

The Supranational Messianism of Weixin Shengjiao: Unifying the Two Chinas Thanks to the Celebration of Mythical Ancestors

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ABSTRACT: Weixin Shengjiao (WS) sees itself as helping Taiwan fulfill a paramount mission: the cultural and mystical reunification of the two Chinas to solve cross-Strait tensions and promote peace and prosperity in the country and in the world. This article focuses on one specific ritual WS has elaborated to this end. The Ancestors' Ceremony, held on January 1, 2017, is analyzed to demonstrate how WS astutely combines contemporary Taiwanese politics with the Three Teachings, through the grandiose celebration of the three mythical Chinese ancestors, the Yellow Emperor Huang Ti, the Yan Emperor, and the so far estranged Emperor Chiyou, along with the deified Chinese sage Guiguzi.

KEYWORDS: Chinese Mythical Ancestry, Resolving Old Grievances, National Messianism, Cross-Strait Issues, Weixin Shengjiao, Weixinism, Hun Yuan.

Introduction

Weixin Shengjiao (WS) came to me as a gift in December 2016, when I was invited by its Grand Master Hun Yuan, together with J. Gordon Melton, Massimo Introvigne, and several scholars from Korea, to attend the impressive Ancestors' Ceremony held on January 1, 2017, in Taipei, and the many events of The International New Religion Interaction Forum of Weixin Shengjiao in the following days. Our hosts took us to visit several of their temples and holy places in the Taipei area, in Taichung, Nantou, and Yilan. Since it is a virtually unknown religion in the West (with the exception of Introvigne 2016; 2017), this paper intends to locate it on the map of world religions.

Not being a specialist of *Sanjiao heyi*, the harmony of the Three Teachings, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, I will not analyze here the theological

contents of the rich doctrines of this new Taiwanese religion. I will focus instead on those aspects of WS that I can relate to as a specialist of contemporary Western religions, that is to say the links between culture/politics and religion, thus between WS and Chinese culture, that of the mainland and that of the Republic of China or Taiwan (ROC). Attending several conferences organized or co-organized by CESNUR in Eastern Asia, as well as conversations with Massimo Introvigne and J. Gordon Melton, fueled my interest in these issues.

To the observer, the quest for a return to the “non-divided” China is most interesting, because it operates through the elaboration of very complex rituals, and the interaction with the business and political world of ROC. WS displays several characteristics of those millenarian religious movements that spring out of social distress, in a situation of colonization or post-colonization and/or in a situation of perturbing rapid social transformations, leading in this particular case to an original form of national messianism. WS is definitely a spiritual enterprise with a coherent political, social, and cultural purpose.

Founded in the 1980s, WS now numbers some 300,000 members (fewer than the official numbers, government sources occasionally mentioning one million: Introvigne 2016). It has built some 40 temples all around the island, in Mainland China and in the USA. It is also completing the construction of its Bagua Holy City, on the hills above Nantou, which will join in size the huge religious venues of other Taiwanese religions.

I will present the context of the foundation of WS, its strong link to Chinese spiritual traditions, and its particularities on the religious scene of Taiwan: its focus on specific heroes of Chinese mythical genealogy in order to bring about the reunification of the two Chinas, a reunification seen as cultural and mystical, but not political, since the constant threat of being attacked by Communist China is most worrisome to all the people we met.

I have drawn on my observation during the first week of January 2017, our interviews with Grand Master, with the teachers of his various colleges, with many of his disciples and above all, his daughter Fiona Chang, to whom I am much indebted, and whom I again met at international conferences in Bordeaux in May 2017 and in Israel in July 2017. WS has now translated into English several items of its explanatory literature (Huang 2016, Hun Yuan 2016a), and there are several very dense articles analyzing it, notably the one presented by Fiona Chang at Cesnur 2016 in Korea (Chang 2016), from which I have drawn various

remarks. Yet we do face a problem as scholars who do not speak Chinese: none of the 18,000 volumes written by Grand Master has been translated so far. This must be the following step for WS to become academically studied by international scholars.

The Foundation of WS

As is often the case in the birth of religious movements, it was the severe illness of the future Grand Master Hun Yuan and his miraculous recovery that triggered his deep interest in religion, as a form of *ex voto* to thank the spirits who helped him recover. Physical suffering leads to spiritual quest, and physical recovery to the need to share the fruit of such beneficial experience. In the realm of ethnic religions elaborated to give back pride to their members, there are several examples of similar processes with a major figure of the group in agony and resurrecting miraculously: one thinks in particular of Handsome Lake (1735–1815), the founder of the Iroquois Long House religion, as well as of John Slocum (1838–1897), the founder of another Native North American religion, the Indian Shakers, both in the 19th century.

The literature of the religion explains that Chang Yi-Jui was born in 1933 in Zhongliao Township, Nantou County, Taiwan. He became a land surveyor and founded a measuring company. In 1982, he fell ill and, when he recovered, he understood that it was his practice of Pure Land Dharma that had cured him. He then felt he was becoming one with a major mystical figure:

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva invited Taoism Taiji Heaven Wang Chan Lao Zu to descend to the mundane world and to enter into Hunyuan's body and heart. ... Since the Deity had entered into his body and heart, his body is the Buddha's body, his heart is the Buddha's heart. (Hun Yuan 2016b, 3)

A mission was then entrusted to him:

You have to help Amitabha to ferry five hundred Rohan's to return to the Western Pure Land. In the meantime, you have to transcend the holy spirits of fifteen thousand six hundred and fifteen surnames of Three Chinese Ancestors. (Hun Yuan 2016b, 4)

Chang Yi-Jui opened a family hall in Taichung. Building on the Three Teachings of China, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, he organized the worship of Buddha, using divination to help followers. In 1984 the hall was expanded into the Shennong temple. A divine revelation gave him the title Grand Master Hun Yuan.

How the Political and Cultural Context of Taiwan Shaped the Orientations of WS

French specialists of the religious and political history of Taiwan, notably Evelyne Micollier and Benoît Vermander, have explained how religious groups took advantage of the new political situation in the island in the last decades of the 20th century (Micollier 1998a; Vermander 1995; Vermander 1998). Both Micollier in her 1998 paper (Micollier 1998a) and Fiona Chang explain how these religious evolutions were an intrinsic part of the more general social changes (Chang 2016). They stress the paramount importance of mainland Chinese immigration to the island in the last centuries and the fact that the identity of Taiwan had to be constantly redefined according to the new norms imposed by the incoming communities and the successive governments. Major upheavals imprinted collective consciousness thus impacting religious changes as well:

— Taiwan has always been a prized territory for its neighbors. In recent centuries, it was occupied repeatedly by the Chinese: “Cheng Cheng-Kung (鄭成功) [1624–1662] ruled Taiwan in 1662, Shih Lang (施琅) [1621–1696] of the Qing Dynasty led forces to Taiwan in 1683 and made it a part of the Qing Dynasty” (Chang 2016, 2). This led to struggles between the new settlers and the aborigines, and fights among the Chinese newcomers between those faithful to the Ming dynasty and those favorable to the new Qing dynasty.

— The penetration of the Europeans as early as the 16th century. If the Protestants came in force in the 19th century, the Catholics were the first to reach the island (that they named Formosa, “the Beautiful”) via the Portuguese voyages. Taiwan was included in 1514 in a Portuguese diocese. Then in 1576 a Chinese only diocese that included Taiwan was founded in Macau. Between 1.5 to 2% of the population is Catholic today. Christians organized various missions to convert locals to either Protestantism or Catholicism and in any case to a radically novel manner of looking at the universe and at oneself.

— The introduction of messianic elements and of vegetarianism (mostly derived from Zhai Jiao, a syncretic teaching that borrows elements from Chan [Zen] Buddhism, the so called White Lotus religion or Badian jiao, and popular Daoism) in the 19th century, which coincided approximately with the arrival of the refugees from the Taiping insurrection and the reaction of society to the scourge of opium.

— The Japanese occupied the island from 1895 to 1945 and profoundly marked it as well, in all domains. They notably tried to impose new religious practices and belief systems, in particular after 1930.

— With their defeat, the island was returned to China, only to become again a pawn in the large-scale war between the troops of Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) and those of Mao Tse-tung (1893–1976). As we know, the defeated army of Chiang took refuge in Taiwan in 1949, along with a massive influx of civilians. Thus, the demographics of the island were again totally modified, the latter inflow adding up to several waves of mainland Chinese and of Japanese who settled along older Chinese populations and aboriginal people. As is constantly explained to visitors, all these waves provoked a malaise within various social classes, the newcomers often treating the ones already settled in demeaning ways.

— With the installation of the nationalist government after the war, religious leaders also arrived from mainland China, which provoked a major inflation of the “religious offer” that was to impact Taiwanese society for the coming decades (Micollier 1998a, 31).

— The most preoccupying danger today is the One China policy and the looming threat of military invasion, what is called the cross-Strait issue. WS presents itself as a “structured answer” to the major challenges faced by the Taiwanese. These challenges are, on the one hand, a very successful and intense involvement of the country in all the networks of globalization, with the concomitant risk to its cultural identity, as Fiona Chang (2016) explains most clearly, and the constant threat of annihilation as a progressive, independent nation.

Following David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer (Jordan and Overmyer 1986), Micollier explains a Taiwanese specificity in the field of religion that will allow us to situate more accurately WS. All the transformations listed above, as well as the fact that a lot of people were left out of the traditionally validated ways to succeed socially in the midst of rapid modernization, led people to feel more comfortable in traditionalism. Hence, many new religions have developed a traditionalist ideology in a society modernizing at a fast pace. Their adepts are able to recover their self-esteem sufficiently to tolerate change, while refusing to experience it themselves (Micollier 1998a). In Taiwan, traditionalists are not opposed to modernity, but they claim they first and foremost belong to a specific tradition (Jordan and Overmyer, 276).

One major upheaval took place in 1987, with the end of the martial law that had been imposed by Chiang Kai-shek, and later by his son. This breakthrough liberalized religious creativity and many new movements, building on traditional practices, appeared or developed more freely, whereas folk inspired religions such as divination and geomancy had been persecuted earlier (see Chang 2016, 3–5). WS is typically one such movement that the evolution of the political context allowed to progress in two complementary ways: to grow in numbers unhindered, and to affirm its spiritual identity even more. It is worth noting that I first presented this paper in a symposium organized by the Centre Durkheim at the Université de Bordeaux, where all the other papers analyzed the evolutions of the state regulations of religions in Vietnam, China, and Japan over the last decades. My own object of study was the perfect example of what happens when state regulations disappear. WS is clearly a success story, made possible by the end of the martial law and it, has never had to go underground unlike many similar religions in mainland China.

One must also take into account the impact of the upheavals listed above, as the last centuries of the history of Taiwan did play a major role in the elaboration of the doctrines and rituals of WS. As an acute observer of his society, Grand Master Hun Yuan understood how the series of invasions and dictatorial governments had greatly perturbed the Taiwanese, whether they be perceived as a united people or as the sum of various ethnic groups, and he sought to redress the unbalance.

In the introduction of her 2016 paper, Fiona Chang looks at the consequences of the attack against ethnic and national feelings in a situation of oppression either at the hand of foreign powers or of domestic dictatorship, what she entitles “Double Jeopardy of Nationalities and the World.” She explains how the sovereignty crisis experienced by the people in the 19th century due to colonization, but also in the 20th century, due to the attack on local cultures by the advance of Western culture, led to the creation of “many new religions with national consciousness [that] were motivated to revitalize the Three Teachings, emphasizing the subjectivity of Eastern nationalities on this basis” (Chang 2016, 1).

Here, the “revitalization theory” of Anthony Wallace (1923–2015) can help us understand the birth of religions such as WS. In a situation of anomy, of loss of bearings, with the weakening of group identity and the disappearance of common

visions, a prophet, or someone akin to this function, will rise and understand, either through his own conscious efforts or through some miraculous means, such as divine revelation, how to build a new movement that will alleviate the sufferings of people and give them a sense of direction (Wallace 1956; Wallace 1966).

Typically, in such circumstances, the new religion invents a configuration that integrates two main strands: those parts of the newcomers' value systems that can be useful to the group and quite a lot of strands from the old religion. The latter will be reoriented to give a feeling of familiarity to the members. Or, in the words of Fiona Chang: "When facing the impact of foreign cultures, learning how to strengthen oneself from advanced civilizations and absorbing nutrients from one's own traditions is a way of self-affirmation" (Chang 2016, 1).

Often groups founded in stressful situations develop millenarian characteristics. WS exhibits several of them in the sense that it claims that thanks to its rituals, Pure Land will at last become reality.

From the point of view of spirituality, everything in WS belongs to the Three Teachings, which seem to be practiced in a very traditional way, with what seems to be an emphasis on Buddhist rituals such as sutra chanting. Yet, contrary to what is usually observed in revitalization cases, as mentioned above, WS has not integrated foreign spiritual imports whatsoever. We asked Grand Master Hun Yuan whether he had looked into other religions, Christianity for example, or Islam or Hinduism, in order to integrate some of their beliefs in WS. Foreign imports, notably Protestantism and Islam, can be found in the major Taiwanese new religion Yiguandao, alongside the Three Teachings (Micollier 1998b; Micollier 2007, 45). Grand Master's answer remained very general: "All groups are brothers and one must work towards world peace." In the page "Main Purpose" of the program of *The International New Religion Interaction Forum of Weixin Shengjiao*, it is stated: "Weixin Shengjiao is looking forward to interacting with other religions in the world to exchange and share our cultural experiences" (Weixin Shengjiao 2016b, 17). I assume this does not imply concrete imports into WS doctrines, for this would run against the program intended in the foundation of the movement: a complete and unwavering inscription into Chinese ancestral culture and religions.

Western imports may be seen nonetheless in its various social services and its Charity Foundation. Such activities in non-Christian religions were often set up

to counteract the intense social activities of the Christian missionaries, as happened for example in Buddhism and Islam as well. Schak and Hsiao explain how Cheng Yen (b. 1937), the founder of Tzu Chi, acted after talking to Christian nuns. They suggested that, since Buddhism taught compassion, she should abide by this tenet and build schools, hospitals and other institutions to help the poor and not just preach compassion (Schak and Hsiao 2005, 56). Similar phenomena are found in Islam (Rigal-Cellard 2017).

The new religion is thus not a combination of exogenous and indigenous beliefs, but on the contrary a strong revitalization, not so much in the sense of Wallace but in the shape of a reinforcement, of ancestral spiritualities. Yet, WS does not content itself with a mere strengthening of the Three Teachings: to buttress them, it has added to them two other age old folk Chinese techniques, I Ching and Feng Shui. These are seen as infallible tools to implement the positive message of the Three Teachings in the material world.

In the words of Fiona Chang: “The rise of Weixinshengjiao can be described as the ‘institutionalization’ of these diffused folk beliefs, turning them into a systematic, organized religion” (Chang 2016, 4). The other reinforcement is sought in the celebration of the mythic genealogy inherited from ancestral China.

Honoring Mythic Chinese Genealogy, the Hierarchy Deriving from Fu Xi and the Three Emperors

Just as Taiwan considers itself as the conservatory of ancestral China, of its arts and spirituality, eradicated in the Mainland by Communism, WS embeds all its rituals and doctrines in the mythic lineage of the Chinese. It offers itself as the best agent to reestablish the long-gone harmony of Chinese culture and to operate a meaningful symbiosis between all its ethnic communities, which centuries of conflicts have sundered and displaced. The importance granted to Emperor Chiyou is most significant in this respect. Chiyou is one of the two mythical ancestors to whom specific dedication is granted in WS, the other one being Guiguzi, a military strategist of the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE) said to have been the earthly embodiment of Bodhisattva Wang Chan Lao Tzu. Through this selection, WS differentiates itself from other sister new religions in Taiwan.

Not being able to distinguish whether WS interprets the mythical genealogy in a “canonical way” (if such an expression makes sense in the field), I will simply here summarize the attributes conferred in the literature of WS on the major ancestors. The third chapter, “The doctrines and dogma of Weixin Shengjiao,” of the major book in English on the religion, *The New Religion of the World: Taiwan’s Weixin Shengjiao*, written by Grand Master Hun Yuan (Hun Yuan 2016a, 32–33), opens on the visual representation of the lineage of Grand Master, that shows how the ancestors are positioned. At the origin: Ancestor Fuxi Shi, the Primordial, is emptiness. He was born 7,352 years ago (Hun Yuan 2016a, 11). Below him: Jiutian Xuannu, or the Mysterious Lady of the Nine Heavens. She inherited Knowledge. The Manifested. Two polarities give rise to four phenomena. Below: the three Chinese ancestors, i.e. Emperor Chiyu, Yellow Emperor Huang Ti, Yan Emperor. Below them, Guiguzi, i.e. the Immortal Master Wang Chan Lao Tzu, and below, the figure of Grand Master Hun Yuan or the Eternities. Guiguzi and Grand Master united and passed the knowledge to modern times, including I Ching and Feng shui.

WS honors Wang Chan Lao Tzu (Guiguzi), considered as the leader of Tian-jie, the ecclesial world, while Grand Master Hun Yuan is a master in humankind’s world. Guiguzi, or the Immortal Master Wang Chan Lao Tzu, is always recognizable with his fluffy whip in his right hand and the symbol of Feng Shui in the palm of the left hand placed on his lap. He presides over all the altars of the religion and thus “signs” them as WS, since one does not find him in the numerous Taoist-Buddhist temples of the island (to my knowledge).

Grand Master Hun Yuan wrote the revelations he received from Guiguzi/Wang Chan Lao Tzu in the sixteen *Apocalypse Sutras* and in the more than 18,000 volumes archived as the *Weixin Daozang*, in the headquarter temple complex Chan Chi Shan Fo (that we visited). Concerning the *Apocalypse Sutras*, when I asked Fiona Chang about their contents, we realized that the term “Apocalypse” may not be the proper translation. It should rather be “revelation,” which is the mere English translation of the Greek word “apocalypse,” but it does not carry the frightening connotation of “apocalypse,” which in the West is associated with horrible catastrophes and destructions.

Much attention is given to “Gui Gu culture,” said to derive “from Kunlun civilization” (Hun Yuan 2016a, 34). In his construction of a coherent

development of this culture, Grand Master Hun Yuan traveled literally to its source:

In 1998, [he] led a multitude of his disciples to Xinjiang Tianshan southern road at Tianchi to trace the origin of our ancestors and Gui Gu culture. He took an oath that he would go to the Mother Queen Temple every seven years. He has made three visits to worship her in 1998, 2005, 2013 respectively. (Hun Yuan 2016a, 34)

In 2013, he worshipped at the temple of the Goddess Jiutian Xuannu in Qinghai Kunlun Mountains. “This place shows Chinese heritage and its origin.... It symbolizes the inheritance of continuous Chinese culture” (Hun Yuan 2016a, 35).

Grand Master Hun Yuan taught in 2015 that 14,500 years ago, the universe was chaotic and

Hong Jun Lao Tzu disclosed the secret of chaos, which was developed into the Kunlun civilization. 7,352 years ago, Fuxi founded the Bagua (8 trigrams) in which he invented the first line as heaven and the second line Earth. ... This civilization was later inherited by Jiutian Xuannu. She developed Tai Chi, a so-called Manifested, synthetic Bagua, in which two polarities give rise to four phenomena and so on. After that the knowledge was passed to three ancestors. Yellow Emperor invented the humanities, clothing, food, housing, transportation: he is considered the patriarch of humanity. He advocated human closeness. Yan Emperor invented medicine and agriculture. He advocated to raise and cultivate talented people. As for Emperor Chiyou; he developed metallurgical technology. He is the patriarch of industry. (Hun Yuan 2016a, 36)

The knowledge of the Three Emperors was transferred to Wang Chan Lao Tzu, forming Gui Gu culture, which is

the future of the world as well as a beacon of peace. It is the cornerstone of Chinese culture. Grand Master applied Gui Gu culture to the present time and made it flourish in Taiwan and overseas. Weixin Shengjiao is thus derived from the Kunlun civilization. (Hun Yuan 2016a, 36)

The purpose of founding WS is given in the title page of the 2016 book by Grand Master Hun Yuan. It is directly the heritage of the Yan Emperor: “Raise and cultivate talented people, revitalize and cultivate people’s morals, refine ambitions, create universal harmony” (Hun Yuan 2016a, title page). Chapter 4 of the book enumerates all the qualities of the one specific patriarch of WS: Guiguizi. As mentioned earlier, Guiguizi is the name Bodhisattva Wang Chan Lao Tzu took when he incarnated on Earth during the Warring States period. “He had

108 disciples.” He was a master military strategist, and a descendant of Yellow Emperor. “He cultivated himself to be an immortal” (Hun Yuan 2016a, 53).

He is the light in the darkness of life. He is everywhere and nowhere. His wisdom is of ‘cultivating’ oneself, regulating one’s family, governing the country and ruling the world. ... It is a beacon of merciful salvation. ... In Taiwan, there are immeasurable plights. He saved countless crowds so that he made people full of hope. (Hun Yuan 2016, 54)

The final paragraph sums up his function for Taiwan specifically within the cross-Strait question:

Guiguzi’s great wisdom has spread from China, glowing everywhere in the world and it has benefited people. His divine wisdom saved Taiwanese fellows and shined over every corner of the world, which cannot be understood by ordinary people. His merits are as respectable as heaven. Whether the peace between cross-straits or world peace, all should rely on Guiguzi’s wisdom in order to successfully realize wishes. (Hun Yuan 2016a, 54)

The second major character chosen as a trademark of WS is Emperor Chiyou. Whereas he is normally excluded from the noble lineage, since he is seen as the enemy who fought against the other two Emperors, in WS he is reintegrated into the lineage and hailed as the patriarch of Chinese ethnic groups expelled from the heartland. In fact, in his flight after his defeat he took his armies with him away from the core of the empire to settle in Korea (mostly) and in Japan.

By reinstalling him, the ethnic groups that descend from the same genealogy, but settled on the fringes of the mainland, are embraced back into the fold. It was very clear during the Ancestors Ceremony I attended that the indigenous people of Taiwan were granted a major place, not only by their seating in the middle of the bleachers, directly facing the altar, but also by being given the last show to perform, thus giving an ecumenical coda to the whole celebration.

All the Emperors of China, from the most remote mythical ones to actual historical figures derive from this genealogy. The ceremonies elaborated by WS are addressed to all the 15,615 ancestors. Since hundreds of wars have killed thousands of people, one now should atone for them in order to prepare a better future, Pure Land, for all the Chinese. Here, the term “all the Chinese” must be understood in its broadest sense for WS considers that the royal lineages of the Koreans, the Vietnamese, and the Japanese all descend from the original Emperors.

The ceremony dedicated to ancestors gives the precise figures of those ancestors:

We summon Chinese nationality fifteen thousand six hundred and fifteen ancestors' spirits, Chinese Nationality nine hundred seventeen Emperors and their family holy spirits, [and since in] Qin Dynasty, Fu Xu [the mythical Chinese progenitor of Japanese royalty] landed in Japan, one hundred and twenty-four Japanese Emperors and their family holy spirits, the holy spirits of one hundred and ninety-five Korean Emperors of the Chiyou Emperor descendants that [sic] migrated to Korea. We follow the religious rites to summon all spirits to come to the Ceremony to accept offerings. (Weixin Shengjiao 2016a, 9)

In the Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Hall, in the San Bao Branch temple, are listed for prayer purposes the 917 Emperors of China, the celestial Emperors of Japan, and those of Korea. This hall distinguishes this temple from the others:

Its originality compared to the other temples: the Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Hall. Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is the main god of the traditional Buddhist belief who is in charge of all the spirits. Therefore, Chinese Ancestors Hall and Emperors Hall were both settled there and they are worshipped by chanting sutras mornings and nights. This is a critical rite to show respect to the ancestors' spirits. The abbot of this temple, Abbot Master Yuan Song is expert in sutra chanting. He is president of the Chanting College, and is responsible for cultivating sutra chanters and preparing Weixin Shengjiao chanting etiquette. (Weixin Shengjiao 2016b, 40)

The Ancestors Ceremony, January 1st, 2017

The full title of the event is: “Twelfth Altars of Weixin Shengjiao Chinese Nationality United Ancestors Worship Ceremony.” It is a grandiose ceremony, perfectly staged for six hours, in which all the vibrant educational, business, and political segments of Taiwanese society participate:

Today, we have vice president of Republic of China, president of Legislative, and leaders of all fields, representatives of the scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants, representatives of the Three Chinese Ancestors descendants from Taiwan and overseas, [they] sincerely express their grateful and expectation for world peace forever. (Weixin Shengjiao 2016a, 10)

The ritual was first performed in 2004 and since then eleven such ceremonies have taken place. The one of January 2017 was the 12th. We were told that it would evolve in the future and be somewhat different from what we were participating in (but we don't know how). The Linkou Stadium, west of Taipei (between Taoyuan International Airport and Taipei) was packed: 33,000 attendees.

The goal of the ceremony is to complete the worship of the 15,615 surname ancestors' holy spirits, and to appease the wraiths (specters, spirits) of 3,762 wars: the millions who have died in the thousands of internecine wars between the Chinese over the centuries.

In past five thousand years, Chinese ethnicity have three thousand seven hundred and sixty-two wars which cause the wraiths then [to] divide fifteen thousand six hundred and fifteen ancestors' spirits and the wraiths of eight hundred and sixteen wars of the world. (Weixin Shengjiao 2016a, 9)

The ceremony will allow these spirits to rely upon the heavenly light. It will bless the 15,615 surname ancestors, allowing them to return to the Western Pure Land, attain liberation and achieve Bodhi. The hatred will disappear. The ghosts, wraiths, of the departed must be put at peace. "Resolve grievances and end wars are our destiny and missions of all Three Ancestors descendants" (Weixin Shengjiao 2016a, 10).

Base [sic] on the religious rites, we recited over ten million sutras and dedicate merits to the ancestor spirits. We pray for the spirits to be peaceful, trace the origin and hope all spirits return to their hearts. In order to return to our hearts, we need to rely upon the merciful light of Deities, God, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Jade Emperor to bless. Buddhas will lead ancestors' spirits, let go of hatred, attain Buddha-nature, liberation and return to the Pure Land. Then together to create Weixin Pure Land at this moment. In order to transcend ancestors' spirits, we must have broad-minded and great wisdom like Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Then it is possible to summon ancestors' spirits to come to the altar to accept offerings. Wang Chang Lao Zu Da Tian Zun promulgates the heavenly order. And Grand Master Hunyuan Chanshi leads all branch temples, abbots, masters and Weixin virtuous fellows, follow the heavenly order, hold the 12th United Ancestors Worship Ceremony. We practice Dao for the nation and pray for people, for the harmony of the Chinese Nationality. We sincerely pray that all ancestors' spirits let go of hatred, hand in hand, heart to heart, world as a family, together to create eternal world peace. (Weixin Shengjiao 2016a, 9)

Before the actual beginning of the ceremony, Grand Master blessed the food that everyone was going to consume. For several hours, the different groups representing members of WS and active members of society marched from the gate of the stadium to the huge altar, in perfect order. They offered prayers and flowers to the souls of the ancestor. In between prayers and specific rituals, dancers and musicians offered their performances to the ancestors for the great joy of the audience.

In one ritual, a priest elevated an offering in a manner reminiscent of the Catholic eucharist offering. Fiona Chang explained to me:

This is a small cup which contains rice, it's a offering to the spirits (Gods, deities and all sentient beings). The Chinese words 午供 mean 'Lunch Offering.' The ritual is derived from Buddhism, [where] there are three times of offering every day: breakfast, lunch and dinner. This is quite common rite in Buddhism. With the magical power of Buddha, the small bowl of rice can be transformed into immeasurable rice which can feed immeasurable spirits. Offering is very important in Chinese religion, we offer not only rice, but also everything especially fruit, flowers, incenses, cereals... etc, even what we do for glorifying God is a kind of offering. (Fiona Chang, e-mail message to author, March 31, 2017)

Major politicians came to offer their respects to the ancestors. A prayer was read by the master of ceremony, then the politician read a prayer and spoke to the audience. The first politician to appear was Wang Jin-pyng, the former president of the Legislative Yuan (i.e. the parliament, which follows a unicameral system, and one of the five branches of government). He remained in office from 1999 to 2016, a term of record length. What is most important is that he is also a member of the conservative Kuomintang party (KMT), but he is said to be conciliatory and has worked with the Democratic Progressive Party. Then came mainland representatives, local government authorities, judicial and police agency representatives, technology and medical representatives, private associations representatives. The second major political figure to appear was Hung Hsiu-chun, the chair of KMT since March 2016 and the first woman holding that position. Born in 1948, she was vice-president of the Legislative Yuan from 2012 to 2016. She comes from the field of education and has worked towards improving higher education. This connection to the KMT is again very important for WS.

Another major Taiwanese religion, Tienti Teachings, has historically been tied to this party. The Taiwan-headquartered branch of the Tienti religion, Tienti Jiao, was founded in 1980 (following a schism within Tiande Shengjiao, whose origins date back to 19th century in Mainland China) by Li Yu-chieh (1901–1994), who was a charismatic figure of KMT. The last (adopted) son of Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Wei-kuo (1916–1997), often participated in Tienti's activities. Vincent Siew, who served as Vice-President of ROC from 2008 to 2012 and was the first Taiwanese-born Premier of the country (1997–2000), and was also vice-chairman of the KMT, was himself a member of Tienti. All this explains why Tienti is sometimes called "the KMT religion" (Micollier 1998b, 45, Chang 2017).

The third major political figure to appear at Weixin Shengjiao's ceremony was Annette Lu Hsiu-lien, who was Vice-President of ROC from 2000–2008. Born in 1944, she is a member of the Democratic Progressive party. She fought against the authoritarian regime and was sentenced to twelve years in jail for sedition. Thanks to international outrage (notably from Amnesty International) she was released after 5.5 years. She is an important leader of the Taiwan Independence Movement and did not follow the policy of Chen Shui-bian when he was the first Democratic Progressive Party president of ROC from 2000–2008. She is also a prominent feminist activist.

The ceremony was concluded by our turning to the gates opposite the altar to bid farewell to the ancestor spirits and accompany them in their journey while we sang “The Hymn to See Off Our Ancestors”:

All spirits return to hearts, see off our ancestors, merit completed. Now, we are respectfully see off our ancestors to return to the Western Pure Land. And sincerely invite Chairman Grand Master Hunyuan Chanshi to read the See Off Ancestors' Spirits Hymn. We follow the mantra of the Gui Gu Immortal Master Heavenly Virtue Sutra (One bow). The Three Chinese Ancestors' spirits come and go from the Southern Heavenly Gate. (Weixin Shengjiao 2016a, 32)

Once the spirits were safely on their way to Pure Land, the 33,000 participants went back to their cars, or to dozens of buses. We were taken to a good restaurant, as we would be every noon and evening for the week, and we sat at the table of Grand Master or the one next to it, with all the masters of Weixin Shengjiao and our friendly interpreters.

Conclusion

Two points must be added before my concluding comments. First, even if the prime membership of WS is made of Chinese, whether in China, Taiwan, or the diaspora, the group aims also at a much vaster audience: its full name is “Weixin Shengjiao, the New Religion of the World.” Even if it remains modest in size, it has high ambitions. So far, there is only one group in Europe, in Madrid, whose members we met in Taipei. The groups in the USA seem to be expanding, and the large temple in mainland China promises that WS will attract more and more mainland Chinese, and possibly as well Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese, either in their own countries or in their diasporas.

Second, I find particularly interesting the fascination for genealogy exhibited by the group. Reappropriating one's own genealogy is a major feature found in the religions of displaced populations, whether through voluntary or involuntary migrations. In the realm of colonized populations, one thinks of the Ghost Dance, a major millenarian phenomenon of Native Americans. At the end of the world that the adepts are bringing about with their long and slow dance, the souls of the ancestors killed by the Whites will come back on trains. In the Melanesian Cargo cults, believers, bound to their ancestors in a life-death continuum, think cargos are sent by their ancestors to help them against the colonizers. Mormonism is one of the best examples in the West of the recourse to genealogy, in a most technical way, to help members fully accomplish their salvation by reuniting them spiritually to all their ancestors. In a society that has lost and keeps losing its knowledge of the past, and consequently has difficulties in building a coherent future, finding one's ancestors, knowing where one comes from, is reassuring.

Interestingly, in the case of WS, the quest for roots is set at a different level: though private individuals and families ancestors were mentioned during the ceremony, the major ones are the collective ancestors, not the individual ones. Thus, the identity of WS members cannot be individualistic. Happiness can only come to the individuals once they have joined in with the thousands of ancestors of the various lineages issuing from the Emperors.

To conclude more specifically on the links between WS and national identity and politics, we can say that WS does indeed display a political project. This is to be understood on two levels: first, in the narrow sense of the integration of major current Taiwanese politicians in the Ancestors' ceremony, and of the participation of the members in the political life of their country. Second, and more originally, by claiming that it is only through WS that the lost unity of the Chinese nation can be recovered. The religion affirms not only its own superiority over the other religious groups, but also the superiority of its country, Taiwan, as the savior of all the Chinese whose souls were destroyed by the wars over the centuries and by Communism. In so teaching, WS does exhibit a strong millenarian outlook, a feature often linked to stressful conditions as we saw above.

Sanjiao heyi, or the harmony of the Three Teachings, forms the strong component of its nationalist project colored with millenarian expectations (Micollier 1998a, 46). Here, millennialism is not to be taken in the biblical sense

(with the scenario from the Book of Revelation in particular), that is, to say with a view of the outside world as decadent, corrupt, impure, and with the expectation of major catastrophes to cleanse the earth and bring about a savior and paradise on earth. Indeed, I have not heard mentions of any form of social decadence. The philosophy developed by Grand Master Hun Yuan and his followers seemed to me most positive and optimistic regarding society at large and the potential of people to succeed in everything they undertake, provided they choose the right tools that WS offers them. Like many East Asian religions, WS is pragmatic and trusts its techniques, whether liturgical or divinatory thanks to I Ching and Feng Shui, to bring about prosperity to its adepts and thus to the rest of society.

Its millenarian expectation is that of the return to the golden age when all the ancestors cohabited, of an age before fighting and grievances and killings separated people and the Chinese ethnic groups in particular. This golden age is what in Buddhism is called Pure Land. Adepts can reach it when they practice the right ceremonies, chant the right sutras, use good I Ching and Feng Shui, and lead a good moral and spiritual life. This individual goal is totally intertwined with the collective need to reach Chinese national, cultural, and genealogical unity. It is this unity that, once realized, will bring a reign of peace on earth:

Weixin Shengjiao fully utilizes ancient Chinese traditional wisdom [I Ching and Feng Shui] to cultivate a pure land in the contemporary Taiwan and hope to bring this achievement and spread it to the whole world. (Weixin Shengjiao 2016b, 17)

The strategy of WS consists in revivifying the culture and the spirituality of Greater China. Taiwanese must fight to preserve the autonomy of ROC, and even declare their independence to the world. It was fitting to see that the politicians who were invited to participate in the January 1st ceremony all seemed to be pro-independence (as far as I could judge from reading the biography of Wang Jin-pyng, Annette Lu Hsiu-lien, and Hung Hsiu-chun).

As in many religions, in WS spirituality is inseparable from politics in the broad sense, since in order to take care of the spiritual and material well-being of its people, any religious group must also address the general conditions in which they live. In his report *WS Future Outlook*, Master Yuan-Dao clearly states that proper spirituality will bring about prosperity, which in turn will put an end to wars:

The true meaning of world peace is to let every family have three meals to consume daily, and have no worries of every day clothing, foods, housing and commute. There will be no hunger and wars, the world in peace and the world as a family. (Yuan Dao 2017, 17)

We can classify the world mankind into two categories: one is on salary basis: government workers, militaries, public officials, teachers, business and industry workers, the second category: the bosses who give employees salaries. They are the owners of all kinds of businesses. They are Buddha reincarnations and they have the special wisdom and predestined relationship. They can at every place and every region create businesses to provide clothing, foods... They can create profits. They will pay taxes to the government and the government will pay salaries ... to take care of the common people and let the country and society see peace. (Yuan Dao 2017, 18)

Yet, in Taiwan prosperity remains endangered by cross-Strait threats. The solution devised by the founder is thus to put an end to those tensions by strengthening the bonds between the people living on the two sides of the Straits.

We see, then, that WS functions like several religions that build nationalism into their theology. In America, Mormonism is again one of the best examples, but we can think of the current movements with the Russian Orthodox Church or also with the Hindu nationalist political parties in India. This “national messianism” implies that a nation endows itself with a specific mission, not only to save its own people but to be a beacon, a model, for the rest of the world.

In the case of WS, it is clear that its members can only be reassured that they are on the right side of the Straits, since their Holy Ancestors, who have now been subsumed in Grand Master Hun Yuan, do protect them in their island. And it is clear for them as well that ROC is endowed with qualities far superior to those of the People’s Republic of China: they do experience on a daily basis true democracy, freedom of religion, social progressivism, a better climate, less pollution, and so on. They must consequently be comforted that they have made the right decision when they came to settle in Taiwan. Because of its integration of Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese genealogies within the broad Chinese genealogy, WS contributes to the construction of ROC as the better nation, in a most fascinating project of national messianism.

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