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The Case of De Jiao (德教)**

Bernard Formoso

Paris X
Nanterre University

bernard.formoso@mae.u-paris10.fr

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469A Tower Block #10-01,

Bukit Timah Road,

Singapore 259770

Tel: (65) 6516 3810

Fax: (65) 6779 1428

Website: www.ari.nus.edu.sg

Email: arisec@nus.edu.sg

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A Wishful Thinking Claim to Global Expansion? The Case of De Jiao (德教)

Bernard Formoso

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the motivations underlying the attempt by a Chinese religious movement named De Jiao (“teaching of virtue”) to expand globally and to become, according to some of its leaders, “the great religion of the 21st century”. I shall also examine its achievements in pursuit of this goal from a practical and symbolic point of view, as well as its ability to reach this goal with regard to its sociological basis and cultural orientation. According to the beliefs of its followers, De Jiao is ruled by a community of gods, called *de de she* (德德社, “society of the great virtue”), which encompasses under the supreme authority of the Jade Emperor an unbounded range of “honourable masters” (師尊, *shi zun*) including Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad, whose enactments are sent to followers through the channel of mediums performing *fu ji* spirit-writing (扶乩). In practice, however, the executive managers of De Jiao congregations, who are in charge of implementing the gods’ commands are Teochiu tycoons who are open to the world and are sometimes involved in international businesses. The strong correlation between their current entrepreneurial orientation and the new extent they intend to give to De Jiao highlights the classical phenomenon of *mimesis*, as a projection of human interests in divine expectations. More generally, De Jiao is a case in point of the way Chinese religiosity and Western ideas of modernity may conflate, and of the ideological tensions that such encounters may generate.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH

The roots of this religious movement date back to 1939, when a group of Teochiu small traders living in a village of the Chaoyang county, started communicating through *fu ji* spirit-writing with two Taoist masters of the Tang dynasty, namely Liu Chun-Fang (柳春芳) and

Yang Jun-Song (楊筠松)¹. At the time the group was looking for divine support to relieve the Chaozhou people from the chaotic situation imposed by the Sino-Japanese war. Because their *fu ji* activity provided accurate predictions and resulted in miracles², they quickly became famous in Chaoyang, and attracted a large number of people looking for divination, cures from illnesses, and relief. Soon, a divine oracle instructed them to open a charitable association named Zi Xiang Ge (紫香閣), “pavilion of the fragrant purple purple fragrance [*qi*]”). Among the earliest followers, a man named Ma Han-Ru (馬翰如), and whose adept name is Ma Gui-De (馬貴德), played a key role in furthering the development of the movement. Because of his educational background and curriculum vitae³, he gave a neo-Confucian inflexion to the movement through the formulation of a basic doctrine and contributed to its institutional extent. In 1940 he was said to have received from gods the instruction to propagate the “virtue of the purple *qi* southward”, with “purple *qi*” being a metaphor for the Taoist dazzling energy. He then created or helped to create several new “pavilions” (閣, *ge*) in the Chaozhou area, whose generic term was *zi* meaning “purple”. Through the “incense fire” ritual (香火, *xiang huo*), which involved taking powder from a mother temple to give life to a new one, he thus founded a chain of affiliated “purple pavilions” that worshipped the same cluster of deities. The next step in 1942 was the promulgation by Boddhisatvas and Immortals of the *De jiao xin dian*, or “Canon of De Jiao” (德教心典).

¹ According to his hagiography, Liu Chun-Fang was a mandarin who became Palace councillor during the reign of Zhen Yuan (785-805). When he was 72 years old, Lü Dong-Bin invited him to retreat and practice meditation on the “Purple Yang” Mountain (Szechuan). After years of Taoist ascetic life he was said to have finally reached the condition of Immortal. Yang Jun-Song was a famous geomancer of the Tai He and Xi Zong reigns. In his old age he retreated to a remote part of the Jiangxi province to increase his magical powers through ascetism. He is considered to be the founder of the *Luan Tou Pai* School of geomancy which emphasizes topography.

² For example, during the great starvation and epidemic of plague of 1943 which caused one million fatalities in Chaozhou, Zi Xiang Ge organized a *Pu du* festival. It is said that at this occasion, the two baskets of husked rice which the association used to distribute rations to the poor were constantly replenished, thanks to gods’ magic, to accommodate the needs of a huge populace. For his part, Hua Tuo (華陀), the famous deified physician and surgeon of the Han Dynasty, intervened to produce charms that immunized followers against the plague.

³ Significantly, the education of Ma Gui-De included an eclectic mix of private Confucian studies, training in Chinese medicine and western-style programs imposed by the Republican government. Later on, in the 1930s, he became headmaster of a private primary school in Shantou. Because of his background and position, he was more conscious than others of the rapid and important ideological changes which marked the first decades of the post-imperial China.

This *fu ji* text of only 346 characters is located within the tradition of the *shan shu* (善书). These morality books were written through *fu ji*, which prospered from the end of the Qing dynasty onwards. The text is divided into four parts. The introduction is called “Incense prayer” (祝香祠, *zhu xiang ci*). Since 1942, the devotees of most De Jiao congregations throughout the world chant it in order to open communication with gods at the beginning of ceremonies or of spirit-writing sessions. The next section is called “invocation” (起讚, *qi zan*), which sets out the cosmology and pantheon of the incipient religious movement, starting with the fundamental complementarities of *yin* and *yang*. It also mentions the “immense force” of the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth), the deities of the five orients and the omnipotent virtue of the Jade Emperor. Last but not least, it invites a specific divine association, the previously mentioned *de de she*, to patronize the rituals of the organization. The third and central part of the *De Jiao xin dian*, the “scriptures” (經文, *jing wen*), expresses the deep compassion of Jade Emperor, who spreads his great teachings to prevent quarrels, epidemics, sickness and suffering among humans. The teaching consists of six commandments: to refrain from cheating, falsehood, greed, rashness, arrogance and laziness. In order to rescue all living things from suffering and misfortune, the pious follower must adhere to these commandments. It is also the way in which they attain “enlightenment, wisdom, Buddha hood and immortality”. Finally, Buddhas and Immortals praise, in the “epilogue” section (收經文, *shou jing wen*), the “immeasurable merits” of the Jade Emperor, who has established the teaching of the “purple virtue” (紫德, *zi de*) as a privileged way to gain access to paradise.

The Jade Emperor to whom the Canon of De Jiao makes reference is Guan Yu (關羽), the well known deified warrior of the Three Kingdoms’ period. According to a millenarian theme issued through *fu ji* oracles in the 1920s⁴, the old Jade Emperor abdicated because he was enraged to see people being lustful and greedy, and felt powerless to cleanse humanity of its vices. Guan Yu is credited with appealing to the Jade Emperor to allow him to establish religious movements based on *fu ji* divination as a last attempt to save humanity from divine displeasure⁵. By integrating this theme into the Canon, Ma Gui-De and his colleagues not

⁴ According to Wang Jian-Chuan and Li Shi-Wei (2000: 215), the first oracular text conveying the theme was published in 1923 by the Taoist *shan tang* Xian Tiao Dao Wan Quan Tang (先天道万全堂) located in Szechuan.

⁵ See Jordan & Overmyer, 1986 : 60.

only justified the practice of *fu ji* as a crucial means to serve moral ends, they also established De Jiao as an attempt to revive China's prosperity under the spiritual guidance of a strong heavenly ruler, and through the model provided by an incipient society of virtuous devotees.

Thanks to this millenarian theme and also because De Jiao worked in close connection with *shan tang* charitable organizations (善堂) organized around the cult of the popular Teochiu bodhisattva Song Da-Feng (宋大峰), it developed so fast during the harsh wartime that its congregations numbered twenty-seven pavilions by the end of 1944. Following the Communist takeover of 1949, De Jiao was banned and its leaders were either imprisoned or fled overseas. Ma Gui-De and other active members then used Hong Kong and Singapore as platforms to revitalise the movement. This impulse was characterized by some changes in scope and ideology. Out of their Teochiu homeland, Ma Gui-De and his friends discovered another more urban, cosmopolitan, and westernized China. They also took an interest in Christianity and Islam, both of which were highly influential locally. Their attitude regarding the westernization of overseas Chinese communities took two forms at that time. Firstly, a conservative reaction from their part advocating the return to a society dominated by Confucian ethics. They thus added to the Canon of De Jiao a list of ten virtues and eight rules of conduct drawn from the *Confucius Analects* that the followers should observe.⁶ Second, following the example of Dao De-She (道德社), Yi Guan-Dao (一贯道) and other sectarian movements, they symbolically appropriated the major religions of the West by formally integrating their doctrines into those they promoted; that is, by placing Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad under the supreme command of the Jade Emperor within the *de de she*, or gods' society. The basic *san jiao* (三教) of the Chinese religious system (namely Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism) were then extended to five, to become the *wu jiao* (五教). Because its purpose was just to contain the perceived threat represented by the spread of western ideas and values, the shift from *san* to *wu jiao* never resonated strongly outside the places where it was politically and ideologically functional, namely Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. Even in these places, Christianity and Islam, although formally recognized by De Jiao grassroots followers, were neither taught nor their liturgy integrated into rituals. The

⁶ The ten virtues are: 1) filial piety ; 2) brotherly love ; 3) loyalty and faithfulness; 4) faith and sincerity; 5) courtesy; 6) righteousness; 7) integrity and honesty; 8) consciousness of shame; 9) benevolence; 10) wisdom. The eight rules are: 1) refrain from cheating; 2) refrain from falsehood; 3) refrain from greed; 4) refrain from recklessness; 5) refrain from arrogance; 6) refrain from laziness; 7) refrain from spitefulness; 8) refrain from hatred.

final criteria of religious distinctiveness that the leaders of De Jiao created in the 1950s were a flag and a specific anthem⁷.

After 1949, De Jiao expanded to Southeast Asia in parallel with the south bound migration of its members. It then followed two paths: one from Chaozhou to Thailand and the other from Hong Kong to Singapore, and from there to the rest of Malaya. Very significant of the rhizome-like pattern of propagation of De Jiao and its non-centred organization, the two branches developed separately for more than 30 years. It was only in the early 1980s, thanks to closely connected congregations on both sides of the border in Thailand and Malaysia, that they started to develop joint projects.

In Thailand, *De Jiao* developed from its early beginnings in close collusion with influential figures of the ruling elite, some of whom attended its spirit-writing sessions. Among these figures were the mother-in-law of Prime Minister Phibun Songkram (1938-1945 & 1948-1957), the father-in-law of General Thanom, who ruled the country from 1963 to 1973, and Sannya Thammasat, a king's councillor and president of the Buddhist association of Thailand. Consequently, its main congregation, Zi Zhen Ge, which is located in Bangkok, has attained the status of a Buddhist association, was inaugurated by the king and its activities are placed under royal patronage. De Jiao also spread locally by incorporating the network of the Teochiu *shan tang*, or halls for good deeds, which were the only Chinese religious

⁷ The De Jiao flag was devised in 1953 by Ma Gui De during a *fu ji* session in Singapore. This flag is made of a white earth's globe with five red parallels and three meridians of the same colour. Within this globe, the word *de* (德), virtue, is written. The globe is located in the middle of a rectangle, surrounded by a yellow background crossed by three horizontal blue stripes. The yellow colour, according to the followers' exegesis, expresses purity, whereas red is symbol of vitality, and blue is the colour of the adepts' loyalty to their motherland: China. Concerning the five red parallels, they illustrate the *wu jiao*, the five doctrines, with the middle one having unity as an additional meaning. The three meridians represent basic Confucian relationships: 1) between the Emperor and his subjects, 2) between a father and his sons, and 3) between a husband and his wife. Finally, the three blue stripes symbolize the cosmological and fecund combination of heaven, earth and mankind.

associations that were welcomed when Thai nationalists ruled the country.⁸ Concerning their outward policy of charity, De Jiao offers relief and welfare services mainly benefiting Thai nationals. Though in its beginning the movement was mainly based in the Central Plain, from the 1970s onwards, it spread to other regions due to Thailand's economic boom and the subsequent deployment of its followers throughout the kingdom. In 2003 it thus numbered 77 congregations, including three new agencies in Laos. This relatively high figure should not, however, conceal a major problem that De Jiao faces in Thailand; namely, the lack of mediums to sustain its spread. Because of the policy of assimilation conducted locally for decades, younger generation local Chinese are Thai educated and are therefore unable to interpret and channel the fine poetry that gods are said to use to send their instructions. In 2005, only five teams of De Jiao mediums, mostly based in Bangkok, were operating in Thailand.

In Singapore and Malaysia, the situation is different. There, most Hua Qiao are Chinese educated, and there are numerous individuals there who receive the revelation to become mediums. In this context, the spread of De Jiao has been challenged by the anarchic proliferation of spirit-writing circles whose often discrepant messages raised the central question of the divine messengers' legitimacy and accuracy. The result has been the parallel development of several denominational groups whose affiliation to De Jiao rests on divine oracles, common moral goals and similar charitable activities, but whose pantheons, rituals and philosophy concerning spirit-writing differ. Thus, besides the Zi group (紫系, Zi Xi) which remains the De Jiao mainstream, a chain of pavilions worshipping Ji Gong (濟公), the Ji group (濟系, Ji Xi) emerged in the 1950s. They were subsequently followed by a Zan Hua group (贊化) whose main god is Lü Dong-Bin (呂洞賓), and a Zhen group (振系, Zhen Xi) organized around the cult of Song Chan (宋禪), a Teochiu Taoist master of the Ming Dynasty.

⁸ In the early twenty-first century, more than 200 Teochiu *shan tang*, or *shan tang*-like associations provided charity in Thailand. Most of these were organized around the cult of Song Da-Feng (1039-1127), a Buddhist saint who lived during the Song Dynasty in Chaoyang county (Formoso, 1996). The oldest of these organizations, Bao De Shan Tang, based in Bangkok, was established in 1910, by the founders of the Bangkok Metropolis Bank and the Thai Farmers' Bank. According to its own records from 1976 to 2000, the Foundation collected US\$61 million, \$52 million of which was redistributed through various means. Bao De Shan Tang constructed and managed the Hua Qiao Hospital in Bangkok, which was inaugurated by the king in 1976. This modern hospital of 750 beds receives an average of 500 patients a day. Among other projects that this hall for good deeds has implemented over the last two decades are the establishment of a college for training nurses and emergency relief workers, and the private Hua Qiao Chalem Prakiat University, which was inaugurated by the king in 2003. Bao De Shan Tang owns a fleet of 20 emergency rescue vehicles, some of which are very high-tech, and employs two teams of well-trained rescuers working on a 24 hours basis. For more details concerning the *shan tang* activities in Thailand, see Formoso (2003).

Whereas the Ji and Zhen groups are active promoters of spirit-writing, the Zi group suspended this practice from 1967 to 1977, and Zan Hua abandoned it after 1971 under instruction from Lü Dong-Bin. Despite this spirit-writing controversy, or perhaps because of it, De Jiao has opened twice as many congregations in Malaysia than in Thailand, most of which are located in the West Coast States where Teochiu is influential. In 2003, there were 140 pavilions in Malaysia and fifteen in Singapore. In Malaysia, as a consequence of tensions between ethnic Malays and Chinese, cultural and religious barriers separating the two communities (for example, through *halal* food and discrimination between non believers and “true” Muslims), and the NEP (New Economic Policy), the charitable activities of De Jiao mainly benefit the Chinese community. In Singapore, this inward-looking attitude is less apparent and the most dynamic association affiliated to De Jiao, Tai He Guan (太和观), cooperates with Malay and Indian charitable bodies. In Singapore, De Jiao also quickly adjusted its slogans and activities to the Lee Kwan-Yew theory of “Asian values”, certainly under political pressure to conform. It therefore offers a comprehensive range of programs and services aimed at “strengthening and building strong families”.

To conclude this short historical account of the early development of De Jiao in Chaozhou and its spread throughout Southeast Asia, we must say a few words about the attempt by Zan Hua to write a “bible” (圣经, *sheng jing*). This attempt, which dates back to the 1960s, offers insights into the internal conflicts raised by diverging views of what De Jiao is and should be. More precisely, the project of writing a western fashioned holy book has been opposed by the majority of Malaysian followers who remained strongly attached to the Chinese religious roots and features of the movement. Whereas the China-centric orientation of the latter was characterized by a firmly rooted faith in the *san jiao* and an emphasis on the practice of *fu ji* spirit-writing, the claim of the bible’s promoters to make of De Jiao a “great universal religion” was concomitant with their rejection of spirit-writing which they suspected was a divisive and superstitious element.

The fact that Zan Hua emerged in the cosmopolitan State of Penang and that Christian priests were acquaintances of its early leaders explain this attitude. In the introduction of the holy book published by Zan Hua in 1971 the stamp of the Abrahamic religions is clearly shown in the assertion that the “true” De Jiao faith is monotheistic. Although the great variety of deities worshipped by De Jiao contradicts the claim, they argue that all these deities are comparable

to the Christian saints as divine projections of a supreme being of transcendent consciousness. The Jade Emperor embodies this omnipotent and omniscient “true Lord”, While Guan Ping (關平) is believed to be his main assistant and Lü Dong-Bin his spokesman. Altogether, they form a “holy trinity”, with Buddha, Lao Zi, Confucius, Jesus Christ and Muhammad in the position of prophets. As we can see, Zan Hua reinterprets cosmology in reference to Christian categories, but the universal order it depicts remains under the control of Chinese divine rulers. In a similar vein, the Zan Hua holy book reproduces the Christian Bible framework, but its content is an anthology of *fu ji* texts, and of Buddhist, Taoist, Christian and Muslim scriptures selected through *fu ji*. Ironically, at the same time it severely condemns spirit-writing; Zan Hua could not imagine a more accurate channel than *fu ji* through which to reach the supreme divine revelation. Although, by integrating to its morality book part of the Christian and Islamic Holy Scriptures, Zan Hua furthers the attempt by Ma Gui-De to broaden the scope of De Jiao, the incorporation of alien ideas remains superficial, whatever the accusation of aping the Western religions addressed to the Zan Hua leaders by others followers.

NATURE AND ORGANIZATIONAL FEATURES OF DE JIAO

The attempt by Zan Hua to make De Jiao a “religion of the Book” raises the question of the specific nature and typical features of this movement. Is it an incipient religion, a *zong jiao* (宗教), according to the claims of Ma Gui-De and of Zan Hua? Is it a sectarian group, a church, a denomination? In early publications, Ma Gui De defined it as the original *zong jiao* of China. However, the compound *zong jiao* was created in modern Chinese as a rough equivalent to the western concept of “religion” and could appear controversial when applied to a Chinese religious complex whose supreme goal is, according to K. Schipper (1982: 15): “to unify humans without dogmatism, profession of faith or doctrinal allegiance”.

Ma Gui-De defines *zong jiao* as the “ancestors teaching.” For him, De Jiao encompasses Confucianism and Taoism as the supreme ethics that the forefathers of Chinese civilisation have bequeathed. He adds that initially, the teaching of virtue was not embodied by a specific organization, but was intrinsic to the political order. It was the unifying principle of a Chinese society of the golden age, which came to an end with the Three Kingdoms Period (220 AC). Ma Gui-De considers that from the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BC) onwards, a progressive

decline of morality undermined the society despite the adoption of Buddhism, so that the people were diverted from the truth and benefits of De Jiao. He relates successive attempts by Confucians to restore moral order, but their failure and the political chaos caused by endless revolts and wars created the conditions for a new and stronger reaction. De Jiao as a modern revival movement was this reaction. Ma Gui-De thinks that it is a *zong jiao*, because it fulfils three requirements: it refers to a corpus of right rules, to a well-trying method of education experienced by ancestors, and to the fairness and benevolence of its aims. To summarize, the “religion” according to him, is the ancestors’ experience, which is applicable to everyone and which espouses fair goals. It thus expresses a traditional way of thinking which echoes M. Granet’s statement that in China: “*religion is not a differentiated function of the social activity*” (1988: 586).

This *emic* point of view sheds light on the philosophical background of De Jiao but is not conclusive in its categorization as a religion in the western sense of the term. In fact, less than other Chinese religious movements, De Jiao gets closer to “religion” as a dogma promoted by a formally organized priesthood through the performance of a standard liturgy. On the contrary, it is firmly rooted in Chinese popular religiosity in so far as it involves openness to a variety of forms and is fundamentally syncretic. In Thailand, for example, it developed in the 1970s as a catch-all strategy by incorporating more than ten charitable associations coming from various persuasions, the aim being to enlarge its local membership and to increase its number of mediums. Moreover, a look into the deities it worships reveals endless local variations on a common theme. As J. Watson and E. Rawski (1988: 4) have pointed out, De Jiao is the true product of a “ritualistic culture” where the identity of the deities to be venerated is secondary but the proper performance of rites (set out as “right rules” by Ma Gui-De) is of paramount importance.

The label “church” doesn’t suit either if we consider M. Weber’s view (1963: 173, 236) that the church is a sacerdotal and hierarchical institution, closely related to the state and whose membership is fixed by birth, irrespective of the devotees’ merits and wishes. Actually, none of these features correspond to De Jiao. It has neither professional priests nor full-time missionaries; it is a non hierarchical movement without any central authority, its membership is elective, it flourishes independently of the state, and, like the Weberian sects, prefers spontaneity and innovation to stilted and solemn liturgies.

In some respects, De Jiao is close to the *pai luan* sects (派鸞) described by D. K. Jordan and D. Overmyer (1986). In both cases, *fu ji* is conceived as a divine charter to contribute to the ethical reformation of humanity. Its followers believe that they are participating in the core traditions of Chinese culture. De Jiao and the *pai luan* sects are also syncretised, mainly with reference to the *san jiao*. From a sociological point of view, they also share common features. Both recruit at all levels of society, within intellectual and business circles, as well as inside the lower occupational strata. Thus, the De Jiao membership comprises businessmen, school teachers, civil servants, petty traders, fishermen, taxi drivers and blue collar workers. Last but not least, partly because of *fu ji* agency and partly because of rivalry, the internal dynamics of De Jiao and of the *pai luan* sects are fissional. New groups regularly come into existence, and the most powerful among them spawn numerous small congregations that are close in their liturgical tradition, but enjoy a large degree of autonomy. Despite these parallels, however, De Jiao and the *pai luan* groups differ in several aspects.

Among the main differences, there is the fact that De Jiao was not built on the repudiation of Buddhist institutions, but conversely in close cooperation with them. Whereas Jordan and Overmyer (1988: 10) underline the trend of Taiwan's *pai luan* groups to proudly stress their separateness with contributing traditions, especially Buddhism, by claiming the encompassing status of a "new whole", De Jiao never adopted this position. On the contrary, its founders were zealous Buddhists; while sponsorship by Buddhist monasteries was sometimes of crucial importance for De Jiao legalization.⁹ Actually, the attitude of De Jiao members toward Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian institutions is one of deference rather than of competition and mistrust. De Jiao also differs from the *pai luan* sects because of its charity benefiting the whole community without any debarment, whereas the activities of the Taiwan sects are introspective and focus exclusively on spirit-writing. More generally, De Jiao can hardly be considered as a sect. It does not practice the "universal vocation" that M. Weber put forward, a vocation based on the strict and common observance of moral rules. Although some De Jiao members are said to be acknowledged by gods for their high degree of morality and claims to the status of "sons of affinity" (缘子, *yuan zi*), they form a minority, and there are no procedures of excommunication for those who infringe the rules.

⁹ Thus, the first De Jiao pavilion to be established in Bangkok, Thailand was hosted for years by a monastery of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition before its activities were officially registered.

Finally, the concept of ‘cult’ that American sociologists have adapted to the study of New Religious Movements approximates more to De Jiao realities, in balance with that of ‘denomination’. Both cult and denominations occupy a half-way position along the institutional continuum from sect to church. Most of the typical features that define cults, according to G.K. Nelson (1968: 355-56), could characterize De Jiao as well. Like cults, De Jiao is loosely-structured, non exclusive and makes few demands on its members. The philosophy of action of its members pertains, like those of cult-type groups, to what R. Wallis (1977: 14-15) calls “epistemological individualism”, which he defines as follows:

“there are few barriers to doctrinal adaptation and change. Since the determination of doctrine lies with the member, cult cannot command the loyalty of their membership which remains only partially committed (...) Members typically move between groups, and between belief systems (...) This leads to tolerance”.

The parallel between De Jiao and cults is also supported by the fact that, unlike sects, cults form without breaking off from another religious movement, and rather than advocating a return to pure dogma, they propose embracing something new (in this case, an original synthesis unifying major Western and oriental doctrines under the same emblem), or embracing something that has been lost (for instance, virtue as it was professed in the early stages of Chinese civilisation). However, De Jiao lacks charismatic leaders around whom *cults* usually form. Significantly, none of its founders were deified after their death. The focus on individual achievements and interests which is so characteristic of cults is also less emphasized within De Jiao; the loyalties and doctrinal changes are mainly negotiated at the level of local factions or congregations.

A parallel can be drawn in this respect with denominations in the sense that De Jiao tends to build good relations with the State (especially in the Southeast Asian context), and to maintain fairly friendly relations with analogous groups. Other common characteristics lie in the great tolerance to theological diversity and its lack of infatuation with proselytism. Contrary to denominations, however, this movement is not the result of a schism within a religion or a church and has no professional clergy.

Finally, De Jiao should be better considered as a hybrid form between denomination and cult, with possible evolution of certain of its components, such as Zan Hua, towards sectarian features. In some respects, the organisational pattern of this movement does correspond to the

a-centred systems that J. Petitot and P. Rosenthal (1974: 48-51) define as networks “in nebula”, where communication takes place between neighbours and where local operations are coordinated so that their achievements can be synchronized apart from any central authority. Petitot and Rosenthal oppose these organizations to *directory structures*, which are holistic in ideology and regulated both by leaders and subordinates, the latter adjusting their behaviours step by step to the norms that their position in the arborescence requires. The fact that local segments of De Jiao sub-groups are historically ordered according to the *xiang huo* ritual, and that some pavilions exert great influence over others due to their prosperity and political connections, suggests that this religious movement could possibly present hybrid forms between *a-centred* and *directory* structures.

Finally, the resort to the concept of *rhizome*, as defined by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari (1980: 30-36), may also be useful to characterize De Jiao relational patterns and to discuss the main aspects of its dynamics. These two authors draw a distinction, which largely tallies that of Petitot and Rosenthal, between two models of organization and spread, one defined with reference to the *tree*, and the other to the *rhizome*. Whereas the relational logic of the former is descent, that of the latter is alliance (in the case of De Jiao, headed and shaped since its early beginning by traders and businessmen, the similar notion of *contract* would be more appropriate). Any point or element of the rhizome can be connected to any other one. This property, which perfectly corresponds to De Jiao, endows it with an outstanding adaptability and durability. The concept of *rhizome* is also interesting since segmentation is one of its basic features, and it is compatible with the idea of hierarchy. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1980: 30), there are nodes of arborescence within the *rhizome* and even sometimes despotic formations.

TOWARD A NEW EXPANSION?

We will now go to De Jiao's recent development, and notably to the worldwide expansion it began in the mid 1990s. At that time, three prominent congregations in Malaysia, Thailand and Hong Kong received joint or parallel instructions from the *de de she*, and notably from Ji Gong, to spread the truth of De Jiao worldwide and to get back to its origin, namely China. This gods' invitation to a bi-directional impulse, one to the global world and the other to the homeland conflated the recurrent tensions within this religious movement between open-to-the-West and China-centric attitudes, albeit with a clear imbalance in favour of the latter. Significantly, the first step of the new impetus was the creation in 1996 of a Research Committee on the Origin of De Jiao, composed of top leaders and big tycoons who claimed for themselves the distinguished status of gods', or "sons of affinity". Interestingly, most of these tycoons were developing businesses in China at the time, so that they could rely on their networks of local partners to spread De Jiao back to the homeland.

The first initiative of this committee was to restore Zi Xiang Ge, the oldest De Jiao pavilion in history. They then re-established contacts with the descendants of Yang Rui-De (楊瑞德), its founder, and tried to buy the house where Zi Xiang Ge started its activities in 1939. The premise had been confiscated in 1951 and allotted to another family. Finally, their highly symbolic project to revive Zi Xiang Ge in its original birthplace was rejected by the local authorities. Moreover, their official request addressed to Beijing to develop charitable activities in Popular Republic of China under the emblem of De Jiao raised suspicions in 1997, when the apocalyptic themes and mass recruitment of Falun Gong were becoming a matter of great concern to the central government. Their demand for legalization was consequently rejected. Despite this rejection, they established the new Zi Xiang Ge in the house of Yang Gui-De's elder son, with one of his grandson as its president. Soon afterwards, a son of Yang Rui-De received the revelation to become medium.

The next step was the organization of research trips to Chaozhou, Jiangxi and Anhui provinces to look for evidence of the primitive roots of the movement. Through *fu ji* revelations, they thus uncovered an old manuscript recording the earliest De Jiao divine oracles, while in Nanchang, they found the vestiges of an ancient hermitage of Lü Dong-Bin, evocatively called Zi Yang Gong ("Palace of the purple Yang"). There the committee created

a pavilion to revive this old palace. More generally, between 1996 and 2003, the Zi and Ji groups founded fifteen underground congregations in mainland China and this process of expansion is ongoing. Although the majority of these pavilions are located in Chaozhou, some were established in highly symbolical places such as Nanchang, one of the historical heartlands of Taoism, Hangzhou (a former imperial capital and city where Ji Gong lived as a monk) and in the Chinese capital of Beijing. Pavilions were also founded in major hubs of economic development along the Pacific coast, such as Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. In most cases, however, the congregations founded in China remain embryonic or virtual. Their membership does not exceed thirty, most rely on mediums from overseas, they do not provide charity, and in several cases the pavilion only consists of a shrine set into a pre-existing temple, according to a Trojan horse strategy.¹⁰ Perhaps because of the ban imposed by the authorities and perhaps because the present goals of De Jiao make little sense to most local Teochiu, the ambition of the Research Committee has been so far limited to the building of a network of potential “nodes of affinity” (結緣, *jie yuan*), in expectation that one day a large number of local people will receive the gods’ revelation. According to a radio broadcasting metaphor in use among mediums, they conceptualise the pavilions of China somewhat like radio relays, located in potent places, likely to offer a good cover and audience. Although not sufficient in themselves, these relays are believed to be necessary to connect a large number of potential users to the divine operators. The other condition is the regular

¹⁰ One of the first attempts to apply this Trojan horse strategy was at Jing Ci Si (淨慈寺), the Buddhist monastery of Hangzhou, where Master Ji Gong spent his final years. Between 1999 and 2001, members of the De Jiao Research Committee visited the monastery and organized *fu ji* sessions in Hangzhou. The oracles that they received these occasions instructed them to establish a pavilion named Zi Hang Ge (紫杭閣) within the monastery complex. At the time, the lay committee in charge of Jing Ci Si planned to rebuild part of the premises for a total cost of ¥RMB160 million. De Jiao offered to support the project and to donate ¥RMB 22 million for the building of a hall containing a gigantic statue of Ji Gong. The temple committee and the local government accepted the donation, but refused to name this hall Zi Hang Ge. Finally, the De Jiao leaders gave up this claim. The hall is due for completion in 2008, which is the year celebrating the 800th anniversary of the Ji Gong’s ascension to heaven. In 2003, the Committee tried the same strategy in relation to a temple of the Quan Zhen Taoist sect in Beijing. A pavilion secretly known as Zi Xin Ge (紫鑫閣) was established without any display of its own identity, through the gift and the laying out of statues of Lü Dong-Bin and Ji Gong in a specific hall. Two years before this event, De Jiao had penetrated another Taoist temple in Northeastern China. An oracle had been proclaimed in Alor Setar (Malaysia) describing in great detail a place in the port of Qingdao (Shandong) where a shrine was to be placed named Zi Cang Ge (紫滄閣). The divine instructions, set out in a medieval map of Qingdao, led the De Jiao prospectors to a famous Taoist temple and to its president. It is said that the latter was waiting them under a tree in the temple courtyard. This man, who was identified in the oracle as the future leader of Zi Cang Ge, had received the previous night an oneiric message from Lü Dong-Bin ordering him to meet his messengers there. Just like in the precedent cases, the opening of the new pavilion was limited to the gift of a statue, and further activities of the pavilion consisted only of daily incense offerings by members of the host association’s staff in return for payment by De Jiao of the incense cost.

activity of mediums able to establish high-tune communication and transactions with the *de de she*.

The problems that face the pavilions settled in China, such as the apathy of local Teochiu and the lack of mediums, are amplified in the other countries where De Jiao has tried to extend its activities. From the late 1980s to 2003, the movement thus established two pavilions in USA, four in Australia, one in Japan and one in Taiwan. Some of these pavilions collapsed a few months after their opening ceremony, while the others became either vegetative or totally inactive. Indeed, for a little-known religious movement like De Jiao, the task of raising interest among the westernized Teochiu living in California or Australia proved to be very difficult. In most cases, curiosity gave way to suspicion in the minds of those the proselytes of De Jiao approached, especially when they had no previous experience of *fu ji*. The *ex nihilo* founding of Zi Cheng Ge in Melbourne is very significant of such reservations and of the ways used to overcome them.

The president of this pavilion, Mr. H.L., which was inaugurated in 2002, is a Cantonese born in Brunei, from Malaysian parents. In 1974, he migrated to Australia where he got a job of accountant, working for a local bank. He was enjoying a Western way of life, and his involvement in religious affairs had been thus far insignificant, when he was visited in 2001 by one of his nephews, a rich contractor based in Thailand. This relative had made the trip to Melbourne with six other businessmen who, like him, were members of Zi Zhen Ge (Bangkok), and had acquaintances or relatives in Australia. Following an oracle of Ji Gong, they were looking for someone who could help them to give a new impulse to De Jiao in Australia after the decline of other pavilions in Canberra and Sydney. H.L. opposed a great unbelief to the incitements of his nephew to become this providential man by founding another and more dynamic pavilion. The De Jiao representatives insisted, however, and offered him and his relatives an opportunity to assess for themselves the power of *fu ji* by paying for their round-trip from Zi Yun Ge (Penang) to Ji Yang Ge (Alor Setar), and from there to Zi Zhen Ge (Bangkok).

H.L. and his companions made the trip in November 2001, and attended spirit-writings in these three associations. If the oracles delivered at Zi Yun Ge and Ji Yang Ge were not appealing enough to remove their scepticism, at Zi Zhen Ge, H.L. received a message from Ji Gong asking him whether his faith was sincere. Both puzzled and flattered to be contacted by

Ji Gong, and probably also due to fear of being publicly disavowed in case of non-commitment, he proclaimed his faith and then received the divine instruction to open a pavilion in Melbourne. His nephew promised to take into charge every material aspect of the project and effectively raised US\$275,000 to buy the premises and prepare the opening ceremony. One hundred persons, including guests from Southeast Asia attended this ceremony in May 2002. More than US\$650,000 was raised for the occasion through individual donations. This money was used to embellish the shrine and for charity in the form of financial support for Australian research on cancer and rare diseases. Over the next few years, however, it failed to raise significant funds either for charitable works, or for inviting mediums to perform occasional spirit-writing. As a consequence, in 2004, the membership of the association was only forty; mostly relatives and acquaintances of H.L, and his activities were limited to the collective incantation of the *De Jiao Xin Dian* twice a month. Finally, this example confirms *fu ji* spirit-writing as the main tool used by De Jiao to spread his “truth” or to enlarge its social basis through new conversions, which allegedly result from gods’ revelations. It accordingly highlights a major hindrance to the movement’s expansion out of its Southeast Asian basis. How can new followers be recruited and how can their faith be entertained in socio-cultural environments where the *fu ji* practice, conceived as the true and almost exclusive channel of communication with gods, is either meaningless or non sustainable?

CONCLUSION

Finally, how to interpret the De Jiao exertion to spread worldwide? According to the view of the movement’s leaders who are involved in the process, they are simply executioners of the gods’ instructions. Consequently, the question should be asked directly to the “honourable masters.” To cope with this epistemological dead end, however, we can put forward some hypotheses. If we consider that one of the explicit functions of the pavilions created by De Jiao is to host the deities when they come down to earth, we can interpret the founding of shrines on different continents as an attempt to adjust the gods’ operational capacity to a globalized world with an unprecedented spatial extent given to human activities and relational networks. The fact that the tycoons who make up the De Jiao Research Committee are actively involved in a wide range of international businesses and take advantage of the new economic trends, support this hypothesis. In possible collusion with mediums and through the oriented exegesis of oracles they seem to have projected their own managerial

ideology influenced by globalisation on the gods' wishes and expectations. That most of their businesses turn toward mainland China may also explain, together with their mystical approach towards Chinese civilization, their emphasis on the movement's spread back to the motherland.

Their approach is in some senses mystical, because against the social and cultural uprootedness that is experienced by most migrants to Nanyang, they try to champion from the periphery the core values and symbols of an idealized Chinese civilisation of the golden age. In some respect, the "research on the origin of De Jiao" that they undertook in the 1990s by visiting primitive places of Taoism, reflects more spirituality and is less politically concerned or family oriented, which are increasingly central to Overseas Chinese links with the motherland. Significantly, none of these leaders has maintained strong family ties in Chaozhou; none of them has intended to settle back there or to have their corpses buried in China.

A gap, however, separates the objectives pursued by the Research Committee, believed to be the "dragon head" of De Jiao, and the goals and aspirations of grassroots followers. For most of the latter, especially the petty traders, local civil servants and blue-collar workers, globalization are an abstract concept, of little concern in their daily lives. The spiritual link they establish with the Chinese civilization by communicating with its potent divine forefathers is turned toward more immediate and concrete goals, namely prosperity, longevity and health. As a consequence, if they do not discuss the merits of the project to spread De Jiao worldwide then it is because they do are not themselves involved in it.

Finally, the claim by a handful of tycoons to make De Jiao the "great unifying religion of the 21st century" appears to be purely rhetorical. Even limited to the Teochiu Diaspora, within which most followers are recruited, the objective can hardly be achieved. Apart that this religious movement is too China-centric and too Teochiu oriented to reach a global audience. Its emphasis on the practice of *fu ji* and the heated interactions with gods it allows are major impediments to the elaboration of a holy book for use as a common dogmatic basis for conversion on a large scale. Last but not least, its loosely-structured and a-centred organizational patterns oppose the important mobilization of followers that such a project would command. Actually, De Jiao is a very opportunistic and non-dogmatic religious movement whose deployment throughout Southeast Asia was made possible, at parity, by

ramification or by the aggregation of disparate elements. If such features were particularly favourable to its adaptation to contrasting national contexts, and were in turn shaped by such conditions, it is too diasporic in character to reach the status of mainstream religion.

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CHINESE/TEOCHIU GLOSSARY

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|-------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|
| <i>De De She</i> | (“The divine assembly” of De Jiao) | 德德社 | Teo. <i>Tek tek zi</i> |
| <i>De Jiao</i> | (“Teaching of virtue”) | 德教 | Teo. <i>Tek Ka</i> |
| <i>De Jiao Xin Dian</i> | (“Canon of De Jiao) | 德教心典 | Teo. <i>Tek Ka Sim Diang</i> |
| <i>Zhu Xiang Ci</i> | (“Incense Prayer) | 祝香祠 | Teo. <i>Zok Hiang Se</i> |
| <i>Qi Zan</i> | (« Invocation ») | 起讚 | Teo. <i>Ki Zian</i> |
| <i>Jing Wen</i> | (« Scriptures ») | 經文 | Teo. <i>Gêng Bhung</i> |
| <i>Shou Jing Wen</i> | (« Closing Prayer ») | 收經文 | Teo. <i>Siu Gêng Bhung</i> |
| <i>Fu Ji</i> | (“planchette divination”) | 扶乩 | Teo. <i>hu ki</i> |
| <i>Ge</i> | (« pavilion, De Jiao congregations») | 閣 | Teo. <i>khor</i> |
| <i>Guan Ping</i> | (the main assistant of the Jade Emperor) | 關平 | Teo. <i>Guang Pêng</i> |
| <i>Guan Yu</i> | (a deified warrior of the Three Kingdoms) | 關羽 | Teo. <i>Guang U</i> |
| <i>Jie Yuan</i> | (« nodes of affinity ») | 圣经 | Teo. <i>gak uang</i> |
| <i>Ji Gong</i> | (Crazy <i>Ji</i>) | 濟公 | Teo. <i>Chi Kong</i> |
| <i>Ji Xi</i> | (a branch of De Jiao worshipping Ji Gong) | 濟系 | Teo. <i>Chi Hi</i> |
| <i>Liu Chun-Fang</i> | (a Taoist master worshipped by De Jiao) | 柳春芳 | Teo. <i>Liu Chun Wong</i> |
| <i>Lü Dong-Bin</i> | (a Taoist Immortal) | 呂洞賓 | Teo. <i>Le Dang-Bing</i> |
| <i>Ma Gui-De</i> | (one of the founders of De Jiao) | 馬貴德 | Teo. <i>Be Kuai Tek</i> |
| <i>Ma Han-Ru</i> | (birth name of Ma Gui-De) | 馬翰如 | Teo. <i>Be Hang Ru</i> |
| <i>San Jiao</i> | (« Three doctrines ») | 三教 | Teo. <i>Sam ka</i> |
| <i>Shan Shu</i> | (morality book) | 善书 | Teo. <i>xiang ze</i> |
| <i>Shan Tang</i> | (« hall for good deeds ») | 善堂 | Teo. <i>xiang teng</i> |
| <i>Sheng Jing</i> | (“Bible”, “Holy book”) | 圣经 | Teo. <i>Sian gên</i> |
| <i>Shi zun</i> | (“Honourable masters” – gods) | 師尊 | Teo. <i>Sai zun</i> |
| <i>Song Chan</i> | (a Teochiu Taoist master) | 宋儂 | Teo. <i>Song Chao Yue</i> |
| <i>Song Da-Feng</i> | (a Teochiu Boddhisattva) | 宋大峰 | Teo. <i>Tai Hong Kong</i> |
| <i>Tai He Guan</i> | (a charitable body affiliated to De Jiao) | 太和观 | Teo. <i>Tai Hua Kuan</i> |
| <i>Wu Jiao</i> | (« Five doctrines ») | 五教 | Teo. <i>Ngou ka</i> |
| <i>Xiang Huo</i> | (– “Incense fire” – ritual) | 香火 | Teo. <i>Hiang huê</i> |
| <i>Yang Jun-Song</i> | (a Taoist master worshipped by De Jiao) | 楊筠松 | Teo. <i>Hia Hung-Song</i> |
| <i>Yang Rui-De</i> | (one of the founders of De Jiao) | 楊瑞德 | Teo. <i>Iang Sui-Tek</i> |
| <i>Yuan Zi</i> | (“sons of affinity”) | 缘子 | Teo. <i>uang ze</i> |
| <i>Zan Hua</i> | (a denominational group of De Jiao) | 贊化 | Teo. <i>Zang Hue</i> |
| <i>Zhen Xi</i> | (a denominational group of De Jiao) | 振系 | Teo. <i>Zing Hi</i> |
| <i>Zi De</i> | (“purple virtue”) | 紫德 | Teo. <i>chi tek</i> |

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| <i>Zi Xi</i> | (the De Jiao main group) | 紫系 | Teo. <i>Chi Hi</i> |
| <i>Zi Xiang Ge</i> | (“Pavilion of the Fragrant Purple [Qi]) | 紫香阁 | Teo. <i>Chi Hiang Khor</i> |
| <i>Zong Jiao</i> | («religion») | 宗教 | Teo. <i>zong ka</i> |



祖考瑞德楊公遺像
時于日八十月八年午壬



Figure 2: Ma Gui De

Figure 1: Yang Rui De



Fig. 3: An Altar of the Zi group, Malaysia



Figure 4: The Altar of the New Zi Xiang Ge with a Copy of the Original Paintings of Liu Chun Fang and Yang Jun Song



Figure 5: The Flag of De Jiao



Fig. 6: A View of Zi Zhen Ge, Bangkok



Fig. 7: A Couple of Mediums in Malaysia



Fig. 8 An Emergency car of De Jiao, Siracha, Thailand