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**The Eternal Mother and the State:
Circumventing Religious Management in Singapore**

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The Eternal Mother and the State: Circumventing Religious Management in Singapore

INTRODUCTION

The event is touted as a “Vegetarian Food Carnival”, held on the ground floor public space of a government flat in the northern part of Singapore. Scrumptious vegetarian dishes have been prepared by members of the Hua Yuan Hui (a pseudonym), a large charitable organisation which was set up to provide social welfare services to Singaporeans. It also runs regular classes on various aspects of traditional Chinese culture, including sessions on the classic texts of Confucianism, Daoism and Chinese Buddhism. The vegetarian food carnival is one of the many outreach activities that the organisation periodically holds throughout different parts of Singapore to attract new members. This particular event that I attend as part of my research with the organisation has a contemporary theme: “Healthy People, Healthy Earth”. On the leaflets to publicise the event, Paul McCartney, the ex-Beatles, is quoted for his view on the importance of giving up meat to save the planet. On a more “scientific” note, reference is also made to a *Wall Street Journal* report that “[i]t takes eight times as much water to produce a pound of beef than it takes to produce a loaf of bread”. Why should the Hua Yuan Hui be concerned with promoting vegetarianism? Nothing in its official constitution registered with the Registrar of Society in Singapore and its social welfare projects show promulgating the benefits of vegetarianism as one of its chief concerns. In fact, the question concerning vegetarianism is precisely what the organisers of the food carnival would like non-members to ask when they attend the event, so that members could explain the *religious* reason for turning vegetarian. Hua Yuan Hui is actually an organisation established by the transnational Chinese religious sect, the Yiguan Dao or Tian Dao, which advocates vegetarianism as one of its key religious doctrines to avoid bad karma that aids followers on the path to spiritual salvation. Many members of the Yiguan Dao in Singapore (and especially Taiwan) run vegetarian hawker stores and restaurants and supply the catering for the organisation’s events. Invitees to these food carnivals who express an interest or some sympathy with the religious ideas of the Yiguan Dao are then encouraged to receive the “secret teachings” by undergoing an initiation ceremony, usually held in an apartment of that particular housing block which has been converted into a domestic temple, or “Buddha hall” (*fotang*). The domestic temples of the Yiguan Dao are at the same time public places of worship as they serve the communities of devotees who live in the neighbourhoods. Almost two thousand such temples are dispersed across Singapore, and new ones are constantly being established, inhabiting the interstices of modernist spaces of urban planning while escaping the state’s grasp in the form of religious regulations.

Most modern states have policies for the management of religion. For those with diverse religious communities, such as Singapore, the question of how to ensure the peaceful coexistence of various religions becomes an important challenge for the governments involved. This is more so under contemporary conditions of globalisation whereby the movements of diverse peoples across nation-state boundaries could facilitate to the creation of diasporas, and resulting from this, the challenge of assimilating these new groups into existing social, cultural and political orders. For the management of religion, modern secular states often actively delineate the “proper” domain for religion in society, and to harness religious forces for nation-building purposes (Marty, 2000; Madsen and Strong, 2003). This can be achieved by stipulating through legal or constitutional means the extent to which religion can influence public policy and politics, or, in relation to this, through the guarantee

of religious freedom for citizens as part of their social rights within the boundary of the “private” sphere defined by the state. In the case of Singapore, the state actively constructs a domain that in its view religion should operate (Sinha, 1999, 2005). The state’s active involvement in regulating religious affairs is often rationalized in terms of maintaining religious and ethnic harmony in this multi-religious and multi-ethnic country (Lai, 2010). However, as I shall be discussing in this paper, the extent to which the state is able to regulate religion is dependent upon two important considerations. The first relates to how the state defines “religion”, and following from this, what groups are considered “religious” and would hence constitute the targets of state policies. The second consideration is the active responses of religious groups in terms of their adaptive strategies in negotiating, accommodating or resisting the state’s effort in surveillance and regulation.

The religious sect that I shall examine here, the Yiguan Dao, in some important contexts does not identify itself publicly as a “religion”, but adopts a more “secular” identity in its official dealings with the public and the state. By “secular”, and “secularisation”, I mean, respectively, an orientation towards “worldly” affairs, and “conformity with this world where religious group or religiously-informed society turns its attention from the supernatural and becomes more and more interested in this world” (Shiner 1967, p. 211; also Fox, 2010; Stark 1985). Hence, in this paper, I do not use the term “secularisation” in the sense formulated by Bryan Wilson and others as a process whereby religion in general loses its public significance in modern societies (Hanson, 1997). As we shall see, one of the Yiguan Dao’s most important proselytizing efforts is not conducted in the public “religious domain” as defined by the Singaporean state, hence overcoming certain restrictions faced by the other public religions. It also takes advantage of the restrictions that the state itself faces in civil society in the structural distinction between the public and the private spheres of the modern nation-state. It operates chiefly within the domain marked out by the state as “secular” and “non-religious”, and engaged in a paradoxical effort of organisational secularisation and sacralisation of secular spaces. Specifically, I examine how the Yiguan Dao has become increasingly “this-worldly” to accommodate state agenda and as a means to operate in a perceived hostile environment. Further, I utilise the concept of religious territoriality to show how the group propagates through spatial practices that transform officially secular spaces into religious ones, while avoiding some of the severe limitations faced by other religions operating in the country.

I first got acquainted with the sect in 2006 when my uncle converted his government flat into a domestic temple that functioned as a place of worship for devotees residing in the neighbourhood. The significance of the presence of the sect in Singapore dawned on me as I realised from interviews with my uncle and the worshippers that this temple was just one of many others in residential properties, private or government-owned. Prior to this, I had not been aware that Yiguan Dao had established its presence in Singapore despite my own research interest on religion in Singapore. Since 2007 I have been conducting participation observation among the Yiguan Dao, by becoming a member of one domestic temple and participating in its religious activities, such as the worship of important deities on the 1st and 15th day of each month in the lunar calendar. I also regularly attend the many classes, seminars and public talks held at either one of the three huge public temples. In addition to participant observation, I have also conducted formal and semi-formal interviews with ordinary members and leaders of the sect. In 2008 I visited the headquarters of one of the Yiguan Dao divisions in Taichung, Taiwan, to learn more about the operation of the sect in relation to its overseas activities.

THE YIGUAN DAO AND ITS TRANSMISSION TO SINGAPORE¹

There are various interpretations of the history of Yiguan Dao (“One-Thread Dao”; Unity Way), a religious sect of popular Chinese religion that is often referred to as Tian Dao (Celestial Way). To its adherents, the sect’s modern founders in the nineteenth century are part of a lineage of prominent saints who have appeared throughout history to lead mankind to salvation by teaching the correct paths to be re-united with the primordial creator of all, the Dao. Duara (2003) has characterised groups like the Yiguan Dao as “redemptive societies”, based on their focus on offering redemption from sins for members. Daniel Overmyer (1976, p. 150) argues that sects like Yiguan Dao should be considered a form of “folk Buddhism” due to its belief in the central role of Maitreya (Chin. *mile fo*) in human salvation, the influence of important Buddhist scriptures such as the *Diamond*, *Heart* and *Pure Land* sutras, and its theory of cyclic decay involving the three periods of dharma. Other scholars, while acknowledging the Buddhist influence, have linked the Yiguan Dao to Chinese folk religion whose beliefs and practices are the result of a history of syncretism of major Chinese religious philosophical and religious traditions (Bosco, 1994; Lu and Graeme, 2006; see also Wee 1997 [1976]). In Yiguan Dao’s theology one can also find strong elements of Daoist millenarianism that can be traced to the ideals of the Taiping Dao in the form of the Dao incarnate to save the world in the impending apocalypse (cf. Seidel 1984). Like many other Chinese sects, the core essence of Yiguan Dao theological system is the syncretism of the three major Chinese traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. In recent years, the religious syncretism embraces Christianity and Islam as well, by rationalising that all religions are derivatives of the ultimate principle, the Dao.

For the Yiguan Dao, salvation is found in the re-uniting with the Dao upon one’s death. The Dao is personified by the Venerable Eternal Mother, or *laomu*². Important means to achieve salvation include participation in congregational rituals, attending teaching sessions, and engaging in mutual aid. The Yiguan Dao also reverts the stages of eschatological progress commonly found in orthodox Chinese religions by offering “attainment before cultivation” (*xiande er haoxiu*).

At present, the frequent occurrence of great calamities signals the decline and destruction of the human race. This is because social morality has declined and mankind has lost his belief and faith in God...However, under the grace of our “Heavenly Mother” who could not bear the destruction of innocent people along with the evil ones, the “Tao” is being disseminated to save those who are virtuous and good (*Elementary Class* n.d.: 2).

The term “attainment” in Yiguan Dao refers to the acquiring of the knowledge of the “right path or way” (Dao) to return to Heaven and be re-united with the Venerable Eternal Mother. One’s “attainment” is assured when one is conferred the Three Treasures, namely, the Heavenly Portal (*xuanguan qiao*), the Divine Mantra (*koujue*), and the Holy Symbolic Seal (*hetong*) while undergoing the rite of initiation.

Yiguan Dao’s teachings on ethics draw mainly from Buddhist injunctions and Confucian principles of proper human relationships, underpinned by the doctrine of karma (Overmyer 1981, p. 158). The Yiguan Dao utilises both the canonical texts of orthodox Buddhism and Confucianism (such as the *Heart Sutra*, *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *Three Character Classics*), as well as a body of literature known as the “precious volumes” (*baojuan*), morality books written by spirit mediums under the possession of the various

saints and deities worshipped by the sectarians. The Yiguan Dao, like many other Chinese sectarian religions, conceptualises the cosmological temporal development in terms of the three *kalpas* (*sanqi*), each of which is presided over by a Buddha. Thus, the Green Sun Era was presided over by the Dipamkara Buddha, the Red Sun Era by Sakyamuni, and the current era, the White Sun Era, will witness the coming of the Maitreya Buddha. This temporal reckoning is intimately tied to the eschatological hope for the ultimate salvation of the human kind. As evidence revealing the coming of Maitreya, Yiguan Dao members like to highlight recent natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, as well as human conflicts such as wars and terrorist attacks, as obvious signs that reflect the dire moral degeneration of humanity. In a talk which I attended for new members, the speaker, who was also a hall master (*tangzhu*), argued that the seemingly frequent occurrences of disasters and conflicts “compared to the past” prognosticated the imminent end of the world (*mojie*), and proceeded to reiterate the need for mankind to repent, to re-unite with the Venerable Eternal Mother, and to turn vegetarian. While in the past some sectarian movements had staged uprisings to overthrow governments to set up a “liberated area” for the arrival of Maitreya or the enthronement of a sectarian king (Ovemyer 1981, p. 160), the Yiguan Dao these days primarily emphasises the attainment of the Three Treasures and moral cultivation for the purpose of individual salvation. Ms Huang, a Yiguan Dao member for around 5 years, has this to say about the Dao:

In this White Sun period, the Dao is available to everyone, not just to those monks and priests who have to go through difficult [spiritual] cultivation (*xiulian*). Even if you are a Muslim or Christian, you can seek the Dao, no problem. You don’t have to give up your own religion. Dao is like a treasure, a valuable thing, important for everyone to have to gain salvation (*dejiu*). After you’ve obtained it, you can still believe in Jesus or God, go to your church. Some of us often attend the religious services of other religions too.

In talk given to more than 200 new recruits with their sponsors, a senior member of the organisation called Mr. Chen tried to explain the difference between Yiguan Dao and other religion:

People often ask me what’s the difference between Tian Dao [another name of Yiguan Dao] and other religions such as Buddhism, Daoism, or Christianity. I often tell them that we are not actually a religion (*zongjiao*), but more like a faith (*xinyang*).

According to the interpretation offered by Mr. Chen, the different groups which have been labelled “religion” are human elaborations of the revelations of the Dao. The term, “religion” (*jiao* or *zongjiao*), in Yiguan Dao’s interpretation, refers to culturally and historically specific ways in which the Dao has manifested itself to different human societies in different times. On the other hand, “faith” (*xinyang*) refers to the belief in the ultimate reality and the means of salvation revealed to the founders of Yiguan Dao by the Venerable Eternal Mother throughout the ages. Furthermore, “religion” is a system of doctrines and practices which aid people in their quest for moral perfection (*xiuxing*), while having “attained the Dao” (*dedao*), entails the acquiring the true knowledge of the means toward salvation, interpreted as escaping the cycle of birth and rebirth and re-uniting with the Venerable Eternal Mother in heaven upon one’s earthly death. In practice, this means that new members, after having gone through the initiation rite and having acquired the Three Treasures for salvation, would ideally continue their moral cultivation through intensive study of the key texts from all the

major religious traditions (interpreted through the Yiguan Dao's theological frames) and as well as the books on morality. (The Yiguan Dao considers all the major "non-Chinese" religions such as Islam and Christianity as containing messages about the Dao that the Eternal Mother had revealed to their founders.) In one such study session I attended, the 'Masses Class' (*dazhong ban*), the lecturer led the audience through an excerpt from the Confucian classic, *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*), line by line, repeating several times, and expounded the meaning of the text and the etymology of some difficult Chinese words. While teachings of the various religions (and these teachings indeed are scrutinised in some study sessions) are considered by Yiguan Dao members as valid and useful means for the attainment of salvation, they are however mere derivatives of a superior Dao, as expressed in the commonly used phrase, "the Dao is superior to religion" (*dao gaoyu jiao*).

Yiguan Dao's "Secular Turn"

The Yiguan Dao was banned in Taiwan until 1987 and is still considered an illegal organisation in mainland China. The group was suppressed partly due to its alleged close ties with the Japanese puppet government at Manchukuo during the Sino-Japanese war, and partly due to the hostile views towards it held by leaders of the more orthodox Buddhist groups. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party has branded the Yiguan Dao as a "reactionary secret society" (*fandong huidaomen*) and an "evil cult" (Palmer 2008, pp. 113-134). Under repressive conditions, the Yiguan Dao has developed adaptive doctrines and experienced institutional innovations in order to survive. Of the latter, it experienced successive schisms into different "divisions" and "sub-divisions", each with loosely connected cells under the leadership of hall masters (Lu and Graeme, 2006; Lu, 2008). While operating more or less covertly for many years in these two places, since the 1970s the leaders of many Yiguan Dao divisions turned their attention abroad, especially to countries in Southeast Asia where there were sizable ethnic Chinese populations. In Malaysia, the Yiguan Dao has established many centres as venues for the dissemination of Confucian teachings and as bastions of Chinese culture. In Surat Thani, southern Thailand, the Fayi Chongde sub-division in 1992 built an impressive temple with the name "Temple of Master Kong, the Former Teacher, and the Great Completer, Supreme Sage" (Soo, 1997). All the major divisions have made efforts to establish presence in Singapore. Among them, the Baoguang Jiande sub-division has been the most successful. In 1971, the senior master of Baoguang Jiande, Lü Shugen initiated the first members of Yiguan Dao in Singapore while on a mission trip to Indonesia. In November the same year, the first temple was established in an unoccupied house owned by a Mr. Huang, which became known as the Huang Temple (Baoguang Jiande 2004, pp. 42-43). Since then, Baoguang Jiande has become the largest Yiguan Dao group in the country, and Singapore is now the base for its missionary activities in Southeast Asia and India

When Yiguan Dao was first transmitted to Singapore and Malaysia, some local press characterised it as an "evil cult" (*xiejiao*) managed by a group of transnational swindlers (Soo, 1997, p.157). The negative reception was partly stoked by the public pronouncements of some leaders of local Buddhist associations who questioned the sect's interpretations of certain key Buddhist doctrines such as *samsara* and *triratna* (Three Jewels), and linked it with the notorious White Lotus movement in imperial China. As Soo (1997, p.157) writes,

The Buddhist associations disapproved of the Unity Sect's teachings based on the beliefs that organized time into three successive cycles, each "controlled" by a Buddha. They also disagreed with the use of Buddhist terminology, and the borrowing of Buddhist texts. The general public, on the other hand, were against the members' practice of vegetarian diet and the "evil oath" they swear during the initiation ceremony.

In July 1981, the Singapore government expelled and blacklisted twelve Taiwanese preachers. In a commemorative volume on the Baoguang Jiande sub-division's missionary effort in Singapore and the region (Baoguang Jiande 2004, pp. 71-72), this early period of perceived state persecution and negative public opinion is interpreted as "severe test" (*dakao*) of the movement's resolve and resilience, an episode in a long history of such "tests" that the Yiguan Dao has undergone from the imperial times to the present day. One direct consequence of this early negative experience was the decision by Taiwan-based leadership to establish a chemical factory in Singapore as a front for missionary activities and as a viable source of funds for the expansion of the group in Singapore and the region. In 1981, the group formally registered in Singapore as the Hua Yuan Hui, essentially identifying itself publicly as a moral uplifting society and charitable organisation, and not as Yiguan Dao and an explicitly religious organisation. In fact, the name of Hua Yuan Hui in Singapore suggested both an orientation towards Chinese traditional culture that might appeal to the Chinese population in the country, as well as to fit into the state's effort to cultivate moral citizens through the re-acquaintance of the "traditional culture" of one's ethnicity. In other words, the Baoguang Jiande seemed to wish to establish a presence in Singapore by downplaying the more "religious" and more controversial aspect of its beliefs and practices, by registering as an institution that focuses on more explicitly "secular" aims such as providing social welfare services, activities that aid moral cultivation, and the promotion of traditional Chinese culture³.

An examination of the constitution of Hua Yuan Hui reveals that it does not include any matter that is usually considered "religious". Here is the core passage of the organisation's constitution:

Constitution of Hua Yuan Hui

The objects of the Association are as follows:

- A
- 1) To promote moral values, righteousness and virtues based on the moralistic teachings of:
 - a. 'The Great Learning'
 - b. 'The Doctrine of the Mean'
 - c. 'Confucian Analects'
 - d. 'The Work of Mencius'
 2. To inculcate a sense of humility, courtesy, responsibility, loyalty and respect, and care for the Elders.
 3. To provide assistance, aid and whatever relief possible to the less fortunate such as the orphaned, aged, homeless, widowed and distressed through free medical care and treatment and any other charitable means.

- 4) To induce members towards the quest for moral enlightenment and perfection.

B

To achieve the above objectives, the Association may do all such things as are incidental or conducive to the attainment of the above objects; it may provide a place for members to have physical and mental relaxation.

One of the reasons the Yiguan Dao has been successful in increasing its membership in Singapore is that it has been able to transcend the dialect and native place boundaries of Chinese Singaporeans (Song, 2002). During the colonial days, Chinese immigrants were divided and formed communities such as clan associations and temples based on their respective places of origin and dialect groups. The Yiguan Dao has been able to transcend the internal differences of the Chinese Singaporeans based on lineage and language to appeal to the Chinese population as a whole by focusing on the broader category of Chinese cultural identity. The broader Singaporean political context has to be examined as well. The Yiguan Dao's growth in the country cannot be understood without consideration of the policies of the Singapore government in the 1980s to Confucianise Singapore society by promoting values such as filial piety, loyalty, thrift, and diligence, and the government's discursive practice of cultivating "Asian values" to counter the supposedly morally corrupting influence of the "West". To provide a "cultural ballast" for Singaporeans in general, and to the Chinese population in particular, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) initiated a series of policy measures such as the Courtesy Campaign, religious education in schools, and the Speak Mandarin Campaign. Hence, despite the initial setback to establish its presence in Singapore, the Yiguan Dao was able to tap into the social and political trends of the time, and registered itself as a moral cultivation society with the focus on promoting Chinese culture and Confucian values. The affinity between the Yiguan Dao and the state is similar to the case of the De Jiao studied by Bernard Formosa and Tan Chee-Beng, who describe how the De Jiao's provision of social and relief services has endeared it to the respective governments (Tan, 1985; Formoso, 2010).

To forge close links with the state, the Yiguan Dao members have been actively participating in national events, for example, as performers during the National Day Parade, and volunteering as ushers during the Chingay Festival, an annual state-sponsored procession showcasing street performances and decorative floats (Other religious organisations also have a strong presence in these national events, either as performers or ushers). In 1995 the Huan Yuan Hui won the Outstanding Volunteering award from the Ministry of Community Development, the first voluntary organisation to receive this award. In his speech, the minister said that "volunteers could play a very important part in changing the perception that Singapore was not a compassionate society". He lauded the members of the organisation as having proven wrong the perception of selfish, "ugly Singaporeans" caught up in the rat race. In 1999, the secretary of Hua Yuan Hui was awarded the Public Service Medal during the National Day celebrations (*Straits Times* 9 Aug. 1999). Baoguang Jiande's focus on social welfare services, especially for the elderly in a society with rapidly ageing population, fills a gap in society created by the PAP government's ideological taboo of state welfarism, which called for the active participation of voluntary welfare organisations and the family to be the bulwark of social support (Trocki 2006, pp. 129-130).

In addition to active engagement in the volunteer sector, to broaden its appeal to the masses the Yiguan Dao members also frequently appeal to science to support the organisation's key teachings. Speakers repeatedly note that the group's doctrines are "scientific" by alluding to "scientific studies" that apparently support the Yiguan Dao's key assertions. For example, in a talk on the Three Treasures, a hall master mentioned, but without giving any detail, a "recent scientific study that proves the location of the Window to the Soul". In a Basic Course talk which I attended, the speaker, Mr. Chen, constantly emphasised to a hall full of neophytes that "we are not talking without any basis, our views are justified by science". In another seminar open to all Yiguan Dao members, the speaker, Mr. Zhong, used the science of climatology and its findings on ozone depletion to support the view that humanity's collective bad karma had resulted in the current dire state of climate change. Mr Zhong further asserted in the seminar—in support of the Yiguan Dao's teachings on vegetarianism—that scientific studies of human molars have shown that humans had originally been vegetarian since their molars had evolved to grind grain and vegetables.

In sum, Yiguan Dao's "secular turn" in its engagements in the public domain has to be examined in the contexts of its historical development in recent mainland China and Taiwan, and more recently in Singapore and the Southeast Asian region. Often labelled as a heterodox movement by leaders of mainstream Buddhism, and has in the past been reviled by the public media and various governments as an "evil cult" (this is still the case in mainland China), the Yiguan Dao in Singapore has undergone a process of transformation that highlights in the public domain its more "secular" elements (e.g. the transmission of Chinese culture, the cultivation of morality, etc.), thus aligning it with the nation-building agenda of the Singaporean state. In an important sense, its growth as a formally secular organisation has been contingent upon its conscious alignment with the political project of the Singapore government, most notably through its provision of welfare services and support for the government's effort to cultivate moral citizenship through the promotion of values such as filial piety, loyalty, thrift, and diligence in Singapore society. However, there is another way through which Yiguan Dao propagates itself and establishes a significant presence in Singapore society, and that is through its practice of religious territoriality.

CONTESTING TERRITORIALITIES

Turner (2007, p.125) has argued that one of the ways through which the modern state manages and regulates religion is by what he calls "enclavement". The enclave can be both in the form of physical barriers (such as a walled space), or non-physical ones related to technologically-augmented forms of surveillance and control. Many modern states through legal provisions demarcate appropriate physical public spaces as places of worship for various religious groups. However, I would argue that while it is important to examine the various strategies of the state to manage and regulate religion, we should also be aware that religious groups (or at least some of them) are capable of finding innovative ways to put the state at arm's length. I have described above how Yiguan Dao in Singapore and in other parts of Southeast Asia has adapted itself to the initially hostile environments by presenting itself publicly more as a voluntary charitable organisation involved with the promotion of Chinese culture than as an explicitly religious group with a controversial history. In what follows, I shall describe another way the Yiguan Dao seeks to escape state's enclavement with the concept of territoriality.

The concept of territoriality can be considered a form of cultural strategy “through which individuals and groups seek to exert control over the meanings and uses of particular portions of geographical space” (Stump 2008, p. 222). Territoriality involves a social ordering of space informed by prevailing cultural norms of various groups and individuals as they seek to express and exert their identities and influence in relation to one another. Like many secular states, Singapore adopts a functional conception of territoriality underpinned by the ideology of development and modernisation. In other words, the fundamental principle that guides the state’s policy of land use is the efficient allocation of scarce land for the purposes of economic development and national building. Given the scarcity of land in Singapore, the state adopts a highly pragmatic and interventionist stance with regard to the allocation of land parcels to be used for religious purposes. As discussed by Kong (2002), each parcel of land in any of the new towns built by the Housing Development Board allocated for religious purposes “is open to tender to each particular religious group”. For example, a site that is reserved for Hindus will not be open for tender by other religious groups such as Christians, Muslims and Chinese religionists. This is to ensure that each of the major religions in Singapore, such as Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism, popular Chinese religion, and other religious groups would be represented in the various government housing estates. Very often, in the effort of urban renewal, old buildings and structures, whether commercial, residential or religious, are torn down to make way for new developments. Sometimes, secular buildings can be converted to religious use. However, the main criteria to be considered are not based on the perceived needs of the specific religious communities, but on planning considerations “such as the location of the building, whether the area is a predominantly residential one, whether too much traffic is going to be generated” (Kong, 1993).

The form of secularism adopted by Singaporean state is not the anti-theistic, militant type. It recognises the importance of religion in people’s life and in principle accord equal treatment to all religions. For the government, this policy is necessary for the peaceful coexistence of the diverse religious and ethnic groups that make up the Singaporean population. While Singapore’s constitution does not mention the term “secular”, and the state does intervene in religious affairs, especially in Islam through a statutory board, its secularism is delineated most clearly in Article 15 (1) of the constitution: “Every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and to propagate it.” Like other modern secular states, the legitimacy of Singapore’s political authority is not founded upon divine or ecclesiastical sanction, but solely on democratic elections that serve as the foundation of ultimate political authority. While spelling out what secularism in Singapore context mean, the state has also in the process provided a rather narrow definition of religion. For example, Singapore’s Court of Appeal has defined religion “as a citizen’s faith in a personal God, sometimes described as a belief in a supernatural being” (Thio, 2008, p.82). This way of delineating the domain of religion thus excludes philosophical beliefs such as humanism and patriotism⁴.

However, there are important qualifications to religious freedom provided under the country’s constitution. Most importantly, the constitution makes a distinction between religious beliefs and actions: while one can freely choose to adhere to any religious beliefs, one’s actions based on such beliefs must conform to Singapore’s laws pertaining to public order and public service (Tan, 2008; Thio, 2009). For example, practitioners of Chinese religion who live in government housing are not allowed to burn joss papers and paper money in the confines of their flats or anywhere they wish in the shared public space. What was previously done in front of altars at home is now mainly conducted with bins provided by the local town councils so that the ashes from the burning will not pollute the environment (Tong and Kong, 2000).

While the spatial practices of the state do shape religious practices to varying degrees through its effort to enforce hegemonic meanings in geographical spaces, we should not think that religions and religious practitioners are always simply in a reactive or reactionary position. Place-making is inherently a dynamic process involving a contestation of meaning. Ordinary people in the lived city will often negotiate, resist or reject the totalistic modernist visions of the planning authorities by carving out spaces for themselves in the expressions of self-determination (de Certeau, 1988). This also means that a given geographical space can have different meanings for different individuals and groups interacting within that space. In the religious expressions of territoriality, spaces can be transformed into religious places by being imbued with the distinct worldview and ethos of the believers. It is useful at this juncture to recall Jonathan Z. Smith's view of rituals as the primary means in creating sacred space. Contrary to Mircea Eliade's influential idea that sacred spaces are sites of hierophany acting as "centres" from which human activities acquire their transcendental meanings, Smith (1987) argues that it is often human actions, more specially, rituals, that create sacred spaces. Georges Bataille (1985) sees the ritual actions undertaken by ordinary people that are capable to resacralise state-imposed secular, profane spaces as acts of transgression that seek to break out of the rationalizing tendency of society. Such ritualistic acts of transgression can be most evidently seen in Yiguan Dao's effort to transform public housings into sacred sites.

As a congregational sect, the Yiguan Dao members gather for religious activities and to receive teachings in "Buddha halls" (*fotang*). These are divided into the "public halls" (*gonggong fotang*) and the "domestic halls" (*jiating fotang*). In Singapore, the Hua Yuan Hui currently operates three public halls, which are massive three to four-stories buildings painted in white, and constructed with a nod towards Chinese architectural style. These three public venues serve as central sites for the conduct of the many self-cultivation and training classes and allow members from the neighbouring "districts" (*de*) to gather for religious worship and social activities. The offices for the administrative staff and leaders of the Baoguang Jiande in Singapore are also found in these buildings⁵. The constructions of these public halls were of course subjected to the state's urban planning rules and regulations as described previously. However, the vast majority of Yiguan Dao's Buddha halls are domestic ones, and are largely hidden from the view of the public and the purview of the state. In terms of religious hierarchy, the Baoguang Jiande is led by the Prior/semior master (*qianren*), who resides in Taiwan and pays frequent visits to various "Dao mission-fields" (*daochang*) around the world. The Singapore mission field, like others, are led by a group of Preachers (*dianchuanshi*) who have received the apostolic commission and are able to conduct initiation rites for new members. Below the Preachers are the hall masters (*tangzhu*) of domestic Buddha halls who maintain the closest ties with ordinary members.

The domestic halls are the most basic unit of the Yiguan Dao organisation structure, and are located in the homes of the members. The first public Buddha hall to be established in Singapore in 1975, the Tianguo Fotang, was a house in a private residential estate purchased with funds transferred from Taiwan. The Yiguan Dao domestic Buddha halls are different from the altars found in the homes of practitioners of other forms of popular Chinese religion/shenism. For the latter, while the altar marks the dwelling place of the deities or ancestors, and hence a sacred space, the home in which the altar is constructed is not itself considered a temple or a religious place. However, the establishment of a Buddha hall in the home of a Yiguan Dao member transforms the house itself into a temple and a sacred place⁶. So while the congregational nature of the Yiguan Dao is similar to that of Christian "cell groups" which often meet in the homes of their members, the significant difference is that the

houses where the Christians meet are usually not considered sacred sites, and are not formally part of a religious organisation.

Recall that in Singapore, the state is the ultimate arbiter on the purpose of land utilization in its urban planning efforts. State bodies such as the Land Office, the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the Housing Development Board (HDB) determine the appropriate sites for residential, recreational/cultural, commercial and religious functions. In its headlong pursuit to construct a modern nation (see e.g. Kong and Yeoh 2003), Singapore through its urban planning policies to build a modern nation has desacralized many pre-existing sacred spaces such as shrines, temples, burial sites, causing them to either disappear, or to combine to form “united temples” or to re-locate. Hence, Singapore’s urban planning efforts have prevented the creation of enduring sacred religious spaces that have historical depth and with defined historic communities. These days, most Singaporeans live in government housing, which comprises of standardised high rise apartments distributed in various high-density new towns or housing estates. The design of the apartments is primarily functional, and in line with the state’s official secularism, does not taking into account the religious practices of various ethnic groups. This means that Singapore public housing estates are designed to be a secular modernist environment that discourages the emergence of religious and ethnic enclaves (Chua, 1997). Also, , government flats must not be used for public religious purposes (This is confirmed to me by a HDB official in a telephone enquiry). Unlike the other mainstream religions which have to compete either denominationally or with each other to secure limited sites provided by the state for religious use in order to build their churches, temples, mosques, etc., the Yiguan Dao is able circumvent this problem through its territorial practices.

A Yiguan Dao member who wishes to transform his home into a domestic Buddha hall will have to undergo a training program⁷ and seeks the approval of one of the Preachers within the organisation. The various courses that comprise the training programme are not only for those deeply committed members who wish to establish a house temple. Leaders of the Yiguan Dao strongly encourage all members, especially new ones, to attend a series of courses on the basic doctrines and rituals of the group. This emphasis on doctrinal training, and the downplaying of spirit-writing, is a relatively recent phenomenon⁸. When the training is completed, the potential hall master will proceed to convert his home, a state-defined secular space, into a sacred one. Whether the person lives in public or private housing, some form of renovation to existing living spaces and changes in amenities are required. First, a new altar has to be constructed in accordance with Yiguan Dao’s stipulations. The most important items include the Buddha Light (*fodeng*), a statue of Maitreya in the form of the Laughing Buddha, an urn for the burning of incense, holders for two large size candles placed on either side of the altar, and vegetarian offerings (e.g. fruits, noodles, snacks). Since the burning of incense and candles is an essential part of collective worship in a Buddha Hall, new fans and other forms of ventilation equipment have to be installed. The house has to be thoroughly cleaned before its official consecration by the Preacher as a Buddha hall on an auspicious day. It must be emphasised again that the establishment of the Buddha Hall is not merely an installation of an altar, but the radical transformation of a secular, residential space into a sacred one.

The sacredness of the house temple space can be observed here in the adherence of certain taboos and prescriptions that mark out the new space as extraordinary and different from other residential quarters. For example, a vegetarian diet has to be observed within the confines of the Buddha hall, and meat is prohibited to be brought in even if it is not to be consumed. Family members of the hall master who are not Yiguan Dao members or who are

still not vegetarians are also subject to this rule. Members of the congregation have to wipe their hands clean with wet hand towels at the entrance of the house temple upon arrival as a way of purifying themselves upon entering a sacred space. This preoccupation with purity prompted me to ask Ms Wong, the hall master of the temple where I regularly attend, if the presence of the toilet and the rubbish bins in the kitchen area posed any problem. She downplayed the significance by highlighting the restricted area of the flat and the fact that the kitchen where the toilet is usually located is in a separate area:

‘That is not a problem at all; the flat is already so small, how can we have the toilet in another place? Not possible to be located outside! Also, the toilet is in the kitchen, which is at the back, so it is separated and not near the altar at all. If we keep the toilet clean, actually we have to keep the whole place clean, this is not a problem for us. Most important is that our heart is pure (*xin shi chun de*)’.

In addition to the emphasis on cleanliness, the deportment of the congregation and the language used are also highly formalised. The reason given is that due the sacredness of the place, one has to switch from the everyday vernacular to “speaking in Heaven’s words” (*jiang shangtian de hua*). When addressing one another, members tend to use titles with surnames, such as “Mister Tan”, “Madam Lee”, “Hall Master Lim”, rather than given names, which would signal a more informal and usual way of address among peers. The preoccupation with modesty among members is reflected in the practice of referring to oneself as ‘junior student’ (*houxue*). Finally, as a nod towards the preservation of Chinese traditional culture, members tend to use the formal and classical form of the Chinese language, such as saying *yong* instead of the commonly used *chi*, to refer to eating. Members refer to each other as “kinsmen of the Way” (*daoqin*); male members are called *qiandao* while female ones are the *kundao*. Typically, the congregation that meet regularly at a specific Buddha hall—usually to celebrate the 1st and 15th day of the lunar month, and the birthdays of important deities—numbers between 20 and 30 people.



Worshipping in domestic temple



Self-cleansing when entering domestic temple

In interviews with Song Guangyu (2002) in the 1990s, the leaders of Baoguang Jiande estimated that by 1997, there were 1457 domestic halls, and by 1999, around two hundred thousand people had been initiated, with approximately twenty thousand active members. Based on my own interviews with a number of hall masters and Preachers, there are currently twenty-six “districts” in Singapore, each of which has around eighty domestic halls with around 15 to 25 active members each. According to Mr Chen the Preacher, there are around 1600 Baoguang Jiande Buddha halls on Singapore, including three public ones, and the goal is to establish at least one Buddha hall in every floor of every block of public housing in Singapore. Estimating from this, the Baoguang Jiande sub-division alone has between 31200 and 52000 active members.

Unlike the other major religions in Singapore whose venues for worship and other religious activities are located in the officially demarcated sites, and hence publicly visible, the overwhelming majority of the Yiguan Dao’s religious sites are hidden from public view, located in the state-demarcated secular spaces of urban modernity. In other words, the religious aspects of Yiguan Dao are manifest most fully within the state-determined “secular” and “private” realm. At the same time, it makes use of this modernist statist distinction between private and public spaces to overcome the limitation of land resource in an urban environment by sacralising an officially recognized secular space, radically transforming it into a sacred space according to its own strategy of territoriality. I would argue that the successful proliferation of a religious sect like the Yiguan Dao lies partly in its territorial strategy that involves the sacralisation of domestic spaces as temples for religious worship. In modern secular Singapore where religious freedom is officially recognized, and where the availability of land is severely restricted, the Yiguan Dao is able to thrive partly due to its ability to replicate its most basic organisational unit through the transformation of the domestic, “private” space into a sacred one. Such strategy of religious territoriality has equipped members of the Yiguan Dao the capacity to transcend the limits imposed on religious activities by the secular authorities embodied by the state. In fact, the “private” domestic space in urban modernity can provide a favourable context for the transmission of religious knowledge and conduct of religious activities away from state and public scrutiny, and for the leaders of the religious sect to maintain a tight control over its members.

CONCLUSION

Religious pluralism in many societies, especially in the context of nation-building in a globalizing world, has posed a series of challenges to nation states (Turner, 2007, pp. 123-124). One such challenge is the question of how the “many” of religions—often assumed to have rigid boundaries and with mutually incompatible worldviews—can be reconciled with the nation-state’s effort of cultivating “one” public national culture with strong consensus on the common good (Madsen and Strong, 2003). The problem of religious pluralism is more acutely felt in a liberal polity whereby the public role of religion takes on greater social and political significance. In officially secular and religiously diverse societies such as Singapore, one way for the state to effectively manage religion is by delineating the domains in which religion can legitimately operate and the public issues that it can make representations on. One of these domains is the “private”/domestic sphere, where religious practices are deemed the “private” concern of citizens, whose right to religious freedom is protected by law and guaranteed under the constitution. It is only in the structurally contrastive domain—the “public” sphere—where the state can exercise its legitimate power to regulate and manage religious activity in the name of a higher unity or common good for the country. In Singapore

this common good is the maintenance of religious and ethnic harmony. As pointed out previously, such carving out of appropriate spaces for religious activities by the state would constitute a form of “enclavement”. As I have shown here, one such physical form of enclavement in Singapore is the designation of sites for religious buildings by the state through its urban planning policies. This present study of the Yiguan Dao demonstrates the various adaptive strategies that a religious group is able to enact to circumvent state’s effort at enclaving religion. I do not wish to suggest here that the Yiguan Dao is actively resisting a repressive state, given, as I have discussed, its accommodation of certain state policies and nation-building agenda for its own propagation. The Yiguan Dao is, however, seeking to circumvent state-imposed constraints through innovation in its organisational structure and its practices of religious territoriality.

The case of Yiguan Dao in modern urban Singapore has shown that the group mainly operates publicly not only in the religious domain defined by the state, partly due to the fact that it does not define itself both formally as well as rhetorically as a “religion”. On the one hand, the Yiguan Dao has established its public presence in the Singapore by emphasizing its “non-religious” aspect, primarily in its provision of social welfare and conducting of activities involving morality cultivation. On the other hand, the group stresses its more explicitly “religious” aspects mainly in the state-defined “private” and “secular” spheres in the form of domestic Buddha halls. This has allowed the group to avoid competition with other religions in the public sphere for resources, especially for the limited parcels of state land specifically allocated for religious purposes under the state’s modernist urban planning. At the same time, Yiguan Dao’s “secular” public activities have found a ready fit with the some of the most important state’s efforts at social engineering. This explicit alignment with state agenda has the intended effect of securing a more conducive environment for the group’s propagation in the face of negative views toward it that are held by the mainstream religions and some members of the public. Organisationally, the preeminent means adopted by the Yiguan Dao to propagate itself is through its religious territorial practices of establishing domestic temples in residential properties, in effect transforming formally secular spaces into religious ones, without the need to seek official approval from the relevant authorities. Finally, one important implication of this study of the Yiguan Dao on the limits of state management of religion is this: The structural distinction of the “private” and the “public” in modern secular nation-states, and the concomitant actions that the state and citizens can legitimately engage in as a result of this very distinction, creates in the same instance both the limitation for the state to effectively manage religion, and the space for certain religious groups to operate outside the official purview of the state. These religious groups, such as the Yiguan Dao, are able to slip through the grasp of the state, and flourish.

NOTES

1. This section is a brief summary of the history of the Yiguan Dao, based on the data I have obtained from my fieldwork in Singapore and Taiwan, and on available scholarly studies. Some notable work on the religious group include Seiwert (1981); Jordan (1982); Jordan and Overmyer (1986), Overmyer (1976); Clart (1997; 2000) Song (1983; 1996; 2002); Lu (2008); and Soo (1997)
2. According to the Yiguan Dao catechism in my possession, apart from the term *laomu*, the Dao is also referred to as *mingming shangdi*, *wanling zhenzai*, *weiyi zhenshen*, *zaowu zhu*, *lao tianye*, and *shangdi*.
3. Kuah (2003), for example, has documented that many of the so-called ‘reformed Buddhist’ groups in Singapore are also undergoing secularisation and are increasing involved in the provision of social welfare services and organisation of ‘cultural activities’.
4. As Thio points out in another article (2009) discussing the Court of Appeal judgement, this definition of religion is overly narrow, even though Hinduism and Daoism with its multiple gods and Buddhism which is non-theistic are generally considered religions in Singapore. The Singapore constitution however does not offer a definition of “religion”.
5. These three public temples are the Tianguo Fotang in Punggol in the north, Tianhui Fotang at Bukit Merah in the central, and Tianjüe Fotang in Pasir Ris in the east, each providing religious, training, and social services for members living in these areas.
6. The creation of religious sites that are hidden from the public view and state authorities can also be found in Sinha’s (2005, pp. 111-2) study of Muneeswaran worship in Singapore. The exact locations of ‘jungle temples’ are known only a select community of devotees, since they are illegal structures occupying state land and are not registered with the Registrar of Societies. A number of Muneeswaran temples are home-based temples found in both privately owned or rented properties. Hidden from the wider society, these temples would be considered illegal since residential units are not supposed to serve as public places of worship. One of the main differences between the case of Muneeswaran and that of Yiguan Dao is that the ‘jungle temples’ and residential temples of Muneeswaran worship are not part of a formal organisational structure, whereas the domestic Buddha halls of Yiguan Dao are formally considered an essential institutional make-up of the group.
7. For the Baoguang Jiande sub-division, the essential courses and their respective duration include the following: Rites and Rules class (2 days); Basic Course, on the key teachings of Yiguan Dao (1 to 2 days); Repentance class, a few days; Model class, to learn oratorical and preaching skills, ink brush writing (2 to 3 times per week, for about a year); Talent class, advanced training in rites and doctrines (about one and a half years); Purification class, oath taking, pledge to Heaven that one would maintain a vegetarian diet (a few days).

8. According to his case study of the Yiguan Dao in Taiwan, Lu (2008) argues that, due to its experience of state repression both in imperial China and also Kuomintang-rule Taiwan, the group traditionally lacked a well-organised and well-trained clergy to provide the necessary intellectual input to create a sophisticated theological system. However, since the Taiwan authorities revoked the ban on Yiguan Dao in 1987, the leaders of the group increasingly felt the need to develop an education system to provide members and the public with a more coherent set of basic doctrines, both in response to the sect's critics and to attract more the educated people. . It now operates openly as Yiguan Dao, and has become one of the most successful new religious movements in Taiwan.

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