ENERGY-ORIENTED GROUPS AND THEIR OPPONENTS: TWO CASE STUDIES

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The paper explores the popularity of spiritual movements that draw on Eastern energy concepts: Ki in the case of Reiki and Tantric ideas about erotic energy in Western groups inspired by Tantrism. The focus is also on their opponents and critics, especially in the second case study.

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1. Reiki, Qigong, and Their Friends and Foes: From Usui to Tai Ji Men

In July 2023, French and Belgian media reported that MIVILUDES, the French governmental anti-cult agency, warned French citizens about Reiki, labeling it a "pseudo-science" that could involve "cultic deviances" and lead some individuals to reject medical treatment, posing dangerous and potentially fatal risks.

Similar to the experience of Reiki, various Qigong teaching groups have faced accusations of being "cults" or have been described in China as evil "organizations spreading heterodox teachings" (xie jiao).

In Taiwan, certain Qigong groups faced repression during the authoritarian and post-authoritarian eras. Tai Ji Men, for instance, had its leaders arrested and teachings denounced during the politically driven 1996 crackdown on spiritual groups that had not supported the ruling party in that year's presidential elections. They were branded as a type of "spiritual fraud," despite Taiwanese courts ultimately pronouncing the Tai Ji Men defendants innocent and confirming that no fraud had occurred.

In the first part of this paper, I will explore Reiki, whose history can shed light on the situations and controversies involving other groups that harness the universal energy known as Ki or Qi, including Tai Ji Men.

I personally practice Reiki and fully understand that it should not substitute for conventional medical treatment. Individuals with health concerns must adhere strictly to the medical protocols set by their doctors. At the same time, Reiki is a powerful, energetic healing method that can enhance a patient's recovery when used alongside medical treatment. Reiki is not a religion and is practiced by individuals from various faiths.

Reiki is fundamentally rooted in traditional Eastern Asian teachings, which state that a universal energy known as "Ki" flows through the universe. An experienced practitioner, trained by a master, can harness this energy to restore balance and promote physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

The Japanese term "Ki" parallels the Chinese "Qi" or "Ch'i." This term represents one of the two characters that compose "Qigong." In Taoism, Ch'i signifies the fundamental essence of the universe. On a macrocosmic scale, the universe's Ch'i balances Yin and Yang. In texts linked to Lao Tzu, we encounter the assertion that: "it is the function of Ch'i to unify the appearance (Yin) with the reality (Yang) of the Ten Thousand Things."

In the realm of the human microcosm, Ch'i represents the essential life-force for our physical and mental health. Practices that enhance the flow of Ch'i have been integral to Taoism for centuries. These practices encompass breathing exercises and physical activity, yet they have always been intertwined with self-cultivation and ethical living.

Although Reiki began in Japan, it is now more widely recognized in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe than in its country of origin. It is paradoxical that Reiki, a practice estimated to have millions of practitioners in the West, remains largely unknown in Japan, its country of origin. Reiki is gradually returning to Japan from the United States as part of the so-called "Japanese New Age" movement. An increasing number of Western Reiki practitioners are visiting Japan. Nevertheless, the term "Reiki" still fails to resonate with many educated Japanese people, including those interested in spirituality.

Reconstructing the story of Reiki is quite challenging. Similar to other spiritual traditions, it encompasses a mythical and scholarly narrative. Scholars emphasize that myths are not simply "fake news" or "lies" but symbolic stories conveying spiritual truths. In contrast, scholarly narratives depend on archival research and documentation. Practitioners might contend that scholars may have accurate facts, but they could overlook the profound significance behind those facts.

Practitioners of Reiki are generally aware of its founder, Mikao Usui, a Japanese man who passed away in 1926. Hawayo Takata, a pivotal Japanese-American figure to whom I will return, recounted

his story. To present Reiki to Western audiences and highlight that Usui's teachings draw from and align with various religions, she claimed that Usui taught in a Christian school in Japan, was ordained as a Christian minister, attended the University of Chicago, and studied at Buddhist institutions of higher learning in Kyoto.

The academic portrayal of Usui's life has been reconstructed by various researchers, particularly through the extensive doctoral dissertation of Dutch scholar Jojan Jonker, released in 2016 after years of investigation in Japan. Due to the destruction of several Japanese archives during World War II, gaps remain in Usui's biographical details. Nevertheless, Jonker and other scholars have convincingly established that Usui never left Japan, never attended the University of Chicago, was not ordained as a Christian minister, and did not study in Kyoto. However, it cannot be ruled out that he taught at a Christian school for a time. The essential truth in Takata's account, stripped of its mythical embellishments, is that, unlike many educated Japanese of his era, Usui possessed an extraordinary interest and gained a rare understanding of various world religions, including Shintoism, Taoism, Christianity, and Buddhism.

Mikao Usui was born in Taniai, a village in Gifu Prefecture, Japan, on August 15 (Japanese calendar) or October 4 (Western calendar), 1865. He received his education at different temple-affiliated schools that taught Zen, Tendai, and the Jodo Shu style of Pure Land Buddhism.

His family, which operated a beer business, went bankrupt in 1880 due to Japan's economic crisis. To support himself, Usui undertook various jobs, including working as a journalist and possibly serving as a private secretary for politician Goto Shimpei. He also explored Shintoism and Christianity, alongside the Buddhist traditions in which he had been educated.

In 1922, Usui experienced a significant event. After spending 21 days meditating on Mount Kurama, he attained enlightenment, or satori, directly from the spiritual realm.

Shortly after the 1922 event, Usui began teaching a new method called "Usui Reiki" and established the Usui Reiki Ryoho Gakkai (Usui Society of the Reiki Technique). Most of his initial students were officers in the Japanese Imperial Navy. In 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake struck Japan, particularly affecting Tokyo, leading to over 130,000 deaths. Usui organized his disciples to assist the distressed population in Tokyo through Reiki practices.

Beginning in 1919, the Japanese government intensified its efforts against new religious movements due to concerns that some leaders might oppose the authorities or even challenge the emperor's power. Usui insisted that his system was neither a religion nor connected to political matters.

In a 1925 interview, Usui referred to Reiki as a "technique" (ryoho), a term included in the name of his organization. He stressed that while Reiki can support healing, it is not a type of medicine. By then, a movement that favored Western medicine and called for the suppression of unlicensed medical practice had gained the Japanese government's backing. Usui stated, "Our Reiki technique is an original therapy method using the power based on Reiki, which is a universal power in the universe." He claimed to have instructed about 1,000 disciples in Reiki. Eventually, Usui's organization stopped using the term "therapy" to emphasize that Reiki was not associated with medicine.

Though not a religion, Usui's "technique" referenced spiritual ideas. In the teachings recorded by his disciples before he died in 1926, Usui asserted, "Everything in the Universe possesses Reiki without any exception," "We humans hold [inside us] the Great Reiki that fills the Great Universe," and "Humans are a microcosm that takes the Great Spirit from macrocosm; everyone holds a part of this Great Reiki in his body."

Usui died from a stroke while visiting Fukuyama on March 9, 1926. He had directed his disciples to ensure his burial at his family's grave in the Saihoji temple in Tokyo, a Buddhist Pure Land Jodo Shu temple. Despite having explored various religions, his burial instructions appeared to reinforce his ties to his family's Buddhist heritage.

After Usui's death, the naval officers who continued his Gakkai did not aim to expand into a large organization. They allowed new members only after completing years of rigorous training. At Usui's passing, the membership numbered in the thousands, but following the Great Depression in 1929, which impacted Japan, it dwindled to just a few hundred. Today, the Gakkai remains a tiny, elitist organization that most Japanese people do not know about.

In the final year of his life, Usui trained a naval medical officer named Chujiro Hayashi, whom he appointed to the board of the Gakkai. Unlike his peers, Hayashi saw Reiki as a valuable gift to be shared globally, prompting him to leave the Gakkai in 1931. He founded the Hayashi Reiki Research Center, but believed that Reiki did not require an organization for its transmission. He emphasized that the key element was the personal connection between masters and their disciples.

In 1935, a pivotal event in Reiki's history occurred when Hawayo Takata, an American of Japanese descent from Hawaii, traveled to Japan for medical care. During this trip, she met Hayashi and reaped significant benefits from Reiki. Takata subsequently invited Hayashi to spend five months teaching students in Hawaii, from late 1937 to early 1938. Hayashi committed suicide in 1940 to protest the militaristic politics that resulted in Japan's disastrous entry into World War II. In a 2023 University of Hawai'i Press publication, Justin Stein meticulously reconstructed Takata's life, demonstrating her pivotal role in establishing Reiki as a global phenomenon. Today, Reiki consists of numerous diverse schools and masters from various backgrounds and faiths, lacking a centralized organization or uniform doctrine. Sociologically, the contemporary "democratized" Reiki, accessible to everyone and enjoyed by hundreds of thousands, contrasts sharply with the exclusive, small group of predominantly Imperial Navy officers that formed the Japanese Usui Gakkai.

Contemporary scholars like Jonker and Stein, who are both academics and Reiki masters, raise intriguing questions about the status and future of Reiki, particularly two that stand out.

Statistical surveys confirm that there are significantly more women than men among Reiki masters worldwide. Is this due to women predominating in many, though not all, spiritual movements? Or could it be attributed to the somewhat simplified and "feminized" version of Usui's original Reiki created by Hawayo Takata? This question remains underexplored and warrants further investigation.

Another sensitive issue is the connection between Reiki and money. The early Japanese masters were military personnel who felt receiving payment for helping others through Reiki was dishonorable. While it's unclear if Hayashi, also a member of the military, charged for his Reiki sessions and training, he suggested that as the practice spread beyond its original small group in the Imperial Navy, requiring payments could be appropriate—for both material and spiritual reasons—since unpaid services might not be fully valued. This perspective became the standard taught by Takata. Ultimately, this approach has benefited Reiki, a movement with millions of practitioners that cannot thrive without organizational resources and funding. However, the introduction of money also brings the potential for misuse and what some refer to as the "commodification" of Reiki spirituality.

Reiki's remarkable success, however, did not stem from organizational elements. Instead, it exemplifies what Stein refers to as "the strength of weak ties." The absence of a hierarchical structure and its non-religious nature appeal to those who have lost faith in institutional religion.

Critics of Reiki or Qigong groups, such as Tai Ji Men, lack an understanding that these practices are not religions, or they hold biases against healing methods that differ from conventional Western medical approaches in promoting physical and psychological health. Nevertheless, the teachings about Ch'i have nurtured the spiritual experiences of millions for over two millennia.

In the 1950s, archaeologists discovered twelve jade pieces in China, dated to the sixth century BCE, which outline fundamental techniques for working with Ki or Ch'i. They conclude with a cautionary message: "Whoever follows this will live; whoever acts contrary to it will die." This refers to the essence of true spiritual life, the most significant gift of all, which Reiki and other disciplines teaching

the mobilization of Ch'i, such as Tai Ji Men, provide to our suffering humanity. While every human story has flaws and imperfections, this remains a gift for which we can all express gratitude.

2. Sacred Eroticism Groups and Their Sensationalized Media Representations

Claiming that unpopular religions hide sex scandals and sexual abuse has always been popular with the media. The combination sells typically. These narratives already had two standard features in the 19th century. First, they targeted groups with secrets. It was assumed that what was done secretly was probably sinister and immoral. Second, they claimed to offer "authentic" revelations based on the reports of "apostates."

Sociologists of religion use the term "apostate" to designate ex-members who turn into militant opponents of the religious organization they have left. Not all and not even most ex-members are apostates. Most people who leave a religion go on with their own lives and are not interested in joining campaigns against the religion they left. However, apostates are the only ex-members who contact the media and write exposés.

I will mention some 19th-century cases of such "revelations" and then focus on two groups whose teachings include sacred eroticism.

A woman called Rebecca Reed spent several months as a novice in a Catholic Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts. In 1835, she published *Six Months in a Convent*, in which she alleged that she was forcibly kept in the convent and sexually tortured to convert to Catholicism, despite having already converted before her stay there. Her false tales incited such fury that a mob besieged the convent, setting it ablaze.

Reed influenced Maria Monk's 1836 book, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*. In this book, Monk claims she was forcibly taken to a convent in Montreal to become a nun. She offered a lurid description of the convent, claiming priests came there to rape nuns. Some became pregnant, and their children were aborted or murdered immediately after birth.

Once more, mobs targeting convents in Canada were inspired by Monk's bestseller, until it was revealed that she had never actually been a nun or a novice and that the only institution she had escaped from was a psychiatric hospital.

Catholics condemned these accounts, yet they joined Protestants in believing similar, albeit false, narratives from women detailing sensational tales of kidnapping and sexual exploitation by Mormons and Freemasons. One famous incident involved Léo Taxil, a French adventurer whose real name was Gabriel Jogand. He started his career as a Freemason and a writer of lurid, anti-Catholic, sexually based exposés.

In 1835, he suddenly declared his conversion to Catholicism. From then on, he started publishing sensational revelations about a Satanic sex cult with female high priestesses that hid behind French and international Freemasonry. His works were enormously successful among Catholics, and even praised by the Pope, until in 1897, Taxil revealed he had never really converted and all his false revelations were aimed at exposing the Catholics' gullibility.

In 2022, the Czech network Voyo broadcast the TV miniseries *Guru*. It is a fictional work based on the case of the Path of YahRa, a Czech movement that includes sacred eroticism teachings and practices. Its founder, Jaroslav (Jára) Dobeš, and his main co-worker, Barbora Plášková, received prison sentences of five and a half years and five years, respectively, based on complaints by seven women who stated they felt pressured into participating in erotic rituals.

The miniseries has many details wrong, but the central point is how the Path's sacred esotericism and the erotic rituals are interpreted. One claim is that the devotees who went through the rituals were selected among the "mentally injured," thus making them "easier to manipulate." This is factually

false and not supported by the trial's documents. One woman in the miniseries insists that she had no idea what sacred eroticism was all about. This defies credibility, as the erotic rituals are presented in written publications of Guru Jára that everybody can read.

In the end, the theory of the miniseries is simple. It is impossible that women would willingly go through sacred eroticism rituals and derive positive experiences from them. If they testified that they were victims, they are victims. If they testified that they were not victims, they are victims as well—of "psychological manipulation," the miniseries says.

Unlike the Czech TV miniseries, BBC's "The Bad Guru," aired as part of the *World of Secrets* podcast, is not a work of fiction. It is about MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, and the British organization imparting the same teachings. MISA was founded in Romania by Gregorian Bivolaru. He was sentenced in Romania to a jail term of six years by the Supreme Court in 2013 for an alleged sexual relationship with a girl called Mădălina Dumitru. She was 17 then, and the age of consent in Romania was 15. However, Romanian law prohibits teachers from having sexual relationships with their students, and as a yoga teacher, Bivolaru was regarded as being under such prohibition. Dumitru later testified that the police had coerced her into signing a statement confirming the relationship, which never happened, nor did Bivolaru ever teach yoga to her. She withdrew her forcibly taken testimony one day after she had signed it.

The Swedish Supreme Court denied Bivolaru's extradition to Romania as it regarded his trial as unfair, and he was granted asylum in Sweden. However, he was later arrested in France and extradited. After he was freed from jail in Romania, Finland issued a warrant of arrest against Bivolaru, based on complaints of Finnish women who claimed they had been manipulated into going through erotic rituals with him in France. He remained a fugitive from justice until he was arrested again in France on November 28, 2023, after seven ex-members had filed complaints claiming their participation in erotic rituals was due to mental manipulation. The French police also claimed it had "liberated" twenty-six foreign women who were "kept as prisoners" and were at risk of being "raped." However, none of the women admitted to being a victim. Twenty of them filed charges—not against Bivolaru or MISA, but against the French police and prosecutors, whom they accused of mistreating them.

The BBC podcast tells the story of Miranda, one of the apostate ex-members who testified against Bivolaru in France. Another of them, Bec, also makes a shorter appearance.

The journalists claim in the podcast, "One thing about the BBC is we try to be scrupulously fair." They did report that Madalina denied ever having sex with Bivolaru and that Sweden granted asylum to him. This was fair enough; however, the BBC still missed the central legal point. Bivolaru was not sentenced for "sex with a minor," as the age of consent in Romania was 15 and Dumitru was 17, but for sex within an alleged teacher-student relationship, which is different.

Also, in fairness to the BBC, they did not edit Miranda's story when her statements were of a nature to be used by Bivolaru's defense. She claimed she was happy with the movement initially, nobody coerced her to join, and she understood that eroticism was part of the movement's teachings and practices at least since she attended her first yoga camp in Romania.

Even when telling the story of her erotic initiation by Bivolaru in Paris, that she spices with sordid details about "dirty bedding, dirty sheets, dirty dressing gowns," the BBC admits that as she meets the yoga teacher, "she knows the initiation will be a sexual encounter," although a highly ritualized one. She said she "wanted to get the most out of it."

The BBC also deserves credit for mentioning that none of the twenty-six women the French police removed from MISA-connected locations in France in 2023 "gave any statement against Gregorian Bivolaru" and "none considered themselves exploited, abused, trafficked or the victim of any rape."

However, it is a pity that the BBC did not seek these women out to hear their version. This would not have been impossible. Some were eager to talk about their experience to Canadian scholar Susan Palmer, who visited them in Romania after the 2023 French raid.

The podcast is only about the narrative of the apostates. One scholar, Suzanne Newcombe, is given a few seconds, but only on generalities. We were told that the British yoga school involved was offered the opportunity to present a reply, which was declined. However, we learn from the podcast itself that the school was not asked to explain its point of view or the context of sacred eroticism, but was requested to answer specific accusations of criminal activities.

Here, I believe, is the problematic aspect of what the BBC did. In the first four minutes of the first episode, we heard that the movement is a "cult," that "to hide behind yoga is particularly reprehensible," and that the leader is a "very, very horrible person." We do not expect from a journalistic podcast the value-free attitude of a scholarly article, and Bivolaru is indeed in jail in France, accused of serious crimes. However, the opening lines of the podcast and its very title, "The Bad Guru," show that, unlike in France, a verdict had already been rendered at the BBC, even before the investigation started. The BBC knows that Miranda has filed a civil suit against the British yoga school connected with MISA, which she attended in England, and significant money is at stake. Nevertheless, the reporters do not find it problematic to fully embrace one side's position in a pending civil case.

I have no reason to doubt that Miranda now reconstructs her experience as negative, although with some initially positive sides. Erotic rituals may be perceived in different ways by different people. MISA students are known for having engaged (as their private activities) in practices such as adult movies, shows presented in erotic festivals, erotic audio and video chat lines, and performance in gentlemen's clubs as pole dancers.

Massimo Introvigne mentions the chat lines, together with other erotic performances, in his 2022 book on MISA *Sacred Eroticism*. Unlike the BBC, however, the Italian scholar tries to understand the paradoxical context of these activities, concluding that the movement perceives them as an idiosyncratic way of infiltrating the world of men who enjoy "adult" products and performances, in the hope of eventually telling some of them about MISA's different approach to eroticism.

To be clear, if some female students are compelled to participate in these activities against their will, as Miranda seems to imply in the podcast, I agree that those responsible should be prosecuted. However, to my knowledge, no MISA leader has ever been sentenced for this crime, although accusations were made decades ago.

Ultimately, Miranda's story is not about physical coercion. It is about "brainwashing," a category dismissed by scholars of new religious movements and even by courts of law as pseudo-scientific, yet liberally embraced by apostates and used throughout the show without even mentioning this criticism.

Other apostates shared their experiences with Danish and Swedish radio stations, which produced podcasts about MISA, along with various other media outlets. The coverage from Danish and Swedish sources is particularly concerning, as it completely overlooks the fact that all women discovered by the police in MISA facilities in France stated they were not victims and went there voluntarily. Furthermore, these podcasts criticize the researchers investigating MISA and challenging the "brainwashing" narrative, even suggesting they should be barred from presenting at academic conferences.

For the BBC, it was a missed opportunity. We are still waiting for media that, while listening to those who report abuses, would also investigate the experience of those who insist their experience of sacred eroticism was positive and uplifting.

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