

Book Reviews

Contemporary New Age Transformation in Taiwan: A Sociological Study of a New Religious Movement, by Shu-chuan Chen. The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008, 251 pages, \$209.00, ISBN-13: 978-0773448803.

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New Age practices and philosophies are now established in societies around the world. Asia is no exception and, while there have been a number of studies of New Age practices and texts in Japan, research on the particular New Ages of other East Asian and South East Asian societies is still in its nascence (especially that available in English). Researching these different New Ages allows us to look more deeply at the phenomenon's transnational qualities and reconsider the importance of English language materials. The nuances evident in these case studies can also inform the study of religion more broadly.

Shu-chuan Chen's monograph *Contemporary New Age Transformation in Taiwan: A Sociological Study of a New Religious Movement* is a significant addition to scholarship on the global New Age. Drawn from her doctoral research conducted between 2002 and 2006 at the University of Warwick, she investigated how 40 New Agers in Taiwan draw upon various New Age theories and practices to negotiate life in a "rapidly changing world."

Chen conducted participant observation fieldwork in groups for A Course in Light (as transmitted by Antoinette Moltzan) and Divine Will (as transmitted by Sanaya Roman). Through her surveys, her participants also reflected the significant influence in Taiwan of Jane Roberts' Seth transmissions. Drawing on this fieldwork, Chen wrote a follow-up chapter in *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (2013), edited by Steven J. Sutcliffe and Ingvild Sælid Gilhus.

Chen grounds her research in four theoretical frameworks: self-religion (following Paul Heelas), reflexive modernization (following Anthony Giddens), emotions and embodiment, and globalization/glocalization. She attempts to strengthen Heelas' work by adding ideas relating to emotional transforma-

tion and augments Giddens' thesis by inserting the New Age into his conception of reflexive modernization. Chen demonstrates a thorough understanding of the debates around these theoretical constructs and while her analysis might not grab the attention of all readers, it is important in contextualising the qualitative dimensions of her study. Her insights will be relevant to those interested in these particular topics and theorists, especially with regard to emotional transformation and modes of healing in contemporary East Asia.

Chen appears broadly sympathetic to the objects of her study (it was her own experiences in New Age publishing that helped direct her to this research project) but remains objective enough to imbue her study with social scientific rigor. The voices of participants are inserted throughout the later chapters, ensuring that the book is grounded in their experiences and how they interpreted these. While these quotations can be distracting, insofar as numerous block quotations might interrupt how a reader engages with the text, they do foreground the lived experiences of Chen's research subjects.

As indicated in the book's title, Chen conceptualises Taiwan's New Age as a New Religious Movement (NRM). This title is slightly misleading as, while she states it has certain qualities of an NRM (that is, it is a broad spiritual movement with shared beliefs), she ultimately moves beyond this definition. Chen describes Taiwan's New Age as a complex network or web, where nodes (real places such as centres and shops and virtual ones such as websites and mailing lists) are connected to varying degrees, set against a transnational network of practitioners and teachers. Her analysis will be of interest to scholars of religious networks and associated models.

Perhaps Chen's most important contribution is her articulation of "parallel glocalization (sic)." Drawing on the work of Roland Robertson, she posits that once established in Taiwan (having been introduced from abroad, normally via the USA), certain New Age ideas have then simultaneously (though not systematically) diffused into other regions. Viewing Taiwan as a hub of religious innovation, I support Chen's formulation: parallel glocalization is relevant to conceptualising how Taiwanese New Age teachers and groups are spreading throughout Asia (and the world), and might even be applicable to the island's globally-minded religious groups and NRMs. Taiwan has a reputation as a hi-tech innovator; it should be known as a religious innovator too.

The appendices include survey questions, demographic details of participants and a chart for understanding the Romanization of Chinese characters. Unfortunately some of the printing in my copy was blurry, rendering certain sentences and diagrams difficult to read. Some readers might find Chen's brief religious history of Taiwan useful. However, despite twice framing her study

as occurring in a “rapidly changing world” (1, 205), she does not adequately contextualise her participants and their experiences in Taiwan: a technologically advanced burgeoning democracy resigned to a diplomatic liminality. Perhaps including greater detail on Taiwanese society during the period of the study would help clarify the nature of her participants’ emotional vicissitudes. Chen also states that the New Age in Taiwan has never been countercultural (56). From a historical perspective (admittedly outside of the realm of her study) this claim can certainly be interrogated, especially with regard to what in Taiwan may be considered “countercultural” and how is different from Western concepts. Also of interest would be if Chen investigated the extent to which New Agers actually identified as “New Age,” and the apparent power of this as an emic term in Taiwan.

In her conclusion Chen accurately notes the potential for future studies of gender in the New Age, of healing practices and yoga, and of the parallel globalization of Taiwanese groups abroad (this is a growing topic, especially when considering Taiwanese figures in China). Anyone undertaking this research will be well advised to consult *Contemporary New Age Transformation in Taiwan*. Having established herself with Anglophone scholars hopefully Chen will make future contributions to the study of the New Age in Taiwan and of Taiwanese New Age groups abroad. *Contemporary New Age Transformation in Taiwan* is revelatory as the first academic English language monograph on New Age practices in a Sinophone society. Chen’s sociological research will be of interest to scholars of religion in Taiwan and China, and of the New Age globally.