

The Best of Times, The Worst of Times... The End of Times? - A Brief Comparison of Eschatology in a Selection of Popular New Asian Religions



Reverend Jason Greenberger

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In popular culture when eschatology is mentioned, it is often associated with the apocalypse and end of times. On the level of etymology, this is logical because “eschatos”

means “last.” However, in popular usage, eschatology can more broadly refer to the end of one age and the start of a new age. With this functional definition in mind, theologically defined eras of humanity, can be examined and compared within a sample of popular new Asian religions. Doing so reveals a pronounced tendency, wherein the impetus for the founding of these new religions is frequently based on the notion that the current era is a novel and pivotal era for humankind. It further follows that this new era for humanity requires a new unifying form of religion to usher humankind into the zenith of its potential.

This eschatology-driven worldview is an especially pronounced feature in Vietnam’s Caodaism (道高臺 *Đạo Cao Đài*), China and Taiwan’s Yīguàn Dào (一貫道), and Korea’s Daesoonjinrihoe (大巡真理會 *Daesunjillihoe*). By contrast, Japan’s Oomoto (大本 *Ōmoto*) and Korea’s Won Buddhism (圓佛教 *Wonbulgyo*) take a somewhat more subdued and implicit approach wherein both religions resist the creation of a detailed taxonomy to categorize the eras of humanity. It is certainly the case that their conception of the new world and the old world, makes fewer assertions than the more detailed taxonomies developed by the three previously mentioned religions of Caodaism, Yīguàn Dào, and Daesoonjinrihoe. That being said, Oomoto and Won Buddhism still follow the general model of seeing the current era as uniquely requiring their respective religious order.

In the following pages, background will be given on each of these religions, their taxonomies of the eras of humankind will be examined, and the significance of each religious order in light of the new era will also be explored. Following this, general comparisons will be made among both the sample of new Asian religions featuring categorical eschatologies (Caodaism, Yīguàn Dào, and Daesoonjinrihoe) and the sample of new Asian religions which formulate interpretative eschatologies (Oomoto and Won Buddhism). Special emphasis will be given to instances wherein the same language is used to convey different meanings.

Part One- Categorical Eschatologies: Yīguàn Dào, Caodaism, and Daesoonjinrihoe

Yīguàn Dào

Overview and Background

Providing a precise background on Yīguàn Dào can be somewhat elusive. Much of the religious thought propagated in Yīguàn Dào can be traced back to much earlier sources such as the remarkably antique White Lotus (白蓮教 *báilián jiào*), Luoism (羅教 *luō jiào*) which emerged in the late fifteenth century, and of course Xiāntiān Dào (先天道) which directly preceded Yīguàn Dào. In the 1870s, Xiāntiān Dào split off into several groups, one of which was led by Wáng Juéyī (王覺一), the founder of Yīguàn Dào.¹ Following the rise of his order’s influence, the Qīng government became suspicious of the sect and speculated that they might be on the verge of

¹ Lu, Yunfeng. *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan: Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy*. Lanham, MD: (Lexington Books, 2008), 3.

staging a rebellion. Consequently, followers of Wáng Juéyī and even his son were killed during this conflict. Wáng Juéyī lived out the rest of his life away from the public to avoid persecution.²

Under the later leadership of Zhāng Tiānrán (張天然) who is seen as an incarnation of the popular and charismatically eccentric Buddhist monastic, Jīgōng (濟公), Yīguàn Dào grew immensely and even became the largest sect in the 1940s in China.³ Among his many contributions to the development of Yīguàn Dào, he notably reformed Yīguàn Dào's organizational structure, received a series of influential spiritist messages, and dramatically increased Yīguàn Dào's missionary activity. Zhāng Tiānrán passed away in 1947, and his second wife, Sūn Sùzhēn succeeded him in terms of leadership according to Yīguàn Dào orthodoxy. The two are seen as pair in celestial sense as well. As previously mentioned, Zhāng Tiānrán is regarded as the incarnation of Living Buddha Jīgōng (濟公活佛 jìgōng huófó). Quite fittingly, Sūn Sùzhēn is held to be an incarnation of Jīgōng's counterpart, Yuèhuì Bodhisattva (月慧菩薩 yuèhuì púsà).⁴

Eras of Humankind

Before examining Yīguàn Dào's eschatology, it is beneficial to have a basic understanding of their cosmology. Yīguàn Dào cosmology is essentially a tripartite or perhaps quadripartite system depending on interpretation. In Yīguàn Dào's diagram of Saṃsāra (輪迴圖 lúnhuí tú), there are four connected rebirth destinations: hell (地獄 dìyù)- containing the denizens of hell, and the realm of phenomena (象天 xiàngtiān)- containing humanity and all life on earth, the realm of spirit (氣天 qìtiān)- containing the deities of popular religion, and the realm of the true principle (理天 lǐtiān)- the home of enlightened buddhas presided over by the Supreme Goddess, Wújí Lǎomǔ (無極老母).⁵

With that cosmology in mind, Yīguàn Dào's eschatology and the significance of their order in the new era can more easily be appreciated. Yīguàn Dào both adopted and innovated the Three Sun or Three Yáng Eras (三陽 sān yáng) system of eschatology which can be traced all the way back to the Hùnyuán Sect of Daoism (混元派 hùnyuán pài), a sect that originated in the Míng dynasty (1368–1644) or perhaps even earlier.⁶ In this system, humanity will go through three eras, the Era of Blue Yáng (青陽期 qīng yángqī), Era of Red Yáng (紅陽期 hóng yángqī), and the Era of White Yáng (白陽期 bái yángqī). The Era of Blue Yáng lasted for 1,886 years (from 3,086-1,200 BCE) under the administration of Dīpaṃkara Buddha (燃燈佛 rán dēng fó). The Era of Red Yáng lasted 3,114 years (from 1,200 BCE - 1912 CE) which was overseen by Śākyamuni Buddha (釋迦牟尼佛 Shìjiā móuní fó), and lastly, it is believed that the Era of White

² Lu, Y., and G. Lang. "Impact of the State on the Evolution of a Sect." *Sociology of Religion* 67, no. 3 (2006): 249-70. doi:10.1093/socrel/67.3.249. 255-256

³ Lu, Yunfeng. *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan: Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy*. Lanham, MD: (Lexington Books, 2008), 4.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ 《認理歸真》。臺北縣板橋市: 正一善書出版社。

⁶ Seiwert, Hubert Michael. *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History*. (Brill, 2003), 326.

Yáng which will last 10,800 years, began in 1912 is being presided over by Maitreya Buddha (彌勒佛 mílè fó).⁷

These Three Yáng Eras account for the eras related directly to humankind, however, on a more macro level, from the point of creation onward, Yīguàn Dào posits that the Supreme Goddess, Wújí Lǎomǔ has allotted the universe one 129,600 year-long cosmic mega-year (元 yuán) period of time between creation and ultimate destruction. This cosmic mega-year is broken up into twelve cosmic mega-months (會 huì). Each cosmic mega-month lasts 10,800 years. The first cosmic mega-month marked the creation of the heavens, the second cosmic mega-month- the earth, and the third cosmic mega-month- humankind. Gradual deterioration will set in during the seventh cosmic mega-month and will increase during the eighth. Humanity will end in the ninth, the earth in the tenth, the heavens in the eleventh, and the destruction of earth and heaven will be so complete during the twelfth cosmic mega-month that both will utterly vanish leaving no trace behind.⁸

The Significance of the Order in the New Era

Probably the most concise statement regarding the significance of Yīguàn Dào during the current Era of White Yáng comes from a book typically given to newly initiated devotees titled “The Three Treasures of Tao (三寶心法：回天之道 sānbǎo xīnfǎ: huítiān zhīdào).” The English translation, provided by Mr. Jerome William McCarthy, could more literally be titled as, “The Three Treasures of Cultivating the Mind: The Path which Returns One to Heaven.” On page six, there is a passage which reads as follows:

“And yet, God, our Supreme and Unsurpassable Mother was extremely compassionate. She could not bear to see the good destroyed along with the wicked. Consequently, She allowed the true Dao to be brought down to humanity and ordered Living Buddha Jīgōng and Yuèhuì Bodhisattva to reincarnate back into the world to save the denizens of three offices by bringing the great immortals of the realm of spirits, the sentient beings of the world, and the ghosts of the netherworld back to heaven in the same manner. These two great figures, Living Buddha Jīgōng and Yuèhuì Bodhisattva, our venerable master and venerable mother, received a mandate from Lǎomǔ to transmit the true Dao and universally liberate the three offices. They were put in charge of this final and ultimate endeavor and thereby, they transmitted the true Dao without relying on scripture or getting caught up in non-essential outside of the scope of doctrine. They pointed devotees directly to their heart-minds (the conscience and spiritual nature possessed by all humans. This enabled the devotees to see into their true self-nature and achieve buddhahood.”⁹

⁷ 日新日德崇信佛堂。2009. Accessed June 30, 2016. <http://www.gsgd.url.tw/e/page/e005.html>

⁸ *Please note that the numbering of these eons uses the 12 earthly branches (十二支) rather than standard numerals. 慈聲橋。《一貫道弟子應有的認識》(善書緣, 2014), 8. This same content is stated even more precisely in the bilingual edition of “Realization of Truth (認理歸真-中英版)” on page 23 but these details are absent from the original Chinese.

⁹ Here I have used my own translation instead of Jerome William McCarthy’s, so that the passage is consistent with the terminology and other conventions I have used in previous

The salvific teachings of Zhāng Tiānrán (Living Buddha Jìgōng) and Sūn Sùzhēn (Yuèhuì Bodhisattva) are known as the “Three Treasures (三寶 sānbǎo).” Although technically all of those deemed good may achieve rebirth in heaven, devotees are Yīguàn Dào are so confident in the guarantee of heavenly rebirth via the Three Treasures that they have colloquially nicknamed the Three Treasures a “passport to heaven (天國的護照 tiānguó de hùzhào).”

The first of the three treasures is known as the “xuánguān qiào (aperture of profound entry into the Dao 玄關竅),” a physical point on the face revealed to devotees by teachers during initiation. The xuánguān qiào is said to be “A form of communication between heaven and humanity. The location where spiritual nature resides and integrates the internal energies of jīng, qì, and shén(精氣神). It is the chief controller of the five senses and all parts of the body. It is also the gate through which spiritual nature arrives animating beings with life and likewise the gate through which it exists upon death.”¹⁰ The xuánguān qiào is seen as a point which is unlocked by teachers during the initiation ceremony. Without initiation, at the time of death, the spiritual nature may leave through a “side gate (旁門 pángmén)” preventing rebirth in heaven and often times leading to an unfavorable rebirth.¹¹ The second treasure is known as “kǒujué (verbal incantation 口訣).” This is a short five character long incantation likewise taught during the initiation ceremony. It is the highly-guarded and secretive aspect of initiation. Kǒujué has been described as “The true scripture which cannot be captured in writing. The great Dao of the three polarities which is both mysterious and subtle.”¹² And the final treasure is known as the “hétóng (covenantal seal 合同).” The hétóng is a way of locking one’s hand together and has been described as follows, “The hétóng is a mudrā (hand seal) and a seal of official verification. It is a covenantal seal which verifies one’s faith in Dao.”¹³

Caodaism

Overview and Background

Although Caodaism marks its founding as having officially occurred in 1926, there are instances of a sort of “proto-Caodaism” which unfolded progressively in the decade prior. Ngô Văn Chiêu (吳文昭) an avid reader of French spiritist writer Flammarion began attending séances at Hiệp Minh temple at Cái Khê near Cần Thơ between 1917 and 1919. It was during this period that he first came into contact with a spirit who identified as “Cao Đài Tiên Ông (The

paragraphs. The original Chinese appears as follows: “然而，賜我們靈性的至高無上之母親 — 上帝，是非常的慈悲，祂不忍善惡俱焚，因此降下真道並派明師即濟公活佛與月慧菩薩降世挽救三曹 — 氣天之太仙，世界的眾生，地府的鬼魂同返天堂。我們 師尊師母二位老大人奉老母的命，真傳真授，普渡三曹，他們的責任是辦理末後一着收圓大事，不立文字，教外別傳，直指人心（直指人人固有之良心，靈性）使人們見自性而成佛。”

伍靜妙。《三寶心法（回天之道）》臺北縣板橋市：正一善書出版社，中華民國84年11月。

¹⁰ 《三寶道義補充教材》。臺北縣板橋市：（正一善書出版社，中華民國91年8月再版）44。

¹¹ 伍靜妙。《三寶心法（回天之道）》臺北縣板橋市：（正一善書出版社，中華民國84年11月），17-18。

¹² 《三寶道義補充教材》。臺北縣板橋市：（正一善書出版社，中華民國91年8月再版）47。

¹³ Ibid, 48.

Immortal Cao Dai 高臺仙翁).” Around 1919, Ngô Văn Chiêu formed his own group of like-minded spiritualists, and they were in frequent communication with Cao Đài Tiên Ông. In 1921, Cao Đài Tiên Ông revealed his full title “Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát (The Immortal Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Cao Dai 高臺仙翁大菩薩摩訶薩);” this is the name of God in Caodaism.¹⁴

Caodaism marks their official founding on November 18th 1926 with a ceremony which attracted some fifty thousand participants. This rapidly growing religion was soon noticed by Buddhists, Catholics, and French Officials who saw it as a potential threat to the status quo. The years that followed saw Caodaism grow from about half a million adherents by 1930 to several million in the years that followed.¹⁵ Preferring solitary cultivation and quiescence, Ngô Văn Chiêu declined the papal post which was offered to him,¹⁶ and instead, early leadership in Caodaism shifted to prominent figures such as Lê Văn Trung (黎文忠), the first Pope (教宗 Giáo Tông), and Phạm Công Tắc (范功則), the first Protector of Laws and Justice (護法 Hộ Pháp). Phạm Công Tắc would later go on to become the second Pope of Caodaism. After receiving direction through a series of spiritist messages, Caodaism constructed their headquarters, the Holy See, in Tây Ninh (會聖座聖西寧 Hội Thánh Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh) and over a thousand temples were built elsewhere throughout Vietnam.¹⁷

Eras of Humankind

The full name of Caodaism is actually, “The Great Faith of the Third Universal Amnesty (大道三期普度 Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ). This is a rather clear reflection of the importance that the eras of humankind hold in Caodaist theology. The current era is understood as the the third universal amnesty, a form of divinely granted redemption revealed to Caodaism by God, Himself. However, to truly grasp the significance of the third amnesty, the previous two amnesties should be examined.

Prior to the first universal amnesty, Caodaism holds that humankind was innately benevolent and lived in harmony with nature. Humans during this period were vegetarians, they only had one religion which was modeled on the Vedic R̥gveda, and despite religious uniformity, God was still known by many names. Towards the end of this era, desire for sense-experience eroded the innate goodness of humankind and due to this emerging hedonism, people lost their sense of a higher purpose. At this point God intervenes and reveals Himself to humankind in a multitude of ways and different early versions of several religions emerge such as Judaism, proto-Buddhism (via Dīpaṃkara Buddha 燃燈佛 Nhiên Đăng Phật prior to the lifetime of the

¹⁴ Blagov, Sergei. *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and Its Leap into Modernity*. (Nova Science Publishers, Inc. 2001), 18-19.

¹⁵ Hoskins, Janet and Deepak Shimkada. "From Kuan Yin to Joan of Arc: Female Divinities in the Caodai Pantheon." In *The Constant and Changing Faces of the Goddess in Asia*, 80-99. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press 2008), 84.

¹⁶ Blagov, Sergei. *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and Its Leap into Modernity*. (Nova Science Publishers, Inc. 2001), 25

¹⁷ Hoskins, Janet and Deepak Shimkada. "From Kuan Yin to Joan of Arc: Female Divinities in the Caodai Pantheon." In *The Constant and Changing Faces of the Goddess in Asia*, 80-99. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press 2008), 84.

historical Buddha, Śākyamuni), proto-Daoism, and proto-Confucianism. This amnesty though initially effective, failed in time.¹⁸

The second amnesty marked another divine intervention characterized by Buddhism-proper, Daoism-proper, Confucianism-proper, and the introduction of Christianity and later Islam. All of these great religions eventually fell into dogmatism and interreligious conflicts also became more prevalent. The third amnesty is Caodaism itself which Caodaists held to be founded by God. Here God manifested through spiritualism to teach religious doctrines and teachings directly.¹⁹

The religious figures associated with each amnesty tends to vary a bit from source to source and a fully comprehensive cataloguing does not even seem to be the intent. One version which appears on the Daotam website offers the following list:

The First Universal Amnesty

In Buddhism there was Dīpaṃkara Buddha (燃燈佛 Nhiên-Đăng Cổ-Phật) who acted as the chief of Buddhism.

Among the transcendents/immortals (Daoism), there was Tàishàng Dào zǔ (太上道祖 Thái-Thượng Đạo Tổ) who acted as chief of Daoism.

Among the sages/saints (Confucianism), there was the God of Culture and Literature, Wénchāng Dìjūn (文昌帝君 Văn Tuyên Đế quân) who acted as chief of Confucianism.

The Second Universal Amnesty

In Buddhism there was Śākyamuni Buddha (釋迦牟尼 Thích-ca Mâu-Ni)

Among the “transcendents/immortals” (Daoism), there was the Grand Pure One, Tàishàng Lǎojūn (太上老君 Thái-Thượng Lão-Quân)

Among the sages/saints (Confucianism), there was Confucius (孔子 Khổng-Tử)

Thereby, among the sages of the east, he was the one known as the “Sagacious One.”

Among the sages of the west, Jesus was known as the “Western Sage.”

The Third Universal Amnesty Majestic - The Solemn and Majestic Governors²⁰

In Buddhism, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (觀音菩薩 Quan-Âm Bồ-Tát) was deputized as the second solemn and majestic governor on the behalf of Buddhism.

In Daoism, Lǐ Bái (太白金星 Thái-Bạch Kim-Tinh)²¹ was deputized as the first solemn and majestic governor on the behalf of Daoism.

¹⁸ Thomas E. Dutton’s paper, “Caodaism as History, Philosophy, and Religion” as it appears in *Cao Dai: A Collection of Various Papers from 1970 Thru 2011*. California: (Caodai Overseas Missionary, 2012), 17.

¹⁹ Ibid, 18.

²⁰ Trấn Oai Nghiêm (鎮威嚴)

²¹ This highly stylized name for Lǐ Bái is an allusion to the mythological account wherein Lǐ Bái’s mother while still pregnant with Lǐ Bái had a dream of the planet Venus and thereby believed her son to be an incarnation of the planet Venus.

In Confucianism, Lord Guān Yǔ (關聖帝君 Quan-Thánh ĐẾ-Quân) was deputized as the third solemn and majestic governor on behalf of Confucianism.²²

The Significance of the Order in the New Era

Caodaism views its order as uniquely qualified to unite the religions which emerged during the previous two universal amnesties. It is believed that though God revealed his truth many times, divine messages in the past always relied upon human frailty, however, the third universal amnesty presents on-going opportunities for God to communicate with humanity directly. Caodaists further take pride in their highly institutionalized and highly organized religion.²³ Caodaist Priest, Reverend Canh Tranh has shared that this high level of institutionalization is a feature in Caodaism which is not found in other similar new Asian religions grounded in spiritualism or automatic writing.

Daesoonjinrihoe

Overview and Background

Among Korea's popular new religions, Daesoonjinrihoe is perhaps one of the youngest. Officially founded in 1969, the life of the man whom Daesoonjinrihoe devotees regard as an incarnation of God, Gang Ilsun (姜一淳), occurred considerably earlier as he lived from 1871–1909. There are three main figures central to the eventual emergence of Daesoonjinrihoe: the aforementioned Gang Ilsun, commonly spoken of as Gang Sangjenim (姜上帝님 the Venerable God, Gang) or Gucheon Sangjenim (九天上帝님 the Venerable God of the Ninth Heaven), the Doju (道主 Master of Dao), Jo Jeongsan (趙鼎山 1895-1958), and the Dojeon (都典 Leader of Principle), Bak Udang (朴牛堂 1917-1996). Gang Sangjenim's incarnation upon the earth is likened to that of a king's intineration of his kingdom. In Gang Sangjenim's case, the itineration is decidedly an act of statecraft rather than an act of leisure. Gangsangjenim is seen by Daesoonjinrihoe devotees as having, through His control of the Three Realms (三界 Samgye: the Realm of Heaven (天界 Cheongye), the Realm of Earth (地界 Jigye), and the Realm of Humanity (人界 Ingye), worked tirelessly to establish the foundation by which an earthly paradise will later manifest.²⁴

Aside from the salvific actions performed by Gang Sangjenim in His capacity as God, He is also regarded as having been a master in the more traditional and human sense of the word. As a Holy Master (聖師님 Seongsanim), He taught humanity how to resolve grievances (解冤

²² "F- Ba Thời kỳ khai Đạo." CHƯ'ÔNG III - Ba Đài. Accessed June 30, 2016. <http://www.daotam.info/booksv/DichLyCaoDai/NguyenThuy/So3HuyenDieu/so3huyendieu-III.htm>

²³ A record of Reverend Canh Tran's presentation, "Brief Outline of History and Philosophy of Caodaism" as it appears in Cao Dai- A Collection of Various Papers from 1970 Thru 2011. California: (Caodai Overseas Missionary, 2012), 82-85.

²⁴ *An Introduction to Daesoonjinrihoe.* (Daesoon Institute of Religion & Culture, 2014), 1-7.

haeweon) and purify themselves through virtue, morality, and engage in mutual beneficence (相生 sangsaeng). These teachings were later systematized and codified by Doju Jo Jeongsan²⁵ into a series of tenets (宗旨 jongji), precepts (綱領 gang-nyeong), fundamental attitudes (要諦 yoche), objectives (目的 mokjeok), commandments (訓誨 hunhoe), and ethical principles (守則 su-chik) which, a few novel items aside, mostly bear a strong resemblance to commonly held Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist values promoted by other traditional and new religions in East Asia.²⁶²⁷

Eras of Humankind

Although eras of humankind can be discussed in a variety of breakdowns within Daesoon theology, there is little doubt that the most prominently featured and soteriologically significant of these taxonomies is the two-stage formulation of the Former World (先天 seoncheon) and the Later World (後天 hucheon). There are five instances in the Main Scripture of Daesoonjinrihoe (典經 jeongyeong) wherein the Former World and the Later World are directly compared to one another. Naturally, these are of great interest in appreciating Daesoon eschatology and their taxonomy of the eras of humankind. These comparisons are contained in the following verses:

Teaching the Dharma (教法 Gyobeob), Chapter 2 Verse 55

The Former World was an era of heroes wherein individuals partook of transgressions in their pursuit of life. However, the Later World is an era of sages wherein individuals partake in goodness in their pursuit of life. Does one become long-lasting by means of pursuing life through transgressions or by means of pursuing life through goodness? Now in the Later World, sentient beings establish themselves according to the standard of living through partaking in goodness.

Skillful Wisdom (權智 Gweonji), Chapter 1 Verse 21

Every time God had an opportunity, he would tell his assembly of disciples, "In governing over the three realms as the Supreme Sovereign, I have rectified all the stages (of humanity's proximity to Dao) from the Former World, and soon I will open a new destiny for the Later World by building a realm for immortals in this world." Whenever He said this, the slower among his assembly of disciples would bemoan (what they perceived to be) God's lack of urgency. They

²⁵ Ibid, 9-11.

²⁶ *Daesoonjinrihoe: The Fellowship of Daesoon Truth*. (Daesoon Institute of Religion & Culture, 2010), 29-34

²⁷ 대순진리회요람. Accessed June 30, 2016.

<http://www.idaesoon.or.kr/bible/brochure.asp?PageInfo=M3S04&SubInfo=0400>

resigned themselves to just hope that God would establish the great opening to the new era as soon as possible.

The stages of humanities proximity to Dao comes from a taxonomy of the eras of human existence espoused by Chinese philosopher, Shào Kāngjié (邵康節 So Gangjeol). This hexapartite taxonomy is known as the “Six Stages of Waning Proximity from Dao (六度數 yuk-do-su / liù dùshu).” They are as follows 1.) The Era of Divine Thearchs (皇時代 hwang-shidae / Huáng shídài) 2.) The Era of Sagely Emperors (帝時代 je-shidae/ dì shídài) 3.) The Era of Heavenly-mandated Kings (王時代 wang-shidae / wáng shídài) 4.) The Era of Cunning Tyrants (霸時代 pae-shidae/ bà shídài) 5.) The Era of Uncivilized Rulers (夷狄時代 ijeok-shidae / yídí shídài) 6.) The Era of Beasts (禽獸時代 geumsu-shidae / qínshòu shídài).²⁸ Each stage represented indicates further diminution in the humanity’s strength in Dao. In the Daesoonjinrihoe application of this taxonomy, humankind is already in the Era of Beasts, however, the arrival of the Later World and the paradise created by the 12,960 “noble individuals empowered by Dao (道通君子 dotong-kunja)” is seen as imminent.²⁹

Prophetic Divination (預示 yeshi) Verse 6

I have rectified the stages of the Former World and in the Later World, the path to the boundless and eternal realm of immortals will be opened. The grudges born from mutual conflict in the Former World will be resolved, and through the Dao of mutual life-giving, it will become widely known that God has redeemed His subjects.

Here “mutual conflict (相剋 sanggeuk)” and “mutual life-giving (相生 sangsaeng)” refer to the Chinese elemental system of the Five Processes (五行 ohaeng). Mutual conflict is the antagonistic cycle of the five phases wherein wood (such as roots) drive through earth, earth re-routes/dams water, water extinguishes fire, fire melts metal, and metal chops apart wood. Mutual life-giving is the harmonious cycle of the five phases wherein wood preserves fire, fire produces earth (ash), earth develops metal, metal enriches water (mineral content), and water sustains wood (living trees).

Prophetic Divination Verse 13

²⁸ The Six-Dohsu(六度數). Accessed July 2, 2016. <http://dsjr.org/?english>

²⁹ Ibid. Some insights presented here were gained through conversation with a Department of Academic Affairs Research Committee Member, Kim Taesoo (김태수), and specialist in Daesoon Theology, Ms. Kim Jimin (김지민).

In the Former World, (humanity's) situation was narrower in scope and matters were easier. Even the application of one method of Dao was enough to bring chaotic matters back under control. In the Later World, (humanity's) situation is broader and matters are more complicated. If all methods of Dao are not united and utilized, then efforts will be insufficient for bringing chaos back into balance.

Prophetic Divination Verse 77

“In the Former World, mālās (prayer/recitation beads) were strung using 108 beads, however, in the Later World, they will be strung using 105 beads.”

Although there are a number of different ways to interpret the meaning behind the 108 bead-count common to most Buddhist mālās, one common interpretation is that the number 108 corresponds to the 108 forms of unease (煩惱 beonnoe). Among those forms of unease is the Buddhist notion of the suffering beings are subjected to during birth, old age, sickness, and death (生老病死 saeng-no-byeong-sa). Therefore, the 105-beaded mālās in the Later World is an allusion to immortality; in other words, 105 represents the absence of old age, sickness, and death.³⁰

The Significance of the Order in the New Era

In a nutshell, what Daesoonjinrihoe purports to offer devotees is a chance to be among the 12,960 “noble individuals empowered by Dao (道通君子 dotong-gunja) after the arrival of the Later World. As there are already over two million followers of Daesoonjinrihoe, it should be noted that membership alone does not guarantee later status as a noble individual empowered by Dao. Indeed, among devotees there are even those who believe that it is possible for non-Daesoonjinrihoe members to gain this status in the Later World so long as their level of spiritual cultivation was profoundly high. Noble individuals empowered by Dao will be the benevolent rulers of this era wherein paradise is built on earth. Those who do not make this cut are known as the “noble populace (蒼生君子 changsaeng-gunja).” This fate is not nearly as positive as the fate of those empowered by Dao, but it is also not a punishment. Additionally, it is held that noble individuals empowered by Dao will not mistreat the noble populace. In fact, it is the duty of these 12,960 to be kind, beneficial, and fair to their subjects.³¹

³⁰ From an email response received on March 7th 2016 from Professor of Daesoon Theology Lee Gyoung-won (이경원) answering my question regarding the numbering.

³¹ This information was also gleaned from conversation with Department of Academic Affairs Research Committee Member Kim Taesoo (김태수) and specialist in Daesoon Theology, Ms. Kim Jimin (김지민) previously referenced in footnote 28.

Part One- Interpretative Eschatologies: Oomoto and Won Buddhism

Oomoto

Overview and Background

The foundress of Oomoto was Deguchi Nao (出口なお), a native of Ayabe, Kyōto. Following the death of husband in 1887, her already impoverished family fell on even harder times. On lunar new year's night in 1892, she had her first spirit dream wherein she explored celestial palaces, came into contact with two divine figures, and experienced a joyful reunion with her deceased husband. The nights which followed likewise produced similar dreams.³²

The foundress, fell into her first possession under the God, Ushitora no Konjin (良の金神), at age of fifty-five. Ushitora no Konjin commanded her to serve as His scribe. Although she was illiterate, through the phenomenon of automatic writing, she found herself somehow able to do as she had been ordered. Later on, divine guidance led a man named "Ueda Kisaburō (上田喜三郎)" to the foundress in 1889. He joined her newly founded religion, Oomoto, and the following year, he married into the Deguchi family by taking Deguchi Nao's youngest daughter and Second Generation Lineage Master, Deguchi Sumiko (出口すみこ) as his wife. Given Oomoto is structured upon a matriarchal priestesshood, Ueda Kisaburō took the name Deguchi Onisaburō (出口 王仁三郎), an act which marked his entrance into the Deguchi familyline. In terms of titles, Deguchi Nao received the special designation of Foundress (開祖 Kaiso) whereas Deguchi Onisaburō was given the title of Seishi (聖師), Sagacious Master.³³ The rest of the titles in the family line are more formulaic. The women are known as "Kyōshu (教主)," Lineage Masters, whereas their husbands are "Kyōshu Ho (教主補)," Assistant Lineage Masters. All Assistant Lineage Masters take the Deguchi family name following their marriages.

Eras of Humankind

Oomoto does not seem to contain the highly-systematized taxonomy of eras of humankind which can be observed in Caodaism, Yīguàn Dào, and Daesoonjinrihoe. In scripture such as "Divine Signposts (道の栞 Michi no Shiori). The present world and the past are referenced at times, but neither is given a fixed name. In part four, chapter four of Divine Signposts, there is discussion of the imminent Age of Maitreya's Construction of a New World (みろくの世建設 Miroku no yo kensetsu). Chapter four further details how God sent down the spirits Izu (厳霊 Izu no Mitama) and Mizu (瑞霊 Mizu no Mitama) to create Maitreya's new world as a salvific action performed for humanity. It specifies that the God, Ushitora no Konjin and His

³² Rowe, Charles and Yasuko Matsudaira. *Nao Deguchi: A Biography of the Foundress of Oomoto*. (The Oomoto Foundation, 1982), 16-18.

³³ Onisaburō, Deguchi and Charles Rowe. "Divine Signposts- The Birth of Oomoto." Divine Signposts. January 1, 1985. Accessed June 20, 2016. <http://www.oomoto.jp/enSignpost/>.

consort, Goddess, Hitsujisaru no Konjin (未申の金神)³⁴ are engaged in the holy work of completing the preparation for the realization of the divine realm on earth.³⁵

The Significance of the Order in the New Era

A message gained through divine counsel in 1910 had relayed that the rebuilding of the world was forthcoming and that this stage is to be known as “The Age of Maitreya’s Construction of a New World.” The Oomoto belief is that in light of this age and God relationship with the Deguchi family, the world’s continuation relies upon the unbroken hereditary succession of female Lineage Masters within the family.³⁶ On October fourth 1914, the Foundress was compelled to engage in another session of automatic writing. In doing so, she received a related message from Ushitora no Konjin which provided additional information and clarifications. Onisaburo’s spirit was more dimensional than originally known. His spirit was that of Maitreya and also the vessel of Ushitora no Konjin’s counterpart, Hitsujisaru no Konjin (未申の金神). Thereby, the Foundress knew that Onisaburo would continue the divinely-planned reconstruction of the world even after her own life had ended.³⁷ Hence the significance of Oomoto in this age is the role it plays in preserving the succession of masters from the Deguchi family who are needed to continually assist in Maitreya’s construction of the new world.

Won Buddhism

Overview and Background

The central figure of Won Buddhism is Founding Master Sotaesan (少太山 大宗師님 Sotaesan Daejongsanim). Within Won Buddhism, it is common to introduce Master So Taesan through the Ten Stages in the Life of the Founding Master (大宗師 十相 daejongsa sibsang). For the sake of providing a brief overview and background, perhaps touching upon seven of these stages might be sufficient. Throughout his youth, he was known for asking profound questions

³⁴ The spirits Izu and Mizu as well as the God, Ushitora no Konjin and Goddess, Hitsujisaru no Konjin should be understood within a context of balancing gender polarities in the Oomoto worldview. Izu is the yang or male spirit whereas Mizu is the yin or female spirit. In the Oomoto context, spirit possession (神懸り kamigakari) can occur only between a God and human female or a Goddess and human male. That is reason behind the pairing between Ushitora no Konjin and Deguchi Nao, as well as the pairing between Hitsujisaru no Konjin and Deguchi Onisaburo.

³⁵ Onisaburō, Deguchi and Charles Rowe. "Part Four, Chapter Four." *Divine Signposts*. January 1, 1985. Accessed July 2, 2016. <http://www.oomoto.jp/enSignpost/>.

³⁶ *The Second Spiritual Leader, Sumiko Deguchi*. 2010. Accessed July 2, 2016. <http://www.oomoto.or.jp/English/enKyos/nidai-en.html>

³⁷ Rowe, Charles and Yasuko Matsudaira. *Nao Deguchi: A Biography of the Foundress of Oomoto*. (The Oomoto Foundation, 1982), 71-72.

and maintaining a high level of morality. Stages two and three demonstrate these traits as Master Sotaesan as an eleven year old spent five years praying in the mountains in hopes of gaining audience with a mountain spirit. In a similar vein, starting at age sixteen he further spent six years looking for a Daoist master or holy sage. Neither of these attempts were fruitful, Master Sotaesan thereby focused entirely on his own practice of spiritual cultivation. In 1916, at age 26, Master Sotaesan achieved enlightenment. After teaching for sometime, a rather complicated but miraculous occurrence was recorded in Won Buddhist history. The various nuances of this event, stage seven in his life known as “Dharma Authentication through the Blood Seal (血印法認相 hyeorin-beobin-sang),” are difficult to explain, but, suffice it to say, Master Sotaesan and nine disciples gained sympathetic resonance with the Dharma realm in 1923. By the time Master Sotaesan has passed away into Nirvāṇa in 1943, he had lived long enough to approve the first draft of “The Principal Book of Won Buddhism (正典 jeongjeon).”³⁸

There are many different ways to appreciate Won Buddhism. It can be understood as a profoundly progressive religious social movement which addressed issues such as gender equality, agism, and ensuring that all children had access to education.³⁹ Won Buddhism can also be seen as a reaction to modernity. The founding motto (開教表語 gaegyo pyoeo) of Won Buddhism is “With this Great Opening of matter, Let there be a Great Opening of spirit (物質이 開闢되니 精神을 開闢하자 muljiri gaebyeokdoeni jeongshineul gaebyeokhaja).” The founding motive (開教-動機 gaegyo-donggi) is likewise a reflection on the need for spiritual advancement in this age of technological advancement. It would also be accurate to view Won Buddhism as a reformation of Korean Seon (禪) due to the way in which it presents Seon teachings in common rather than classical language, simplifies ceremonies, and emphasizes practical offerings over symbolic offerings. Won Buddhism is also a thoroughly realized synthesis of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and other religious thought. It can also be seen as a new religion unto itself. Won Buddhism is quite dynamic in this sense.

Eras of Humankind

The frequent comparison among past, present, and future in Won Buddhism is not systematized as in Caodaism, Yīguàn Dào, and Daesoonjinrihoe. In Won Buddhist scripture, specialized language regarding eras of humanity are uncommon, however some terms which arise multiple times include the aforementioned “great opening of matter” and “great opening of spirit,” as well as “scientific civilization (科學文明 gwahak-munmyeong).” The section of “The Principal Book of Won Buddhism” devoted to the “Founding Motive” goes into great detail about Master Sotaesan’s concern that material culture grows stronger and stronger while spiritual culture grows weaker. His aim in founding the Won Buddhist order was to teach others how to

³⁸ The History of Won Buddhism. Accessed July 3, 2016.
<http://www.wonbuddhism.org/docs/5.the.wonbuddhist.scriptures/1.History.of.Won.Buddhism.pdf>

³⁹ This issues are explored in - The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism (正典 정전) - Part Two : Doctrine (第二 教義編 제2 교의편) - Chapter Three: The Four Essentials (第三章 四要 제3장 사요)。

be strong in spirit, not become enslaved by material things, and instead utilize material things for proper spiritual means. Won Buddhism has a system of dating known as the Won Era. To give an example, the year 2016 is known as “year 101 of the Won (Buddhist) Era.” This reflects the passage of time from the enlightenment of Master Sotaesan. With regard to eschatology in the sense of “end of days,” “armageddon,” etc., it is important to note that Won Buddhism does not make any such assertions about the future. In a writing titled “Introduction to Won Buddhism,” Prime Dharma Master Emeritus, Jwasan (左山上師님 Jwasan Sangsanim) remarks, “(Won Buddhism is) A religion with an optimistic and hopeful outlook of the future, unlike those that have pessimistic eschatologies.”⁴⁰

The Significance of the Order in the New Era

Master Sotaesan viewed the religions of his era as having faults in need of reformation, and he further saw the commonalities which prominent religions shared and the possibility of synthesizing religious thought into a new religion which could unify the masses. He also believed his system of Buddhism would provide all practitioners with the opportunity to advance to the highest stages of Dharma rank. Enlightenment therefore is accessible to everyone willing to devote themselves to this reformed system of spiritual cultivation. It was no longer the case that only monastics had any hope of achieving enlightenment. Now of course, Buddhist reformation is quite common, but when Master Sotaesan taught advanced methods of spiritual cultivation to ordinary Buddhist householders, it was truly revolutionary because at that time lay Buddhists mostly just prayed, attended complicated ceremonies, and made symbolic offerings.

General Comparisons

Yīguàn Dào, Caodaism, and Daesoonjinrihoe all share a vast sense of human history and the history of the world itself. Certain periods and stages cover thousands of years and change can occur gradually or suddenly. Oomoto and Won Buddhism, by contrast, juxtapose the current era with the immediate past and make the case for their reformations and holy missions within that framework which is more observable and less speculative.

The sense in which Oomoto’s “Age of Maitreya’s Construction of a New World” and Daesoonjinrihoe’s “Later World” are both viewed as imminent is quite similar in nature. Toward the end of her life, Foundress Deguchi Nao realized that the construction of the new world would not be completed in her lifetime, but she seemed to believe that it could be completed by Sagacious Master Deguchi Onisaburo. Now, the Foundress’s great-great-granddaughter, fifth-generation and current Lineage Master, Deguchi Kurenai (出口紅) is still carrying out this holy work and perhaps Oomoto devotees no longer consider the new world to be close on the horizon. By contrast, Daesoonjinrihoe devotees tend to believe that the Later World will arrive in their lifetime.

⁴⁰ *Appendix I. Introduction to Won Buddhism. In Korean and English- The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism.* (Department of International Affairs of Won-Buddhist Headquarters, 2008), 277.

Key Differences in Shared Terminology

There are some intriguing instances wherein some of the religions explored in this sample of new Asian religions use the same terminology but the usage itself contains important differences. For example, both Yīguàn Dào and Daesoonjinrihoe use the terms “先天” and “後天.” In the Yīguàn Dào context, this can be translated into English as “Prior Heaven” and “Posterior Heaven.” In the Daesoonjinrihoe context, it is usually translated as the “Former World” and “Later World.” In Yīguàn Dào thought, Prior Heaven is in harmony with Dao whereas the Posterior Heaven has grown away from this harmony. During Yīguàn Dào’s competition with the automatic writing spiritists in the Phoenix Halls (鸞唐 luán táng), it was claimed that Yīguàn Dào’s automatic writing was “Automatic Writing of the Prior Heaven (先天扶乩 xiāntiān fújī)” and thereby able to reach the realm of true principle to receive divine messages from the Supreme Goddess, Wújí Lǎomǔ. The automatic writing of the Phoenix Halls was said to be the “Automatic Writing of Posterior Heaven (後天扶乩 hòutiān fújī)” and thereby only capable of receiving messages from the deities who reside in the realm of spirit.⁴¹ Here the meaning of “後天” is clearly pejorative. In Daesoonjinrihoe, however, since Gang Sangjenim has rectified all the stages of humankind’s waning proximity from Dao and revealed His plan to open up a realm for immortals here on earth during the Later World, “後天” in the Daesoonjinrihoe usage has an extremely positive meaning readily akin to paradise or utopia. Part of this is due to differences in soteriology. In Yīguàn Dào, ultimate salvation is achieved through rebirth in the realm of true principle which is separate from the realm of phenomena where humans reside. In Daesoonjinrihoe, ultimate salvation occurs on earth in the Later World when the boundless and eternal realm of immortals is opened.

Daesoonjinrihoe and Yīguàn Dào also share the concept of cosmic time which both groups adopt from the Shào Kāngjié’s “The Book of the Thearchical Ruling Order of the World (皇極經世書 huángjí jīngshì shū / hwanggeuk gyeongse seo).” Although the usage of the concepts are virtual identical down to even the consistent use of the same numbers, in Yīguàn Dào, the deterioration which begins in the seventh cosmic mega-month and destroys, humanity, earth, and heaven beyond even a trace by the twelfth month is seen as unavoidable. Eternal salvation is gained through rebirth in the realm of principle. In Daesoonjinrihoe, the Later World will open a realm for immortals on earth.⁴²

Perhaps not surprisingly given their geographical proximity and similar age, Daesoonjinrihoe and Won Buddhism share some common terminology. One such instance which is related to eras of humankind, is the notion of the “great opening (of an era) (開闢 gaebyeok).” In Won Buddhism gaebyeok is used to describe scientific technology and material culture in the modern era. The Founding Master’s desire was that humanity also achieve a great opening of spirit so that the great opening of

⁴¹Clart, Philip. *The Phoenix and the Mother: The Interaction of Spirit Writing Cults and Popular Sects in Taiwan*. (Journal of Chinese Religions, no. 25, 1997), 12-13.

⁴² *Principle of the Cosmic Change*. Accessed July 2, 2016. <http://dsjr.org/?english>

matter can be properly utilized. In Daesoonjinrihoe, there is an epithet for Gang Sangjenim wherein He is known as the “Lord of the Great Opening (of the New Era) (開闢長 gaebyeok-jang).” This refers to His capacity to rectify all the stages of humanity’s waning proximity from Dao in the Former World, resolve grudges born from mutual conflict in the past, and redeem humankind. Through mutual life giving, the great opening of a new era is possible wherein a realm for immortal can be opened on earth. Both religions view the creation of a paradise in this world as possible, however, in Daesoonjinrihoe, this is an act of divine intervention, whereas in Won Buddhism, the establishment of that paradise is a human endeavor performed by a community of spiritually advanced individuals.

Conclusion

There are numerous similarities and likewise no shortage of differences among this sample of new Asian religions regarding their taxonomies of the eras of humanity. It is perhaps no surprise that Yīguàn Dào and Caodaism share many common elements given that both can be traced to Xiāntiān Dào.⁴³ Daesoonjinrihoe, on the other hand, also has a highly developed taxonomy which categorizes the eras of humankind and also the eras of the world. Given the complexity of these taxonomies, the extremely specific timeframe each provide regarding various eras, and the multiple assertions that each make about the past, present, and future, these taxonomies can be understood as “Categorical Eschatologies.” The subtle taxonomies of eras of humanity provided by Oomoto and Won Buddhism are not assertive or particularly speculative. The language utilized regarding past, present, and future in Oomoto and Won Buddhism tends to be more evocative in nature. This relaxed style of categorizing eras of humanity can be described as “Interpretative Eschatologies.”

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⁴³ Goossaert, Vincent, and David A. Palmer. *The Religious Question in Modern China.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 100-102.

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