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# Opening the Wilderness for the Way of Heaven: A Chinese New Religion in the Greater Vancouver Area

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## Introduction

“Opening the Wilderness” is a literal translation of the Chinese term *kaihuang* 開荒. In its basic meaning it refers to the opening up of wastelands to agricultural cultivation; Chinese sectarians have long used it for the activities of pioneer missionaries in hitherto unconverted areas. In this meaning the term was adopted by Christian missionaries to describe their endeavor to sow the faith in pagan soil. This use of the term is reflected in phrases such as *kaihuang budao* 開荒布道, which R.H. Mathews translates as “pioneer evangelism.”<sup>1</sup> In recent years a new religion has been coming from China to open up the spiritual wastelands of the West for its own faith. This religion calls itself alternatively the “Way of Heaven” [Tiandao 天道] or the “Way of Unity” [Yiguan Dao 一貫道].<sup>2</sup> To the general population, the presence of the Way of Heaven in the Greater Vancouver area is barely noticeable, even though between twenty and thirty “Buddha halls” [*fotang* 佛堂] of this religion are operating there. This obscurity is a result of the Tiandao’s mode of operation: most Buddha halls are located in ordinary residential homes, not recognizable from the outside as places of worship, and new members are sought through personal contacts rather than through public evangelism. From 1993 to 1996 I made a systematic effort to seek out Tiandao Buddha halls

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<sup>1</sup>Mathews’ *Chinese-English Dictionary*, 3204.147.

<sup>2</sup>Both terms are employed as autonyms by believers, though “Tiandao” is more commonly used these days. Although the scholarly literature tends to use the term “Yiguan Dao” as the more specific one, I shall follow my informants in using mainly the name “Tiandao.”

in the Greater Vancouver area with the aim of compiling a survey of the development of this new religion among a major overseas Chinese community. I took part in and observed activities of the Buddha halls and interviewed leading functionaries and ordinary members. This article presents some of my findings.<sup>3</sup>

## History and Teachings of Tiandao<sup>4</sup>

The Way of Heaven is both a new and an old religion. It is new in that it was given its present shape in the 1920s and 1930s by its leader Zhang Tianran 張天然. It is old in that it is a modern successor to a long Chinese tradition of popular sectarianism, reaching back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> The Way of Heaven sees itself as the carrier of a secret teaching ["mind-dharma," *xinfa* 心法], passed on for centuries only from one teacher to one disciple, until today it has finally been made available to everyone with the right karmic affinity. The mind-dharma originates from the primordial force of the cosmos, personified as a mother deity called the Venerable Mother of the Ultimateless [Wuji Laomu 無極老母].<sup>6</sup> The line of patriarchs who have passed on this teaching throughout history starts with the legendary founder of Chinese civilization, Pan'gu 盤古, and remains a largely mythical construct until we get to the more recent patriarchs. Many of these are shared with other sectarian groups; the first patriarch claimed exclusively by the Way of Heaven is the fourteenth patriarch Yao Hetian 姚鶴天, and the true founder of the present Way of Heaven is Yao's successor and fifteenth patriarch Wang Jueyi 王覺一 (d. 1884). It was Wang who coined the term "Teaching of Unity" [Yiguan Jiao 一貫教] for his faction within the Way of Prior Heaven [Xiantian Dao 先天道] cluster of sects.<sup>7</sup> The leadership of the sect passed through the hands of two more patriarchs before Zhang Tianran took over as the eighteenth patriarch in 1930 and reorganized its teachings and practices. Under Zhang Tianran's leadership the sect, now called Yiguan Dao, spread all over China, particularly in areas controlled by the Japanese and their Chinese puppet regime. After 1945 this resulted in charges of collaborationism against the Yiguan Dao, which counted high-ranking ministers of the puppet government among its initiates. Zhang Tianran died in 1947; immediately a

<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, the situation is described as it presented itself by early 1996, when I ended my systematic data collection.

<sup>4</sup>The following summary is based both on interviews with Vancouver Tiandao leaders and on accounts in the secondary literature. The latter includes Jordan, "Recent History of the Celestial Way"; Jordan and Overmyer, *Flying Phoenix*; Li Shiyu, *Xianzai Huabei mimi zongjiao*; Ma and Han, *Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi*, chapter 18; Sung, *Tiandao gouchen*; and Wang, "Taiwan Zhajijiao yanjiu zhi er."

<sup>5</sup>Daniel L. Overmyer provides the best general introductions to the Chinese tradition of popular sectarianism. See Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion and Precious Volumes*.

<sup>6</sup>Rather than the conventional written character for "mother" [*mu* 母], Tiandao uses the newly created character 𠂇 to express the cosmic and non-gender specific nature of the Eternal Mother.

<sup>7</sup>The term *yiguan* ["the one which pervades everything"] is derived from a passage in the *Analects* where Confucius claims that his Way "is that of an all-pervading unity" [*wu dao yi yi guan zhi* 吾道一以貫之]. See Legge, *The Chinese Classics* 1:169 (*Analects* 4.15).

conflict erupted between his two wives for leadership of the movement, resulting in the split of the Yiguan Dao into two factions loyal respectively to the first wife, Madame Liu 劉, and the second wife, Madame Sun 孫. The Sun-ist faction turned out to be more successful, and since all Buddha halls in the Vancouver area are from this faction we shall concentrate on it.

Madame Sun shares the eighteenth patriarchate with Zhang Tianran. Together they are revered in Buddha halls of the Sun-ist faction as “Honored Teacher” [*shizun* 師尊] and “Mother Teacher” [*shimu* 師母]. With the Communist victory in the civil war, Madame Sun had to leave the Chinese mainland and took refuge first in Hong Kong, then in Taiwan where she lived until her death in 1975. Even before her death, however, her leadership of the Yiguan Dao had become largely nominal. The sect had taken on a segmentary structure, consisting of named branches led by different disciples of Zhang Tianran or their disciples. The conventional figure given for the number of these branches is eighteen, but that does not accord with the real situation. As these branches have a tendency to further split up into sub-branches, and new branches may secede from established ones, it is very difficult to get a firm count. I have been able to identify seven branches in Greater Vancouver.<sup>8</sup> Each branch is led by an elder [*qianren* 前人], usually resident in Hong Kong or Taiwan, who has the final word in all affairs of the Vancouver Buddha halls.

The core teachings of the Way of Heaven center upon the “mind-dharma” whose transmission has been entrusted to it by the Venerable Mother. This “mind-dharma” is the knowledge of the unitary Way [Dao 道] that is only imperfectly given expression to by the existing religions. Accordingly, Tiandao does not see itself as a religion, but as representing the Dao underlying all religions. A common simile used is that of the Dao as the hand’s palm out of which the “five religions” (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) grow like the fingers. Consequently, initiation into Tiandao does not preclude the initiate from continuing to practice his or her original religion. There exists no necessary link between initiation and active membership. Initiation consists of a secret ceremony involving the teaching of a mudra and a mantra to the initiate. In addition, the initiator symbolically points out the seat of the Dao on the human body and opens the so-called “mysterious pass” 玄關 at this very spot (on the forehead). This ceremony teaches the initiate the location of the Dao, of his or her true divine self, and enables him or her to henceforth cultivate the Dao effectively. This cultivation can take place in a Tiandao *fo*tang, but there is no obligation to choose this particular environment. A Christian, for example, may continue to cultivate him or herself within the Church; what he or she has gained through Tiandao initiation is a new understanding of the Christian teaching. Tiandao views the Bible (and the scriptures of all other religions) as containing a level of esoteric meanings accessible only to the initiated; “receiving the Dao” [*dedao* 得道] in a Tiandao initiation provides the key for the understanding of this esoteric level.

Transmitting the Dao [*chuandao* 傳道] to as many persons as possible is the central mission of Tiandao. It is given a measure of urgency by the vision of an impending apocalypse in the course of which all the uninitiated will perish. As the Way is a treasure of

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<sup>8</sup>These are: Baoguang 寶光, Xingyi 興毅, Changzhou 常州, Jichu 基礎, Puguang 蒲光, Xingli 性理, and Shanyi 善一. The latter three branches are not among the standard eighteen branches. They are relatively small groups based in Hong Kong.

esoteric knowledge, however, it cannot be taught indiscriminately, which is one reason why Tiandao does not proselytize publicly, but prefers to approach converts through personal relationships. Only those with the correct karmic affinity [*you yuan de ren* 有緣的人] can be given the Dao. The criteria for determining whether an applicant is among the chosen differ from branch to branch. For some branches the simple fact that a person has come into contact with a Buddha hall and has uttered the wish to “seek the Dao” [*qiudao* 求道] is proof enough of their karmic affinity, while others select their candidates according to their moral worthiness.

The great emphasis laid upon initiation without an accompanying commitment to Tiandao as a religious institution explains why in most branches the number of initiates is several times that of the active membership, as many initiates choose not to become actively involved with the *fotang* where they received the Dao. The Buddha hall is the basic organizational unit of Tiandao as a religious institution. As we have seen, Tiandao views itself as representing the Dao, not a specific religious teaching [*jiao* 教]. This concern with the unitary Dao focuses on the initiation ceremony. All subsequent activities of the *fotang*, such as worship, meditation, and preaching, however, are recognized as “religious” in the sense that they are concerned with the cultivation of the previously transmitted Dao in the framework of a fixed set of doctrines and ritual practices. The *fotang* thus qualifies both emically and etically as a religious community.

A central component of Tiandao doctrine is its conception of the cosmos as proceeding in a cyclical movement from chaos through order back to chaos, and of a pantheon that guides humanity through this movement of the world. As I already pointed out, at the top of this pantheon is seated the Venerable Mother, formally known as Mingming Shangdi 明明上帝, who is the origin of everything in existence. Humans are her children and carry within themselves the divine spark that enables them to return to their Mother’s paradise, if they can attain and cultivate the Dao. The conferral of the Dao in the Tiandao initiation is thus considered an indispensable precondition for the return to one’s divine origin. The cultivation that is to follow aims to purify human nature from all desires and attachments of the profane world of dust. Purification is aided by meditative practices taught at the *fotang*, but its central component is a moral life. Moral conduct is deemed to both purify the mind and give expression to this purity; a crucial component of *fotang* meetings are long sermons on problems of everyday morality. The parameters used to define such a morality that is conducive to the cultivation of the Way are largely derived from China’s Confucian tradition, emphasizing the Eight Virtues [*bade* 八德] of filial piety, submission to one’s elder brother, loyalty, trustworthiness, propriety, righteousness, modesty, and a sense of shame. The need for moral reform is reinforced through preaching, mutual exhortation, and (sometimes) the keeping of “ledgers of merit and demerit” 功過格 by *fotang* members.

Tiandao liturgy centers upon the worship of a selection of deities from the Chinese pantheon by a complex pattern of bows and kowtows. Only a small number of these deities are represented on a Buddha hall’s altar, usually the Venerable Mother (represented by a lamp with the characters *wuji* 無極, “ultimateless,” on top), the Buddha Maitreya [彌勒祖師], Guanyin 觀音 [南海古佛], Jigong Huofo 濟公活佛, Guan Sheng Dijun 關聖帝君, and Lü Zu 呂祖. These deities are not only worshipped but also communicated with. Communication is achieved through the practice of spirit-writing [*fuji* 扶乩; *kaisha* 開沙],

whereby written messages from the gods are transmitted through an entranced medium. In Tiandao, spirit-writing is usually restricted to Buddha halls fairly high in the hierarchy. No Vancouver Buddha hall carries on spirit-writing on a regular basis. Usually the mother halls in Hong Kong or Taiwan hold regular séances; copies of the texts received are then faxed to the Vancouver halls. It is thus a major event when an elder visiting his or her branch's Vancouver halls brings along a spirit-writing team [*sancai* 三才] to perform there.<sup>9</sup>

## Organization of Buddha Halls

There are two types of *fotang*: “family halls” [*jiatang* 家堂] and “public halls” [*gongtang* 公堂]. A *fotang* is called a “family hall” when it is situated in a building that simultaneously serves as a family’s residence. The second type, “public halls,” are buildings that function exclusively as places of worship, the only people residing there being a few full-time Tiandao functionaries. An analogous difference in a Christian context would be between a home Bible study circle and a church. A “public hall” is usually headed by an initiator [*dianchuanshi* 點傳師], a person who has undergone several years of training and who has been authorized by his or her branch’s elder to perform the initiation ceremony on others. The initiator is aided by a number of meritorious laypeople from among the congregation who have been appointed to the rank of “shrine masters” [*tanzhu* 壇主]. This structure is best illustrated by means of a case example, for which I will refer to the Vancouver Buddha hall I am most familiar with, the Mingde Fotang 明德佛堂 [“Buddha Hall of Bright Virtue”], belonging to the Xingli 性理 branch and founded in 1989.<sup>10</sup>

This hall is headed by Initiator Huang, an unmarried woman of about fifty years of age. She is aided by two or three full-time female assistants who reside together with her in the *fotang*. Ms. Huang has appointed from among the lay membership four shrine masters (three women and one man) and six assistant shrine masters [*futananzhu* 副壇主] to help run the *fotang*. To involve as many members as possible in the affairs of the hall, the *fotang* is organized into five departments, which again are subdivided into work groups:

1. Department of Voluntary Work [*yigongbu* 義工部]
  - cleaning group [*qingjiezu* 清潔組]
  - transport group [*zaiyunzu* 載運組]
  - engineering group [*gongchengzu* 工程組]
  - supplementary group [*chengquanzu* 成全組]

<sup>9</sup>On Tiandao liturgy and mediumship, see Jordan, “Eufunctions, Dysfunctions, and Oracles”; Jordan and Overmyer, *Flying Phoenix*; Lane, “The Left Hand of God”; and Sung, *Tiandao gouchen*. See also Yeung, “The Celestial Way,” for an in-depth description of the liturgies employed by a Vancouver *fotang*.

<sup>10</sup>While the names of branches and Buddha halls are not pseudonymized, their romanizations and English renderings are my own and do not necessarily coincide with the halls’ own official designations. I proceed in this way both for the sake of consistency and to give some protection to my informants’ privacy.

2. Kitchen Duties [*chuwu* 廚務]
  - kitchen duties group [*chuwuzu* 廚務組]
  - shopping group [*goumaizu* 購買組]
3. Reception Department [*jiedaibu* 接待部]
  - documents group [*wenshuzu* 文書組]
  - on-duty group [*dangzhizu* 當值組]
  - information group [*zhihuizu* 知會組]
  - accounting group [*kuaijizu* 會計組]
  - computer group [*diannaozu* 電腦組]
4. Preaching Department [*xuanhuabu* 宣化部]
  - group looking after members in need [*qinminzu* 親民組]
  - children's group [*ertongzu* 兒童組]
  - preaching group [*fashizu* 法施組]
5. Department for Rituals and Music [*liyuebu* 禮樂部]
  - entertainment group [*kanglezu* 康樂組]
  - group for ritual garments [*lifuzu* 禮服組]
  - ritual training group [*lianlizu* 練禮組]
  - tape recording group [*yingyinzuz* 影音組]

Each department is headed by a “department head” [*buzhang* 部長], and each group by a group head [*zuzhang* 組長]. Group heads are often given a deputy [*fuzuzhang* 副組長] to help them, and have between two and five group members working under them. The department heads are all shrine masters or assistant shrine masters. To become a shrine master, a person has to prove his or her worthiness by particular devotion to the *fotang*; in addition he or she has to take a vow of total vegetarianism. Assistant shrine masters, by contrast, need only be partially vegetarian. Ms. Huang’s selection of *tanzhu* or *futananzhu* has to be approved by the branch’s elder in Hong Kong, who in turn has to submit the list of names for approval to the gods.

The above is the internal organization of the Buddha hall. All external affairs are handled by a board of managers [*dongshihui* 董事會], which consists of Initiator Huang and members skilled in handling financial and legal matters. As a purely secular institution, the membership of this board is appointed by Initiator Huang without confirmation by the elder or the gods.

The members of the Mingde Fotang meet every Sunday for worship, communal vegetarian meals, and sermons. Special religious classes are held on Sundays for the children. On other days of the week, classes [*ban* 班] are held for smaller groups of members: Monday mornings an English language class, Tuesday evenings a meditation class, Wednesday and Friday evenings training classes for the shrine masters, and Thursday evenings a Cantonese language class for the Buddha hall’s non-Chinese members. Communal worship, preceded by a cleaning of the whole *fotang*, also takes place on the first and fifteenth of every moon. Meetings of the department heads and of the shrine masters are held once a month. Twice a year, five day “dharma assemblies” [*fahui* 法會] are held, which are marathon events consisting of special worship ceremonies, sermons, and lavish vegetarian banquets. The dharma assemblies are usually attended by emissaries from the Hong Kong headquarters, who

conduct classes and give sermons. Other events are scheduled on an irregular basis, such as picnic excursions, “assemblies for releasing living beings” [*fangsheng hui* 放生會], and training classes for new initiates.

At least once every two years, the branch elder Mr. Huang comes to Vancouver to participate in a dharma assembly. Often he brings with him a spirit-writing team to perform at the Mingde Fotang. In spite of his age (he is over eighty years old), Elder Huang frequently goes on overseas trips visiting his branch’s *fotang* all over the world. In 1996 the Xingli branch had a total of fifteen Buddha halls: five in Hong Kong, six in Canada (one each in Vancouver, Edmonton, Ottawa, and Montreal, as well as two in the Toronto area), two in the U.S.A. (New York and San Francisco), one in Singapore, and one in Australia (Sidney). New halls were in the process of being set up in the Netherlands, France, and England.

The Mingde Fotang follows a selective policy in initiation. Initiator Huang insists that candidates attend the Buddha hall for some time before being initiated, thus building up a personal relationship. For this reason the great majority of the approximately 400 people initiated since 1989 have remained loyal to the hall and attend its activities regularly. As in most other Buddha halls, among the membership women outnumber men by at least two to one.

The Mingde Fotang is an especially thoroughly organized and active Buddha hall, but in its general outline this organizational structure applies to all public halls. In family halls, which are usually smaller and have a much less active schedule of events, this structure tends to be less complex. Family halls are often led by persons of shrine master rank, which means that these halls are not able to initiate people on their own, but must secure the services of an outside initiator.<sup>11</sup> If their Tiandao branch does not have an initiator in the Greater Vancouver area, the shrine master will invite an initiator from the branch’s headquarters in Hong Kong or Taiwan to perform the initiation. Of the eleven *fotang* that I have visited personally, six are family halls and five are public halls.

## Development of Tiandao in Greater Vancouver

There are a number of reasons why it is not easy to investigate the history of the Way of Heaven in Vancouver. As the Buddha halls are not recognizable as such from the outside, the researcher needs to rely on personal introductions to even find a worship group. Even when one is introduced to one *fotang*, however, this does not mean that one will be able to move on easily to other groups. Due to the already mentioned segmentary structure, the Buddha halls are not connected in a comprehensive network. Cooperation between Buddha halls is minimal and mostly restricted to halls belonging to the same branch or sub-branch.<sup>12</sup> A further factor is

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<sup>11</sup>This, however, is not a hard and fast rule. I have been to three family halls in Greater Vancouver that were headed by persons of initiator rank.

<sup>12</sup>An exception is the relationship between the Buddha halls belonging to the Puguang and Xingli branches, which maintain close contacts. To a lesser extent, the Shanyi halls also participate in this cooperation. This is due to the friendly and cooperative relations of these branches’ elders in Hong Kong. By contrast, there are two Xingyi branch halls in Greater Vancouver (one in North Vancouver,

the great emphasis laid by Yiguan Dao doctrine on “saving others” [*du ren* 度人] by initiating them into the Way; Yiguan Dao disciples are usually eager to initiate somebody into their own group and reluctant to let them go on to other groups. In addition, the whole project of investigating the Celestial Way’s development strikes most hall leaders as rather irrelevant; there exists a strong anti-intellectual tendency, more pronounced in some halls than others, which sees any mental effort centering upon things other than the Dao as misguided and futile. As a rule, functionaries are happy to expound upon the Way for hours on end, but regard it as a waste of their time to discuss externals such as the founding date of their hall, their branch affiliation, the difficulties met in setting up the hall, organizational details, and the like. A common problem met by researchers trying to study Yiguan Dao in Asian countries, where the religion often is subject to government pressures, is the defensive attitude of secrecy adopted by many leaders. In Vancouver, where such government pressures do not exist, cautious reluctance towards outside investigators usually does not play a role.

One of the unfortunate results of these conditions is that I was not able to visit every Buddha hall in the Greater Vancouver area. I have reliable evidence for the existence by 1996 of twenty *fotang* in the Greater Vancouver area, though the total number is likely higher, perhaps thirty or so. For fifteen *fotang* I managed to determine their branch affiliations and approximate founding dates; these are listed in the appendix. Out of these fifteen, I personally visited eleven. The following account is largely based on information gathered in these eleven Buddha halls, whose leaders were forthcoming with information to differing degrees, so that the quality of the data collected varies from hall to hall.

The earliest Tiandao group established in the area was the “Buddha Hall of Bright Truth” [Mingzhen Fotang 明真佛堂, Baoguang branch 寶光組], which was set up probably in the late 1970s. This was followed by the “Buddha Hall of Just Brightness” [Gongming Fotang 公明佛堂, probably also Baoguang branch], which opened its doors in 1980 or 1981. On these two pioneer halls, I unfortunately have very little information. The picture gets clearer when we get to the third group founded in Vancouver, the “Buddha Hall of Aiding Virtue” [Xiede Fotang 協德佛堂] which opened its doors officially in 1983.<sup>13</sup> The Xiede Fotang belongs to a Hong Kong-based branch of Tiandao calling itself “Hall of Unity in Goodness” [Shanyi Tang 善一堂], a split-off from the Changzhou branch 常州組. Led by an almost ninety-year-old elder named Chen Wenhua, the Shanyi Tang counts over thirty Buddha halls in Hong Kong. Since the early 1980s the Shanyi Tang has been actively trying to establish Buddha halls overseas and has succeeded in doing so in Canada, the U.S.A., Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and Singapore. When Initiator Cao was entrusted by Elder Chen with the task of “opening the wilderness” of Vancouver, she was already close to seventy years old. Arriving in Vancouver in early 1981, she regularly attended services at a Buddhist temple on

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the other in Coquitlam) which, belonging as they do to different sub-branches, are not even aware of each other’s existence.

<sup>13</sup>Information derived from an interview on January 29, 1996, with the Xiede Fotang’s leader, Miss Cao, and two functionaries of the Xunwen Fotang 遜文佛堂, another hall of the same branch. Additional information has been derived from Mary Yeung’s “The Celestial Way (Tian Dao): The Xiede Buddhist Hall as a Case Study,” a term paper prepared for Daniel Overmyer’s course on “Buddhism in China” at the University of British Columbia. I would like to thank Miss Yeung for permission to use her paper.

49th Avenue. There she met fellow Tiandao members (so-called “relatives in the Way,” *daoqin* 道親) who introduced her to the two already existing *fotang*, both of which were located in Chinatown. By 1983 she had gathered a sufficient number of faithful around her to set up her own Buddha hall in a residential home which she bought after a protracted search. Called the Xiede Fotang, this hall has been operating continuously ever since and has initiated hundreds of people over the years. Of these, however, only a core group of between fifty and one hundred persons regularly attend the activities of the hall. Among this core group, women predominate. After attending several Sunday morning services, University of British Columbia graduate student Mary Yeung observed that the congregation was usually made up of more than fifty women and fewer than thirty men. This gender disparity prevails in many Buddha halls and was explained by one Shanyi Tang initiator, Miss Huang, as due to the fact that women are less bound up with work and thus have more time to devote to religious activities. The Xiede Fotang congregation consists exclusively of ethnic Chinese, another aspect in which it is typical of Greater Vancouver Buddha halls.

The Xiede Fotang served as a springboard for the subsequent establishment of further Shanyi Tang Buddha halls. In 1989 the Chanwen Fotang 闡文佛堂 was established in Burnaby, in 1990 the Xunwen Fotang 遜文佛堂 in Vancouver, and in 1992 the Dewen Fotang 德文佛堂 in Richmond, bringing the total number of halls affiliated with this Tiandao branch to four. They are collectively registered with the government as a “moral society.” The total number of initiates of these four halls runs to more than 2,000.

Though my figures are not complete, it seems that a boom of *fotang* foundings started in the early 1990s. Of the fifteen *fotang* for which I possess fairly definite founding dates, ten were established between 1990 and 1995. Also, while all the *fotang* opened in the 1980s originated with Hong Kong-based branches of Tiandao, the 1990s saw the advent of an increasing number of Buddha halls of Taiwanese background. This development apparently reflects the large number of Taiwanese investor immigrants in these years who arrived under a Canadian government program granting landed immigrant status in return for a sizeable investment in an approved economic venture in Canada. Thus at present, *fotang* are separated from each other not only by branch affiliation, but also by language, with Hong Kong halls operating in Cantonese and Taiwan halls in Mandarin and/or Taiwanese.

While in general these two linguistic communities do not mix much, there are some *fotang* that cater to both by providing simultaneous translation of their sermons. Most notable in this respect is a group of *fotang* affiliated with a Taiwanese organization called the “Buddha Maitreya’s Court of Celestial Grace” [Tianen Milefo Yuan 天恩彌勒佛院]. Strictly speaking, this is not a Tiandao branch, but an attempt to establish a unified leadership set above all the individual branches. Its leader, Wang Haode 王好德, headquartered in the Taiwanese city of Hsinchu, had been assigned to look after Madame Sun, the “teacher-mother,” during the last years of her life. Some time after her death Wang began to claim that Madame Sun had entrusted the leadership of Yiguan Dao to him, and he demanded to be recognized as the religion’s head by all the other elders. Only a minority did so, however, while the majority rejected his claim.<sup>14</sup> Wang Haode’s group established itself in Vancouver in

<sup>14</sup>The general background of Wang Haode’s faction outlined above is taken from the short account in Zhou, Lin, and Wang, *Gaoxiang xian jiaopai zongjiao*, 84.

grand style in 1994. A Baoguang branch elder from Hong Kong, who is a supporter of Wang Haode, provided the funds for the purchase of a former Christian church building. The building was converted into a Tiandao temple featuring a massive Maitreya Buddha statue (the largest in Canada, according to the temple's leadership), flanked by large-size statues of patriarch Zhang Tianran and Madame Sun.<sup>15</sup> This building is named Tianen Milefo Yuan after the group's headquarters in Taiwan. It is the only Tiandao hall in Greater Vancouver that is not situated in a residential building and that is clearly marked as a temple. The initiators leading the Vancouver Milefo Yuan are from Taiwan, but for their sermons in Mandarin simultaneous translation into Cantonese is provided, indicating a conscious effort to appeal both to Cantonese and to Mandarin speaking converts. At least eight Buddha halls in Vancouver, both Cantonese and Mandarin speaking ones, recognize Wang Haode's authority and maintain close contact with the Milefo Yuan. They form a faction largely cut off from the other Tiandao *fotang* whose leaders do not recognize Wang Haode's leadership.<sup>16</sup>

It is always difficult to investigate conflicts within the Celestial Way, as members are forbidden to speak ill of others. Tensions between the Wang Haode faction and the other *fotang*, however, are quite obvious. Wang Haode's claim to have been given a mandate for overall leadership of the Celestial Way is not a matter of merely administrative significance. It involves serious questions of orthodoxy and legitimacy. In Tiandao, the right and the ability to "transmit the Way" is passed along in a kind of apostolic succession. Zhang Tianran bestowed this power on his disciples, who in turn gave it to their disciples. The latter became the elders of the present branches who confer the authority to transmit the Way to the next lower level of functionaries, the initiators. In order for an initiation to be valid, the performing initiator has to be properly empowered. By claiming to have taken over Madame Sun's mandate for leadership, Wang Haode tries to occupy a nodal point in Tiandao's orthodox line of tradition, where he is the only authentic source of legitimacy and power. Accordingly, the initiations of any branch that does not recognize Wang's authority are regarded by his faction as not properly authorized and hence invalid. "Relatives in the Way" who switch from an "illegitimate" *fotang* to an orthodox one, have to be initiated again, as their former initiation is not recognized.

The other *fotang* do not take kindly to such an attempt to rob them of their legitimacy. With typical Tiandao reticence and politeness, this conflict is not fought openly and there is no willingness to wash dirty laundry before the eyes of an outside observer. The strongest criticism of the Milefo Yuan faction that I have heard from the leader of an unaffiliated *fotang* is that it is "not orthodox" [*bu zheng* 不正], which basically throws the ball of heresy back into Wang Haode's court. More typical are suggestions that people like Wang Haode,

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<sup>15</sup>In smaller scale *fotang*, the patriarch and Madame Sun are usually represented by photographs hung to each side of the altar. This was the first time I had seen them represented by larger than life-size statues.

<sup>16</sup>Most of the Buddha halls that recognize Wang Haode's authority belong to Tiandao's Baoguang branch, which is also where Wang Haode started out. At least one of the eight halls, however, belongs to the Jichu branch. Wang Haode has not abolished the branches, but simply demands their leaders' allegiance to his person.

unbeknownst to themselves, are sent by Heaven as a trial so as to test the “relatives in the Way’s” steadfastness and ability to tell right from wrong.<sup>17</sup>

## Factors and Patterns in the Local Development of Tiandao

The coming of the Celestial Way to the Greater Vancouver area coincides with the increase of Chinese immigration to the area. Sometimes there exists a direct link: an immigrant who comes to Canada for personal reasons and who is a Tiandao member wants to practice his religion here and therefore decides to set up a family-type Buddha hall in his home. I have visited four such Buddha halls which have been set up in homes of wealthy Taiwanese or Hong Kong businessmen who came to Canada under the investor immigrant program. Public halls, by contrast, are typically founded by initiators who were specifically dispatched by their elders with the purpose of “opening the wilderness.” We have seen such a pattern in the establishment of the Xiede Fotang by Initiator Cao. Another such example is the Mingde Fotang which I have described above. In these cases the connection to Chinese immigration to Canada lies in the fact that it has created a large community of first generation Chinese-Canadians who constitute the primary target group of Tiandao missionaries.

The presence of a large pool of potential converts among overseas Chinese communities is a key factor in the overseas expansion of Hong Kong- and Taiwan-based Tiandao branches. The drive to proselytize overseas is grounded in an earnest desire to spread the Dao as far over the globe as possible. The Way of Heaven places a strong emphasis on missionary activity, which needed new outlets as soon as the religion’s growth peaked and leveled off in its base areas, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Starting in the 1970s this missionary impulse thus came to be directed at the overseas Chinese communities.

For the Hong Kong branches an external factor further stimulating overseas expansion was the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997. As the Way of Heaven is a proscribed religion in mainland China, many “relatives in the Way” were apprehensive about the new authorities’ attitude toward Tiandao, prompting a drive to establish a secure new basis for their branches outside of Hong Kong and China. This motivation played an important role, for example, in the expansion of the small Hong Kong-based Xingli branch, which by now has significantly more Buddha halls overseas than in Hong Kong. This expansion started in 1988 when a question concerning the future of the Xingli branch was answered by the planchette with the statement “*qiantu meihao*” 前途美好, “the future is beautiful and good.” Elder Huang recognized a hidden message in this somewhat bland affirmation: “mei” [“beautiful”] can also mean “America” [Meiguo 美國]; thus the message could be read as “in the future America will be good.” Thereupon Elder Huang established a one-year course to be taken by future missionaries [*kaihuangban* 開荒班], which included instruction in English, Mandarin, Tiandao doctrine, the scriptures of the five major religions, and vegetarian cooking. From among the ninety graduates of this course, twenty were chosen to go to San Francisco, where a nephew and a niece of Elder Huang were living. There this group of missionaries set up the

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<sup>17</sup>Incidentally, members of the Milefo Yuan faction will use this same rationale to explain other elders’ unwillingness to recognize Wang Haode.

first overseas Buddha hall of the Xingli branch. The reference to America was not interpreted in an overly restrictive sense, as in the same year another group of missionaries led by Initiator Huang (a daughter of Elder Huang) came to Vancouver to establish the first Canadian Buddha hall of the Xingli branch, the aforementioned Mingde Fotang. It is no coincidence that over the years Canada has become the country with the highest number of Xingli-affiliated *fotang*. There existed plans to move the branch's headquarters and assets from Hong Kong to Vancouver prior to the handover in 1997, establishing a new basis of operations in Canada. This prompted the Mingde Fotang to make an effort to establish a more secure legal basis for its activities in Vancouver. Like most other public halls, the Mingde Fotang had previously been registered with the provincial government under the British Columbia Society Act. In 1995 it lodged an application to be recognized as a religious and charitable institution which was granted after the Buddha hall appealed an initial rejection. This gave the Mingde Fotang a more favorable tax status and also allowed it to raise funds for charitable work. One of Initiator Huang's projects for the future is the establishment of a Xingli branch-operated primary school with a strong emphasis on moral education, an aspect she thinks is sadly neglected by the British Columbia public school system. The new arrangement has clear legal and fiscal advantages for the Mingde Fotang, but it has also greatly complicated its institutional existence. For example, its charitable status demands strict accounting procedures and makes it subject to periodic government audits, pushing it towards greater professionalism in the management of its affairs. The Buddha hall has also found that its new status may sometimes work against it. When a neighbor lodged a complaint against the Buddha hall for operating a place of worship in a residential area, there was not much the *fotang* could do to counter this argument. It applied to the municipal authorities to have its lot rezoned so that it could be used for religious purposes, but by the time I left Vancouver in 1998 this application had been rejected and the Hall was preparing to relocate to a commercial district. These experiences may deter other *fotang* from enhancing their legal status, but the Xingli branch decided that it had no choice but to jump through all these bureaucratic hoops in order to attain the institutional stability needed for a relocation of its global headquarters to Vancouver. In the end, however, it was all for naught as the numerous legal and bureaucratic difficulties tipped the scales against Vancouver; the branch's assets were transferred to a New York City Buddha hall instead.

## Outlook

The vast majority of active *daoqin* in the Greater Vancouver area currently are first generation immigrants. For them a Tiandao *fotang* is a cultural home away from home, a place where traditional Chinese culture and values are cultivated and lived. In this context it has to be pointed out that although the Tiandao is often maligned by outsiders (especially Buddhists) as a "heterodox religion" [*xiejiao* 邪教], in fact there is nothing exceedingly exotic about the religion's teachings or rituals. Quite to the contrary, the prevailing impression one gets from attending Tiandao services is that of a conscious cultural conservatism, an ambition to cultivate the attitudes and values of a highly honored Chinese tradition. I am not saying that Tiandao *fotang* are merely ethnic clubs with a thin religious veneer; they are

serious and committed religious communities. Their cultural dimension, however, does play a significant role in attracting and holding members and is therefore not to be neglected. The function of providing continuity in a culturally discontinuous environment has been noted for Tiandao groups in other overseas Chinese settings as well.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, sects such as Tiandao play this role as repositories of Chinese tradition (rather than its heretical antithesis) not just in overseas Chinese communities, but also in Taiwan where modernization appears to threaten that tradition, creating another form of discontinuity. Here, too, it is the traditionalism of Tiandao that attracts many converts.<sup>19</sup>

The strong identification of Tiandao with traditional Chinese culture that helps attract culturally uprooted first generation immigrants, on the other hand, seems to obstruct efforts to proselytize among second generation ethnic Chinese and among Westerners. Attempts to convert Westerners have been largely unsuccessful so far. Many *fotang* have initiated a number of Westerners, but only one has been able to integrate some of these initiates into the hall's community. To a certain extent, this is due to linguistic barriers. Monolingual Cantonese initiators find it very difficult already to attract even Mandarin speakers; these difficulties of communication are compounded when they have to deal with speakers of English. I think, however, that cultural barriers are even more important. Tiandao doctrines and practices are so closely enmeshed with Chinese culture that it is not easy for Westerners to find access to them. Those Westerners that are attracted by the Way of Heaven have typically had previous exposure to some aspect of Eastern culture, which serves to narrow the cultural gap. Such exposure may take the form of Zen meditation, Taiji or Qigong gymnastics, Asian martial arts, or being married to a Chinese spouse. It is for the same reason that Tiandao finds it difficult to attract second generation Chinese-Canadians who usually have distanced themselves from the cultural background in which their parents had been brought up. Having gone through the Canadian education system, in many cases they are not able to read Chinese and are much more familiar with Western than with Chinese cultural concepts.

In a way, Tiandao is faced with problems similar to those that Christianity had (and still has) to struggle with in its effort to spread the gospel in China. It is now recognized by many Christian denominations what the Jesuits had already realized in the sixteenth century, namely, that Christianity has to be "inculturated"; it has to stop being a Western ethnic religion and become a genuinely Chinese religion if it wants to gain a firm foothold in the Chinese cultural area.<sup>20</sup> By the same token, if Tiandao wants to establish itself firmly in Canada, it will have to find a way to shed the cultural baggage that makes its message

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<sup>18</sup>See Sung, *Tiandao chuandeng*, chapter 6, on the role of *fotang* as carriers of Chinese ethnic and cultural identity in Tiandao's spread in Southeast Asia. Further information on Tiandao's development in Southeast Asia (specifically in Malaysia) can be found in Soo, "Xian jieduan de Yiguan Dao yanjiu" and "A Study of the Yiguan Dao."

<sup>19</sup>Clart, "Sects, Cults, and Popular Religion." The strong role of traditionalism in Tiandao has already been emphasized in Seiwert, "Religious Response to Modernization in Taiwan." See also Joseph Bosco's argument against a view of Chinese sects as radically opposed to conventional religion; he argues instead for a fundamental continuity between Tiandao and Chinese popular religion (Bosco, "Yiguan Dao").

<sup>20</sup>However, while this is widely accepted in principle, opinions on how far "inculturation" of the churches' teachings can go without compromising the gospel are vastly divided.

inaccessible to persons not steeped in Chinese culture. Otherwise it will remain an ethnic religion catering to a shrinking clientele of first generation immigrants. The current Tiandao leaders in Greater Vancouver are without exception first generation themselves and are too monocultural to approach such a project. Most of them are content to confine themselves to the pool of (at the moment very numerous) Chinese immigrants and to leave the future in the hands of providence.

The Mingde Fotang is, as far as I am aware, the only Tiandao group in Vancouver to make a conscious effort to attract and retain Western converts. In 1996 it had a contingent of four or five Western initiates for whose benefit an English language service was being held on Thursday evenings. This was preceded by a Cantonese language class for those who were interested. The worship ritual was conducted in English, the translations having been worked out over several months by a translation group consisting of bilingual Chinese members and some Western members. They also received input from the Hong Kong headquarters and made use of the translations of Tiandao liturgy in David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer's *The Flying Phoenix*, which contains two chapters on Tiandao.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the lengthy sermon (sometimes up to two hours) that is listened to respectfully and silently by the Chinese membership on Sundays was replaced by a lively roundtable discussion for the English language congregation. Topics ranged from expositions of basic Tiandao doctrine to deliberations on aspects of the Confucian moral code, for which James Legge's translations of *The Four Books* were employed.<sup>22</sup> There are probably two reasons for the Mingde Fotang's special efforts to develop a non-Chinese membership. For one thing, there is the previously mentioned concern of the Xingli branch to develop a firm local foundation in Vancouver. In addition, the Xingli branch leader Elder Huang himself has a less monocultural background than most Tiandao elders. He speaks fluent English, was educated in a Catholic school in Hong Kong, and served during the Second World War as an interpreter in C.L. Chennault's Flying Tigers Corps. Still, if one looks more closely at the Mingde Fotang's efforts, one will find that they are not truly an attempt at inculturation. Taken together with this Buddha hall's Cantonese classes for Westerners, religious instruction for the members' children, and the plans for a Tiandao primary school, the objective rather seems to be the creation of a sufficiently "sinified" community of believers among Westerners and second-generation Chinese-Canadians to carry on Tiandao's mission in Canada without having to make significant doctrinal compromises for the sake of "inculturation."

Such inculturation will likely be a task left to the next generation of local-born leadership who will stand a better chance of acquiring the necessary linguistic and cultural skills. Whether inculturation will ever be successful is an open question. In a study of Tiandao's development in Indonesia, Iem Brown found that although after forty years of proselytizing the Indonesian language had largely supplanted Chinese in all ritual procedures and sermons, the religion was still attractive mainly to those Indonesian Chinese with a strong attachment to traditional Chinese culture. Brown concludes that with the decline in numbers of this clientele

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<sup>21</sup>In December of 1995, the Xingli branch headquarters began to coordinate translation work in its Hong Kong and overseas Buddha halls with a view to increasing the amount of English language material available and standardizing the religious terminology.

<sup>22</sup>Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vols. 1 and 2.

“the very reason for the rapid growth of Maitreya Buddhism [as he calls Tiandao] over the past two decades, namely its many continuities with traditional Chinese religious culture, may in the long run prove to be its downfall.”<sup>23</sup>

By the same token, the very “Chineseness” of Tiandao that is currently one of its strongest selling points in the Greater Vancouver area will hinder efforts at cultural translation. From the viewpoint of Tiandao moral teachings, for example, the Confucian Eight Virtues [*bade*] are universal virtues, the expressions of the human mind’s natural goodness. From a Western viewpoint, on the other hand, they constitute a culturally specific morality that does not easily tie in with the religious traditions and life experience of Western civilization. How such fundamental differences might be negotiated remains to be seen.

## Appendix

The table below provides information on the fifteen Buddha halls for whose existence in the year of 1996 I have obtained sufficient evidence. Not completely corroborated information is marked with a question mark. The category “L” (“language”) refers to the language used principally in the *fotang*’s proceedings (C, Cantonese; M, Mandarin, frequently combined with Taiwanese; E, English). The category “T” (“type”) indicates whether it is a public (P) or a family (F) hall. The answer under the rubric “V” (“visit”) indicates whether or not I have personally visited the *fotang*. The term “Tianen” after the branch affiliation indicates that the *fotang* recognizes Wang Haode’s legitimacy.

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<sup>23</sup>Brown, “Agama Buddha Maitreya,” 123. The full implications of “cultural translation” are underestimated by current Tiandao leaders and also, I believe, by Sung Kwang-yu, the leading scholar in “Tiandao-ology.” While he stresses Tiandao’s need to universalize and grow beyond the Chinese cultural sphere, he seems to see the problem mainly as a linguistic one which can be solved by the development of foreign language skills (*Tiandao chuandeng*, 433-434). By contrast, Iem Brown’s study underlines that inculturation involves far more than language adaptation.

Fifteen *fotang* in Greater Vancouver (1996)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Branch</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Founding Date</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>V</i>
Mingzhen Fotang 明真佛堂	Baoguang (Tianen?)	Vancouver	late 1970s	C	P	no
Gongming Fotang 公明佛堂	Baoguang?	Vancouver	1980/81	C	P	no
Xiede Fotang 協德佛堂	Shanyi	Vancouver	1983	C	P	yes
Chanwen Fotang 闡文佛堂	Shanyi	Burnaby	1989	C	P	no
Mingde Fotang 明德佛堂	Xingli	Vancouver	1989	C E	P	yes
Xunwen Fotang 遜文佛堂	Shanyi	Vancouver	1990	C	P	yes
Hongguang Fotang 宏光佛堂	Jichu/Tianen	Vancouver	c. 1991	C	F	yes
Dengshi Fotang 鄧氏佛堂	Xingyi	Coquitlam	c. 1991	M	F	yes
Pude Fotang 普德佛堂	Changzhou	Richmond	1992	C M	P	yes
Xinmin Tan 新民壇	Puguang	Burnaby	c. 1992	C	F	yes
Dewen Fotang 德文佛堂	Shanyi	Richmond	1992	C	P	no
Lushi Fotang? 盧氏佛堂	Xingyi	North Vancouver	c. 1994	M	F	yes
Tianen Milefo Yuan 天恩彌勒佛院	Baoguang/ Tianen	Vancouver	1994	C M	P	yes
Xinzhong Fotang 信衆佛堂	Baoguang/ Tianen	Richmond	1994	M	F	yes
Tianyong Fotang 天永佛堂	Baoguang/ Tianen	Burnaby	1995	M	F	yes

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