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# Impact of the State on the Evolution of a Sect

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*Theories about the sect-to-church transition focus on changes in the social characteristics of members, or changes in the size and prosperity of the organization, to account for the transition. However, the state may also affect the likelihood of a sect-to-church transition. Under conditions of state repression, sects are likely to be more schismatic. State repression can also strengthen sectarianism by preventing the orderly succession of leaders and the emergence of professionalized and educated priesthood. We illustrate with the case of Yiguan Dao in China. This sect exhibited sectarian features under state repression, until the late 1980s when the sect was legalized in Taiwan. Thereafter, the various branches of the sect have introduced a series of changes designed to reduce schisms, formalize the succession of leadership, professionalize sectarian leaders and elaborate doctrines. These developments cannot be comprehended theoretically without some revisions to theories of sect-to-church changes.*

## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of religious movements in Europe and North America has been extensively analyzed using sect-to-church theory. It argues that a sect characterized by high intensity of worship and some tension with the surrounding society may eventually reconcile itself to prevailing social conditions and become more church-like (Yinger 1946; Johnson 1963; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Lawson, 1995; Stark and Finke 2000). Many factors contribute to the evolution

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of sect to church. The principal mechanism by which this occurs is the changing social characteristics of the sect's members (Niebuhr 1929; Harrell 1967). Upward social mobility of members can drive a sect to accommodate to the prevailing society and become church-like.

Other factors in the evolution of sect-to-church include the succession of generations, and the increase in the size of the group. Niebuhr (1929) suggests that sects tend to retain their primal zealotry for only one generation; later generations may not retain the motives and preferences of the founding leaders and members (Sherkat 2001). The increase of group size can contribute to the sect-to-church transition (Pope 1942; Alston and Aguirre 1979; Pinto and Crow 1982). Sects, which tend to be small in size at the outset, usually rely upon laypeople as leaders, but the growth of organization in many sects has led to increased reliance on full-time professional ecclesiastics (Stark and Finke 2000:162-168). These full-time clergy, selected on the basis of advanced education and formal ordination, tend to reconcile themselves to the surrounding society for a variety of reasons. As a result, "growth (especially at the congregational level) and the professionalization of their ecclesiastics will tend to shift religious organizations from higher to lower tension—from sects to churches" (Stark and Finke 2000:166). These theoretical and empirical studies are helpful in understanding the ideological and organizational evolution of religious groups.

However, the impact of the state on the features of sects has rarely been examined. A notable exception is the work of Daniel Overmyer (1976). Overmyer argues, from Asian cases, that where state repression of sects is high, a divided political situation is vital for the development of sects. Where competitive regimes or political jurisdictions are available, a sect suppressed in one secular jurisdiction may find refuge in another regime. Secular support has allowed some sects to become church-like, as evidenced in Europe and Japan. For example, "Luther could gain the support of Philip of Hesse, while Shinran's Jodo sect could establish its own town at Osaka and enjoy the devout favoritism of Ieyasu, the founder of the Yokugawa shogunate" (Overmyer 1976:63). With the secular support, both of them later established a denominational structure. But when there are no available alternative jurisdictions, as in imperial China, sectarian movements have no chance to gain secular recognition beyond the reach of a hostile state, and thus Chinese sects failed to develop "incipient 'denominational' or 'church' structures" (Overmyer 1976:62). Unfortunately, Overmyer's analyses, which are at a macro-level, do not identify the specific mechanisms by which states block the transition of sect-to-church. Neither does he examine the impact of deregulation on the evolution of sects.

Following the above studies, this paper examines the impact of the state on sects by analyzing Yiguan Dao, a modern successor of the earlier Chinese sectarian movements. Originating in a sectarian tradition which developed in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the sect had been suppressed several times by the Qing rulers, and also by the republican regime after 1911. But it became the biggest

Chinese sect in the 1940s, recruiting millions of followers and spreading to at least 80% of the counties of China according to some estimates (Fu 1999)<sup>1</sup> After the Chinese Communist Party came into power in 1949, Yiguan Dao was regarded as a reactionary organization and was largely destroyed in mainland China by 1953 (Deliusin 1972; Lu 1998). Some sectarians fled to Taiwan after 1949, but the sect was also subsequently suppressed in the island (Song 1983; Jordan and Overmyer 1986).

When the Kuomintang regime lost the civil war and retreated to Taiwan in 1949, it applied martial law which restricted religious freedom. Since Yiguan Dao had a strong organization beyond the control of the Kuomintang, the state officially outlawed Yiguan Dao in 1953. In the following three decades, the authoritarian state stigmatized the sect as a “rebellious organization” (*panluan zhuzi*) and a “heterodox religion” (*xiejiao*), claiming that the sect held naked congregations, raped female believers, threatened and intimidated apostates, and cheated money from the gullible masses. The police also frequently raided the sect’s congregations and took sectarians into custody. However, persecution did not prevent the sect’s development. During the period of suppression, Yiguan Dao successfully developed from a small immigrant sect into one of the most influential religious groups in Taiwan (Song 1996).<sup>2</sup> In 1987, through constant efforts, the sect finally gained legal status in Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> Also in 1987, the Kuomintang government lifted martial law. Two years later, the state totally deregulated religion through the law on civic organization (*renmin tuanti fa*), whereby all religious groups were permitted to exist legally. Today, as a result of immigration and missionary activity, Yiguan Dao is a world-wide religion which has spread to more than sixty countries (Song 1996).

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<sup>1</sup>Lu (1998) estimated that Yiguan Dao had fifteen million believers in 1947, but the number of Yiguan Dao sectarians cannot be established with certainty due to its underground nature.

<sup>2</sup>Repression induced Yiguan Dao to create adaptive doctrines, and to adopt institutional innovations sustaining their networks. Suppression is also helpful to reduce the risk of religious goods offered; and to mitigate free-riding. These unintended consequences of religious suppression contributed to the growth of Yiguan Dao when it was under suppression (Lu 2004). After deregulation, however, Yiguan Dao did not grow significantly. Actually, it even declined slightly in Taiwan. The Taiwan Social Change Survey shows that 2.2 percent of respondents were Yiguan Dao believers in 1989, while in 2003 that number declined to 1.5 percent. The stagnation of Yiguan Dao in the island is triggered by many reasons, such as the previous organizational structure blocking innovation, the rise of reformed Buddhism in Taiwan and the shift of Yiguan Dao’s missionary focus from Taiwan to overseas, especially the Chinese mainland.

<sup>3</sup>However, some Yiguan Dao divisions, especially some branches of the Xingyi division, did not want to be legalized and they refused to be officially registered, so some divisions of Yiguan Dao still maintain a secret status in Taiwan and are not open to outsiders. A detailed analysis is available in Song (1996). Our analyses focus on those divisions that gained secular recognition from the state and are open to researchers.

Since Yiguan Dao was officially repressed but regained its legal status in the late 1980s in Taiwan, it furnishes a useful case study for examining state influence on sect development, and the impact of changing state policy on the sect-to-church transition. In this paper, we argue that suppression contributes to: (1) frequent schisms, (2) the absence of regulated leadership succession, (3) the lack of a professionalized clergy, and (4) the immaturity of intellectual development. These results hinder the transition of sect to church. We will also probe how deregulation of religion affected the sect's evolution in the past two decades.

The data utilized in this paper were mainly collected during a three month period of field research in Taiwan between September and December 2002 by the first author, following and building on an earlier field trip to Taiwan in June 2001 by the second author. With the sect's permission, we visited a number of important temples in several cities in north, central, and southern Taiwan, interviewed sectarian leaders and ordinary members, participated in some of their activities, and collected written materials produced by the sect such as spirit-writings and pamphlets. The first author also did extensive participant observation in three of the four largest divisions of Yiguan Dao: *Jichu*, *Baoguang* and *Fayi*.<sup>4</sup>

## SUPPRESSION, ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND SCHISMS

The origin of Chinese sectarian tradition can be traced back to Taiping Dao, a Taoist sect involved in the rebellion of the Yellow Turbans in the late Han dynasty (200 B.C.E-220 C.E.). In history, Confucian officials were active in defining and suppressing unsanctioned religious groups whose leaders and organizations fell out of the official framework (Yang 1961). Among those state-defined 'heterodox' religious movements, the White Lotus Sect (*Bailian Jiao*) is well-known. Originating from a completely orthodox Buddhist tradition, the White Lotus Sect was finally labeled heterodox in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and the term "*Bailian Jiao*" was later used by imperial officials to refer to all so-called "heterodox" movements (Overmyer 1976). In this sense, Chinese sects were partly products of state repression<sup>5</sup>.

A full-fledged Chinese sectarian tradition emerged in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) when hundreds of sects were active. Most of those sects accepted

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<sup>4</sup>There are at least nineteen divisions in the World Yiguan Dao Headquarters (*Yiguan Dao shijie zonghui*). They are: *Fayi*, *Xingyi*, *Baoguang*, *Jichu*, *Wenhua*, *Fasheng*, *Qianyi*, *Tianxiang*, *Jingguang*, *Tianzhen*, *Huiguang*, *Huaoran*, *Zhongyong*, *Andong*, *Mingguang*, *Puguang*, *Changzou*, *Chande*, and *Zhengyi*. Among them, *Fayi*, *Xingyi*, *Baoguang* and *Jichu* are most competitive, covering more than 90% of total Yiguan Dao Buddha halls and population (Mu 2002:80-127). These Yiguan Dao divisions compete intensively with each other (Clart 2000; Song 2002).

<sup>5</sup>State regulation is an important factor in the generation of sectarianism, but not the sole one. Even in an unregulated market sects can exist in high tension with the surrounding society. State repression is not a necessary pre-condition for the emergence of a high tension sect.

the Eternal Venerable Mother (*Wusheng laomu*) myth<sup>6</sup>, produced their own scriptures, emphasized eschatology, personal salvation and individual involvement, and had a hierarchical structure headed by their respective patriarchs (*zushi*) (Overmyer 1999). The sectarian movements became more numerous and widespread in the Qing dynasty even though the officials adopted stricter policies to persecute sectarians (Seiwert 2003). When the Chinese Republic was founded in 1911, there was a veritable explosion of sectarian movements among which the Morality Society (*Tongshan She*), the Red Swastika Society (*Hong 卐 Hui*), and Yiguan Dao were well-known (Li 1975). All of these sectarian movements were suppressed by the Chinese Communist Party after 1949, but some sects began to revive in the 1980s in mainland China (Munro 1989; Dean 1998; Lu 2005a).

The history of Chinese sectarian movements is also a history of state suppression of these so-called “heterodoxy” groups. China’s imperial regimes were careful to ensure that no religious organization became sufficiently well-organized and powerful to produce political challenges. They adopted strict policies to suppress sectarian movements which they viewed as potential political threats. The imperial officials executed sectarian leaders, exiled activists and punished ordinary believers (DeGroot 1903; Yang 1961; Lang 1998).

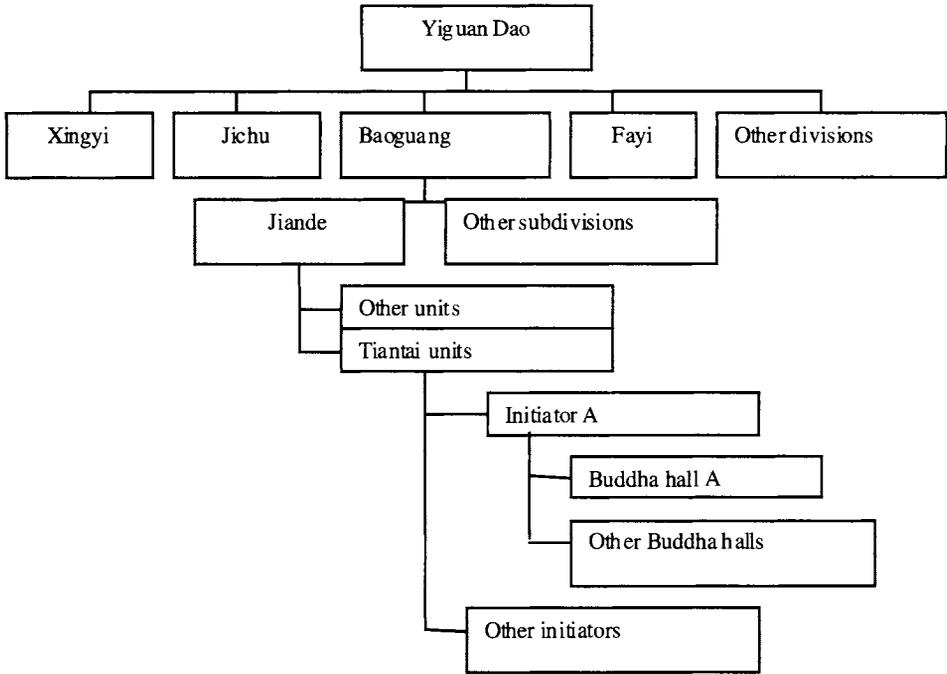
Persecution strengthened the schismatic tendency of Chinese sects. Stark and Bainbridge (1985:101-107) point out that such factors as social stratification, geographic isolation, political boundaries and cultural barriers could contribute to schisms. These observations are applicable to Chinese sectarian schisms (Seiwert 2003). In addition to these factors, persecution played a significant role in promoting frequent schisms within Chinese sectarian movements. Persecution particularly induced Chinese sects to develop a special organizational structure. In the case of Yiguan Dao: during the period when the sect was suppressed in Taiwan, eighteen divisions carried out their missionary work independently. Each division, which was led by a senior master (*Qianren*), included many independent units led by “initiators” (*Dianchuanshi*), as chart 1 indicates. Initiators are actually independent religious entrepreneurs who are responsible for managing their own local followers. Thus Yiguan Dao was actually comprised of thousands

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<sup>6</sup>According to the Mother myth, the Mother is the creator of the cosmos who created 9.6 billion original souls (*Yuanling*) and then sent them down to the Eastern world (*Dongtu*). But these spirits, lured by secular enjoyments, lost some of their pure spirituality. In order to save these primordial spirits to return to “the original home in the world of true emptiness” (*Zhenkong jiaxiang*), the Mother sent three Buddhas to the world. The former two Buddhas, namely Dipamkara Buddha (*Randeng fo*) and Sakyamuni Buddha, had saved 0.4 billion primordial spirits. The remaining 9.2 billion primordial spirits will be saved by the Maitreya Buddha (*Mile fo*). The sectarians believe that catastrophes will precede the final salvation, with widespread disasters, darkness, and chaos.

<sup>7</sup>The term “senior master” did not appear until the sectarians fled to Taiwan, and refers to chief leaders of Yiguan Dao divisions. They are the higher-level initiators holding the right of appointing other “initiators”. The term “initiator” refers to the senior sectarians who could serve as the representatives of the Mandate of Heaven and hold the ritual of initiation.

**Chart 1**  
**The organizational structure of Yiguan Dao when under suppression**



of small initiator-disciple cliques managed by individual initiators (Jordan 1982). We must note that this organizational structure is not an innovation by Yiguan Dao; the same organizational structure has been used in Chinese traditional sects since the 16th century (Song 1990).

Institutional schisms were a salient characteristic of Yiguan Dao. The sect expanded by means of fission reproduction. According to the structural arrangement of Yiguan Dao, there is a hierarchy of authority passed down through senior masters, initiators, lecturers (*jiang-shi*), masters of Buddha hall<sup>8</sup> (*tang-zhu*), assistant lecturers (*jiang-yuan*), Dao business helpers (*ban-shi-yuan*) and ordinary sectarians. Each Yiguan Dao sectarian has a chance to establish his/her own initiator-disciple group by means of missionary efforts<sup>9</sup>. As the size of a group

<sup>8</sup>A Buddha hall (*Fotang*) is a building or part of a building where the Eternal Venerable Mother and other Yiguan Dao deities are worshiped. Yiguan Dao's Buddha hall has two forms: the family Buddha hall and the public Buddha hall. While the former is often operated by a local family, and caters mainly to other families in the same district, for worship, classes, and other Yiguan Dao activities, the latter usually serves as a center for holding the large-scale activities.

<sup>9</sup>Usually, an active Yiguan Dao sectarian can build a big group. For instance, Chen Hongzhen, the senior master of *Fayi Chongde* division who came from mainland China to Taiwan in 1948, built an Yiguan Dao group which now has more than ten thousand Buddha halls (Mu 2002:110). Nearly all senior masters of Yiguan Dao today can tell a story about efforts and successes in building up the membership of their divisions.

increased, a new initiator-follower clique would split off from the mother group. The new clique naturally carries with it much of the organizational and theological tradition of the original group, and normally continues to retain a close relationship with that group. A powerful Yiguan Dao division may thus spawn numerous smaller ones and form an extended-family-like group which is centrally controlled by a senior master. But there is little horizontal interaction among sub-divisions. In particular, to avoid persecution, some Yiguan Dao divisions purposely reduced the horizontal communications between sub-groups during periods of suppression (Song 1996). Not surprisingly, the death of a sect leader appears to have regularly generated schismatic tendencies because the major disciples had their own cliques. We can use this point to explain important features of the development of Yiguan Dao.

Seiwert (2003:451) observes that “the majority of the countless sectarian groups of the Ming and Qing probably came into being through separation from existing organizations, that is, schisms.” Yiguan Dao also emerged as a result of religious schisms. An anonymous reviewer thinks that Yiguan Dao is more like a syncretic cult than a sect. Indeed, like many Chinese sects, Yiguan Dao is syncretic and claims to unite all religions in one (*Wanjiao heyi*)<sup>10</sup>. But historical studies have shown that Yiguan Dao was previously a part of the “prior-to-heaven Dao” (*Xiantian Dao*), a sect formed in the 17th century (Ma and Han 1992; Mu 2002). Due to the persecution by Qing officials, *Xiantian Dao* split into several small sections, one of which was led by Wang Jueyi who in 1877 purported to be the fifteenth Patriarch<sup>11</sup> of this sectarian movement which was renamed as “the religion for the final salvation” (*Mohou Yizhu jiao*) (Lin 1986:189). After Wang’s sect became increasingly influential, the Qing government suspected that it intended to rebel and suppressed the sect in 1883. Many followers of Wang,

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<sup>10</sup>One of attributes of sects in Western society, according to O’Dea (1966:68), is “exclusiveness both in attitude and in social structure”. For this reason, people would probably think that syncretism and sectarianism are logically incompatible and that it is therefore bad English or feeble-mindedness to speak of “syncretic sectarianism.” Judith Berling (1980) uses a whole chapter to argue against the above ideas, demonstrating that syncretism and sectarianism are commonly united in China. Jordan and Overmyer (1986:10) go further and point out that Chinese sectarians always self-consciously create “a new religious system out of materials that are seen as separate traditions”. Many studies support these arguments (e.g. Lang and Lu 2004).

<sup>11</sup>Like other Chinese sects, Yiguan Dao stresses that its Patriarchs exclusively receive the Celestial Mandate and Mind-dharma (*Xinfa*) which are conceived to be the basis for salvation. There were supposedly eighteen Eastern Patriarchs which range from Pan-gu, Fuxi, to Confucius and to Mencius. Then the Dao shifted to India where twenty-eight Western Patriarchs inherited the celestial mandate. The Dao shifted to China again when Bodhidharma came to China, according to the sect. After Bodhidharma went to China, there were eighteen subsequent Patriarchs. The first six Patriarchs are identical with Chan Buddhist patriarchs. The next seven Patriarchs of Yiguan Dao are identical with the *Xiantian Dao*’s list. This also indicates that Yiguan Dao is a result of religious schism from *Xiantian Dao*. For an English-language introduction to the succession of Yiguan Dao’s Patriarchs, see Jordan and Overmyer 1986:289-92.

including his son, were killed. Wang was forced to live secretly until his death (Ma and Han 1992).

The end of the imperial regime in 1911 did not signal an end to religious repression, although Article 13 of the constitution of the Republic of China claimed a right to “freedom of religious belief”. Yiguan Dao could not get an official recognition during the Republican era, remaining as a small local sect in Shandong province where it was led by Lu Zhongyi, the seventeenth patriarch of Yiguan Dao. When Lu died in 1925, the sect split into several small sections one of which was headed by Zhang Tianran (Lu 1998:9-10). In 1930, Zhang Tianran formally declared himself to be the new Patriarch of Yiguan Dao, namely, the Eighteenth patriarch (Fu 1999). Although his leadership was not fully recognized by other divisions of Yiguan Dao, Zhang successfully developed his group into what seems to have been the biggest sect in China in the 1940s. When Zhang Tianran died in 1947, a further schism occurred and the sect broke into two main sections: the mistress section (*Shimu pai*) led by his second wife, Madame Sun, and a rival group, the “society for supporting correct principles” (*Zhengyi fudao hui*)<sup>12</sup>. When Madam Sun died in 1975, schisms continued. Many people claimed to be the sect’s new patriarch, using spirit-writing to affirm their status. Today, Yiguan Dao is a collection of dozens of independent divisions.

When operating in a suppressive environment, the organizational structure analyzed above was helpful for suppressed religious firms to avoid persecution, sustain the sectarians’ morale and motivation, and promote innovations (Lu 2004). But the structure can easily lead to religious schisms. Further, since breaking up large sectarian networks and disrupting sect structure were always the main objectives of the Chinese state, eliminating the sectarian leadership became a central measure adopted by Chinese imperial officials (Overmyer 1976). This measure made communication between dispersed communities more difficult. The cleavage of sectarian movements into smaller units was therefore a natural outcome. In this way, state suppression accelerated the tendency of schisms within sectarian movements.

There are many cases in Chinese history which shows that the elimination of sectarian leaders leads to fissioning of the group (Seiwert 2003). We can also see this point from the case of the Mormons. After the death of Joseph Smith the LDS Mormons migrated to the Great Salt Lake area and developed their version of Mormonism while other Mormon groups eventually developed other leaders and structures in Illinois, under different leaders including Joseph Smith’s son as in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now called the Community of Christ by members, based in Missouri).

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<sup>12</sup>This sub-sect is also called the senior disciple section (*Shixiong pai*). But the followers of this section itself do not like this title which they think stigmatizes them. They do not recognize the leadership of Madam Sun.

With the trend of deregulation in Taiwan in the 1980s, Yiguan Dao sectarian leaders realized that the potential toward continual schisms must be conquered. Chen Hongzhen, the chief leader of the *Fayi Chongde* division of Yiguan Dao, stated that:

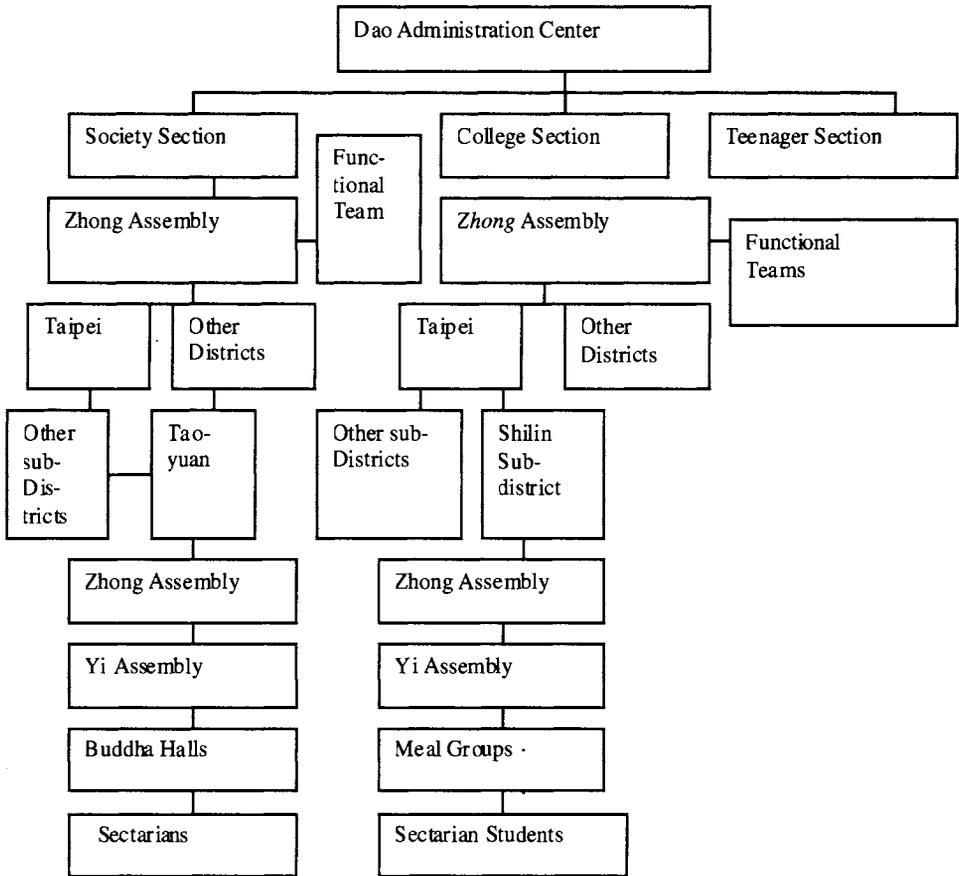
In some divisions of Yiguan Dao, when their senior masters were living, the followers were active in doing the Dao business. But when their senior masters passed away, they separated quickly and became independent from each other. Due to this reason, several divisions declined or even disappeared. In order to accomplish the sacred mission and ensure a bright future, we have to change ourselves (Chen 1992:4).

One of the changes introduced by the *Fayi Chongde* division is to centralize its administration. Since the 1980s, *Fayi Chongde* has gradually developed a new structure centered on the *Zhong-yi* assembly (*Zhong-yi ziban*) and ten functional teams (see chart 2). The *Zhong* assembly (*Zhong ziban*), available at different levels, is the managing panel in charge of the horizontal coordination among different units in its administrative area. The *Zhong* assembly also plays a role in the vertical coordination, delivering information, supervising the implementation of policies and recommending the promotion of sectarians. The *Yi* assembly only exists at the grass-root level, implementing policies and gathering information. The members of *Yi* assembly are elected from lecturers or ordinary believers, while most of the *Zhong* assembly members are initiators. Both assemblies hold meetings regularly and discuss the operation of religious business. On the top of this administrative structure, there is also an "administration center" (*bangban zhongxin*) in charge of coordination and management of the whole division's business. The administration center regularly updates its members who are elected from local *Zhong* assemblies. At the same time, the center also includes ten functional teams which provide specific services, ranging from document management to cooking.

*Fayi Chongde* also divides its religious affairs and activities into three sections: the society section, the college section and the teenager section. The society section is made up of those sectarians who have graduated from university. Similarly, the proponents of the college section are college students while the teenagers form the teenager section. In managing each section, *Fayi Chongde* adopts district-centered leadership. For instance, the society section is divided into seven districts: Yunlin, Zhanghua, Taipei, Taizhong, Tainan, and Gaoxiong. Each district includes several sub-districts. In each district, the boundaries between different initiator-follower cliques were broken and the sectarians are instead collectively led by a group of initiators (Song 1998:361-364). Thus the previous initiator-centered structure has been replaced by the district-organized structure which focuses on division of labor and collective leadership. The *Fayi Chongde* division does not depend on fission-expansion any longer.

*Fayi Chongde* is not the only division which has updated its organizational structure to prevent further schisms. Other divisions of Yiguan Dao, such as *Jichu*

**Chart 2**  
**The current organizational structure of *Fayi Chongde***



Source: Wu 1998:27

*Zhongsu* and *Baoguang Jiande*, also began to restructure themselves by imitating the *Fayi Chongde*'s institutional innovation (Yang 1997; Chen 1999). Establishing a stable organizational structure has extensive effects on the development of Yiguan Dao. It reduces the degree of organizational isolation and accelerates the integration of Yiguan Dao into the surrounding societies. Sects, according to Stark and Bainbridge (1985:60-62), are manifested in their separation from the larger society. During the period of suppression, Yiguan Dao had to separate itself from the surrounding society and retreat into organizational isolation. The lifting of repression makes it possible for Yiguan Dao to be a part of the larger society. Since many divisions of Yiguan Dao now organize themselves on the basis of the geographical division, the degree of organizational openness is

increased. Today, Yiguan Dao is active in local communities in Taiwan, offering free courses for studying Chinese classics, printing and distributing morality books (*Shanshu*) and providing other social and religious services. Yiguan Dao is no longer an isolated, separated and secret religion.

The establishment of stable structure is also changing the ways of recruiting members. Frequent persecution and schisms prevented traditional Chinese sectarians from transferring their religious identity to the next generation. Like many suppressed sects in China, Yiguan Dao gained new members primarily through conversion when it was suppressed. With the lifting of repression and the establishment of a durable structure, the sect turns its attention to the religious socialization of children. Today, Yiguan Dao tries its best to “make all the family members believe in Yiguan Dao” (*Daohua Jiating*). One central measure is to pass on their belief to the next generation. More and more young Yiguan Dao believers inherit their religious preferences from their parents. They usually begin their primary education by attending the “courses for children to read classics” (*Ertong Dujingban*) held by the sect. In these courses they learn Yiguan Dao doctrines and rituals as well. In addition to courses, various kinds of religious meetings (*Fahui*) and summer camps are designed by the sect to cultivate and strengthen the next generation’s religious identity. In short, when recruiting members in Taiwan, Yiguan Dao begins to shift its emphasis from converting adults to religiously socializing children. If a sect is characterized by recruitment of new members through voluntary joining while a church replenishes its membership mainly from the children of members (O’Dea 1968:68), we can hold that Yiguan Dao is developing in a church-like direction.

## TOWARD A REGULATED SUCCESSION OF LEADERSHIP

An orderly succession of leadership is important for the sect-to-church transition. A sect usually begins with a charismatic leader. But the charismatic leadership, according to Weber (1963), is not durable and it will undergo a process of routinization into traditional or rational-legal structure. After the charismatic leader dies, the group tends to establish norms that define the process of leader selection and succession. With the establishment of leadership succession, a sect will require specification of the qualifications and duties of the leader. “At this point something highly significant has happened—the leader has become an officeholder” (Johnstone 1997:98). When the leader’s role is routinized, a formal structure, which is a prelude to the sect-to-church transition, comes into being. But in imperial China, suppression prevented the routinization of leadership succession.

The theory of “the mandate of heaven” (*Tianming*) is the basis for legitimizing the leadership of Chinese sects. As the fundamental theory of the Chinese state and governmental authority in China, the mandate of heaven theory appeared in the early Zhou period (c.1066–221 BCE) and was apparently accept-

ed by the common people (Perry 2002). Many sects borrow the mandate of heaven concept to support the heaven-ordained nature of their Patriarchs. They argue that the patriarchs, holding the mandate of heaven, are sent and ordained by the Mother to offer salvation. The mandate of heaven is considered essential to ensure valid salvation. For example, Yiguan Dao holds that only “the enlightening master with the celestial mandate (*Tianming Mingshi*)” can offer salvation by opening the mysterious gate through which the spirit enters the heaven. At the same time, the mandate of heaven is often updated. When one patriarch dies, from the sect’s perspective, his celestial mandate expires; accordingly, the salvation by him is invalid. Valid salvation can only be provided by the new patriarch equipped with the latest celestial mandate.

Yiguan Dao puts much emphasis on the importance of celestial mandate, but it offers a vague idea about who is eligible to achieve the position of patriarch, how the patriarchs receive the celestial mandate from the Mother, and how the succession of such mandate is determined. In practice, Yiguan Dao tried to settle such mysteries by spirit-writings. By Wang Jueyi’s time it had already become an established practice for Yiguan Dao to choose new patriarchs by means of spirit-writing (Clart 1997). But spirit-writing has not been an entirely dependable and undisputable way to choose the leadership; rather, it facilitated schisms. After a sect leader dies, it was a common phenomenon that influential disciples utilized spirit-writings to identify themselves as the new patriarch with the updated celestial mandate. Those who finally built the biggest group around such claims would win the competition for leadership.

The patriarchs were usually regarded as the incarnations of gods or Buddhas by the sectarians (Jordan and Overmyer 1986). For example, Lu Zhongyi, the seventeenth patriarch of Yiguan Dao, was identified as the incarnation of Maitreya Buddha; Zhang Tianran, the eighteenth patriarch, claimed that he was the incarnation of Jigong Living Buddha. In any case, for Yiguan Dao believers, these patriarchs are charismatic leaders rather than officeholders. Therefore, Yiguan Dao was always in an apocalyptic era and the sectarians were waiting for the next patriarch with a valid celestial mandate. The succession of leadership had never been routinized and formalized.

Since the release of state suppression in Taiwan in 1987, however, the sect has attempted to end the apocalyptic era by reinterpreting the Mandate of Heaven theory. Today, Yiguan Dao stresses that Zhang and Sun were the last patriarchs and there will be no new patriarchs. The five element theory (*Yinyang wuxing*) is invoked by the sectarians to provide a mystical explanation for this argument. According to Guo (1997:78), the succession of patriarchs is thought to be predetermined by the rotation of the five elements. Since a circle is supposedly ended when the number reaches sixty-four, and since there have been sixty-four generations of identified patriarchs of Yiguan Dao, Guo holds that the age of patriarchs is over. Now it is the age of ordinary believers; every sectarian has a celestial mandate or mission; and their mandate is to make full use of their

potential abilities endowed by heaven to realize the true-self by means of self-reflection and cultivation (Guo 1997:131). The sectarians should follow the truths revealed by the previous patriarchs rather than wait for the next patriarch since there will be no new patriarchs. Guo's ideas have been largely adopted by the mainstream of Yiguan Dao, namely the divisions joining in the World Yiguan Dao headquarters. Today, the World Yiguan Dao headquarters officially opposes any claims that a nineteenth patriarch will appear, and insists that there will be no new patriarchs (Mu 2002).

In connection with this decision, nearly all Yiguan Dao divisions have officially discarded the activity of spirit-writing. The activity of spirit-writing was once a powerful tool for Yiguan Dao to attract adherents and compete with its rivals (Clart 1996; Zhou, Lin and Wang 1997). But the revelations by means of spirit-writing are inherently threatening to existing structures of authority and thus can cause religious schisms (Lang and Ragvald 1998). It seems that the sect realizes this point. In one spirit-writing, for example, believers were told that:

I [the Eternal Venerable Mother] tell you that spirit writing will be put aside soon. In order to help you to understand the truth, I established the teachings by means of spirit writing. But spirit writing can not be practiced forever and I will not send gods to do spirit writings any more. Later, there will be heterodoxies which still make use of spirit possession. They will be equipped with great theurgy and can produce wonderful spirit writings; they will claim that they have the celestial mandate and hold the Mother's decree to offer the last salvation. Various heterodoxies will emerge and many mystical phenomena will occur. My children, you must be careful to avoid being tempted by these false patriarchs. You should reflect yourselves and improve the level of spirituality. That is the right way to accumulate merits. (Kind Teachings from the Mother, revealed on the 15th December, 1994)<sup>13</sup>

When studying the denominationalizing process of the Assemblies of God, Poloma (1989) finds that the sect, in order to adapt to the evolving needs and attitudes of members, gives up some earlier taboos and practices, such as the rejection of physicians and medicines, of public swimming, and of professional sports. Lawson (1995) describes similar processes among Adventists as they abandoned their original pacifism and adopted a lower-tension approach to society and the state. The same logic is visible in the case of Yiguan Dao. As the above spirit writing shows, the sect believes that spirit writings tend to produce new revelations that threaten the administrative order. In order to establish a stable structure, all of the Yiguan Dao divisions except *Fayi Chongde* have discarded the practice of spirit writing, and even in *Fayi Chongde*, it plays a much reduced role in the affairs of the division.

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<sup>13</sup>This message can be downloaded from <http://www.cd.org.tw/becute/> retrieved January 23, 2005.

## THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF CLERGY

Sects usually utilize laypeople as leaders. These lay leaders are part-time and they “likely have little if any formal theological training” (Johnstone 1997:88). With the growth of organization, those managing a large group cannot easily run the organization on a part-time basis, and they become full-time professional ecclesiastics (Stark and Finke 2000:162-168). With the group establishing formal norms that outline the training programs and the qualifications to perform some set of services or functions, it becomes professionalized. As Stark and Finke (2000) point out, professionalization is a step towards the sect-to-church transition.

State suppression and the frequent schisms it caused prevented the professionalization of Chinese sects. The growth of a sectarian group and the development of a stable organizational structure are the preconditions for professionalization. As mentioned above, Chinese sects failed to establish a stable structure which can support sustained growth. They tended to split when their leaders died. Therefore, they were too schismatic to develop a professionalized clergy. As a matter of fact, few Chinese sectarian movements were sustained by an educated professional clergy. They had to depend on the leadership of folk intellectuals at the bottom of the social system (Overmyer 1976).

In the case of Yiguan Dao, the sect did not develop a professional clergy. Instead, Yiguan Dao attached much importance to lay involvement. Every Yiguan Dao sectarian could act as a missionary; all of them made their living through secular businesses; and they did not earn a salary from their missionary work (Li 2000:72-76). This is called “simultaneous cultivation of the sacred and the secular” (*Shengfan jianxiu*) by the sectarians (Yang 1997:79-80).

Since the 1980s, some divisions of Yiguan Dao have begun to establish a professionalized clergy. For example, Fayi Chongde, the largest division of Yiguan Dao, had hundreds of devout believers who made a vow of celibacy (*Qingxiu*). Led by Chen Hongzhen, a female celibate, the division encouraged young sectarians to be celibates by means of spirit possession and spirit-writing. Since “being a celibate” was in conflict with the requirement of “simultaneously cultivating the sacred and the secular”, messages from the gods became an appropriate way to propagate such ideas. The division produced a large number of revelations revealing the shortcomings of marriage and stressing that being a celibate is religiously and morally superior to the laity. The division also actively utilized spirit possession to encourage its young followers to make a vow of being a celibate. Being affected by “the miracles” of spirit possession, many young sectarians in the 1970s became celibates, most of whom were college students. These celibates were taught to abstain from secular entertainments (e.g. watching movies and reading novels), devoting themselves to studying Yiguan Dao doctrines and doing missionary work. Today, most of these celibates have been promoted as initiators, occupying most of the important positions of *Fayi Chongde* and making a

living by managing the religious staff. These celibates are now typically professional ecclesiastics.

We must note that the degree of Yiguan Dao divisions' professionalization varies, but most of them have a system to train qualified believers to perform specific clerical occupational roles, using a series of research courses run by members of the division. Most Yiguan Dao divisions have devoted themselves since the 1980s to teaching these courses, which focus especially on traditional Chinese culture (*Guoxue Yanxiuban*). The courses also expound the theology of Yiguan Dao from the primary level to more complex and abstract texts. If a sectarian wants to be an initiator, it will take him several years to attend all of the courses and make specific vows step by step (Lu 2005b). The sect also plans to establish its own university to train professional ecclesiastics. To summarize, a professionalized Yiguan Dao priesthood has begun to be developed since the end of state suppression in the late 1980s.

## DOCTRINAL TRANSFORMATION

When studying the evolution of Adventism, Lawson observed that the establishment of an educated leadership was helpful for the sect to become church-like. The educated leadership, he concludes, had "a strong and growing desire for broad acceptance and recognition by the powerful in society, and considerable concern for the public image of their church" (Lawson 1995:370). Such concerns made them more willing to accommodate with the outside society and this is one of the reasons why the group has become more church-like. In China, however, state repression largely prevented elite intellectuals from leading sectarian movements (Overmyer 1976:63-66). In this section, we will see that deregulation is accompanied by the rise of educated leadership, and those educated sectarian leaders, as Lawson observed in the case of Adventism, are determined to establish a positive image of their group in the wider society.

State repression in imperial China led to the absence of educated sectarian leadership. In a sense, Chinese sects were intellectually decapitated by suppression (Overmyer 1976:65). Yiguan Dao was also theologically underdeveloped. Historically, the sectarians even depreciated the importance of intellectual exploration. Zhang Tianran told his followers that:

It does not matter if you do not read any books. . . . In addition, Buddhist sutras have five thousand four hundred and eighty scrolls. This means that even if you read one scroll every day, it will take you fifteen years to read through all of these sutras. Time elapses quickly. How can you spend so much time in reading sutras? (Zhang 1937:93)

Partly due to the rejection of intellectual tradition, Yiguan Dao turned to the folk culture for ideas and beliefs. Most Yiguan Dao teachings were interpreted in a highly personified style with a low level of abstractness and intellectual elaboration (Yang 1997:86). Although Yiguan Dao borrowed a lot from Buddhism to

develop its doctrines, the sectarians even misunderstood some basic Buddhist terms. For example, Yiguan Dao emphasized that “pithy mantra” (*Koujue*), which is one of “three treasures” (*Sanbao*) of Yiguan Dao<sup>14</sup>, is very important to achieve salvation. For Yiguan Dao, the pithy mantra is something like a password to enter heaven. In different periods, there were different passwords; in the green sun period (*Qinyang Qi*)<sup>15</sup> according to the sect, the mantra was “*wuliang shoufo*”; in the red sun period, the mantra was “*nan-wu-a-mi-tuo-fo*”; finally, the mantra in the white sun period was the “true sutra with five words” (*Wuzi Zhenjing*). Actually, both the term “*wuliang shoufo*” and the term “*nan-wu-a-mi-tuo-fo*” refer to the Amitabha Buddha; the former is a free translation while the later is a transliteration. For Buddhists, it is an unforgivable mistake to stress the difference of the above two terms, but Yiguan Dao regarded the difference of the two terms as the key to getting salvation. Without educated leaders, Yiguan Dao did not manage to develop a “thorough-going intellectual formulation” (Overmyer 1976:65).

From the middle 1980s, however, Yiguan Dao began to build an ambitious educational system in Taiwan which “is perhaps second only to the public school system in its pursuit of education for its members” (Jordan and Overmyer 1986:237). In addition, an increasing proportion of Yiguan Dao sectarians, especially the second or the third generation, receive good secular education. These educated people began to occupy important administrative positions in Yiguan Dao in the 1990s. They have also been active in elaborating the sect’s doctrines since the late 1980s. Lin Jinsheng, an initiator of the *Baoguang Jiande* division, holds that it is time to filter out the teachings which are out of date. He even uses the term “classifying rubbish” to refer to the work of doctrinal transformation (Yang 1997:90). Since some of the traditional teachings are out of date, Lin argues, Yiguan Dao must discard these “rubbishes” because they have become a roadblock to attracting and sustaining followers. Li Yuzhu, the chief leader of *Xingyi Nanxing* group who has a master’s degree of Chinese philosophy, systematically offered new explanations of Yiguan Dao teachings and rituals from the per-

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<sup>14</sup>The term “three treasures” comes from Buddhism. Yiguan Dao uses this term to refer to “mystic portal” (*Xuanguan*), “pithy mantra”, and “hand seal” (*Hetong*). The sectarians regarded them as sacred and secret transmissions from the Eternal Venerable Mother, and strongly prohibited sectarians from making them known to outsiders. However, the contents are no longer secret and have been posted on the internet. Briefly: the mystic portal is the point between the two eyebrows; the true sutra includes five words which praise Maitreya Buddha, so it is also called as “true sutra with five words”; the hand seal requires the left hand to be put under the right hand with two thumbs pressed on a certain part of the right hand. An extensive explanation in English, provided by Yiguan Dao, is at: <http://www.with.org/english.htm>.

<sup>15</sup>According to the sect, human history is divided into three stages: the green sun period (*qingyang qi*), the red sun period (*hongyang qi*) and the white sun period (*baiyang qi*). Dipamkara Buddha presided over the salvation business of the green sun period; Sakyamuni Buddha in the red sun period; and the Maitreya Buddha presiding over the white Sun period, which began in 1912, corresponding with the founding

spective of neo-Confucianism. Guo Mingyi, the chief leader of *Hui Guang* division as well as an expert at Chan Buddhism, produced several popular books which are intellectually sophisticated and highly readable. Their purpose is simple: attracting and sustaining a more affluent and educated membership.

In the process of doctrinal transformation, the sect has thrown away some "rubbishes". The explanation about the difference of the term "*wuliang shoufo*" and the term "*nan-wu-a-mi-tuo-fo*", which is incorrect, is now officially rejected by the sect (Yang 1997). The sect also gave up some of the teachings which have been disparaged by exponents of other religious systems. For example, some religious writers, including Buddhists and Christians, have criticized Yiguan Dao for making use of severe oaths, such as the punishment of thunder-killing for apostasy (i.e. calling for death by lightning from Heaven for anyone who abandons the sect), to terrify believers. From their perspective, "these oaths seriously influence believers' lives, preventing believers from leaving Yiguan Dao even when they find that the sect is not an ideal faith" (Ma and Liu 1993:16). In response to such criticisms, Yiguan Dao has reformed the contents of the oath and cancelled the punishment of thunder-killing for apostasy. Apparently, these efforts indicate that the educated leadership of Yiguan Dao is prepared to establish a more positive public image and reduce the tension with other religions and the surrounding society by making the doctrines more sophisticated and more acceptable to educated people in Taiwan.

## CONCLUSION

We have briefly outlined the historical development of Yiguan Dao, and its further development after gaining legal status in 1987. The main purpose of this paper, however, is not to engage in historical description, but to test the sect-to-church theory by extending it to an Asian society. We find that suppression has played an important role in the sect-to-church tendency. Previous studies indicated that the following factors could contribute to the sect-to-church evolution: the growth of group size (Pope 1942), the establishment of a regulated leadership succession (Johnstone 1997), the professionalization of clergy (Stark and Finke 2000) and the doctrinal adaptations introduced by educated clergies (Lawson 1995). In the case of Yiguan Dao, however, we find that state repression blocked the emergence of these conditions.

First, the persecution implemented by imperial regimes induced Chinese sectarian movements to be organizationally unstable. Persecution contributed to the separation of Yiguan Dao and the larger society, forcing the sect to be secret and keep a distance from the surrounding society. Faced with repression, Yiguan Dao developed a structure stressing fission-production which was helpful to maintain secrecy and sustain the followers' morale. But such structure made the sect schismatic. The death of sectarian leaders often resulted in further schisms. Moreover, state suppression accelerated the tendency of schisms by periodically eliminating

sectarian leadership, an important strategy employed by China's imperial officials. While in societies inhabited by Judeo-Christian religions, the growth of sects is associated with the transition to church, such growth in imperial China usually provoked persecution and thus, schisms.

With the end of suppression of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan in the late 1980s, however, various divisions of Yiguan Dao have introduced a series of changes to fight against schisms and organizational isolation. They have tried to discard the old organizational structure which can easily lead to schisms; they are also attempting to establish new organizational structures based on geographical subdivisions which can support sustained growth. The establishment of a durable structure not only increases the degree of organizational openness but also makes it possible for the sectarians to pass on their faith to the next generation.

Second, suppression and the schismatic tendency it induced prevented sects from establishing an orderly leadership succession. The growth of a religious movement, according to previous studies (O'Dea 1963; Poloma 1989), usually involves a process of institutionalization, transforming from a prophetic type to a more routinized form. Charisma will gradually be eclipsed. But in China, the routinization of charisma was hampered by persecution concentrating on the elimination of leadership. Chinese sectarians were always willing to accept a new patriarch with the updated mandate of heaven, a charismatic leader rather than an officeholder elected according to established procedures. But there were no dependable ways to generate the patriarchs. Usually, the legitimation of leadership depended on the leaders' missionary ability. The succession of leadership had never been routinized and formalized in Yiguan Dao due to the suppression of sectarian religious leaders by the state. With the arrival of religious freedom in Taiwan, however, the sect tries to formalize the succession of leadership by updating the "mandate of heaven" theory. Today, Yiguan Dao emphasizes that there will be no new Patriarchs. Charisma begins to give way to institution.

Finally, state suppression impeded the professionalization of Chinese sects. They were not managed by an educated professional clergy. The lack of an educated priesthood left the sect intellectually under-developed and unable to accommodate the more sophisticated doctrines available to educated persons within the surrounding society. All of these strengthened the sectarianism of Chinese sects. When the sect gained its legal status in 1987, the sect began to develop a professionalized priesthood to run the administrative affairs of the divisions. These more educated leaders of Yiguan Dao have tried to establish a more positive public image and reduce the tension with the surrounding society by making the doctrines more sophisticated and more acceptable to educated people in Taiwan.

To sum up, suppression strengthened sectarianism in China by inducing schisms, and by blocking the orderly succession of leadership, and the emergence of professionalized and educated priesthood. As Overmyer (1976:62) argues, "incipient 'denominational' or 'church' structures were never allowed to develop

to their full potential because of official hostility” in China. During the period of suppression, Yiguan Dao was a sect characterized by organizational isolation and separation, charismatic leadership, a low degree of professionalization, and high tension with the social environment. With the legalization of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan in the late 1980s, however, various divisions of Yiguan Dao have introduced a series of changes, attempting to establish a sustainable structure, increase organizational openness, religiously socialize their children, formalize the leadership succession, professionalize the clergy, and adjust its doctrines to the outside society. Yiguan Dao is becoming more church-like or denomination-like. Clearly, deregulation has exerted a great influence on the contemporary development of this Asian religion.

The case study of Yiguan Dao shows that state regulation can influence the sectarian characteristics of religious groups. But it is not an isolated case which has only occurred in Chinese societies. The Mormon Church (i.e., The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) in the United States also had a partly similar evolution. During the first decades of its existence, the Mormon Church was subjected to legal and extra-legal persecution because Mormons practiced polygamous marriage. Partly due to this persecution, “nineteenth century Mormonism had exhibited many sectarian features” (Baer 1988:xiii-xiv). After the LDS Mormon Church abandoned polygamy in 1890, the official persecution ceased. After that, the Latter-day Saints Church initiated several reforms. By the late 1890s, the church accelerated the trend of centralizing church administration, attempted to reduce the degree of organizational isolation and defined the LDS church “as part of the larger society rather than as a separate community” (Alexander 1996:94). The church leadership also tried to create a favorable public image among nonbelievers. At the same time, the Mormon Church discarded or redefined parts of its doctrines to accommodate to the surrounding society. In addition, the church paid much attention to education. These changes, which took place in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, transformed the Latter-day Saints from a hated sect to an increasingly respected religious community (Alexander 1996). As Baer (1988:xiii-xiv) argues, “twentieth century Mormonism took on an appreciable number of denominational or ecclesiastical features.”

Sociological theories in regard to the state-religion relationship are underdeveloped, partly because “the range of state-religion relations in contemporary Europe and North America is much narrower than in Asia” (Lang 2004:105). This study indicates that state regulation, which is rarely probed by the sect-to-church model, can have an important impact on the transformation from a sect to a church. The development of Yiguan Dao in particular and Chinese sects in general cannot be comprehended theoretically without some revisions to theories of sect-to-church transformation. This study also illustrates the usefulness of cases from Asian religious cultures to test and expand our theoretical models.

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