that resonated with the Indonesian social environment.

Over time, the KKTH also developed a clerical structure to promote and institutionalize Confucianism. However, even though positions resembling clergy had begun to emerge, the Confucian Associations at this stage had not yet explicitly defined themselves as a religion in their statutes. Most of their regulations focused instead on ethical teachings and on standardizing traditional Chinese practices such as weddings and funerals (Coppel 1981, 192–194; Wang 2010, 215). The 1930s was a politically turbulent decade in the Dutch East Indies, shaped by the global economic depression, intensified nationalist movements, and tightening colonial control, all of which pushed various ethnic and religious communities—including Chinese groups—to reorganize and redefine their cultural identities (Ricklefs 1981). Due to the loose organizational structure of the KKTH, it struggled to coordinate the various local Confucian associations. In the 1930s, a group of active Chinese reformers emerged in Solo, who hoped to establish a more effective central body capable of unifying Confucian associations across the country. Thus, in 1938, various local Confucian associations convened in Solo and established a new Confucian General Council. Later, the development of the Confucian General Council made little progress during World War II. After Indonesia gained independence, the rise of Indonesian nationalism further pressured the Confucian General Council to embark on a process of Indonesianization (Wang 2010, 215–216).

In Indonesia, religion occupies a central place in both public life and state governance, largely due to the national ideology of *Pancasila*. As the foundational framework of the Indonesian state, Pancasila comprises five principles, the first of which—'Belief in the One and Almighty God'—establishes religious affiliation as a core marker of national identity and civic belonging. Although Pancasila does not mandate adherence to any specific faith, citizens are expected to identify with one of the state-recognized religions,

which in turn structure key aspects of civil administration, including marriage registration, education, and legal documentation. It was in this religious and administrative context that the Confucian General Council in Indonesia undertook efforts to institutionalize Confucianism as an organized religion, seeking legal recognition, cultural protection, and full participation in the religiously structured framework of Indonesian society. In 1955, they attempted to rename the council Perserikatan Kung Chiao Hui Indonesia (孔教聯合會, federation of Confucian associations, *kongjiao lianhehui*), and later, in 1963, finally adopted the title *Agama Khonghucu* (Wang 2010, 216). In Indonesian, the term *Agama* refers to "religion". This marked a significant transformation, formally redefining the Confucian General Council as a religious body. Originally, titles of the Confucian publications, as well as the institutional names mentioned in the previous paragraphs, were Hokkien romanization. Renaming these institutions and publications into Indonesian became an important strategy for localization. The subsequent efforts to institutionalize Confucianism received recognition from President Sukarno. In 1965, Sukarno issued Presidential Decree No. 1, which designated *Agama Khonghucu* as one of Indonesia's six official religions.[3] Sukarno did so in order to balance the opposing forces of the right-wing military and the left-leaning Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). In the political landscape of 1960s Indonesia, the PKI promoted secular and atheistic principles, which clashed with the state ideology of Pancasila—particularly its first principle, belief in a supreme God. By strengthening the public role of religion and institutionalizing multiple faiths, including *Agama Khonghucu*, Sukarno reinforced Pancasila as the ideological foundation of the nation. This strategy not only curtailed the influence of the PKI but also prevented the military from monopolizing anti-communist legitimacy (Ricklefs 1981).

Following the 30 September Movement in 1965, Suharto—a right-wing military general—came to power, and PKI was dismantled. In order to eradicate left-wing influence and prevent PKI from re-emerging, Suharto continued to promote and strengthen religious institutions. Various religions in Indonesia, including *Agama Khonghucu*, entered a period of unprecedented development. Sensing the political climate, the Confucian community adapted accordingly. At its 1967 national congress, it adopted the new name *Majelis Tinggi Agama Khonghucu Indonesia* (MATAKIN). During this period, MATAKIN established detailed religious regulations and ritual systems, effectively transforming itself into a full-fledged religion. MATAKIN identifies *Thian* (天, Heaven, tian) as the sole supreme deity and regarded Confucius as a prophet. Confucian places of worship is called *lithang* (禮堂, ritual halls, litang), where a statue or an image of Confucius is enshrined for veneration. The clergy are organized into three ranks: *Hak Su* (學士, Xueshi), *Bun Su* (文士, Wenshi), and *Kauw Seng* (教生, Jiaosheng). Unsurprisingly, the language used within MATAKIN is entirely Indonesian. Rituals typically begin with the singing of hymns, followed by sermons delivered by clergy. Adherents are expected to abide by the Five Constants (五常, wuchang) and the Eight Virtues (八德, bade), both of which constitute foundational principles within

Confucian thoughts (Suryadinata 2002, 54–57). These features show clear parallels with monotheistic traditions (such as Christianity and Islam) and illustrate how Confucianism was localized and reshaped in the Indonesian context.

After the Suharto regime became relatively stable, in 1979 it no longer recognized MATAKIN as one of Indonesia's six official religions. In Indonesia, every citizen's identity card must indicate their religion, and in addition to the legal registration of marriage, a religious wedding ceremony is also required for the marriage to be considered legally valid. Once MATAKIN was not recognized as an official religion, followers could no longer list their faith on their identity cards, and their *litbang* could not officiate marriages for them. MATAKIN's activities were thus forced to be conducted privately within households. Due to MATAKIN's strong association with the Chinese ethnic identity, many followers during the New Order period converted to Buddhism or Christianity, as these religions were more socially acceptable (Suryadinata 2002, 57–59). It was only after Suharto's fall in 1998 that MATAKIN gradually regained official recognition as one of the six national religions.

From its initial establishment within THHK, through its subsequent historical transformations to the present, MATAKIN was sustained primarily by the Peranakan Chinese. Notably, the Peranakan generally had limited proficiency in Chinese and little understanding of the substantive content of the Confucian classics. Yet they consistently insisted on the continued existence and local adaptation of MATAKIN. This situation reveals a disjunction between linguistic competence and classical knowledge on the one hand, and the persistence of MATAKIN on the other. Rather than a transmission of Confucian doctrine, MATAKIN thus functioned primarily as a symbolic site for articulating and maintaining Chinese cultural identity in Indonesia.

Mile Dadao

Before discussing Mile Dadao, it is necessary to trace the early history of Yiguandao's transmission to Indonesia, as Mile Dadao emerged as a branch of Yiguandao. Yiguandao was first introduced to Indonesia in 1950 by a Taiwanese missionary, Chen Boling (陳伯齡, ?–1984). In the aftermath of Japan's defeat in World War II and its withdrawal from Taiwan in 1945, followed by the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Yiguandao missionaries from mainland China relocated to Taiwan between 1945 and 1950. It was during this period that Chen Boling was initiated into Yiguandao in Taiwan. Previously, Chen had worked as a doctor under Japanese colonial rule and was later conscripted by the Japanese military as a medical officer in Indonesia, where he married a Chinese Indonesian woman. These transregional experiences shaped both his personal trajectory and his subsequent religious activities. In 1950, Chen returned to Malang, East Java, with the intention of propagating Yiguandao. Fluent in Hokkien, Mandarin, and Indonesian, Chen was able to communicate effectively with Chinese Indonesian communities at a time when Chinese languages were still widely used, prior to the New

Order's assimilationist policies. This linguistic competence, combined with his familiarity with local social contexts, facilitated the rapid expansion of Yiguandao. Over the following two decades, Chen and his followers established more than 200 Yiguandao buddha halls (佛堂, *fotang*) across Indonesia's major islands (Shen 2022, 223–224).

Localization was central to the movement's endurance. Under Chen's leadership, Yiguandao teachings, scriptures, and ritual formulas were gradually translated into Indonesian. Chen also established a robust network of local relationships. These strategies allowed Yiguandao buddha halls to embed themselves within Indonesian society and later contributed to their survival during the New Order period, when expressions of Chinese culture and religion were heavily restricted. Despite this institutional growth, Chen did not appoint a clear successor in his later years. Moreover, Taiwan's continued martial law severely limited communication between overseas communities and Yiguandao's central leadership. Following Chen's death, these conditions led to organizational fragmentation among the Indonesian buddha halls. It was during this period of uncertainty that Wang Haode (王好德), founder of Mile Dadao in Taiwan, reached out to Chen's former followers (Chung 2013, 52)[4]. As a result, the majority of these buddha halls were subsequently reorganized under the Mile Dadao framework, marking a significant reconfiguration of Yiguandao-derived religious networks in Indonesia.[5] Yiguandao advocates the unity of the Three Teachings—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—emphasizing Confucian ethical engagement with the world as a means of salvation, while drawing on Buddhist and Daoist principles for inner cultivation and self-discipline.[6] Mile Dadao largely adheres to Yiguandao's doctrinal teachings and ritual practices; however, it is not recognized by Yiguandao authorities as belonging to the orthodox lineage. In 2000, Mile Dadao formally registered as a separate religious organization in both Taiwan and Indonesia.[7]

Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes religion as a structured field in which various forms of capital—social, cultural, and symbolic—are accumulated, transmitted, and converted across generations of actors (Bourdieu 1986, 241–260). From this perspective, religious continuity is not merely doctrinal but is embedded in networks, authority structures, and embodied practices that constrain and enable later transformations. Empirical studies of Chinese religious movements further substantiate this view. David Palmer's analysis of qigong (氣功) organizations in contemporary China demonstrates how new religious and spiritual movements often emerge as organizational descendants of earlier networks, inheriting personnel, practices, and modes of legitimacy while adapting to shifting political and regulatory environments (Palmer 2007). Returning to the case of Mile Dadao, although it is not recognized as a legitimate lineage by contemporary Yiguandao authorities and is often regarded as having seceded from the orthodox transmission, it nonetheless inherited substantial local religious capital in Indonesia. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of the religious field, institutional continuity does not necessarily imply the inheritance of doctrinal orthodoxy, but rather the transmission of social, symbolic, and organizational capital accumulated within a specific historical context.

Based on my fieldwork, this continuity is materially and symbolically expressed in the public buddha halls of Mile Dadao, where photographs of Chen Boling are displayed, and in historical narratives that situate Chen as a foundational figure in the Indonesian transmission of the faith. Such practices reflect not doctrinal continuity but a localized reconfiguration of religious memory, enabling Mile Dadao to claim legitimacy within the Indonesian religious field despite its contested status in transnational Yiguandao orthodoxy.

Mile Dadao was able to survive the New Order period largely because of its effective localization strategies. These included the exclusive use of Indonesian in religious activities, as well as the institutional and social foundations previously established by Chen Boling. Building upon these foundations, Mile Dadao further adapted to the Indonesian context by actively engaging in the fields of education and public welfare—domains that have long been central to religious legitimacy in Indonesian society. In Indonesia, due to the limited resources of the government, religious organizations have been expected to participate in the provision of education in order to ensure broader access to compulsory schooling. Consequently, the establishment and operation of schools by major religious groups in Indonesia is a common and institutionalized practice. In this regard, building upon these foundations, Mile Dadao further adapted to the Indonesian context by establishing schools. My fieldwork further indicates that Mile Dadao's activities extended beyond formal education. Its "Happy Nature Exercise" program (大自然快樂操, *daziran kuailecao*), which emphasizes collective harmony and happiness, has been incorporated into local Indonesian primary and secondary school settings, allowing the movement to circulate in secular educational spaces without overt religious labelling.[8] In addition, Mile Dadao developed large-scale religious parks in cities such as Medan and Batam. Designed as recreational spaces featuring landscaped gardens, monumental architecture, vegetarian restaurants, cafés, and souvenir shops, these sites deliberately blurred the boundary between religious space and leisure space.

By downplaying explicit religious markers and emphasizing vegetarianism, aesthetics, and cultural consumption, Mile Dadao presented itself as socially beneficial, culturally embedded, and compatible with Indonesia's broader framework of development and pluralism, thereby enhancing its capacity for sustained local adaptation in Indonesia.

Yiguandao

In this section, *Yiguandao* refers specifically to the new wave of missionaries who arrived in Indonesia around the 1990s. During the New Order period, anti-Chinese policies in Indonesia significantly reduced the willingness of missionaries from Taiwan to engage in proselytization. It was not until the later years of the New Order, when economic development accelerated and restrictions on Chinese culture were gradually relaxed, that conditions became more favorable. At the same time, Taiwan's

"Southbound Policy" (南向政策, *nanxiang zhengce*) encouraged Taiwanese businesses to invest in Southeast Asia. Within this broader political and economic context, Yiguandao missionaries followed these transnational flows and expanded their activities across Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. Based on my fieldwork, this later cohort of missionaries differed markedly from Chen Boling's generation in their approach to localization. While these missionaries did learn Indonesian in order to communicate with the society, they consciously retained the use of Mandarin within the religious community, including in ritual formulas and everyday interaction. After nearly three decades of restrictions on Chinese language education, many Chinese Indonesians had lost proficiency in Chinese and familiarity with Chinese traditions. In response, these missionaries undertook systematic efforts to teach Mandarin and reintroduce elements of Chinese culture to their followers from the ground up.

After the repeal of anti-Chinese legislation in 1999, Yiguandao in Indonesia increasingly reframed itself as a vehicle for the revival and transmission of Chinese culture. This repositioning coincided with the rising global prominence of China, which generated growing local interest in learning Chinese language and culture (Hoon 2012, 88–96), thereby providing Yiguandao with new opportunities for expansion. In 2005, Yiguandao established the *Majelis I-Kuan Dao Indonesia* after receiving a verbal assurance from the Minister of Religious Affairs that it would be registered as an official religious body. However, due to bureaucratic ambiguity, the registration process was never formally completed, leaving the organization in an ambiguous legal position. As a result, Yiguandao temples encountered recurring difficulties at the local level: some regional authorities refused to acknowledge the organization's legitimacy, while others classified its Buddha halls as illegal following reports filed by members of competing religious groups, notably Mile Dadao. These challenges constrained Yiguandao's ability to operate openly. It was not until 2014, under the leadership of a new chairman with stronger connections to government institutions, that Yiguandao successfully registered under the name *Majelis Agama Buddha I-Kuan Dao Indonesia*.[9] This case illustrates how Indonesia's bureaucratic structures shape the trajectories of transnational religious movements, particularly those perceived as foreign. It also highlights how interreligious competition within the Chinese Indonesian religious field can generate additional obstacles for newer or less institutionally entrenched groups.

In Indonesia, once a religious organization is registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, it is entitled to establish a national-level governing body (majelis). However, such registration requires the religion to be classified under one of the six official religious categories. In this context, *Majelis Agama Buddha I-Kuan Dao Indonesia* occupies the same institutional level as the Indonesian Buddhist council WALUBI (Perwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia). It is worth noting that, Yiguandao chose to be categorized under "Buddhism" rather than MATAKIN. This decision reflects a broader perception within Indonesian Chinese communities that Yiguandao constitutes a form of polytheistic religious practice, making its inclusion under MATAKIN—officially defined as a

monotheistic religion—administratively and theologically less viable.

As noted earlier, religion occupies a central position in Indonesian social life. For a marriage to be legally recognized, couples must not only register with the Ministry of Home Affairs but also conduct a religious wedding ceremony. In response, Yiguandao temples in Indonesia have incorporated religious wedding rites into their public activities—a practice that is uncommon in other national contexts. Furthermore, because the Indonesian state encourages religious organizations to establish educational institutions in order to alleviate pressures on public education, Yiguandao has also founded schools in Indonesia, currently operating mainly at the kindergarten and elementary levels in a limited number of cities (Shen 2022, 238–239). Nevertheless, Yiguandao's engagement in educational provision remains far more modest than that of Mile Dadao. This disparity reflects the relatively weaker institutional foundations and social networks that Yiguandao has been able to establish vis-à-vis the Indonesian state and society, particularly when compared to Mile Dadao's deeper historical roots and more extensive localization strategies.

In place of pursuing full linguistic and ritual Indonesinization, the Yiguandao missionaries adopted a selective localization strategy. On the external level, the exclusive use of Indonesian in rituals, sermons, and public interactions enabled these groups to align themselves with the national framework, thereby securing institutional legitimacy and public visibility. On the internal level, however, they deliberately retained the use of Chinese in ritual formulas, scriptural recitation, and doctrinal instruction, while encouraging followers to learn Chinese and read canonical texts in their original language. Proficiency in Chinese thus became transformed into a symbolic qualification for proximity to "orthodox" lineage and authentic transmission. This internal linguistic regime also served to consolidate transnational religious networks, most notably by maintaining ritual, doctrinal, and institutional ties with headquarters in Taiwan. Through such connections, Chinese functioned not merely as a liturgical language, but as a medium through which authority, lineage, and transnational legitimacy were reproduced. This approach was shaped not only by the broader political and cultural environment, but also by earlier experience—the loss of buddha halls originally established by Chen Boling, which were later re-affiliated with Mile Dadao. From this historical precedent, selective localization can be read as a form of strategic boundary-making. Earlier experiences of organizational reconfiguration in Indonesia informed later Yiguandao missionaries' careful calibration between openness and control, localization and lineage preservation. This process resonates with Talal Asad's argument that religion should not be understood as a fixed set of beliefs, but as a form of practice that is continually redefined within specific configurations of political power, language, and authority (Asad 1993). The case of Yiguandao in Indonesia thus illustrates how religious actors strategically recalibrated their practices to remain both locally viable and transnationally anchored, producing a form of localization that was at once politically attuned and institutionally durable.

Conclusion

This article has examined how three Chinese-attributed religious movements—MATAKIN, Mile Dadao, and Yiguandao—have been variously reconfigured in Indonesia through distinct strategies of localization, institutional adaptation, and engagement with the state and society. Rather than treating localization as a linear or uniform process, the Indonesian cases demonstrate that religious adaptation is contingent upon historical timing, political regimes, linguistic regimes, and pre-existing social networks.

MATAKIN represents the most extensive form of institutional and symbolic localization. From its early development among Peranakan Chinese to its eventual recognition as *Agama Khonghucu*, MATAKIN was transformed from a cultural-philosophical tradition into a formally institutionalized religion. This transformation was closely tied to Indonesia's political structure, particularly the centrality of religion under Pancasila. By adopting monotheistic elements, clerical hierarchies, standardized rituals, and exclusive use of Indonesian, MATAKIN redefined itself in ways that aligned with state expectations, thereby securing legal recognition and long-term legitimacy. Mile Dadao exemplifies a different mode of adaptation, one that foregrounds social embeddedness and institutional continuity. Building upon the foundations laid by the Yiguandao missionary Chen Boling, Mile Dadao emphasized Indonesian-language practice, educational institutions, and large-scale religious parks that blurred the boundaries between religious space, leisure, and civic life. Its strong engagement in education, wellness activities, and public-facing infrastructure enabled the movement to present itself as socially beneficial and developmentally compatible, particularly during and after the New Order period. This strategy effectively softened the visibility of "foreign religion" while embedding Mile Dadao within everyday Indonesian social life.

Yiguandao, by contrast, adopted a strategy of selective localization. While later missionaries actively learned Indonesian and complied with local legal and social requirements—such as conducting religious weddings and operating schools—they simultaneously preserved Mandarin and Chinese ritual language within internal settings. Based on fieldwork, this dual linguistic strategy transformed Chinese language competence into a marker of orthodoxy and transnational legitimacy, particularly in relation to Taiwanese headquarters. Such positioning reflects a conscious response to Indonesia's post–New Order political climate, in which Chinese culture became increasingly visible but foreign religious affiliations still required careful negotiation. Compared to Mile Dadao, Yiguandao's weaker institutional embeddedness limited its capacity in areas such as education, revealing how uneven social foundations shape divergent adaptive outcomes.

Taken together, these cases illustrate that religious localization in Indonesia is not merely a matter of cultural translation, but a dynamic process of repositioning religious cores and boundaries within shifting political, linguistic, and social structures. The diverse trajectories reveal how Chinese religious movements recalibrated their cores and

boundaries in response to Indonesia's evolving religious landscape, producing multiple, locally grounded forms of religious life rather than a single model of adaptation.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] See https://databoks.katadata.co.id/en/demographics/statistics/e721e03ed6c37e3/12-of-indonesias-population-is-of-chinese-ethnicity and https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/indone- sian-culture/indonesian-culture-population-statistics, retrieved on 24 November 2025. Indonesia conducts a national census every ten years, with the most recent one carried out in 2020. However, the census results did not publicly report the proportion of the ethnic Chinese population. Therefore, this article refers to data from the 2010 census. Some scholars argue that many ethnic Chinese individuals—due to historical discrimination, social pressures, and assimilation—choose not to identify themselves as Chinese in official surveys, resulting in an underestimation of the official figures. Scholars estimate that the actual proportion of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia may reach 2–3 percent.

[2] For instance, an incident involving protests by local Muslims against a statue of Lord Guan at a Chinese temple in Indonesia—resulting in the statue being covered with a red cloth—is documented online; see https://coconuts.co/jakarta/news/igniting-controversy-social-media-giant-statue-chinese-god-covered-east-java/ for details.

[3] The other five recognized religions are Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

[4] Mile Dadao developed out of Yiguandao and later evolved into an independent religious organization.

[5] This move later became a major source of competitive advantage in its rivalry with Yiguandao in Indonesia, while also giving rise to numerous disputes. As these issues fall outside the scope of the present study, they are not examined further here.

[6] Within Yiguandao, this is referred to as the 'unity of the Three Teachings' (三教合一, sanjiao heyi)

[7] See Mile Dadao's official website: https://www.maitreya.org.tw/About-us.html, as well as Shen (2022, 227).

[8] For Mile Dadao's "Happy Nature Exercise", see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GN3lt_7Wkw , retrieved on 22 December 2025.

[9] Majelis Agama Buddha I-Kuan Dao Indonesia does not have an official website. For reference, see the North Sumatra branch's website: https://mabikti.org, retrieved on December 22, 2025.

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Beyond Utilitarian Compassion: The Daoist Practice of Animal Release

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Abstract

This article examines the Daoist practice of animal release (*fangsheng* 放生) as a cultural phenomenon, aiming to explore how it embodies the characteristics of diverse integration and harmony in diversity within Daoist culture, while also uncovering its contemporary relevance. Methodologically, the analysis unfolds across three dimensions of Daoist animal release: ideological, ritual, and ethical. Ideologically, it integrates the Confucian concept of benevolence, the Daoist idea of equalizing all things, and the Buddhist notion of reincarnation. Ritually, it incorporates Buddhist ceremonial norms while preserving distinct Daoist features. Ethically, it critiques "pre-arranged animal release" (預補放生) and proposes a harmonizing approach of "spontaneous release according to circumstances" (隨緣放生). The authors argue that Daoist animal release not only serves as an example of the creative integration of the three teachings (Confucianism 儒, Daoism 道, and Buddhism 佛) but also offers significant insights for the modern era: its ecological perspective of "no distinction between species" (類無貴賤) provides resources for ecological ethics; its shift from utilitarian release to spiritual cultivation promotes inner transformation; and its model of harmonious coexistence among diverse cultures offers a historical paradigm for mutual learning among contemporary civilizations.

Keywords: Daoism; Animal Release; Three Teachings; diverse integration; Ecological ethics

Introduction

Animal release, an essential component of traditional Chinese religious practices, centers on freeing captured animals destined for slaughter, to obtain divine blessings and protection. The concept of animal release in ancient China drew from two primary sources: the Confucian philosophy of "cherishing all living beings and valuing life" (愛物重生), which reflects the benevolent regard and care for life held by the humane; and Buddhist prohibitions against killing, coupled with the doctrines of karma and reincarnation, which emphasize that excessive killing will inevitably bring about disaster. Ming Dynasty scholar Xie Zhaozhe (謝肇制) noted a significant difference in the motivations behind the prohibition of killing in Confucianism and Buddhism: "Buddhists refrain from killing for the sake of reincarnation, whereas we refrain from killing simply because we cannot bear to see life unjustly taken" (佛家戒殺為輪回計，吾之戒殺則不忍其死於非命而已, Xie 2009, 306). Qing Dynasty scholar Qian Chengzhi (钱澄之) elaborated on the motivations for animal release in both traditions: "Confucianism advocates release out of compassion and the inability to bear suffering, while Buddhism advocates it out of fear of karmic consequences and the dread of retribution" (由儒家之说生怜悯心有不忍　不放者, 由因果之说生恐怖心有不敢不放者, Qian 2006, 89). Nevertheless, these differences did not hinder the acceptance of the practice of animal release. On the contrary, they contributed to its emergence as a representative folk custom in traditional Chinese society. After the Six Dynasties period (六朝 222–589 CE), Daoism established its own cultural system of animal release by building upon traditional Chinese concepts while assimilating Buddhist doctrines and rituals. Rather than simply transplanting or piecing together traditional release concepts, it employed the wisdom of "harmony in diversity" (和而不同) to break through the cultural barriers between Confucian and Buddhist thought. This approach not only constructed a theoretical framework and ritual norms for animal release with distinctive Daoist characteristics but also enriched the diversity of Daoist culture.

However, compared to Buddhism, academic research on Daoist animal release culture remains notably insufficient. Currently, the practice of animal release in Buddhism has been systematically and thoroughly explored. Chinese scholars (Wei Dedong 1999; Feng Jun 2010; Sheng Kai 2013; Feng Guodong and Xiong Shuqi 2020) have established a fundamental narrative framework for Buddhist animal release culture from multiple dimensions, including its historical origins, the formation of its rituals, and its integration with traditional Chinese culture. Animal release is not only regarded as an act of saving animal lives but also as a significant practice within the Buddhist spiritual system, "achieving salvation through saving others." The ritual procedures of Buddhist animal release can be traced back to the Tiantai school monks Zhili (知禮) and Zunshi (遵式) of the Sui Dynasty (隋朝 581–618 CE). The basic structure encompasses seven stages: setting the seat (敷座), reciting mantras (誦咒), scattering and sprinkling (散灑), inviting the Three Jewels (請三寶), conferring the Three Refuges (授三皈依),

invoking the name of *Ratnasambhava* (稱寶勝如來號), expounding the Twelve Nidānas (說十二因緣), and repenting with vows (懺悔發願), all reflecting profound religious ethics and compassion for life.

Meanwhile, the international academic community often examines Buddhist animal release within the context of ecological ethics and social practices, particularly focusing on coastal regions such as Taiwan and Xiamen in China, analyzing the ecological and social issues it raises. For instance, Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes (2008) point out that animal release activities may lead to unintended environmental consequences and, from contemporary economic and public health perspectives, critique the phenomenon where compassionate motives are overshadowed by commercial interests. Katherine Swancutt (2020) views animal release as a poetic ethical practice that restrains violence and redefines human-animal relationships—an interpretive approach that shares certain resonances with Daoist perspectives on animal release. Avi Darshani (2021) focuses on the tension between Buddhist animal release in Xiamen and state regulatory policies, particularly noting how religious groups defend their rituals amid public criticism, reflecting the complex interplay between religious practices and secular governance.

Just as the Buddhist practice of animal release reveals multiple layers of meaning and social reverberations, Daoist animal release similarly embodies profound ethical concepts and a unique cultural logic. However, compared to Buddhist animal release, systematic research on Daoist animal release remains relatively scarce. Most scholars (Schipper and Verellen 2004; Zhang 2014; Zuo 2019; Huang 2024) have only scratched the surface of its concepts and attitudes, failing to delve into its cultural origins, the formation and evolution of its rituals—elements that truly reflect the intrinsic characteristics of Daoism. In light of this, this article aims to adopt a philological perspective to explore the historical context of the formation of Daoist animal release culture, the creation and development process of its rituals, and its theoretical contributions to rectifying the shortcomings of traditional animal release practices. This research illuminates how Daoism synthesized and assimilated the animal release cultures of Confucianism and Buddhism, creatively transforming them to develop a cultural expression with distinct Daoist characteristics. This process not only highlights the structure and spirit of Daoist culture itself but also profoundly demonstrates its capacity for harmony and intrinsic vitality within a context of multicultural coexistence. However, Daoist animal release, as a religious practice equally deeply rooted in China's indigenous cultural traditions, has not yet received corresponding academic attention.

Unity in Diversity: How Daoist Animal Release Absorbs and Integrates the Philosophies of the Three Teachings

The earliest records of Daoist animal release can be traced back to the Lingbao School's scriptures during the Six Dynasties period. For instance, the *Dongzhen Taishang Basu Zhenjing Sanwu Xinghua Miaojue* (洞真太上八素真經三五行化妙訣

Wondrous Formula for Practicing Transformation by the Three and the Five)[1] states: "The benevolent cherish life, abhor killing, rescue the endangered, protect the growing, prohibit harm and slaughter, and shun envy. Such individuals can harmonize yin and yang, liberate the living to deliver the deceased, embody compassion, constantly dwell on virtuous deeds, accumulate benevolence to attain longevity, and ultimately achieve immortality" (*Daozang*, vol. 33, 475). Similarly, the *Dongxuan Lingbao Taishang Zhenren Wenji Jing* (洞玄靈寶太上真人問疾經 The Transcendent Person of the Most High Enquires into Illness) notes: "Those who liberate lives and deliver the deceased have long attained the True Dao" (*Daozang,* vol. 24, 679). By the Tang Dynasty, the *Zhengyi Fawen Jing Huguo Jiao Haipin* (正一法文經護國醮海品 Offering to the Seas for the Protection of the State, from the Zhengyi Ritual Canon) also emphasized: "Practitioners of the Dao should firm their faith, diligently cultivate merit, establish achievements for the state, rescue and protect the people, prioritizing others over themselves... Persisting in liberating lives and delivering the deceased, when merit is perfected, they will attain the Dao and ascend to heaven" (*Daozang*, vol.32, 702). These records reflect Daoism's emphasis on the value of life, its compassion, and its spirit of self-sacrifice, prioritizing others over oneself. Conversely, violating the doctrine of "prohibiting killing" (禁殺) not only prevents one from attaining immortality but also incurs divine punishment.

After Buddhism was introduced to China, Daoism incorporated its precept against killing and gradually established animal release as an important practice. For example, according to the teachings of *the Taishang Dongzhen Zhihui Shangpin Dajie* (太上洞真智慧上品大誡 Great Superior Rules of Wisdom), practitioners should always maintain a heart of compassion, pity all living beings, and help people overcome calamities through releasing animals. Doing so generates great merit. It enables people in this present life to turn danger into safety, recover from illness, escape poverty and become wealthy, and fulfill their heartfelt wishes.

The *Zhengyi Fawen Taishang Wailu Yi* (正一法文太上外籙儀 Compendium of the Exterior Registers of the Zhengyi Canon) introduces the concepts of "Five Virtues and Nine Merits" (五德九功) among which the first of the Five Virtues is "releasing animals to save lives, treating all sentient beings with an equal heart" (*Daozang.* 1988. vol.32, 211). The *Shangqing Hetu Neixuan Jing* (上清河圖內玄經 Book of the Interior Mystery of the River Chart, from the Shangqing Canon) also references "Nine Virtues" (九德) and "Nine Merits" (九功) listing non-killing as the primary virtue and releasing animals to save the dying as the foremost merit. Additionally, the *Taishang Dadao Yuqing Jing* (太上大道玉清經 Scripture of Jade Purity of the Great Tao of the Most High) describes various methods practitioners use to accumulate merit. Among them, "the sixth merit is to ransom and release animals, regardless of their value, size, or status—even including aquatic life—doing one's utmost to aid them. If no suitable water source is available, they should be moved to deeper waters so they may revive and thrive" (*Daozang*, vol.33, 365). These guidelines form essential precepts that Daoist practitioners must strictly adhere to

in daily life and represent a key means of accumulating merit. Furthermore, classical texts such as the *Wushang Biyao* (無上祕要 The Essence of the Supreme Secrets) classify failure to release animals and redeem the deceased as one of the taboos. Those who violate these, according to doctrine, will face interrogation and punishment by officials of hell.

Daoism regards animal release as a way for practitioners to accumulate blessings and combines it with the traditional Chinese concept of "reciprocal retribution" (Chengfu 承負, Wu 2024). It means that the good or evil deeds performed by ancestors can affect the quality of life of their descendants. Through this, Daoism conveys the idea that "good deeds beget good rewards" (善有善報), encouraging people to do more good deeds. For example, the Scripture of the Jade Purity of the Great Tao mentions a blissful realm called "The paradise of new life" (種人天), which four types of people can enter. The first three types are devout people who are filial to their parents, widely benevolent, and uphold precepts while performing good deeds. The *Taishang Dadao Yuqing Jing* explains that the blessings we speak of are not always cultivated by oneself. It may be that their grandfather or an ancestor in a past life performed actions involving giving alms, releasing animals to save lives, aiding the poor and vulnerable, relieving the elderly and sick, or supporting practitioners—although these good deeds were not ultimately completed, the merit did not vanish, and the blessings extended to their descendants. Such individuals belong to families with profound accumulated virtue, which can last for nine generations. This concept of increasing blessings through animal release enriches Daoism's theory of reciprocal retribution: the good deeds performed by ancestors, especially acts such as animal release, transform into blessings for the happy lives of their descendants. If people wish for their descendants to continuously enjoy a happy life, they must persistently practice good deeds such as animal release during their own lifetime.

It is generally believed that Daoism incorporated a well-known fable about animal release recorded in the Buddhist Sutra known as *Jin Guangmingjing* (金光明經 Sutra of the Golden Light). This story recounts how Liushuizhangzhezi (流水長者子 Jalavāhana) saved a large number of dying fish by not only providing them with water and food but also expounding the Mahayana teachings to them. After hearing the Buddhist doctrine, the fish were reborn in Renlitian (忉利天 Trāyastriṃśa). Later, the fish manifested as *devas* and returned to his dwelling, showering him with countless jewels and displaying auspicious signs in gratitude. This story profoundly influenced the practice of animal release in Chinese religion, particularly reinforcing the tradition of releasing fish and aquatic creatures. Daoism further integrated this tradition with the symbolic meaning of fish in Chinese folk culture. Due to their prolific reproduction, fish are often regarded as auspicious symbols of prosperity and numerous offspring. Consequently, releasing fish gradually acquired the connotation of praying for descendants. Meanwhile, Daoism emphasizes that saving one fish is equivalent to saving numerous lives, thereby accumulating more merit. For instance, the Song Dynasty Daoist

text *Taishang Shuo Xuantian Dasheng Zhenwu Benzhuan Shenzhou MiaojingZhu* (太上說玄天大聖真武本傳神呪妙經注 Scripture of the Divine Spell Personally Transmitted by Zhenwu, Great Saint of the Dark Heaven, and Spoken by the Most High) states: "According to the Chapter on Protecting Descendants, if a family has few members and lacks thriving offspring, this can be resolved through animal release and redeeming lives" (*Daozang.* vol.17, 120). The Yuan Dynasty text Book *Zitong Dijun Huashu* (梓潼帝君化書 Book of Transformations of the Divine Lord of Zitong) more explicitly interprets animal release as "not killing fish, and especially not harming fish roe" (*Daozang.* vol.3, 293). It also records a miraculous tale: a wealthy merchant purchased a large quantity of fish roe and released it into rivers, an act equivalent to saving a hundred thousand lives. Ultimately, he was rewarded with a twelve-year extension of his lifespan.

Daoism also promotes animal release as a means of healing and prolonging life. For example, the *Scripture of Zhengyi Weiyi Jing* (正一威儀經 Scripture on the Liturgy of the Zhengyi Masters) records: "If a master falls ill or encounters calamity, disciples should attend to them by burning incense, making offerings, repenting for wrongdoings, and releasing animals, praying for longevity and deliverance from misfortune" (*Daozang.* vol.18, 255). The *Taishang Lingbaotianzun Shuoyanshou Miaojing* (太上靈寶天尊說延壽妙經 Marvelous Scripture on Longevity, Preached by the Most High Lingbao Tianzun) also states: "If men and women in the world wish to extend their lives, dispel disasters, and accumulate blessings, they should sincerely burn incense, maintain vegetarian fasting, practice the Dao, give alms, release animals, accumulate merit, and recite scriptures as offerings" (*Daozang*, vol.6, 308). Daoism further integrates this concept into medical practice. As written in the appendix "An Essay on Practicing Compassion through Action" (力到行方便文 Texts exhorting people to perform daily acts of kindness) of the *Secret Recipes of Xianzhuan Waike Mifang* (仙傳外科祕方 Secret Formulas for External Medicine, Transmitted by the Immortals), compiled by the early Ming dynasty Daoist priest Zhao Yizhen (趙宜真) : "The suffering of all living beings is no different from that of humans. If killing can be avoided, it should be. Insects, birds, and beasts should all be treated equally. Those who commit excessive killing will face judgment in the hell" (*Daozang* vol.26, 718). Daoist medical texts combine the everyday good deed of animal release with the common people's desire to preserve life and prolong longevity, encouraging both the accumulation of merit and reinforcing Daoism's auxiliary role in social education. The underlying logic is that by saving other lives, one can equivalently exchange for their own extended lifespan. Through the act of animal release, people sow seeds of good causes, hoping to reap favorable outcomes in the future and thereby resolve suffering. This religious notion that "doing good deeds will inevitably bring good retribution" (施皆有報) aligns with the most fundamental emotions and expectations of the people.

In summary, the Daoist concept of animal release integrates traditional Chinese beliefs such as cherishing life and reciprocal retribution, while also incorporating

Buddhist principles like the prohibition of killing, karmic retribution, and expedient means of spiritual practice. This has formed an inclusive ideological system. Its diverse and integrated nature made Daoist animal release culture more accessible to grassroots society. For instance, during the Tang and Song dynasties, the practice of animal release became particularly widespread. At large-scale events, tens of thousands of people gathered by lakesides, releasing millions of birds, fish, and turtles. Today, remnants of animal release ponds and related inscriptions from that era can still be found. At the time, officially organized animal release activities primarily emphasized bestowing kindness and benevolence upon all creatures, with their core focus being reverence for the ruler and praying for the emperor's longevity and blessings. These activities were regarded as acts of virtuous compassion rather than highlighting their Buddhist origins. Daoism, which maintained close ties with the imperial court, was naturally influenced by this trend. Daoist temples across the country constructed animal release ponds, using them as means to pray for the emperor's prolonged life.

The Distinctive Daoist Animal Release Ritual: An Indigenous Creation Based on the Buddhist Paradigm

The practice of animal release can be traced back to the salvation rituals of Daoism during the Six Dynasties period, where it often formed part of the repentance process, though detailed records of the specific procedures are lacking. According to some Daoist scriptures, acts such as animal release and lamp lighting could help atone for the sins of the deceased, accumulate merit, and facilitate their rebirth in paradise. The frequent pairing of "animal release" and "lamp lighting" (燃燈) in texts reflects how Daoism incorporated Buddhist rituals during its development. In Buddhism, practices such as animal release, lamp lighting, incense offering, and flower presenting are all means of expressing devotion, accumulating merit, and repenting for wrongdoings. Interestingly, early Buddhist texts provide limited detailed accounts of lamp lighting ceremonies. Instead, it was Daoism that integrated China's ancient tradition of lamp and candle worship with Buddhist thought, giving rise to the "Lingbao Lamp Liturgy" (靈寶燈儀). As scholar Wang Chengwen （王承文） noted, the Daoist lamp liturgy evolved by integrating Buddhist teachings into the framework of the Celestial Master Dao tradition (Wang 2001, Ji 2003). Similarly, the Daoism animal release ritual likely developed and matured by drawing inspiration from Buddhism in a comparable manner.

It was not until the Song Dynasty that Daoist texts began to document complete animal release rituals. The Golden Register Animal Release Ritual, compiled in the early Song Dynasty, was specifically used to pray for blessings on the emperor's birthday. The "Golden Register" (金籙齋) generally refers to prayer ceremonies held for the emperor, and the officially organized animal release activities in the Song Dynasty were often associated with the emperor's birthday. People in the Song Dynasty often released pigeons and birds to celebrate birthdays. This custom was not only practiced during the

emperor's birthday but was also adopted by nobles, officials, and even common people to mark their own birthdays. At that time, animal release was not limited to fish but also included birds, beasts, and even livestock. Through animal release, the people expressed respect for life and prayed for blessings for the emperor and the nation. Using animal release to celebrate birthdays also implied an emphasis on new life and the auspicious meaning of continuous renewal. The animal release process recorded in the Golden Register Animal Release Ritual (金籙齋放生儀 The rites for the liberation of living beings) includes steps such as purifying the venue, conducting the ceremony, releasing the animals, and chanting scriptures. The *Lingbao Lingjiao Jidu Jinshu* (靈寶領教濟度金書 Golden Book of Salvation according to the Lingbao Tradition), compiled by Lin Lingzhen (林靈真) of the Southern Song Dynasty, also includes a complete set of animal release rituals. The basic structure of the two rituals are very similar, with the main difference lying in their purposes: the former was to praise the emperor's virtues, extol his benevolence and respect for life, and pray for the nation's peace and stability; the latter was for ordinary believers to accumulate merits in the hope of avoiding disasters and receiving divine blessings through animal release. It is certain that animal release rituals were typically performed after large-scale Daoist ceremonies. Daoist believers held the conviction that through such rituals, they could genuinely accumulate good deeds, gradually increase their blessings, and thereby receive positive rewards.

In rituals for the salvation of deceased souls, the animal release segment is typically arranged after the step of "salvation through sublimation" (鍊度). For instance, *The Lingbao Wuliang Duren Shangjing Dafa* (靈寶無量度人上經大法 Great Rites of the Book of Universal Salvation) mentions that after salvation through sublimation, one should perform the animal release ceremony. Another Daoist text from the Southern Song Dynasty, *Shangqing Lingbao Dafa* (上清靈寶大法 Great Rites of the Shangqing Lingbao), also records that the animal release ceremony is generally scheduled on the third day of the ritual, following the sending-off and cremation ceremonies, serving as the final segment of the day. Some rituals place the animal release ceremony toward the end of the entire ritual as an important act of expressing gratitude and repaying kindness. The *Lingbao Yujian* (靈寶玉鑑 Jade Mirror of the Numinous Treasure) notes that the concluding phase of the ritual should involve "offering thanks through a ceremony and redeeming lives by releasing animals" (酬恩設醮, 贖命放生, *Daozang*, vol.10, 147), meaning that animal release is used to express thanksgiving and appreciation. This arrangement has been widely adopted in later Daoist redemption rituals. The book also details the complete procedure for animal release:

> (1) All Daoist priests gather before the altar, led by the priest in charge of music chanting the "Pacing the Void Lyrics."(步虛詞)
> (2) The priest responsible for announcing the ceremony invites the deities and opens the proceedings. Following this, Daoists sequentially recite the names Heavenly Worthy of Life Preservation (長生保命天尊), Heavenly Worthy of

> Carefree Happiness (逍遙快樂天尊), and Heavenly Worthy of Abundant Blessings (福生無量天尊). For each Heavenly Worthy (天尊) mentioned, a passage from the release prayer and blessed text is read. The names of these Celestial Worthies all symbolize attaining freedom and entering a state of joyful existence without constraints. It is as if invoking their names can bring about spiritual salvation.
> (3) A presiding priest, dressed in ritual vestments (法服), recites specialized Daoist verses for animal release, formally beginning the liberation of the animals.
> (4) All the Daoists chant scripture and pray together to accumulate merits for the participants in the religious ceremony. (*Daozang,* vol. 10, 159)

The ritual is structured with precision and distinct rhythm, embedding the act of animal release within a solemn religious framework. It emphasizes that this practice is not merely an act of kindness but also a significant religious undertaking for accumulating merit and communicating with the divine.

Particularly noteworthy is that during the Southern Song Dynasty, a Daoist priest named Jiang Shuyu (蔣叔輿) recorded the complete steps of the animal release ritual in the thirty-first volume of his book, *Wushang Huanglu Dazhai Lichengyi* (無上黃籙大齋立成儀 Standardized Rituals of the Supreme Yellow Register Retreat): Opening of the Incense Burner (發爐), Making a Declaration (啓白), Reciting the *Siweidingzhiji* (思微定志經偈, a text that promotes the concept of retribution for good and evil and encourages abstinence from killing), the actual release of animals, and finally Closing of the Incense Burner (復爐). The book also includes the incantations to be recited by the priest during the release, such as: "Today, the patron of this retreat, motivated by a heart of repaying kindness, has organized this grand retreat and personally donated funds to redeem the animals. We have cared for them well and now release them into clear waters, hoping that this virtuous deed will aid in the deliverance of departed ancestors" (*Daozang*, vol.9, 567). This is followed by a note in small characters: If the priest is performing the release personally, an additional line should be included: "As stated in the scriptures, releasing animal and delivering the deceased are primary practices for Daoist cultivators. I personally undertake this and dare not neglect it" (*Daozang*, vol. 9, 567). Another passage reads: "There are also devout laymen and women who, out of compassion, have individually contributed funds to purchase turtles and fish, joining me at the water's edge to release them together and grant them renewed freedom" (*Daozang*, vol. 9, 567). A further note adds: If no lay devotees are actually participating, the phrase "Men and Women of Pure Faith" (清信男女) should be omitted. This passage was retained because it originates from the ritual texts of the earlier Celestial Master Lu, and the compiler did not dare to arbitrarily delete it. It is especially significant that Jiang Shuyu mentioned that he referenced the content of the "Ritual Codes of Heavenly Master Lu," (陸天師科) where Heavenly Master Lu refers to the renowned Daoist priest Lu Xiujing (陸修靜) of the Liu Song Dynasty (406–477 CE) . If this claim is reliable, it implies that by at least the 5th century, daoism may have already

developed complete animal release ceremonies—potentially even earlier than the practice of animal release activities in Chinese Buddhism. Furthermore, judging from Jiang Shuyu's specific distinctions between different types of animal release needs in his writing, it appears that by the Southern Song Dynasty, Daoist animal release ceremonies had already become quite widespread. Daoist priests had thoughtfully considered various scenarios, developing corresponding procedures and preparing tailored ritual texts for each specific need.

In summary, Daoist animal release culture demonstrates a rich diversity of ritual forms and a spirit of inclusivity and harmony. As early as the Six Dynasties period, animal release practices were often integrated into rituals for redeeming the deceased and repenting for sins. Although fixed ritual protocols had not yet been established at that time, they were already combined with activities such as lamp-lighting, sutra chanting, and almsgiving, drawing inspiration from Buddhist concepts of offering while remaining deeply rooted in indigenous traditions. By the Sui and Tang dynasties, Daoist animal release rituals were frequently paired with lamp-lighting ceremonies, reflecting daoism's absorption and innovation of Buddhist rituals. In the Song dynasty, structured and specialized Daoist ritual protocols for animal release emerged. Although these rituals followed similar procedures, their functions varied: some focused on praising sages and seeking blessings, while others aimed to accumulate merit in the hidden realm for the patrons. The timing of these rituals was also highly flexible, some were held after the redemption of the deceased or at the conclusion of fasting ceremonies, while others served as expressions of gratitude to divine benevolence or as preludes to the dispersal of the ritual altar. The animal release rituals of the Lingbao School, in particular, emphasized practical needs, distinguishing between scenarios such as Daoist priests releasing life on their own behalf, on behalf of devotees, or in collective ceremonies. They also retained oral prayers that could be flexibly adapted. All of these aspects illustrate how life-release practices have long been integrated into various levels of society, embodying daoism's cultural characteristics of respecting life, harmonizing with nature, and promoting symbiotic coexistence.

From Animal Release to Generating Life: Daoist Pluralistic Ecological Ethics and Its Transcendence of Anthropocentrism

Folk animal release activities often take place on the birthdays of Daoist and Buddhist deities, reflecting the profound influence of religious culture on folk traditions. For instance, the *Xuantian Shangdi QishengLu*（玄天上帝啓聖錄 Record of the Epiphany of the Supreme Ancestor of the Dark Heaven) mentions that Tanzhou (潭州 , an Ancient Chinese place name of an area located in the present-day Hunan region) held four animal release gatherings each year, corresponding to the major celebrations of the Perfected Lord of Numinous Response (真武靈應真君), Sakyamuni Buddha

(釋迦牟尼佛), the Lord of Mount Tai (東嶽泰山掌命府君), and the Dragon Lords of the Four Seas and Nine Rivers (四海九江龍君神母). On these occasions, people would purchase live birds, fish, and turtles to release them back into nature, a practice known as the "animal release Organization" (放生會). Animal release is not only a folk custom but has also evolved into a form of diplomatic activity. During the Northern Song Dynasty, when Japanese envoys came to pay tribute, the imperial court would organize animal release assemblies on the third day of the third lunar month and the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, accompanied by variety shows to showcase Chinese culture.

However, animal release activities have also sparked considerable controversy. Some people specialize in stealing animals that others have just released, while others directly criticize the practice as a vulgar street activity that goes against moral etiquette. Moreover, the continuous hoarding and trading of animals for release have led to many animals dying prematurely in cages. Criticism of animal release has been growing in society, mainly focusing on two aspects: the contradiction of "capturing animals for the purpose of release" (預補放生) and the ethical question of whether animal life or human life holds greater value. Therefore, Daoism calls for restraint and guidance on folk bad release behavior to make it healthier and more meaningful.

The ancient Chinese intellectuals' reflections on capturing animals for the purpose of release originated from a profound critique of the anecdote "Jianzi Releasing Captive Animals" (簡子放生, Zhao Jianzi, a powerful official of the Jin state in the late Spring and Autumn Period) in *Liezi* (列子, Also known as the "True Scripture of the Void and Supreme Virtue," it is a classic text that records historical anecdotes from the Warring States period) records the following story: A citizen of Handan presented a turtledove to Jianzi on New Year's Day. Jianzi was very pleased and gave the man a generous reward. A guest asked him why he did so. Jianzi said that releasing the bird on New Year's Day was a way to show his kindness. The guest said that the people, knowing that Jianzi wanted to release the birds, would compete to catch them, and as a result many would die. If Jianzi truly wanted them to live, it would be better to forbid the people from catching them in the first place. Catching and then releasing them—the good would not make up for the harm.

The most severe issue with using animal release to showcase imperial virtue lies in this: once those in power display a certain preference, the common people will swiftly follow the trend and act for profit, capturing and hoarding animals in advance, even trading them repeatedly. Lin Xiyi (林希逸) of the Southern Song Dynasty once sharply criticized, "Nowadays, too many people make this mistake. For instance, releasing fish and turtles into the isolated mountain lakes, some of which are even traded multiple times a day" (*Daozang,* vol. 14, 801). This outcome fundamentally deviates from the original intention of humane compassion. True great love should be based on respect for life, not reduced to mere formality.

Unfortunately, many people overlook the warnings that animal release may lead to excessive capture and killing. Instead, they focus more on how the practice can

demonstrate human compassion for all living beings and invoke divine blessings. Thus, on special occasions such as the birthdays of deities or emperors, people organize the release of pre-captured animals back into the wild. The *Xuantian Shangdi QishengLu* documents a scene from an animal release assembly organized by Yuan Yan (元晏, a local official in Tanzhou) which was a grand spectacle where the crowd seemed immersed in a merrymaking celebration of life:

On the day of the animal release, the streets were filled with people buying, selling, and leading birds and beasts. They brought these pre-captured animals to the riverbank, chanting about the merits of release as they set them free into the river. However, some of the birds and aquatic creatures either fell heavily after briefly flying or floated belly-up on the water. Some people picked up these animals to examine them and found that the birds were either tightly bound by glue nets, unable to move, or riddled with arrow wounds. The fish, shrimp, crabs, and shellfish were in even worse condition—their scales torn off by fishhooks, their tails damaged by nets.

A Daoist priest criticized Yuan Yan, "Is this really animal release? This is nothing but intentional killing (故杀), deceitful killing (诳杀), foolish killing (昧杀), and greedy killing (贪杀)! " (*Daozang*, vol.19, 624). If this were truly a release, why can't these animals even fly or swim properly? Think about it: birds are meant to fly in forests, and fish and shrimp are meant to swim in rivers. Whether in the sky or water, their lives are as precious as human lives. Unless they are destined to perish, for instance, fated to be cooked and eaten, they should accept their fate. But now, because of this animal release assembly, even more animals have pointlessly lost their lives! This misguided practice stirred greedy and thoughtless individuals to devise cunning plans. They cared nothing for sin, focusing only on immediate gains, lying in wait at night, casting nets to catch fish, and confining aquatic creatures in pens, indifferent to their starvation. As a result, fewer than ten out of ten thousand fish survived, and even among those ten, hardly one truly lived. Those that did survive were often severely injured. Year after year, with such practices, are you accumulating merit or committing evil?

This well-known Daoist event, called "Yuan Yan's Awakening" (元晏悟化), exposed the hypocrisy of traditional animal release practices: seemingly compassionate yet inherently cruel, superficially about salvation but ultimately causing greater harm. Subsequently, the Tanzhou region completely abolished the grand animal release ceremony and instead organized "charity gatherings for the poor" (施貧會). Shao Jingbang (邵經邦) of the Ming Dynasty also reflected in *Hongdaolu* (弘道錄). Later generations also had people who prohibited the killing of birds and sparrows and erected animal release tablets, but why do these actions always seem unconvincing? It is because the administrators fail to understand that one must first love their own family, then extend that love to the people; only after loving the people can one further extend love to all living beings. But if it is done in reverse, without genuinely practicing benevolence, merely occasionally entertaining the idea of 'animal release' while eagerly seeking good outcomes—they are not motivated by sincere compassion for life but by

the utilitarian goal of gaining rewards through release. Naturally, this is unconvincing. More seriously, numerous practitioners, driven by profit, engage in large-scale capture, causing animals to suffer injuries during capture, contract diseases in captivity, and struggle to survive even after release due to compromised health. Ultimately, this misguided practice of animal release, having lost its original purpose, has become a significant driver of ecological destruction.

Daoism recognized the potential drawbacks of premeditated animal release very early on and established clear guidelines to address this issue, emphasizing that such acts should be done spontaneously rather than deliberately. The Daoist classic *Taishang Dongxuanlingbao Fashenzhilun* (太上洞玄靈寶法身制論 Regulations for the Body of the Law) points out that "the best way to accumulate merits is to refrain from harming other living beings. The essence of saving lives lies in genuine compassion from the heart" (*Daozang,* vol. 6, 921). However, at that time, many believers, especially with the arrival of summer in the fifth month of the lunar calendar, often announced animal release ceremonies in advance. As a result, even before the scheduled release, people began capturing animals on a large scale. By the time the release took place, many animals had already died or been injured during capture and transportation. What was originally intended as an act of kindness and merit accumulation ended up causing more harm and sin. Only when one happens to encounter animals about to be slaughtered and feels compelled by compassion should they be purchased and released. Masters must also forbid their disciples from casually organizing large-scale animal release events; otherwise, the organizers will be held accountable. Violators of this rule were to be confined in solitary quarters for two hundred days. This spontaneous and non-coercive approach to animal release is worth learning from.

Daoism also engages in profound reflection on the fundamental significance of animal release from the perspective of the equality of all life. It emphasizes that humans are not inherently superior to animals, nor should animals be viewed as existing merely to serve human needs. Gao Shouyuan pointed out: humans ought to possess universal benevolence toward all beings, not merely displaying kindness through animal release; the myriad things generated by heaven and earth do not exist solely for human use (*Daozang,* vol. 15, 160). He further elaborated on the concept that "there is no innate hierarchy among species" (類無貴賤), arguing that no being exists for the sake of another. Humans eating chickens, and chickens eating insects, is simply a natural law rather than a divine arrangement. The human assumption of superiority and disdain for other species is based solely on intellectual strength – "survival of the fittest" (弱肉強食)—which does not reflect the true way of nature. Just as mosquitoes bite humans and tigers and wolves eat meat, can it be said that heaven specifically created mosquitoes for humans or meat for tigers and wolves? Daoism holds that although humans and other creatures differ in form, they share interconnected emotions, and all life desires self-preservation. However, with the decline of morality in the world and human greed, the relentless hunting and consumption of living beings lead to incessant

killing, which contradicts the ultimate pursuit of harmony among all things. This Daoist idea actually serves as a positive correction to "anthropocentrism" (人類中心主義), reminding people to respect all forms of life. A deep understanding of this point also helps rectify some superficial religious practices. True spiritual cultivation should not be merely about formalities but must begin with purifying the heart, maintaining goodwill, and cherishing all beings.

Unlike Confucianism, which refrains from killing out of compassion, or Buddhism, which dares not kill due to the doctrine of karma, the core of Daoist animal release philosophy emphasizes the natural principle of "perpetual vitality" (生生不息). Shen Changqing (沈長卿) of the Ming Dynasty wrote about this in *On the Dingyang Animal Release Association* (定陽放生會社): "The essence of animal release is simply to preserve the vitality within our hearts and eliminate the intent to kill, thereby aligning with Heaven's virtue of cherishing life" (Shen, vol. 1131, 593). This perspective not only echoes Daoism's core teaching that "the Way of Immortality values life" but also demonstrates an inclusive spirit that harmonizes the three teachings—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Because this Animal Release Association worshipped the Daoist immortal Lü Dongbin (呂洞賓, One of the Eight Immortals in Daoism) whom they regarded as the first to truly integrate the three teachings.

What makes this animal release manifesto unique is its view that "killing" is an acquired habit rather than an innate human nature. The author uses himself as an example: "When I was sixteen, I still did not eat pork. My family, pitying my frail health, earnestly persuaded me to reluctantly comply. Yet, after just three days without meat, I began to crave it again, this is habit, not nature" (Shen, vol. 1131, 593). In other words, killing is not an inevitability but stems from customed behavior, which can be changed through discipline and awareness. The text further depicts the cruelty of killing: animals are cut with knives and boiled in pots, suffering and crying out in agony yet unable to escape. Consider the morsel of meat picked up with our chopsticks: our enjoyment is limited, but the animal's suffering is boundless. Even with delicacies laid before us, the thought of this makes them hard to swallow. The author points out that by treasuring one's own life and extending this care to all living beings, even an ordinary person can attain sagehood. Daoism thus transforms animal release into a daily practice of compassion and further issues a warning: "If vitality withers and energy dissipates, Heaven and Earth will lose their foundation for existence" (Shen, vol. 1131, 593). From a Daoist perspective, animal release expands from personal cultivation to a public philosophy concerned with the entirety of life and respect for ecological cycles.

What Daoism is most renowned for is its genuine concern for the lives of ordinary people, particularly evident in its reinterpretation of animal release and prohibition of killing from the perspective of life nurturing. It connects these practices with "longevity" (長命) and "Health Preservation" (養生) integrating them into daily life. Daoism emphasizes that people should curb their desires and actively engage in what is within their capacity, thus cultivating their character. Extending from this, Daoism opposes

indulgent hunting and killing for the sake of gluttony, believing that such actions only lead to a loss of mental clarity. It advocates using animal release to restrain desires, viewing it as a prerequisite for life nurturing. For example, Daoist priest Wang Chongyang (王重陽) once wrote in a poem: "Knowing you can reflect on yourself, the lives of creatures are no different from humans" (知公能作自身觀, 物命於人沒兩般, *Daozang,* vol.25, 693). This means that all living beings share the same essence of life as humans, and animal release is not only an act of compassion but also a way to accumulate merits and prolong life. Daoist priest Yin Zhiping (尹志平) also wrote in a poem that even a small fish, when released back into nature, embodies immediate freedom—why expect it to become a giant whale in the future? (乞得纖鱗免受烹, 放歸溪水任遊行, 莫言他日成鯨去, 目下從容也暢情. *Daozang,* vol.25. 503). Meanwhile, Daoist priest Zhang Sanfeng (張三丰) explicitly stated in his Essay on Carefree Living: "By practicing animal release and refraining from killing, one will certainly cultivate their nature and prolong their life" (能放生而戒殺, 亦養性兮延年, Li 2017, 278). Daoism liberates the practice of animal release from the heavy concept of samsara, turning it into a lighter, more joyful life ritual—free from the burden of sin and karma, but instead, through letting go and restraint, experiencing the ease of life and the joy of authenticity. It is precisely this wisdom, so close to human life, that makes the path of animal release more accessible to ordinary people.

Conclusion

Daoist animal release culture, rooted in traditional Chinese Confucian and Daoist thought and enriched by Buddhist wisdom, has formed a diverse and inclusive system of practice. It is not merely a religious ritual but also an embodiment of life ethics: from accumulating merit through "releasing life to transcend death" (放生度亡) to promoting health and longevity via "redeeming life to extend one's lifespan" (贖命延壽), and further to familial ethics centered on "bearing consequences and blessing descendants"(承負報應). Daoist animal release consistently emphasizes compassion and reverence for life. However, historically distorted practices such as "prearranged animal release"(預放生) driven by profit have prompted Daoism to reflect on the essence of this act—true virtue should not be reduced to a formalistic tool but must return to the Daoist core of "equality of all beings" (萬物平等), which breaks away from anthropocentrism and acknowledges the equal value of all life. Daoism advocates "releasing life in accordance with conditions" (隨緣放生)and "cultivating the mind as the priority" (修心爲本), promoting an evolution from "daring not to kill" (不敢殺 out of fear of karmic retribution) to "bearing not to kill" (不忍殺 out of inner compassion) and further to "not interfering with the natural order of animal life" (不扰物生 respecting the freedom of all beings). This offers profound insights for contemporary ecological ethics: protecting life is not the exclusive responsibility of religion but a universal principle for harmonious coexistence between humanity and

nature. Today, Daoist animal release culture continues to remind us that the core of ecological ethics lies in transcending utilitarianism, respecting nature's inherent character, and nurturing all beings with the "inherent virtue of cherishing life"(好生之德), rather than causing harm under the guise of good deeds. This philosophy belongs not only to Daoism but should also serve as a shared resource for global ecological civilization construction.

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Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] All English versions of Daoist scripture titles cited in this thesis are sourced from Kristoffer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen (eds), *The Daoist Canon: A Historical Companion to The Daoist Canon*（*Daozang tongkao* 道藏通考）, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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The Fusion of Maitreya and Messiah Symbols in East Asian New Religions: An Examination of Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam

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Original Articles

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Abstract

The research explores the significant cultural and religious exchanges between Western and East Asian cultures initiated by Jesuit missionaries from the 16th century onward. By employing a strategy of "cultural integration," the Jesuits harmonized Christian teachings with Confucian ideals, appealing to East Asian intellectuals. They used Christian messianic symbols and the figure of Jesus Christ to connect with East Asian religious symbols such as Maitreya, the Buddhist Savior, and Shangdi, the Supreme God in Chinese tradition. This integration combined Christian monotheistic ideas with traditional East Asian beliefs. To illustrate this point, the research examines the evolution of messianic symbols in two major East Asian religious movements: Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam. Both religions merged the symbols of Maitreya and the Messiah to create the concept of a "universal savior," represented as Jeungsan in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Cao Đài Tiên Ông in Caodaism.

Keywords: Fusion; Maitreya; Messiah; Daesoon Jinrihoe; Caodaism; New Religious Movements (NRMs)

Introduction

While Western civilizations had impacted communities of people on several continents prior to the 16th century, surprisingly, it was still wholly alien to East Asians before the Jesuit missions arrived at that time. The remarkable role of Jesuit missionaries in establishing a cultural bridge between the West and East Asia has been exceptionally significant: a period of profound cultural and religious contact leading to the penetration of Christianity into East Asian societies has continued. With the missionary strategy of "cultural integration," Matteo Ricci and Jesuit missionaries introduced Christianity to indigenous people in China in ways that harmonized with Confucian ideals which fostered mutual curiosity between Christianity and the religious traditions of East Asia, including the messianic concept (Ricci 1607). Based on Tianzhu Shiyi (天主實義), the true meaning of the "Lord of Heaven," Ricci and Jesuit missionaries brought the message of Christianity to East Asia to explain to the intellectual class in East Asia that Jesus the Savior of humankind is also a friend (Iesus Hominum Salvator or esum Habemus Socium).[1]

Based on this connection, the meaning of "the Lord of Heaven" and the "Savior of humankind" in Christianity has been applied to the Lord of Tusita Heaven (兜率天) and the Savior of Buddhist followers (Maitreya). Merging the central symbol of the Supreme God in East Asian religions (Shangdi/上帝 in Chinese means "Lord-on-High") with God and God the Father (in Holy Trinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit) in Christianity, resulted in the united symbol of religions: Messiah - the Savior. This integration of Maitreya and Messiah symbols in East Asian religions, then, is a testament to the deep cultural intertwining between East and West in the 16th century. Consequently, religious life in East Asia underwent fundamental changes and the crucial role of Indigenous missionaries post-Ricci in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam encouraged many followers of East Asian religions to accept Christian monotheistic ideas. The use of the messianic concept was a key turning point in spiritual life in East Asia with the appearance of Messiah and the united Supreme God - Shangdi, Maitreya - Savior - Messiah.

This research explores and compares how both Maitreya and Messiah are employed in the subsequent new Asian religious movements, such as Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam, across three main steps: 1) the symbolic evolution of Maitreya and Messiah in religious narratives, 2) the doctrinal and practical amalgamation of these figures in these religions, and 3) social characteristics underpinning this syncretism. Through this approach, the research highlights how new religious movements in East Asia reinterpreted messianic salvation, merging East-West religious concepts to meet the evolving religious needs of the followers.

Daesoon Jinrihoe (대순진리회/大巡眞理會) was founded in April 1969 by Park Han Gyeong (박한경 / 朴漢慶, 1917–1996), who is known by the honorfic name Wudang (우당 / 牛堂). This is the most significant movement of Kang Jeungsan (Gang Il-Sun, 1871–1909), believed by his followers to be the incarnated Supreme God, Kangseong

Sangje (姜聖上帝), the Supreme God of the Ninth Heaven, the Originator with Whom All Beings Resonate. According to "Daesoon Jinrihoe: The Fellowship of Daesoon Truth," Gucheon Sangje "stopped in this eastern land of Korea; he spiritually entered the statue of Golden Maitreya Buddha in the Geumsansa Temple at Moak Mountain in Jeolla Province, where He stayed for thirty years" (Daesoon Jinrihoe 2017, 15). As Rigal-Cellard explained, Sangje, standing for the Supreme God in Christianity, "incarnated in his son, Jesus Christ, who allowed for the radical transformation of the condition of man through his physical sacrifice. Daesoon differs in that Sangje did not offer himself as a sacrifice when he came on earth but reorganized the world and taught how to apply benevolence to establish the Earthly Paradise" (Rigal-Cellard 2022, 61). This is how Daesoon Thought merged the Messiah of Christianity, Jesus Christ, with the Maitreya symbol to create a messianic symbol of Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea. According to Donald L. Baker, Daesoon Jinrihoe "shows less Christian influence than other Korean new religious movements.... This means Daesoon Jinrihoe is more in tune with traditional East Asian anthropocentrism than Western theocentrism" (Kim 2020, xv).

Similarly, Caodaism, officially named *Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ* (Great Way of the Third Period of Salvation), is a syncretic religion founded in 1926 in Tây Ninh province, Vietnam. Caodaists worship Cao Đài Tiên Ông as their Shangdi (上帝), the High God, Lord On High, Celestial Lord, or the Supreme God. According to Cao Dai Manifesto,

> the universalist syncretism of the *Three teachings*; and the three-phase eschatology (Tam Kỳ Mạt Kiếp/sān qí mò jié 三期末劫) with the first dispensation associated with Moses and Fúxī (伏羲), the second associated with Buddha, Confucius, Lǎozǐ (老子), and Jesus, and the third to be ushered in by Maitreya. The initial name of Cao Đài – Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ or the "Great Đạo of the Third Cycle of Universal Salvation (Jammes and Trương 2023, 260).

In this way, Shangdi in Daesoon Jinrihoe, as well as in Caodaism, stands for a meaning similar to the Deus symbols in Indo-European religions (e.g., Zeus, Jupiter, Tiwaz) or the God of Jews, Christians, and Muslims when He merges with the symbol of Messiah or Maitreya, He becomes a "united savior," "global messiah," or "universal savior."

In reality, East Asian religions before the 16th century, such as Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and various folk religions, were devoid of monotheism. The only way to unite religious ideas was the concept of "Dao"; by "aligning oneself with Dao, creating harmony and a sense of participation in it… (this would) create a state of overall goodness and well-being-in cosmos, nature, society, and the human body" (Kohn 2001, 4). These traditions shaped people's cultural, social, and spiritual lives in East Asia without the need for monotheist symbols. After Ricci's time, some East Asian religious branches evolved to adapt aspects of Christian thought, particularly the messianic symbol.

In Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam, this fusion of Maitreya and Messiah fosters a synthesis of universal salvation ideas framed through four main aspects:

1) The influence of Christian culture on East Asian religions;
2) Transformation of the messianic concept;
3) Role of Maitreya and Messiah in new religious movements; and
4) Distinctive fusion of these symbols in the new ideas or thoughts.

By analyzing the transformation of the above-mentioned symbols with reference to these four ideas, this research examines how cultural exchange has historically fostered new forms of religious expression, blending traditional East Asian beliefs with Christian symbols. This transformation exemplifies the adaptability of religious beliefs and cross-cultural exchanges between East and West. Such exchange fosters new interpretations to meet contemporary religious demands while honoring traditional symbols and doctrines that formed new religions.

Therefore, this research utilizes an integrated framework that offers a comprehensive lens to examine how symbols function in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism to explore the fusion of Maitreya and Messiah symbols in East Asian new religions. Clifford Geertz's interpretive systems of meaning are incorporated with Robert Weller's theories of religious syncretism to create a framework for analysis. This framework also relies on additional themes of eschatology, which provide a structure for explaining death, and on aspects of modernization theory to explain how Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism have adapted traditional symbols for contemporary relevance. In this way, the symbolic value of Maitreya and Messiah is revealed.

Geertz's concept of religion is "a system of symbols" within a cultural system. According to Geertz, religious symbols shape human motivation by constructing conceptions of reality that feel uniquely authentic and emotionally resonant (Geertz 1973). This theoretical framework explains the navigation and resolution researchers must elaborate on regarding these modern challenges. Further, studying religious change in East Asian contexts involves exploring syncretism, showing how blending distinct religious elements forms coherent belief structures. On the other hand, syncretism, as an aspect of secularism, has always had a profound impact on every society or prevalent religion. Robert Weller explained, "This opening up of popular religion under the modern state also suggests generalizations about the dialectic between social formation and religion" (Weller 1994, 162).

Together with Geertz and Weller's concepts, the research also draws on the eschatological concept, which refers metaphorically to the end of permanent reality and to union with the Divine and is consequently "concerned" with death, judgment, heaven, and hell. In many religions, eschatology is taught as a future event prophesied in sacred scriptures. Eschatology may include concepts such as the Messiah, Messianic times, the end of time, and the last days (Joseph 1988).

Above all, these eschatological symbols comfort and guide followers, embodying hopes for spiritual renewal as they face an uncertain destiny. Therefore, symbols like Maitreya and Messiah are symbols of hope in an increasingly insecure world. Thus, the

theoretical framework above enables the researcher to examine how Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism reinterpret Maitreya and the Messiah to create inclusive and adaptive ideas of salvation through eschatology in their religious lives. Through this lens, these movements represent continuity with traditional beliefs while adapting to the new cultural contexts, demonstrating how the fusion of Maitreya and Messiah symbols continues to shape new East Asian religions.

An Examination of the Fusion of Maitreya and Messiah Symbols in East Asian Culture

Over the past two decades, my research has focused predominantly on the Maitreya symbol in the Asian cultural context, particularly in East Asia (Dinh 2024a). This process has allowed me to uncover significant transformations in the Maitreya symbol across different times and places. For example, from a prototype of the Indian god of wealth named Kubera, the Chinese formed a new Maitreya symbol in China with the image of Milefo 彌勒佛, (also called Budai Heshang 布袋和尚 or Qieci 契此) at Lingyin Pagoda, Hangzhou, China in the Southern Song (1127—1280). This famous Maitreya symbol, or "Laughing Buddha," later spread throughout East Asia. When this symbol entered Vietnamese culture, it was integrated with indigenous Vietnamese beliefs to form "Maitreya - God of Wealth," a new religious movement in Vietnam (Dinh 2024b). Such transformations are so complex that most people in China and Vietnam cannot distinguish Maitreya from Buddha, Bodhisattva, or God of Wealth. My recent research clarified how these symbols developed in East Asian cultures and religions, explaining these distinctions and the transformations (Dinh 2024a, 60–72).

This renewed focus on researching global catastrophes that followed the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a heightened engagement with Apocalypse and Messiah theories, making them increasingly relevant in academic discourse and conferences. In the international conference, *Can Religions Help the World Solve Its Civilizational Crises?* on October 4–10, 2023, at Daejin University, Korea, I presented a paper entitled "Messianism in Civilizational History: The Transformation of the Buddhist Messiah via Maitreya" (Dinh 2024b). During the conference, engaging dialogues among scholars, especially Livia Kohn, David Kim, and Michael Wesch, underscored the profound transformations that East Asian religions have undergone over the past centuries. These insights motivated me to delve deeper by investigating new religious movements in East Asia.

Some new religions in Korea and Vietnam have been formed by merging the concept of Maitreya with Messiah to move towards a new practice that formed new religions such as Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam. This merging of highly different ideas of Eastern and Western religions is not easy, even in the post-Ricci period. However, the founders of new religions in East Asia have a "key" to solving this problem, which is to merge the symbols of saviors (such as Maitreya and Messiah) into a "united savior,"

"global savior," or "universal messiah." This is the fusion of Maitreya and Messiah symbols in East Asian faiths from the post-Ricci time to the present. Examining Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam is an initial step to delve deeper into these changes in culture and religion in East Asia because it reflects a unique interplay of religious syncretism, cultural adaptation, and doctrinal evolution.

There are three fundamentals of sources as foundations for this research: 1) The historical context of religions in East Asia and the influence of Western culture and religion on East Asia via Jesuit missionaries; 2) The symbolism of Maitreya in Buddhism and Messiah in Christianity; and 3) Expressions of Maitreya and Messiah Symbols in New Religions (Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism).

Firstly, as Weller and Shahar mentioned,

> representations of the power of various supernatural entities are sustained and perpetuated by enabling productive activities in several domains (individual construction of religious autobiographical narratives, community construction of local identity, self-legitimation of the state through ritual) to draw upon the same symbols in what I term rhetorics of mutual authentication. (Weller and Shahar 1996, 155)

Over the centuries, this syncretic approach has allowed East Asian religions to remain adaptable, integrating new influences and fostering belief systems that are not only multifaceted but also resilient in the face of change (Menegon and Cogan 2015).

In China, the interplay of what is known as the "Three Teachings" (San Jiao 三教) allowed for differing beliefs to coexist, fostering a societal framework where diverse spiritual identities could flourish without conflict (Clayre 1985). In Japan, the intricate relationship between Shinto, the indigenous beliefs, and Buddhism, which was introduced from the continent, is epitomized by the concept of Shinbutsu-shūgō (神仏習合), or the "fusion of Kami and Buddhas" (Josephson 2012). In Korea, the San Jiao coexist with Shamanistic traditions. As Choi Geeongchun pointed out,

> Because of this long-standing battle between shamanism (Satan and his angels) and Christianity, some Christians have lowered their guard and become confused as to whether or not shamanism is an enemy or a friend. One thing is certain people who are affected by shamanism are to be our friends, and they need Christ" (Choi 2013).

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the term "worship and you will be blessed, abstain and you will be safe" (có thờ có thiêng, có kiêng có lành) showed that San Jiao in Vietnam has been woven with indigenous beliefs.

When Westerners like Marco Polo and his companions arrived in China in the 13th century, they encountered significant cultural conflicts. This situation changed with the arrival of Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century. This period marked

a pivotal turning point in the religious development of East Asia. The Jesuit missionaries were not only religious figures; they were also scientists and experts in various fields, including notable individuals such as Francis Xavier (1506–1552), Melchior Nunes Barreto (c. 1519–1571), Luís Fróis (1532–1597), Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), Adam Schall von Bell, and Ferdinand Verbiest. They introduced Western religious, scientific, and philosophical ideas to the region.

After a period of sublimation, the successors of early Jesuit missionaries encountered significant opposition during the "Chinese Rites Controversy," which ultimately led to the suppression of Christianity under the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Similarly, in Japan, initial successes by Jesuit missions led by Francis Xavier were reversed due to concerns over foreign influence, culminating in the ban on Christianity in 1614 and the implementation of the isolationist "Sakoku" policy. In Korea, Catholicism spread subtly through Chinese texts and faced conflicts with Confucian norms, resulting in severe persecution during the late Joseon era (1392–1910). In Vietnam, Jesuits played a crucial role in establishing Catholicism and developing the Vietnamese Romanized script (quốc ngữ). However, increasing suspicion of Western influence prompted intensified suppression under the Nguyễn dynasty (Tran 2018, 4).

Despite facing various challenges, the Jesuit legacy has had a lasting impact on East Asia. Their presence facilitated an essential exchange of religious and cultural ideas. Christianity, with its Latin cultural characteristics and science, significantly influenced fields such as astronomy, mathematics, and cartography in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. This influence fostered continuous cultural exchange, leading to the "Christianising Asianness" process in the post-Ricci era. In this new context, Asians witnessed the emergence of new religions and the blending of religious symbols, such as Maitreya and Messiah.

Secondly, in examining the symbolism of Maitreya as a Savior or Buddhist Messiah, researchers such as Sponberg and Hardacre realized that Maitreya's universal character can connect global religions. "Here, we have an aspect of Buddhism that resonates significantly with some of the most cherished themes of the Judeo-Christian tradition. From a consideration of 'Buddhist messianism', but only if we are willing to allow our culturally generated concept of messianism to be significantly transformed and expanded" (Sponberg and Hardacre 1988, 293). In another way, Kim Inchang focuses on portraying Maitreya as a benevolent future Buddha who brings salvation to the world. This role of Maitreya as a messianic figure has been integral to Buddhism, especially in East Asia, where the future Buddha's anticipated return has often paralleled Christian eschatological themes. Maitreya symbolizes hope and ethical reform, fitting well within syncretic movements seeking a messianic figure who embodies spiritual and societal salvation (Kim 1997, 15).

Thirdly, religious syncretism, which involves blending Christian and Buddhist symbols within East Asian religions, allowed for a fusion of beliefs that later influenced the symbols used in new religious movements. East Asian spiritual practices began to

incorporate elements of Christian messianism alongside Buddhist concepts like Samsara (beginningless cycle of repeated birth, mundane existence, and dying again), as well as "Asian syncretic pluralism," to meet local needs. This incorporation trend is evident in the practices of contemporary new religions such as Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism.

In Korea, Daesoon Jinrihoe incorporates Maitreya's attributes of enlightenment that reflect Korea's spiritual heritage and form its messianic symbol through social convulsions. As David Kim points out,

> "The historical narratives of the political conflicts, social incidents, and civic protests are seen to generate the ideological change of the Korean peninsula from the traditional beliefs of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and folk religions. The emergence of the initial native new religions, such as Donghak, Daejonggyo, Wonbulgyo, and the Jeungsan movement, is the result of the social and political disorder in the process of colonial modernization" (Kim 2020, 8).

In Vietnam, Caodaism adopted not only symbols of San Jiao (三教) and Messiah to form Cao Đài Tiên Ông but also gathered different Western, Chinese, and Vietnamese literary icons such as Victor Hugo, Sun Yat-sen, Nguyen Binh Khiem to form a united "great way" (Đại đạo) of Caodaism, such as depicted in the painting "Three Saints Signing the Peace Treaty" (Tam Thánh ký Hòa Ước 三聖記和約).[2] This painting represents an inclusive and universal form of divinity incorporating Buddhist, Daoist, and Christian elements in the "united East-West culture." Caodaism emphasizes the symbol of the Supreme God (Cao Đài Tiên Ông) as a unifying figure who transcends cultural boundaries, representing both Maitreya's enlightenment and the Messiah's salvational role with a symbol: the Left Eye stands for God Cao Dai. As David Wesch explains, "The foundation idea of Cao Dai is that we are emanations of God, the original One-ness that appeared in the Voice in a time before time began. In the words of God Cao Dai" (Wesch 2023, 218).

Coincidentally, Greenberger and Lee found content depicted similarity in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism that "the painting depicted in Daesoon Jinrihoe titled *Five Immortals Playing Baduk* (五仙圍碁 Oseon Wigi), and the painting in Caodaism titled *The Three Saints* (三聖, Tam Thánh) are strikingly similar in the manner in which both countries depict a national representative alongside foreign representatives" (Greenberger and Lee 2021, 87). Such depictions are evidence of reframing Maitreya and Messiah symbols in the "Asianness" of the new religious movements of East Asia (Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism) that Janet Hoskins pointed out like "conversations with divinities" (Hoskins 2015, 29). They address harmonious issues of salvation and ethical transformation for native residents. Both movements have adapted these messianic icons to resonate with local cultural values while emphasizing collective salvation, societal reform, and spiritual unity. This synthesis illustrates the dynamic process of religious hybridization and the enduring adaptability of East Asian religious systems in the face of global influences.

Maitreya and Messiah Symbol in New Religious Movements

The Role of Maitreya and Messiah in East Asian New Religions

As mentioned above, Maitreya and Messiah symbols in new religious movements (NRMs) serve as powerful symbols of world transformation and salvation, blending Buddhist concepts of the future Buddha with Christian messianic expectations to create syncretic concepts that address modern crises and offer hope for universal renewal. East Asian NRMs have developed sophisticated theological systems that creatively blend Buddhist and Christian messianic concepts, particularly through the figure of Maitreya, the future Buddha, and various Messiah-like saviors. These movements emerged during periods of social upheaval and modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries, offering alternative visions of salvation and world transformation (Jenchieh, 2020, 171).

The syncretic nature of these movements reflects their response to both traditional religious heritage and encounters with Western Christianity that address contemporary spiritual and social needs. The role of Maitreya and Messiah symbols in East Asian new religious movements thus represents a renewed theological phenomenon that combines traditional Buddhist eschatology with Christian messianic concepts to create innovative frameworks for understanding salvation, world transformation, and religious identity in the modern world.

Within this context, the figures of Maitreya and the Messiah frequently emerge as central symbols, embodying hopes for salvation, social reform, and a utopian future. Thus, Maitreya, the future Buddha in Buddhist eschatology, is believed to descend to earth in a time of moral decay to establish a golden age of peace and prosperity not only for Buddhist followers but also for people of other religions. This concept resonates deeply in East Asia, where social upheaval and political instability have historically fueled messianic expectations. NRMs often identify their founders or key figures as incarnations or representatives of Maitreya, imbuing them with divine authority and the power to usher in a new era.

In this context, the Messiah—a concept originating in Judaism and central to Christianity—has also been adopted and reinterpreted by NRMs, often blended with indigenous beliefs and new cultural values. In some cases, the Messiah is seen as a universal savior, encompassing aspects of both Buddhist and Christian eschatology. The appeal of Maitreya and Messiah figures in East Asian NRMs stems from several factors: hope for a better future, divine authority, syncretism, and cultural relevance.

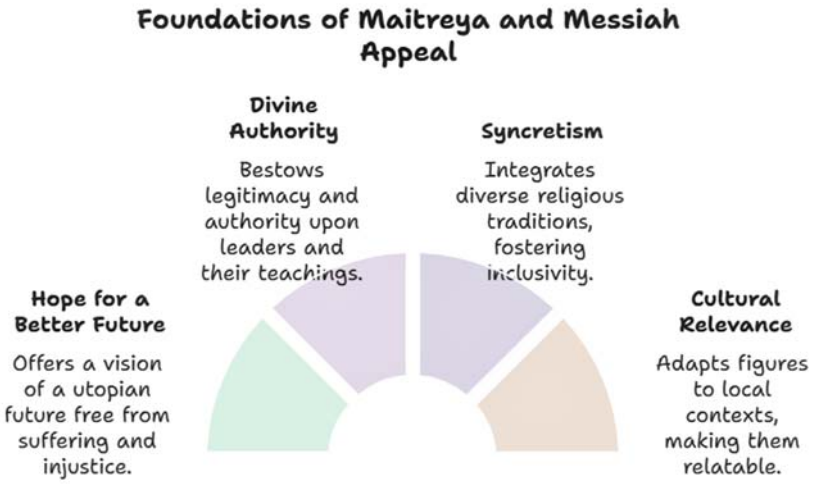


Figure 1. Foundations of Maitreya and Messiah appeal

This combination has created a dramatic shift in East Asian religious life, which is the blurring of the boundary between monotheistic religions and the polytheistic forms of belief that were dominant in Asia. This shift has two aspects: 1) the ideas of monotheistic religions have a new place in people's lives, and 2) NRMs in East Asia have a practice order and a doctrinal system that is clearer than before. Naturally, not all East Asian NRMs during this period had orderly doctrines and practices. Many NRMs emerged and "died young," while some groups are "still wavering" to this day (typically Long Hoa Di Lac in Vietnam and some groups in Korea). Meanwhile, Cao Daism and Daesoon Jinrihoe have asserted new positions in the new context of global religious life.

Maitreya as a Messiah Symbol in Daesoon Jinrihoe

Daesoon Jinrihoe embodies a syncretic blend of Eastern and Western traditions through its philosophical and theological frameworks. Its philosophical thought is described as "receptive, composite, and syncretic" within East Asian philosophy and custom. It aims to harmonize the "Three Realms (Heaven, Earth, and Humanity)" and unify faith from major religions. Its teachings are fundamentally based on the organized "by the logic of the three teachings (San Jiao) of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism" (Teiser 1996). Daesoon Jinrihoe integrates elements from Korean Shamanism, San Jiao, and Christianity. While affirming a "monotheistic" God (Kang Jeungsan, the incarnation of Gucheon Sangje, the Supreme Being of the Ninth Heaven), it also maintains a "pantheistic perspective" of celestial deities (Cheonji-Shinmyoung), allowing for a complex divine concept that is both monotheistic and polytheistic.

The religion presents a balance between Eastern traditions that emphasize human work and performance, and an absolute, personal God, akin to the Christian concept.

Its founder, Kang Jeungsan, admired Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci's approach to "inculturation," seeing it as a model for "opening the earthly paradise" and balancing "the two worlds" (Ricci's efforts to behave like a Chinese and introduce Confucian values to the West were seen by Kang as a bridge between cultures). Daesoon Jinrihoe's social work and ethical teachings, such as the "resolution of grievances for mutual beneficence (Haewon-sangsaeng 해원상생 / 解冤相生)" reflect this syncretic blend. This focus on harmony is described as being deeply rooted in East Asian philosophy, where everything is conceived as derived from a state of harmony that generates life.

In Daesoon Jinrihoe, the Maitreya and Messiah symbols are intertwined, representing a unique fusion of Buddhist and Korean religious thought. Therefore, Kang Jeungsan, the founder, is considered an incarnation of Gucheon Sangje, the Supreme God, and also identified with Maitreya, the future Buddha.

> "Maitreya's appearance in Daesoon Thought serves as a symbol throughout Korean culture. This symbol represents the highest role of a Supreme God, encompassing various religions such as Confucianism and Daoism, which are integral to people's religious lives. That shows that the Korean notion of Sangje in Confucianism has been combined with the teachings in Daoism to complete a hybrid symbol, Maitreya" (Dinh 2025).

Daesoon Jinrihoe places great emphasis on the figure of Sangje, the Supreme God, who is believed to have descended to earth in the 19th century to restore order and harmony to the universe. While Sangje is the central deity, the concept of Maitreya also plays a significant role in Daesoon Jinrihoe's cosmology and soteriology. Jo Jeongsan, the successor to Gang Jeung-san (considered the incarnation of Sangje), is regarded as Maitreya Buddha by many followers of Daesoon Jinrihoe. Following Kang's prophecies, Jo Jeongsan received religious authority and became the central figure of Daesoon Jinrihoe. Kang Jeungsan himself, and thus by extension his successor Jo Jeongsan and the Daesoon Jinrihoe tradition, are linked to the Maitreya Buddha (Mireuk) concept, which plays a significant role in the doctrine of the future world order. This identification is based on interpretations of Gang Jeung-san's prophecies and Jo Jeongsan's teachings. Daesoon Jinrihoe believes that Jo Jeongsan's role as Maitreya is to guide humanity towards enlightenment and salvation in the coming era of Great Transformation (Ko and Greenberger 2023).

The Maitreya symbolism in Daesoon Jinrihoe is intertwined with the concept of Haewon Sangsaeng, which emphasizes mutual cooperation and the resolution of grievances. Followers believe that by practicing Haewon Sangsaeng, they can contribute to the establishment of a harmonious and just society, paving the way for Maitreya's reign. Daesoon Jinrihoe's interpretation of Maitreya differs from traditional Buddhist eschatology in several ways. First, Maitreya is not seen as a future Buddha who will descend to earth at some distant point in the future, but rather as a figure who has already appeared in the person of Jo Jeongsan. Second, the emphasis is not solely on

individual enlightenment, but also on collective salvation through the practice of Haewon Sangsaeng.

In Daesoon Jinrihoe, Kang Jeungsan is considered the savior symbol. His mission involved carrying out the "Reordering Works of Heaven and Earth" to save the Three Realms (Heaven, Earth, and Humanity). Although the term "Messiah" is not explicitly used in Daesoon Jinrihoe's official teachings, the role of Sangje and Jo Jeongsan as saviors of humanity shares similarities with messianic figures in other religious traditions. They are seen as divinely appointed leaders who will guide humanity towards a new era of peace and prosperity, like Maitreya's millennium in Buddhism.

As Wang Zhihe has argued, Haewon-sangsaeng can be understood "as a representative thought regarding peace in Korean new religions" (Bae 2018). As a matter of fact, in some sense, many ideas of Daesoon Jinrihoe, such as the messianic vision, the concept of chosenness, the earthly paradise, and its eschatological beliefs, are closely related to the doctrine of Haewonsangsaeng. Also, Haewon-sangsaeng thought penetrated through the whole life of Kang Jeungsan (Park 2016), who established the tradition leading to present-day Daesoon Jinrihoe (Wang 2022).

Maitreya as a Messiah Symbol in Caodaism

Caodaism, founded in Southern Vietnam in 1926, is a syncretic religion that draws heavily on the principles of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, collectively known as the "Three Teachings" (Tam giáo). Its full name, "Great Way of the Third Period of Universal Salvation" (Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ), explicitly references a three-phase eschatology and the unification of these ancient doctrines. The very name of its supreme deity, Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát (Caodai the Immortal Mahabodhisattva Mahasattva), incorporates Daoist (Immortal), Confucian (Caodai), and Buddhist (Mahabodhisattva Mahasattva) elements, reflecting its foundational philosophy. The new doctrine teaches virtues found in Buddhism and Daoism, such as doing good, avoiding evil, loving humanity, and promoting harmony.

The term "Đấng Chí Tôn" (Venerable Supreme Being) is specifically used by Confucians to refer to the High Tower (Cao-Đài), demonstrating a direct link to Confucian terminology within Caodaist theology. This term may also be influenced by Western concepts, possibly transposed from the French "l'Être supreme." The Supreme Being is described as the "Supreme Spirit" who transmits divine teachings through spirit-writing mediums. These revelations aim to synthesize and preach the noble precepts of the Three Ancient Religions, including "Confucius' high morality." The Supreme Being also presents himself as the "Master of all mortal beings" (Thầy của chúng sanh) and teaches virtues like humility and self-effacement.

In Caodaist cosmology, the Supreme Being's existence is intricately linked to the cosmic order: he came into being from the clashing winds of the void (Hư Vô Chi Khí), and his throne is Thái Cực (Supreme Ultimate). This Thái Cực then divides into

Lưỡng/Nghi (yin/yang), with the Supreme Being remaining as the yang constituent. This creation narrative, while presenting the Supreme Being as primary, also introduces a dualistic element through the implied co-equality of the originating male and female aspects of divinity. Caodaism teaches that Maitreya is responsible for the third and final period of divine revelation, following the periods of Shakyamuni Buddha and Jesus Christ. In this final period, all religions will be united under the banner of Caodaism, leading to a universal era of peace and harmony. Jesus Christ is also revered as a significant figure in Caodaism, representing the Christian tradition and embodying the principles of love and compassion. He is considered one of the prophets who paved the way for the final revelation of Caodaism.

The concept of the Messiah in Caodaism emphasizes the collective responsibility of humanity to create a better world. The role of the Giáo Tông in Caodaism can be seen as having messianic undertones. The Giáo tông is considered the spiritual leader of the religion and is believed to be divinely appointed to guide humanity towards salvation. Caodaism's syncretic approach enables the integration of both Maitreya and messianic figures into its cosmology. The religion emphasizes the unity of all faiths and the importance of collaboration in building a better future for humanity. The symbols of Maitreya and Jesus Christ, along with those of other spiritual leaders, embody this unity and inspire followers to strive for peace, justice, and harmony. In Caodaism, Phạm Công Tắc is considered the savior symbol, the incarnation of the Hộ pháp of Caodaism, like Buddha in Buddhism and Jesus Christ in Christianity (Đức Nguyên 2000 Vol. 1, 1540). Caodaism teaches that Maitreya is the chief judge of the upcoming Universal Judgement and will instruct people in universal fraternity and mutual tolerance under the guidance of the Supreme God, Đức Chí Tôn. He will also usher in an era of high moral standards, symbolized by his return as a new Buddha to teach the divine law, or dharma.

Phạm Công Tắc's notable sermon, "The Divine Path to Eternal Life" provides a "celestial journey and esoteric mapping of Heaven." These sermons offer a visual summary of Caodaist beliefs and the operation of the cosmos. The "Holy Words" (thánh ngôn) collected from spirit-medium messages form an extensible corpus that directly influences liturgical use and religious law. This similarity, as Kang Jeungsan in Daeson Jinrihoe, is that practices and rituals are designed to guide adherents toward spiritual enlightenment and salvation within a framework that harmonizes diverse religious traditions. They combine elements of traditional East Asian cosmology, ethics, and ritual with modern spiritism, offering a path for both individual self-cultivation and collective spiritual progression.

In some ways, Cao Daism is like a variant of Xiantiandao (先天道, the Great Way of Former Heaven). These societies propagated the worship of the spirits of the Three Teachings (Tam giáo: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism). Caodaism views Maitreya as a central figure in its eschatology. This assembly is described as a "great eschatological reunion of deities and men, modeled on assemblies of the Buddha Maitreya," promising aid in this life and salvation after death. The core doctrine of Caodaism, Đại Đạo Tam

Kỳ Phổ Độ (大道三期普度), explicitly references a three-phase eschatology (sān qímò jié), where Maitreya is said to usher in the third dispensation. The name "Great Đạo of the Third Cycle of Universal Salvation" signifies the realization of these prophecies (Đức Nguyên 2000 Vol. 1, 929).

The Influence of Maitreya and Messiah in East Asian New Religions

Maitreya, originally conceived as a deity for prayers regarding future reincarnation, came to be associated with immediate world transformation during times of crisis. Therefore, in premodern China and Korea, rebels who resisted state power reimagined Maitreya as a figure who would immediately appear to end the current world order. This is evidence that modern East Asian NRMs have developed these revolutionary aspects of Maitreya. This represents a fundamental shift from traditional Buddhist eschatology, in which Maitreya's arrival is still in the distant future. According to Daesoon's thought, "due to Jeungsan's descending on the earth, the incarnation of Maitreya has been accomplished" (Kim 2022).

It can be said that East Asian NRMs demonstrate the approaches to religious syncretism with messianic figures, as Jenchieh pointed out, these movements function as "types of nativist millennialism" where "the ultimate goal in all three is redeeming lost elements by magical means - the sudden disappearance of invading forces, the return of mystical heroes or messiahs, and an altered landscape" (Jenchieh 2020).[3]. This differs significantly from Christian concepts of sacrificial redemption while maintaining messianic themes of divine incarnation and world transformation.

Furthermore, East Asian NRMs typically emerge during periods of social crisis and offer visions of radical world transformation. The concept of Kaebyŏk in Korean new religions exemplifies this pattern, having evolved from a classical literary concept describing world creation into "a radical cosmological transformation in the future, which new religions in Korea have generally accepted until the present. This transformation occurred gradually during political crises in the 18th century and thereafter. These movements share "strikingly similar ethnocentric (i.e., Japanocentric, Koreacentric, Sinocentric, Vietnam-centric) colouring of the myth" regarding millennial transformation (Pokorny [ed.] 2020). The ethnocentric dimension suggests that salvation and world renewal will emanate from specific East Asian cultural centers, reflecting both religious nationalism and universal salvific claims.

Comparative research reveals consistent patterns across different East Asian contexts, suggesting common underlying dynamics in how these movements develop and function. It also shows how traditional religious symbols are reinterpreted during periods of social crisis. Some studies provide detailed textual analysis and historical documentation, while others offer comparative frameworks that may lack specific detail about theological development (Jenchieh 2020). Therefore, the blending of Maitreya and Messiah concepts in East Asian NRMs represents a significant change in this region. These movements

demonstrate how religious traditions can creatively synthesize seemingly disparate elements to address contemporary spiritual needs. The transformation of Maitreya from a distant-future Buddha to an already-embodied savior reflects an adaptation of Christian concepts of divine incarnation while maintaining Buddhist cosmological frameworks.

Nowadays, modern examples continue to emerge, as seen in movements that interpret global crises through millennial lenses. Research on how Buddhist adherents perceive civilizational crises through symbols associated with Maitreya, based on the Buddhist concept of the Messiah, suggests the ongoing relevance of these theological frameworks for understanding contemporary religious responses to global uncertainty. Understanding these syncretic processes has practical implications for the methodology of religious studies, interfaith dialogue, and the analysis of religious innovation. The success of movements like Daesoon Jinrihoe and Cao Daiism, which have attracted significant followings while maintaining distinctive theological positions, demonstrates the continuing appeal of syncretic messianic concepts in addressing modern spiritual and social concerns.

The Fusion of Maitreya and Messiah in East Asian New Religions

In East Asian religious movements, messianic figures are almost universally reconfigured in pre-modern and modern socio-historical contexts. Maitreya reinterpreted through messianic narratives that emphasize world renewal, moral regeneration, and collective salvation. This fusion is not a simple borrowing of Western messianism, but rather a creative synthesis shaped by indigenous cosmologies, millenarian traditions, and responses to social crisis, colonial encounters, and modernity. It rearticulates Maitreya as a messianic agent operating within historical time rather than a distant eschatological future. This transformation reveals a broader shift from transcendental soteriology toward immanent, socially embedded forms of salvation, as it is localized and re-signified in new religious formations.

In China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, new religious movements have emerged as responses to social, political, and cultural upheavals, particularly since the 19th century. Among their most striking features is the fusion of Maitreya, the Buddhist future Buddha, with the Christian Messiah, creating a singular eschatological savior figure who promises a new era of peace and cosmic renewal. This syncretism is not merely a theological curiosity but a reflection of broader socio-cultural dynamics, including shared salvific expectations, doctrinal blending of Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, and indigenous traditions, and distinctive ritual practices that ultimately gave rise to the notion of a "United Savior" in modern religious discourse.

Taking *Tianzhu shiyi* as a foundational text of early Sino-Christian encounter, the section examines how Christian theological categories—God, salvation, and moral order—were initially translated and framed through Confucian metaphysics and ethical rationalism. Through textual analysis and comparative historical interpretation, we can

see that a "United Savior" reflects a shift from doctrinal exclusivity toward an integrative soteriology shaped by plural religious landscapes, social upheavals, and modern nation-building projects. This evolution reveals how salvation in East Asia has been progressively reimagined as a collective, this-worldly, and culturally mediated process.

From *Tianzhu shiyi* to a "United Savior"

As mentioned in the first paragraph, *Tianzhu shiyi* (天主實義), authored by Matteo Ricci in 1603, is a foundational text in the history of Christian–Confucian dialogue in China. It sets the intellectual and theological stage for later discussions about a "United Savior" in East Asian new religious movements as a key bridge between Christian and Confucian Thought. In his text, Ricci aimed to present Christian teachings in terms familiar to Chinese literati, using Confucian concepts and arguing for the rationality and universality of belief in "Tianzhu" (the Lord of Heaven/God). Ricci identified "Tianzhu" with the Confucian "Shangdi" (High Emperor) and the supreme principle of Heaven, while differentiating his view from Buddhist metaphysics. He sought to show a unity of highest moral authority rather than exclusive dogma. This approach fostered the notion of a single, supreme, benevolent deity—a conceptual shift that later influenced new religious movements seeking syncretic forms of salvation.

In the new situation, East Asian new religion, responding to periods of crisis and competing worldviews, often proposed a "United Savior" by fusing elements of Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, and indigenous traditions. An example of the Unification Church (Korea) also reflects this trend: its founder, Sun Myung Moon, taught that Jesus' mission was completed. It was blending Christian messianism with indigenous and Confucian motives of unity and cosmic restoration. It can be said that Ricci's Tianzhu shiyi paved the way for these innovations by demonstrating how doctrines of salvation could be meaningfully integrated across cultural and theological boundaries rather than being kept exclusive.

This heritage of dialogue and synthesis means that new religions commonly teach that "all faiths are united" and that the savior may be interpreted as Maitreya, the Messiah, the Lord of Heaven, or local incarnations. The concept of a "United Savior" in East Asian religious contexts relates to Tianzhu shiyi, which serves as a bridge between Christian and Eastern thought. In this case, Tianzhu shiyi was a strategic text to frame the Christian God (Tianzhu) as the universal, supreme Lord of Heaven, analogous to the highest Chinese concept of Heaven (Tian) and the Confucian moral order. This helped introduce a unifying divine figure— one supreme deity responsible for cosmic order and moral law - into a religious landscape traditionally populated by diverse deities and philosophies, and the foundation for syncretic salvation concepts. By demonstrating that Christian salvation could be reconciled with Chinese ideals on cultural and philosophical grounds, Ricci's text paved the way for later East Asian new religious movements to develop the notion of a "United Savior." This savior figure synthesizes figures like Maitreya (Buddhist

future Buddha), the Messiah (Christian savior), and even Confucian sages under a transcendent, singular cosmic principle, often depicted as a source of universal salvation.

The *Tianzhu* introduced in *shiyi* is not merely a Christian God but a concept that resonates across religious traditions as the divine source of all. The "United Savior" in later religions inherits this role as an all-encompassing savior, drawing legitimacy from Ricci's portrayal of a supreme divine authority that transcends and unites religious boundaries, as well as from the facilitation of religious dialogue and integration. Tianzhu shiyi helped cultivate an intellectual context in which religions could be discussed in dialogue and synthesized rather than viewed as competing exclusivities. This is reflected in new religious movements, where the figure of the "United Savior" embodies and harmonizes multiple religious identities, allowing followers of different faiths to find shared hope in one redeemer.

In East Asian religious contexts, the "United Savior" concept builds on the theological and cultural groundwork laid by Matteo Ricci's Tianzhu shiyi, which depicted the Christian God as a supreme cosmic lord compatible with Chinese ideals. This foundation enabled later syncretic religious movements to develop a unified savior figure who integrates Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, and Taoist elements into a single salvific authority, fostering both doctrinal inclusivity and spiritual renewal across traditions, laying the groundwork for the "United Savior" motif in East Asian new religions. These movements synthesize the roles of Buddha, Messiah, Confucian sage, and Taoist immortal, adopting inclusive doctrines and practices that embody the aspiration for cosmic and social renewal through a singular, universal savior-figure.

Shared Salvific Expectations Amid Social Upheaval

The fusion of Maitreya and Messiah as a singular savior figure in East Asian new religious movements is deeply rooted in shared salvific expectations that arise in times of social upheaval and crisis, including crisis and messianic hope, Maitreya as an apocalyptic savior, and the fusion of these elements into a unified salvific vision. Historically, periods of political turmoil, war, famine, invasions, and social injustice in East Asia generated widespread anxiety about moral and cosmic decline. These conditions fostered a popular yearning for a transformative savior who would deliver people from suffering and establish a new world order of justice and peace.

Buddhist doctrine traditionally expects Maitreya's arrival far in the future, but popular belief has repeatedly anticipated his imminent coming during times of social distress. Throughout the history of China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, Maitreya became a symbol of rebellion and hope, inspiring religious uprisings and messianic movements promising an earthly paradise—often called the "Maitreya Kingdom." This transformation reinterprets Maitreya not just as a Buddha of spiritual awakening but as a messianic deliverer who intervenes directly in history to establish salvation here and now. Meanwhile, the Messiah symbols in Christianity and syncretic traditions also embody the

expectation of a returning savior who will defeat evil, resurrect the righteous, and inaugurate God's kingdom on earth. As a result, East Asian syncretic movements absorb this Christian hope, merging it with Buddhist and indigenous traditions to create a composite savior who is both spiritual redeemer and worldly ruler.

To create a unified salvific vision, Maitreya and Messiah become two aspects of one "United Savior" figure who addresses both the spiritual and social dimensions of salvation. This savior promises cosmic renewal, repairing the fractured moral order, restoring natural harmony, and ending suffering, reflecting the hopes and fears of people caught in epochal change. Movements like Yiguandao[4] and Victory Altar explicitly articulate this fusion, portraying their founders or leaders as incarnations of the united savior, tasked with bringing the prophesied new era.

The fusion inspires not only cosmic salvation but also social redemption: liberation from oppression, the abolition of corruption and inequality, and the restoration of harmonious community life. It speaks to the aspirations of marginalized and suffering groups who see in the united savior the possibility of radical personal and communal transformation. As a result, shared salvific expectations amid social upheaval motivate the fusion of Maitreya and Messiah in East Asian new religions. The savior figure embodies popular hopes for immediate deliverance and cosmic renewal during times of crisis, merging Buddhist millenarianism and Christian messianism into a powerful, unified vision of spiritual and social salvation that resonates deeply with East Asian historical experiences. These shared expectations reflect a collective yearning for salvation and stability, with the Maitreya-Messiah figure serving as a bridge between Buddhist eschatology and Christian soteriology.

Table 1. A comparation between Maitreya, Messiah, and Syncretic savior

Maitreya in Buddhist tradition	Messiah in Christian influence	Syncretic savior
Maitreya is the future Buddha who will appear at the end of the current cosmic cycle to restore dharma and establish a world of harmony. This eschatological hope resonated with communities facing crises, offering a vision of renewal.	Christian missionary activities in East Asia introduced the concept of the Messiah, a divine figure who redeems humanity and establishes God's kingdom. This resonated with local populations seeking salvation amid oppression.	where a universal savior, informed by both figures, unites humanity in a new spiritual era. This era venerates Maitreya as a messianic figure who will lead adherents into the millennium, a time of universal harmony.

Doctrinal Syncretism and Blending Traditions

The fusion of Maitreya (the future Buddha) and the Messiah in East Asian new religions exemplifies rich doctrinal syncretism, blending Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, Confucian, Manichaean, and indigenous beliefs into unified salvific systems. Key aspects

of this syncretism include: 1) Maitreya as the Buddhist Messiah and a symbol of salvation in East Asian Buddhism; 2) Christian Messianism and the integration of Confucian and Daoist elements; 3) the eternal mother and a cosmic parent deity; 4) soteriological themes and historical progression.

In China, the messianic role merged with Manichaean dualistic themes in movements such as the White Lotus Sect, which incorporated apocalyptic and salvific expectations centered on Maitreya's return. Meanwhile, Christian Messianism, introduced through Jesuit missions and texts such as *Tianzhu shiyi*, brought the notion of a singular redeeming savior. This was combined with Confucian ideals of moral order and the Daoist concept of a primordial Way (Dao) that governs cosmic harmony. The idea of "Five Teachings in Unity" (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam)[5] often emerged, with Maitreya and Jesus regarded as complementary manifestations of universal salvation under a supreme cosmic principle.

Many sects elevated an eternal maternal figure (such as Wu Sheng Lao Mu)[6] as the cosmic source and orchestrator of the descent of Maitreya, Jesus, and other salvific messengers, blending matriarchal and patriarchal traits. The savior figure as the "True Parent" (e.g., Victory Altar's Cho Hee Sung)[7] embodies this fusion by acting as both Buddha and Christ, fulfilling the cosmic plan to restore heaven on earth.

In some central concepts, history is divided into distinct ages, with each savior figure inaugurating a new era: Dipankara Buddha (Green-sun), Gautama Buddha (Red-sun), and Maitreya Buddha (White-sun).[8] Here, parallel Christian and indigenous cyclical time concepts are integrated. Salvation involves spiritual rebirth in Maitreya's heavenly realm or the realization of the new cosmic age through the united savior's role. Meanwhile, syncretism appears in scriptures, ritual practices, and group identities - where Buddhist sutras, Christian gospels, Daoist texts, and folk prophecies intermingle. Historical rebellions and new religious movements often harnessed this syncretism to legitimize social and cosmic renewal under the banner of the Maitreya-Messiah savior.

This doctrinal syncretism enabled the creation of uniquely East Asian new religions in which the figures of Maitreya and the Messiah are not in opposition but are interwoven, reflecting the region's pluralistic spirituality and historical experiences of upheaval, hope, and renewal. The fusion of Maitreya and the Messiah is underpinned by a doctrinal syncretism that integrates Buddhist, Christian, Daoist, and indigenous elements, creating a cohesive theology that appeals to diverse audiences, as shown below. This blending of traditions reflects the adaptability of East Asian new religions, which draw on multiple sources to create a theology that is both universal and locally resonant.

Table 2. The fusion of Maitreya and Messiah in NRMs of East Asia

Category	Description
Buddhist Elements	The Maitreya figure brings the Buddhist emphasis on compassion, enlightenment, and the cyclical renewal of dharma. For example, Won Buddhism (founded in Korea in 1916) reinterprets Maitreya as a symbol of universal truth (Il-Won), blending traditional Buddhist ethics with modern spiritual aspirations.
Christian Elements	The Messiah's influence is evident in the emphasis on salvation through divine intervention and moral redemption. In Caodaism, the savior is linked to the "Great Way" that incorporates Christian notions of a personal God (Cao Đài, or the Supreme Being) alongside Maitreya's universal compassion.
Taoist and Indigenous Influences	Taoist cosmology, with its focus on harmony and the cyclical nature of time, complements the eschatological visions of Maitreya and the Messiah. Indigenous beliefs, such as Vietnamese spirit worship or Chinese folk religion, add localized elements, including reverence for ancestors and deities like the Jade Emperor.
Example in Practice	Kang Jeungsan, the incarnation of Gucheon Sangje, the Supreme Being of the Ninth Heaven in Daesun Jirihoe, as well as Caodaism's "Third Amnesty" doctrine, merges Maitreya's role as a future teacher with the Messiah's mission to save humanity, incorporating Taoist deities and local spirits into a universal pantheon.

Characteristic Practices and Preparations for the Emerging Era

As a key point, the Maitreya-Messiah symbol is central to the ritual practices of East Asian new religions, which aim to prepare adherents for the promised new era. These practices include millenarian feasts, devotional recitations, and spirit-writing, each reflecting the syncretic nature of the movements. These communal gatherings celebrate the imminent arrival of the savior and the new era. In Caodaism, major festivals such as the "Great Ceremony of the Jade Emperor" involve elaborate rituals, vegetarian feasts, and prayers to align adherents with the cosmic renewal promised by the Maitreya-Messiah figure. Chanting and reciting sacred texts are standard practices to invoke the savior's presence and prepare for salvation. In Yiguandao, adherents recite mantras dedicated to Maitreya, blending Buddhist chants with invocations of divine protection drawn from Christian and Taoist traditions. These recitations reinforce doctrinal teachings and cultivate spiritual discipline.

Among the activities mentioned above, spirit-writing (giáng bút, cầu cơ) is one of the most significant, being a distinctive practice in many East Asian new religions. Spirit-writing involves mediums or masters receiving divine messages from the Maitreya-Messiah or related deities. In Caodaism, spirit-writing sessions (called cơ bút) produce sacred texts that guide adherents, blending Buddhist prophecies with Christian-inspired

revelations. This practice underscores the living connection between the community and the divine savior.

These practices create a shared experience that bridges cultural and religious divides. These rituals not only reinforce the syncretic theology but also build a sense of community and purpose among adherents, preparing them for the anticipated cosmic transformation. Thus, the fusion of Maitreya and Messiah in East Asian new religions represents a synthesis of Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, and indigenous traditions, driven by shared salvific expectations amid social upheaval. This syncretism is evident in the doctrinal blending of diverse frameworks and in ritual practices such as millenarian feasts, devotional recitations, and spirit-writing, which prepare adherents for a new era of cosmic renewal. Movements such as Caodaism, Yiguandao, and Won Buddhism exemplify how the Maitreya-Messiah symbol serves as a unifying symbol of hope, adapting global religious ideas to local contexts. By addressing the spiritual and social needs of their communities, these new religions highlight the dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation in East Asian spirituality, offering insights into the enduring human quest for salvation and renewal.

Table 3. Several NRMs containing the Maitreya-Messiah symbol

Movement	Savior Figure	Doctrinal Fusion
Yiguandao	Maitreya "Grand Patriarch" (Mile Zushi)	"Unity of the Five Teachings" (五教合一): synthesizes Maitreya, Laozi, Confucius, Christ, Muhammad under the Eternal Mother principle.
Xiantiandao	Wusheng Laomu's emissary Maitreya	Rooted in White Lotus lineage: Maitreya as final savior after Dipankara and Sakyamuni; frames itself as primordial "Way" transcending all religions.
Victory Altar	"Victor Christ" = Maitreya Buddha (Cho Hee-Sung)	Cho as incarnate Savior-Buddha; five "covenants" (e.g. ending war, ensuring harvests) mirror miraculous messianic acts (Rigal-Cellard 2024).
Daesoon Jinrihoe	Kang Jeungsan "Jeungsan is Maitreya"	Interprets founder as the real Maitreya to actualize an earthly paradise; merges Confucian, Buddhist, Christian motifs without literal millennialism.
Caodaism	Di Lặc Phật	In Caodaism, Maitreya (or Di Lặc) is the future Buddha who is destined to guide humanity to salvation and harmony.

Kenosis in the Christian theological concept of "self-emptying," epitomized by Christ relinquishing divine privilege to become fully human, intersects profoundly with Tianzhu shiyi and the idea of a "United Savior" in East Asian religious contexts. It presents Christian doctrine in dialogue with Confucian and Chinese philosophical ideals. The self-emptying love of Christ found resonance in concepts such as *ren* (Confucian

benevolence) and Daoist emptiness, both of which emphasize humility, self-giving, and unity with the cosmos. Ricci's method itself was kenotic when he entered the Chinese world with humility, adapting his message thoughtfully, emptying his "Western" self to become incarnate as a Confucian literatus, thus embodying the principle he preached. This is a background of the "United Savior" in East Asian new religions. It is often portrayed as one who embodies kenotic self-sacrifice. Such saviors' manifest qualities of humility, compassion, and selflessness, core criteria for spiritual authority in both Christian and Asian religious frameworks.

Thus, the kenotic savior unites disparate traditions, not through power, but by emptying self and identifying with suffering humanity. Asian religious values of non-attachment, egolessness, and universal benevolence; the kenotic Christ, or Buddha-Messiah, is thus seen as the archetype of selflessness and reconciling unity, forming philosophical parallels. Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi* drew explicit parallels between Christian kenosis and the Confucian virtue of *ren* ("benevolence" as self-emptying love), as well as the Daoist ideal of *wu* (emptiness).

Kenosis, also related to the concept of *sunyata* (Buddhist emptiness), constructs a model in which ultimate reality is achieved through self-emptying, not as negation, but as openness to others, aligning with both Christian and Buddhist mystical insights. Ricci's kenotic adaptation led to religious practice focused on life-witness, humility, service, and spiritual insight, rather than dogmatic assertion. This paradigm empowered Asian Christologies and Buddhist-Christian dialogs, informing the idea that the united savior must live and manifest self-emptying love in action. It can be said that Kenosis provides a conceptual and ethical bridge between Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi* and the "United Savior" motif in East Asian religion. Both reframe salvation in terms of divine self-emptying, resonating deeply with the humility, compassion, and spiritual unity emphasized in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and integrating these into the figure of a universally redeeming savior.

Conclusion

This research offers a fresh perspective on the modern transformations of East Asian religions by integrating Christianity, particularly through the cultural exchanges initiated by Ricci and the Jesuit missionaries. These exchanges illustrate how Eastern and Western cultural concepts intertwine, creating new religious symbols. By examining Maitreya and the Messiah as symbols of future enlightenment and salvation, this research explores how East-West cultural interactions led to a profound reconfiguration of religious identities and a transformation of traditional symbols. This blending of messianic concepts gave rise to distinct expressions of "neo-messianism" in East Asia as new religious movements emerged.

Influenced by Buddhist and Christian eschatology, new religious movements in East Asia have developed new messianic visions. This "neo-messianism" reinterprets Maitreya

and the Messiah by blending Buddhist concepts of samsara with Christian messianic themes. This synthesis reflects a distinct combination of Eastern and Western religious ideas, creating symbols of hope, redemption, and universal harmony in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism. The fusion of Maitreya and the Messiah figure fosters a spiritual inclusivity that bridges Eastern and Western religious thought. It unifies and addresses modern existential concerns, social challenges, and the human desire for a meaningful connection across different religious and cultural boundaries. This integration also reflects a transformative process in which East Asian religions, influenced by early Christian interactions with Jesuit missions, gradually redefined their messianic symbols to resonate with evolving cultural contexts. Through this cross-cultural exchange, traditional symbols such as Maitreya, the Buddhist bodhisattva of the future, began to intertwine with Christian messianic themes.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] "Lord of Heaven" is a title referring to a supreme divine being, most often God in Christian and Judeo-Christian contexts, signifying ultimate authority and sovereignty over the cosmos. It can also refer to deities like Indra in Hinduism or Ông Trời in Vietnamese culture (Dinh 2025, 196), emphasizing their dominion over heavenly realms. The phrase can also be found in historical works by Matteo Ricci, where it is used to explain the concept of God to a Chinese audience (Ricci 1607, 2016).

[2] "The Three Saints Signing the Peace Treaty" was created by artist Le Minh Tong in 1947, depicting the Three Saints of Caodaism, wearing typical costumes with halos on their heads. One wrote the content of the peace treaty in Chinese characters, and the other wrote it in French, with the same content: "Heaven and Earth, Compassion and Justice" (天上天下 博愛公平).

[3] For example, in Daesoon Jinrihoe, the Supreme God Sangje incarnated as Kang Jeungsan (1871-1909), who "did not offer himself as sacrifice when he came on earth but reorganized the world and taught how to apply benevolence to establish the Earthly Paradise" (Rigal-Cellard 2022).

[4] Yiguandao (一貫道), meaning the "Way of Pervading Unity," is a Chinese salvationist religion that blends Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism with elements from other faiths, emphasizing spiritual unity and salvation in a final era, known for its rapid spread from China to Taiwan and globally, despite being banned in mainland China. It's a syncretic faith, combining traditions and offering a path to enlightenment accessible to laypeople, often through home-based practice and communal worship in "Buddha Halls" (佛堂).

[5] The "Five Teachings in Unity" refers to a syncretic belief system that merges the core philosophies and doctrines of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam. This synthesis is most prominently found in East Asian new religious movements, particularly in the Cao Dai religion and Yiguan Dao (Unity Way).

[6] Wusheng Laomu (無生老母), meaning "Unborn Old Mother," is a supreme, genderless divine principle in Chinese salvationist religions like Yiguandao, representing the source of the universe, also called the Infinite Mother (Wujimu).

[7] Cho Hee Sung (조희성 / 曺熙星) was the founder of the South Korean religious movement known as

the Victory Altar (Seungnijedan 승리제단 / 勝利祭壇, also known as Yeongsaeng-gyo 영생교 / 永生教), established in 1981, who proclaimed himself the "Victor Christ and God," a unique Messiah promising biological immortality and universal salvation, blending Christian, Buddhist, and Korean shamanistic beliefs with strong Korean nationalism, though considered a cult by mainstream churches.

[8] The triad of Dipankara Buddha (Green-sun), Gautama Buddha (Red-sun), and Maitreya Buddha (White-sun) represents the Three Sun Periods (三陽) or the Three Eras of Salvation in Chinese eschatological and salvationist traditions, particularly within Yiguandao. This doctrine divides human history and cosmic time into three stages, each of which is presided over by a Buddha sent to guide sentient beings.

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The Rationality of Myth: An Analysis of the Mythology in *The Canonical Scripture* through the Lens of Bronisław Malinowski's Functional Theory of Myth

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Abstract

While Western modernity saw the displacement of a myth-based worldview by reason, Asian cultures followed a different trajectory. There, myth retained the ethical and spiritual dimensions acquired during the Axial Age (800–200 BCE), continuing to serve as a foundational social force. The enduring power of this *mythos* is evident in the emergence of new religious movements (NRMs) in 19th and 20th century Korea and, moreover, it remains significant today, offering a necessary counterweight in a pragmatic world where *logos* alone is often insufficient and where the need for compassion is renewed. This study analyzes the mythology of Daesoon Jinrihoe's *The Canonical Scripture* (*Jeon-gyeong* 典經) through the lens of Bronisław Malinowski's functional theory of myth, demonstrating how it shapes lifestyles, reinforces beliefs, justifies rituals, and codifies social norms.

Keywords: myth; functional theory of myth; Daesoon Jinrihoe's mythology; haewon sangsaeng; chiseong, ethics; ritual practice

Introduction

As European cultures transitioned through the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment into modernity, the ancient concept of *mythos* evolved. More importantly, the worldview grounded in myth was largely displaced by one based on reason. In contrast, Asian cultures retained a vital role for myth, specifically in the sense acquired during the Axial Age (800–200 BCE),[1] defining it not only through ritual but also through values such as individual spirituality, morality, and ethical conduct.

The era of Axial Age was distinguished by the recognition that suffering is an inherent aspect of the human condition. Furthermore, there was an increasing emphasis on the importance of empathy, compassion, and justice. There was also an observable shift in people's tendency to rely on religious experts, with a concurrent effort to seek truth from within. Finally, anthropomorphic images of deities became less significant, and amorphous concept of a higher reality, "unattainable" to human reason, such as the Chinese Dao (道), gained in importance (Armstrong 2021, 95–98). If we look at the emergence of New Religious Movements (NRM) in 19th and 20th century Korea, and analyze their doctrine and mythology, it becomes evident that this *mythos* from the Axial Axe was not only still present but also gained a new significance at the time. Moreover, this continues today, and some of the Korean NRM that emerged in 20th century, such as Daesoon Jinrihoe (大巡眞理會, The Fellowship of Daesoon Truth),[2] can serve as good example for this continuity of the *mythos* from the Axial Age in today's world.

As Karen Armstrong (2021, 156) has pointed out, we are living in a pragmatic and rational world where *logos* is not always effective, mostly because it is incapable of addressing profoundly entrenched, unrestrained fears, desires, and neuroses – this is the task of spiritually and ethically oriented mythology. Myth, as a way of thinking and practicing helps us to face the prospect of destruction, death and nothingness and, to some extent, to accept it (Armstrong 2021, 152). Consequently, its continued necessity is evident. In this sense, the *mythos* of the Axial Age offers a compelling framework for addressing contemporary global issues and challenges, particularly within the context of human conditions, but not limited to it. This type of mythology posits the notion that the cultivation of altruism and the recognition of empathy and compassion for others are of great significance. Such principles are elucidated in the teachings of Daesoon Jinrihoe.

This study will analyze the mythology of Daesoon Jinrihoe's *The Canonical Scripture* (*Jeon-gyeong* 典經) through the lens of Bronisław Malinowski's functional theory of myth, demonstrating how mythology present in the religious doctrine shapes the way of life, reinforces beliefs, justifies rituals, and embodies social norms and moral principles.

Bronisław Malinowski's Functional Theory of Myth

Although many prominent anthropologists, such as James Frazer (1854–1941), Andrew Lang (1844–1912), Franz Boas (1858–1942), and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), contributed significantly to the study of myth, it was the Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942)—the founder of the study method known as "participant observation" – whose functional theory of myth helped shift the scholarly focus from the 19th century preoccupation with the origins of myth to a more practical concern with its functions within living societies (Dundes 1984, 194). Malinowski conducted his participant observation and research on mythology among the indigenous cultures of Melanesia, publishing his findings in numerous scholarly articles and books. His major contribution to the theory of myth was first presented as a series of lectures at the University of Liverpool in November 1925, later published as an essay in *Psyche* in April 1926 (Dundes 1984, 194), and subsequently released in London the same year as the book *Myth in Primitive Psychology*.

The central premise of Malinowski's cultural studies is the conception of culture as an "integrated whole," understood as "a complex of means of production, as well as means of consumptions, the rules of interpersonal interactions and the common social practices like reproduction of ideas, beliefs and customs" (Siedin 2021, 168). Malinowski further argues that culture emerges primarily from the fundamental biological needs of humans, such as nutrition, shelter, reproduction, health, and safety. To meet these needs, an "artificial environment"– which he identifies as culture – must be created. Moreover, the processes involved in satisfying these needs constitute the driving force of cultural change, initiating the assimilation of historical innovations. He also links cultural diversity to the specific regional conditions in which these needs are addressed (Siedin 2021, 168–169). From a functionalist perspective, however, a key consideration for this research is that mythology, alongside science, performs analogous functions by addressing the fundamental biological and social needs of human beings, and is, as a result, necessary. In the first chapter of *Myth in Primitive Psychology* Malinowski writes:

> Myth as it exists in a savage community, that is, in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. This myth is to the savage what, to a fully believing Christian, is the Biblical story of Creation, of the Fall, of the Redemption by Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross. As our sacred story lives in our ritual, in our morality, as it governs our faith and controls our conduct, even so does his myth for the savage. (Malinowski 1926, 21).

Then he continues:

> Studied alive, myth, [...] is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject-matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertion, even practical requirements. Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function: it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of a man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom. (Malinowski 1926, 23).

It is therefore essential to approach myth not as a static narrative preserved in textual form, but as a living reality – an integral component of every culture that shapes human ways of life, not solely the "primitives," as Malinowski terms them. The functionality of myth is manifested in its role across social, ritual, and ethical domains; consequently, the study of myth must focus on the specific ways in which societies utilize it to maintain cultural cohesion, regulate social relations, and reproduce collective values and beliefs. Although myths often refer to remote past and distinct historical contexts, the values they convey – such as social norms and moral principles – continue to underpin many cultures even nowadays, reinforcing traditions and shaping collective beliefs. Malinowski underscores this perspective at the conclusion of his work, noting that:

> Myth as a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present-day life and as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief. It is, therefore, neither a mere narrative, nor a form of science, nor a branch of art or history, nor an explanatory tale. It fulfils a function *sui generis* closely connected with the nature of tradition, with the continuity of culture, with the relation between age and youth, and with the human attitude towards the past. The function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events. (Malinowski 1926, 124–125).

From the perspective of structural anthropology, as articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) in *The Savage Mind*, myth-makers operate as "bricoleurs." In this sense, rather than inventing entirely new narratives, they draw upon pre-existing motifs and, through their recombination, construct myths that are based on "reconstructed sets of events." Wendy Doniger (1998, 138) builds on this idea, observing that "cross-cultural themes of myth [...] can only be changed within the rules of the game – which often means inverting given patterns or breaking dichotomies down into continuums, rather than

creating new patterns with entirely different structures. Myth-makers know this, which is why all of them are bricoleurs rather than patented inventors." This structural interpretation, however, does not necessarily stand in opposition to Malinowski's theory. While myth-makers frequently borrow motifs and reconstruct them according to specific cultural needs, their aim, which is the rationalization of experience and the fulfillment of social and psychological needs, remains the same. In this way, myths continue to reinforce collective belief systems and ritual practices, which is also visible in other religious traditions of Korean people, like shamanism.[3]

To conclude, mythology for centuries functioned as a rational means of exploring the world, explaining social structures, moral behavior, and systems of belief. Although each historical era has generated its own myths, these narratives consistently emerged as responses to the particular needs of their time and society – "a constant by-product of living faith, which is in need of miracles; of sociological status, which demands precedent; of moral rule, which requires sanction" (Malinowski 1926, 125). As the following chapter will demonstrate, this is also evident in the mythology of Daesoon Jinrihoe.

Drawing Inspiration from the Past

For a religion to attract adherents, it must provide more than a compelling and persuasive solution to a significant existential problem. It must also present an object of ultimate concern – whether conceived as an anthropomorphic deity, an ultimate reality, or another transcendent principle – and articulate a moral framework that guides followers in cultivating virtuous lives (Baker 2016, 2). As noted in the introduction to this study, belief systems that emerged during the Axial Age, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, placed particular emphasis on morality, offering distinct sets of principles to enable individuals to live ethically. Daesoon Jinrihoe continues this tradition of moral cultivation, yet it distinguishes itself by grounding ethics in the specific incarnation of the Supreme God, Sangje (上帝). Central to Daesoon Jinrihoe's soteriology is the belief that Sangje incarnated into human history in 19th century Korea as Kang Il-sun (姜一淳; 1871–1909), best known by his honorific name, Jeungsan (甑山). In this sense, he is not merely a sage but the supreme object of faith and the focal point of worship within Daesoon Jinrihoe.

For his followers, Sangje is not only the source of moral instruction in daily life but also the embodiment of moral perfection itself. As Donald Baker (2016, 4) has pointed out, Daesoon Thought (*Daesoon sasang* 大巡思想) integrates ethical practice with devotion to a divine exemplar: "Daesoon philosophy combines traditional anthropocentrism and traditional anthropomorphism to create a new form of spirituality, one that is focused not just on God or just human beings but on both, recognizing the power of God but also recognizing the power of human beings to better themselves through their own efforts". In this respect, Sangje – and, by extension, his earthly life as

Kang Jeungsan – serves as a mythic paradigm of proper moral conduct. Moreover, *The Canonical Scripture* frequently depicts Sangje drawing upon diverse mythological narratives to elucidate his teachings, particularly those concerning the cultivation of a moral life.

Among the four tenets of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the third – known as "The Resolution of Grievances for Mutual Beneficence" (***haewon sangsaeng*** 解寃相生) – is regarded to be the most important. This is because it emphasizes a system of mutual reciprocation through the resolution of conflicts, grudges, and grievances in the human and spiritual realms. By promoting reconciliation and harmony, both human and divine beings are able to communicate and cooperate, thereby attaining mutual benefit. Ultimately, this process culminates in the realization of the Dao within the world – a transformation of the present world into an earthly paradise of the Later World (***hucheon*** 後天), which in Daesoon Thought corresponds to the last of four tenets, referred to as the "Perfected State of Unification with the Dao" (***dotong jingyeong*** 道通眞境). In *The Canonical Scripture* (Daesoon Institute of Religion and Culture 2020a) we read:

> One day in the seventh month, Sangje remarked, "Through this Reordering Work, I will resolve the grievances that have accumulated since time immemorial. I will remove all inauspiciousness resulting from grievances and thereby enable the realization of eternal peace. The grievance of Danzhu, the son of Yao, lies in the beginning of human history and marks the first chapter of the history of grievances. If that grievance is resolved, all subsequent grievances accumulated throughout history can gain eligibility for resolution. This is like leading the head to make the body follow. Yao deemed Danzhu unworthy and gave his two daughters to Shun and abdicated the throne to him. This caused Danzhu to form a grievance, which, in turn, caused Shun to die at a river near Cangwu County, and Yao's two daughters (wives of Shun) drowned themselves in Xiaoxiang River. This was the root grievance that entangled the world continually, generation after generation and caused Heaven and Earth to overflow with grievances and reach the brink of near disaster. Consequently, as I endeavor to rescue humanity from this state of destruction, I must undergo this Reordering Work of Grievance Resolution" (*Reordering Works* 3:4).

According to the teachings of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the origins of all grudges and grievances, as recorded in the history, can be traced back to the era of ancient Chinese dynasties and the time of the first legendary rulers. Within this narrative, the rivalry between the successors of the legendary Emperor Yao (堯; 2356?–2255? BC) – namely Shun (舜; 2294?–2184? BC) and Danzhu (丹朱; 2356?–2255? BC) – is understood to have given rise to the earliest recorded grudges and resentments. These initial hostilities are believed to have generated conflicts that accumulated and intensified over the centuries, eventually leading the world into a state of chaos. This narrative not only

functions as a mythological account of the beginning of accumulation of grievances and disorder but also carries a broader moral, social and religious significance.

The narrative of Yao and Shun was canonized in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記), composed by Sima Qian (司馬遷, 145–86 BC), who integrated both written sources and oral traditions in the compilation of his historical records. Among his principal sources was likely the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), one of the earliest extant texts of Chinese historiography (You 2019, 122). The myth of Yao and Shun underscores the centrality of virtuous conduct in accordance with Confucian moral principles. In this sense it conveys one of the ultimate truths of moral order: those who live ethically are ultimately rewarded, whereas those who act immorally inevitably face punishment. By invoking this tradition, Sangje Kang Jeungsan is not only introduced as someone who instruct his followers in proper moral behavior but also as someone among the ranks of the great sages – comparable to those of the Axial Age, like Confucius or Buddha – who also frequently drew upon mythic precedents to convey and contextualize new doctrine (Armstrong 2021, 108), which eventually started to serve as a basis for newly created religious and moral systems and social structures.

As Karen Armstrong (2021, 104–105) has observed, the sages of the Axial Age maintained that a myth reveals its full significance only when it leads to the cultivation and practice of virtue in everyday life. Without ethical conduct and moral transformation, myth remains a mere abstraction, detached from lived experience. Myth, therefore, should not be regarded merely as a source of supplementary information or commentary; rather, it serves as "a warrant, a charter, and often a practical guide" (Malinowski 1926, 38) for human activity and moral orientation. This functional perspective is vividly realized in Daesoon Jinrihoe's doctrine.

In *The Canonical Scripture* Sangje often invokes moral principles according to which his followers should live in order to achieve the previously mentioned paradise of Later World. For example, in the chapter "Dharma 2," we find a reference to grievance and grudges, which became the basis for the third out of five precepts[4] of Daesoon Jinrihoe that all of its believers should follow in their life:

> There is a saying that "*mu-cheok jal sanda* (one lives very well)," which can also be interpreted as people can live happily only without *cheok* (grudge). Do not provoke grievances from others, or those grievances will turn into a *cheok* that will come back to you. Furthermore, do not hate others. Even if that hatred is not consciously known, their spirits will notice it first and return it back upon you as a *cheok*[5] (*Dharma* 2:44).

Other narratives, such as the one found in the chapter "Acts 4" of *The Canonical Scripture*, emphasize that only through devoted service to Sangje and adherence to his moral teachings can individuals participate in, and ultimately experience, his second coming.

> One day in the fall of that year, Sangje said to Ahn Nae-Seong, "Put your efforts into farming diligently. Externally, do not neglect to serve in the Reordering Works, and internally, you shall hold a memorial rite for your ancestors with sincerity, serve your parents with respect, and raise your children with care. Then, wait for Me to return" (*Acts* 4:44).

A virtue of sincerity[6] directed both toward Sangje and toward other beings is a recurring theme throughout *The Canonical Scripture*. Among the various narratives, the one presented in the chapter "Prophetic Elucidations" particularly underscores the reward bestowed upon those who faithfully embody this virtue:

> Sangje said, "Take a look at the example of how a man who had worked as a servant for ten years to attain the arts of immortality was elevated to Heaven due to his sincerity. The man tried to find a teacher in order to learn the arts of immortality, and in the end, he found one. The teacher asked him to show his sincerity first before teaching him. The man worked his fingers to the bone farming the teacher´s field for ten years. In the end, the teacher took the servant to a pond and said, 'Climb up the willow branch extending onto the water and then jump into the water, and you will become well-versed with the arts.' The servant trusted him and climbed up the tree branch to jump into the water. At that moment, auspicious, colorful clouds gathered as celestial music sounded, and a splendid palanquin took him up to Heaven" (*Prophetic Elucidations* 83).

All of the aforementioned narratives clearly articulate the moral principles that guide the daily lives of Daesoon followers. Moreover, by invoking the distant mythical past and the supernatural realm, these narratives lend authority and legitimacy to the moral values they convey, thereby reinforcing the continuity and strength of the tradition. However, the narrative of Yao and Shun further also implies that, throughout history, none of the major East Asian traditions present in Korea – whether Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, or shamanism – have offered a comprehensive solution to humanity's fundamental problems. Within Daesoon Thought, it is Sangje who transcends all other deities, sages, and their teachings, assuming the role of ultimate guide and instructor in the restoration of cosmic order – a status clearly illustrated by the following narratives:

> When Sangje stayed in the Ninth Heaven, divine sages, buddhas, and bodhisattvas gathered and petitioned Sangje, the Supreme God of the Ninth Heaven, that Heaven and Earth in this state of calamities cannot be rectified by anyone other than Sangje. Thus, Sangje descended to the Tower of Heavenly Revelation in the Kingdom of the Great Law (Daebeopguk 大法國) in the West, and examined the

> Three Realms. He went on the Great Itineration (Daesoon 大巡) throughout the whole world and at last He reached this land in the East. And for 30 years, He spiritually entered the golden icon of Maitreya at Golden Mountain Temple (Geumsan-sa) of the Mount Mother (Moak-san). He caused Choi Suwun (Choe Je-u) to establish the great Dao by giving him the heavenly mandate and power of divine law. However, in the Gapja Year (1864), He withdrew the mandate and the power and decided to descend into the world Himself in the Shinmi Year (1871) (*Prophetic Elucidations* 1).[7]

> Sangje said to Kim Hyeong-Ryeol, "In the Former World, as all creations were ruled by the principle of mutual contention (*sanggeuk* 相克), grievances and grudges have been accumulating, condensing, and filling up the Three Realms. Heaven and Earth, losing the constant Dao, are overwhelmed with all kinds of disasters and calamities, and the world has fallen into wretchedness. To save all the people in the world, I will resolve the grievances and grudges accumulated from time immemorial by recalibrating the Degree Number of Heaven and Erath, harmonizing divine beings, and establishing the Later World's paradisical land of immortals which will be based on the principle of mutual beneficence (*sangsaeng* 相生). The grievances must be resolved by the Dao of gods in every small and large matter. If first I solidify and harmonize Degree Numbers, then human affairs shall naturally unfold in accordance with that action. This is indeed the Reordering Works of the Three Realms" (*Reordering Works* 1:3).

Sangje is believed to have descended to the human realm to deliver humanity from its profound misery by undertaking the monumental task of the Reordering Works of Heaven and Earth (*cheonji gongsa* 天地公事). This process, rooted in the resolution of grievances, is destined to culminate in the establishment of an earthly paradise. It is, therefore, no coincidence that this soteriological event is situated within a specific historical moment – the chaotic twilight of the Joseon Dynasty.

The end of 19th and beginning of 20th century in Korea was a period of acute crisis, marked by internal corruption, social decay, and the aggressive geopolitical intrusion of Western superpowers and imperial Japan, creating a desperate social climate in which people longed for salvation. It was also a time when traditional belief systems and "old ideas" no longer sufficed to address the sociological and psychological needs of many individuals.[8] Consequently, there emerged a demand for new mythologies, along with new cultural heroes and supernatural figures capable of fulfilling those needs. Within this historical and cultural context, new living myths were created and subsequently transmitted through both doctrinal teachings, moral conduct and the main focus of the next chapter, ritual practices.

Reinterpreting the Ritual

Another expression of sincerity and veneration toward Sangje, as well as other deities and ancestral spirits, are sacrificial rituals dedicated to them, such as *chiseong* (致誠)[9] and *jesa* (祭祀). Ancestor worship has a very long tradition in Korea, and long before the introduction of Confucianism to the country, it played a very important role in the religious life of the people of the peninsula. However, it was during the Joseon Dynasty (朝鮮, 1392–1910), which adopted Neo-Confucianism as its state ideology,[10] that based on Zhu Xi's (朱熹, 1130–1200) *Family Rites* (*Jiali* 家禮), rituals honoring ancestors became one of the foundations of the social order. This order was conceptualized as a family and governed by principles of propriety. Today, ancestral rites continue to play a vital role in Korean society.

Traditionally, various types of ancestral rites were practiced in Korea. In the old times some of them were performed not only for the deceased ancestors, but according to Confucian teachings also to the highest god – Heaven. Nowadays, some are held to commemorate deceased family members on their death anniversaries, known as *gijesa* (忌祭祀), while others, such as *jeolsa* (節祀), also referred to as *charye* (茶禮), are seasonal rites observed according to the agricultural calendar or traditional holidays. Although these rites may differ slightly in terms of their ritual sequence, the offerings presented, and whether a pre-composed ritual text addressed to the ancestor is recited, they all share a common feature: the consumption of the ritual food at the conclusion of the ceremony, a practice known as *eumbok* (飮福) (Sin 2010).

In accordance with Confucian tradition, Koreans consume the ritual food which has been sanctified by their ancestors at the conclusion of the ceremony, thereby symbolically internalizing the ancestors' blessings. Later, sacrificial food is also shared with other family members and, in smaller villages, with neighbors, reinforcing social bonds and communal participation in the ritual (Sin 2010). However, one of the stories in *The Canonical Scripture,* which refers to ancestral rituals, teaches a different order for the consumption of ritual foods:

> Sangje redefined for His disciples the seasonal rituals for ancestors. On a seasonal holiday, the following event occurred: Kim Hyeong-Ryeol prepared for his ancestral ritual. Following Sangje's order, he brought Him the food for the ritual. Sangje shared it with many disciples and said, "This is none other than a seasonal ancestral ritual." And Cha Gyeong-Seok, who prepared for his father's memorial ritual, also shared food with His disciples. Sangje explained to the disciples, "This is an ancestral ritual." From then, Hyeong-Ryeol and Gyeong-Seok offered Sangje food at every seasonal holiday and ancestral ritual (*Progress of the Order* 1:45).

This account clearly demonstrates that Sangje and his disciples did not adhere to the traditional sequence of ancestral rituals, consuming the offering food even before the

ceremony had commenced. Sangje further instructed his disciples that henceforth they should conduct the ancestral rites in this manner. According to the narrative, this practice ultimately resulted in a situation in which ceremonial food was offered to Sangje during every seasonal festival and ancestral rite. As Sin Seongmi (2010) has noted, this is because, within Daesoon Thought, Sangje is understood as "the Heaven" – the supreme deity above all others and the creator – for whom, in the Confucian tradition, the *jesa* ritual was originally conducted. In this regard, he is to be presented with ceremonial offerings prior to all other spirits. The narrative thus functions not merely as a justification for the associated ritual practice, but also as a reaffirmation of the doctrinal belief in Kang Jeungsan as the incarnate manifestation of the supreme heavenly deity, Sangje, who transcends all other divine beings. This narrative further relates to another story cited below, which may be interpreted as a mythological foundation for one of the most significant sacrificial rituals in the Daesoon Jinrihoe tradition, known as *chiseong*.

> While Sangje was staying at Cha Gyeong-Seok's house, the disciples came to have an audience with Him. At this place, Sangje drew the shape of a person on an entire sheet of paper, posted it on the wall, and located the offerings as if He had performed an ancestral rite. Sangje ordered them, "Bow deeply four times towards the picture, while moving as though you are grasping the authority of Heaven and receiving the energy of earth. While doing so, pray in your heart that your wishes may be granted." After the disciples did as Sangje had ordered, He stood in the front of the offerings and concluded the ceremony. He then asked, "To whom did you pray regarding your wishes?" One of the disciples replied, "I prayed to You inwardly." Sangje said with a smile, "I received a memorial ritual while alive. It shall be influential from now on. The mats made of cotton wool grass among the mats here are clean" (*Progress of the Order* 1:37).

This myth recounts the story of Sangje and his disciples performing an ancestral offering before a sheet of paper bearing a portrait drawn by Sangje himself. Of particular significance, however, is the form of prayer that Sangje instructed his disciples to carry out. The type of obeisance depicted in the aforementioned story – in which practitioners symbolically grasp the authority of Heaven from above and receive the vital energy of Earth from below (*sangakcheongwon haseupjigi* 上握天權 下襲地氣) while bowing to the deity – corresponds, within the Daesoon tradition, to a form of ritual prostration known as *beopbae* (法拜). In contemporary practice, this type of obeisance is performed by Daesoon adherents exclusively toward the Supreme Deity, Sangje, during temple prayers or the *chiseong* sacrificial rites[11] (Pak 2020).

As Gernot Prunner (1976, 18) has noted, *beopbae* symbolically embodies the doctrine of Daesoon Jinrihoe through the movements of the human body, in which the unification (*dotong* 道通) of the three fundamental principles – Heaven, Earth, and Humanity – is realized.[12] From the perspective of the present study, however, what is more significant

is that Sangje not only instructed his disciples in the "proper" manner of performing sacrificial offerings to Heaven and to the ancestors, but also imparted the most essential form of ritual obeisance, namely *beopbae* (Pak 2020). This, in turn, not only legitimizes the ritual practice itself but also reinforces the belief that its origin lies in a transcendent or divine authority.

A historical event cannot serve as a source of religious inspiration until it has been mythologized. A myth, by its very nature, cannot remain a singular occurrence; it must be liberated from its original temporal context and integrated into the lived experience of contemporary believers in order to sustain its influence (Armstrong 2021, 123–124). In the case of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the historical event was brought to life with the *chiseong* ritual,[13] and became a "living reality" that is ever-present in the lives of Daesoon Jinrihoe believers.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how both ancient and more recent myths may be invoked and employed by Korean religious practitioners, in this case the followers of Daesoon Jinrihoe, to convey enduring moral principles that continue to shape human ethical life today. At the same time, it has illustrated how these mythological narratives can be instrumental in the creation, transmission, and articulation of new ideas, particularly when they are connected not only to the distant past but also to supernatural events or beings, thereby strengthening the religious tradition and enhancing their persuasive power.

Through the analytical framework of Bronisław Malinowski's functional theory of myth, the mythology found in *The Canonical Scripture* reveals itself as a "living reality" that not only preserves traditional values but also fulfills practical and moral functions within the Daesoon community. Myth, in this context, serves as a dynamic force that guides ethical conduct, legitimizes ritual practice, and sustains the cohesion of the religious and moral order. The teachings of Sangje – embodied in the narratives of grievance resolution, sincerity, and moral cultivation – operate as pragmatic charters for everyday life, exemplifying how myth fulfills a social and psychological necessity rather than existing as mere symbolic narrative.

Furthermore, the reinterpretation of traditional rituals such as *jesa* and *chiseong* underscores how Daesoon Jinrihoe reconfigures established cultural forms to articulate a renewed spiritual vision of ancestral worship. By situating these rituals within a mythological framework that centers on Sangje as the supreme deity, the movement revitalizes ancestral customs while infusing them with new theological meaning. In this way, historical events are mythologized and integrated into lived religious practice, transforming myth into an experiential and enduring dimension of faith.

In sum, *The Canonical Scripture* exemplifies how myth functions as a rational

instrument within religious life – a means of explaining human experience, moral order, and cosmic harmony. Daesoon Jinrihoe's mythology demonstrates continuity with the ethical and spiritual ideals of the Axial Age while adapting them to modern contexts, offering followers not only metaphysical insight but also moral orientation and social cohesion. Thus, myth in Daesoon Thought is neither irrational nor obsolete; rather, it represents a rational, functional, and indispensable element of human culture, bridging the ancient and the contemporary in the continual quest for meaning, virtue, and order in the world.

Conflict of Interest

Dominik Rutana has been a member of Editorial Board since July 2024 but had no role in the decision to publish this article. No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article

Notes

[1] The term "Axial Age" was first proposed by a German philosopher Karl Jaspers in his book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte (The Origin and Goal of History)* published in 1949. According to Jaspers, the period between the 8th and 3rd centuries BC proved to be a turning point in the spiritual development of humanity. The transformations that occurred during the Axial Age exerted a profound influence on the evolution of religion, shaping it into the form we recognize today. It was also the time in which some of the most prominent religious and philosophical systems of Asia – Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, as well as monotheism in the Middle East, and Greek rationalism – emerged. See, Jaspers (1965).

[2] Daesoon Jinrihoe was officially established in 1969 by Wudang Park Hangyeong (牛堂 朴漢慶; 1917–1996).

[3] See Kim (2012), Rutana (2021), Walraven (2002).

[4] The five precepts are: 1. Do not deceive yourself, 2. Practice virtuous speech, 3. Do not provoke *cheok*, 4. Do not disregard the beneficence bestowed upon you, 5. Promote the betterment of others (Daesoon Institute of Religion and Culture 2020b, 37–39).

[5] Traditionally, Korean people believed that if a person died while harboring a deep grudge or unresolved grievance (*wonhan* 怨恨) toward the living, their spirit would not depart peacefully. Instead, they transform into vengeful, wandering ghosts. Because they are unable to cross over to the otherworld, they remain trapped in the earthly realm and inflict misfortune and disaster upon the living, including their own relatives.

[6] Sincerity is one of the "Three Fundamental Attitudes" in Daesoon Thought. The other two are respectfulness and faithfulness (Daesoon Institute of Religion and Culture 2020b, 30-31).

[7] Another version of the narrative, recorded in *The Canonical Scripture*, chapter *Progress of the Order* 1:9, emphasizes the rationale for Sangje's withdrawal of "the mandate" from Choe Je-u (崔濟愚, 1824-1864) – a religious leader and a founder of Eastern Learning (*Donghak* 東學). According to this account, Choe's limitation lay in his inability to transcend the framework of Confucianism and to convey the "true meaning of the Great Dao."

[8] As Lee Gyungwon has already pointed out: "The dominant religions of the late Joseon period could not satisfy the basic religious need of the Korean masses or give sufficient meaning to peoples' live at the

time. The traditional religions of late Joseon were not prepared to digest and respond to the sunned cultural shock, the mature social consciousness of the Korean masses, and the people's desire to actively engage in a changing world." (Lee 2016, 160-161).

[9] Choe Gil-seong (n.d) defines *chiseong* as the ritual act of offering earnest prayer and sincerity toward a specific object of worship.

[10] Scholars of the Joseon period, influenced by the concept of the "Confucian transformation of Korea" presented by Martina Deuchler in her book in 1992, titled *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*, long adhered to the view that the Joseon society had undergone a total transformation under the Neo-Confucian state ideology. Since then, this concept has been widely adopted, particularly within Korean studies in the West. However, in her 2007 article "Is 'Confucianization of Korea' a valid concept of analysis?", Deuchler herself criticized the concept as unambiguous, self-evident fact. Through continued research, she reached the conclusion that Joseon society cannot be viewed as a completely "Confucianized". She argued that such a notion is incorrect, particularly when viewed from the dimension of the relationship between Confucian thought, society, and rituals. In other words, the changes that occurred at that time cannot be seen as having taken place solely in order to put into practice Confucian ideology. Furthermore, regarding certain changes, their causes also cannot be attributed simply to this ideology. According to Deuchler, there were other practical aspects to the social changes occurring at the time, and these must be taken into consideration. See Deuchler 2007. Regarding this point, Walraven, who studied the role of popular religion in Joseon's Confucian society, argued that among the reasons Neo-Confucian scholars rejected many aspects of Korean traditional culture, i.e., *musok* (shamanism) and *mudang* (shamans), practical aspects such as the proper order of society, the maintenance of social hierarchy, and ritual obligations according to social class were paramount (Walraven 1999, 170).

[11] For the full description of *chiseong* ritual in English, see Prunner 1976.

[12] "Thus, unification of the three separate principles heaven, earth and man is symbolically achieved in the Pŏpbae by rising both hands towards heaven as if pulling it down, then lowering them to the ground as if picking up earth and, finally, uniting them in front of one's chest as if taking possession of the powers of heaven and earth for man which, incidentally, is the essential meaning of tot'ong." (Prunner 1976, 18).

[13] The ritual itself was systematized by Doju Jo Cheolje (道主 趙哲濟; 1895–1958).

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Language and Identity Construction in Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity and the Korean Daesoon Jinrihoe Religious Movement

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Abstract

Language plays a crucial role in constructing institutional and collective identities and it is central to the negotiation of identity especially in religious communities. Nigeria has a massive presence of several mega Pentecostal churches dotting the landscape of both rural and urban cities. Additionally, in Asia, Korea has had quite a number of new religious movements out of which the Daesoon Jinrihoe movement, so named in 1969, has emerged as the prominent NRM. In Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity, leaders of churches use distinctive linguistic expressions and statements that function as identity markers, shaping not only how congregations perceive themselves but also how outsiders recognize each denomination. This paper examines the linguistic construction of identity in selected Pentecostal churches with large membership in Nigeria and the Korean Daesoon Jinrihoe religious movement. Using Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) *sociocultural linguistic framework,* it highlights the idiolects and sociolects associated with the leaders of the religious groups, judging from popular statements often said by them and quotes from their teachings available on their websites. The study adopts a linguistic ethnographic methodology, particularly participant and non-participant observation, to harvest the lexicons and statements that have constructed an identity for the selected churches. It also conducts unstructured interviews with some leaders and members of the religious groups to generate critical data about spiritual leadership and how the leaders' statements shape the negotiation of identities within its membership. It concludes that these linguistic identities are emergent, interactional, and intersubjective, reinforcing each religious movement's theological orientation and communal ethos.

Keywords: Identity construction; linguistic identity; Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity; Daesoon Jinrihoe movement; idiolect and sociolects; identity markers

Introduction

The role of language goes beyond communication as it is very important in identity construction and reconstruction. Language shapes how people perceive themselves and can therefore be said to be a form of identity in itself (Olodude 2024). Nigeria, being a very religious country, has a massive presence of several mega Pentecostal and traditional churches dotting the landscape of both rural and urban cities. The country is said to have the largest Christian population in Africa with more than 80 million Christians belonging to different denominations (Olaleye 2021). Ogunbade highlighted some of the factors responsible for the proliferation of churches in Nigeria. The study asserts that while some of the churches were established out of the genuine need for rapid evangelization and spiritual nourishment of the members, quite a number of them were established for commercial purposes to enrich the founders of the churches (Ogunbade 2020). On the average, almost every street in Southern Nigeria can boast of at least one church. For instance, the Redeemed Christian Church of God has a vision to plant at least one church in every five-minutes walking distance in every developing country, including Nigeria. This has therefore resulted in a large presence of the denomination in different parts of the country. The incredible growth of Nigeria's Pentecostal Christianity has also led to a struggle for survival and competition for membership, resulting in creativity and innovation which indirectly constructs identity for the churches. There are quite a number of new religious movements (NRM) in Korea out of which the Daesoon Jinrihoe movement, so named in 1969, has emerged as the prominent NRM. The religion which is Asia-centric is seen as the largest indigenous Korean religion, amalgamating essential religious elements of movements such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Shamanism and Chinese lore (Alam 2024).

This article examines the linguistic construction of identity in selected Pentecostal churches with large membership in Nigeria as well as the Daesoon Jinrihoe religious movement in Korea. It highlights the idiolects and sociolects associated with the leaders of the religious movements, judging from popular statements often said by them, which serve as identity markers for these churches. This is because language plays a crucial role in constructing institutional and collective identities and it is central to the negotiation of identity especially in religious communities. In Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity, leaders of churches use distinctive linguistic expressions and statements that function as identity markers, shaping not only how congregations perceive themselves but also how outsiders recognize each denomination. Ritualized statements, idiolects, greetings, declarative slogans, lexical innovations, and prayer formulas are more than rhetorical devices; they are performative acts (Austin 1962; Butler 1997) that reinforce theology, authority, and communal belonging. These statements are symbolic practices that solidify the theological orientation, spiritual authority, and communal ethos of each denomination. This article analyses the linguistic practices of four selected Nigerian churches—Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Deeper Life Bible Church

(DLBC), Dunamis International Gospel Centre, and Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM)—with attention to how their leaders' statements construct distinct identities. It also explores statements from the leaders of the Daesoon Jinrihoe religious movement in Korea.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study adopts an ethnographic methodology, particularly participant and non-participant observation to harvest the lexicons and statements that have constructed an identity for the selected churches. Data were obtained by listening to the sermons of the leaders of the churches available on their website. Information about the churches, including their aims, vision and mission statements are all available in the public domain on their websites. The researcher also visited some of the church locations in Nigeria over a seven-month period between January and July 2024, and participated in their services to gather information on how these symbolic statements reinforce communal belonging and construct distinct identities. The researcher also conducted unstructured interviews with some leaders and members of the selected churches to generate critical data about spiritual leadership in the selected churches and how the leaders' statements shape the negotiation of identities within the church membership. Furthermore, several commonly expressed statements and phrases frequently used by leaders and official teachings within the Daesoon Jinrihoe religious movement in Korea were drawn directly from the movement's doctrinal materials including the canonical scripture and museum sources available on their website (eng.daesoon.org), reflecting how its leaders communicate core principles and inspirational guidance to members of the movement.

The article also draws insights from Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic framework, which notes that identity is not fixed but constructed through interactional practices, including ritualized expressions and repeated linguistic patterns which end up as forms of the individual's idiolect or the group's sociolect.

Olodude (2021) notes that the use of language differs in style from person to person and from group to group, hence, the existence of language varieties among individuals and social groups. Certain individuals chose to speak in certain way different from others all in a bid to carve out a unique identity for themselves. The peculiar language use or style of an individual referred to as idiolect serves as a marker of identity for the individual, while at the societal level, the peculiar language use of a social group is referred to as sociolect or sociolectal variations. This is the peculiar language style of a social group which only in-group members understand among themselves. The sociolect of a social group serves as a very important identity marker for the group and makes them distinct from other groups, with respect to language use and style (Edwards 2009, 19–22). This study notes that the sociolect of the leaders of the selected churches falls under the third sociolectal purpose identified by Grabias, which is expressiveness. The use of the popular phrases and words serve the purpose of group identity expression for

the churches.

Language and Identity

Edwards traces the derivation history of the word Identity. According to him, the word was derived from the Latin word "idem" which means, the "sameness of an individual at all times or in all circumstances…the fact that a person is oneself and not someone else" (Edwards 2009). Identity therefore seems to be what makes an individual unique. Individuals have features and characteristics that distinguish them from others.

Chew opines that "identity is used as an umbrella term to describe a person's expression of their individuality or affiliation to a group. Some identities are individual while others are more expressive of social or group membership" (Chew 2014, 51). Identity is who people are, how they see themselves, and the group they identify with. Identity seems to be dynamic and could be multifaceted, hence the tendency for people to possess multiple identities. Dorian puts it this way that people "will redefine themselves when circumstances make it desirable or when circumstances force it on them" (Dorian 1999, 25). In other words, since we belong to different social groups, people tend to take on different identities by associating with different social groups, as the situation demands.

Bichani (2015) goes further to identify four types of "identity" as follows:

1) Personal identity: Every individual has features that distinguish him or her from any other person. These features could be biological, physical, psychological, and so on. It may be gender, complexion, attributes, beliefs, education, etc. which differentiates an individual from the other.
2) Social identity: This is the collective identity of a social group. People come together to form social groups and usually have some features, attributes and characteristics in common that bind them together. They usually have a sense of belonging to the group.
3) Ethnic identity: Padilla (1999, 115) defines ethnic identity as an "individual's membership in a social group that shares a common ancestral heritage", while Norton (2006, 2) defines it as "the relationship between an individual and other members of a particular ethnic group… who are considered to share a common history, a common language…" Joseph (2004) sees ethnic identity as focusing more on "shared common descent, cultural heritage and political aspirations for autonomy" (cited in Garri and Mugaddam 2015). From these definitions, members of the same ethnic group share things in common. Usually, they have the same history, cultural background, and ancestral heritage and have a common language for communication. The people of Ile-Ife, for instance, would be seen as an ethnic group, based on the above, and share the same ethnic identity.

4) Religious Identity: This is when people identify themselves with their faith or religious beliefs, rather than their membership of any other social group. For instance, a devoted Hausa Muslim in Ile-Ife could prefer to rather introduce himself first as a Muslim and value his faith above his ethnic identity of being a Hausa indigene.

Bichani (2015) omitted one major type of identity in her classification which is linguistic identity. The role of language goes beyond communication as it plays a very important role in identity construction and reconstruction. Language shapes how people perceive themselves and can therefore be said to be a form of identity in itself. It is quite obvious that individuals do not exist alone, in line with the popular saying that "no man is an island". Individuals are attached to different groups which could be social, professional, ethnic and religious. It is this attachment that leads to the "us" versus "them" syndrome. We often delineate boundaries, and once these boundaries are delineated, the concept of in-group allegiance and favouritism comes in. This is in line with the main findings of the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1979). It was this theory that later metamorphosed into the Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory on which this study is based. Language has often been seen as a medium of communication. The reality, however, is that language is far more than that. Certain languages are tied to certain social groups and in fact such languages are oftentimes the markers of such identities.

Chomsky differentiates between "competence" and "performance" (Chomsky 1965, 3). According to him, modern theories of language analysis should only focus on "competence", which is "an idealized capacity, a mental capacity" of language knowledge. This is in contrast with "performance" which is the production of actual utterances. Chomsky believes that "performance" is usually influenced by several extraneous societal factors. Modern linguists however are realizing the fact that language analysis goes beyond seeing it as a mere medium of communication. Edwards opined that "any investigation of language that considers only language will be deficient and inappropriate limitations and restrictions will cripple insights" (Edwards 2009).

One main societal factor that interacts with language is the identity-marking function of language. Earlier, we had highlighted four different types of identity identified by Bichani. These are personal, social, ethnic and religious identities. Each of these identities has its unique and peculiar language markers. Language as a form of personal and social identity marker shall be examined below.

Personal identity marker: Certain individuals use language in certain ways that are peculiar to them. This is referred to as "idiolect." The idiolect of individuals mark them out and once the individual speaks, other members of the society easily recognize who is speaking. It may be the voice pitch, tone, pronunciation, style, or frequent use of certain words or jargon by the individual. All these form the idiolect which is the identity marker of the individual.

Social identity marker: Individuals belong to different groups in society. Some of

these are social class, professional groups, gender groups, age groups, etc. It is a well-known fact that these social groups have particular language varieties peculiar to them. These peculiar language varieties are referred to as sociolects. In addition, we often refer to these sociolects as the "register" of the group. Sociolect or the register of a group is an identity marker that clearly distinguishes a social group from another. This consists of the linguistic repertoire available and exclusive to a social group. Certain professional groups have particular registers which they choose from in communicating. For instance, medical doctors have a way of communicating among themselves to the exclusion of out-group members. Only in-group members of the profession would be able to decode what is being communicated. Also, certain age groups have their peculiar way of communicating among themselves.

Norton views the concept of identity as "dynamic and constantly changing across time and place… constructed by language" (Norton 2006, 3). In other words, people tend to change identity from time to time and from place to place. This is because people do not exist in isolation. We meet with different groups and make contact with diverse people from varied backgrounds, languages and cultures. People therefore associate with and sometimes assimilate the culture and language of people they come in contact with. As a result, one individual could have more than one identity based on the social groups he belongs to. This is in line with Dorian's view that individuals "will redefine themselves when circumstances make it desirable or when circumstances force it on them" (Dorian 1999, 25). This is what Bichani refers to as having "multiple and overlapping identities" (Bichani 2015). Identity is therefore multifaceted and highly dynamic.

There is no gain-saying that language has a strong relationship with identity. Joseph (2004) views language and identity as inseparable (cited in Chew 2014). Hollington puts the relationship this way "a desire to sound different and express oneself differently…" (Hollington 2016, 147). It is quite obvious that when people come together as social groups, it always comes with a desire for self-expression and self-assertion. Language is usually the vehicle of self-expression, either for individuals or for groups. Garri and Mugaddam (2015) opined that "language is the easiest determinant of unveiling others' identities". This is perhaps why we often ask the question "where are you from?" for the addressee to reveal their identity.

Language may also be a tool to either keep people "out" or "in". In other words, each social group has its peculiar language which serves as a means of excluding outsiders from the group. Chew added that "language is the key factor which defines, erects and maintains (or eradicates) social boundaries that exclude those who believe and behave differently" (Chew 2014). Language choice thus becomes a veritable means of distinguishing the "we" from the "them". Identities can be said therefore to be facilitated by language.

Bichani (2015, 38–39) identifies three schools of thought in the literature, on the relationship that exists between language and identity. The first school of thought believes that language is a major factor in defining groups, as it functions as a distinctive

marker within a group (Edwards, 2009). To this group of scholars, language is the vehicle of culture, hence, "ethnocultural groups often seek to maintain their language and in this way their ethnocultural identity".

The second school of thought believes that language is not as important to identity as it is being paraded. They argue that there are lots of ethnic groups that have held on to their identity, even though language shift has occurred to their language. Canagarajah (2008) and Kumar et al. (2008) gave examples of Tamil and Hindi identities, respectively that have been sustained, despite the occurrence of language shifts in their language. Kumar et al. (2008) opined that "if a group considers language a core value, it will hold language central to its identity and will be likely to view language shift as a shift in culture." This school of thought believes that while some cultures hold language central to their identity, some other cultures are not tied to their language, hence a detachment from their identity.

The third school of thought believes that "a group's language affects the construction of its identity." (Bichani 2015). In other words, an individual's language identity has a way of influencing his language choice and vice-versa. This school of thought therefore believes that language and identity interdepend on each other. This is the case of the Hausa ethnic group which this study investigates.

Although there is a strong relationship between language and identity as expressed above in the literature, it is also true that linguistic identity can be detached from ethnic or religious identity as in the case of the Ilorin people of Yoruba ancestry (Oloso 2019). The choice of identity can sometimes be fluid as people tend to switch from one identity to the other based on different circumstances and as situations force it on them.

Language and Religion

The intersection of language and religion has attracted increasing scholarly attention, though the field remains relatively underexplored. Omoniyi and Fishman notes that "the onus remains with sociolinguistics… to fill the current gap in the disciplinary neglect of the language variable in the field of the sociology of religion" (Fishman 2006, 13). Similarly, Chew (2014) observes that while religion is often studied as a social institution, the role of language in shaping and sustaining religious identity has received comparatively less attention.

Religion cannot function independently of language. Religious experience extends beyond the material into the realm of the supernatural, and communication is central to this encounter. Believers address God through prayers, songs, chants, and sermons, while divine communication is perceived through scripture, revelation, and spiritual impressions. As Hatoss affirms, "language controls and reaches the supernatural, e.g. the language of prayers; it is a vital tool for reaching God, has a strong symbolic power, and is a tool for expressing identity… Since verbal communication between God and His followers is an essential part of most religions, most churches adopt a covert or

overt'language-religion-ideology'" (Hatoss 2012, 96).

This close link is often discussed in terms of religiolinguistic choices (Hary and Wein, 2012), highlighting how languages function as vehicles of the sacred and as markers of group belonging. Sacred texts such as the Qur'an or Bible were revealed in particular languages and are transmitted through these linguistic forms. Ritual practices—prayers, hymns, chants, and liturgies—are likewise deeply shaped by language, making it indispensable to religious identity. Language is therefore central to religion, functioning as both a symbolic and functional tool for transmitting faith, preserving sacredness, and fostering identity. The use of Arabic in Islam and ritualized Korean in Daesoon Jinrihoe as highlighted in the next sections demonstrates how language anchors religious life, while adaptive strategies on some occasions illustrate its flexibility in new environments. Ultimately, religiolinguistic choices not only sustain traditions but also negotiate cultural and social change, underscoring language's indispensable role in religious identity.

Arabic as the Liturgical Language of Islam

Islam provides a clear example of the interdependence between language and religion. Arabic is not only the liturgical language of Islam but also the original language of the Qur'an, which Muslims believe to be the unaltered word of God. Qur'anic recitation in prayer is performed exclusively in Arabic, even by non-native speakers, reinforcing the global symbolic status of Arabic as both a medium of worship and a sacred identity marker (Chew 2014).

Marranci's (2007) ethnographic research on Muslim migrants in Scotland and Northern Ireland illustrates this dynamic. Despite living in predominantly English-speaking contexts, migrants maintained Arabic as central to religious practice, perceiving it as crucial to safeguarding religious and cultural identity. For many, Arabic symbolizes the purity of faith, with translations regarded as distortions of divine meaning. Even Muslims unfamiliar with Arabic often memorize key phrases for prayer, thereby reinforcing Arabic's centrality in religious life.

Language Variation in Religious Practice

Marranci (2007) further shows how language use in religion is contextually flexible. In Scotland, most mosques conduct Friday *Juma'at* sermons in Arabic, though some supplement this with English or Urdu summaries to cater for diverse communities. In Northern Ireland, however, sermons are predominantly delivered in English, with Qur'anic verses translated for accessibility. This illustrates how religious identity anchored in Arabic may coexist with linguistic adaptation to local sociolinguistic realities, thereby producing a dynamic interplay between faith and language.

The Daesoon Jinrihoe Movement in Korea: Ritual Language and Identity

A parallel case outside of Islam is the Daesoon Jinrihoe movement in Korea, one of the largest new religions in the country. The movement underscores how language functions as both a doctrinal medium and a ritual instrument in shaping identity. Daesoon Jinrihoe teachings, centered on the revelations of Kang Jeungsan, were initially transmitted orally and later codified in texts such as the *Jeon-gyeong*.

In ritual contexts, the movement employs formalized chants, invocations, and recitations distinct from everyday Korean. This ritual register marks a boundary between the ordinary and the sacred, reinforcing collective identity among adherents. The use of such expressions shows how Daesoon adherents linguistically participate in constructing a shared worldview.

At the same time, Daesoon Jinrihoe illustrates the balance between tradition and modernity in religious language. While scriptures and rituals preserve older registers of Korean and classical references, sermons and outreach increasingly employ contemporary Korean, ensuring accessibility to younger generations. This dual approach parallels Islam's balance between Arabic recitation and vernacular preaching, demonstrating how religiolinguistic choices preserve identity while adapting to modern contexts.

The cases of Islam and Daesoon Jinrihoe highlight the dual function of language in religion: as a sacred medium preserving doctrinal purity and as a social tool enabling accessibility and cohesion. Whether through Arabic recitations in Islam or ritualized Korean in Daesoon practices, language mediates the sacred while anchoring group identity. Yet, contextual adaptations—such as English sermons in Northern Ireland or modern Korean preaching in Daesoon temples—show that linguistic practices in religion are fluid, shaped by community needs and sociocultural realities.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Identity construction in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)

The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) was founded by Pa Josiah Olufemi Akindayomi (1909–1980) in 1952. The founder of the church was said to have chosen Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye, an erstwhile mathematics lecturer at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, who joined the church in 1973, to succeed him as General Overseer. The church has one of the largest memberships in Nigeria and its vision and mission is "to make heaven; to take as many people with us; and, to have a member of RCCG in every family of all nations". Currently, there are about 2000 parishes of the RCCG in Nigeria alone, over 50,000 parishes worldwide and over 9 million members worldwide in 197 countries and territories (www.rccg.org).

The General Overseer of RCCG, Pastor E. A. Adeboye, is renowned for his ritualized

opening declaration which always announces his ascension to the pulpit: *"Let somebody shout halleluyah."* This utterance functions as a ritualized greeting that signals the start of worship and the presence of the General Overseer. This statement has become a household statement in RCCG, as whenever the statement is uttered even outside the congregation, RCCG comes to mind. In fact, this introductory announcement has been adopted by both Pastors and members of the church and has become a distinct and indelible linguistic identity marker for the church. The ritualized opening which initially could be said to be part of the idiolect of the General Overseer, Pastor Adeboye has now turned to becoming a sociolect for members of the church, as the statement is now associated with RCCG. From the perspective of Gumperz's (1982) *interactional sociolinguistics*, this utterance serves as a contextualization cue that signals the transition into worship and instantly frames the interaction as sacred. Most times, after the ritualized introductory statement, the General Overseer often swings into a worship mode singing songs of praise to God which the church's worship team immediately joins in echoing the songs. The entire congregation also unitedly join in singing the song which then sets the tone for the sermon of the day to be delivered by the General Overseer, fondly referred to as 'daddy G.O'.

The statement creates a call-and-response dynamic that unites the congregation in one voice, reinforcing collective participation. Its call-and-response form fosters immediate participation and unity, collapsing the distance between pulpit and pew and reinforcing solidarity among members. Over time, the phrase has acquired indexical significance (Silverstein 2003): it directly evokes RCCG's identity whenever uttered, whether inside or outside the church. As an identity marker, the statement points to RCCG and its worship culture. Theologically, "hallelujah" underscores themes of praise, joy, and victory, reinforcing RCCG's identity as a worship-driven, globally inclusive movement. RCCG is known for its strong praise and worship culture which manifests from top to bottom and across all strata of the church.

A central identity marker in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) under Pastor E. A. Adeboye is the recurrent theme of pastoral assurance and intimacy with God. This theme is expressed through a distinctive set of discursive practices that emphasize divine closeness, blessings, and spiritual safety. One of Adeboye's most recognizable phrases is "My Daddy says…"—a personalized way of referring to God that conveys both intimacy and immediacy. By invoking God as "Daddy", Adeboye shifts the believer's perception of the divine from distant majesty to familial closeness, positioning God as a caring father actively involved in the daily affairs of His children. This discursive habit also reinforces Adeboye's identity as God's confidant, the one through whom divine messages are directly relayed to the congregation (Ukah 2008; Kalu 2008).

In addition, Adeboye frequently employs declarative authority in his sermons and prayers, using expressions such as "I decree…" or "I prophesy…". These performative utterances are not treated as mere words but as acts of blessing and spiritual intervention that members believe carry divine authority. Through such declarations, Adeboye

assumes the role of a spiritual father who guarantees divine covering and ensures that no member leaves a service without a word of assurance (Peel 2016; Marshall 2009). Closely tied to these declarations are his reassuring blessings: "It shall be well with you," "God bless you mightily," and "So shall it be in Jesus' Name." These phrases often conclude prayers, sermons, or prophetic messages, serving as ritual affirmations of God's favor. Their repetition creates a sense of continuity and reinforces the expectation that every encounter in RCCG ends with divine reassurance (Ojo 2006).

Adeboye's soft-spoken tone and calm delivery further enhance this theme. Unlike the fiery or flamboyant styles associated with some other Pentecostal leaders, his gentle manner communicates humility and quiet authority. This rhetorical style reinforces RCCG's identity as a spiritual family defined not only by holiness but also by intimacy, safety, and assurance of God's presence (Ukah, 2008). Theologically, this emphasis on pastoral assurance and intimacy reflects the Pentecostal conviction that believers enjoy a direct and personal relationship with God (Anderson, 2013). In RCCG, Adeboye models this intimacy through language, teaching members to approach God as a loving father while relying on the prophetic assurances of their spiritual leader. Consequently, this theme functions as a powerful identity marker that unites RCCG members worldwide, cultivating a collective sense of belonging, divine protection, and ultimate hope in God's promises.

Identity construction in the Deeper Life Bible Church (DLBC)

The Deeper Christian Life Ministry (DCLM) with the church arm known as the Deeper Life Bible Church (DLBC) was founded in 1973 by Pastor Williams Folorunso Kumuyi. He was a mathematics lecturer at the University of Lagos and started a Bible Study group with just 15 university students before resigning from the services of the university to lead the church in full time capacity. The then Bible study group later metamorphosed into the now Deeper Life Bible Church. The church has planted over 500 churches in Lagos and over 5000 in the rest of Nigeria. The church has its headquarters in Gbagada, Lagos, Nigeria, from which it has sent missionaries to over 40 countries across the globe (www.dclm.org). The church is one of Nigeria's most influential holiness movements. A significant feature of the church's growth and consolidation lies in the ways its leader, officially referred to as the General Superintendent (GS), constructs identity through his recurrent statements and discursive practices. Pastor Kumuyi's rhetoric does not only function as preaching; it also builds a shared worldview that marks Deeper Life members as distinct within the broader Pentecostal landscape (Kalu 2008; Ojo 2006).

The General Superintendent (G.S.) of the Deeper Life Bible Church (DLBC) is known to always announce his presence on the pulpit with the phrase "Praise the Lord". Pastor W. F. Kumuyi's opening phrase is often delivered with a unique intonation, illustrates how idiolect (Crystal, 2008) can become institutionalized, anticipating a uniform congregational response. He usually says it in a unique manner with the whole church

usually responding with a thunderous "hallelujah". As soon as he mounts the pulpit, everyone can almost anticipate that the phrase would be the first set of words from his mouth. The unique delivery of the phrase creates a leader-centered idiolect, anticipating congregational response and reflecting the church's strong discipline and order. This is his idiolect which is usually copied by all other overseers and pastors to carve a unique identity for the church.

Furthermore, there is a regular prayer statement from the G.S. which has become a household name in DLBC. It goes thus:

> "As I succeed, you will succeed
> As I make progress, you will make progress
> Everywhere I go in life, you will go there…"

The above statement is an identity marker for the church. At a point, the statement with the voice of the G.S. became the ringing tones in the mobile phones of most members of the church.

Another popular statement which serves as identity marker for members of DLBC is the following: "No lack; no loss; no limitation". This was a prayer made by the G.S. which suddenly turned to an identity marker for members of the church to the extent that most members of the church converted the statement into a car sticker and can be found on the car of almost all members. The slogan "No lack; no loss; no limitation" now functions as a portable linguistic emblem as members reproduce it on stickers, phones, and in prayers, extending church identity into everyday life. The reproduction of these slogans on stickers, ringtones, and cars demonstrates how enregisterment (Agha, 2007) extends church identity beyond worship settings into everyday life. DLBC therefore constructs an identity of holiness, order, moral discipline, belief in the promise of divine provision and collective participation in divine progress. The church is known for its stance on holiness and righteousness and Pastor Kumuyi is often tagged a 'holiness preacher'.

The declarative prayers such as "As I succeed, you will succeed" and the slogan "No lack; no loss; no limitation" highlight what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) term authentication, where linguistic practices authenticate the spiritual authority of the leader while transferring divine success to members. The prayer declarations ("As I succeed…") construct an identity of transference, where the leader's spiritual and all-round progress becomes a prototype for members' success—reinforcing loyalty and hierarchical spiritual authority.

One of the defining features of Kumuyi's discourse is his uncompromising emphasis on holiness. Statements such as "Without holiness, no man shall see the Lord" or "Heaven is real; Hell is real—where will you spend eternity?" position Deeper Life as a community whose identity is rooted in moral purity and spiritual vigilance. This doctrinal insistence creates a counter-cultural identity in which members see themselves as separated from the secular world, upholding a lifestyle of modesty, purity, and consecration. Scholars have noted that this emphasis reflects the Holiness tradition that

shaped early African Pentecostalism (Marshall, 2009; Kalu, 2008). Kumuyi frequently frames his sermons around admonitions such as "Examine yourself whether you are in the faith" or "Don't play with sin—it will destroy you." Through such warning language, members are reminded that spiritual carelessness has eternal consequences. This rhetorical strategy shapes a vigilant, self-examining identity where believers are encouraged to live with a heightened sense of personal responsibility. Ojo (2006) observes that such moralistic preaching distinguishes DLBC from prosperity-oriented Pentecostal churches, situating it as a reformist voice in Nigeria's religious marketplace.

Another central marker of identity is Kumuyi's eschatological emphasis. Statements like "Jesus may come today—are you ready?" cultivate a sense of perpetual readiness within the congregation. The church is constructed as a "remnant" community living in anticipation of Christ's imminent return. This orientation toward eternity serves both as motivation for holy living and as a distinguishing mark of Deeper Life spirituality. Peel (2016) identifies this eschatological urgency as one of the enduring features of African evangelical identity, where expectation of the end continually shapes Christian practice. Furthermore, Kumuyi's sermons are marked by constant appeals to the authority of scripture. Phrases such as "The Bible says…" and "Open your Bible to…" reinforce the centrality of the Word of God in shaping both doctrine and practice. In doing so, Kumuyi constructs Deeper Life as a Bible-centred community, distinct from expressions of Pentecostalism that emphasize charisma, material prosperity, or emotional experiences over scriptural grounding. This aligns with Ukah's observation that African Pentecostal leaders often use scripture-saturated speech as both a legitimizing and identity-marking practice (Ukah 2008).

A recurrent theme in Kumuyi's discourse is separation from the world. By invoking biblical injunctions such as "Come out from among them and be ye separate," he underscores the expectation that true Christians must stand apart from the world. This separation is reinforced through lifestyle codes concerning dressing, entertainment, and social conduct. The effect is the construction of a communal identity that is deliberately distinct, defined by visible and spiritual boundaries. As Kalu (2008) explains, such practices create a Pentecostal counter-culture in which difference from the world is both theological and performative.

Also, Kumuyi's frequent references to the corporate character of the church—phrases like "We are a Bible-believing church"—emphasize discipline, order, and collective holiness. Members are not just individual Christians but part of a disciplined body tasked with being "light in the world." This rhetorical framing strengthens the sense of belonging and responsibility that sustains DLBC's cohesion as a religious movement. Ojo (2006) highlights that this collective discipline is central to Deeper Life's reputation for moral strictness and organizational order. Pastor Kumuyi's statements and rhetorical strategies serve as powerful tools for constructing the identity of Deeper Life Bible Church. By emphasizing holiness, moral vigilance, eschatological urgency, scriptural centrality, separation from worldliness, and corporate discipline, he positions the church

as a holy remnant within contemporary Nigerian Pentecostalism. In this way, Kumuyi's discourse does more than convey doctrine; it performs identity work, shaping how members understand themselves, the world, and their ultimate destiny (Marshall 2009; Ojo 2006; Kalu 2008; Ukah 2008).

Identity construction in Dunamis International Gospel Centre

The church was founded on 10 November 1996 by Pastor Dr Paul Enenche. The church moved to its present site in Airport Road, Abuja, Nigeria in 1997 and in November 2018, it completed its 100,000 seat mega auditorium called "The Glory Dome" making it the church with the largest building with a single roof in the world. The church is named after a Greek word *Dunamis* meaning 'power' (www.dunamisgospel.org).

The identity of Dunamis is shaped through both declarative and innovative language. Phrases like "Where is your place? Above only, that is my place" articulate a theology of elevation and dominion, positioning members as destined for superiority. The rhetorical question "Where is your place?" constructs a collective self-image of superiority and dominion, emphasizing the theology of elevation ("above only") which the church holds on to dearly. The phrase enacts what Butler (1997) describes as performativity: language here does not merely describe status but creates a reality of dominion. By repeating the statement, members of the church, through faith, believe that they are positioning themselves for dominion over evil and negative forces.

The statement "If the devil cannot hinder your givings, then he cannot hinder your receivings" encapsulates prosperity theology framed as reciprocal covenant practice. The prosperity declaration reinforces a reciprocal theology of covenant which aligns material blessings with spiritual discipline.

Notably, Dunamis demonstrates linguistic creativity through coinages such as *olatricity* and *olatrified* (derived from the Idoma word *ọla* meaning fire, blended with English *electricity*/ *electrified*). These lexical innovations and coinages demonstrating code-switching and blending as identity work fuse local culture with global Pentecostal discourse, grounding the church's identity in both Nigerian linguistic heritage and transnational Christian charisma. These coinages exemplify what Irvine and Gal (2000) call iconization, where linguistic forms symbolize spiritual power. Dunamis thus positions itself as a church of power, prosperity, and innovative expression.

The church also has portable linguistic emblems such as:

> Origin: Dunamis; Warning: Do not trespass

Members of the church often reproduce this on stickers placed on their cars, houses, etc. This statement reinforces the image of superiority and dominion which the church identifies with and symbolize the possession of spiritual power by the members of which there is a subtle warning to non-members not to dare confront them. Members of the

church believe that by identification with the church, as members, they have dominion over evil powers and human trespassers. One of the most dominant rhetorical features of Enenche's preaching is his constant invocation of power, fire, and glory. Statements such as "You shall experience power, fire, and glory in your life!" or "Dunamis means power—the power of the Holy Ghost at work" define the church's core identity. Through these utterances, Dunamis is framed as a movement of supernatural empowerment. Members internalize the idea that they are carriers of divine energy, and this collective identity is continually reinforced through testimonies of miracles, healing, and deliverance.

Another dominant feature of Enenche's statements is his militant language of victory and warfare. Expressions such as "Every agenda of the enemy against your life is destroyed" and "You shall not be a victim; you shall be a victor" establish members as triumphant Christians. This discourse constructs a militant, warrior-like identity where the congregation is seen as actively engaged in spiritual battle against evil powers. The emphasis on victory over defeat strengthens the self-perception of Dunamis believers as overcomers and spiritual conquerors. In addition, Enenche frequently leads the congregation in corporate confessions. Statements like "I am a child of God" or "I cannot fail, I cannot be defeated" are repeated in unison, transforming sermons into communal affirmations. These practices foster a sense of belonging and reinforce a shared self-definition as victorious, faith-filled believers. Through these rituals, identity is not only preached but performed in collective participation.

Identity construction in the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM)

The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) which started as a small prayer group of 24 people in 1989 held its first service as a church on April 24, 1994. The church that has now grown to a mega church has branches in the United States, Canada, Europe, the Caribbean, Asia, and indeed every continent of the world. Its international headquarters is in Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria. (www.mountainoffire.org). The church was founded and headed by Pastor Dr. Daniel Kolawole Olukoya as General Overseer with the appellation 'Daddy G.O.' and supported by his wife, Pastor Sade Olukoya also tagged 'Mummy G. O.'. There are seven Assistant General Overseers and other Senior Pastors and Ministers. Some of the key phrases identified as the sociolects of the church include:

> "Die by fire"
> "Any power from my father's house attacking me, die by fire."
> "Powers from my father's house, catch fire, catch fire."

These phrases embody a militant linguistic identity, constructing MFM as a church of spiritual warfare and deliverance. The leadership of MFM employs militant prayer language such as "Die by fire" and "Any power from my father's house attacking me, die by fire." This constitutes an incantatory register of spiritual warfare, marked by repetition,

aggression, and fiery imagery. The repetitive, aggressive structure ("die by fire", "catch fire") functions like an incantatory battle cry, reinforcing urgency, intensity, and violent confrontation of spiritual enemies. These utterances illustrate Austin's (1962) notion of illocutionary acts—they are not just descriptive statements but performative, functioning as battle cries that enact spiritual warfare.

The reference to ancestral powers, "from my father's house", situates MFM's discourse within an African cosmological belief of generational and territorial spiritual forces, making the language resonate deeply within Nigerian spiritual contexts. By rallying against "powers from my father's house", members of the church tap into culturally resonant narratives of generational curses. Within the Nigerian cosmology and among Pentecostal Christians, there is the strong belief in the existence of ancestral and generational curses which they believe have the potentials to distort and alter present and future progress if not dealt with aggressively and violently. There is a frequent reference and allusion to the bible verse which says "...the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force" (King James' version of Matthew chapter 11 verse 12). Members of MFM therefore invoke fire on these evil forces through performative utterances which function as battle cries, reinforcing MFM's collective identity as a deliverance-oriented, fire-branded movement committed to violent confrontation of perceived spiritual enemies and evil powers.

Identity Construction in the Daesoon Jinrihoe Movement in Korea

Daesoon Jinrihoe is one of the largest new religious movements in Korea anchored on the belief in the existence of the "Supreme God of the ninth Heaven" (Gucheon Sangje) who is believed to have incarnated in Kang Jeungsan (1871–1909)" at the end of the 19th century. The movement was later reorganized and got its new name *Daesoon Jinrihoe* in 1969. The origin and roots of the movement have been found to be tightly connected to both the religious traditions of diverse Eastern and Western religious movements (Alam 2024). In carrying out its mission and practising its doctrines, the movement carries out what it terms the basic works of "propagation, edification and spiritual cultivation" through charity aid, social welfare and education. The religious movement currently has religious facilities including five temples; 120 local fellowship buildings and 200 local fellowship halls spread across different parts of Korea. (www.eng.daesoon.org).

There are a number of statements and quotations from Daesoon Jinrihoe leaders and the canonical scriptures which work together to construct the identity of the movement—both internally (for members) and externally (for the wider world). These quotes collectively provide a window into the spiritual heart of Daesoon Jinrihoe—spanning cosmic vision, moral cultivation, and the transformative path toward ultimate liberation and harmony which the movement preaches and can be summarised as consisting of the following:

1. Cosmic-Historical Identity

Jo Jeongsan's proclamation that "This new year is the Gyehae Year, the start of a new cycle of Won…" situates Daesoon Jinrihoe within a grand cosmic timeline that signals a new beginning. This links the movement's existence to a new era in universal history, presenting followers as participants in a divinely ordained transformation. Identity here is eschatological as Daesoon believers believes that they are not just part of a Korean religious group, but pioneers of a new world order.

2. Spiritual-Moral Identity

Statements like "Sincerity itself is the Dao of Heaven" and "Cultivate the Dao with extreme sincerity" construct members as moral practitioners whose identity is grounded in inner refinement. Similarly, verses from the Daesoon scriptures such as "Even Heaven is afraid of a man who believes in Me and keeps his mind right" elevate faithful and morally upright individuals into spiritually powerful beings. The Daesoon identity is therefore tied to moral self-cultivation, sincerity, and correct conduct rather than mere ritual membership.

3. Ethical-Communal Identity

Leaders of the movement emphasize "Resolution of Grievances for Mutual Beneficence" and "Priority of others before oneself." These doctrinal statements mark Daesoon Jinrihoe as a community of reconciliation and mutual aid, contrasting against a world seen as fractured by grudges and selfishness. Members' identity is defined through ethical practices of harmony, gratitude, and collective care—not just individually but communally. This collective ethos differentiates Daesoon followers from secular society and other religions by foregrounding relational healing as central to the salvation of souls.

4. Global and Universal Identity

Statements like "Our Dao is not confined to our country alone; it encompasses the whole world and even the entire universe" and the founder, Park Wudang's insistence that "Only through worldwide propagation will it become possible to vastly save all sentient beings" construct Daesoon Jinrihoe as global in mission. The movement thus claims a universal scope: not a parochial Korean sect but a religion with cosmic significance that covers the entire universe. This identity positions Daesoon Jinrihoe alongside world religions, seeking legitimacy on the global stage. The statement therefore seeks to affirm a global identity rather than a localised movement within Korea alone.

5. Prophetic and Transformative Identity

Jo Jeongsan's statement "I am the one who will spread forth the Degree Number of the Later World of Fifty Thousand Years, and you are the ones who will attain the Dao" establishes the founder as a prophetic mediator of divine authority. Followers' identity is bound to that prophetic mission. Members of the movement see themselves as agents of a world transformation, co-workers with Sangje (the Supreme God). The movement thus frames itself as a chosen community with a divinely mandated destiny.

6. Identity as a Religion of Renewal

Verses from the Daesoon scriptures like "With only fire and water, you shall sustain your life even though you live on a stony peak" symbolize resilience and spiritual renewal in hardship. This constructs Daesoon Jinrihoe as a religion that thrives in difficulty—its identity is one of perseverance, survival, and hope. Members are not passive believers but active participants in re-creating the world into an Earthly Paradise.

Conclusion

The statements of church leaders in Nigerian Pentecostalism demonstrate that linguistic practices are central to identity construction. The linguistic practices of these churches reveal how statements in form of idiolects from leaders become sociolects which function as performative acts of identity construction rather than mere descriptive statements. RCCG's joyful and ritualized introductory statement "Let somebody shout halleluyah" foregrounds praise and inclusivity for the church; DLBC's declarative slogans and ritualized prayers emphasize holiness, discipline, and transference of blessing; Dunamis innovates linguistically to frame dominion and prosperity in a culturally rooted manner. It blends prosperity, power, and lexical innovation rooted in local culture; while MFM asserts a militant deliverance identity through warfare metaphors. In line with Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) framework, these linguistic identities are emergent, interactional, and intersubjective, reinforcing each church's theological orientation and communal ethos. Together, these linguistic identities not only distinguish one church from another but also demonstrate the central role of language in shaping collective belonging, theological orientation, and social visibility in Nigerian Christianity. Similarly, the statements of the leaders of the Daesoon Jinrihoe movement in Korea, highlights a combination of cosmic vision, ethical self-cultivation, communal responsibility, and universal mission which carves out an identity for the movement and distinguishes Daesoon Jinrihoe both within Korea and in its aspiration toward global religious legitimacy.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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Invented Traditions and the Construction of New Religious Collective Memory in Southern Vietnam: An Overview Study from a Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Invented tradition is a concept in the fields of cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, and history, and in the case of the new religious movement in Vietnam, it is all the more evident in emphasizing the connection to the past in the context of the diminishing dominance of Sino-Vietnamese civilization amid the growing and expanding influence of the West into China and its surrounding countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This study employs the post-structural perspective of cultural studies and applies Eric Hobsbawm's theory of invented traditions and Maurice Halbwachs's idea of collective memory to demonstrate that the emergence of the new religious movement is an indirect result of a series of cultural negotiations among migrant groups to Southern Vietnam. The ultimate result is the syncretism of religions. The trauma in the historical memory of the old homeland, combined with contemporary political trauma and the trauma in religious practices, led to the rise of the new religion in Vietnam. The new religious movement in Vietnam is a direct product of cultural negotiations among different resident groups to create a shared collective cultural memory, represented by the three ethnic groups: Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer. This study begins by introducing the two concepts of invented traditions and collective memory, as well as their relationship within the historical, cultural, and regional context of Southern Vietnam. It then discusses several previous studies with the common theme of syncretism and multiculturalism in Southern Vietnam. In the last two sections, the long history of cohabitation and the balanced position in memory negotiation among different resident groups will be shown. Theoretically, this study adds a new approach to research on new religions in Vietnam. Practically, it provides an overview of the political and cultural capacity of migrant groups.

Keywords: New new religious movement; Southern Vietnam; Cochinchina; Immigrants to Vietnam; Southwards process

Introduction

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the influence of imperialism and colonialism posed a significant challenge to building an organic cultural identity in modern East Asian societies. As the Chinese "cake" was squeezed and even invaded by imperial powers regions influenced by Chinese Confucian traditions, often referred to as "Little China," such as Vietnam, were inevitably caught up in this fateful historical whirlwind. The historical landscape of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was so stormy, harsh, and intense that almost any cultural, political, or religious event was affected by it. Consequently, this geopolitical context became a grand narrative—a rational explanation for what happened in Vietnam. Interpretations and analytical approaches to the new religious movement in Vietnam are a rather typical case in point.

Religious groups that emerged in Southern Vietnam at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century have been studied from various multidisciplinary perspectives. These studies focus on areas such as religious studies (examining the development, organization, and notable features of new religious groups), philosophy (interpreting the values and philosophical principles expressed in the new religions), anthropology and sociology (analyzing the relationships between new religious groups and local communities as well as the broader society, including their roles in social change), cultural studies (notably surveys and fieldwork on the impact of new religions on local culture, including art, traditional culture, and lifestyle), and history (interpreting the historical context and key events that stimulated the development and emergence of new religions in Southern Vietnam during the specified period). These approaches analyze the relationship between new religious groups and migration psychology and land expansion, as well as the significance of these new religious movements in the nationalist movements. Overall, these studies acknowledge the important role of new religions within the cultural, political, and social context of Southern Vietnam at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Our perspective aligns with that of Nguyễn Xuân Hậu in the 2020 doctoral thesis on Religious Studies, which also highlights common findings among the research conducted by other scholars. It can be said that the conditions leading to the emergence of religions in Southern Vietnam are a notable and distinct contribution of previous works. Factors such as natural conditions, historical context, ethnic composition, and political upheavals indicate that Southern Vietnam at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was a complex amalgam of many elements. These factors created a "spiritual vacuum" for cultural subjects. Previous works have achieved significant results regarding the history of population formation in Southern Vietnam, the cultural influence of various ethnic groups, and the role of these groups in creating a cohesive yet open approach to new influences, etc. This provided crucial groundwork for the emergence of new religions, based on the inheritance and integration of

traditional culture, beliefs, and religions. Another aspect emphasized by previous research is the political factor in Southern Vietnam at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, including the role of the Nguyễn dynasty, French colonial invasion, and the accompanying Western cultural layer, and so on. All these created challenges for traditional religions. This was a core premise for the activities and transformations of religions that emerged in Southern Vietnam. Most authors argue that the religions that emerged in Southern Vietnam are a mix of religions and beliefs. The distinctiveness of this mix is reflected in the traditional elements that serve as the foundation (Nguyen 2020, 18–19).

However, while acknowledging the existence of a spiritual vacuum in a specific and highly particular historical context, it is an oversimplification of the intrinsic vitality of migrants—who carry with them cultural memories or even cultural DNA that not every political or historical upheaval can alter. Therefore, it could be theorized that at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in Southern Vietnam, there were traditional creative activities aimed at constructing collective memory for a cohabiting community of the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer ethnic groups from various waves of migration to Southern Vietnam. These activities, or processes, involved informal interfaith dialogues and negotiations between different religious communities, with the ultimate goal being to ensure that no belief or faith was overlooked.

This theory is applied by starting with a discussion of the concepts of invented traditions and collective memory, and their interrelationships. Building on this foundation, traces of migrants and what they brought with them to Southern Vietnam can be discovered. Finally, a series of negotiations that occurred within the beliefs of the local community of followers in this new land will be examined.

Invented Traditions and the Construction of Collective Memory of Cultural Subjects in New Religious Communities in Southern Vietnam

Invented tradition can be understood as practices or customs that people often believe to have existed for a long time but were created or constructed relatively recently, as efforts to reinforce identity, build collective memory, or establish a connection with the past (Trinh 2022a; 2022b; 2023). This involves embedding certain values and behavioral norms through repetition, implying continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1983, 1). Most of these ideas are documented in a collection of essays edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger titled *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). This study plays a crucial role in shaping and developing the theory of invented traditions. Hobsbawm introduces the concept of invented traditions and the ways in which different societies construct and use traditions to serve political, cultural, and social purposes. The essays in this study examine a range of cases, mainly from Britain and some former colonial territories, to illustrate the argument that traditions are often modern inventions presented as ancient practices. Terence Ranger further supports his collaborator's

proposition by demonstrating that many traditions in former colonial countries in Africa were created or shaped by the practices of the colonizers (Ranger 1983, 211). These traditions can be used to create a sense of national unity, control public perception, and maintain power structures. *The Invention of Tradition* is considered influential in the study of tradition, memory, and cultural identity. It shows that traditions are not static relics of the past but dynamic structures developed to meet contemporary needs. The book has stimulated discussions about how traditions shape society and how society shapes their traditions, illuminating the complex relationship between history, culture, and power. However, it should also be pointed out that, to date, the application of invented traditions to religion has not been precedent in Western research due to the characteristics of theological tradition. Nonetheless, in the case of new religions, particularly new religious groups in Vietnam, the arguments for the existence of invented tradition activities in creating collective memory for communities are plausible.

Collective memory is a concept in sociology, psychology, and cultural studies that explores how a group of people, a community, or a society remembers and commemorates past events. Collective memory refers to shared recollections of events, experiences, and historical-cultural phenomena that are preserved and transmitted across generations. The theory of collective memory delves into questions about how societies construct their histories, how memories of events develop over time, and how social, cultural, and political factors shape the ways in which events are remembered and commemorated. It also examines the role of media, technology, and institutions in shaping and transmitting collective memory.

Several key theorists and scholars have contributed to the development of the theory of collective memory, each with their own perspectives and approaches. Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), a French sociologist and philosopher, is considered one of the founding figures in the study of collective memory. In his 1950 study titled *La mémoire collective*, Halbwachs proposed the idea that individual memory cannot be separated from the social context in which it exists. He emphasized that memory is not just an individual recollection but is also influenced by social frameworks and interactions. He coined the term "collective memory" to describe the ways in which groups remember and commemorate events (Halbwachs, 1992). While collective memory exists and is reinforced by the foundation of a unified group, it is the individuals within the group who are the ones who actually remember (Halbwachs, 1992, 48).

Collective memory is thus understood as the memories, events, and experiences shared and remembered by a group of people (such as a community, ethnicity, or society). These memories not only persist over time but are also reinforced and strengthened through the connection and interaction among members of the group. Its foundation is *a coherent body of people*. Collective memory relies on the unity and connection of that group. This unity provides strength and durability to the collective memory, while individuals in the group hold specific memories. The author succinctly summarizes this by stating that we are never alone (Halbwachs 1992, 23).

Collective memory and invented traditions are interconnected aspects of how societies remember and interpret their pasts. They contribute to the construction of social identity, cultural continuity, and the shaping of historical narratives. Both concepts highlight the dynamic nature of memory and the complex ways in which societies and communities negotiate their relationships with history. Collective memory and invented traditions often interact and can influence each other. Collective memory, as shared experiences and events within a social group, can provide a foundation for creating new traditions. Conversely, invented traditions can generate new collective memories by establishing new practices and customs. Both collective memory and invented traditions are related to identity formation and creating connections with the past. Collective memory helps reinforce a sense of unity and defines who "we" are, while invented traditions are often used to create symbols and practices that represent the social group.

Collective memory and invented traditions can both be utilized to address specific political issues. Collective memory can be selectively shaped and emphasized to promote certain narratives or ideologies. Similarly, invented traditions can be intentionally created to influence how a community remembers and interprets its past. Collective memory can provide a stable foundation for the creation of invented traditions. Existing memories, events, or cultural practices can be reinterpreted and adjusted to create a sense of continuity. At the same time, invented traditions can also emerge during periods of change when societies seek new ways to define their identities (Trinh 2022a). Ultimately, both collective memory and invented traditions contribute to social cohesion and group identity. They provide a shared framework of meaning that connects individuals to their community and gives them a sense of belonging.

Overview of the New Religious Movement in Southern Vietnam

In Vietnam, based on the dialectical materialist and historical materialist theories of Marxism-Leninism regarding religion, with the theory "The state and society produce religion" (Marx and Engels, 1995, 569), "The state and society" is understood as the specific social context, region, and period. For Southern Vietnam, this refers to the geographic, historical, economic, cultural, social, and political characteristics of the new land where religions emerged at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Research approaches and interpretations based on Marxist principles in Vietnam have largely dominated scholarly work related to Caodaism specifically and new religious movements in Vietnam in general. This dominance is significant in both quantity and impact within academic discussions. Its influence on foreign research on the same subjects is also substantial. Fortunately, even with the rise of deconstructivist or poststructuralist academic trends, these research findings still hold a place in related discussions.

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, alongside foreign religions such as Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism, Southern Vietnam witnessed the

emergence of several indigenous religions. Notable examples include Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Phật Giáo Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo, Caodaism, and Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ Phật Hội Việt Nam among others.

The aforementioned religions emerged within the context of the developing and evolving region of Southern Vietnam. Various historical, political, cultural, and social factors of Southern Vietnam at the time influenced these religions: the harsh environment of the new land; the mysterious Seven Mountains region; the border area of Tay Ninh, an ideal spiritual locale; the influence of the Heavenly Earth Society from the Chinese to the secret societies of the Vietnamese; the synthesis of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism with folk beliefs; the weakening of traditional religions; the decline of the Nguyen Dynasty; and the French colonial rule over Cochinchina, among others. All these factors created a profound void in a society experiencing a crisis of faith, lacking authoritative leadership in both spiritual and temporal realms. The people of Southern Vietnam— the cultural agents of the region— were in need of a new religious movement to fill this void (Nguyen 2020, 1).

Nguyen, Dang Duy, in *The Spiritual Culture of Southern* (*Văn hóa tâm linh Nam Bộ*), focuses on analyzing the syncretic aspects of the religions, notably Cao Dai (CĐ): "...The God Creator, arranging everything, comes from Christianity; the celestial spirits descending come from Taoism; human morality is derived from Confucianism; and the desire for material pleasures, the source of all suffering, is from Buddhism" (Nguyen 1997, 71). The French scholar and Cao Dai follower Gabriel Gobron, during 1948–1949, published *The History of Caodaoism* and *The History and Philosophy of Caodaoism*, highlighting the role of linking the living with the deceased and preparing for reincarnation. Later, in *An Initial Study of Caodaoism* (1995), Dang Nghiem Van (editor) provided a comprehensive overview of the religion, examining its historical formation, religious practices, ecclesiastical organization, and social roles. Crucially, this work periodizes the history of Caodaoism through pivotal milestones while meticulously tracing the trajectories of key foundational figures such as Ngo Van Chieu, Pham Cong Tac, and Le Van Trung. A significant finding in Dang's research is the influence of Cao Dai; the author asserts that: "Cao Dai is practical, a religion focusing on attracting the masses by providing them with spiritual nourishment; it blends the mundane with the metaphysical, aiming to offer them a path to alleviate the frustrations of everyday life" (Dang 1995, 165). The work also discusses the nationalistic and worldly aspects, reflecting on Cao Dai's influence on the Vietnamese community in Southern Vietnam. In summary, as discussed from the beginning, there are not many critiques in the discussions about the reasons for the emergence of new religious movements in Southern Vietnam in general.

In the work *The History of the Exploration of Southern Vietnam*, edited by Huynh Lua, the authors, drawing from various sources, present the migration, land reclamation, and settlement processes of the Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer, and Cham peoples in Southern Vietnam. Although this work does not directly address the indigenous religions

of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it provides extensive documentation on the process of exploring Southern Vietnam from the 17th to the 19th centuries, as well as the social changes during the later reclamation period. The authors particularly emphasize the manifestation of solidarity, the development of material and spiritual life of the brotherly peoples, through the harmony and syncretism of traditional elements and the assimilation of new values: "Southern Vietnam, in general, even at the beginning of its reclamation, had many ethnic groups living together and intermingling. This is a notable point compared to any other region in Vietnam" and "The mixture of populations from various local origins, different religions, and beliefs, and varying levels of social development over many centuries has not at all hindered the unity and cohesion of the peoples living together in Southern Vietnam" (Huynh 1997, 239–240).

Tạ Chí Đại Trường, in *Gods, People, and the Land of Vietnam*, also discusses the characteristics of syncretism and ethnic diversity in Southern Vietnam as a major driving force behind the emergence of new religious movements (Ta 1989). In this study, the author argues that Southern Vietnam is a place where various migration movements converged along with their own pantheon of deities, with a notable influence from the Tian Di Hui (Heaven and Earth Society) of the Minh Hương people. Regarding Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, he views it as the beginning of a prophetic line, extending to Four Gratefulnesses and Filial Piety (Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa / 四恩孝義) all operating within the context of a secret society: "The followers and sects opposing the French were suppressed so harshly that before 1945, the term Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (道寶山奇香) (and Four Gratefulnesses and Filial Piety), in the two provinces of Long Xuyên and Châu Đốc, the region of origin, was only whispered among the people. Those distant or curious could not find any trace" (Ta 1989, 327).

Sergei Blagov, in his doctoral thesis *The Caodai: A New Religious Movement* (1999), asserts that the emergence of Cao Đài is a fusion of political and religious movements and traditional thought, a reconciliation of Eastern and Western civilizations, and a political-religious organization in Southern Vietnam. The author's perspective is clear on the syncretism of the new religion.

Motivation for Coexistence and Survival in the New Land

The history of the Mekong Delta region is crucial background for understanding the emergence of new religions in southern Vietnam. In the 1st to early 3rd century, this region was part of the Kingdom of Funan. Later, the Champa Kingdom expanded to include Funan territory. In the 6th century, the Khmer Empire (*Chân Lạp*) absorbed and succeeded Funan.

The subsequent centuries in the Mekong Delta were marked by disruption until new settlers began arriving to reclaim the land. From the 17th century onwards, Vietnamese people started to cultivate the region, both overland and by sea. Ngo Duc Thinh, in his book *Culture and Cultural Regions of Vietnam* (*Văn hoá và phân vùng văn hoá Việt*

Nam) suggests that the Khmer arrived in the Mekong Delta as early as the 13th century, following the collapse of the Angkor Empire. This implies that the Khmer were present in the region 2-3 centuries earlier than the Vietnamese (Ngo 1993, 285).

Tran Quoc Vuong, in *The Foundations of Vietnamese Culture* , adds that by the 16th century, the Vietnamese had settled in the Mekong Delta with diverse social backgrounds. Some were prisoners brought to clear land, others were wanderers and the poor seeking refuge, while the majority were soldiers and officials dispatched to protect the new territory and chose to stay (Tran 2005, 269).

In *The People of the Mekong Delta and Indigenous Religions*, Pham Bich Hop (2007) argues that Chinese immigrants also played a critical role in the reclamation and development of the Mekong Delta region. In 1678, Mac Cuu[1] (鄚玖 / 1655–1735) led 400 people to the Hà Tiên area for reclamation. In 1679, Dương Ngan Dich[2] (楊彥迪 / ? - 1688) and Tran Thuong Xuyen[3] (陳上川) were granted permission by the Nguyen lords to settle in My Tho[4] and Bien Hoa. This group was known as Minh Hương settlers. Even into the 20th century, there were still waves of Chinese migration to the Mekong Delta. Regardless of their background or occupation, the Chinese formed organized groups called *bangs*, each led by a leader known as a bang trưởng (Pham 2007, 56–57).

The Vietnamese community migrating from the northern and central regions of Vietnam is also considered a highly significant demographic factor. One notable example is the group known as the "Dan Hai Huyen," who originated from the central region of Vietnam—a region known for its harsh weather and living conditions. In *Religion in the Historical Context of the Vietnamese Nation* (1983), Cao The Dung writes about this group:

> The Dan Hai Huyen have retained their Vietnamese identity, particularly symbolizing the Vietnamese cultural line extending from Gia Dinh through Dinh Tuong to Vinh Long, An Giang, Chau Doc, and Cao Lanh. The Dan Hai Huyen expanded rapidly in the An Giang region... As the Dan Hai Huyen increased in number, they organized into villages according to the administrative structure of the court and carried with them the customs and traditions from their northern homeland through the stopover at Gia Dinh. (pp. 12–19)

A summary of the Dan Hai Huyen illustrates how settlers from Central Vietnam, after a long journey, brought their cultural heritage to the new land in Southern Vietnam, seeking a better life. Son Nam, in *History of the Southern Land Reclamation*, notes that "Miet Hai Huyen"[5] refers to the people from the five Quang provinces (Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Quang Duc, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai) who settled in the South. The area known as Miet Hai Huyen is associated with the Ong Chuong River (Long Xuyen). The term "Hai Huyen" refers to the two administrative units—Tan Binh and Phuoc Long—that were the first to be established by the Nguyen lords in the South, now part of Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa. The people of Long Xuyen, known as Dan Hai Huyện, were likely settlers from Bien Hoa and Gia Dinh or soldiers from the five Quang provinces who settled in

Long Xuyen.

Examined more closely, the group of Vietnamese migrants to the South can be divided into three categories. 1) According to Nguyen, Duc Toan (2015a), since the 17th century, the southwestern region of southern Vietnam began to see the emergence of a new class of settlers - Vietnamese migrants. Most of them were poor farmers and craftsmen from northern provinces who were forced to leave their homeland due to the calamities caused by the war between the Trinh and Nguyen factions. The oppressive taxes, forced labor, conscription, and the brutal exploitation by the feudal class compelled them to migrate in search of a better life: "leaving was a gamble, with no certainty of morning sunshine or afternoon rain" (*ra đi là sự đánh liều, nắng mai không biết, mưa chiều không hay*).[6]

2) Additionally, there was a small segment of exiled convicts. Although historical records do not specify this issue, researcher Huynh Lua suggests that this group also made up a significant number, as the practice of exiling convicts to the south had been in place since the Le dynasty (especially during the reign of Le Thanh Tong from the mid-15th century onwards) and was continued by the Nguyen lords.[7]

3) Besides farmers and craftsmen, there was also a group of individuals who opposed the court to varying degrees: those dissatisfied with the examination system, those whose talents went unrecognized, those who exposed corrupt officials, or those who led or participated in various uprisings under the Lê-Trịnh regime. These were considered "intellectuals" with broad knowledge, literacy, and writing skills. These individuals could be the "thầy đồ" who played the role of teachers for the children of settlers in the new land.

The early migrants to the Mekong Delta region also included wandering adventurers (Vietnamese Text: giang hồ tứ chiếng)[8] or border soldiers. In general, all those discontented or dissatisfied with the current feudal regime aimed for this distant southern land in the hope of finding a better life (Nguyen 2015a, 20–21)

Li Tana in "An Alternative Vietnam? The Nguyen Kingdom in the 17th and 18th Century" (1998) argues that the experience of expanding borders southward seems to present an image of Vietnam quite different from the northern territories at that time, opening the door to a world where diversity was embraced and utilized for the development of Vietnam itself. This period was marked by significant development in Southern Vietnam under the rule of the Nguyen feudal dynasty, creating a new dynamic with the expansion and settlement efforts of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer peoples.

From the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, the Nguyen dynasty lost its control over the country. At this time, the French in Vietnam clearly displayed their economic and political ambitions. In response, anti-French activities were continuously carried out across Southern Vietnam. Unfortunately, these uprisings generally ended in failure, often resulting in significant losses for the local people. The anti-French movement in Southern Vietnam continued in a different form, heavily influenced by mystical religious elements. This was the period when Buu Sơn Ky Hương, Tu An Hieu

Nghia, and various groups of Ong Dao (religious sects) emerged, closely associated with land reclamation, village establishment, resistance against the French, and opposition to the oppressive actions of the feudal officials (Nguyen 2020, 31).

A community of residents composed of various ethnic groups and traditional beliefs found themselves in a new land due to traumatic experiences and a longing for their homeland. Despite the hope of finding a promising new territory, this new land did not immediately offer great prospects for establishing their cultural memories. As a result, an implicit agreement and negotiation between these ethnically and religiously diverse groups began to take shape in their interactions and coexistence.

Negotiating Memories Among Cultural Agents

Historical trauma from the old homeland, combined with contemporary political traumas and the ultimate trauma in religious practices, led to the emergence of new religions in Vietnam. These new religions are a direct product of the cultural negotiations among various groups of residents, aimed at creating a shared cultural collective memory among the four groups of inhabitants from three different ethnic backgrounds.

Khmer immigrants carry with them the memory of Theravada Buddhism.

Nguyen Van Trung (2015b), in his work *Dossier on Lục Châu Studies: Understanding People in the New Land, Based on Literature and Historical Documents in the National Language in the South from 1865 – 1930* (*Hồ sơ về Lục Châu học, Tìm hiểu con người ở vùng đất mới, Dựa vào tài liệu văn, sử bằng Quốc ngữ ở miền Nam từ 1865 – 1930*), notes that "the local Buddhism of the Cham and Khmer people is Theravada Buddhism, which focuses solely on individual salvation through personal practice and is somewhat incompatible with the high sense of collective solidarity among frontier settlers. Furthermore, the Mahayana Buddhism from the North and Central regions, while concerned with the salvation of all beings, also found it difficult to develop in the South during the French colonial period" (Nguyen 2015b, 302). On the other hand, Buddhist teachings can be recognized as profound and sophisticated, in the context of the near-decline from the 15th century, with the increasing prominence and institutionalization of Confucianism in the 19th century, and the lack of genuine spiritual guides, along with the harsh conditions of the new land, the Buddhism that immigrants brought with them was, to some extent, not well-suited for those who sought to make a significant impact (Nguyen 2020, 41–42).

The Vietnamese migrants from the northern regions carried with them the memory of Confucianism.

The Vietnamese carried Confucianism from the northern regions into the South. Some Vietnamese adopted Confucianism from the Chinese settlers who came to the South during the same period seeking a livelihood. However, the influence of Confucianism on the people in the South was not as strong as in the North. This is due to the rebellious nature of the migrants who wanted to break free from the constraints of their homeland. Author Thach, Phương (1992), in the book *Folk Culture of the Vietnamese in the South* (Vietnamese Text: Văn hoá dân gian người Việt ở Nam bộ) states that as one moves further south, the feudal characteristics diminish, replaced by a spirit of democracy and equality, evident in both communal village life and in the daily lives of individual families (Thach 1992, 68). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Confucianism was favored by the Nguyễn dynasty for the construction of a centralized feudal state, serving as the ideological foundation for "regulating the family, governing the country, and pacifying the world." At this time, Confucianism was not only a political doctrine for the court but also a key component of education at all levels. Confucianism permeated strongly from the royal court to the common people, providing ethical guidelines and discipline among the masses.

The third group of migrants, namely the Chinese, brought with them various religious organizations to the Southern region.

The Heaven and Earth Society, also known as the Red Lotus or Three Points Society, is a secret society from China with religious elements aimed at "restoring the Ming dynasty and overthrowing the Qing dynasty." When Western powers began ruling Hong Kong, they viewed all Chinese secret societies as threats and illegal, making it extremely difficult for such organizations to operate. The Heaven and Earth Society spread to the Southern region of Vietnam along with Chinese immigrants.

Son Nam (1926 – 2008), a renowned writer, journalist, and cultural researcher from Southern Vietnam, often called the "Old Man of the South," is one of the authors who has done extensive work on religious organizations, including the Heaven and Earth Society, which is considered to have originated from and led by the Chinese community.

The fourth group of residents consists of the descendants of wealthy families who went abroad for higher education in Western countries.

Illustrating this economic and cultural transition, La Laurette observed that the economy of Cochinchina was "stable and developing well," which enabled many newly wealthy families to send their children to Europe for higher education. Upon their return,

these western-educated youth significantly "contributed to the Europeanization of the region" (Nguyen 2015b, 333).

Based on this, the influence of Western culture on the religions that emerged in the Mekong Delta was quite apparent in the early 20th century. However, the Vietnamese in the Mekong Delta were very proactive, adapting the culture in their own way and seeking to make it independent of its origin. La Laurette remarked: "The Vietnamese learned from France the language, fashion, customs, advancements, and methods of social and economic organization, not to make Cochinchina French but to advance Cochinchina to a point where it no longer depended on France." (Cited in Nguyen Van Trung 2015b, 334).

Each community group, along with their faith, plays a clear role in politics and social status. For example, a Khmer leader named Asoa, who was of royal descent, established a base in the Seven Mountains area, Châu Đốc, and once collaborated with Nguyễn Hữu Huân in the resistance against the French (Tran and Tran 1998, 151). Asoa's activities were supported by the Vietnamese in the region and formed a movement. The uprising led by Pôkumpao in Saigon and Tay Ninh, also a prominent Khmer figure, had a significant impact on the Khmer community in Southeast Vietnam. Pôkumpao allied with other patriotic figures such as Truong Quyen,[9] the son of Truong Dịnh.[10] This force later became a powerful element in the resistance against the French, stretching from Tay Ninh to the Southwest, and achieved several notable successful uprisings (Nguyen 2020, 31–32). The political and cultural prowess of each ethnic group is an important factor in the cultural negotiation process. An additional example of the "Dân Hai huyện" can be found when they migrated to the South—where the Chinese community had already settled. The "Dan Hai huyen" people maintained and preserved their Vietnamese identity, from personal and family life to traditional customs and ethnic culture (Cao 1983, 13–18).

The groups discussed above reveal an equality in political roles and social positions. No group held a dominant or weaker role compared to the others. Therefore, the balance of status in the process of negotiating and reconciling memories is equal. This is the foundation for the syncretic nature of new religious movements in Southern Vietnam.

Conclusion

This study initially proposes a new approach to explaining the syncretism of new religious movements in Southern Vietnam. From the perspective of invented traditions and collective memory, the long history of coexistence, emphasizing the balance in the ability to negotiate memories among different migrant groups, can be highlighted. On this basis, the syncretic nature, integrating various religions into a new religion, is formed. Furthermore, the capacity for balance to negotiate among groups also shapes the spirit of harmonious coexistence among different new religious movements in the same region of Vietnam, a region with a history, and political volatility.

Admittedly this study lacked sufficient physical space to elaborate on the political and social roles of the resident groups—a factor that directly affects the process of negotiating memories and cultures among these groups. Additionally, more space to delve deeper into the manifestations of the invented religious traditions in Southern Vietnam would have been desirable. It is hoped that future research will continue to elaborate upon this research idea

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] Mac Cuu (鄚玖), also known as Mac Kinh Cuu (鄚敬玖) was a Chinese merchant who contributed to the reclamation and establishment of the Ha Tien region (Kien Giang) in the early 17th century in Vietnam.

[2] He was a leader in the anti-Qing, pro-Ming movement and a general of the Ming Dynasty under Trinh in Longmen, Qinzhou, Guangxi, China. In 1679, he, along with his entourage, sailed to pledge allegiance to Lord Nguyen and became instrumental in the development of the My Tho region in Vietnam.

[3] He is considered the first person to have made significant contributions to the large-scale reclamation of the Bien Hoa region. He was honored by Lord Nguyen with the noble titles "Nguyen as king, Tran as general, a great meritorious official without end." He was also conferred the title of "Supreme Deity" by Emperor Minh Mang and Emperor Thieu Tri.

[4] In 1679, a group of approximately 3,000 Ming Chinese immigrants were settled in this new land by Lord Nguyễn. Led by Duong, Ngan Dich they established My Tho Big City (美荻大浦). By the 17th century, MyTho had become one of the two largest commercial centers in Southern Vietnam.

[5] Miệt is a regional term used in the Mekong Delta of Southern Vietnam, meaning "area."

[6] This is a local folk verse from the western region of Southern Vietnam.

[7] The Nguyen Lords (Chúa Nguyễn / 阮王) (1558-1777, 1780-1802) were the rulers of Đàng Trong, the southern region of Vietnam, from Thuận Hóa (south of the modern-day Ngang Pass) to the southern part of the country. This period was marked by the Trịnh-Nguyễn civil war, where the Nguyễn Lords opposed the Trịnh Lords of Đàng Ngoài in northern Vietnam.

[8] "Giang hồ tứ chiếng" is a popular and familiar phrase in Vietnam, meaning people who are everywhere and go everywhere, often carrying a negative connotation.

[9] Trương Quyền (1844–1871), also known as Trương Huệ or Trương Tuệ, was a leader in the anti-French resistance movement in the latter half of the 19th century in Cochinchina, Vietnam. He was honored by the people with the title Bình Tây Nhị Lang Nguyên Soái (Marshal of the Second Army Against the West).

[10] Trương Định (張定; 1820–1864), also known as Trương Công Định or Trương Trường Định, was a military commander of the Nguyễn dynasty and a leader in the resistance against the French from 1859 to 1864 in Vietnamese history.

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BOOK REVIEW

- Don Baker, *Korean New Religions*
  Carole M. CUSACK (University of Sydney)

- Siddhartha Deb, *Twilight Prisoners: The Rise of the Hindu Right and the Fall of India*
  Edward IRONS (The Hong Kong Institute for Culture, Commerce and Religion)

https://doi.org/10.25050/JDTREA.2026.5.2.147

Don Baker, *Korean New Religions,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025; 72 pp. ISBN: 978-1-0096-1472-6, AUD $36.95 (ebook)

Carole M. CUSACK
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In this book Don Baker investigates the diversity of new religions on the Korean peninsula. The first new religion, Ch'ŏndogyo, began as Donghak ('Eastern Learning') in 1860. There are aspects of local traditional religions in Korean NRMs (animism, mountain worship, shamanism). Korea also has been strongly influenced for 1500 years by Confucianism and Buddhism, both literate traditions which became indigenized. Roman Catholic Christianity entered the peninsula in the late eighteenth century, and Protestantism arrived in 1884. Protestantism used the Korean language and introduced the term *Hananim* (One God) or *Hanŭnim* (Lord of Heaven) to refer to the monotheistic god. In defining new religions, Baker foregrounds those of recent origin. Ch'oe Cheu (1824–1864) received revelations from *Sangje* (the Lord on High), and his movement Donghak was in opposition to Sŏhak (Western Learning) or Christianity. He taught that *kaebyŏk* (Great Transformation) would renew the universe, which had declining levels of *ki*. Ch'ŏndogyo is Confucian in morality and outlook.

The next NRM examined is Won Buddhism, which Baker positions as the most "respected" (p. 16) of Korea's newer faiths. Pak Chungbin (1891–1943), known as Sotaesan, received a revelation in 1916. He engaged in social relief (helping farmers financially and reclaiming land from the sea) and founded the Society for the Study of Buddha-Dharma in 1924. Won Buddhism is innovative; no statues of Buddha or bodhisattvas are venerated. Rather, the key symbol is the empty circle, *ilwŏn*. Won Buddhism also teaches *kaebyŏk* and Sotaesan proposed that adherents should work to improve the world rather than detach from it. Won Buddhism self-identifies as Buddhist but claims to be an entirely new manifestation of the religion.

Baker notes that Confucianism is a big part of the Korean NRM scene. He examines Kim Hang (1826–1884), also known as Ilbu, who reinterpreted the eight trigrams of the *I Ching* (among other Confucian concepts and practices), and inspired three neo-Confucian groups (the Religion of Singing Songs and Stomping Feet, the Rectified Confucian Way – Kaengjŏngyudo - and Sŏngdŏkto). Kaengjŏngyudo members seek to live a traditional Confucian life, including donning Chosŏn costume and living in community, while Sŏngdŏkto (the Way of Sagely Virtue), is primarily concerned to demonstrate the compatibility of Confucianism with modern culture. Chapter 5, "Christianity and New Religions" opens with the observation that Catholicism has

generated no new religions, whereas Protestantism has fewer doctrinal controls and is therefore more facilitative of NRMs. The Unification Church is the best-known Korean NRM, and the religious career of Moon Sun Myung (1920–2012) is explained in some detail. Baker clearly explains the Christian context of Moon's teachings, while making clear to the reader how they differ from mainstream churches and theology.

Other Christian groups – the Olive Tree Movement, the Church of the Heavenly Father, and Shincheonji – are discussed. Then Baker turns his attention to Daesoon Jinrohoe, founded by Kang Jeungsan (1871–1909), who is recognized as the supreme god, Sangje, by his followers. Kang, who met Kim Ilbu, taught *kaebyŏk* from 1901, arguing that the Great Transformation "must begin with the elimination of grievances" (p. 41). Other religions stemming from Kang include JeungSanDo and Taejonggyo, which worships the culture hero and legendary founder of Korea, Tan'gun.

Chapter 7, "Religions and the State," considers how religions are considered in present-day North and South Korea. The Japanese occupation (1910–1945) mandated very few religions; only Christianity, Buddhism, and Shinto were licensed. Religious freedom came to South Korea when Japan lost the Pacific War. The next chapter considers the place of Juche ("self-reliance"), associated with the veneration of the ruling Kim family, in North Korea. Marriage is commemorated by visiting a statue of Kim Il Sung, and veneration of dead ancestors is also commemorated by making offerings to statues of Kim Il Sung. Baker's "Conclusion" notes that South Korea does not have a dominant religious community, and that several Korean NRMs are not theistic. He observes that these phenomena are located in the wider modern world, but have distinctive local Korean characteristics. This is an attractive and interesting short book, which is enthusiastically recommended to readers.

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Siddhartha Deb, *Twilight Prisoners: The Rise of the Hindu Right and the Fall of India,* Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2024, 232 pp. ISBN: 979-8-8889-0088-8, $21.95 (pbk)

Edward IRONS
The Hong Kong Institute for Culture, Commerce and Religion

Siddhartha Deb is primarily a novelist, but his journalistic work has appeared in such major publications as *Harper's*, *The Baffler*, and *Tablet*. *Twilight Prisoners* collects many previously published non-fiction works into a critique with a single focus—Mahendra Modi's India. Deb is not bashful about criticizing Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Despite this animus, the first two pieces provide a useful rundown of the rise of Modi, Hindu nationalism, and sectarian violence since 2014. Deb roundly criticizes the current government and the elite in general for their efforts to make India a capitalist paradise. He does not try to unpack this new ideology, however, focusing instead on its authoritarian tendencies, as well as increasing dangers to minority groups.

India's Northeast

The partisan flavor is tempered in many of the articles that deal with specific sites and events. Deb gives readers a clear description of the Bhopal disaster, for instance, a relevant reminder that corporations need to be held accountable for gross negligence and nonexistent governance. The article on the isolated province of Manipur, "Nowhere Land," is an exceptional description of the ethnic and economic tensions that keep this overlooked corner of the world turbulent. The piece takes an unexpected turn by uncovering the plight of Myanmar dissidents who have been leading a marginal existence there for nearly 40 years.

India has famously givenbook cover_260817 shelter to democratic activists and refugees, most prominently the Tibetan communities who left Tibet beginning in 1959. But the current government takes a different view of refugees, especially those from Bangladesh and Myanmar who come for economic reasons. The far right has promoted a theory that immigrants from Bangladesh are going to dilute the Hindu population in such regions as Assam, where around two million Bengali-speaking migrants (called *ghuspetiyas,* "infiltrators") from Bangladesh live, including both Hindus as well as Muslims. The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 allowed migrants from neighboring countries to apply for citizenship—unless they are Muslim.

Ayodhya: The Ram Temple

Deb's animus toward Modi and the BJP is an annoying presence in his otherwise fine description of his visit to the new temple dedicated to the god Ram in Ayodhya. The temple's site is said to be the birthplace of the god. It is also the former site of a mosque, Babri Masjid. The temple became prominent in 1984 when the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), a BJP-affiliate, called for the mosque to be destroyed and a new temple built. A funding campaign ensued, with donations flowing in from both India and the overseas diaspora. Babri Masjid was finally torn down by a crowd of Hindu "volunteers," called *kar sevaks,* in 1992. Deb points out that the Ram temple issue served as a useful symbol and rallying point for the BJP, which later led a coalition that won the 1998 national elections. However, the temple project has been plagued with problems. Construction did not begin until 2020. It was finally completed in 2025 and is now one of India's main pilgrimage sites.

Deb notes (118-9) that the ruins unearthed under the site were probably not from an original Hindu temple, but from a Buddhist or Islamic one. The area had indeed been a center of Buddhism, called Saket, in the sixth century BCE, the era of Buddhism's founding. The city was mentioned as a Buddhist center by the visiting Chinese monks Fa Xian and Xuan Zang, in the fourth and seventh centuries, respectively.[1] Nevertheless, the Ram Mandir complex, as it's now called, played a significant role in the BJP's rise and dominance. The chant sung during the old temple's demolition, "Jai Shri Ram!" (Long Live Lord Ram!), has now become closely associated with the Hindu right.[2]

The BJP and its allies, the mass movement Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, "national volunteer corps") and the VHP, have created a discourse of India as a uniquely Hindu culture under threat from outside ideologies. A major element of "Hindutva" is hypermasculinity. Purushottam Ram is the version of Lord Ram as the ideal man. In his age, it is taught, there were no outside disruptive forces, and no crime. In BJP ideology the Ram Mandir will be a manifestation of this ideal state from prehistory.

But the Lord Ram revealed in the Ramayana is not the ideal man. Although an avatar of Vishnu, Ram is not aware of his divinity and is subject to very human fears. Pressured by people who doubt his wife Sita's fidelity, he expels her to the forest. In some versions of the story, at the end of his rule of Ayodhya he drowns himself.

In addition to the ideal version of Ram, the Hindu right and the BJP have also appropriated the popular god Hanuman, whose image can be seen throughout India in a new version, "angry Hanuman."

Hindutva and Politics

Deb is not only critical of the BJP and Modi. His primary focus is "Hindutva," the movement to make "Hinduness" the nation's dominant ideology. This framing of issues puts minority groups, minority religions, journalists, and anyone promoting progressive causes on a collision course with right-wing organizations like the RSS.

Dhirendra Jha, in *Shadow Armies: Fringe Organizations and Foot Solders of Hindutva,* describes several of these thirty-odd groups loosed associated with Hinduvta. One particular group is the Santan Sanstha (SS, "the Path for Spiritual Progress") a charitable foundation founded in Goa in 1999. SS has been linked to bombings and prominent assassinations of journalists, although charges have never been upheld in court.

One of the assassinations was of Gauri Lankesh, left-wing editor of the *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*, who was gunned down in 2014. She had been reporting on one particular sensitive topic—the possibility that Lingayat Hindus in the state of Karnataka were asking to be granted status as a separate minority religion. The Veerashaivas, conservative Lingayats, see themselves as fully Hindu. And in political terms the defection of this powerful body from Hinduism would take away the BJP's most important group in Karnataka. Lankesh was a critic of the BJP on other issues, but this political one was so sensitive it led to her assassination. India continues to be a place of danger for journalists, ranking 151 out of 180 countries in 2025, lower than Hong Kong and Rwanda.[3]

In support of Hindutva the BJP government has established what amounts to a surveillance state. The National Investigation Agency (NIA), tasked with anti-terrorism, uses the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) of 1967 to arrest and hold civil-rights activists and government critics without trial for years. And recently, according to Deb, they have used powerful spyware applications, such as Pegasus, to plant documents on the computers of activists (181).

The influence of Hindu nationalism is only gradually coming to light through brave writers and journalists. Deb profiles Arundhati Roy, author of the novel *The God of Small Things*, who has devoted most of her prose writing to political issues. Deb's work is also in this vein and deserves to be applauded. At the same time, he spares little attention to exploring the BJP's core developmental agenda. His primary argument appears to be that millions remain mired in poverty while the new elites, industrialists, internet entrepreneurs, and their political allies, are rewarded with riches. This is hardly a full critique. His writing would benefit from tackling the validity of specific elements in government plans. He does a fine job of unpacking the fallout from such plans. But I find myself wanting to know more about what India's leaders will do to solve the intractable issues of livelihood and justice profiled here.

Notes

Nishad Wankhade, "The Buddhist Claim on Ayodhya," *Round Table India* website, 25 May 2020, https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/the-buddhist-claim-on-ayodhya/.

[2] Mir Afzal, "Jai Shri Ram: Exploring the Significance and Cultural Context of a Sacred Chant, on *Smart English Notes* website, 22 Jan 2024, https://smartenglishnotes.com/2024/01/22/jai-shri-ram-exploring-the-significance-and-cultural-context-of-a-sacred-chant/#google_vignette.3

3 "RSF World Press Freedom Index 2025: Economic Fragility a Leading Threat to Press Freedom," rsf.org. May 2025.

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