



Australian Government

Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice China

China – CHN35859 – Yiguan Dao – Fujian

8 January 2010

1 Please provide background information on the beliefs and practices of Yiguan Dao.

The Yiguan Dao sect, also referred to as Tian Dao, was founded in Shandong province in the 1920's by Zhang Tianran (Zhang Guangbi, 1889–1947).¹ The sect spread widely throughout Japanese-occupied areas within China during World War II. The religion was outlawed in China by the Communists in the 1950's resulting in members being arrested or driven underground. With the death of Zhang in 1947, many of the remaining followers found their own way to Hong Kong and Taiwan, escaping communism in China. They established their own "group", mainly following their ancestral temple's name from China, spreading the teachings of Yiguan Dao.

Roughly translated, Yiguan Dao means "unity way" or "the way of pervading unity". Yiguan Dao claims it unites "the world's five great religions": Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, and Christianity. Scriptures from all these religions are believed to be sacred texts, but the current followers of the five religions are believed to be misguided.²

Yiguan Dao operates secretly in China and so there is limited information on its beliefs and practices. Also, due to the variety of traditions and the lack of any central authority ruling on religious matters, local temples and their committees can innovate and reinterpret rituals and beliefs. As a result, a variety of beliefs and rituals may coexist within one area. As Philip Clart states:

the sect split up into a number of separate branches (usually said to be eighteen) that continued to develop more or less independently. There thus exists today no independent leadership for the sect, which has become a family of closely related yet autonomous branch associations.³

According to Bosco, much of Yiguan Dao belief and ritual is borrowed from popular religion and Yiguan Dao members worship all gods; this syncretism is typical of Chinese religion.⁴ He notes Yiguan Dao differs from popular religion primarily in its focus on the Maitreya Buddha and in its belief of an all-encompassing spirit known as *Laomuniang*, the Venerable Heavenly Mother who Yiguan Dao believers worship. In common with many earlier Chinese sectarians, "the Unity Sect sees human history as intimately involved with salvation by a series of

¹Clart, P. 2005, 'Yiguan Dao', in *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* ed E.L. Davis, Routledge, London, p.699 - Attachment 1

²Bosco, Joseph, 1994, 'Yiguan Dao: "Heterodoxy" and Popular Religion in Taiwan' in Rubenstein, Murray R, 1994, *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the present*, East Gate, NY Ch.16 p.424 – Attachment 2

³Clart, Philip(undated), 'Way of Former Heaven (Hsien-Tien Tao) sects', Overview of World Religions, PHILTAR (Division of Religion and Philosophy, University of Cumbria) – Attachment 4

⁴Bosco, Joseph, 1994, 'Yiguan Dao: "Heterodoxy" and Popular Religion in Taiwan' in Rubenstein, Murray R, 1994, *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the present*, East Gate, NY Ch.16 p.433 – Attachment 2

Buddhas ...most recently the Maitreya Buddha. The Buddhas were commissioned by the Venerable Mother to bear tidings of salvation to floundering humanity”.⁵

Practices of the Yiguan Dao include:

Temples – temples are located on the top floors of private homes and believers are organised in temple cells of eight to ten core followers per temple. Temples are organised in districts under the loose leadership of a master. The master presides over initiation ceremonies and guides the activities of the district faithful. He is treated with great respect. Due to the Yiguan Dao being organised as a secret sect, its members seek converts discretely.⁶

Ceremonies – ceremonies are only open to initiated members. Initiation involves new members being taught the ‘Three Treasures’ which is the core secret of the sect. The Three Treasures are a mantra, a hand position and the symbolic opening of a door in the body so the soul may depart from the proper exit and not from one of the body's other orifices.⁷

There are also five rituals common to Yiguan Dao gatherings⁸:

1. The Ritual of Saluting and Taking Leave of the Honourable Presence
2. The Ritual for Presenting Incense
3. The Ritual for Presenting Offerings
4. The Ritual for inviting Spirits to the Altar
5. The Ritual for Transmission of the Way/ The Rite of receiving the Way

Prayer/Kowtows – Religious activities include morning and evening prayer sessions but only the most devout carry them out daily. Believers are expected to attend at least on the full and new moon. Yiguan Dao praying involves very rapid kowtowing in a kneeled position while a cantor on the right announces the names of gods and a cantor on the left counts out the kowtows.⁹

As stated by Jordan,

entering the sanctuary itself: each of them individually performed the "the "Ritual for Saluting and "Taking Leave of the Honourable Presence" consisting of nineteen kowtows, done in groups of five, three, three, and eight at a kneeler facing an altar. The first five kowtows (preceded by a salute are directed to the Most Bright Emperor (Ming-ming Shaug-u) which is regarded as another title for the Unborn Mother. The next series of three kowtows, performed after only the slightest pause, is directed to “all celestial gods and saints”.¹⁰ The final eight kowtows are to a variety of deities and beings.

Yiguan Dao also uses spirit writing to receive encouragement and direction from deities.¹¹

⁵ Jordan, David K. & Overmayer, Daniel, L., 1986 ‘The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan’ Princeton University Press p. 214 - Attachment 3

⁶ Bosco, Joseph, 1994, ‘Yiguan Dao: “Heterodoxy” and Popular Religion in Taiwan’ in Rubenstein, Murray R, 1994, *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the present*, East Gate, NY Ch.16 p.425 – Attachment 2

⁷ Bosco, Joseph, 1994, ‘Yiguan Dao: “Heterodoxy” and Popular Religion in Taiwan’ in Rubenstein, Murray R, 1994, *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the present*, East Gate, NY Ch.16 pp.424-425 – Attachment 2

⁸ Jordan, David K. & Overmayer, Daniel, L., 1986 ‘The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan’ Princeton University Press p. 227 - Attachment 3

⁹ Bosco, Joseph, 1994, ‘Yiguan Dao: “Heterodoxy” and Popular Religion in Taiwan’ in Rubenstein, Murray R, 1994, *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the present*, East Gate, NY Ch.16 p.435 – Attachment 2

¹⁰ Jordan, David K. & Overmayer, Daniel, L., 1986 ‘The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan’ Princeton University Press p. 236 - Attachment 3

¹¹ Bosco, Joseph, 1994, ‘Yiguan Dao: “Heterodoxy” and Popular Religion in Taiwan’ in Rubenstein, Murray R, 1994, *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the present*, East Gate, NY Ch.16 p.431 – Attachment 2

For more general background information on the beliefs and practices of Yiguan Dao, please see previous RRT Country Research 2003, *Research Response CHN15735*, 19 February¹² and RRT Country Research 2007, *Research Response CHN32439*, 19 October.¹³

2 Please provide some background on the religion's status in PRC.

Yiguan Dao remains illegal in PRC as it was outlawed in the 1950's by the Communist government. The PRC government carried out campaigns in the 1950's and 1980's to suppress the Yiguan Dao religion and during these campaigns believers and leaders were arrested and even executed.

Since the 1980's, Yiguan Dao has gradually been re-establishing itself as an underground movement through the efforts of missionaries from outside the mainland and in particular from Taiwan. In the face of widespread government crackdowns on unauthorised religious activities, these missionary endeavours are conducted in great secrecy and it is not clear how large a following the sect has regained in the PRC as there has been little information on the active existence of the Yiguan Dao in China.

In 2007, Associate Professor Philip Clart (from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia), who has published on the Yiguan Dao in China, was contacted, and asked to comment on the treatment and situation of followers. Dr Clart stated that:

- (1) Yiguan Dao is a proscribed religion in the People's Republic of China, and was radically stamped out by the Communist government in the 1950s.
- (2) Efforts are under way by Yiguan Dao groups outside China (principally in Taiwan) to make converts in the People's Republic and re-establish the religion there. The province of Fujian is a centre of such activity due to the strong presence of Taiwanese-owned companies and joint ventures in this area.
- (3) The Chinese authorities do crack down on such cells when they are discovered.¹⁴

The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in 2001 noted that even with the relative opening of religious freedom in China, Yiguan Dao remains "a universal villain in the Chinese press. The sect remains illegal and given the intensity of past government propaganda against it, is not likely to be accepted by the PRC government anytime soon".¹⁵

A background to Yiguan Dao's status in PRC can be further demonstrated by Forney who reported that:

Members of the Way of Unity maintain their traditional, although secretive, worship in legitimate Taoist temples. Many sects operate under the guise of Buddhism or Taoism, often with full knowledge...and sometimes participation...of local authorities. Despite their apparent docility, though, the sects remain potential lightening rods for local discontent.¹⁶

¹² RRT Country Research 2003, *Research Response CHN15735*, 19 February and - Attachment 5

¹³ RRT Country Research 2007, *Research Response CHN32439*, 19 October - Attachment 6

¹⁴ Clart, P. 2007, Email to Research & Information 'Re: Yiguan Dao in China', 13 October – Attachment 7.

¹⁵ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2001, CHN36541.E 'China: Reports of arrests and detention of Tian Dao (also Yiguan Dao, various spellings) believers in the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong (2000)', 6 April : http://www.irb.gc.ca/cgi-bin/foliocgi.exe/refinfo_e -Attachment 8

¹⁶ Forney, M. 1996, 'Religion In China - God's Country', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 June - Attachment 9

3 Please advise whether the police crack down on the Yiguandao in Fujian and is there any information about this during 2007 or more recently?

No information involving Yiguan Dao was found relating to police crackdowns in Fujian or China during 2007 or more recently.

The most recent evidence of police crackdowns in Fujian was reported by the BBC in 1994 when:

six priests from the Taiwan Tientao [Providence] religious society's "Secret Light Sect" and the "Tienchen [Celestial Endowments] Holy Temple" were interrogated and educated by police in the city of Quanzhou a few days ago for setting up pulpits, delivering sermons and recruiting followers in Quanzhou and Zhangzhou, in Fujian.

According to official newspapers, since June 1992, the six priests, including Hsia Yu, have entered Fujian repeatedly, carrying large quantities of "Tientao" classics and ceremonial equipment under the cover of making investments and running factories. They have made wide contacts with possible followers; propagated "Tientao" teachings everywhere; not hesitated to spend an ample sum of money supporting the construction of pulpits; set up eight fixed altars and one temporary altar in eight places, including Zhuanghu Lane and Donghu Road in downtown Quanzhou, the town of Fuqiao, the city of Nanan, Huian county and the city of Zhangzhou; and recruited more than 400 followers.¹⁷

Whilst there is evidence that the police have in the past cracked down on Yiguan Dao followers in the Fujian province, no specific reports of arrests or detention by the Chinese authorities have been found since 1994.

List of Attachments

1. Clart, P. 2005, 'Yiguan Dao', in *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* ed E.L. Davis, Routledge, London, p.699. (MRT-RRT Library)
2. Bosco, Joseph. 1994, 'Yiguan Dao: "Heterodoxy" and Popular Religion in Taiwan' in Rubenstein, Murray R, 1994, *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the present*, East Gate, NY Ch.16 pp.423-44.
3. Jordan, David K. & Overmayer, Daniel, L., 1986 *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* Princeton University Press p. 213-66. (MRT-RRT Library)
4. Clart, Philip (undated), 'Way of Former Heaven (Hsien-Tien Tao) sects', Overview of World Religions, PHILTAR (Division of Religion and Philosophy, University of Cumbria).
5. RRT Country Research 2003, *Research Response CHN15735*, 19 February.
6. RRT Country Research 2007, *Research Response CHN32439*, 19 October.

¹⁷ 'Six Taiwan "Secret Light Sect" Priests Being Interrogated In Fujian' 1994, *BBC Monitoring Service: Asia-Pacific*, source: _F 'Ming Pao', Hong Kong, in Chinese 30 Apr 94 p b14, 21 May – Attachment 10.

7. Clart, P. 2007, Email to Research & Information 'Re: Yiguan Dao in China', 13 October.
8. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2001, CHN36541.E -'China: Reports of arrests and detention of Tian Dao (also Yiguan Dao, various spellings) believers in the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong (2000), 6 April: http://www.irb.gc.ca/cgi-bin/foliocgi.exe/refinfo_e.
9. Forney, M. 1996, 'Religion In China – God's Country', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 June.
10. 'Six Taiwan "Secret Light Sect" Priests Being Interrogated In Fujian' 1994, *BBC Monitoring Service: Asia-Pacific*, source: _F`Ming Pao', Hong Kong, in Chinese 30 Apr 94 p b14, 21 May.