

ASSIMILATION OF 'NEW AGE' BELIEFS INTO CULTS AND NEW RELIGIONS IN EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Introduction

In East and Southeast Asia, some beliefs and practices within popular religion are similar to some "new age" beliefs in Europe and North America. These Asian beliefs have periodically been incorporated into Asian sectarian religions and cults by religious innovators who adopted various idiosyncratic combinations of elements from this ancient stream of popular culture. Hence, much of what is called "new age" in Europe and North America has a very long history in Asia.

However, some new elements have entered into this Asian religious milieu during the 20th century from speculations on the fringes of the sciences, and from "new age" and "cultic milieu" scientism¹ in Western countries. Instead of stimulating a growth of new-age activities and cults, however, these elements have been incorporated into several Asian new religious movements which combine traditional themes with elements drawn from the Western cultic milieu. To understand how so-called "new age" beliefs

¹ We use the terms "scientism" and "scientistic" to refer to writings which are not scientific (in the sense of formal communications among scientists about their theories and research), but which attempt to appear to be scientific by using words and phrases similar to those used by scientists, in order to increase the apparent legitimacy of non-scientific arguments. Of course, in the realm of popular-science writing and some journalism, it is not always easy for non-specialists to detect the differences between writings which report or reflect on "science", and writings which are merely "scientistic". It should also be noted that some scientists, when venturing outside their fields of expertise, can be guilty of such writing as they promote social, political, or religious agendas using *scientistic* language and analysis.

and practices are being assimilated in Asia, therefore, we need to understand how they are combined with more traditional Asian beliefs and practices.

Much of so-called “new age” theorizing in the West would not seem innovative to most Asians who are interested in such themes. Indeed, there is a long history of theory and practice in the region in regard to such “new age” preoccupations as self-cultivation to achieve higher states of existence, invisible means of communication, foreknowledge, and exotic powers within nature and in the human body.

What is new to this Asian ‘cultic milieu’, however, is the “new age” material from the West which is grounded in scientific ideas and investigations, but leaps from the sciences into what most scientists would consider to be unscientific speculation and unprovable claims. These ‘leaps’ from science into speculation and scientism occur in a number of directions, but we will focus here particularly on “new age” interest in contacts with extraterrestrial civilizations.

One of the topics which attracts some “new age” seekers is the possibility of extraterrestrial civilizations which have contacts with humans on earth. Such contacts could occur through rebirth into those other worlds, or through travel, or through exotic communication, or through the presence of ‘space-ships’ sent to visit earth. Claims that people have seen such space-ships have been so widely repeated and elaborated in books and movies in Europe and North America that almost everyone knows about so-called “unidentified flying objects” or UFOs.

Those immersed in the quest for hidden powers and hidden dynamics – an underlying feature of many “new age” topics – are particularly intrigued by claims that these alien beings have contacted humans or are attempting to do so. Thus, UFO/contact stories circulate within the ‘cultic milieu’ as well as within the field of ‘new age’ activities. Bainbridge, for example, documents such beliefs as one of the ‘new-age’ factors in his factor-analysis of responses from an on-line survey (Bainbridge, 2004:388). The fascination with UFOs, extra-terrestrial civilizations, and exotic contacts with humans has also occasionally led to the establishment of cults in which these preoccupations are central. One of the earliest studies of such a UFO

cult was Festinger's account in *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger, et al. 1956).

In this paper, we offer two examples of how such ideas have been incorporated into Asian religions or cults: first, the incorporation of 19th and early 20th century European speculations about other worlds into the Vietnamese new religion known as Caodaism, in the 1920s; and second, the incorporation of UFO speculations and claims about aliens and their influence on humans into the Chinese cult known as Falun Gong, in the 1990s.

Astronomy, Other Worlds, and New Religions in Vietnam: the case of Caodaism

Caodaism² was founded in Saigon in 1925, and spread quickly among the peasantry in the southern part of Vietnam. Within the next three years, it gained more adherents than the Catholics had managed to convert during the previous 300 years (Werner, 1981). The founders of Caodaism, however, were educated urban Vietnamese men,³ most of whom worked during some period for the French colonial administration. Werner analyzed the backgrounds of most of the principal figures who were involved in the founding or establishment of Caodaism, and concluded that nearly 40% of these individuals were what she called 'upper-class dignitaries' (Werner, 1976:18-19): landowners, entrepreneurs, and high-ranking officials.

² In this paper, as in Werner (1981), 'Caodaism' refers to the religion, 'Caodai' refers to followers or adherents of Caodaism, and 'Cao Dai' refers to the principal or supreme deity of Caodaism (following Oliver, 1976). (Note, however, that some worshippers refer to their religion as 'Cao Dai'. See, for example, Bui [2000])

³ We should note that women seem to have played an important role in the early Cao-dai movement. A number of the early spirit-writing revelations specifically acknowledge their roles and their dedication. A 'female college' was set up on the instructions of the deity Cao Dai, and a number of women were appointed to prominent positions in this college. They were regularly exhorted, during spirit-writing sessions, to keep the faith and follow the principles, and periodically praised for their dedication.

The doctrines and practices of Caodaism were originally derived from revelations received by mediums, using various techniques. The Vietnamese founders of Caodaism were aware of both Chinese-style spirit-writing (using a stick or a basket with a stick inserted into it) and European-style seances using tables or alphabet-boards. The early Caodai spirit-writers had learned and practiced spirit-writing in Vietnamese Taoist sects which used a stick to write the characters on trays of sand (Werner, 1981:8), a method common in Chinese spirit-writing sects. They evidently also experimented with European methods of divination.

The original revelations which directed the founding of the religion were received by mediums in Saigon in the mid-1920s. The revelations eventually announced that they derived from the supreme being, Cao Dai. However, a large number of other figures descended to give messages to the attendees, including deceased luminaries known to Europeans whose presence was undoubtedly impressive to at least some European and French-educated Vietnamese attendees. Thus, the seances were graced by Victor Hugo, Shakespeare, Joan of Arc, Louis Pasteur, Descartes, and even Lenin. Victor Hugo had a special place in the Caodai sainthood, on the basis of his sympathy with the oppressed. He is pictured in the Tayninh cathedral along with Sun Yat Sen and a famous 16th century Vietnamese poet, Trang Trinh Nguyen Binh Khiem, as the “three saints” representing the unifying character of the new religion for Vietnamese, Chinese, and French. In a mural at the temple, they point to a plaque showing the principles of “God and Humanity” and “Love and Justice”, written in Chinese, French, and English.

One useful source of information about the mentality of the founders of Caodaism comes from the collection of spirit-writing revelations titled the *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen* (literally, the ‘collection of selected holy messages’).⁴ Such collections usually include, scattered among the general

⁴ Our version of *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen* is a Vietnamese-language edition published in Vietnam in two volumes, in 1969 and 1970, acquired by Lang during a trip to Saigon and Tayninh in 2001. This research trip was supported by small-scale research

moral pronouncements, specific messages through which we can gain some sense of the local preoccupations of the spirit-writers, and of their audience (Lang and Ragvald, 1998). We can also often get a sense of the sources from which they draw their ideas and images. Hence, we will quote from *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen* (hereafter TNHT) to illustrate and document the sect's philosophy and aims.

The founders of Caodaism were familiar with features of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and with some of the Vietnamese writers and sectarian groups which had tried or claimed to incorporate the best of the "three religions", or to show that the three systems were simply different expressions of the same truths. The Caodaists' own incorporation of elements of these religions was opportunistic and eclectic, and made little attempt to produce a philosophical rationalization of the differences (Werner, 1981).⁵ The founders of Caodaism were also familiar with Catholicism from their extensive experience with the French colonial regime and with local Vietnamese Catholics. The theology which they developed through spirit-writing reflects the influences of all of these religions.

In addition, we can also detect some influence from French spiritualist writers such as Flammarion and Allan Kardec, who are mentioned by Cao

grant from City University's Southeast Asia Research Centre. We gratefully acknowledge this support. We are also grateful for translations of these volumes for Lang by Dr. Hum Tak Bui.

⁵ Werner (1981:6) describes this amalgamation as follows: "From Buddhism, Caodaism adopted the Three Submissions, the Five Interdictions, the beliefs in karma, reincarnation, and Nirvana, the practices of asceticism, devotions, meditation, vegetarianism, religious purity and charity for the poor. From Taoism, Caodiasm borrowed the Three Jewels (matter, spirit, soul) and the 'Union of the Five Elements' (mineral, vegetable, water, fire, and earth). Taoist themes included the belief in spirits, magic, [and] the intervention of the spirits to promulgate and reaffirm religious laws. Confucian themes in Caodaism defined social relationships and behavior emphasizing correct comportment, the ranking of social relationships, the belief in the necessity of proper relations between superiors and inferiors, a rejection of egalitarianism, and preoccupation with rites, [and] an attachment to community, scholarship, knowledge, and tradition".

Dai as among the earlier prophets bringing messages to mankind in various lands.⁶ The references to Kardec and Flammarion are particularly interesting, because they show that the spirit-writers were familiar with European intellectual developments (Blagov, 2001:48). Writings by Flammarion, Kardec, and other French spiritualists had been published in Saigon in the 1920s and were well-known to many educated Vietnamese (Werner, 1981).

Kardec (1804-1869), a free-lance educator and writer, had become enthusiastic about spiritualist seances during the middle decades of the 19th century, eventually publishing a 'Book of Spirits' (*Le Livre des Esprit*) containing his distillations of the philosophy which he believed the spirits were trying to impart. This book was widely circulated in other countries, and spiritualist writings from those countries were incorporated into later editions of the book. Early in his career, he was interested in trying to find ways to unify the Protestant sects, and this 'unifying' impulse was expressed later in his spiritualist writings.

Flammarion (1842-1925) was an astronomer who turned to futuristic science fiction and then, late in life, to seances, spiritualism, and psychic phenomena, on which he also published several widely-circulated books. He was fascinated by the prospect of communication between spirits and the living, and between spirits in different worlds.

These two French writers seem to have influenced the Caodaist spirit-writers, not only because of their advocacy of prophetic spiritualist seances but also because of their visions of a new and unifying religious philosophy, and because of their belief in many inter-connected worlds. We can find all of these themes within Caodai theology.

Astronomical studies and speculations in the late 19th and early 20th century also seem to have influenced Caodaist thinking, particularly, the speculations about numerous other planets and worlds beyond the earth. The Caodaist theology includes a system of progressive transmigration of

⁶ For example, in a message on Oct. 27, 1926, Cao Dai asserts: "I sent Allan Kardec, I sent Flammarion, as I sent Elijah and Jesus Christ; one is persecuted, and the other killed. By whom? By Mankind." (TNHT, 1969:131).

souls "upward" through 68 planets, 3,000 worlds, and 36 heavens. While the bottom end of this system (the 10 courts of Hell, below the level of the planets) reflects much older Buddhist and Taoist depictions of Hell, the upper realms of planets and worlds seems to be influenced, directly or indirectly, by astronomical discussions by European scientists.

Indeed, in providing instructions for the iconography in the Holy See in Tayninh, the supreme deity, Cao Dai, told his followers to build a giant blue globe to represent these worlds, on which they should draw the North Star and other stars, as well as Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. Cao Dai goes on to say that if they are unsure about the location of those stars, they should "look in the Western books on astronomy and imitate the pictures of the stars" (TNHT, 1969:44; Sept. 26, 1926). This extraordinary endorsement of Western astronomy by the Supreme Deity of the universe suggests that the Caodaist mediums were more than impressed by science (evidently filtered through writings such as those by Flammarion), and wished to show the up-to-date modernity of their revelations through such references.

To summarize: the influence of French colonial rule in Vietnam, and the resulting exposure of educated Vietnamese officials who had studied in France to European cultural, scientific, pseudo-scientific and scientific writings, led to the incorporation of some of what we would now call "new age" preoccupations into a Vietnamese new religion in the 1920s. This new religion absorbed the European speculations about other inhabited worlds, which in turn had been stimulated by discoveries in astronomy, but adapted these "otherworld" speculations to the Asian concept of levels of existence, stratified on the basis of the merits of the inhabitants.

We now turn to a recent case in China, where a similar process has occurred in which modern scientific material about UFOs and aliens has been assimilated into a Chinese cult which started in the 1990s.

UFOs, Aliens and Cults in China: the case of Falun Gong

In the 1990s, China's economic development was very rapid, but it occurred in an ideological vacuum. Socialism had been largely abandoned as a basis for collective enthusiasm among much of the population, Confucianism was attracting increasing attention but held little interest for younger people, and other non-Chinese religions and political philosophies could not be advocated in public forums. The regime emphasized the importance of science and technology and of assimilating the best of science and technology from the West. But as in much of the U.S. and Europe, the distinction between science and pseudoscience was not well-understood by much of the population.

Meanwhile, however, some curious 'seekers' interested in pursuing the most fascinating and extraordinary of the ideas circulating in the West could explore the possibilities of aliens and UFOs – ideas which seemed to be scientific, or to deal with secular and scientific issues – without any risk of appearing to advocate subversive religious or political themes. The possibility that UFOs were visiting the earth, and the even more intriguing idea that they might be communicating with humans, was one of the most exotic secular themes in Western scientific literature, and hence, attracted great interest among Chinese intellectuals keen to explore radical new ideas. Some of them also found a way to connect this field of speculation with China's rapid economic development: they suggested that aliens were particularly interested in China precisely because of its recent spectacular increase in wealth and power.⁷

⁷ See for example "Aliens among us?!", *Pravda*, 01/14/2004, on-line edition, at: English.pravda.ru/printed.html?news_id=11796, retrieved from the Web 5/6/'04. This article notes the frequent reports of UFO sightings in China, the proliferation of Chinese UFO clubs, and the remarks of one 'UFO expert', Sun Shili, that "China appeals to aliens the most, due to the country's recent breakthroughs and its aspiration to become the world's leader". He thinks that the interest of aliens in the U.S. has recently declined.

As mentioned in the introduction, China has a long history of theory and practice in regard to such "new age" preoccupations as cultivation of invisible forces and exotic powers within nature and in the human body. When the CCP came into power in 1949, however, these practices were viewed as feudalist superstitions and prohibited by the Party, which "followed the hard line of militant atheism" (Yang 2004: 103). In the late 1970s, with some relaxation of the very strict controls over religions, the interest in exotic and quasi-supernatural or invisible powers and forces began to be revived. Among these themes, UFOs and *qigong*, both of which were promoted as 'scientific' fields of inquiry, were most popular in China in 1980s and 1990s.

People in mainland China began to pay more attention to the topic of UFOs when People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao*) published an article titled "UFO: a great riddle puzzling the world" (UFO: *yige nanjie de shijie zhi mi*), 13 November, 1978. This article was placed into the column on "Discussions on International Sciences" (*Guoji keji mantan*). As the most influential and authoritative newspaper in Communist China, People's Daily played a role in promoting Chinese people's interest in UFOs. In 1979, "the communication center of Chinese UFO fans" (*Zhongguo UFO aihaozhe Lianluochu*) was founded in Wuhan University. In May 1, 1980, the center was renamed "China's UFO Research Association" (*Zhongguo UFO yanjiuhui*). From then on more branch research associations devoted to UFOs were established in various provinces. In addition to the founding of these associations, dozens of books on UFOs were published in China in the 1980s, most of which are translations of English books. A popular magazine which exclusively discusses UFOs, the Journal of UFO Research (*Feidie tansuo*), was issued in 1981. This popular magazine not only introduced the reports on UFOs in western countries but also reported on alleged sightings of UFOs in China. Due to the publication of these books and magazines, Chinese people became more and more familiar with UFO themes.

These translations of Western UFO-related books as well as many publications on UFOs by mainland Chinese writers probably contributed to a rise in "sightings". As in the U.S. in the 1950s, sightings and reports of

UFOs in the 1980s and 1990s multiplied rapidly, and some writers proposed various possibilities and explanations.

For example, the writer Ke Yunlu wrote about the possibility that aliens had visited Earth in the remote past and created humans, leaving humans only with the memory of god-like creatures which eventually became 'gods'. Since Ke Yunlu was particularly interested in trying to understand and explain the figure of Jesus, he speculated that Jesus could communicate with these beings through his extraordinary powers – acquired through *qigong* practice. Alternatively, he supposed that Jesus could be the offspring of aliens, who kidnapped Mary and made her pregnant (Ke, 1994: 1153).

Also in the 1980s, *qigong* thrived in China. Previously supported by the state as a secular and scientific way to increase health, *qigong* gradually developed in the direction of mysticism, as various *qigong* masters pursued so-called "supernormal abilities" (*teyi gongneng*). Many intellectuals also engaged in studying *qigong* and other mysterious topics. Among them, Ke Yunlu is perhaps the best well-known. As a talented writer, Ke produced a couple of popular books probing and propagating mysterious phenomena, including dreams, supernormal abilities, *qigong*, UFOs, and religions. With the publication and wide distribution of those books and magazines propagating mysticism, and with amplification of this material by a largely uncritical mass media, a mild but distinct "cultic milieu" flourished in China in the 1980s and 1990s. The UFO theme and *qigong* began to intertwine with each other within this milieu. Many voluntary groups emerged, absorbing and sharing the majority of symbols and ideas with the surrounding milieu.

This growing interest in UFOs, aliens, extraterrestrial civilizations, and their possible impact on human societies became a popular topic in the mass media, and attracted some of the same seekers as those who were fascinated by the alleged extraordinary powers which could be cultivated through *qigong* practice. Hence, it became useful to mention such phenomena or to make claims of special knowledge about them, among cultural entrepreneurs seeking the attention of audiences to whom they were promoting their methods of achieving special powers and exotic knowledge. One such entrepreneur was Li Hongzhi.

Falun Gong was founded by Li Hongzhi in China in the 1990s, originally as one of the varieties of *qigong* practices taught and promoted by various masters in China during that period, through lectures, books, and tapes.⁸ Apparently driven by competition with other *qigong* exponents, Li introduced doctrinal and organizational innovations which converted Falun Gong into a quasi-religious movement, as Li gradually subordinated the physical and moral benefits of *qigong* practice under an elaborate theoretical scheme of karma and salvation linking past, present, and future existences (Lu, forthcoming). The movement came into increasing conflict with authorities, and was banned after the famous demonstration by practitioners in Beijing in 1999, which had been organized as a protest against official harassment. Li Hongzhi had by that time left the country, and the movement continued to grow in North America, Europe, and Australia, mostly among overseas Chinese, but also attracting some non-Chinese adherents.

Most of the research and analysis of Falun Gong has focused on its origins, evolution, and relationships to earlier religious and cultural themes and movements in China, including its roots in sectarian religions and in various Buddhist and *qigong* theories and practices (eg. Palmer, 2003; Ownby, 2003; Lu, forthcoming). There has been little comment, however, on the fact that Li also assimilated elements of modern scientific and pseudo-scientific discussions about UFOs, other worlds, extra-terrestrial aliens, cloning, and hidden dimensions of reality. At first, he did not get this material directly from non-Chinese sources. Instead, it seems that he was exposed to these themes in Chinese media and popular culture in the late 1980s

⁸ In China, the striving for extraordinary powers has produced a diverse stream of ideas and practices devoted to the pursuit or cultivation of these powers in humans. Much of this belief and practice can be categorized under the general label of *qigong*, or the cultivation and use of mystical energies which flow within the body and are somehow connected to wider exotic powers in the universe. During the 1980s, there was a considerable expansion of *qigong*-related activities in China. The Communist regime in China had originally supported *qigong* research and activities as an apparently secular and scientific way to increase health, treat or prevent illness, and pursue powers supposedly understood in China but not in the West (Palmer, 2003).

or early 1990s, and incorporated some of it into his reflections in lectures and writings. He elaborated some of this material later, after he left China.

In Li Hongzhi's earliest lectures, delivered before he left China, he referred periodically to flying saucers or UFOs (e.g. in *Zhuan Falun*, published in Chinese in 1994, and in a lecture in Beijing in 1995: Li, 1994:30,150; Li, 1995). These early references to UFOs do not suggest hostility toward aliens or toward science. Indeed, Li seemed to be reflecting and taking advantage of the fascination with UFOs which was widespread in China during the 1990s, no doubt in part to titillate his audience with his alleged knowledge of such phenomena.

After he left China, he began to focus more on extra-terrestrial beings with malevolent intentions. During his lectures in 1998, he repeatedly referred to aliens. In a lecture in Frankfurt, Germany, he also claimed that aliens abducted humans and displayed them, on other planets, in cages (Li, 1998a). By that time, he had evidently been exposed to the themes of the 'abduction' stories prevalent in UFO literature and in the 'cultic milieu' in the U.S.

Aliens, he claimed, were also responsible for the development of computers, and use computers to control people. Indeed, "aliens have registered everyone who knows how to operate a computer" (Li, 1998a). Of course, some of Li's own followers have proved to be adept at using the World Wide Web for promoting Falun Gong and publishing his books and lectures on-line, but he has thought of this problem, and reassures them that they are protected: "as to our students, I've cleaned all of that up for them, so that they won't be interfered with by aliens when they use computers".

In 1999, interviewed by Time Magazine, he was still repeating and elaborating these themes (van Biema, 1999). For example, he claimed that scientists were actually manipulated by aliens, who are responsible for scientists' inventions. The aliens intend to replace humans with clones, and already have a major impact on human cultures.

Unlike some Western "new age" or "cultic milieu" writings, claims, and theorizing about aliens and UFOs, Li Hongzhi uses the concept of "aliens" to explain many things which seem puzzling and disconcerting to him and perhaps to other Chinese. Struggling to understand the rapid trans-

formations of the modern world which have had such a big impact on China in the 1990s, Li proposes that we can explain these rapid and unprecedented transformations by attributing them to the activities of these aliens. Where do the aliens come from?

The aliens come from other planets... Some are from dimensions that humans have not yet discovered... they have corrupted mankind.

How have they "corrupted" mankind? They have introduced all the modern inventions which have produced such a striking change in the world in recent decades:

Everyone knows that from the beginning until now, there has never been a development of culture like today...The aliens have introduced modern machinery like computers and airplanes.

Why are the aliens introducing these inventions? The purpose is to manipulate and control mankind through inventions produced by scientists:

They started by teaching mankind about modern science, so people believe more and more about science, and spiritually, they are controlled. Everyone thinks that scientists invent on their own when in fact their inspiration is manipulated by the aliens.... [now] Mankind cannot live without science.

Why do they want to control humans? The purpose is to clone new beings, to replace humans:

The ultimate purpose is to replace humans. If cloning human beings succeeds, the aliens can officially replace humans....

In case the humans discover these plots, the aliens make sure that societies are distracted by conflicts:

The aliens use many methods to keep people from freeing themselves from manipulation. They make earthlings have wars and conflicts and develop weapons using science.... modern science is destroying mankind.

Indeed, the aliens have already penetrated into human bodies, and try to control them using computers:

Aliens have already constructed a layer of cells in human beings. The development of computers dictates this layer of body cells to control human culture and... in the end to replace human beings. (van Biema, 1999).

It would be a mistake to try to find a consistent perspective in these interviews and lectures. Li Hongzhi periodically changed the explanations and the extent to which he viewed these developments in a negative way. A science teacher in Singapore, for example, asked Li what to do about the fact that they have to make a living teaching science, which Li claimed is produced by aliens to control us. He replied that there is not much choice except to continue to make a living with one's profession (Li, 1998b). He then justified this kind of acceptance by observing that in China, gods had been sent down to China to invent paper and the compass, so, presumably, it is not such a difficult problem to acknowledge that some other beings (aliens) were responsible for the extraordinary achievements of contemporary science.

To summarize: the increasing interest in Western science-and-technology writings in China in the 1980s and 1990s, and the decline of faith in socialism, led to questing and seeking by intellectuals for new ideas and sources of power. Since many of these intellectuals and seekers lacked a thorough understanding of the sciences, they eagerly and uncritically embraced many *scientistic* writings and themes, including stories and beliefs about aliens and UFOs. UFO clubs and UFO books proliferated. In a few cases, these themes and ideas were incorporated by cult-innovators into a new theology and cosmology, as in the case of Li Hongzhi's frequent use of UFOs and aliens to explain the rapid changes, amazing technologies, and many problems of the modern world.

Conclusions

Most of the so-called "new age" themes in Europe and North America have a very long history of belief and practice in East and Southeast Asia, and have been incorporated into many syncretistic sects and cults, as well as into mainstream 'popular religion'. They do not appear as a separate realm of "new age" preoccupations in much of Asia, or circulate within the realm of what would be called in Europe and North America the "cultic milieu", because such a milieu is already well-established and thoroughly

diffused within most Asian societies. It is what anthropologists call "popular religion".

Nevertheless, there were some striking ideas which emerged in Europe and North America during the past century which were unknown in East and Southeast Asia, and which seemed to many seekers to be grounded in the discoveries and exotic knowledge of the sciences. Some of these ideas diffused into Asian sects and cults because they were actively appropriated by Asian religious entrepreneurs seeking extraordinary claims which they could use to decorate their new movements.

Thus, in Vietnam, French-educated Vietnamese officials became familiar with European spiritualism and the fascination of some European "new age" writers (as we would now call them) with other worlds, and with their role in the progression of spirits and the communications between civilizations. Such themes were absorbed into the exotic cosmology of Caodaism, and we can recover the sources quite easily by consulting the spirit-writings produced by the Caodai adepts in the 1920s.

More recently, in China in the 1980s and 1990s, the rapid opening up of China to Western science and technology led to the diffusion into the country of scientific writings and ideas (which many Chinese could not easily distinguish from genuinely scientific material), particularly, Western writings and claims about UFOs. While much of the mass media coverage of the claims about these phenomena did not go beyond coverage of alleged sightings, some seekers and intellectuals began to speculate about the intentions, powers, and impact of aliens in the UFOs. Eventually, at least one major Chinese cult entrepreneur, Li Hongzhi, used UFOs and aliens as one of his explanatory devices in his lectures and writings on the reasons for the rapid and disorienting changes of the late 20th century world.

So: the *scientific* features of "new age" and "cultic milieu" preoccupations in Europe and North America are the features which are genuinely new in Asia, and they have already been incorporated into Asian new religions. Perhaps as Asian 'popular religion' declines among young people in major cities in the region, however, we could expect to find more cultural space for the infusion of "new age" material, and to see a more distinct "new age" milieu developing among urbanites in the future.

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