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I have been interested, for many years, in the issue of religious revival in global politics, and decided, as a graduate student, more than twelve years ago to study this phenomenon in East Asia, because it seemed then that no studies on this topic had been undertaken. In the last two decades, a considerable amount of work has been done on the issue of religious diversity and the series of challenges this diversity raises for democratic societies, with reference to the traditions of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Indic religions. Yet, relatively little has been done with respect to East Asian traditions and how they manage diversity. This is all the more striking since East Asia was, for years, the focus of an important debate about the incommensurability of Western liberal values with those of that part of the world, allegedly based on the Confucian tradition. The construction of this tradition as the guiding philosophy of East Asia has served to bolster claims by East Asian conservative elites that their societies have been spared religious traditions' irrational views, that, historically, these societies have been homogeneous, and therefore that the issue of diversity is irrelevant to their national conditions. My studies at UBC, under the guidance of Pete Chamberlain, Diane Mauzy, John Wood, and Diana Lary, and with thanks to colleagues such as Philip Clart, under the shadow of Daniel Overmyer, taught me that Chinese society is extremely complex in its cultural diversity, deeply shaped by a remarkable diversity of religious beliefs and practices, and finally, that these have never ceased to interact with the state to challenge the government's definition of culture.

My primary research interest, since then, focuses on the recovery of religious traditions to serve the construction of national identity in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and in the Republic of China (ROC). Despite their shared reference to China, these two polities seek to establish two very different national projects, each trying to reconcile the reality of cultural diversity in different ways. In the PRC, recognition of this diversity is embodied in the state constitution's claim that "China is a unitary multi-national state", in which all its 55 national minorities live among the Han, or ethnic Chinese, majority. However, no recognition of ethnic cleavages among the Han can be acknowledged, despite documented instances of discrimination based on place of birth and origins. In addition, the Chinese state's recognition of cultural diversity is embodied in a rigid definition of religion that acknowledges only five traditions, of which three are foreign. In Taiwan - as the ROC is known - no constitutional recognition of ethnic diversity exists. Yet, politicians of all stripes, since the beginning of the democratization process, emphasize the necessity to overcome divisions between aboriginal people and Han Chinese, and within this larger group, between "mainlanders" and "native Taiwanese," and, finally, among the latter, between Hokklos and Hakkas. Governments in both countries have tried to manage their diversity by resorting to compelling narratives of national unity. In the PRC this narrative rested, after 1949, on China's unique role as a Third World leader in a transformative vision, and more recently, as this claim has lost its force, it rests on a theme of nationalist revival premised on the revival of an old cultural tradition. In Taiwan, reference to liberal concepts of citizenship is made in an attempt to supersede local divisions. A major question I seek to investigate is: What strategy is more likely to favor inter-ethnic peaceful co-existence: strategies of recognition that emphasize cultural differences, or strategies that subsume them within definitions of civic nationalism?

My interest in a comparison between China and Taiwan is based on methodological as well as normative reasons. Methodologically, ethnic Chinese people - or Han - in both China and Taiwan, despite the obvious differences in terms of size and levels of development in each country, share many important cultural traits. Both have also been subjected for decades to a historical narrative of national

(re)unification that tied their histories together. But by deciding to focus on the divergence in the strategies used by both states to retrieve traditions, my research also supports a normative claim. I want to question the culturalist arguments that there exists a Chinese exception, let alone an East Asian or Confucian way in politics, that would make democracy, pluralism and liberalism incompatible with the societies in this part of the world. Considering the enormous and obvious differences between East Asian and Western cultures and historical legacies, I am aware that the normative position staked here has important ramifications for any discussion about the adoption of democracy and pluralism in other non-Western societies.

My own research on Taiwanese Buddhist organizations has led me to conclude that the discourse on Asian values trumpeted by the Chinese and Singaporean government, along with other conservative political forces, both within and outside East Asia, represents a major effort to construct a regional "imagined community" that should not be held accountable to the same standards as the liberal West. Yet, I stand by scholars like Yash Ghai and others, who have argued that this discourse on Asian values represents a simplistic view of both East and West. Furthermore, I agree with Gordon White and other students of East Asian welfare regimes who have demonstrated that, to the caricature of an individualist West, corresponds a "positive orientalism" that exaggerates the importance of communal values to East Asian people, as well as their attachment to unity and their abhorrence to the allegedly divisive nature of cultural diversity. I believe that these essentialist views about "Asian values" are problematic because if we are to believe them, the notions of multi-culturalism and cultural diversity can hardly be compatible with these societies.

I recognize, as Frank Dikotter has demonstrated for China, and Micheal Weiner for Japan, that there exists in East Asia very strong narratives about racial homogeneity that tend to deny diversity. Furthermore, these views tend to be reinforced once one takes into account the efforts of governments to enforce linguistic homogeneity, efforts most successfully implemented in Japan and Korea. Since language has often represented in Europe the primary marker of ethnic identity, from which national consciousness has emerged, it is not surprising that East Asian societies, when viewed from afar, seem extremely homogeneous and hardly receptive to the notions of ethnic and cultural diversity: a mindset that makes the possibility of immigration from outside extremely problematic, despite the demonstrated need for such a movement of people into these rapidly ageing societies. Most East Asian societies are often perceived to be especially homogeneous in terms of their ethnicity and national characters. If one excludes the presence of Tibetans, Mongols and other national minorities in the People's Republic of China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan do not appear diverse or plural in their ethnic make-up: a view that is often voiced both abroad and by some politicians in these countries. This impression is reinforced by the reluctance of the governments of these countries to, apparently, defer to the wishes of their constituencies, to welcome new immigrants in their labor markets. Finally, and again with the exception of China, Japan and most especially Korea do not count any 'native people' community.

Yet, I argue that in one significant respect, which could have some profound consequences for the local nurturance of pluralism, East Asian societies have a long tradition of cultural diversity. Once one explores the realities of East Asian societies from the angle of their religious traditions, a radically different picture emerges. This time, it is the dazzling diversity of practices, institutions, affiliations and beliefs that strike the observer. This diversity shows itself in the religious realm: in all these societies, people adhere to a wide variety of religious beliefs, and even when governments try to control and regulate this aspect of life in society, they must first take into account this diversity as a basic fact. And since the argument about the incompatibility between East Asian societies and the allegedly Western import of democracy and diversity is premised on the sacrosanct character of 'Asian values', it is remarkable that so little has been written on the religious foundation that should, logically, flow from this debate. I understand that before making the claim that religious diversity in East Asia can have consequences for the strengthening of diversity, tolerance and democratic governance, one has to make the case for the political relevance of religion in East Asia. This was a task I decided to explore recently, when I revised and published my thesis on the politics of Taiwanese Buddhist organizations between 1966 and 2003. I also then wrote a few contributions to an edited volume in which I assessed the non-

confrontational, but also conservative, approach adopted by Buddhist organizations in the democratization process of that country.

My argument that religion matters in East Asian politics and, moreover, that it interacts with the states' attempts to create national identities, sometimes in a supportive way, sometimes in opposition, rests on the evidence provided by historians of East Asian societies, who have documented that religion has played, for centuries, an important role in triggering major political changes. The Taiping rebellion in China and the Tonghak uprising in Korea, to name just a few, represent two famous examples in recent history, where religion, combined with anti-colonial sentiments, made a volatile mix. In Japan, the use of Shinto religion as a central component of an ideology of "national essence" premised on racial superiority lends that trend an international impact.

Although all East Asian societies have embarked, after World War Two, in projects of rapid modernization that seemed at once to have eradicated the legacy of their religious past, sociologists have found on the contrary that this part of the world remains quite hospitable to new religious movements that make these societies increasingly diverse. Whether they be syncretic new religious movements such as Falungong in China, the Tiandejiao in Taiwan, and the Tenrikyo in Japan; or older, established religions, with new forms, such as the Unification Church in Korea, or the Buddhist sect Soka Gakkai in Japan; or simply transnational religions with deep roots in the regions, such as the catholic Church of Korea or the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan; they can sustain or promote nationalist projects (e.g. the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan), maintain or even revive existing transnational ethnicities (e.g. the Yiguandao in the Chinese-Taiwanese diasporas). One of the striking trends of current Chinese politics, in which an authoritarian communist party enters the uncharted domain of ruling a post-socialist economy and society, is the effort to retrieve religious traditions to buttress its declining legitimacy. The calls for a return to Confucian values, and the sponsorship of Buddhist institutions, which I have witnessed firsthand in Taiwan and in the PRC since 1993, represents the most visible sign of that trend. A pressing question is the extent to which such a retrieval of religion can avoid the pitfall, observed elsewhere and in the regions' past, of emerging new identities that generate new divisions, or, alternatively, can this retrieval lead to a social pluralism providing a powerful incentive for political pluralism.

These questions, I argue, find resonance in other parts of the world. Communal conflicts between Protestant Unionists and Catholic Republicans in Ireland, between Orthodox and Catholic nationalists in the Balkans, between Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communalists in the Indian subcontinent and between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East have long been defined as conflicts between opposing ethnic groups, or as conflicts opposing nationalist projects. Yet, these conflicts have also in common a religious dimension that has some consequences outside of the areas in which they occur. Conflicts in the Middle East, in the Balkans or in the Subcontinent resonate globally because they are portrayed by their protagonists as instances of larger clashes between cultures or civilizations. In other words, these localized conflicts tend to take on enormous significance in the minds of the main protagonists, as well as for outsiders who may feel connected, however tenuously, to people with whom they may share some affinity. In addition, as sociologists of religion such as Stark and Bainbridge have famously noted, far from being the opiate of the masses, religion acts as an amphetamine that can awaken people into action in ways that are more powerful than any secular ideology because, contrary to nationalism or socialism, it does not have to care about the plausibility of its claims in this world. Martin Marty has noted, in this connection, that religion has the potential to divide as well as to unite.