

Research Notes

ISA RC-22 Vilnius Conference Papers on New Religious and Spiritual Movements in Taiwan, Transitional Justice, and the Tai Ji Men Case

The Research Committee on Sociology of Religion (RC-22) of the International Sociological Association (ISA) held on November 11–14, 2021, in Vilnius, Lithuania, its mid-term conference, on the theme “Religion, Politics, and Uncertainty: Shifting Boundaries.” Session 4 of the conference was devoted to “Religion and Politics in China and Taiwan.” Besides including an unrelated paper by Lithuanian scholar Tadas Snuiškis, from Vilnius University, on the Consciousness-Only school of Buddhism in China, the session presented four papers related to the question of new religions and spiritual movements in Taiwan, transitional justice, and the Tai Ji Men case. The session was chaired and introduced by Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson, from Vilnius University. We publish the texts of Massimo Introvigne, Chen Yi-Jing, Rosita Šorytė, and Tsai Cheng-An.

The Anti-Xie-Jiao Tradition, Taiwanese Governments, and Minority Religions

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ABSTRACT: Scholars are familiar with the expression *xie jiao* (“heterodox teachings,” sometimes translated as “evil cults”) in contemporary Mainland China, where it identifies religious movements banned and heavily persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party. However, the notion of *xie jiao* dates back to the Middle Ages, was codified in legal texts of late Ming era, and was adopted by Nationalist China before Mao’s victory in the Civil War. It passed also to Taiwan, where some religious movements labeled *xie jiao* were persecuted until the end of the Martial Law period in 1987 and beyond. In fact, a crackdown against several new religious and spiritual movements happened in 1996, during the post-authoritarian period. Its consequences are still at work, as one of the cases deriving from the 1996 events, the Tai Ji Men case, is not solved to this date.

KEYWORDS: *Xie Jiao*, *Xie Jiao* in Taiwan, Anti-Cult Movement, Anti-Cult Movement in Taiwan, New Religions in Taiwan, Tai Ji Men.

On September 30, 1949, the day before he started his 27-year term as the first Premier of Communist China, Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) led the 3,000 delegates of the First Conference of Chinese Political Consultation to Tiananmen Square, where they broke ground for the Monument to the People’s Heroes. After Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong (1893–1976) himself spoke. He described the eight bas-reliefs to be constructed for the monument, honoring eight Chinese revolutions (Zhang 2009). The second was to celebrate the Jintian Uprising of 1851, when Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864) started what will become the Taiping Rebellion.

In the following years, Mao personally ordered to celebrate Hong and the Taiping through monuments, museums, novels, and theatrical plays, soon to be supplemented by television series (Weller 1987; Boer 2016b). The celebration of the Taiping has been continued by all Mao’s successors, including President Xi Jinping (Boer 2016a; Boer 2019, 183–99).

That Mao and the Chinese Communist Party celebrate Hong contrasts with how the founder of the Taiping movement was seen in Imperial China and by 19th century Western politicians and scholars, including Karl Marx (1818–1883: Little 2009; Thakur 2020). Unlike Mao, Marx moved from an initial sympathy (Marx 1853) to a very negative view of the Taiping (Marx 1862).

Hong proclaimed himself the younger brother of Jesus, married eighty-eight wives, and had those of them who displeased him or forgot they should constantly smile beheaded. The war to eradicate the Heavenly Kingdom he managed to establish costed China between 30 and 70 million deaths (Michael and Chang 1966–71; Spence 1996). Although some Western historians have re-evaluated Hong’s religious creativity (Kilcourse 2016), in modern journalistic jargon he would be the quintessential “cult” leader. In Imperial China, the Taiping were considered a stereotypical example of a *xie jiao*, a word often translated in English as “evil cult” but whose exact meaning is the subject matter of this paper.

Mao, who launched the first great campaign to eradicate the *xie jiao* in Communist China, arresting in the 1950s more than 13 million members of Yiguandao and other religious movements (Shao 1997, 452–55), regarded the Taiping as a patriotic proto-Communist movement. Indeed, calling the Taiping a *xie jiao* remains forbidden in contemporary Mainland China. For different reasons, considering them good Han Chinese rebelling against the foreign Manchu Qing dynasty, Chinese nationalists, from Sun Yat-Sen (1886–1925),

who even nicknamed himself “Hong Xiuquan the second,” to Chiang Kai-Shek (1887–1975), also considered the Taiping a legitimate patriotic movement rather than a *xie jiao* (Bohr 2009, 16).

The same contrasting judgments have been formulated for the xenophobic and anti-Christian movement of the Boxers, exterminated by the foreign forces of the Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900 and 1901 after it had killed some 30,000 missionaries and Chinese Christians. In 2021, a controversial book calling the Boxers a *xie jiao* written by Chinese dissident Liu Qikun and published in Taiwan (Liu 2021) was banned in Hong Kong. The new National Security Law was quoted, and the fact that offending the Boxers, regarded as good patriots, and labeling them a *xie jiao* is forbidden in Mainland China (Kwok and Ye 2021).

By mentioning these examples, I am not suggesting any conclusion about either the Taiping or the Boxers. My point here is to show that the label *xie jiao* has a strong political content, something that is important for understanding the anti-xie-jiao campaigns both in Mainland China and in Taiwan.

In 2020, Zhang Xinzhang, a professor at the School of Marxism of Zhejiang University, published an article on the meaning of *xie jiao*, which he said originated from conversations with the undersigned after he had read some of my articles on the issue and had visited me in Italy. Zhang stated that it is a mistake to translate *xie jiao* as “cults” or “evil cults.” To him, these translations are misleading. He recommended not to translate *xie jiao*, and to simply transliterate it, as scholars normally do for *qigong* or *kung fu* (Zhang 2020, 93–4).

The main argument used by Zhang was political. He noted that the core feature of the *xie jiao* in China is to be perceived as hostile to the government and dangerous for social stability and harmony, which is not necessarily part of the meaning of the word “cult” in English. I believe that another strong argument in support of his idea not to translate *xie jiao* comes from history, as evidenced by the studies of Wu Junqing (Wu 2016, 2017).

Translating *xie jiao* as “cults” is anachronistic. *Jiao* means “teachings” and *xie* means “twisted,” “bent,” and when applied to ideas “incorrect” or “wrong.” This application predates the Christian era. However, the compound *xie jiao* was first used by an identifiable historical figure, Fu Yi (555–639), a Taoist intellectual and Tang courtier. Fu was persuaded that Buddhism was a mortal threat for China and should be eradicated altogether, if necessary by exterminating Chinese

Buddhists. In two texts written in 621 and 624, he explained why this was necessary and Buddhism was a *xie jiao*, a newly coined term indicating “heterodox teachings” (Wu 2016, 8–9; Wright 1951).

Already in the first use of the term by Fu Yi, we may see that theological criticism of Buddhism was secondary. For Fu, the two key features of a *xie jiao* are not theological. First, a *xie jiao* does not recognize the absolute authority of the Emperor and does not support the state. Second, *xie jiao* are expression of a “barbarian wizardry” which is not part of the great Chinese religious tradition. Fu had nothing against magic in general. In fact, he was the Great Astrologer of the Tang court. What he meant was that Buddhism was using *black* magic (Wright 1951).

While, as we all know, Buddhism was finally not eradicated in China, although it was periodically persecuted, the Medieval Song and Yuan dynasties continued to use *xie jiao* to indicate movements they planned to eliminate, including the elusive “White Lotus.” The group was frequently prohibited by Chinese Emperors but, according to Dutch scholar Barend ter Haar, may never have existed as such. “White Lotus” was rather a label affixed to different and unrelated movements the state had decided to eradicate for political reasons (ter Haar 1992). The two features of a *xie jiao* remained being perceived as anti-government and being accused of using black magic, including raising goblins and casting malevolent spells (Wu 2017).

It was during the late Ming era that the prohibition of *xie jiao*, with the death penalty for those involved in its activities, was officially legislated, and movements were officially declared *xie jiao* first at the local and then at the national scale (Wu 2017, 94–6). In the 17th century, they included once again the White Lotus, and Christianity as a whole. Christians were also accused of practicing black magic, including tearing out the eyes and internal organs of children and using them in alchemical rituals (Folk 2017, 101). The Qing dynasty “repeated almost verbatim” the Ming provisions against the *xie jiao* (Seiwert and Ma 2003, 457).

Later, the case of Christianity continued to prove that listing a religion as a *xie jiao* or removing it from the corresponding list largely obeyed to political motivations. The Qing listed Christianity as a *xie jiao* in 1725 but took it off the list in 1842 due to pressures by the Western powers (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 27–31).

Nationalist China, Communist Mainland China, and Taiwan did not invent the category of *xie jiao* but inherited it from a century-old tradition, which had very little to do with Western controversies about “cults” (Melton 2021). I have written extensively about the campaigns against *xie jiao* in Communist China (Introvigne 2020), and article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code, which makes it a crime punished with substantial jail penalties “using” a *xie jiao*, i.e., being active in a group included in the list of the banned movements in any capacity (Introvigne, Richardson, and Šorytė 2019). I would not deal further with the People’s Republic of China in this paper.

Rather, I would like to insist on the fact that fighting *xie jiao* was not a feature distinguishing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from its nationalist counterpart, the Kuomintang. Certainly the CCP’s struggle against the *xie jiao* cannot be compared quantitatively to the parallel struggle by the Kuomintang, if we consider the number of those arrested and executed. However, from a theoretical point of view, both Sun Yat-Sen and Chiang Kai-Shek shared with Mao the idea that *xie jiao* should be eradicated.

Chinese nationalism was born as a progressive ideology of modernization, and *xie jiao* were seen as “superstitious organizations” (*mixin jiguan*) resisting modernity and progress (Wu 2017, 132–35). Although as scholars such as David Ownby (2016, 2020) and David Palmer (2008) have noted, nationalist governments in Mainland China were consistently busy with other priorities and never managed to develop the effective anti-xie-jiao apparatus that Mao was able to build since the 1950s, their ideologists continued to call for crackdowns on the *xie jiao*, and sometimes they were heard. In 1927, for instance, one of the largest new religious movements that existed in China, Tongshanshe, was the victim of one such crackdowns (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 104).

Spirit-writing religions, i.e. groups that obtained their sacred texts from spirits through forms of automatic writing, such as Daoyuan and Wushanshe, were also persecuted (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 104).

After the Communist victory in China’s Civil War, the Kuomintang leaders moved to Taiwan, where they established the Republic of China led by Chiang Kai-Shek. In the 1950s, members of groups persecuted in Mainland China as *xie jiao*, including the spirit-writing religions (Jordan and Overmyer 1986) and the most targeted movement in that decade, Yiguandao, escaped in significant

numbers to Taiwan (Irons 2017), although they knew the Kuomintang was also hostile to them.

During the Martial Law period, i.e., between 1949 and 1987, Yiguandao was indeed subject to surveillance and periodical crackdowns in Taiwan. It was also falsely accused of practicing black magic (Laliberté 2009, 63). Other movements subjected to crackdowns in the Martial Law period were those whose headquarters were in Japan, including Tenrikyo and Soka Gakkai, as the memory of fighting the Japanese was very much alive in the Kuomintang elite (Laliberté 2009, 62–3).

It should be remembered that Chiang Kai-Shek himself had converted to Christianity, and saw American-style Protestant Christianity as both a modernizing and an anti-Communist force (Bae 2009). However, this applied to mainline Christianity only. Non-mainline Christian new religious movements were easily accused of being *xie jiao*. As Tsai Cheng-An evidenced, in 1974 a violent crackdown targeted The New Testament Church, a Pentecostal movement founded by Christian Hong Kong movie star Mui Yee (1923–1966), whose headquarters had been moved after the founder's death in 1966 to Mount Zion, near Kaohsiung, in Taiwan (Tsai 2021, 73–4).

After the Mount Zion community had been disbanded by the 1974 crackdown, a second and equally violent raid, where devotees were badly beaten and some died, targeted members of The New Testament Church around Taiwan in 1985. Only protests by American Pentecostals and the intervention of the U.S. government ended the persecution (Tsai 2021, 74).

The Kuomintang had also developed a mutually supporting relationship with BAROC, the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China, allowing the government to claim that notwithstanding the Martial Law it was a friend and patron of religion. However, the authority of BAROC was eroded by independent Buddhist masters and new movements, which often advocated democracy and social justice and were thus at least implicitly critical of the government (Laliberté 2009, 64–5).

This was one of the reasons leading to a renewed persecution of groups labeled *xie jiao* in the post-authoritarian phase of Taiwan. Martial Law was lifted in 1987, but the Kuomintang largely maintained its power, and only from 2016 has

Taiwan had both a President and a majority in the Parliament not affiliated with nor including the Kuomintang.

Taiwanese voters were first allowed to elect their President in 1996. Some leaders of religious movements believed that democracy implied that they were free to express their support for the presidential candidates who opposed the reelection of Kuomintang's President Lee Teng-Hui (1923–2020). One of these candidates was Chen Lu-An, a disciple of Master Hsing Yun, the abbot of the large Buddhist order Fo Guang Shan. The abbot openly promoted Chen as a presidential candidate, as did Master Wei Jue (1928–2016), the leader of another Buddhist order, Chung Tai Shan (Laliberté 2009, 65).

Eventually, the Kuomintang candidate Lee was reelected, and his Justice Minister Liao Zheng-Hao (1946–2022) carried out a purge against the religious movements that had not supported Lee. In addition to Fo Guang Shan and Chung Tai Shan, the crackdown on groups labeled as *xie jiao* targeted the Taiwan Zen Buddhist Association (later the Shakyamuni Buddhist Foundation), founded by Zen Master Wu Jue Miao-Tian, the *menpai* (similar to a “school”) of *qigong*, self-cultivation, and martial arts Tai Ji Men (see Chen's paper in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*), and the Sung Chi-Li Miracle Association, a new Taiwanese religion whose founder is Master Sung Chi-Li (Tsai 2021, 75–8).

All these movements were accused of being anti-government, of “religious fraud” and tax evasion, importing some rhetoric against “cults” from the West and Japan. Media also claimed they had sinister magical practices, thus continuing the traditional rhetoric against the *xie jiao*. Tai Ji Men was accused, falsely and somewhat ridiculously, of “raising goblins” (Tan, Ding, and Huang 2016, 88–97).

In the end, long prosecutions led in some cases to sentences for administrative violations, while in the case of Tai Ji Men the defendants were found innocent of all charges, but the main accusations did not hold. Even Master Sung Chi-Li, who had been sentenced to seven years in jail in 1997 and had been depicted as the quintessential “evil cult” leader defrauding his followers of large sums, had his conviction overturned by the Supreme Court in 2003 (Tsai 2021, 77).

We know that not all religious movements respect the law (Introvigne 2018). Yet, what happened in Taiwan in 1996, featuring the persecution of groups later declared totally innocent by the highest courts of the country, including Tai Ji

Men, is yet another example of the political use of the category of *xie jiao*. The label was born in the Middle Ages in China to crack down on religious groups perceived as not supporting the power that be, and has continued to be used for this purpose ever since.

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