

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

1. Please provide information on the TIEN DO Society, evidently Taiwan-based but found in China where it has been proscribed.
2. Is there any public press comment on industrial relations or political directions in December 1998 in Tianjing City, or information about the “Xiang Worker Self Guard Society”?

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Google search engine
UNHCR *REFWORLD* UNHCR Refugee Information Online

Databases:

Public	<i>FACTIVA</i>	Reuters Business Briefing
DIMIA	<i>BACIS</i>	Country Information
	<i>REFINFO</i>	IRBDC Research Responses (Canada)
RRT	<i>ISYS</i>	RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State <i>Country Reports on Human Rights Practices</i> .
RRT Library	<i>FIRST</i>	RRT Library Catalogue

RESPONSE

1. Please provide information on the TIEN DO Society, evidently Taiwan-based but found in China where it has been proscribed.

It seems that the most likely group being referred to is the Tian Dao [also called Tien Tao, Yiguan Dao, I-Kuan Tao and numerous other variations]. The following documents provide information about Tian Dao in China and Taiwan.

A 2003 RRT Research Response looks in detail at the group. Question 1 covers the tenets and beliefs of the group, which is regarded as a syncretic religion combining elements of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, Christianity, and Chinese popular religion. Important figures are the Maitreya Buddha and the Venerable Heavenly Mother; the group believes in reincarnation, that the end of the world is imminent, and that only believers will be saved. The sect tends to operate in secret, and to have a number of sub-sects. Question 2 examines the history of the group in China from its origins in the late 1920s in Shandong province, its banning by the communists after they came to power, and its existence in the present day. Question 3 discusses in detail the attitude of the Chinese authorities, who have attempted to suppress the group, particularly during campaign during the 1950s and 1980s when there were arrests and even executions of believers and leaders. The group remains illegal and there is little recent information on its activities as it operates in secret. Question 6 examines the group's operations in Australia, and discusses the various addresses of temples and meeting houses that have been given by applicants from time to time. Question 7 discusses the term "ren cai" which is a yiguan dao term for a specialised position or office bearer within the sect, associated with spirit writing and spirit possession (RRT Country Research 2003, *Research Response CHN15735*, 19 February – Attachment 1).

A September 2003 REFINFO response looked at the Christian elements within Tian Dao:

Tiandao is fundamentally syncretist, which means that it views all religions as being part of its own lineage. Thus, it traces its own founding to include the major figures of world religions, including the Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed and Jesus Christ. Each of these was said to have revealed part of a larger truth in a preordained plan for universal salvation. This process would eventually lead up to the revelation of Tiandao, alternately known as Yiguandao (the Way of Penetrating Unity), the latter name emphasizing the idea that the teaching already existed in the guise of other religions before it was formally revealed to the world. Because of this, it is common to see some Christian symbolism in Tiandao temples, including visual or scriptural references to Jesus Christ. Occasionally this may even include portrayals in statues or altars, but these are generally not central to the temples, which are more Buddhist in appearance. Finally, the revelation of Tiandao does imply the culmination of a larger process of universal salvation, which can be taken to imply the end of sacred time, and thus the immanent end of the world. This feature of Tiandao was much more prominent in its earlier (1930s-40s) incarnation than it is today, but many believers still do draw comparisons between the Tiandao image of the apocalypse and that portrayed in the *Book of Revelation*.

As far as Christian practices, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish clearly between Tiandao and elements of Asian Christianity. The latter is often more mystic than Western Christianity -- the Pentecostal church is very popular in Taiwan (where Tiandao is strongest), and is very charismatic, with members entering trances, speaking in tongues, etc. Other elements of Asian devotion, such as scripture recitation, also feature prominently in Asian Christianity. Tiandao and Christianity both exhibit these features, but I would not characterize them as specifically Christian for that reason (22 Sept. 2003).

An abstract of Dr. Edward Allen Irons' Ph.D. thesis (Graduate Theological Union, California) on the Tian Dao faith states that Tian Dao, also Yiguandao, "is a dynamic Chinese religious tradition which began in the early years of the twentieth century and is now found all over the world..." (2000). Another abstract of Irons' work says that "Yiguandao is the most influential Chinese religion today, part of a 600-year-old Chinese sectarian tradition which mixes Ancient

Mother worship, Maitreya Buddha millenarianism, and Confucian ritual practice and morality” (Irons 2000) (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2003, *CHN41903.E – China: Whether Tian Dao incorporates Christian elements into its beliefs and practices and, if so, the description of these Christian elements*, 18 September – Attachment 2).

In Taiwan, the sect is more mainstream. A recent news report describes a speech given by the President of Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian at a sutra competition sponsored by the I-Kuan Tao (another name for the sect). The President called for “the revival of ethics and the upgrading of cultural orientation in Taiwan society” and pointed to the I-Kuan Tao as a good example, expressing the hope that “the I-Kuan Tao followers may expand their influence to awakening the conscience of human beings to jointly build a more courteous and peaceful international society” (‘President Chen calls for a revival of ethics’ 2005, *The China Post*, 22 August – Attachment 3).

A January 2005 REFINFO response provides some recent information:

In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a professor emeritus from the University of British Columbia who has written a book on religion in contemporary China indicated that the Tian Dao continues to be a banned sect in China (9 Dec. 2004). Both the professor emeritus and the World I-Kuan Tao Headquarters, based in El Monte, California, stated that they had no recent information on the situation of sect followers in China (9 Dec. 2004; 15 Dec. 2004). Likewise, the communications director of the non-governmental organization Human Rights in China (HRIC) explained in 9 December 2004 correspondence sent to the Research Directorate that it has not obtained recent information on the treatment of Tian Dao followers from the media it monitors or from Tian Dao followers themselves. However, the human rights organization pointed out that this “doesn’t mean there hasn’t been persecution of Tian Dao” (HRIC 9 Dec. 2004).

While the professor emeritus commented that “it is unlikely that [the sect] still exist[s] [in China]” (9 Dec. 2004), the secretary general of the World I-Kuan Tao Headquarters, in correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, noted that the religion is still being practiced in China, though not in public (15 Dec. 2004). The Headquarters did not provide further information on sect followers in China. (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2005, *CHN43233.E – China: The treatment of Tian Dao (also Yiguan Dao, various other spelling) followers by authorities; any reports of arrests in Guangdong (2001-2004)*, 6 January – Attachment 4).

2. Is there any public press comment on industrial relations or political directions in December 1998 in Tianjing City, or information about the “Xiang Worker Self Guard Society”?

It seems probable that the name being referred to is “*Xiagang* Worker Self-guard Society”. Searches were conducted for this name and variations, but no information was found on this particular group among the sources consulted.

One report was found on a political event related to Tianjing City in December 1998. A vice-chairman of the Beijing-Tianjing branch of the China Democracy Party was detained by police at a hotel, in order to prevent him attending the trial of senior officials of the party which was taking place in Beijing at that time (Chan, Vivien Pik-Kwan 1998, ‘Six held, court cordoned off as Xu stands trial’, *South China Morning Post*, 22 December – Attachment 5).

The following information may be of use as it deals generally with *xiagang* workers and with the growth in recent years of protests by such workers, and by others who have been disadvantaged by China’s transition to a market economy.

The term *xiagang* refers to workers who have been laid off from China's once huge State Owned Enterprises (SOEs), but who remained for a period the responsibility of the SOE:

A labor contracting system was introduced in the mid-1980s. This signalled a marked shift away from the system of lifetime tenures with its potentially distorted work incentives...

SOEs gained the right to lay off permanent workers. Those employees without contracts had lifetime tenure with SOEs, but in the mid-1990s, this tenure was eroded. SOEs, however, were required to establish so-called "re-employment centers" (RECs) for laid-off workers ("*xiagang*"), which provide retraining and job search assistance and pay unemployment benefits. If the laid-off worker remained unemployed for more than three years, the employer could sever the relationship. From 2002, newly laid-off workers received only unemployment benefits, and the RECs will be phased out by 2004...

...As SOE reform gained pace in the late 1990s, about 25 million SOE and collective employees were laid off in 1998-2002 as part of a reemployment program (*xiagang*) that provided laid-off workers with a safety net. Such employees could enter Reemployment Centres (REC) where they could stay until they found a job or for up to three years. As long as they stayed in the REC they remained officially employed by the SOE, but received a lower monthly benefit than their previous wage. Although most *xiagang* are middle-aged workers with few skills and poor education, more than two-thirds were reported to have found jobs, while others have retired [a footnote adds that some have argued that the official re-employment rates of *xiagang* have been overstated]. The number of *xiagang* remaining in RECs has declined from a peak of about 9.5 million at the end-1999 to about 6.4 million by end-2002, as workers have found jobs, transferred to the registered unemployed or dropped out of the workforce (Brooks, Ray & Ran, Tao 2004, 'China's labor market performance and challenges', *China & World Economy*/21-35, Vol.12, No.1, pp.28-29 http://www.iwep.org.cn/wec/2004_1-2/taoran.pdf – Accessed 11 October 2005 – Attachment 6).

The problems that some of the *xiagang* workers have encountered, and the resulting widespread protests, are discussed in a recent article by Dorothy Solinger. Solinger states that "the last annualized figure for labor protests that the Chinese state was willing to announce publicity was 100,000 for the year 1999" but that since that time there had been numerous protests by peasants and workers. The authorities, she comments, tend to tolerate such protests as long as they "appear to be spontaneous, disorganized, localized and leaderless"; however:

The political elite is less tolerant of disturbances that seem to have been mobilized by dissidents, are marked by some measure of violence, evince a measure of organization, threaten to spread, or entail the obstruction of major transport trunk lines. Indeed, the few episodes that make it into the media beyond the Chinese Mainland usually involve such protests as railway lay-ins or blockages of major urban thoroughfares, assaults on and clashes with authorities, detentions and arrests (Solinger, D. 2005, 'Rising worker protests in China', *The Korea Herald*, 12 February – Attachment 7).

The causes of the protests, says Solinger, are "unpaid wages and pensions; sudden and massive job terminations; corrupt officials held responsible for the bankruptcy of some industrial enterprises; and an end to most socialist privileges and benefits". *Xiagang* workers have been "increasingly challenging authorities over the past decade". Solinger goes on:

As workers' consciousness of their rights increases, they are more and more apt to appeal their grievances to courts of law. Indeed from 1995 to 2001, the number of labor disputes adjudicated by the courts rose from 28,000 to 101,000. Admittedly, workers have often found that arbitration has not helped them, owing to graft and the greater clout of the more powerful managers against

whom they have filed suit. But legal redress has managed to turn the attention of at least some disaffected workers temporarily from the streets to mediation, and this has tended to reduce the number of confrontational street demonstrations.

Nonetheless, over the past few years, the number of urban protests in China has risen dramatically, and according to police reports, they are ever larger and better organized. So far, the regime has succeeded in maintaining overall stability through control of the media (thereby preventing one protest movement from learning about and linking up with others); by buying off angry unemployed workers with temporary stipends; and by suppressing and imprisoning those it cannot dissuade. But these are temporary measures and when considered in tandem with the waves of peasant protest caused by arbitrary taxation, official corruption and wanton land confiscation, party leaders find themselves confronted with a deeply worrisome situation. For what the party now confronts is a political threat no longer made up of students and intellectuals, as in 1989, but of workers and peasants, paradoxically the very disenfranchised classes on which Mao built his revolution and in whose name the Chinese Communist Party has ruled unilaterally for so long (Solinger, D. 2005, 'Rising worker protests in China', *The Korea Herald*, 12 February – Attachment 7).

Two RRT Research Responses examine the situation of *xiagang* workers:

- A 2004 response looks at *xiagang* workers in Shanghai (Question 2) (RRT Country Research 2004, *Research Response CHN16506*, 11 March – Attachment 8).
- A 2003 response looks in detail at the situation of *xiagang* workers, including information on government policies and their consequences (Questions 1-3) which draws on earlier material by Dorothy Solinger, as well as Human Rights Watch and others. Question 6 of this response looks at recent labour activism and the government's response (RRT Country Research 2003, *Research Response CHN16313*, 4 December – Attachment 9).

List of Attachments

1. RRT Country Research 2003, *Research Response CHN15735*, 19 February
2. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2003, *CHN41903.E – China: Whether Tian Dao incorporates Christian elements into its beliefs and practices and, if so, the description of these Christian elements*, 18 September (CISNET)
3. 'President Chen calls for a revival of ethics' 2005, *The China Post*, 22 August
4. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2005, *CHN43233.E – China: The treatment of Tian Dao (also Yiguan Dao, various other spelling) followers by authorities; any reports of arrests in Guangdong (2001-2004)*, 6 January
5. Chan, Vivien Pik-Kwan 1998, 'Six held, court cordoned off as Xu stands trial', *South China Morning Post*, 22 December
6. Brooks, Ray & Ran, Tao 2004, 'China's labor market performance and challenges', *China & World Economy*/21-35, Vol.12, No.1,

http://www.iwep.org.cn/wec/2004_1-2/taoran.pdf – Accessed 11 October 2005

7. Solinger, D. 2005, 'Rising worker protests in China', *The Korea Herald*, 12 February
8. RRT Country Research 2004, *Research Response CHN16506*, 11 March
9. RRT Country Research 2003, *Research Response CHN16313*, 4 December