

Syncretism, Religious Freedom and Revival: TAIWAN'S YIGUANDAO

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Research and Analyses – No. 48 – June 2024

URL : https://religion.info/pdf/2024_06_Yiguandao.pdf

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Introduction

Yiguandao (一貫道, or Way of Pervading Unity), is one of the fastest growing religious movements in Asia, and has attracted millions of followers worldwide. The group is one of Taiwan's largest religions, having originated in China and relocating the center of its activities across the Strait in the mid-20th century under intense persecution by the newly empowered Communist Party of China.

Barely one hundred years ago, Yiguandao was a tiny sect in Shandong Province, China, forced to live in secrecy under a rapidly waning Qing dynasty. Today, it exists as a highly adaptive transnational religious movement devoted to self-cultivation and social harmony. Moreover, in contrast with other Chinese religious traditions, the group's millenarian teachings lend believers a sense of urgency as they carry out proselytizing activities across the world.

Yiguandao has its roots in the Xiantiandao (先天道, or Way of Anterior Heaven movement), a syncretic religious movement that blends traditional Chinese folk beliefs, Taoist principles, and emphasized the pursuit of spiritual cultivation, moral integrity and social harmony. Today, Xiantiandao exists as a diverse and decentralized religious movement with numerous offshoots and organizations across China and the world; Yiguandao is perhaps one of its most successful branches.

No study of religion in the modern Chinese world can afford to ignore this wave of groups. Nevertheless, the field of Chinese so-called redemptive societies (救世團體 Jiùshì tuántǐ) remains a relatively niche topic.

This article analyzes this unique sect in a bid to gain insight into Sinitic culture, spirituality and religious diversity. Over the course of several months between late 2023 and early 2024, Religioscope met with Yiguandao leaders and believers in Taiwan's coastal province of Taitung. The following is the result of in-depth conversations with members quietly dedicated to self-mastery, serving their communities, and better understanding their place in both their society and the cosmic order they recognize.

1. Historical Context

China



The Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) is often tied to the downfall of the Qing Dynasty. (Source: SNN 2021)



The Wuchang Uprising precipitated the fall of the Qing Dynasty. (Source: ANN 2016)

The collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912 was a pivotal moment in Chinese history, ending more than two millennia of imperial rule and initiating a profound reevaluation of traditional Chinese values and institutions across the country.¹

The dissolution of the imperial order meant the disintegration of traditional social hierarchies, sparking rapid experimentation and competition for new political identities.² In addition to modernization and Westernization efforts, a litany of other ideological movements, such as nationalism, communism and republicanism, vied for dominance in shaping China's future.

The upheaval was no less significant for religious groups throughout China. The fall of the Qing dynasty created space for religious revival and reform movements; the end of

imperial patronage and weakening of state control over religious affairs saw various religious groups, from Buddhists to Muslims, Daoists to Christians, begin to assert themselves more independently and, in some cases, align old

¹ Useful introductory analyses of the political and sociological outcomes from this period can be found in Fairbank (1978), Spence (1999) and Hsü (2000).

² See also Hershatter (1996), Hui (2016) and Zheng (2018).

traditions with the new ideologies.³ For sects compelled to carry out their activities in secret under imperial rule, this tumultuous chapter of Chinese history offered a window for explosive growth - one they proved more than ready to take advantage of.

Religious Revival

In the political upheaval of the first two decades of the Chinese Republic (1911-1949), a wave of religious groups otherwise banned under the Qing as “White Lotus” (白蓮教 Báilián jiào) or “heterodox sects” (邪教 Xiéjiào) emerged to expand rapidly into, and in some regions even dominating, China’s religious landscape.⁴

Understood under the umbrella of “redemptive societies” by modern researchers, these large and multi-faceted groups promoted both new models of morals and ethics, as well as new patterns of salvation.⁵ They typically shared a number of common features, such as a modernized take the traditional Chinese concept of the “Unity of the Three Teachings” (三教合一 Sān jiào hé yī)⁶, incorporating Christianity and Islam to create a new unity of five teachings, and a millenarian eschatology that warned of a coming world apocalypse at the end of the three periods of human history (三期末劫 Sān qímò jié) and the possibility of salvation.

³ See Zarrow (2006) and Goossaert and Palmer (2011).

⁴ While many of these sects predated the fall of the Qing dynasty, others were entirely new movements. See Nedostup (2010) and Goossaert and Palmer (2011).

⁵ The term “redemptive societies” was first coined by Duara (2001) in an article referring to a wave to religious movements which appeared in Republican China, among them Yiguandao. The issue of redemptive societies, their definition and categorization has been discussed in depth by other researchers. Ownby (2010) views the category of redemptive society as a useful tool to analyze contemporary groups like the Falungong. Broy (2015), meanwhile, has been critical of the category, arguing an implied break between premodern sects and modern movements. Palmer (2011) prefers instead to use the category of “salvationist religion.” This paper has chosen to use the term for its geographical and historical specificity, and the grouping of disparate sects according to their common teachings at the time.

⁶ The “Unity of the Three Teachings” refers to the harmonization of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism into a unified philosophical framework. The concept is discussed in greater detail in the second section of this paper.

While unpacking the ongoing theological discussions behind these groups is beyond the scope of this paper, further background information on the movement's doctrinal lines as they pertain to Yiguandao is provided in the second section of this paper.

The Formalization of Yiguandao

Soon after the first generation of formally registered religious associations in China was established in 1912, several of these so-called redemptive societies went on to found national modern-style organizations, registering with the new Chinese state as religious, philanthropic, or public interest groups, establishing a central headquarters and a network of provincial and municipal chapters.⁷

Between the founding of Yiguandao in the late 19th century and the 1920s, the sect had remained small. Led by a series of patriarchs, the early decades were



Artwork demonstrating the concept of the “Unity of the Three Teachings.”
(Source: Penglai Pavilion 2022)

⁷ Palmer, D.A. (2011) Chinese Redemptive Societies and Salvationist Religion: Historical Phenomenon or Sociological Category? *Journal of Chinese Theatre, Ritual and Folklore/ Minsu Quyi* 172 (2011), p. 22.

characterized by persecution, fragmentation, and development of theology and ritual under divine revelation.⁸

By 1930, the sect had grown to a few thousand members gathered in Shandong,⁹ and soon experienced rapid growth under the 18th patriarch Zhang Tianran (張天然) well into the 1940s.¹⁰ The Japanese invasion of China in the late 1930s helped legitimize Yiguandao's millenarian teachings, and the religion grew to an estimated membership of 12 million that decade.¹¹ In 1947, the Yiguandao registered with authorities as the Chinese Society for Morality and Charity (中华道德慈善会 Zhōnghuá dàodé císhàn huì).¹²

Contemporary Reactions

The “redemptive societies” phenomenon did not escape the attention of the missionary press, itself basking in a religious “Golden Age” devoted to the Christianization of the Chinese nation.¹³

Frank Rawlinson, an American Protestant missionary to China from 1902 to 1937, wrote of two movements rocking China at the time.¹⁴ The first, he said, was the secular New Culture movement, a kind of “intellectual renaissance” led

⁸ Lu, Y. (2008) *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy*, Lexington Books, p. 4.

⁹ An official Chinese government webpage describes Yiguandao activity at this time as “rampant” or “unchecked” (猖獗 Chāngjué), with many families deceived by the Dao cult (道受骗 Dào shòupiàn). Shaanxi authorities (n.d.) 第三节 一贯道 [Chapter 3: Yiguandao], Shaanxi authorities, http://dfz.shaanxi.gov.cn/sqzlk/xbsxz/sxdyl/wns_16202/tgxz/201610/t20161025_730762.html

¹⁰ Today, Zhang Tianran is often referred to as the Father of Yiguandao, or Honored Teacher (師尊 Shī zūn). See for example 興毅 Xingyi (2024) 天然師尊 [Natural Master], Xingyi Branch, <https://shingyi.org/%E4%B8%80%E8%B2%AB%E9%81%93%E6%BA%90%E8%B5%B7/%E5%A4%A9%E7%84%B6%E5%B8%AB%E5%B0%8A>.

¹¹ Lu (2008) p. 37.

¹² Lo, L.P. 羅涼萍 (2024) 一貫道「發一崇德」發展之探究 [An exploration into the development of Yiguandao's "Fa Yi Chongde"], Institute of Religious Studies, University of Nanhua, p. 81.

¹³ Palmer (2011), p. 28. See also: Shan, P. F. (2009) Triumph after Catastrophe: Church, State and Society in Post Boxer China, 1900-1937, *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 16:2, Article 3.

¹⁴ Rawlinson, F (1929) *Revolution and Religion in China*, Presbyterian Mission Press, pp. 1, in Palmer (2011) p. 28.

by young, modern-educated intellectuals. The second movement was the response to the former, a “revolutionary religious movement” led by older, Confucian-trained academics that attempted to explain and resolve the consequences of the 1911 revolution. The first led an anti-Christian campaign, while the latter attempted to absorb Christianity into its already syncretistic worldview.¹⁵

Writing a few decades later, researcher Wing-tsit Chan held a disdainful view of the new religious movement: “[The new religious societies are] negative in outlook, utilitarian in purpose, and superstitious in belief... they deserve the attack of intellectuals and are already being suppressed by the new government in China”.¹⁶

That said, even Chan recognised elements of these religious societies which could point the direction of Chinese religion in the future: patriotism, revolution, a focus on “this world”, and an emphasis on ethics, lay leadership, and syncretism.¹⁷

The development of these religious societies would soon be forced across the Strait. The brief window for Chinese religious freedom had already begun to close, and the new Communist Party of China (CPC) regime was quickly proving determined to quash any threat to its desperate grip on power—real or perceived.



A revolutionary comrade stamps out religious paraphernalia. The text reads: “Smash the old world. Build the new world.”

【打碎旧世界 创立新世纪】 (Source: Steven F. Jackson 2018)

¹⁵ Rawlinson (1929), p. 86.

¹⁶ Chan, W. (1953) *Religious Trends in Modern China*, Columbia University Press, pp. 167, in Palmer (2011) p. 28.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 168-185.

Persecution Under the CPC

The strength of this new wave of religious fervor was such that the first mass political campaign launched by the CPC after 1949 was the campaign to eradicate “reactionary sects and secret societies” (反動會道門 Fǎndòng huìdàomén).¹⁸

Police records indicate that a full two percent of China’s population, some 13 million followers, were counted in the ensuing campaign, and 820,000 sect leaders and activists turned themselves into police custody or were arrested.¹⁹ Based on an analysis of local publications at the time, other researchers estimate that popular sect membership in the early 1950s exceeded 18 million.²⁰ Compared to available data on other religions in Republican China, which counted 500,000 Buddhist monks, one million Protestants and the three million Catholics, redemptive societies made up the largest group of organized religious congregations in the country by far.²¹

Despite the success of the CPC in quashing most redemptive societies in China, or forcing them back into hiding,²² a significant number of these groups expanded to Taiwan where they eventually grew to become some of the largest religious organizations in Taiwan. They also contributed to the evolution of several more new religious movements, such as the True Buddha School (真佛宗 Zhēn fú zōng), Haizidao (亥子道), and the Miledadao (彌勒大道).²³

¹⁸ A fascinating justification for the campaign, written from a pro-CPC perspective, has been provided by “Wang Yuan” 王援 (2009, August 4) 取締反动会道门 [*Ban the reactionary guilds*], Sina News China, <https://news.sina.com.cn/o/2009-08-04/103116064396s.shtml>.

¹⁹ Palmer (2011) p. 26.

²⁰ Lin, R. 林容澤, 一貫道歷史 - 大陸之部 [*Yiguandao History - Mainland Branch*], 蘭臺出版社 [Lantai Publishing House], pp. 58-62, in Palmer (2011).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Introvigne, M. (2018, November 8) Yiguandao: The Original Xie Jiao, Bitter Winter, <https://bitterwinter.org/yiguandao-the-original-xie-jiao/>

²³ Palmer (2011) p. 27. The True Buddha School was founded in Taiwan in 1995, Haizidao in 1993, and the Miledadao in 1987.

At the same time, redemptive societies such as the Yiguandao, Dejiao (德教) and Zhenkongjiao (真空教) became religious, social and philanthropic pillars of overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, and remain so today. The contemporary regional footprint of Yiguandao is discussed in the third section of this paper.

Taiwan

Amid the turmoil of the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949) and the rise of the CPC, many followers of Yiguandao fled China to migrate to Taiwan. There, they sought refuge and religious freedom, and found fertile ground for growth among both local Taiwanese communities and fellow immigrants from Mainland China.

While the migration of Yiguandao members to Taiwan no doubt helped to facilitate the spread of Yiguandao beliefs and practices throughout the country, the island was itself marked by its own post-war social and political upheaval.²⁴ Local Taiwanese understandably sought stability, meaning and community amid the



A ceremony held at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. Based on images from the event, President Tsai Ing-wen was in attendance. (Source: Yiguandao Association of the Republic of China Facebook Page 2017)

end of Japanese colonial rule and the arrival of the Kuomintang government from China. Yiguandao offered a spiritual and moral framework that was both

²⁴ See, for example, Lee, S. and Williams, J.F. (eds.) (2014) *Taiwan's Struggle: Voices of the Taiwanese*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

familiar and prescriptive, introduced by charismatic leaders focused on religious conversion with their persuasive rhetoric and compelling teachings.²⁵

Yiguandao quickly established networks of temples, congregations and community organizations, offering not only religious instruction but also social support. Before long, the group was once again viewed as a threat by political authorities, and subject to police raids, arrest and propaganda campaigns.²⁶ By 1952, the Kuomintang had officially outlawed Yiguandao, charging the sect as immoral and under suspicion of cooperation with Chinese communists.²⁷ Taiwanese Buddhists circles denounced the sect as heterodox, and the group was again forced underground.²⁸

Rapid economic growth in Taiwan between the 1960s and 1990s, however, presented Yiguandao leaders with the chance to spread their influence via the private sector. Many members became successful business people, combining missionary work with commercial activities in a strategy that persists today.²⁹ By 1989, Yiguandao members numbered more than 440,000 people, or 2.2 percent of the population, and the Kuomintang officially gave the group legal status in January 1987.³⁰ As Taiwan has transitioned to a more democratic and

²⁵ Billioud, S. (2020) *Reclaiming the Wilderness: Contemporary Dynamics of the Yiguandao*, Oxford University Press, p. 17.

²⁶ Bosco, J. (1994) Yiguan Dao: 'Heterodoxy' and Popular Religion in Taiwan, in Rubenstein, M. (ed.) *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the Present*, Routledge, pp. 423-444. Anti-Yiguandao sentiment at the time ranged from "duck egg sect" (鴨蛋教 Yādàn jiào) slurs to accusations of sexual abuse and naked congregations. See Lu, Y. (2005) *Chinese Traditional Sects In Modern Society: A Case Study of Yiguan Dao*, [Doctoral Dissertation, City University of Hong Kong], https://lbms03.cityu.edu.hk/theses/c_ftt/phd-ss-b19290536f.pdf, pp. 59-65.

²⁷ Lu, Y. (2005), p. 59.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Yiguandao describes this concept as "combining missionary work and business activities" (商教合一 Shāng jiào hé yī). See also Billioud, S. (2020) pp. 51-55. This tendency was confirmed during fieldwork. For example, Religioscope attended services and classes in a prayer hall above a hairdressing shop run by Yiguandao members.

³⁰ Lu (2008) p. 64. The relationship between the Taiwanese government and Yiguandao is discussed in greater detail in section 4 of this paper.

pluralistic society, Yiguandao is now recognised as one of the major religious movements in the country.³¹

International Expansion

In addition to migrating across the Taiwan Strait in the early 20th century, Yiguandao has also seen rapid international growth through a combination of migration and missionary activities.

Fragmentary data indicates a strong presence in the Southeast Asian region, including Thailand, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Malaysia.³² In Vietnam, the group has a strong enough presence to warrant persecution by Vietnamese authorities.³³ In China, where the group is not recognized as an official religion by the CPC, it is impossible to access reliable statistics; based on the group's history and contemporary proselytizing efforts on the Chinese Mainland, however, it is likely that the sect maintains a foothold in the country.³⁴

³¹ As with many religious groups, there is a lack of reliable quantitative data regarding the size of Yiguandao as it stands today. Current estimates on Yiguandao members vary between 2.1 and 3.5% of the Taiwanese population, with between 500,000 and 800,000 members and 3,000 temples and prayer halls across the country. The prevalence of residential prayer halls means the true figure may be higher than the official count; the fact that membership figures focus on initiations rather than retained individuals means the figure could be lower than the official count. See: American Institute Taiwan (2022, June 2) *Taiwan 2021 International Religious Freedom Report*, American Institute Taiwan, <https://www.ait.org.tw/2021-international-religious-freedom-report-taiwan-part/>, Liberty Times Net (2022, May 22) 密碼台灣》台灣寺廟年年增、教堂漸凋零 [Password Taiwan: Temples in Taiwan Increase Every Year, Churches Gradually Decline], Liberty Times Net, <https://ec.ltn.com.tw/article/breakingnews/3927332>, and Billioud (2020) p. 20.

³² See, for example, Broy, N. (2022) Nodes and Hubs: An Exploration of Yiguandao Temples as 'Portals of Globalization', *Religions* 13:366, <https://ul.qucosa.de/api/qucosa%3A85889/attachment/ATT-0/>.

³³ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (2023) Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2024-01/AR%202023.pdf>, p. 46.

³⁴ Zhao, Z.Y. (2024, May 1) *Taiwan's Yiguandao Believers Arrested as "Cultists" When Visiting China*, Bitter Winter, <https://bitterwinter.org/taiwans-yiguandao-believers-arrested-as-cultists-when-visiting-china/>.

The group's efforts to "reclaim" China are further discussed in section four of this paper.

The group has also successfully expanded into vastly different cultural environments, such as on the Indian subcontinent, South Africa and a number of Western countries.³⁵ Indeed, Yiguandao's presence outside of Taiwan is now much larger than that within the country, with the Taiwanese Yiguandao maintaining a central role in monitoring and facilitating this bulk of this expansion.³⁶

2. Cosmology, Beliefs and Practices

Yiguandao, like many new religions that fall under the umbrella of Chinese redemptive societies, has its roots in the Way of Anterior Heaven, or Xiantiandao (先天道 Xiāntiān dào), a syncretic religious movement that emerged in the early 18th century and gained prominence by the early 20th century.

The Way of Anterior Heaven is an amalgamation of traditional Chinese folk beliefs and Taoist principles, and emphasizes the pursuit of spiritual cultivation, moral integrity, and social harmony.³⁷ It also draws from ancient Chinese apocalyptic and millenarian traditions. The movement claims a long spiritual lineage in the transmission of the Way (道統 Dàotǒng), and is deeply rooted in the foundational texts and teachings of Daoism.

In the same vein, the cosmology, beliefs and practices of Yiguandao are a syncretic blend of traditional Chinese spirituality and moral philosophy, emphasizing the pursuit of enlightenment and ethical living ahead of the end of the world.

³⁵ See Broy (2022) and Broy, N. (2019) Maitreya's Garden in the Township: Transnational Religious Spaces of Yiguandao Activists in Urban South Africa, *China Perspectives*, 2019-4, <https://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/9662>, pp. 27-36.

³⁶ Billioud (2020) p. 21.

³⁷ For an in-depth description of both the Xiantiandao movement and modern Chinese redemptive societies, see Palmer, D.A (2011) Redemptive Societies in Cultural and Historical Context, *Journal of Chinese Theatre, Ritual and Folklore / Minsu Quyi* 173, https://www.academia.edu/8280221/Redemptive_Societies_in_Cultural_and_Historical_Context.

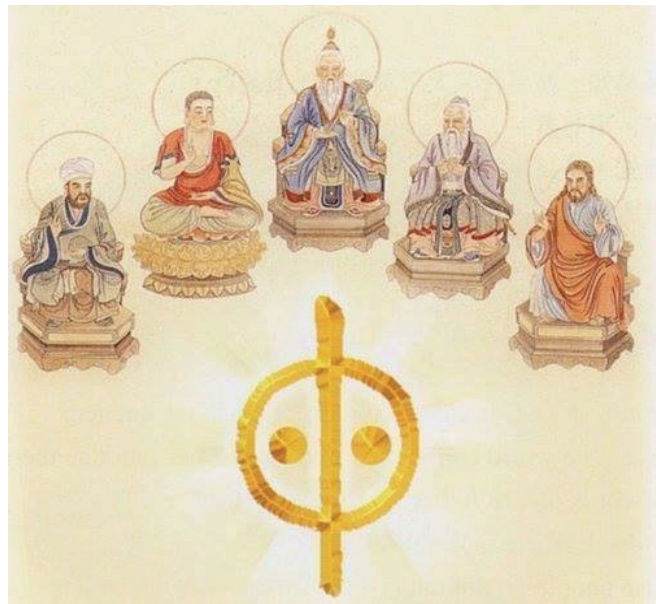
Chinese Syncretism and the Three Teachings

Syncretism is a key feature of Chinese religion, with a range of beliefs and practices having coexisted and influenced one another over centuries. Any attempt to understand Chinese religious society must begin from an appreciation of this spiritual pluralism, whereby individuals may draw from different traditions according to their needs and inclinations.

For many scholars, Chinese religious syncretism is codified in the concept of the “convergence of the three teachings” (三教合流 *Sān jiào héliú*), or Three Teachings, a traditional Chinese folk belief that harmonizes Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism), and Buddhism.³⁸ These three philosophical and religious traditions have coexisted and interacted in Chinese society for centuries, each offering its own insights into moral conduct, spiritual enlightenment, and the nature of reality.

The unity of the three teachings emphasizes the complementary nature of these traditions rather than their contradictions. In practice, individuals in Chinese society often draw upon elements from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism to navigate various aspects of life, blending moral principles, spiritual practices, and philosophical perspectives from each tradition.

The influence of the three teachings concept is readily evident in Yiguandao philosophy and practice. A central concept of the Yiguandao belief system is the “unity of the five teachings” (五教合一 *Wǔ jiào hé yī*), expanding the “three



A visual representation of Unity of the Five Teachings, with Lao Tzu, Confucius and Buddha joined by Jesus Christ and the Prophet Mohammed. Below them sits the Yiguandao symbol, representing 母 (Mǔ), or mother. (Source: Wind and Cloud Capital 2017)

³⁸ In an adaptation of the concept, the “Unity of the Three Teachings” (三教合一 *Sān jiào hé yī*) is a core Xiantiandao belief and, by extension, a foundational teaching in Yiguandao.

teachings” principle to include the teachings of Christianity and Islam. While Yiguandao does not adhere to traditional Christian and Islamic dogma, it embraces the moral and spiritual teachings of both Jesus Christ and the Prophet Mohammed.³⁹

To understand the boundaries of Yiguandao’s embrace of both Jesus and Mohammed, Religioscope asked if the sect had adopted the Christian view of Jesus as the Son of God, or if Jesus was perhaps considered one of many gods. In response, one teacher referred to Jesus’ parable of the “Narrow and Wide Gates.”⁴⁰

In addition to encouraging adherence to the teachings of the Christian God, the parable emphasizes the importance of making moral choices in life, and prioritizing spiritual growth even if this way of living departs from the social mainstream or encounters difficulties along the way. This message is very much aligned with Yiguandao philosophy.⁴¹

Moreover, any glaring theological contradictions are typically explained away with the conclusion that the various religious frameworks share common insights, and a shared mission in self-transformation.⁴² We were also told that it is good and useful for Yiguandao members to research other religions, to the extent that understanding of other faiths can facilitate efforts to convert people to Yiguandao.

³⁹ In one interview, a teacher expanded the “five teachings” concept even further to become “the unity of ten thousand teachings” (萬教合一 Wàn jiào hé yī). Another congregant used the following expression: “One book is scattered into thousands of treasures, and thousands of treasures still belong to one book,” [一本散為萬殊，萬殊仍歸一本]. Regardless of the metaphor used, the meaning becomes very clear, for Yiguandao adherents, the sect channels and unifies all world religions into the one, true, and final “Way.”

⁴⁰ “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” Matthew 7:13-14 NIV

⁴¹ “Teachings like these are the same (相同 xiāngtóng) as what we know in Yiguandao. There is truth (有道理 yǒu dào lǐ) behind these teachings, so it is important to include them in our own,” the teacher explained.

⁴² Lu (2008) argues that there has historically been an anti-intellectual streak within Yiguandao, offering this as an explanation for sometimes shallow explanations and analogies. Confirming or challenging this hypothesis requires extensive fieldwork that goes beyond the goals of this paper. Lu (2008), pp. 137-139.

“Yiguandao is for all of society. That is why I have a Quran in my house,” one congregant said, “I read it and am able to better understand Islam, which means I can better explain Yiguandao teachings to a Muslim.”

The theologies of the five, then, are expounded and adopted to the extent that they align with Yiguandao theology; in the words of Billioud, “Here, we reach the limits of the notion of syncretism since at a purely theological level there is no real syncretism any longer.”⁴³

Cosmology and Millenarian Eschatology

The Yiguandao cosmology emphasizes the existence of a divine hierarchy, and the interconnectedness of the universe. Central to its cosmology is the concept of Tian (天), meaning heaven or celestial realm, which is the ultimate source of cosmic order and spiritual power. Yiguandao divides the universe into three realms, or three “Tians”: the realm of forms (象天 Xiàng tiān) where humans, animals and physical forms reside; the realm of matter energy (氣天 Qì tiān) inhabited by souls, spirits and ancestors; and the realm of principle (理天 Lǐ tiān) which is the fundamental source of reality (本體 Běntǐ). The latter realm is inhabited by celestial beings and deities.⁴⁴ Only those people or spirits who are initiated into Yiguandao can hope to join the realm of principle, escaping the endless cycle of births and deaths (samsara, a concept borrowed from Buddhism). Those outside the sect will need to redeem themselves in the next life. This was described as simply a case of cause and effect (因果 Yīnguǒ, or karma).

Indeed, Yiguandao shares the belief in the soul’s rebirth and transmigration (reincarnation, or 輪迴 Lúnhuái) after death with many other religious traditions. According to Yiguandao teachings, the soul reincarnates into different bodies based on karma (緣 Yuán) and spiritual development; by accumulating merit

⁴³ Billioud (2020) p. 8.

⁴⁴ Yiguandao (n.d.) 一貫道詮釋儒家經典之—關鍵性觀念的考察 [A Study of Key Concepts in the Interpretation of Confucian Classics], Yiguandao, http://www.1-kuan-tao.org.tw/zongsu/culture/9902/magazine_subject.asp?isession=216&iorder=11&subject=%A4%40%B3e%B9D%BB%CD%C4%C0%BE%A7%AEa%B8g%A8%E5%A4%A7%A1X%C3%F6%C1%E4%A9%CA%C6%5B%A9%C0%AA%BA%A6%D2%B9%EE%202.

through virtuous deeds, acts of charity, and spiritual practice, followers work to purify their karma and advance along the path to salvation.⁴⁵

Over the course of our fieldwork, there emerged a common response to questions regarding the minutiae of Yiguandao theology: typically variations of “if you understand one thing, everything is understood; if you don't understand one thing, nothing is understood.”⁴⁶ We were often encouraged to first receive the Dao and complete the conversion ceremony, from which everything else would become clear.⁴⁷

Deities

Yiguandao cosmology venerates a range of various deities and spiritual beings, the most senior figure among them being The Mother, or the Eternal Venerable Mother (無生老母 Wú shēng lǎomǔ). Although the deity is called “Mother,” it does not have a tangible image or gender; instead, Yiguandao represents the god with the symbol of fire. Mother Light (母燈 Mǔ dēng) is therefore the central focus of an Yiguandao shrine.

Under the Mother, Yiguandao also venerates a variety of other deities, bodhisattvas, and celestial beings. These can include figures from traditional Chinese mythology, enlightened masters, and guardian spirits. Yiguandao practitioners offer prayers, make offerings, and seek the intercession of these

⁴⁵ To describe Yiguandao cosmology as complex and multi-layered would be a vast understatement. From a researcher's perspective, it often feels like tugging on a piece of string with no end: the more questions asked, the more concepts, principles and metaphors are relayed. This is, in large part, due to the decentralized nature of the Yiguandao faith; a structure that helped the sect persevere and expand under decades of government repression has also contributed to a less-than-streamlined theology (神學 Shénxué). See Billioud (2020) p. 9 and Lu (2008), pp. 137-156.

⁴⁶ [你明白一樣，樣樣都會明白了；你若一樣也不明白，樣樣都不明白] The phrase appears to be a Buddhist refrain, suggesting that gaining insight into one aspect of existence can lead to an understanding of all aspects. Conversely, failing to comprehend a single aspect means understanding as a whole remains incomplete. The idea appears to be that knowledge, and enlightenment, are interdependent and comprehensive. See, for example, 西行者 [Xixíng zhě] (2020, June 8) 《华严经》中的智慧 | 一即一切 一切即一 [Wisdom in the Avatamsaka Sutra], Lingyinsi Temple, https://www.lingyinsi.org/detail_14032.html.

⁴⁷ At the time of writing, this researcher has maintained outsider status on principle. For the purposes of completing this article, however, promises of clarity and enlightenment proved increasingly tempting.



This congregation service involved a series of solemn rituals involving incense, fruit offerings, and coordinated bows from both the men and women's side of the room.

beings for various purposes, such as health, protection, or spiritual advancement.

In keeping with Chinese folk religious practice, ancestor worship is also an important aspect of Yiguandao practice. Ancestral spirits, such as deceased family members and ancestors, are honored through rituals, offerings and prayers. Ancestral spirits are believed to play a role in protecting and guiding the living; maintaining harmonious relations with ancestors is seen to be essential to spiritual well-being.

Millenarianism

Yiguandao teaches a cyclical conception of the universe, with the cycle starting with the origin of the universe (the creation of heaven, earth, and humans), and ends with the destruction of all three. In the current cycle, or kalpa, the relatively short human history is divided into three periods: the green sun period (青陽期 Qīng yáng qī), the red sun period (紅陽期 Hóng yáng qī), and the

white sun period (白陽期 Bái yáng qī), which roughly began at the beginning of the Chinese Republic era in 1912.⁴⁸

This last phase is characterized by a range of disasters, stemming from human flaws and constitute signs of a coming apocalypse. Tsunamis, floods, nuclear accidents, climate change and pandemics are considered good examples of these disasters, and indicative of the end of the third and final period of human history (三期末劫 Sān qīmò jié).



A sect member explains the different heavenly realms according to Yiguandao cosmology.

At the end of the White Sun period, “Hell’s gate shall be open and all devils shall come out and take revenge on those who are indebted to them. Only those who are good and have cultivated the Dao earnestly would be spared.”⁴⁹

The Maitreya Buddha (彌勒佛 Mílè fú), the Buddha of the future, is entrusted with the mission to save lost souls and bring them toward enlightenment. The

⁴⁸ See Billioud’s chart of Yiguandao time cycles and segments, adapted from materials collected during fieldwork and training sessions. (2020) p. 12.

⁴⁹ No author (1992) Realization of the Truth, Zhengyi Shanshu Chubanshe, p. 24, via Billioud (2020) p. 26.

realization of this mission forms the foundation of Yiguandao's fervent proselytizing efforts, discussed in greater detail in part three of this report.

Spirit Writing

Spirit writing (扶乩 Fújī, 扶鸞 Fú luán) is a practice observed in a range of Chinese religious traditions, including Yiguandao.⁵⁰ It involves a form of mediumship, where a practitioner acts as a channel for spiritual communication, allowing divine beings, ancestors, and other spiritual entities to convey messages to the human world through writing.

Practitioners of this form of mediumship will enter a trance-like state, typically induced through meditation, chanting, or other spiritual practices, that allows a spiritual entity to temporarily communicate through them.

While in this trance-like state, practitioners hold a writing instrument, such as a brush or pen, and allow their hand to be guided by the spirit. These messages may be unfamiliar to the practitioner, but recognizable to others familiar with spirit writing. These messages can vary widely, and may include guidance, blessings, warnings or instructions for individuals or the community. They also proved particularly expedient for navigating tensions between leadership or succession challenges.⁵¹

They can also serve a strategic purpose. The following is a spirit writing excerpt that was used by Hong Kong sectarians to spread the Yiguandao message by borrowing elements from Christianity:

“I am Jesus Christ. Following Jehovah's mandate and together with the *Yuehui* Bodhisattva, I have come here to meet you all... Shouldering God's mission, I looked after lambs and tried my best to propagandize the gospel which had been lost for a long time... But now the time is over, and I have handed in the

⁵⁰ See, for example, Katz, P. R. (2015) Spirit-writing and the Dynamics of Elite Religious Life in Republican-era Shanghai, *Religious Development in Modern Chinese History: Collected Essays*, https://www.academia.edu/39293850/Spirit_writing_and_the_Dynamics_of_Elite_Religious_Life_in_Republican_era_Shanghai, and Clart, P. (1997) *The Phoenix and the Mother: The Interaction of Spirit Writing Cults and Popular Sects in Taiwan*, Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁵¹ See Billioud, S., “Yiguandao's Patriarch Zhang Tianran: Hagiography, Deification, and Production of Charisma in a Modern Religious Organization” in Che, C., Goossaert, V., and Ownby, D. (eds.) (2017) *Making Saints in Modern China*, Oxford University Press, pp. 209-240.

holy decree and return to the Principal Heaven (理天 Lǐ tiān). I will rest in peace. Today, facing the coming end of the world, I cannot save you since I currently do not have the Mandate of Heaven (天命 Tiānmìng)... Now the task of salvation is on the shoulders of [Zhang Tianran] and [Sun Suzhen].”⁵²



It is common for Yiguandao altars to feature the Maitreya Buddha front and center, flanked by other deities or spirits revered by individual prayer halls.

Much of the literature on Yiguandao indicates that the sect has discarded the practice in favor of protecting existing authority structures.⁵³ Even so, we were told at one Buddha hall in Taitung that two spirit writing events (for that specific sub-branch) would take place in 2024, in May and November, at the branch temple in Kaohsiung. We were also gently advised that only those who have received the Dao would be permitted to attend.

⁵² The writing urges Christians to follow Zhang Tianran (張天然), the 18th patriarch of Yiguandao, and Sun Suzhen (孫素真) the 18th matriarch and successor of Zhang. Lu (2008) p. 147.

⁵³ Lu, Y. and Lang, G. (2006) Impact of the State on the Evolution of a Sect, *Sociology of Religion*, 67:3, p. 261,

The Cultivation of the Self

The Yiguandao practice of self-cultivation (修真 Xiūzhēn or 修自己 Xiū zìjǐ) involves a process of self-refinement and inner transformation with the goal of reaching spiritual enlightenment, being a force for good in the world, and obtaining salvation.

Over the course of Religioscope's fieldwork, the issue of self-cultivation was repeatedly returned to as the crux of the human experience, and offered as a prescription for resolving many of the world's issues.⁵⁴

"If Vladimir Putin received the Dao today, and began self-cultivation, the war in Ukraine would be over tomorrow," a teacher advised.

Indeed, the emphasis on cultivating the self often felt like a religiously charged self-help experience. Religioscope was welcomed at monthly lessons in which practitioners were encouraged to honestly examine their thoughts, emotions and behaviors, identify areas for improvement, and recognise root causes of suffering and delusion.

Practitioners also engage in rituals and ceremonies as a means of cultivating the self. Rituals can include making offerings to deities and ancestors, such as fruits, flowers, incense and other symbolic items. Altars are typically adorned



A congregation lecture emphasized the importance of living faithfully over the course of one's life.

⁵⁴ For example, 「先修好自己才能維護家的和平」 (Cultivate yourself first, and then you will be able to maintain peace at home), 「修身齊家」 (Cultivate yourself to manage your family).

with images of deities, sacred texts and ritual implements.⁵⁵ They are a sacred space in every prayer hall, and individuals bow three times toward the altar upon entry to the room.

Moreover, cultivation of the self extends beyond personal transformation to include acts of compassion and service to others. Individuals are encouraged to practice kindness, generosity and altruism, with the intention of alleviating suffering and, ultimately, contributing to the welfare of humanity as a whole. Service to others is also seen as a means of cultivating virtue, accumulating spiritual merit, and deepening one's spiritual practice.

Answer for Suffering

In addition to prescriptive conversations about self-cultivation, interviewees were enthusiastic to speak about the nature of suffering, and appropriate responses to it.

According to Yiguandao, suffering is often the result of past actions, or karma. Individuals accumulate karma through their thoughts, words, and deeds, which lead to positive or negative consequences in both this life and subsequent lives. Not only that, but suffering can also be understood as part of the cycles of the universe: creation and destruction are a part of life, and a fundamental part of the cosmic balance.

On an individual level, Yiguandao teaches that attachment to worldly desires, material possessions and other ego-driven pursuits leads to inner suffering and discontentment. It is only through spiritual practice and adherence to moral values that individuals can alleviate this form of suffering, and find inner peace.

In response to questions about suffering, and appropriate responses to it, believers were unanimous in affirming the need to understand one's place in the universe, detach, and, as always, cultivate the self. In one conversation over

⁵⁵ In the altar picture: on the right is the Yuehui Bodhisattva (月慧菩薩), or Moon Wisdom Bodhisattva, representative of Zhang Tianran's third wife Sun Huiming (孫慧明). The marriage was purportedly platonic, and Sun relocated to Taiwan after the CPC came to power in 1949. On the left is the Jigong Living Buddha (濟公活佛), a legendary figure in Chinese Buddhism known for his unconventional behavior and compassion for the poor and oppressed.



This poster describes the physical and spiritual benefits of vegetarianism, tying the choice not to kill animals to spiritual enlightenment. Images such as these are designed to be easily shared on social media platforms such as LINE, the most commonly used messaging app in Taiwan. (Source: PIXNET 2017)

lunch with several teachers gathered together from a prayer hall in Taitung and the parent temple in Kaohsiung, the example of a car accident was given:

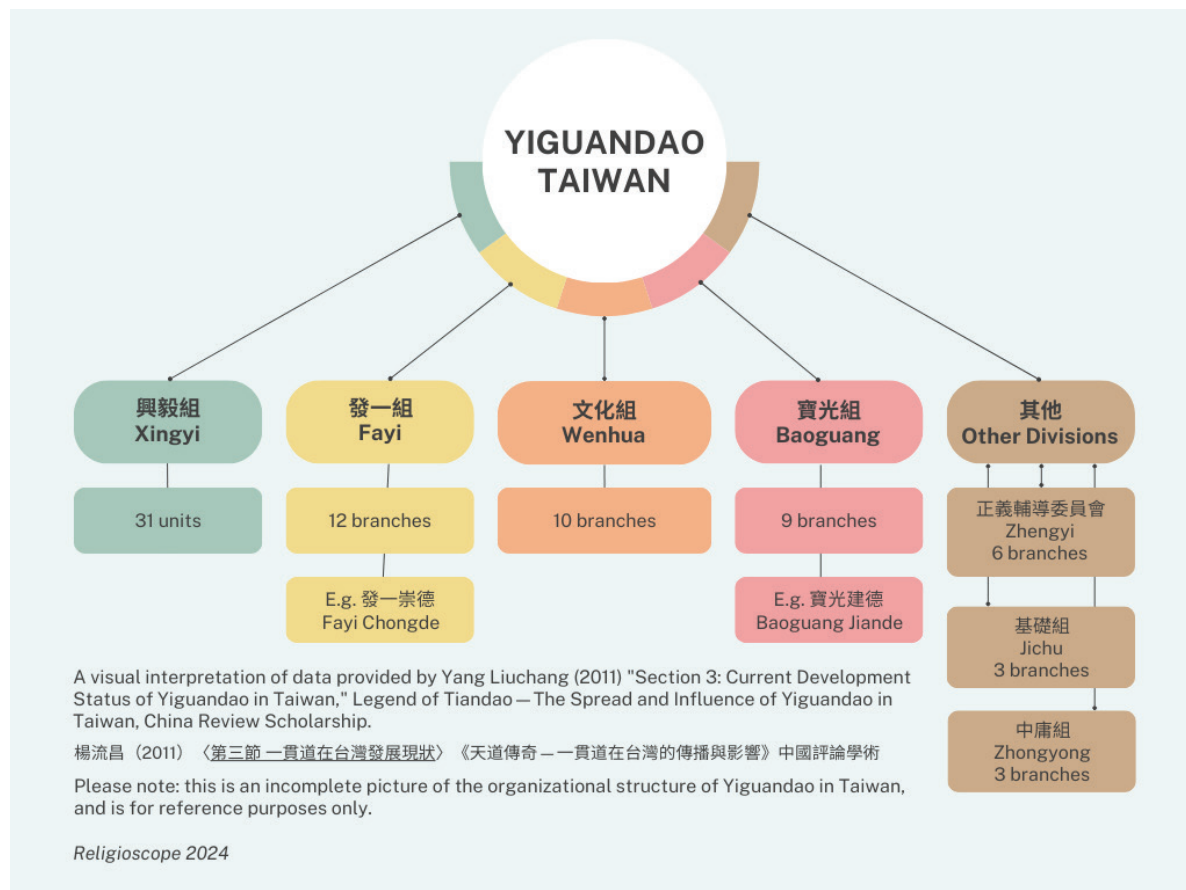
“If you are driving in your car, and someone runs into the back of you, what do you do?” An elder posed, “do you get out and yell? Do you react aggressively and out of anger?”

Those sitting around the table smiled knowingly. “If the person hit has received the Dao, if they are a Yiguandao believer, they will say, “Don’t worry. No problem.” and the situation will be resolved. “This is the cycle of the universe: good things happen, bad things happen.”

To the question about whether or not the car accident were to cause serious bodily injury, we were answered with another knowing smile: “That is the cycle of the universe. If you are a Yiguandao believer, you let it go. You see, this is why

the world becomes a better place when more people receive the Dao and cultivate the self.”⁵⁶

3. Community and Organisation



Yiguandao's early development in Taiwan was marked by extreme fragmentation, though attempts are now being made to integrate the faith's various entities across the country.⁵⁷

Today, Yiguandao relies on a decentralized organizational structure in Taiwan, with a network of temples, congregations and community organizations that operate semi-autonomously under the umbrella of broader religious

⁵⁶ In a perhaps more compelling example of endurance in the face of suffering, Religioscope spoke with a Yiguandao missionary recently returned to Taiwan after a year in prison in China. The teacher had been imprisoned for his missionary activities. He was composed in his description of his confinement alongside more hardened criminals, but described the experience as a chance to practice what he had spent his whole life learning. Better yet, he viewed the experience as a valuable opportunity to proselytize to his fellow inmates.

⁵⁷ See Billioud (2020) pp. 17-19, and Lu (2008), pp. 119-131.

associations. Recent estimates put the number of largely independent Yiguandao branches (組線 Zǔ xiàn) in Taiwan at 19, subdivided into around 51 sub-branches (支線 Zhī xiàn).⁵⁸

Yiguandao temples or Buddha halls (佛堂 Fó táng) serve as the primary centers of religious practice and community activities. Temples are typically led by a resident clergy member, referred to as a master (師傅 Shīfù) or teacher (老師 Lǎoshī). These leaders oversee religious ceremonies, provide spiritual guidance to followers, and manage day-to-day temple affairs.

Temples vary in size and scale, ranging from small local shrines to larger regional centers with multiple buildings and facilities.

Within each temple, there are congregations or local groups of followers who gather for religious services, meditation sessions and educational programs that are designed to meet the needs and interest of members. These congregations deliberately foster a sense of community and belonging among followers, providing social support and encouragement for mutual spiritual growth. At one such religious service attended by Religioscope, there was even a “birthday celebration” to commemorate one member’s first year as part of the congregation, complete with a birthday cake and song.



A large Yiguandao temple currently under construction in Kaohsiung. This poster hangs in a small Buddha hall in Taitung, where followers were gently encouraged to make small financial contributions to the building of the temple.

⁵⁸ The official website for the Yiguandao General Association of the Republic of China (中華民國一貫道總會) lists 26 branches, although this list separates certain branches that other scholars appear to group together (for example, the Fayi (發一組) or Xingyi (興毅組) branches. Yiguandao Association of the Republic of China (n.d.) 一貫道總會各道場簡介, Yiguandao Association of the Republic of China, <https://ikuantao.org.tw/sitesintro/>. It is important to note that not all branches and sub-branches have joined the Yiguandao General Association, and even within the same branch (or sub-branch) some may have joined while others have not. Billioud (2020) pp. 197-198.



Religoscope observed a genuine sense of community and mutual support between followers.

Both temples and local groups facilitate conversion ceremonies (修道 Xiūdào or 得道 Dé dào). These initiation rituals involve the “Three Treasures” (三寶 Sānbǎo), and constitute salvation provided by The Mother for those who receive the initiation. The full meaning of the Three Treasures is kept highly secret by Yiguandao followers, and it is strictly prohibited from being shared with non-initiates.

Yiguandao temples and congregations are often affiliated with regional religious associations or federations,⁵⁹ which provide organizational support, coordination and some level of oversight over temple activities. These associations also facilitate communication and collaboration among member temples, organize regional events and



Religoscope attended a congregation service in rural Taitung wherein new initiates were taken to a second location by van to conduct the Three Treasures ceremony.

⁵⁹ See, for example, the website for the Fayi Chongde (發一崇德) sub-branch, which belongs to the Fayi 發一 (Promotion of Unity) branch. The sub-branch is one of Yiguandao’s most influential entities.
<https://www.fycd.org/>

ceremonies, and help to represent the interests of Yiguandao followers to authorities.⁶⁰

Yiguandao in Taiwan also operates a number of educational institutions, such as school and academies, that provide religious instruction, training for clergy members, and opportunities for further academic study and research. Yiguandao Chongde College (一貫道崇德學院) and the Yiguandao Imperial College (一貫道天皇學院) are two such examples of these. Some temples also provide religious instruction for children, teaching Yiguandao beliefs, ethics and rituals, as well as traditional subjects such as Chinese language, literature, and culture.⁶¹



A blood drive poster offering a 7-11 certificate, a pendant and a bottle of rye juice in exchange for donations.



A young man in his early 20s, a recent graduate from an Yiguandao training school in Kaohsiung, enthusiastically relays his school experience to believers in a remote village congregation in Taitung Province.

⁶⁰ The dragon blood donation poster demonstrates a level of coordination between different branches and sub-branches. The “guiding unit” is the Yiguandao General Association of the Republic of China, the Tainan Branch of the General Association is the event organizer, and a number of charitable foundations from the Fayi Chongde, Xinyi, Baoguang and Jichu branches are listed as co-organizers.

⁶¹ See this post in a public Yiguandao Facebook group, for example, encouraging parents to appreciate the value of educating their children on Chinese classics: 基隆市讀經學會 [Keelung Reading Society] (2024, 5 April) 兒童讀經的好處 [The Benefits of Children Reading Classics], [Facebook post] <https://www.facebook.com/groups/235714333464594/posts/2081144058921603>.

At the national level in Taiwan, there is a central administrative body known as the Yiguandao Association of the Republic of China, or The General Association of Yiguandao of the Republic of China, (中華民國一貫道總會) located in New Taipei City.⁶² This organization is the official Yiguandao association recognized by Taiwanese authorities, and is responsible for issuing guidelines and policies, coordinating activities among regional associations, and representing Yiguandao's interests in a broader social and religious context.

At the international level, the World I-Kuan Tao Headquarters was established in Los Angeles, USA, in 1996.⁶³ According to a newsletter written to celebrate the inauguration of the I-Kuan Tao Association of Republic of South Africa (RSA) in 2011, I-Kuan Tao Associations have also been established in Cambodia (1995), Thailand (2000), Indonesia (2000), Malaysia (2001), Japan (2006), Austria (2007), Australia (2009), England (2009) and Paraguay (2009).⁶⁴

Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Italy have since joined that list. In 2023 alone, I-Kuan Tao Associations were opened in Singapore, Nepal, South Korea, Canada's Vancouver and Toronto, as well as Vietnam's Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.⁶⁵

4. Future Trends

Taiwan's economic prosperity since the 1970s, as well as its subsequent urbanization, rising levels of education, and internationalization, has done little to dampen the island's religiosity. According to a 2021 survey, 27.9 percent of

⁶² The General Association website: <https://ikuantao.org.tw/>. The official Taiwanese government online listing also provides useful data: https://aomp109.judicial.gov.tw/judbp/whd6k/q/Q_TA12Xhbm9MZBLVXhVIQy15l2xD07AtjWc5HvEE79KI9ptwlo-KuzH4Xyc=.

⁶³ See I-Kuan Tao USA (2006) The Inaugural Convention I- Kuan Tao USA, [Event Pamphlet], <http://www.taousa.org/pdf/ikuantao-booket.pdf>. There appears to be two websites associated with the I-Kuan Tao USA: <https://www.with.org/> and <https://www.greatao.org/html.html>.

⁶⁴ I-Kuan Tao R.S.A (2011) The Inauguration of I-Kuan Tao Association of R.S.A. 2011, [Newsletter], <http://www.1-kuan-tao.org.tw/zongsu/culture/9902/275/275p10-13.pdf><http://www.1-kuan-tao.org.tw/zongsu/culture/9902/275/275p10-13.pdf>.

⁶⁵ I Kuan Tao World Wide Web (2023) 各國一貫道總會辦事處 [National Yiguandao Federation Offices], I Kuan Tao World Wide Web, <https://www.i-kuantao.com/web.php?html=action3&Fid=20219&Tsubject=635>.

the population practices traditional folk religions, 19.8 percent describe themselves as Buddhist, and 18.7 percent Daoist.⁶⁶ Yiguandao believers make up roughly 2.2 percent of the population.⁶⁷

At the same time, the current relationship between Taiwanese authorities and religious organizations is unrecognizable from the era of martial law under the Kuomintang (1949-1987). Taiwan's first Ambassador at Large for religious freedom, Ambassador Pusin Tali, last year voiced the government's support for the peaceful coexistence of religious belief in Taiwan where it does not endanger national security, and even called for Taiwan's path to religious freedom to be a role model for the region.⁶⁸

Tali's comments are especially relevant in the context of rising concerns over religious freedom in the Asian region, least of all for religious practitioners in China.⁶⁹ As tensions between Taiwan, China, and their respective global allies heighten, the issue of religious freedom appears to lend increasing legitimacy to Taiwan on the international stage. "Taiwanese people deserve democracy and freedom, and live a dignified and better life. We must never look back. We must spread these beliefs to the public so that more people can protect Taiwan together," Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen urged an audience at a Yiguandao temple in 2019.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, the CPC is further tightening its grip on China's religious environment. In September 2023, Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues put into effect further restrictions that require religious venues to "support the leadership of the CCP, support the socialist system, and

⁶⁶ American Institute Taiwan (2023, June 8) *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Taiwan*, American Institute Taiwan, <https://www.ait.org.tw/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom-taiwan/>.

⁶⁷ The survey also found that as many as 80 percent of practitioners combine multiple faith traditions, making it difficult to properly delineate responses.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (2023).

⁷⁰ Lin Chaoyi (2019, October 20) 蔡英文出席一貫道道場 盼一起守護台灣 [Tsai Ing-wen attends the Yiguandao Dojo and hopes to protect Taiwan together], Newtalk, <https://newtalk.tw/news/view/2019-10-20/314072>.



A Yiguandao follower shows off photos of the growing Yiguandao community in Vietnam. She had just returned from a group trip made up of two Yiguandao members from Taitung and seven from Taipei, where they visited and encouraged new converts. Much of the group appear to be ethnically Chinese, but do not speak or read the language. Visitors from Taiwan communicate via translators.

thoroughly implement Xi Jinping's new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics".⁷¹ Religious venues that fail to actively broadcast CPC propaganda "face liquidation".

It is in this context that Yiguandao, a Chinese-born religious movement marked by both syncretism and determined proselytism, now operates. From their base in Taiwan, Yiguandao missionaries continue their work in spreading the message of salvation to their regional neighbors and the world at large.⁷²

This is no less true for China, which has long been a destination for Taiwanese Yiguandao members keen to visit and support their counterparts across the Strait, and help reach new believers within the country.⁷³ For decades, Taiwanese missionaries managed to slip through a convenient loophole: although Yiguandao is not listed as an official religion with the CPC, it has also

⁷¹ United Front News (2023, July 31) 【全文】《宗教活动场所管理办法》公布，今年9月1日起施行 [[Full text] "Measures for the Management of Religious Activity Sites" announced and will come into effect on September 1 this year], The United Front Work Department of CPC Central Committee, https://www.zyztb.gov.cn/zyztb/2023-07/31/article_2023073109112759820.shtml.

⁷² See Broy (2022)

⁷³ Zhao (2024)



New anti-cult posters in China warn citizens against cults (邪教 Xiéjiào) and to believe in science instead. (Source: Bitter Winter 2022)

avoided being included on official and semi-official lists of heterodox religions.⁷⁴

Recent moves by the CPC, however, appear to put heterodox religions in the crosshairs. In December 2023, Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council warned that Yiguandao believers were now the target of criminal charges in China, and described cases in which people were detained for bringing books on vegetarianism into the country.⁷⁵ Taiwanese authorities warned individuals (i.e.

⁷⁴ US Department of State (2019) *2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)* Office of International Religious Freedom, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/>.

⁷⁵ Li Yawen (2023, December 26) 一貫道信徒被關押 陸委會：沒必要不要前往大陸 [Yiguandao believers were detained. Mainland Affairs Council: There is no need to go to the mainland] Central News Agency, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202312260316.aspx>.

Religioscope met with one such missionary who recently returned to Taiwan after having been detained in a Chinese prison for a year for proselytizing activities.

sect members) to consider personal safety, and criticized the CPC for ignoring human rights protections.

It was not too long ago that Yiguandao faced a similar situation of persecution in Taiwan which, over time, the movement was able to overcome in part through appealing to the authoritarian Kuomintang government's sense of "Chinese-ness" by disproportionately emphasizing the importance of Confucianism to the group.⁷⁶ In China, there are documented examples of redemptive societies using Buddhism and Daoism as a cover for their activities; there is every reason to believe Yiguandao believers are just as pragmatic today as they have been in the past.⁷⁷

Conclusion

Chinese redemptive societies like Yiguandao are deeply shaped by the politics of their time. The breakdown of state authority in the early 20th century allowed these groups to grow on an unprecedented scale, even prompting some to formally register with the government. The ensuing crisis wrought by intense persecution under the CPC saw them pivot to Taiwan, where they, once again, faced social and political persecution.

Thanks to a highly decentralized organizational structure, the sect was able to survive and channel its growing influence into efforts to achieve legalization. By the turn of the century, Yiguandao had grown to become an international movement with organizational bases across the globe.

Today, Yiguandao is as proactive as ever in its attempts to bring new believers into the fold. Perhaps most notable are its efforts to support and grow its base in China. From its stronghold in Taiwan, viewed by many as a regional bastion of democracy and religious pluralism, the group persistently sends missionaries across the Strait in spite of increasing religious persecution by the CPC.

⁷⁶ Billioud describes a "gradual Confucianization of the Yiguandao" in response to persistent tensions with its Sinicized political environments. Billioud (2020) pp. 139-154.

⁷⁷ Billioud, S. (2018) *The Varieties of Confucian Experience: Documenting a Grassroots Revival of Tradition*, Brill, pp. 112-118.

During our research and fieldwork, Religioscope identified two core themes: for Yiguandao believers, suffering is to be gracefully endured and, when it comes to expanding and reaching new believers, philosophical pragmatism reigns. As such, the sect offers depth of insight into China's rich religious and cultural heritage, as well as evolving regional political dynamics.

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