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Yiguan Dao in Hong Kong: A Case Study of its Organizational Characteristics and Conversion Experiences of Adherents

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Abstract: Through extensive fieldwork in a Yiguan Dao Buddha Hall located in Hong Kong, this paper attempts to study the organizational characteristics of this Chinese religion and the conversion experiences of its adherents. It first discusses the developmental history and features of this religion through textual analysis and interview. Drawing insights from Lofland and Stark's model of conversion (1965), it attempts to study how conversion takes place in Yiguan Dao through analyzing the narratives of twelve Yiguan Dao practitioners in Hong Kong. It suggests a five-stage model to explain their conversion to Yiguan Dao that consists of (1) *predisposing personal conditions*; (2) *developing social ties with Dao practitioners*; (3) *receiving Dao*; (4) *cultivating Dao* and (5) *promoting Dao*. In brief, social networks play a significant role in the conversion process as it often takes places within family, among friends, colleagues, and neighbors.

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Introduction

Yiguan Dao 一貫道 (also known as Tian Dao 天道, I-Kuan Dao or the Way of Unity) was founded in 1905 by Liu Qingxu in mainland China, but it can trace its origin doctrinally to Luo Sect (15th century) and organizationally to "Prior-to-heaven Dao" (18th century). It was perceived as a cult at this point of time. Based on data from Chinese provincial governments, Lin estimated that there were at least 1,500,000 members in the 1940s in Mainland China with the largest membership in Shanxi province (421,375) (Lin 2007: 270). When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came into power in 1949, Yiguan Dao suffered ruthless suppression by the government and many of its masters and practitioners fled to Taiwan and Hong Kong, places that were beyond the control of the CCP at that time. After surviving a similar suppression by the Kuomintang in Taiwan, Yiguan Dao was officially recognized by the government in 1987. Hong Kong and Taiwan are then known as strongholds for the spread of Yiguan Dao after its eradication on the Mainland by the Communist regime. Nowadays, it has established overseas branches in America, Canada, South Asia and Europe and succeeded in attracting local members beyond ethnic

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Chinese.

The reason for choosing Yiguan Dao as a case study is two-fold. Firstly, although Yiguan Dao is a fast-growing religion in Chinese communities and has attracted scholarly attention in Taiwan (e.g. Jordan & Overmyer 1986; Lu 2008; 2011) and Malaysia (Soo 1997), there is little or inadequate studies on its development in Hong Kong (Soo 1997: 24). This paper can shed some lights on the characteristics of this religion and thereby enrich the sociological studies of new religion in contemporary Hong Kong. Secondly, it is interesting to see how conversion takes place in Chinese religions, and how it may differ from the processes suggested in the Lofland and Stark's model (1965) derived from the study of a Western religion (i.e. Unification Church).

Methodology

In September 2012 and March 2013, I conducted fieldwork in a Yiguan Dao Buddha Hall in Hong Kong for my Ph.D. thesis. I focused on a group of believers in Bao Guan Buddha Hall 寶光佛堂, which is located in a factory estate in Kwan Fong, New Territories (Figure 1). This Buddha hall is chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, Bao Guan Buddha Hall belongs to *Ji Chu* Division 基礎組, which is one of the most well-established divisions among the eighteen divisions of Yiguan Dao and has the most branches in Hong Kong. Focusing on this group enables me to understand how a typical Buddha hall of Yiguan Dao has operated in Hong Kong. Second, the fact that Bao Guan Buddha Hall has attracted members of various social backgrounds that suits my interest in doing a qualitative analysis of conversion experiences of adherents coming from different backgrounds.

Figure 1. Passing through the corridor filled with chairs is the entrance of the Buddha Hall

In this paper, the history of Yiguan Dao in Hong Kong is examined mainly through the oral histories of members. Besides, along with participant observation (attending Dao lessons and vegetarian banquets and taking part in religious rites regularly), data are gathered through semi-structural interviews with members. In particular, twelve active members were selected on

the basis of Snow and Machalek's identification scheme (1984: 172)[1] for in-depth interview to study their conversion experiences. The results are compared with Lofland-Stark's model of conversion at the end of this paper. Appendix 1 summarizes the details of twelve informants. In terms of limitation, narrative analysis based on interviews of twelve current Yiguan Dao adherents is qualitative in nature. Therefore it may represent the ideas of some members and should not be viewed as the general picture of the organization.

Doctrines of Yiguan Dao

Yiguan Dao believes that all creatures in this world are created by the Eternal Venerable Mother (*Wusheng Laomu* 無生老母) and will return to this origin if ones can find the right way (*Dao*) through "cultivating Dao" (xiudao 修道). The organization rejects the label "religion" and regards itself merely as a group of people known as "Dao cultivator" 道親 who practice Dao and pursue the saving truths. According to Yiguan Dao's official history, the truths originated from Wusheng Laomu and were consecutively inherited by 68 Saints until today (Song 2011: 101–4). Prominent figures in the Dao-orthodoxy include Pangu, Laozi, Confucius, and Shakumuni. The organization claims that the saving truths of mankind are not only found in the classics of Chinese religions and philosophies (Confucianism and Taoism) but also in the holy scriptures of different world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam). Therefore, it is important for Dao cultivators to enhance their knowledge of these classics.

Yiguan Dao promotes a strict vegetarian diet. To cultivate Dao and free oneself from the cycle of reincarnation, one must stop killing (eating meat) and change to a vegetarian diet. The religion also puts particular accent on the promotion of *gu-li* (古禮), a set of traditional etiquettes invented in ancient China.[2] For instance, disciples are required to bow to their master, wear robe inside Buddha hall, talk and act with proper manner, and sit separately for men and women, etc.

All Yiguan Dao members acquire the *san-bao* 三寶 (English: three treasures) at the end of initiation rite, which are believed to be holy power rendered by Eternal mother. They are *Xuan Guan* 玄關 (a point on our face where the soul enters our physical body), Wu-zi-zhen-jing 無字真經 (sutra without words) and *He Tong* 合同 (a symbolic seal or *mudra*) (Chen 2008: 29).

1 They argue that conversion occurs when one experiences four stages known as (1) *biographical reconstruction*, (2) *the adoption of a master attribution scheme*, (3) *a suspension of analogical reasoning*, and (4) *embracement of the convert role*.

2 The purpose of which is to maintain Chinese family ethics and social harmony through the promotion of proper standards (usually derived from Confucianism) of moral principle, behavior, and speech. Adopting the spirits of *gu-li* and applying them into contemporary society, Yiguan Dao's doctrines and practices emphasize the unbreakable relation between master and disciples, family ethnics, seniority, gender differences, proper outlook and speech, and respect to others.

Yiguan Dao in Hong Kong

When the Chinese Communist Party came into power in 1949, Yiguan Dao was criticised as "reactionary cults" (*fandong huidaomen*) by the Maoist government and became the target of suppression together with other popular religions (Soo 1997: 23). Millions of ordinary believers were forced to discard their faith, and those who were reluctant to do so were put into jail and some were even executed (Lu 2008: 40–1). Some leaders were able to escape to Hong Kong where religious freedom was guaranteed by the colonial government. Upon their arrival to the city, due to the lack of human and financial resources, re-establishing the organization was not an easy task. Some were so poor that they could not even feed themselves. Some lived together in a small flat to reduce living expenses and made small handicraft like plastic flowers to earn a living. Years later they were able to save enough money and started to buy or rent new properties (usually flats with rooftops) big enough for religious activities and group worships. During the 1950s, the religion retained a low public profile (Soo 1997: 1). According to I-Kuan Dao Headquarters (1988: 63), it had more than 300 Buddha Hall and more than 50,000 members in Hong Kong in the late 1980s.

When July 1st 1997 neared Hong Kong, the organization had to prepare itself under the new government. Given CCP's past suppressions on Yiguan Dao, many masters who escaped from the Mainland decided to leave Hong Kong and focused their missions in overseas Chinese communities such as those in America, Canada, and Australia. As a result, the number of Dao initiators in Hong Kong has dropped a lot and some Buddha halls were forced to close down. The organization also adopted a low file approach some few years before and after 1997, such as reducing their recruitment efforts or even temporarily closing the holy altar, making it impossible to conduct initiation rite. It is only until 2000 when political transitions appeared to have little impact on the organization that recruitment started to return to a normal level. Nowadays, there are around 200 Buddha halls in Hong Kong.[3]

In terms of current memberships, there is no data made public by the organization or revealed in academic studies. Therefore, I attempt to make a very rough estimation based on the data gathered during my study. All Yiguan Dao Buddha halls organize vegetable banquet on important Chinese festivals. In terms of their scale, around 70% are small (140) and 30% (60) are large.[4] A large-sized Buddha hall has a capacity of around 70 tables while a small-sized around 10 tables. Each table can seat about *12 people*. Based on my observation on the Open Day of Bao Guan Buddha Hall (23 March 2013, Figure 2, 3, and 4), the hall was already crowded with people long before the meal formally started. Many of them came with their family who might or might not be members; there are approximately *three non-members* in each table. Provided that the numbers suggested by staffs are accurate, by putting all these numbers together, we obtain a very rough estimate of 50,400 members (140 X 10 X 9 + 60 X 70 X 9), which is less than 1%

3 Interview with Miss Chan (Active member, play important roles in administration and some rituals) dated on 15 Sept 2012.

4 Interview with Miss Ng (Vice Head of the Buddha hall) dated on 15 Sept 2012.

of the Hong Kong population (around 7 million in 2014). This figure is similar to the 1980s's figure (50,000) suggested in *A Brief Introduction to Yiguan Dao* (1988: 63). Further studies are required to obtain a more accurate membership number.

Figure 2. Vegetarian banquet on Open Day at Bao Guan Buddha Hall (23 March 2013)

Figure 3. Vegetarian meal offered on Yiguan Dao's Open Day.

Figure 4. Notice board showing the information of activities and announcement related to the Buddha hall.

Some Characteristics of Yiguan Dao Adherents

Absence of the five prohibited

According to Yiguan Dao's doctrines, five types of people are not eligible to attain Dao

because their job/ lifestyle violates the spirits of Dao that emphasize ahimsa (non-violence/ non-harming), traditional etiquette, and honesty. They are *the butchers*, *tailors*, *barbers*, *actors/ actresses*, and *people not engaged in proper works and with bad habits* (drug taking, gambling, and visiting prostitutes). Butcher is associated with killing and therefore is contradictory to the cultivation of Dao. The job nature of tailor and barber requires them to have physical contact with clients of the opposite sex, which is against *gu-li* according to Yiguan Dao. The job nature of actor/ actress requires role-playing and concealing of their own personalities that is regarded as dishonest and incredible. People who are unemployed and with bad habits are not eligible either because they do not live a proper life.

High female participation

Another significant observation in Bao Guan Buddha Hall is the presence of a disproportionately large number of female members. In contemporary Hong Kong society, female tend to have higher religious participation than their male counterparts. According to World Value Survey conducted in 2005, 33% of female informants claim to have religious faith whereas only 19% of male do so; and the size of female is almost double the size of male in each religious category.[5] In fact, the sex ratio found in Bao Guan Buddha Hall appears to be more extreme, which maintains at about one male to four female. The uneven sex distribution in the Buddha Hall is attributable to four reasons: (1) housewives have relatively more free time to engage in religious activities. (2) Housewives tend to focus their social life on neighborhood and local community where recruitment effort of Yiguan Dao is particularly strong. (3) They have higher commitment to their families and would practice religion for the good health of their family. (4) Volunteer works (cooking and cleaning) within the Buddha Hall is more housewife-oriented. The gender difference implies the religion is able to attract and mobilize a larger amount of female members.

High tendency of vegetarianism

Adopting a vegetarian diet, according to Yiguan Dao's doctrine, is a very important step for the cultivation of Dao. Therefore, the group has developed a very strong tendency of vegetarianism. It is found that the devoted members are mostly vegetarian; new members will gradually switch to a vegetarian diet. They also show a high concern about improving their health by following a healthy diet, especially that based on the three-low principle (low sugar, low salt, and low oil). In fact, people who are interested in or have already adopted a vegetarian diet would find it easier to integrate their vegetarian lifestyle with Yiguan Dao's religious belief, thereby facilitating their joining to this group.

5 Ng Chun Hung. *Survey on Hong Kong Citizens' Attitude to Life and Living* 1 March 2005–31 May 2005. Retrieved from World Value Survey Database. http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSData.jsp Integrated into World Vale Survey.

Conversion Experiences of Yiguan Dao's Adherents

The conversion experiences of the twelve informants are analyzed and summarized in table 1 that is characterized by five important stages: (1) predisposing personal conditions; (2) social ties with Dao practitioners; (3) receiving Dao; (4) cultivating Dao; and (5) promoting Dao. Their narratives can further be summarized into a conversion model (Table 2).

(1) Predisposing personal conditions

It is quite common for the informants to have espoused some beliefs that set the very important prerequisites for their conversion to Yiguan Dao. Firstly, many of them have *practiced folk religions* (folk Buddhism, folk Taoism, and worship of local deities) before. They seem to be more familiar with the religious teachings and deities found in the Yiguan Dao's belief system. From the perspective of religious capital, it is easier for them to transfer their religious knowledge accumulated within the old religious traditions to the new Yiguan Dao's settings. Secondly, they may have developed deep *interest in the study of Chinese classics or Chinese cultures*. Since most Yiguan Dao's doctrines are derived from Chinese classics, having interests and knowledge in Chinese cultures is advantageous to the practice of Yiguan Dao. The third one is *dissatisfaction with the previous religious traditions* and *seeking change*. People with these tendencies may seek new religious alternatives. The last one is a *strong vegetarian tendency* that makes their diet and lifestyle more compatible with the practices and doctrines of Yiguan Dao. However, we should note that this stage is significant but not indispensible to conversion.

(2) Developing Social ties with Dao practitioners

Developing social ties with Dao practitioners appears to be a very essential stage in our model of conversion. Most converts, in various social settings, have *developed ties with Yiguan Dao's adherents*. These ties are usually found in family, neighborhood, and workplace. The strength of ties varies in different cases. Apart from family members, whether one would establish social ties with members of Yiguan Dao is relatively random and unpredictable. Without this connection, however, conversion to Yiguan Dao is basically impossible because it is often through invitation by current believers that newcomers get to know the location and information of Buddha hall.

(3) Receiving Dao

When someone has developed ties with Dao practitioners, he/she consequently becomes potential recruit of Yiguan Dao. He/she will *receive invitation to vegetarian banquets in Buddha Hall*. Whether one is willing to attend the vegetarian banquets depends on the *strength of ties between the recruit and recruiters*, *to what degree one wants to eat vegetable meals*, and *to what degree one wants to experience something new*. Generally speaking, if one accepts the invitation and visits the Buddha Hall, he/she will normally be initiated into Yiguan Dao as seen in most conversion experiences. The motivations for current members to invite other people to join Yiguan Dao are also related to Karma and religious credits.

Table 1. Conversion Experiences of Yiguan Dao Adherents

Informants	(1) Predisposing personal conditions	(2) Social ties with Dao practitioners	(3) Receiving Dao	(4) Cultivating Dao	(5) Promoting Dao
Mr. Leung	Used to attend Christian Schools but never developed strong faith in Christianity because it cannot explain many mysteries.	Invited by a colleague to attend vegetarian banquet.	Went to the Buddha Hall for the purpose of eating. Asked to worship Buddha and kow-tow without knowing much about the meaning of initiation.	Continued to develop more interest in Yiguan Dao though attending meetings. Followed a half vegetarian diet	Finally adopted a full vegetarian diet and invite others to Buddha Hall.
Miss Yu	Parents used to eat vegetable sometimes on special Chinese festivals. Has been worshiping Bodhisattva or other deities in Taoist temples.	Invited by a neighbor to a vegetarian banquet.	Attended the vegetarian meal for health and merit. Thought it is acceptable to join Yiguan Dao because of past religious experiences and habits.	Appointed by master to play a role in rituals. Started to adopt a vegetarian diet.	Truly believed in the power of *three treasures* that saved the life of her parents. Actively promoted the saving truths to others.
Miss Chan	Interest in Chinese cultures and classics. She and her family were practitioners of folk Buddhism and Taoism. Also interested in *Feng Shui*	During her study of Feng Shui, she found one of her seniors was an adherent of Yiguan Dao who invited Miss Chan to visit the Buddha Hall.	Initiated because of her interest in the doctrines and practices of the group.	The more she committed herself to Dao, the more she believed in the power of nature and herbal therapy. Helped conduct Dao lesson with other senior.	Visited Buddha halls in Taiwan and the US to learn more about the spread of Dao outside Hong Kong. Committed to the mission of using *feng shui* to help more people and promoting Dao
Miss Yam	Used to practice folk religions and believe in Buddha, Bodhisattva and many other deities for blessings and fortunes. Adopted a Buddhist worldview. Concerned about living a healthy life.	Invited by a friend to Buddha Hall.	Went for vegetarian meal and got initiated because she believed worshiping Buddha leads people to good deeds.	Not a full vegetarian yet, ate vegetable on the 1st and 15th of every month of Chinese calendar.	Invited her relatives to Buddha Hall for vegetarian banquet on open day.
Mr. Chan	Nil.	Invited by his sister to Buddha Hall. Found no reason to reject his sister.	Went to Buddha Hall for eating and got initiated.	Had not been to Buddha Halls for years because he was busy. Until his mother got a stroke, he went to Buddha Hall and sought help from the Eternal Mother. Became a strong believer when her condition improved.	Continued to promote Yiguan Dao and cultivated Dao in order to maintain the divine connections with the Eternal Mother.
Mr. Chong	Used to gamble a lot, harming his relation with family. Wanted to change his life and become a good husband.	Invited by a neighbor to Buddha Hall.	Went to Buddha Hall to seek a chance to change himself.	Underwent metamorphosis. Discussed Chinese classics with masters seniors and learned a lot from them.	Stopped gambling very soon after receiving Dao. Avoided meeting those "bad friends" and promoted Dao to his family.

Mr. Choi	Interested in Chinese culture. His father was a member of Yiguan Dao. Studied physics in university, discovered the similarities between science and Chinese philosophies.	Suggested by his father to visit Buddha Hall together.	Got initiated because of his interest in Chinese philosophies.	Inspired by the wisdom found in Chinese classics. Share his understanding of Chinese philosophies from the perspective of science to other members.	Found his role to play in the Buddha Hall: providing a scientific perspective of Dao to other members.
Miss Tang	Nil	Invited by a colleague to Buddha Hall Open Day. Went there just to satisfy her.	Initiated unwillingly because of pressure from her colleague and others.	Experienced stress in work. Started to visit Buddha Hall again regularly to seek spiritual support.	Believed that Dao gives her the power to overcome difficulties in life.
Miss Fong	Used to worship Wong Tai Sin (Taoist deity).	Invited to Buddha Hall Open Day by a colleague who worked in the same restaurant.	Believed it is "no harm" worshiping more gods and got initiated.	Continued to visit Buddha Hall and developed more interest in Dao and a sense of commitment to the Hall.	Became an active volunteer for Buddha Hall, preparing vegetarian meals for other members.
Mr. Lee	No particular religious belief but inclined to adopt a Buddhist worldview.	Invited by his girlfriend to Buddha Hall who has been Dao adherent before they knew each other.	Went to Buddha Hall to please her girlfriend but soon developed strong interest in the Buddhist doctrines in Yiguan Dao.	Visited Buddha Hall regularly and studied Chinese classics in his spare time.	Believed in the precious Dao and gradually promoted Chinese cultures among his friends.
Mrs. Lee	Born in a Yiguan Dao family.	Brought to Buddha Hall by her parents when she was a child.	Got initiated without knowing much about the nature of Dao.	Continued to visit Buddha Hall regularly. Become more interested in Dao when she grew up. Believed it could offer her a set of values to live a meaningful life.	Realized the need to promote Dao and eventually brought her boyfriend to Buddha Hall.
Miss Yeung	Concerned about living a healthy life, interested in health tips, a big fan of vegetable and fruit.	Invited to Buddha Hall by a friend she knew in a health course.	Went to Buddha Hall for vegetarian meal and realized the purpose of adopting a vegetarian diet from a religious perspective.	Realized how the cultivation of Dao would bring a healthy physical and spiritual life. Believed in the connection between a healthy vegetarian diet and spiritual happiness.	Shared health information with other members. Encouraged members to adopt a full-vegetarian diet as early as possible. Promoted vegetarian diet to friends and relatives.

Table 2. Model of Conversion to Yiguan Dao in Hong Kong

(1) *Predisposing personal conditions*
- i. Used to practice folk religions
- ii. Interested in the study of Chinese classics or Chinese cultures
- iii. Dissatisfaction with the previous religious traditions
- iv. Seeks change
- v. Vegetarian tendency

(2) *Developing Social ties with Dao practitioners*
Develops ties with Yiguan Dao's adherents in various settings

(3) *Receiving Dao*
Receives invitation to vegetarian banquets.
Which depends on:
- i. Strength of ties between the recruit and recruiters
- ii. To what degree one wants to eat vegetable meals
- iii. To what degree one wants to experience something new

(4) *Cultivating Dao*
Actively affiliating themselves to the group through:
- i. Participating in Dao lessons
- ii. Reading scripture
- iii. following the ethics and doctrines of Yiguan Dao

(5) *Promoting Dao*
- i. Realizes the need to spread the precious Dao
- ii. Invites people to vegetarian banquets
- iii. Promotes Chinese classics

(4) Cultivating Dao

Receiving Dao is just like acquiring the membership of Yiguan Dao only. Whether this member is a true member or a free rider, however, is another matter. To become truthful believers of Yiguan Dao, they have to continue to cultivate Dao by *actively affiliating themselves to the group*. Through *participating in Dao lessons* and *reading scriptures*, they develop greater interests in the doctrines and practices of Yiguan Dao. *Following the ethics and doctrines of Yiguan Dao* would gradually cause changes in their life style, manner, behavior, and mindset. Members adopting this particular set of ethics would find it easier to associate with other group members because of the similarities and predictability in actions and thoughts. Some may even gradually dissociate with lay people that do not adopt this kind of religious doctrines. This process helps strengthen solidarity among members while weaken their old ties with people outside the group.

(5) Promoting Dao

When they become more committed to the group, they have better understanding of Yiguan Dao's doctrines and *realize the need to spread the precious Dao* to all mankind. They look for opportunities to *invite people to vegetarian banquets* and *promote Chinese classics*. It usually happens within family, workplace, and neighborhood. In this way the conversion process goes back to the second stage and forms a cycle of recruitment.

Some Comparisons with Lofland and Stark's model

In his doctorial thesis "The World Savers: A Field Study of Cult Processe", John Lofland conducted a case study of Unification Church in California. His work has become one of the first modern sociological studies of new religious movement (NRM). Based on this study, he and Stark (1965) constructed a conversion model, which is arguably the most cited and debated model in the discussion of conversion (Snow & Phillips 1980: 167) and is regarded as an important step towards a new conversion paradigm by focusing on the *process* of conversion (Inaba 2004: 3).

Lofland and Stark argue that organizational efforts in promoting the religion were ineffective, and personal relationships with other members and family relationships are far more significant factors for conversion (1965: 852). Their seven-step model composes of three *predisposing characteristics* and four *situational factors*. The model is value-added in nature in which the addition of a new step increases the chance of conversion. The three predisposing characteristics, also being the first three steps of the model, are (1) perception of long term tension, strain, and so on; (2) perception of a religious rhetoric and problem solving perspective; and (3) self-definition as religious seeker. The next four stages, also known as the situational factors are: (4) reaching a turning point when old lines of action no longer work; (5) development of affective ties between preconvert and group members; (6) weakening affective ties with nongroup members; and (7) intensive interaction with group members. According to this model, conversion is both a result of individual decision and social interactions. Or to be more precise, conversion is a transitional process in which one goes through individual self-realization followed by the effect of social interactions. It first starts with self-realization of stress, adoption of a religious problem solving perspective, and self-identification as religious seeker. In such a critical moment, encounter with religion tends to lead to conversion if one succeeds in establishing social ties with other members, increasingly dissociates from old practices, and intensively associates with group members. This model is arguably sufficient to explain most conversion process taken place in many religions, although one does not necessary go through all the seven stages.

The five-stage model suggested in this paper is similar to Lofland and Stark's (1965) model. Both of them argue that conversion relies heavily on social interactions. Conversion to Yiguan Dao also depends heavily on "predisposing personal condition" and "development of ties with adherents", the former being important facilitator but not essential while the latter being necessary condition for conversion to take place.

In terms of difference, while there is more than one critical event that may lead to initiation in the case of Unification Church, it seems that *one single event*, which is being invited to vegetarian banquet, stands out in the conversion process to Yiguan Dao. In Chinese culture, having vegetable meal represents one's intention to accumulate good karma and is a common practice among some Hong Kong people. Moreover, eating vegetable on special Chinese festivals (such as 1st and 15th of every month of Lunar calendar, Qingming Festival, and Chung Yeung Festival etc) for the purpose to please the heavenly gods and benevolent deities is also seen as a custom in Chinese folk traditions. Emphasizing these connections (i.e. eating vegetable as

traditions and accumulation of good karma) may have positive effects on Yiguan Dao's recruitment.

Conclusion

The five-stage model of conversion to Yiguan Dao presented here is based on narrative analysis of twelve believers of Yiguan Dao in Hong Kong. It is found that five stages (1) predisposing personal conditions; (2) social ties with Dao practitioners; (3) receiving Dao; (4) cultivating Dao; and (5) promoting Dao are significant in the conversion process. While the first stage is not indispensible, it has significant catalytic effects in affecting how easy one would accept Yiguan Dao. The second stage is the core of the model, indicating conversion to Yiguan Dao relies heavily on social networking. Stage three is the critical moment when one attends vegetarian meals and formally gets initiated into Yiguan Dao. Stage four is the process during which commitment to the group increases along with rapid interactions with other group member and engagement in various religious activities and practices. In stage five, the convert has become an active recruiter for the group who embraces the role of promoting Dao.

While this model may be able to explain conversion to Yiguan Dao, there are some questions that are worthy of discussion in the future. For example, can this model apply on other Chinese societies and/or other Chinese religions? How is commitment towards Yiguan Dao being strengthened when converts go through the five stages? Answering these subject matters will bring new perspectives to the studies of religious conversion.

Appendix 1. Information of Informants

Name (pseudonym)	Year of Birth	Year of initiation	Occupation	Date of interview
Mr. Leung	1960s	1982	Correctional Services Department	8 Sept 2012
Miss Yu	1950s	1993	Housewife	8 Sept 2012
Miss Chan	1960s	1980s	Trading company	10 Sept 2012
Miss Yam	1960s	1990	Garment industry	15 Sept 2012
Mr. Chan	1950s	1980s	Retired	6 March 2013
Mr. Chung	1950s	1990s	Retired	21 March 2013
Mr. Choi	1984	1990s	Retired	21 March 2013
Miss Tang	1970s	2000s	Quality inspection industry	26 March 2013
Miss Fong	1960s	1995	Working at restaurant	26 March 2013
Mr. Lee	1980s	1999	Logistics company	26 March 2013
Mrs. Lee	1980s	2000	Accounting	26 March 2013
Miss Yeung	1970s	1990s	Civil servant	28 March 2013

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