

## **New Religions and Lifelong Learning in Taiwan: The I Ching University of Weixin Shengjiao**

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**ABSTRACT:** In the past three decades, more and more students have enrolled in lifelong learning institutions operated by religious non-profit organizations in Taiwan. Under the conditions of lifelong learning policies, laws, and regulations, the types and courses of these institutions have become more and more diversified. The management of the organizations, the development strategies, and the quality of the organizations are different, calling for individualized case studies and in-depth research. The paper focuses on a pioneer lifelong learning institution, I Ching University, created by Taiwanese new religion Weixin Shengjiao. Its unique development model of the lifelong education system has been examined by using interviews and observation methods to collect qualitative data. The I Ching University has successfully applied five basic principles of lifelong learning: (1) the long-term talent training model; (2) access to learning regardless of age; (3) a curriculum oriented towards the practical needs of life; (4) a certification system; and (5) a self-built teacher training system. However, the research suggests, the effectiveness of lifelong learning at I Ching University may be improved by (1) applying for non-formal learning accreditation; (2) performing a satisfaction survey on learning, followed by informal discussions; (3) implementing a self-evaluation mechanism; and (4) establishing a process to evaluate learning effectiveness.

**KEYWORDS:** Lifelong Learning, I Ching University, Weixin Shengjiao, Non-profit Organizations in Taiwan, New Religions in Taiwan.

### *Introduction*

Taiwan is proud of its religious freedom, granted to both traditional and new religions. Confronted with rapid social changes, traditional religions try to readjust their organization and communication strategies, to be able to keep up with times and meet contemporary needs. Traditional religions may use

substantial financial resources to create non-profit organizations and set up networks of formal educational institutions, ranging from kindergarten to university. However, few of them have developed lifelong learning institutions in Taiwan. New religions are a more recent phenomenon. They may show greater flexibility in using modern media, innovative organizational management methods, and cutting-edge cultural and educational models.

### *1. Research Background*

One reason non-profit organizations created by new religions in Taiwan established adult lifelong learning institutions is that they are less expensive than formal educational institutions, for which newly established religions may lack funds. Another reason is that adult education may be used as a tool to spread and promote religious beliefs and strengthen religious movements. There are several non-profit organizations in Taiwan created by new religions, and many offer lifelong learning courses. Among the most important are the Bliss and Wisdom Foundation of Culture and Education, the Taiwan Tzu-Chi Foundation, the Heavenly Teaching Foundation, Weixin Shengjiao's Merit Foundation, and several foundations created by Yiguandao.

### Research Questions

More and more adult students attend lifelong learning institutions. The management of the organizations, the development strategies, and the quality of the organizations are different, calling for individualized case studies and research.

### Literature Review

The term “lifelong learning” was first used by Paul Legrand at one of the meetings held by UNESCO in 1965 (Legrand 1972; Wu 2004) The concept and practice of lifelong education began to develop around the world, thanks to the vigorous promotion by international organizations, such as the UNESCO, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the

European Union. In the 1990s, it became a significant educational trend in developed countries. After Yang Guoci (1984) introduced lifelong learning in Taiwan, many scholars proposed lifelong learning theories suitable for the local community (Yang 1992, 1995; Deng 1991). Seven main principles emerged:

1. Whole-person education
2. Self-directed learning
3. Role and qualification of teachers
4. Cooperative modality
5. Value clarification teaching
6. Confluent education
7. Flexibility of the education system.

All scholars insisted on the paramount importance of teachers in the lifelong learning process. The Taiwanese Ministry of Education officially promulgated the Lifelong Learning Act in 2002 (Ministry of Education 2002). The Act also defined the meaning of “lifelong learning institutions” and “lifelong learning models.” With this legal basis, the development of institutions began to diversify. At present, the major institution is the National Open University. There are also 87 community colleges and 66 learning camps for senior citizens. Community development organizations have 6,881 associations in Taiwan and nearly 100 institutions devoted to adult education programs for senior citizens. They are committed to develop community education and to launch lifelong learning courses in various parts of the island. Several non-profit corporations and non-profit organizations established by new religions have also set up lifelong learning institutes (Ministry of Education 2016) The percentage of lifelong learning participation in Asian countries in 2016 was 46% in Singapore, 39% in Japan, and 35.83% in Taiwan. Taiwan, thus, ranked third in Asia (Ministry of Education 2016).

## *2. The Research*

### Research Design

This paper focuses on the study, as a representative example of a lifelong learning institution created by a non-profit organization operated by a Taiwanese new religion, on I Ching University, established by Weixin Shengjiao (on which see Introvigne 2016, 2017b; Chang 2014, 2017; and, for a self-presentation, Hun Yuan Chanshi 2016). Interviews and observation (through personal participation in curricular lessons) were the methods used to collect qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the founder of the institution, the heads of the University, and the students who had studied there respectively for one year, three years, five years, and more than ten years. After compiling the interview data, a final analysis was performed, and recommendations were offered based on mainline lifelong learning theories.

### I Ching University

I wanted to research an institution with more than ten years of operations and classrooms all over Taiwan as a representative model of lifelong learning. I selected I Ching University, a lifelong learning institution established by Weixin Shengjiao Merit Foundation. I Ching University was founded in 1992. It has 42 branches in Taiwan, with classrooms all over the island. There are currently 524 classes, with nearly 20,000 students, and more than 200 lecturers. There are also nine overseas branches, San Francisco and New York in the United States, Vancouver and Toronto in Canada, Melbourne in Australia, Madrid in Spain, Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, Johor in Malaysia, and Osaka in Japan.

As of September 2019, more than 100,000 students have completed the course known as Fundamental Class at I Ching University. Every year, the University offers a variety of summer college student camps, teacher counseling training camps, I Ching camps for children (Chen, Li, Lin and Lin 2015), and classes for overseas Chinese. The fact that I am a member of Weixin Shengjiao, the parent new religion of I Ching University, made the research easier. On the other hand, I Ching University is clearly a representative example of lifelong learning institutions operated by new religions in Taiwan.

## Data Analysis

In 1992, the founder of Weixin Shengjiao Grand Master Hun Yuan Chanshi (see Introvigne 2017a; Huang 2016; Fang 2018), established Weixin Shengjiao Merit Foundation as a non-profit organization. Since its operation, the foundation upholds the principles of cultivating talents for society, promoting moral education, enhance spiritual wisdom, and promoting world peace. Its classes are open to public enrollment, and everyone can register to learn. Education focuses on Chinese culture, I Ching, Feng Shui, and religion. Grand Master Hun Yuan proclaims that the Foundation's aim is to help students to apply ancient Chinese wisdom to modern-day problems, both individual and social, from peace issues to economic betterment, based on the principle that when every family is at peace, the world can be at peace too (Hun Yuan Chanshi 2014).

The Foundation does not cater to members of Weixin Shengjiao only. Students of different religions are encouraged to participate in the study of I Ching and Feng Shui. After this study, they can return to serve others in their respective religious groups. Several devotees of folk religions and traditional religions attended the Foundation's courses (Chen, Li and Lin 2015a, 2015b). Then, the Foundation gradually established a lifelong learning education system, offered by Weixin Shengjiao's I Ching University. When this started, it was an innovative educational strategy in the milieu of Taiwanese new religions. At the same time, I Ching University continued to promote the twin missions of Weixin Shengjiao, to teach members how to cultivate themselves for the benefit of the country and to pray for humanity.

The teaching strategy of I Ching University is based on graduality. After the initial stage, students can attend one Intermediate Class per year. Weixin Shengjiao Merit Foundation also organizes free I Ching Feng Shui seminars in various communities, which enjoy a large popularity. Weixin Shengjiao also uses television to broadcast every day the program, *View All Perspectives of I Ching Feng Shui*, which has proved very successful. In 2009, Weixin Shengjiao created its own TV network to broadcast I Ching-Feng Shui programs 24 hours per day through satellite. These activities were widely advertised through printed, electronic, and online social media. They increased significantly the popularity of Weixin Shengjiao and promoted the lifelong learning programs of I Ching University.

Grand Master Hun Yuan selected the lecturers, completed the training programs, and recruited volunteers to conduct seminars in various communities in Taiwan and set up classrooms allowing students to learn near their homes.

Every evening, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m., thousands of students listen intently to lessons in more than one hundred classrooms in Taiwan. There are no restrictions of faith, age, or gender. All those interested can sign up for the courses. This, from the point of view of Grand Master Hun Yuan, serves in fact a moral purpose. I Ching University should provide students of all faiths with teachings of both spiritual and practical significance, empowering them to live better lives and help those in need (Hun Yuan Chanshi 2014).

Weixin Shengjiao's I Ching University has a curriculum of 24 years, and the percentage of students who try to complete the whole course is very high. The University uses what it calls a "virtuous fellow certificate system," in which every three years students who have attended the prescribed courses advance to the next level. There are eight three-year levels, for a total of 24 years. Every year, a solemn graduation ceremony is organized, which is also a religious event. All teachers and students wear Weixin Shengjiao sacred robes, and the solemn atmosphere emphasizes the importance of the learning achievements.

Grand Master Hun Yuan also established Weixin Shengjiao College, a college-level accredited institution that offers academic education in the form of a theological seminary. Thus, Weixin Shengjiao created a unique system combining lifelong learning with academic education.

The lifelong learning system of I Ching University and Weixin Shengjiao College is summarized in Figure 1:

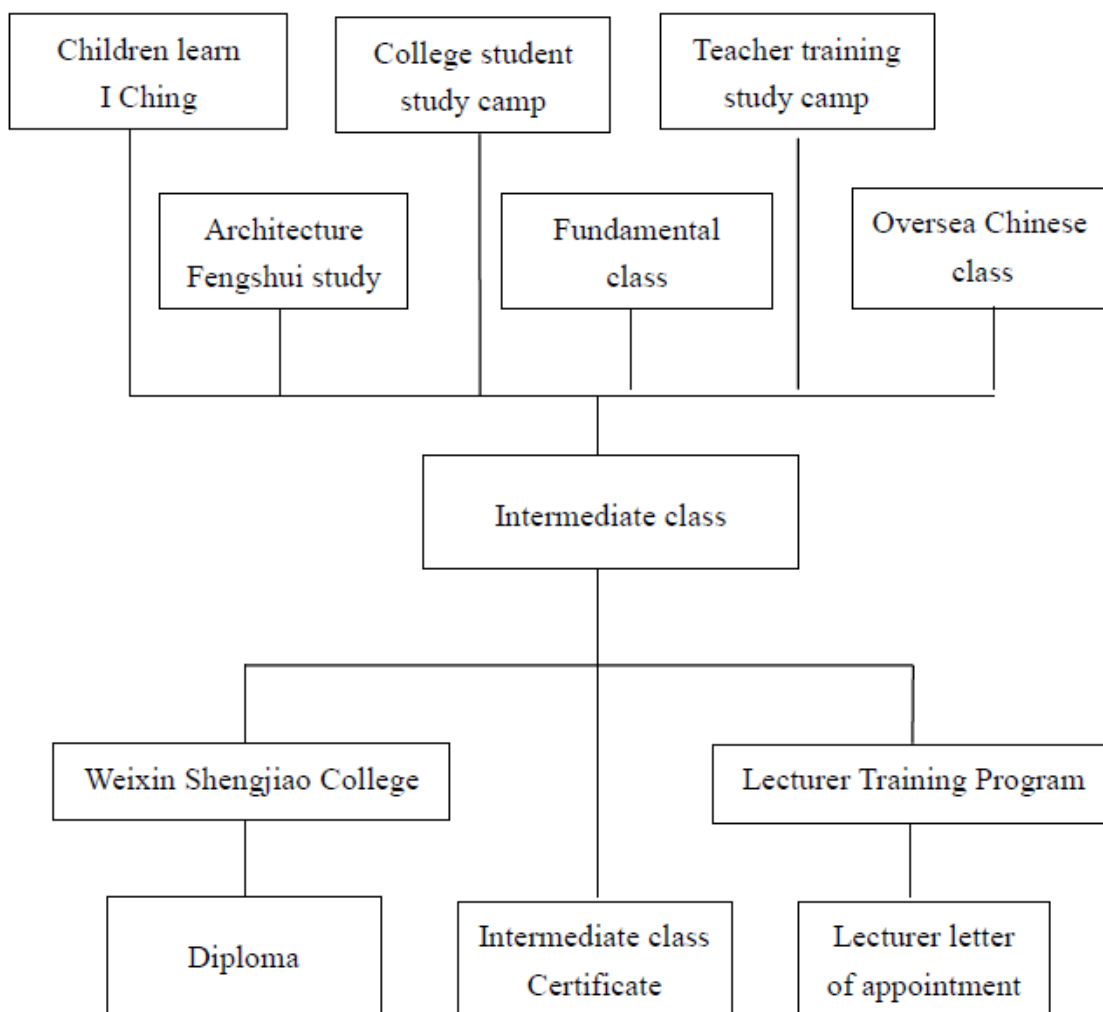


Figure 1. The lifelong learning system of I Ching University and Weixin Shengjiao College.

### 3. Conclusion

#### Research Findings

The findings of my study of the lifelong learning system of I Ching University show that this model successfully spread Chinese traditional culture, I Ching, and Feng Shui through multimedia technology, attracting more and more students who are also introduced to the religious worldview and practices of Weixin Shengjiao. At the same time, I Ching University provides courses fully in line with mainline theories of lifelong learning, permanent and wholistic education, self-directed learning, and value clarification teaching.

I regard the following as five factors explaining the success of I Ching University:

1. *A long-term talent training model.* I Ching University has a 24-year long-term curriculum, which gives students a perspective for continuing their studies for a significant part of their lives.

2. *Freedom of learning regardless of age.* I Ching University students may enroll in the courses regardless of age, gender, or academic qualifications. People from all walks of life can participate in the learning process.

3. *A curriculum covering the practical needs of life.* The main contents of the I Ching University courses are based on traditional Chinese culture, I Ching, Feng Shui, and religion. They advocate the use of ancient wisdom for solving modern-day problems and address the real needs students experience in their daily lives.

4. *An appropriate certification system.* The learning certification system can provide the students with a sense of accomplishment. As mentioned earlier, I Ching University's virtuous fellow certification system covers eight learning stages in 24 years. The graduation ceremony also strengthens the students' feelings of loyalty and pride.

5. *A self-built teacher training system.* The curriculum of I Ching University is very specialized. Teachers would not be easily recruited from outside. The University has established a self-built teacher training system, whereby outstanding senior students are selected and trained to become teachers.

#### Recommendations for I Ching University

My research also suggests that the effectiveness of lifelong learning at I Ching University may be improved by adopting four measures.

1. *Applying for non-formal learning accreditation.* Under Taiwanese law, I Ching University lifelong learning program may apply for accreditation from the Non-formal Education Programs Accreditation Center of the Ministry of Education. This would provide students with the option to choose the accredited course, which would enable them to receive a certificate issued by the Accreditation Center.



2. *Performing a satisfaction survey on learning, followed by informal discussions.* Each year, students should be interviewed to review the organization and gathered in informal discussion. This would both offer information to the principals on how to improve the courses and bolster the students' cohesiveness.

3. *Implementing a self-evaluation mechanism.* More broadly, I Ching University should establish a self-evaluation system based on the mission of the institution. Such a self-evaluation mechanism should be periodically re-examined and reviewed.

4. *Establishing a process to evaluate learning effectiveness.* Lifelong learning institutions are schools where students learn independently, pass no exams, and attend classes in mixed-age groups. It is recommended to establish a simple checking method, to enhance learning effectiveness, and provide remedial teaching and classes for students whose learning progress fell behind their class' average.

## Assessment

I Ching University is a unique educational institution, with a learning model covering formal learning, non-formal learning, and informal learning. Since its establishment 27 years ago, the lifelong learning system helped countless students to learn about Chinese culture, I Ching, and Feng Shui, and at the same time strengthened the development of Weixin Shengjiao. The University successfully organized students and volunteers to provide educational and social services throughout Taiwan and abroad. Such integration of religion, education, and social services is a successful example of how new religions in Taiwan establish, and operate through, non-profit organizations and lifelong learning institutions. The results of the study can serve as a reference for examining other lifelong learning institutions established by new religions through their non-profit organizations.

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