

The Millenarian Myth Ethnocentrized: The Case of East Asian New Religious Movements

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1 Introduction

Robert A. Segal defines “myth” succinctly as a story—related to “personalities” either qua “agents or the objects of actions”—which “accomplishes something significant for adherents” (2015: 3–5). In the given sense, there is one particular story that many religious traditions embrace at their core, which I would like to call the “myth of the millennium.” This paper takes into focus a specific coloring of the myth that is salient particularly among East Asian new religious movements (NRMs); that is to say, the millenarian myth espoused by East Asian NRMs is more often than not articulated in ethnocentric terms. This paper will comparatively delineate various ethnocentrized manifestations of the myth in East Asian new religiosity.

Before I start outlining selected cases, several terms need to be clarified—“East Asia,” “NRM,” “millenarianism” and “millennium,” as well as “ethnocentrism.” As I have argued elsewhere (Pokorny and Winter 2018: 4–6), from the perspective of Cultural Studies, I understand “East Asia” as “the part of Asia whose socio-cultural anatomy is conspicuously characterised” by the Chinese discursive archive “inscribed through a millennia-long unfolding process in substantial parts of today’s nation-states of China and Taiwan, Japan, South and North Korea, and Vietnam.” “NRMs” are religious communities that have emerged institutionally distinct since the early or mid-nineteenth century, a time when—larger in numbers than ever before—“novel religious programmes were devised inhaling a transformative spirit moulded by the surrounding discourse and the new paradigm of (unfolding) modernity,” marked by industrialization, colonialism, and glocalization (ibid.: 7). My use of “millenarianism” draws upon the definition offered by Catherine Wessinger (2011: 5), and is, like any other Religious Studies definition of millenarianism, indebted to Norman Cohn (2004: 13). It is the vision of a salvational transformation of the current world order, through which (at least) the faithful will experience well-being. The change will (substantially) come to fruition imminently and in accordance with a transcendent blueprint, either laid out by a superhu-

man being or naturally by following the workings of an impersonal absolute. The change may be assisted or brought forth through the action pursued by human beings. The “millennium” refers to the full or significantly progressed state of millenarian consummation, which, in case of the former, may remain infinitely or until the advent of a new cosmological era within a cyclical worldview. The term “salvation”—as in “salvational transformation”—stands for the transcendence of the dianoetic, emotional, physical, and spiritual limitations of the ordinary human condition. As pointed out by James Beckford (1986: x) and indicated by my definition of NRMs above, new religious developments are based on a concerted attempt to implement change. By elevating this program to a universal scale, millenarianism comes into play. Wessinger (1997: 48–51) distinguishes two modes of millenarianism: “catastrophic millenarianism” or “apocalypticism” and “progressive millenarianism.” The former indicates the vision of a millennium that rises from the ashes of a world that has been laid to waste by a cataclysm. The latter refers to the belief that the millennium will materialize gradually without the need of an apocalypse. Indeed, in some movements, millenarian expectations may over time shift or even oscillate between the two, in particular when the human intervention factor is assigned special doctrinal importance, whereas so-called “avertive millenarianism,” according to Daniel Wojcik (2011), refers to the millenarian belief that ultimate catastrophe may eventually be averted for the sake of gradualism. What I like to call “oscillatory millenarianism” is a millenarian mode that moves back and forth between apocalypticism and gradualism. Finally, for the purpose of this paper, “ethnocentrism” is seen as a way of thought that is channeled through the prism of belief in ethnic distinctiveness or superiority.

The case studies assembled below stretch across the East Asian new religious landscape, both in terms of regional and doctrinal provenance. The groups discussed belong to the key actors of the new religious realm. Korea: the Unification Movement (1954), Chŭngsando 증산도/甞山道 (Way of Chŭngsan, 1974), Wŏnbulgyo 원불교/圓佛敎 (Circle Buddhism, 1916); Japan: Sekai Kyūseikyō 世界救世教 (Religion of World Salvation, 1935), Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学 (Science of Happiness, 1986); China/Taiwan: Fǎlún Gōngfǎ 法輪功 (Practice of the Law Wheel, 1992), Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì 全能神教會 (Church of Almighty God, 1991); Vietnam: Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ (Great Way of the Third Period of Universal Salvation, 1926; in short: Cao Đài).¹

1 The figure in the brackets indicates the year of establishment. Note: all translations of the original languages are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

2 The Millenarian Myth Ethnocentrized

2.1 Korea

The Korean peninsula (in the north, up until the end of the Pacific War) has been a crucible of new religious developments. Scholars count up to 700 individual groups, which are known by their name in past and present. Many more have hitherto escaped “discovery” due to their small size or ephemerality. The Unification Movement with its religious core body, the Heavenly Parent’s Holy Community (*Hanül Pumonim Sönghoe* 하늘부모님성회) is one of the peninsula’s largest NRM with some estimated 300,000 followers worldwide. Unificationism marshals a basic Christian nomenclature strikingly mingled with elements of the Korean religious heritage. Occupying center stage is the notion of Cheon Il Guk (*ch’önilguk* 천일국/天一國),² that is, a multi-layered state of harmonious complementarity, alongside the axis individual–family–tribe–society, peaking at the cosmic level, which represents the Unificationist millennium. This Kingdom of Heaven (*ch’önguk* 천국/天國) is meant to spiritually merge the physical and the spiritual world, fulfilling Heavenly Parent’s (*hanül pumonim* 하늘부모님; i.e., God) Ideal of Creation. In this Ideal World (*isang segye* 이상세계/理想世界) human beings will rejoice in God’s love living a life of “freedom, peace, unity, and happiness centering on God and True Parents” (CIGH 8.1) and based on the “principles of mutualism, mutual prosperity, and shared morality” (CIGH 9). In Unificationism, True Parents (*cham pumonim* 참부모님) are God’s ancestral couple who have for the first time in history sealed the marriage blessing covenant as a sinless bride and groom in the face of God. Previous messianic candidates have failed. Owing to their continued salvific activities, True Parents could finally proclaim the full substantialization of cosmic Cheon Il Guk *in nuce* on 22 February 2013—a watershed moment from which the embryonic millennium would progressively fill heaven and earth.³ So far the condensed Unificationist version of the myth. The Koreacentric dimension is explicit. The Unificationist reading of Revelation in the

2 This is held to be an abbreviation for *ch’önju p’yöngghwa t’ongilguk* 천주평화통일국/天宙平和統一國 or Kingdom of Cosmic Peace and Unity.

3 Mainline Unificationism is a point in case of avertive millenarianism. The messianic achievements by the founder and his later wife, and, by extension, the sincere commitment of the early adherents, is held to have forestalled a cataclysmic event in the shape of World War III. Interestingly, one recent off-shoot—the Sanctuary Church of Newfoundland—claiming to have inherited the late founder’s authority, has adopted the catastrophic outlook of old; this being a brilliant example of oscillatory millenarianism.

New Testament made it clear from the beginning that the Lord of the Second Advent (*chaerimju* 재림주/再臨主) were to be a Korean. The Korean peninsula was viewed as the locus of the Messiah's appearance because it is the land belonging to a spiritually gifted people. Koreans are believed to be God's elect (Pokorny 2013: 177–179). The group's founder Mun Sön-myöng 문선명/文鮮明 (1920–2012) and his widowed wife-cum-successor Han Hak-cha 한학자/韓鶴子 (b. 1943) assumed co-messianity, thereafter successfully liberating their followers of their Satanic immanence and, concomitantly, shepherding all of humankind to the edge of the millennium that commenced its self-expansion in 2013. The Korean peninsula (Third Israel) is believed to be the springboard of salvational change, a model for all the other nations of the world. Moreover, the official language of Cheon Il Guk (or the Fourth Israel) must be the language of the Savior, that is, Korean (*WK* 11.6.5).⁴

A typical case of catastrophic millenarianism can be found in Chŭngsando established by An Se-ch'an [Unsan] 안세찬/安世燦 [운산/雲山] (1922–2012). This group, presently consisting of some estimated several tens of thousands adherents, belongs to a major family of Korean NRMS, that is, the so-called Chŭngsan cluster of religions, all tracing their lineage back to Kang Il-sun [Chŭngsan] 강일순/姜一淳 [증산/甞山] (1871–1909). Like the Unification Movement, Chŭngsando has gone international, albeit with a very small outreach predominantly limited to expat Koreans. Chŭngsando draws heavily on the Three Teachings (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism) brought into a New Age framework. According to Chŭngsando, Sangjenim 상제님/上帝님 (the Lord on High), the ruling (yet not creating) God of the cosmos took bodily form and, while on earth, created a safe passage for humankind to enter the dawning millennium. The uncreated universe would follow a cyclical course lasting 129,600 years divided into four seasons, currently transitioning from Cosmic Summer (*uju'üi'yörüm* 우주 [宇宙] 의여름) to Cosmic Autumn (*uju'üi kaül* 우주 [宇宙] 의가을). The imminent shift or the Creation of the Latter Heaven (*huch'ön kaebyök* 후천개벽/後天開闢) would unleash three cataclysms, wiping out the unfaithful. These impending catastrophes over the course of three years include consecutively a devastating world war, the outbreak of a ravaging pandemic, and a pole shift leading to apocalyptic natural disasters. In contrast, since the faithful would follow the course set by

4 The providential value of Korea and Koreanness stands out in the millenarian myth and has several practical implications. Koreans have always filled all key positions in the Unification Movement. Likewise, despite the group's promotion of interracial blessing marriages, True Parents' children have been exclusively married to fellow Koreans to maintain salvific purity within the True Parents Family.

Sangjenim, they are thought to arrive unharmed in the Land of Immortality of the Latter Heaven (*huch'ŏn sŏn'gyŏng* 후천선경/後天仙境). Chŭngsando's millennium is a blissful place in which humans will be released from pain and vice, enjoy longevity for up to 1,200 years, and rejoice in their complementarity with all of existence (*sangsaeng* 상생/相生). The faithful will also experience a growing spiritual perfection until the Cosmic Winter period arrives, where all life will cease before being revived in the age of the Cosmic Spring. Chŭngsando's myth of the millennium is replete with Koreacentrism. Sangjenim is held to have taken bodily form on the Korean peninsula as a male Korean by the name of Kang Il-sun, for when the world was created Korea became its geomantic center and was thus destined for Sangjenim to descend onto the peninsula. Belief in Sangjenim called Sin'gyo 신교/神敎 (Teaching of the God) qua humankind's primordial religion had allegedly taken root already around 9,200 years ago in a prehistoric (mythical) Korean realm—the spiritual center of ancient human civilization—spread across Eurasia, and was passed on throughout millennia before branching out into the plethora of religious traditions past and present. Kang is believed to have revitalized this *ur*-faith and commenced his divine harmonizing work or *ch'ŏnji kongsa* 천지공사/天地公事, ultimately bringing into balance the dysfunctional interplay of *ŭm* 음/陰 and *yang* 양/陽 (Chinese: *yīn* and *yáng*) and thus teaching the modes of survival with a view to the coming violent cosmic transformation. The first two catastrophes ushering in the Land of Immortality of the Latter Heaven are thought to have their origin on the Korean peninsula. World War III, whose trigger has been the Korean War (1950–1953), will only end once the pandemic brutally silences the parties involved. The pandemic's cure lies in the teachings of Kang, specifically in a powerful healing mantra to be uttered in Korean. The Chŭngsando myth maintains that when all across “the mountains are turning upside down and the ground is cracking up and sinking deeply into the sea” (*TJ* 7.23.1), new land will rise from the Sea to the west of the peninsula merging with the crumbled landmass of China to form a new home for the surviving Koreans (*TJ* 7.18). The recreated Korea will then be the nation guiding others into the new era as a role model following the Way of Chŭngsan (*TJ* 5.273.8). Moreover, the Korean language and script will become the unified language and script of the millennium (*TJ* 2.19.6; 5.11.3).

The next case study, i.e., Wŏnbulgyo, cherishes the vision of a millennium that will arrive progressively. Founded by Pak Chung-bin [Sot'aesan] 박중빈/朴重彬 [소태산/少太山] (1891–1943), Wŏnbulgyo has evolved into a globally active movement with well beyond 100,000 members, coupling a general Buddhist mindset with a Confucian ethical spirit. Pak taught that around the second half of the nineteenth century the world has entered into a tran-

sitional phase, leaving behind the Age of Ŭm (*ŭm sidae* 음시대/陰時代) and steering for the Age of Yang (*yang sidae* 양시대/陽時代). However, contrary to many of his contemporaries, Pak rejected the idea of the world's destruction at this juncture of cyclical history: "The traces of a sage have been cut off for a long time and rightful morality has become dim, so it is true that this is the End of Times [*malse* 말세/末世]. However, this world will not be ruined for this reason. The world to come will truly be a greatly civilized world of morality. Therefore, now is the end of the old world and the beginning of the new world"⁵ (*TJG* 14.19). The current state of the world is described as degenerate and full of hardships. Yet, in every cycle when decay is rampant a Savior (*kuse sŏngja* 구세성자/救世聖子) would come forth, whose teachings are "capable of converting the energy of heaven and earth, rectifying the world, and harmonizing the human heart-mind" (*TJG* 14.1). This would gradually give rise to a long-lasting golden age of peace and plenty, a World of Great Civilization (*tae munmyŏng segye* 대문명세계/大文明世界) where humankind's spiritual and intellectual level is far advanced embracing nature, recognizing its original familial unity, and exerting dominion over material achievements (i.e., reverting the status quo). The Wŏn Buddhist millennium promises longevity, enlightenment, and ubiquitous altruism; a Grand Paradise on Earth (*sesang'e iltae nagwŏn* 세상 [世上] 에일대 낙원 [一大樂園]) led by religious professionals. The millennium is dawning following a dark night: "The bright sun will rise in the East" (*TJG* 14.21); that is, the Korean peninsula is understood to become the spiritual leader and center of the world. From there the new teaching would shine forth rectifying humankind. Korea is slated to become the "spiritual parent country for all sentient beings" (*CCP* 3.33), the spiritual object of emulation for the world. The land and its people will be the world's glory, literally "turning from a fish into a full dragon" (*TJG* 14.23). Pak is believed to be the Savior or the Buddha Maitreya (*Mirŭkpul* 미륵불/彌勒佛) and his religious community is meant to be the Order of the Dragon Flower (*Yŏnghwa hoesang* 용화회상/龍華會上),⁶ that is, the movement upholding the great dharma of the new world and the true dharma of all the ages respectively. Wŏnbulgyo is held to become the dominant faith of the millennium (*CCP* 3.13). The original

5 [...] 성인의 자취가 끊어진 지 오래고 정외의 도덕이 희미하여졌으니 말세인 것만은 사실이나, 이 세상이 이대로 파멸되지는 아니하리라. 돌아오는 세상이야말로 참으로 크게 문명한 도덕 세계일 것이니, 그러므로 지금은 묵은 세상의 끝이요, 새 세상의 처음이 되어 [...].

6 Dragon Flower refers traditionally to the Dragon Flower Tree (Sanskrit: *nāgapuṣpa*) under which the bodhisattva Maitreya, the historical Buddha's successor-in-waiting, is predicted to attain buddhahood.

scriptural language of the dharma will be plain Korean, to be translated into the languages of the world in order for everyone to learn and take delight in (*TJG* 14.3).

2.2 *Japan*

Like Korea, Japan has verifiably been home to hundreds of NRMS. The next case study, Japanese Sekai Kyūseikyō, is not a single group but a coalition of three movements,⁷ whose collected membership is an estimated 500,000 adherents worldwide with large branches in Brazil and Thailand. Sekai Kyūseikyō belongs to the Ōmoto 大本 cluster of religions with elements of Buddhism and Shintō featuring prominently.⁸ Furthermore, the impact of the Western esoteric current is noticeable. The millenarian myth employed by Sekai Kyūseikyō is expressed in a catastrophic fashion. The spiritual world (*reikai* 靈界), which is deemed interdependent with the physical world, is held to be in the conversion process from an Age of Night (*yoru no jidai* 夜の時代) to an Age of Day (*hiru no jidai* 昼の時代). A tripartite transformation apparently commenced in 1881, entering the second stage in 1931, and with the last stage, which is imminent, eventually affecting the physical world before its glorious completion. The (so transpiring) millennium is envisioned as an eternal Ideal World (*rissō sekai* 理想世界), a Paradise on Earth (*chijō tengoku* 地上天国) where the three great miseries (*sansai* 三災) of being—disease, poverty, and conflict—are brought to nought, and a “world of truth, love, and beauty” (*TI* 2.4). Due to the intensifying spiritual energies of the cosmos, the final act of the change would entail a Great Purification (*dai jōka* 大浄化) involving the concentrated purging of spiritual clouds (*kumori* 曇り) accumulated through human wrongdoing in thought and action in both the individual and the world at large. Whereas the faithful would endure the individual purification because of their spiritual hygiene pursuant with the teachings of Sekai Kyūseikyō, others would be eradicated, for the more clouded the spirit, the more violent its cleansing. The spiritual cleansing of humans is believed to materialize mostly as a wide spectrum of diseases, or, lesser so, in the form of other calamities; the closer the civilization of old approaches the millennium, the deadlier the illnesses that will manifest. When the world will be subjected to the Great Purification, this would take expression through a panoply of dreadful natural disas-

7 These are Sekai Kyūseikyō Izunome Kyōdan 世界救世教いづのめ教団, Sekai Kyūseikyō Tōhō no Hikari Kyōdan 世界救世教東方之光教団, and Sekai Kyūseikyō Su no Hikari Kyōdan 世界救世教主之光教団.

8 Ōmoto is an NRM founded in 1892, which spawned a larger number of groups particularly in its first decades of existence. The founder of Sekai Kyūseikyō was formerly a high-ranking adherent of Ōmoto.

ters as well as an annihilating World War III, bringing apocalyptic destruction only survived once again by the faithful who would rejoice in the transformation. However, this grim scenario might be at least partly averted if human action could be put in line with the divine law as revealed for the first time in its full genuineness by Sekai Kyūseikyō's founder, Okada Mokichi 岡田茂吉 (1882–1955). Okada is considered to be the emanation of the bodhisattva Kannon 觀音 (Skt. Avalokiteśvara),⁹ sent to Japan by the supreme deity Miroku Ōmikami 大光明真神 (of which he is sometimes even deemed a Jesus-type personification) in order to prepare humankind for the tumultuous arrival and the mechanics of the True Civilization (*sin no bunmei* 真の文明). He provided the knowledge and (ritual) practice necessary to enable humans who are safely traversing into the Age of Day.¹⁰ In fact, Japan is thought to have been assigned a unique role in the world. It is meant to beacon other nations as a paradigm of natural and artistic beauty.¹¹ The promotion of Japanese culture and craftsmanship as well as the establishment of three miniature earthly paradises in Japan utilizing the scenic beauty of the land would facilitate peace and happiness in the world.¹² Sekai Kyūseikyō would, in fact, pool Japan's spiritual power—while being complemented by the material achievements of the United States—to lead humankind to salvation.

Kōfuku no Kagaku is the most prominent Japanese NRM that has crystallized out of the global New Age current also borrowing heavily from Buddhism and Shintō; a group well-known for its oscillatory millenarianism moving from the catastrophic to the progressive scenario and back. Over the years, Kōfuku no Kagaku variously claimed to have up to twelve million adherents, with 200,000 to 300,000 members being a more reasonable estimate. Kōfuku no Kagaku cosmology sets cosmic creation to some forty billion years ago. Around sixty billion years prior to that, the Primordial Buddha [or God] of the Great Universe (*Daiuchū no konpon butsu* [shin] 大宇宙の根本仏 [神]) commenced the planning phase, gradually downscaling his consciousness into a

9 The Buddhist tradition, it is held, has actually been transmitted to India via Japan because Kannon, who was then an incarnation of the deity Izunome 伊都能売, had been the teacher of the historical Buddha. With a view to the nascent Age of Day, the prime salvational power has now been transferred from Buddhism to Sekai Kyūseikyō (TI 2.10).

10 Notably, Sekai Kyūseikyō was founded as Dai Nippon Kannon Kai 大日本觀音會 (Kannon Association of Great Japan). Shortly after the Pacific War (1947), Okada renamed it to Nippon Kannon Kyōdan 日本觀音教團 (Japan Kannon Church). Its present name was given ten years later.

11 Cf. 日本文化の特異性 at http://shuken.sonnabakana.com/mioshie/tengoku_no_isizue_old/index.html (accessed: October 15, 2018).

12 Cf. 日本再建の指針 at http://shuken.sonnabakana.com/mioshie/tengoku_no_isizue_old/index.html (accessed: October 15, 2018).

wide spiritual spectrum of autonomous projections, one of which being an entity named El Cantare (*Eru kantāre* エル カンターレ), the Great Spirit (*tairei* 大靈) of earth. El Cantare's consciousness (*ishiki* 意識) is believed to have repeatedly incarnated in the past in order to instruct humanity how to advance spiritually. In our times, once again, El Cantare took human shape as a world teacher, having emerged at a time of utmost crisis. The moral decline of human civilization seems to effect an impending and almost inevitable apocalypse. The reason being that accumulating ill thought of humanity spiritually darkens the planet and thereby triggers its self-purification (*jijō sayō* 自浄作用). If a critical mass of humanity would hold fast to the teachings of El Cantare, the spiritual contamination can be reduced in time to avert disaster. While El Cantare's millenarian outlook was initially grim, it shifted to an optimistic progressive perspective from the mid-1990s only to return to an increasingly negative view in more recent years. What is believed to occur soon, however, and irrespective of whether there will eventually be disaster or not, is the realization of Utopia (*yūtopia* ユートピア), that is, Kōfuku no Kagaku's millennium. Utopia or the Buddha Land (*butsu kokudo* 仏国土) is understood as a Happy World (*kōfukuna sekai* 幸福な世界) brought about foremostly by the principle of love that gives (*ataeru ai* 与える愛). When being mastered it concretizes through enlightenment, that is, the implementation of the Utopia of the Heart-mind (*kokoro no yūtopia* 心のユートピア), of which the Buddha Land Utopia is the worldly extension. Owing to El Cantare's ministry, the self-cultivational deadlock of this degenerate age is held to have been finally resolved, enabling humanity soon to enter the Age of the Sun (*taiyō no jidai* 太陽の時代), in which the social, political, and economic conditions resemble the natural pattern of the cosmic law conceived by the Primordial Buddha in his creational preliminaries. According to Kōfuku no Kagaku, the place chosen by El Cantare and other high-ranking spirits to incarnate at this historical watershed is Japan, which is deemed the node of present-day world politics and the intersection point of Eastern and Western civilization. In fact, El Cantare's embodiment in these troublesome times is thought to be Ōkawa Ryūhō 大川隆法 (b. 1956), the founder and current leader of the movement. His teachings would usher in Utopia, burgeoning out of Japan, the supposed global spiritual center lasting for at least some decades, a thousand years, or perhaps virtually indefinitely. While some parts of the world are believed to perish soon, Japan would be destined to become the lynchpin of a Golden Age (*ōgon jidai* 黄金時代)—the Ideal State (*risō kokka* 理想国家) where science and religion have merged—spelled out by Ōkawa, that will beacon to the light those who live in the darkness. Japan appears as the future model nation, whose social, cultural, political, economic, technological, and religious

ways are to be emulated around the globe. In this view, Kōfuku no Kagaku operates according to the salvific spiritual logic hypostasized by Ōkawa that is currently being adopted by the Japanese people at large, and in a next step encompassing the whole world. Indeed, the Japanese are deemed by Ōkawa a spiritually and technologically superior civilization with a special history in which a number of individuals have allegedly already paved the way for what is now brought to glorious fruition by Ōkawa; the Japanese are purportedly divinely chosen to receive and salvifically foster the Law (*hō* 法). It would actually be their commitment to the Law that might very likely prevent ultimate catastrophe.

2.3 *China*

The Greater Chinese area, and specifically the People's Republic of China (PRC), is in many ways uncharted territory regarding our knowledge of NRMS. The two best-known groups of recent years, primarily due to the PRC placing them at the center of its anti-*xíjiào* 邪教 (“evil cult”) crusade, will serve as case studies below. Fǎlún Gōng or Fǎlún Dàfǎ 法轮大法 (Great Law of the Law Wheel) is a product of the *qìgōng* fever (*qìgōng rè* 气功热) of the 1980s and 1990s; a group that allegedly had several tens of millions of practitioners in the PRC until the authorities cracked down on it in 1999, resulting in heavy persecution and a legal ban. Whereas Fǎlún Gōng was almost eradicated in the PRC, it is still most active abroad, likely with some hundreds of thousands of members at present. Emically, Fǎlún Gōng is viewed as a cultivation system, being superior to conventional *qìgōng*, or any other program of cultivation for that matter. Fǎlún Gōng teachings richly draw on Buddhism and Daoism while also embracing a number of New Age beliefs. It is held that the workings of the multidimensional cosmos follow a natural pattern, the Law or Dharma (*fǎ* 法), whose qualities are truth (*zhēn* 真), compassion (*shàn* 善), and forbearance (*rěn* 忍). What are now human beings were once Buddhas, Daos, and Gods (*fú, dào, shén* 佛、道、神), that is, perfectly cultivated beings fully manifesting the *fǎ*-qualities; however, misguided social interaction had them gradually degenerate into a largely malicious and spiritually blind species. In line with the principle of *fǎ*-rectification (*zhèngfǎ* 正法), that is, a mode of cosmic self-purification, we—this fallen species that goes against the *fǎ*-qualities—should have been destroyed in the process. Yet, our peers of old, the great enlightened beings (*dàjuézhě* 大觉者), prevented extinction out of utmost compassion, thus enabling us to embark on “returning to the origin” (*huánběn* 还本). *Fǎ*-rectification would express itself as a cyclical pattern of creation and destruction, one that had occurred on earth already eighty-one times with the next one being at hand. Signs of humankind's de-

terioration are believed to be abundant, the world is in disarray, and earth is karmically rotten, which would trigger the Great Catastrophe (*dà jié nàn* 大劫难), the shift from the Old Cosmos (*jiù yǔ zhòu* 旧宇宙) to the New Cosmos (*xīn yǔ zhòu* 新宇宙). These days are supposed to be the Final Period of the Ending Kalpa (*mò jié zuì hòu shí qí* 末劫最后时期) (ZF 1.7) or the Period of the Ending Dharma (*mò fǎ shí qí* 末法时期) (ZF 3.2), where it is taught that a messianic figure (Maitreya) will appear, guiding the faithful safely through the cataclysm involving a rupture-like Day of Consummation (*yuán mǎn dì nà yī tiān* 圆满的那一天) that awaits shortly (ZF 2.3). The survivors will enter a world where the way of Fǎlún Gōng, which is believed to resemble the *fǎ*, is ubiquitously upheld. In this Future Cosmos (*wèi lái yǔ zhòu* 未来宇宙) humans will have succeeded in their *huán běn*-mission, becoming yet again socially unattached great enlightened beings with vast supernatural powers. Owing to their regained divine abilities, they would not be bound to earth, freely moving across space or dwelling in their realms of old, rejoicing in emulating the *fǎ* for all eternity. The Buddha Maitreya (*Mí lè fó* 弥勒佛) predicted by Fǎlún Gōng is Lǐ Hóngzhì 李洪志 (b. 1951/1952), the group's founder and present leader. Lǐ professes to be the only enlightened human being fully embodying *fǎ* and its qualities. This salvational status would empower only him to salvifically capacitate practitioners to more efficiently cultivate themselves, by implanting in their lower abdomen—through another dimension—a *fǎ lún* 法轮, as well as placing other co-working energy mechanisms around the body. Fǎlún Gōng is presented by Lǐ as the only effective practice in keeping with the cosmic *fǎ*. Apparently, like (ancient) Chinese culture in general, it is the culmination of a long evolutionary process. Being the carriers of a culture handed down by the gods (*shén chuán wén huà* 神傳文化), the Chinese would stand at the forefront of the coming calamities. In fact, it has been the Chinese, alongside a few other peoples, who are believed to have survived the last global disaster—a flood (*dà shuǐ* 大水)—by taking refuge in the Kūnlún Mountains. It is taught that the divinely enmeshed ways of the ancients with, among others, their attires like that of heavenly people (*tiān rén* 天人) and their superior science (having been far advanced vis-à-vis modern Western science), have prepared the stage for Lǐ to incarnate. Throughout human history highly cultivated *fǎ* learners always gravitated toward (that is, reincarnated in) the spiritual center, viz. China. Moreover, only the Chinese language would provide the subtlety and profundity to approximate the *fǎ*. While modern Chinese is already to some degree believed to be corrupted in contrast to the classical language, it still holds immense power—potentially even working miracles when being studied. The characters are thought to be close to the script used by the great enlightened beings themselves. However, the splendor of Chinese culture would

be dimmed today because of many moderns mimicking the depravity of the West as well as the PRC government being permeated by evil. Practitioners are urged to mirror the great virtue of the ancients in their *fǎ* praxis in order to rejoice when the Day of Consummation has arrived. Lǐ sums up his and the Chinese people's role in a poem: "Civilization of 5000 years; splendor of a culture handed down by the gods; we are the descendants of the gods; industrious, courageous, civilized, and kind-hearted; profound history is the glory of our nation; heroes through the ages glitter like starlight; the beautiful landscape gifted by the gods; this is the place where the Creator [*chuàngshìzhǔ* 創世主] descended; saving all beings, restoring the Right Way [*zhèngdào* 正道] with [Lǐ] Hóng[zhì]'s vast grace; the Chinese civilization will flow on forever."¹³

Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì is the internationally most visible actor of China's vastly growing Protestant-based new religious arena, for it is the most fiercely persecuted NRM at present. Like several other groups featuring on the PRC's *xiejiao* black lists, Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì likely branched off from Hūhǎnpài 呼喊派 (Shouters, 1967), itself being a spawn of Dìfāng Jiàohuì 地方教會 (Local Church, 1927). The three unify in their eschatological outlook, with Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì envisioning the impending apocalypse most grimly and vocally. Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì is estimated to have a fellowship reaching into the hundreds of thousands or even millions worldwide. The group's thought stresses that humanity is living at the brink of dramatic change, having only recently entered the Age of the Kingdom (*guódù shídài* 国度时代), the last phase in a tripartite division of history. The shift from the previous Age of Grace (*ēndiǎn shídài* 恩典时代), which itself, following the birth of Jesus, succeeded the Age of Law (*lǜfǎ shídài* 律法时代), allegedly occurred through the re-appearance of the Messiah (*Mísàiyà* 弥赛亚). The God incarnate or Christ of the Last Days (*mòshì de Jīdū* 末世的基督) would herald great disasters soon to be unleashed by Almighty God's (*quánnéngshén*) wrath, which will exterminate the unfaithful. The New Jerusalem (*xīn Yēlùsālěng* 新耶路撒冷), that is, the Millennial Kingdom (*qiānnián guódù* 千年国度) will rise, and while those parts of humankind imbued by Satan will be obliterated, the "overcomers" (*déshèngzhě* 得胜者), that is, those resorting to Almighty God, will rapture before Him and will live in His Kingdom forever. Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì's earthly millennium is depicted scantily as a place of peace and harmony, love and bliss, piousness, sanctity, and eternal youth. Human beings would ultimately reinstate their

13 五千年的文明，神傳文化的輝煌，我們是神的子民，勤勞勇敢文明善良，深厚歷史是民族的榮耀，千古英豪星光燦爛，錦繡江山是神的恩賜，這是創世主降臨之地，救眾生復正道洪恩浩蕩，中華文明萬古流長。Cf. 中国之歌 in 洪吟四 at <https://zhuanfl.com/gedijiangfa/hongyin4/index.html#at121> (accessed: October 21, 2018).

Edenic nature and purpose according to God's Management Plan (*jīngyíng jihuà* 经营计划), resting as perfected beings and rejoicing in the worship of God for evermore. Of all the countries of the world, the PRC is imagined to be the first that will be annihilated by Almighty God, for it epitomizes the biblical Great Red Dragon (*dà hóng lóng* 大红龙) or Satan. According to Quán-néngshén Jiàohuì's Manichean worldview, "China represents all the forces of darkness, and the people of China represent all who are of a physical body, of Satan, and of blood and vital breath. The people of China, who have been corrupted by the Great Red Dragon most severely, who have opposed God most rigorously, and whose humanity is most lowly and filthy, are therefore the archetype of all corrupted humankind."¹⁴ And exactly because "[o]ut of the entire universe, the Chinese are the most backward of people, are born lowly and with low character, are imbecile and numb, are vulgar and degenerate, their whole body being saturated by Satan's disposition, and are filthy and licentious,"¹⁵ they are God's elect and, as such, the luckiest of all people. Their culture and nature in past and present is understood to have always been soiled by Satan's influence, being farthest away from God. Hence, it was only natural that while Jesus concluded his mission of redemption in Judea among the godly Israelites, the returning Christ would emerge amid the evil incarnate in the Satan-bound PRC to consummate humankind's salvation—for darkness would only magnify His holiness. God, it is taught, is taking special attention vis-à-vis the Chinese because their salvational victory would render them a model for every other people. Accordingly, God had approached Chinese (prophetic) individuals, such as the founder of Dìfāng Jiàohuì, to prepare humankind for the Last Days and the arrival of the Messiah, whose identity is as yet undisclosed. While it used to be a female Chinese, the group's more recent writings relate to a male Christ figure; perhaps the founder Zhào Wéishān (赵维山 (b. 1951) himself.

2.4 Vietnam

Another part of East Asia bustling with NRMS today is Vietnam. The largest movement is Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ (大道三期普度), in short Cao Đài (High Tower/Palace; 高臺), actually a cluster consisting of dozens of groups, of which Tòa Thánh (Holy See) Tây Ninh and Ban Chính Đạo stand out as the biggest

14 中国代表所有的黑暗势力，中国的人代表所有属肉体、属撒但、属血气的人。中国的人被大红龙败坏得最厉害，抵挡神最严重，人性最低贱、最污秽，所以是整个败坏人类的典型代表 [...]。；cf. *HZR* 作工异象 二, p. 502.

15 全宇之下，中国人是最落后的人类，出生低贱，人格低下，痴呆麻木，庸俗腐朽，撒但性情沾满全身，污秽淫乱，你们样样都有。；cf. *HZR* 拯救摩押后代的意义, p. 608.

with likely more than a million adherents each.¹⁶ The entire cluster draws on some three million followers with a diasporic community of up to 30,000 devotees. Cao Đài's creation is linked to the colonial turbulences of 1920s French Indochina, giving a new highly syncretic guise to millenarian teachings and mediumistic practices traceable via various Vietnamised Minh redemptive societies to the early Qīng Dynasty (1644–1912) Xiāntiān Dào 先天道 (The Way of Former Heaven) current. Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ literally means Great Way of the Third Period of Universal Salvation, and denotes a three-part eschatology (*tam kỳ mạt kiếp*). Various mythical and historical religious figures—among them the likes of Nhiên Đăng Cổ Phật (Dīpaṃkara Buddha), Khổng Tử (Confucius), Lão Tử (Lǎozǐ), and Jesus (Giê-su)—are believed to have opened the First (*nhứt kỳ phổ độ*/一期普度) and the Second Period of Universal Salvation (*nhị kỳ phổ độ*/二期普度) respectively, transmitting the teachings of Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát (Heavenly Emperor of the High Tower and Great Bodhisattva Mahāsattva; 高臺天皇大菩薩摩訶薩), in short Cao Đài, the (post-creation) supreme deity alongside his female counterpart Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu (Golden Mother of the Jade Pond; 瑤池金母). Over time the teachings spread by the different prophets are held to have been degenerating, prompting Cao Đài for a final time to convey his unifying salvational message—this time through mediums, which heralded the birth of the movement in this Third Period of Universal Salvation (*tam kỳ phổ độ*/三期普度). In the current age, cataclysmic events involving wars, disease, and natural disasters would soon reduce the human population to a mere ten percent. When the world or Planet 68 (*Địa cầu 68*/地球 68) has been laid to ashes (*tận diệt*/盡滅), Maitreya (*Di-Lặc*; 彌勒) is held to convene the Great Dragon Flower Assembly (*Đại hội long hoa*/大會龍花) summoning humanity's survivors for his Final Judgement (*phán xét cuối cùng*). That is to say, Maitreya is slated to oversee a Final Examination (*khảo thí chung*) of all human spirits. Those deemed unworthy due to their past transgressions would be annihilated and thus significantly lose accumulated karmic achievements, being thrown back millions of years in their spiritual evolution. In contrast, the worthy ones would make a great leap in their spiritual progress—depending on their examination results—turning into Buddhas (*phật*/佛), immortals (*tiên*/仙), saints/sages (*thánh*/聖), or spirits (*thần*/神) able to dwell aside Cao Đài and Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu delighting in eternal bliss. A third group of examinees, having less merits than the promotees, would populate the brilliant new world that will arise out of the old. This

16 The discussion below draws on the doctrinal understanding promoted by the Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh branch.

Great World (*thế giới đại đồng*) is envisaged as being replete with morality and piousness, beauty and love, longevity and peace; an environment conducive for accelerated spiritual growth. It consummates the Fourth Transition (*tứ Chuyển*/四轉), marking the inception of a new cosmic cycle (cf. Nguyễn 2000a: 357–362; 2000b: 252–262; 2004: 399–413; Tùng 2008: 145–159). By ushering in the Third Period of Universal Salvation, Cao Đài selected Vietnam as the holy land. Its geographic features, namely an *âm-dương* (*yīn-yáng* 陰陽) or *bát quái* (*bā guà* 八卦) shape, give to it a geomantic-spiritual power necessary for its soteriological function in the current transitional age. Likewise, he assigned the Vietnamese a distinguished role for they have a uniquely good nature enduring persistent suffering as well as a spiritual dignity particularly fed by Confucian mores that allegedly inhere a Vietnamese spirit. Their customs being preserved for millennia bolstered by royal influence, and spiritual excellence fostered by the new national religion (*quốc đạo*/國道) (i.e., Cao Đài) are meant to become a model for the world to emulate. Their traditional music is considered the most powerful in days past and present. They are deemed a blessed people,¹⁷ first and directly to receive the teachings to quickly get ready for the impending End of Days (*Tận thế*/盡世). Hence, Vietnam would serve as the millenarian point of origin—the world is soon to follow in its wake. Eventually, the small Vietnam will spiritually govern the whole world.

3 Concluding Remarks

The self-identity of most East Asian NRMs anchors in the myth of the millennium, that is, the story of a soteriological transition soon to arrive at the state of completion as a whole or a significant part thereof (i.e., the millennium). The myth provides NRMs with a *raison d'être*; it explains why a given movement exists and how a movement will fulfill its role. It legitimizes modifications in doctrine and praxis, accommodating to new challenges, for the myth is malleable in its specifications. The myth allows for twofold transitional trajectories (catastrophic and progressive) with the possibility to have them blend

17 Early recorded (Francophile) divine messages likewise granted the French people a particularly exalted position alongside the Vietnamese. The majority of the revelatory corpus was related in Vietnamese with a smaller portion verbalized in French. The esoteric language is exclusively Vietnamese. Overall it is taught that in order to fully comprehend Cao Đài teachings one must master Vietnamese since translations cannot convey the nuanced meaning of the original texts.

together¹⁸ or even take turns (oscillatory millenarianism). Frequently, the millennium inscribed into the myth employed by East Asian NRMs is depicted as soteriologically unsurpassable, providing *ab ovo* the peak level of spiritual cultivation (see Fǎlún Gōng, Sekai Kyūseikyō, Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì). Contrary to that, the millennium may also operate in the myth as a continuum geared toward soteriological insuperability, deterministically leading the faithful to further and expedited salvational augmentation and, eventually, consummation (see Chūngsando, Kōfuku no Kagaku, Unification Movement, Wōn Buddhism). The vision of a dual millennium is rarely at play, allowing for both soteriological pathways, namely that of *ab ovo* salvational perfection on the one hand, and *post hoc* salvational perfection (or salvational gradualism) on the other (see Cao Đài).

Another shared element central to the myth in its East Asian new religious application is ethnocentrism, that is, the notion of ethnic exceptionalism or ascendancy. That is to say, the millennium and its contextual universe in the myth are ordinarily approached regionalistically, making for Korea-centric, Japanocentric, Sinocentric, and Vietnam-centric narratives. The topos most commonly employed is the (early) core clientele's (i.e., the target recipient ethnicity's) spiritual supremacy in the past as well as, manifesting even more splendidly while being ubiquitously recognized, in the future. In the same vein, civilizational and linguistic grandeur in past and present, and their prospective transformative or salvific impact upon the rest of humankind, are often highlighted. Similarly, in many cases, it is the respective movement's chief teaching-figure who (salvifically) beacons the faithful to the millennium. Moreover, the native lands of the core clientele is more often than not assigned a special status qua starting point of the millennium and the guiding spiritual center of the world. Notably, the standard line of argument stressing the outstandingly positive attributes of one's own people and their country (which is not necessarily identical to the nation-state, whose present appearance is often rather criticized—if not outrightly rejected) may in fact be entirely inverted. This is the case, most conspicuously, with Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì, which chooses a Sinocentric tapestry where ethnic magnificence is understood as unfolding out of superlative ethnic degeneracy.

Exploring in more detail the varieties of the myth of the millennium greatly deepens our understanding of millenarian morphology. This enables us to re-

18 For example, avertive millenarianism in which the catastrophic outlook shifts to a progressive one. A special case of catastrophic millenarianism—what I like to call “reductive millenarianism”—might be seen, for instance, in the case of Sekai Kyūseikyō, where collective orthopraxis is considered to reduce in scale (i.e., partly avert) the calamities-in-waiting.

fine the overall analytical framework used in the study of millenarianism, comprehending the full range of possible configurations through which the myth of the millennium may find expression. The present essay is a first comparative attempt in this direction.

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- HZRX *Huà zài ròushēn xiǎnxiàn* 话在肉身显现
- TI *Tengoku no ishizue* 天国の礎
- TJ *Chũngsando Tojõn* 甌山道 道典 (Chũngsando Tojõn P'yõnch'an Wiwõnhoe 2003)
- TJG *Taejonggyõng* 대종경 (大宗經) (Wönbulgyo Chôngh-wasa 2008b)
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