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# 14 American Dao and Global Interactions: Transnational Religious Networks in an English-Speaking Yiguandao Congregation in Urban California

> In the year 2007 there is still a vast American wilderness that extends from the borders of California deep into the American interior, the Midwest and plains states. It is a wilderness of spiritual opportunity, a wilderness where a voice is proclaiming a better way, a different way, an enlightened way. It is the voice of the I-Kuan Tao, which until two years ago was virtually unheard here. [. . .] We have learned that just as the pioneers of the western frontier struggled and persevered, we too must struggle and persevere. We must improve our own practice, giving up bad habits, and embracing proper conduct so that our example shines before others. [. . .] We have learned that just as the original colonists, we must be satisfied with small beginnings that grow into large results and blessings. An enormous oak tree starts its life as a tiny acorn.[1]

This statement is from the pen of Bill,[2] an approximately sixty-year-old Taijiquan 太極拳 instructor, spiritual seeker, and practitioner of the Taiwanese religious movement Yiguandao 一貫道. Having established itself as an independent religious organization in the early twentieth century and exhibiting an innovative synthesis of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist teachings as well as sectarian traditions and popular religious influences, Yiguandao is at present one of the fastest growing religious movements in Asia and among Chinese migrants worldwide.[3] Bill, who was raised as a Roman Catholic and is based in the suburbs of Indianapolis, had a profound interest in the spiritual and bodily practices

1 "Two Years in Indiana, by Bill Bunting", http://greattao.org/english/2008-01.htm (accessed 15 November 2018).

2 Throughout the paper, I chose to identify some Yiguandao activists by their real names, as they appear in both publicly accessible primary sources (websites and journal articles) and in their own essays and blogs. Accordingly, there is no reason to conceal their identities by using pseudonyms.

3 D.K. Jordan and D.L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 216–266; Y. Lu, *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan: Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008; S. Billioud, *Reclaiming the Wilderness: Contemporary Dynamics of the Yiguandao*, submitted to Oxford University Press, forthcoming. On the global spread of Yiguandao, see N. Broy, J. Reinke, and P. Clart, "Migrating Buddhas and Global Confucianism: The Transnational Space Making of Taiwanese Religious Organizations", Working Paper Series des SFB 1199 an der Universität Leipzig (2017) 4, pp. 1–36, at 20–24.

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of "Asian philosophies" for years until he came across a Daoist-related website run by an activist belonging to an Yiguandao temple in Los Angeles County, California. Then, in 2004, he became a member of the congregation. The quotation epitomises not only his individual religious fervour and missionary zeal, but also reflects a much deeper engagement with the Yiguandao convention of perceiving proselytization as "opening the wilderness" (*kaihuang* 開荒) and making land arable.

While most studies on Chinese religions overseas draw attention to how they predominantly cater to the diaspora communities and serve to establish and maintain ties between migrants and those who stay behind,[4] this chapter analyses an English-speaking congregation of Yiguandao – usually translated as the "Way of Pervading Unity" or the "Dao that Pervades Everything" – and their endeavour to transcend traditional patterns of interaction and networking through the use of computer-mediated communication.[5] Drawing on ethnographic data from my fieldwork conducted in Los Angeles and San Francisco in February and March 2018, published Yiguandao materials, and internet resources, this chapter addresses the spatial configurations of this group in and beyond urban California. It seeks to understand how members of this group shape, transform, and contest spaces of religious interaction. In particular, it investigates how the frequent use of internet resources helps to foster new geographies of circulation that extend beyond the usually local outreach of most Yiguandao congregations in America. Section 1 sketches Yiguandao's development in the United States, and in Los Angeles in particular, in order to establish some background information. With a few exceptions, Yiguandao's endeavour in the US has not yet been the object of detailed research.[6] Here, I also outline the history of the Los Angeles temple that belongs to Jichu Zhongshu 基礎忠恕

**4** Ibid., pp. 7–9.

**5** I shall use "Chinese" in a broad sense to refer to individuals and communities tracing their origins back to Chinese ancestry and sharing Chinese cultural notions and practices, such as the Chinese language. Instead of indicating national identities of individual members of these communities, I will use "Taiwanese" or "PRC/Mainland Chinese" to distinguish them.

**6** E.A. Irons, "Tian Dao: The Net of Ideology in a Chinese Religion", PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, University of California, Berkeley, 2000; Pan C., "Attaining the Dao: An Analysis of the Conversion of Adherents of Yiguan Dao", PhD thesis, Trinity International University, 2009; Yang H. 楊弘任, "Yiguandao Luoshanji yingyu daochang de wenhua kuajie chutan 一貫道洛杉磯英語道場的文化跨界初探" [A First Look at the Transcultural Activities of an English-speaking Yiguandao Community in Los Angeles], Conference Paper of Yiguandao quanqiu chuanbo ji qi yingxiang guoji xueshu yantaohui 「一貫道全球傳播及其影響」國際學術研討會 [International Conference "The Global Spread of Yiguandao and its Significance"], D2, 2017, pp. 1–29.

("Foundation, Loyalty and Reciprocity"), which is one of the largest and most successful Yiguandao divisions. Section 3 introduces the object of this case study, a group of English-speaking Yiguandao practitioners that I name the "Tao Talks" group – a name chosen from their weekly online instalment. Section 4 analyses how the frequent use of computer-mediated communication enables the group to transcend regional, religious, and cultural boundaries by reaching out to sympathizers of "Asian philosophies" on an almost global scale. It explores how the group's catering to a pool of spiritual seekers embedded in a westernized version of Chinese Daoist philosophies have helped to transcend traditional modes of proselytization in Yiguandao. Finally, Section 5 argues that this model of religious interaction contributes to crossing conventional cultural, linguistic, and spatial boundaries and thereby open new geographies of circulation for Yiguandao teachings and practices.

## Yiguandao's Mission to the City of Angels

While the earliest missionary endeavours reaching beyond the Chinese mainland and Taiwan date back to the late 1940s and were directed towards other East and Southeast Asian countries,[7] Yiguandao's earliest engagements in the United States commenced during the late 1960s and early 1970s in the Chinatowns of New York and Boston as well as in San Francisco.[8] Missionary activities gained momentum particularly in the 1980s, responding to the implementation of new immigration policies for highly educated Asians during the 1970s, which led to increasing numbers of Taiwanese business and education migrants arriving in North America.[9] In addition, this development reflected the economic and political circumstances in Taiwan, which was a predominantly agricultural society until rapid industrialization, urbanization, and a boost in general education gathered speed in the early 1970s.[10] Accordingly, most Yiguandao practitioners at that time were still primarily concerned with making a living and had few resources for travel or migration. Furthermore, Taiwan's emigration policy and restrictions imposed on migrants to many countries (such as the United States,

**7** Mu Yu 慕禹, *Yiguandao gaiyao* 一貫道概要 [An Outline of Yiguandao], Tainan: Tianju shuju, 2002, pp. 134–152, 156–157, 172, 184.

**8** Ibid., pp. 201–206.

**9** C. Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 19–23.

**10** P. Clart, "Sects, Cults, and Popular Religion: Aspects of Religious Change in Post-War Taiwan", *British Columbia Asian Review* 9 (1995/1996), pp. 120–163, 129.

Australia, and Canada) were another factor in restraining outmigration and missionary activities.[11]

In contemporary America, Yiguandao congregations can be found in most places with a fair number of Chinese, ranging from New York, Boston, and Miami to Houston, Dallas, and Honolulu. Regarding the number of followers, estimates vary between 100,000 and 200,000 practitioners, and there were more than three-hundred temples and private shrines by the early 2000s.[12] However, due to the segmentary structure of Yiguandao and the high degree of fluidity in terms of actual participation as well as remigration, it is difficult to give exact numbers. Based on data provided by my informants as well as on published Yiguandao materials,[13] there currently appear to be at least twelve divisions active in Los Angeles. Unlike the early activities in America's traditional Chinatowns in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many Los Angeles temples are located in a part of the San Gabriel Valley that was described by Li Wei as the LA "ethnoburb", namely – and among others – the cities of Monterey Park, Alhambra, Baldwin Park, Temple City, and El Monte.[14] According to Li, the ethnoburb differs from older Chinatowns, which were ethnic enclaves located in the densely populated city centres, in that they are situated in suburban areas where Chinese do not represent the majority anymore and Chinese businesses extend beyond the traditional ethnic economy, such as running Chinese restaurants and supermarkets.[15] Even though some of them, such as the city of El Monte, have a lower percentage of Chinese than adjunct cities, it had the highest number of Chinese-owned warehouses and distribution centres in the entire region in 2001.[16] Hence, it is no wonder that many – but not most – practitioners and activists of the temple's Chinese congregation live or work in the ethnoburb. Because of Yiguandao's compartmental structure and the favouring of vertical networks within the branches instead of cross-branch interaction, the situation in Southern California presents a very complex picture. While there is a limited degree of cooperation among most divisions – most of which are headquartered in Taiwan, whereas others hail from Hong Kong and Korea –

**11** Song G. 宋光宇, *Tiandao chuandeng: Yiguandao yu xiandai shehui* 天道傳燈: 一貫道與現代社會 [The Heavenly Way Transmits the Light: Yiguandao and Modern Society], Banqiao: Sanyang, 1996, pp. 429–432.

**12** Mu Yu 慕禹, *Yiguandao gaiyao* 一貫道概要, p. 209.

**13** Ibid., pp. 204–208.

**14** W. Li, *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.

**15** Ibid., pp. 42–49.

**16** Ibid., p. 115.

it is restricted primarily to large events (such as charities, temple anniversaries, etc.). In terms of proselytization and day-to-day business, however, congregations belonging to one branch do not interfere with others.

Further complicating the picture, even within one branch single congregations retain regular relationships with their respective head temples in Taiwan, but less so with fellow branch communities that adhere to another head temple. This leads to the slightly ironic situation that, for instance, Jichu Zhongshu's Los Angeles and San Francisco headquarters – which are geographically only 572 km away from each other – are organizationally and religiously closer to their respective head temples in Taiwan, almost eleven thousand km away.[17] This fairly odd feature of how networks are being ordered in Yiguandao is the result of the concept of the "golden thread" (*jinxian* 金線), which channels the transmission of religious expertise and authority into vertically arranged networks.[18] These ties are imagined as threads that run from every individual of one particular congregation through her or his "initiation master" (*dianchuanshi* 點傳師) to the current branch leader (designated "senior", *qianren* 前人, or in some cases also "venerable transmitting master", *laodianchuanshi* 老點傳師), the founder of the branch ("venerable senior", *laoqianren* 老前人), and eventually to the original patriarchs Zhang Tianran 張天然 (1889–1947) and Sun Huiming 孫慧明 (1895–1975).[19]

In this chapter, I will focus on one particular group of activists belonging to Jichu Zhongshu.[20] Headquartered in Taoyuan County in north-western Taiwan, it is one of Yiguandao's largest branches and runs an impressive transnational network of temples and congregations. Its Los Angeles community goes back to the activities of "transmitting master" Yang Bizhen 楊碧珍 (1938–2011) who migrated from Taiwan during the late 1980s. Its headquarters, Quanzhen daoyuan 全真道院, was originally established in Baldwin Park in May 1989 and finally relocated in 1994 to its current position on Lower Azusa Road in El Monte – both of which are located in the aforementioned "ethnoburb", about 25km east of downtown Los Angeles.[21] In the early 1990s, Yang's husband, Dr. Joseph

**17** For similar observations in Canada, see P. Clart, "Opening the Wilderness for the Way of Heaven: A Chinese New Religion in the Greater Vancouver Area", *Journal of Chinese Religions* 28 (2000), pp. 127–144, at 133.

**18** Lu, *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan*, pp. 55–60.

**19** See ibid., p. 121. and an Yiguandao monograph on the topic: Yang Mingzhang 楊明章, *Jinxian yu xiudao* 金線與修道 [The Golden Thread and Cultivating the Dao], Banqiao: Zhengyi shanshu chubanshe, 2003.

**20** If not designated otherwise, data are derived from my fieldwork observations, informal conversations with practitioners, and interviews.

**21** Chen Zhengfu 陳正夫, *Chengxian qihou: Yiguandao maixiang shijie de hongyuan* 承先啟後: 一貫道邁向世界的宏願 [Inherit the Past and Usher in the Future: The Great Vow of Yiguandao

Chen (Chen Zhengfu 陳正夫, b. 1939), joined the team and helped to consolidate the community. Due to his effort and engagement, Quanzhen temple rose to transregional and even global significance, as it became the site of the "World I–Kuan Tao Headquarters" (official abbreviation is WITH, Ch. *Yiguandao shijie zonghui* 一貫道世界總會), founded in 1996, and the "Great Tao Foundation of America" (*Meiguo Yiguandao zonghui* 美國一貫道總會), established in 2006.[22] Both institutions are representational bodies that serve to facilitate communication with government officials, cultural agencies, and other religious organizations. Accordingly, California and particularly this temple serve as Jichu Zhongshu's hub in its global expansion.[23]

## Yiguandao and the "Tao Pop Culture": The Tao Talks with Derek Lin

Most Yiguandao engagements in the Los Angeles area – and in other countries, for that matter – are not only very much local in nature insofar they target practitioners and sympathizers based in this particular region. Moreover, they also cater primarily to the Chinese communities. Consequently, it is no wonder that most Yiguandao congregations appear to be predominantly Chinese. And even some of their English-speaking groups are still dominated by second-plus generation Chinese. On the other hand, the group of activists that will be analysed in the following pages is not only primarily non-Chinese, but also their online and offline engagements enable them to transcend conventional boundaries of circulation and interaction.

The "Tao Talks study group" – as I am referring to them by the name of their weekly online instalment – came into existence about twenty years ago and is intimately related to the activities of the charismatic Yiguandao lecturer, translator, and activist Derek Lin. Born in 1960s Taiwan where he was exposed to American culture already back in his childhood days,[24] he moved with his family to the

towards the World], Taipei: Zhengyi shanshu chubanshe, 2015, pp. 17–15, 33–34. See also the temple websites: http://www.greattao.org/html.html and http://truetao.org/tao/ (accessed 2 February 2018).

**22** Ibid., pp. 51–58, 172–175. See also the official websites http://www.with.org/ and http://www.taousa.org/ (accessed 17 November 2018).

**23** Ibid., p. 39.

**24** Unless otherwise noted, the information come from my interview with Derek at Quanzhen temple, 25 February 2018.

United States in the 1980s. While his parents had been involved in the activities of Quanzhen temple for many years already, he only began to participate regularly when their health began to decline and he wanted to spend more time with them – thus epitomizing the characteristic Chinese impetus to support and care for one's parents, encapsulated in the Confucian value of "filial piety". Derek considers himself "unconventional", which may explain why he – even though a Yiguandao lecturer (*jiangshi* 講師) and thus a fairly well-established religious specialist in the religious hierarchy – is not regularly appointed to lecture for the Chinese-speaking community as well. Because of his apparent success in attracting non-Chinese followers, they seem to let him do his own thing. Yet, he is more than a maverick, as he and his Taiwanese-born wife publish the bimonthly temple bulletin *Quanzhen tongxun* 全真通訊, which serves as the official community newsletter and reaches out to both Chinese and English-speaking members.[25] Founded in the late 1990s, it celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2018.

Derek has translated various Yiguandao materials into English, among them introductions to teachings, basic principles, and regulations for Dao cultivators.[26] In addition, he is widely known as an "award-winning, bestselling author in the Tao genre" (self-description from his website Taoism.net). He is appreciated not only for his translation of the Daoist classic *Daodejing* 道德經 (*Tao Te Ching: Annotated & Explained*, published in 2006), but he also authored books that address Dao-related concepts and values in a more practical manner, namely *The Tao of Daily Life* (published in 2007), *The Tao of Success* (2010), *The Tao of Joy Every Day* (2011), and *The Tao of Happiness* (2015). While arguably not especially reliable because of the possibility of fake commentaries, the customer reviews on his Amazon.com website indicate that most readers seem to hold his work in high esteem: thus, as of 16 November 2018 his translation of the *Daodejing* generated 4.7 stars out of 5 (from overall 125 reviews), while *The Tao of Daily Life* even earned 4.8 stars (from overall 163 reviews). In addition, all of his five books are listed among the top 100 of Amazon's best sellers in the category of "Taoism" and "Tao Te Ching", his translation even ranks as number 31.[27] With overall more than 1,000 hits for "Taoism" and 480 for "Tao Te Ching" on Amazon, his publications rank among the more popular ones. Even though these numbers and online

**25** The temple's online archive provides access to the journal back to October 2005, see http://greattao.org/monthly/index.htm, 20 November 2018.

**26** See, for instance, some of the essays collected on "The Great Tao Foundation of America" websites (http://greattao.org/html.html, as well as http://truetao.org/tao/ [accessed 19 November 2018]).

**27** See https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Books-Tao-Te-Ching/zgbs/books/297525/ref=zg_bs_pg_2?_encoding=UTF8&pg=2 (accessed 16 November 2018).

ratings do not necessarily translate into offline reality, they nevertheless hint at the popularity of Derek's work among Daoism-interested people.

Besides being a recognized author in the field of Daoism-related writings, Derek's commitment to the Yiguandao community is also particularly felt in the realm of websites and online activities. Already in 1998, he launched the websites TrueTao.org and Taoism.net, where he posts anything from small notes, didactic stories, and essays to translations and information about his English Dao class. According to internal material, in the mid-2000s the site had approximately two-thousand hits per day.[28] While I was not able to test these claims, average numbers of visitors on Taiwanese Yiguandao websites (that openly display these numbers) suggest that the site must have been quite popular: for instance, the primary websites of other divisions, such as Baoguang Jiande 寶光建德 and Andong 安東 counted between 1,300 and 1,400 as well as 1,400 and 1,500 hits per day in early November 2018.[29] Note that these websites are the principal references for followers worldwide, which is why the data traffic of TrueTao.org appears somewhat out of the ordinary.

In addition to websites, around the same period Derek began to run regular English-language classes for the temple youth that a couple of years ago have been translated into an off- and online event entitled "Tao Talks with Derek Lin", which is scheduled on Sundays from 10:30 to 12:30 a.m. (Pacific Standard Time). The sessions are held at Quanzhen temple but simultaneously broadcast online using the webinar software. After each class, the session is uploaded to a YouTube channel, which was created in 2014 and as of 25 January 2019 had 1,280 followers and 2,280 followers as of 27 April 2020.[30] Since it had only 747 followers in early February 2018, it appears to grow steadily. Finally, Derek is also involved in the "Tea House forum", which advertises itself as a "[c]ommunity to converse about the Tao in harmony and mutual respect."[31] It is a fairly open platform to discuss matters related to Eastern spirituality, such as how to apply the teachings of the *Daodejing* in daily life, enquiries by newcomers who feel lost in the huge market of Dao philosophies, and discussions about Dao and environmentalism, but also very practical enquiries, such as where to obtain certain books or tips for a healthy relationship. In addition,

**28** JCZZ 11 (2006) 215, pp. 30–31. The abbreviation refers to Jichu Zhongshu's mouthpiece *Jichu zazhi* 基礎雜誌 [Foundation Monthly Bulletin], a monthly bulletin published by the Taoyuan headquarters since 1989.

**29** See the websites http://www.bgjd.org.tw/ and http://www.andong.org.tw/index.php.

**30** https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsPVNGGfoy7_vqhi_lT9eVA (accessed 25 January 2019).

**31** https://www.tapatalk.com/groups/teahouse/ (accessed 9 November 2018).

there are also threads related to physical regimens, such as Taijiquan and Qigong 氣功, but also to meditation and the occult *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經). Having been launched in 2012, the forum had 908 members (including me) as of 12 November 2018. Judging from a cursory look at data traffic (number of postings and views), however, the forum's most vibrant period appears to have been years ago. For instance, besides me, only four other new participants registered in 2018 and all of them have not shown any activities since their registration in January or February. While it is reasonable to assume that there are many lurkers among the 908 members of the forum – i.e. people who observe online activities without actively participating in them – most threads started in 2018 only generated low numbers of hits, ranging from 3 to 73. On the other hand, most of the threads that reached up to more than 3,000 hits did so over a period of several years.

Derek's work – both his books and his online enterprises – serves as a bridge between Jichu Zhongshu's Los Angeles community and the apparently large pool of "seekers" in the field of "Eastern spirituality" in the United States.[32] Thus, the 1960s counterculture and the New Age movement with their accentuation of values such as naturalness, holism, tranquillity, and environmental concerns have helped to create what David Palmer and Elijah Siegler have termed a "Tao Pop culture"[33]: Centred on teachings and practices derived from the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (often transliterated as "Chuang-Tzu"), and other works, this culture has established Daoist vocabulary and concepts, such as *qi* 氣, Yin and Yang, or Tao/Dao in the American religious landscape. Because Daoism (and what was conceived to be Daoism) has often been understood in opposition to the dominant church-style of religion and rendered as free and unrestrained, Daoist-related teachings have spread particularly in New Age circles.[34] The prominence of the *Daodejing* in these circles is not at all coincidental, as it is the second most translated book in the world after the Bible and an important source of inspiration in the New Age scene.[35] Siegler assumes that there exist roughly between 10,000 and

**32** On America's "spiritual marketplace", see W.C. Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

**33** D.A. Palmer and E. Siegler, *Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Spirituality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017, pp. 16–17.

**34** R. Madsen and E.T. Siegler, "The Globalization of Chinese Religions and Traditions", in: D.A. Palmer, G.L. Shive, and P.L. Wickeri (eds.), *Chinese Religious Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 227–240, at 237–239; Palmer and Siegler, *Dream Trippers*, pp. 9, 15–17, 64–68.

**35** E.T. Siegler, "The Dao of America: The History and Practice of American Daoism", PhD thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2003, pp. 314–317; Palmer and Siegler, *Dream Trippers*, pp. 15–17.

30,000 self-identified American Daoists,[36] but the number of people who communicate and practise Daoism-related subjects without being affiliated to a Daoist organization may be much higher. Most of these people became acquainted with Daoism during a high school or college class or were lent a book by a friend, most often the *Daodejing*.[37] The other important starter is Benjamin Hoff's popular *The Tao of Pooh* (first published in 1982), which employs the fictional hero Winnie the Pooh to convey Dao-related teachings to a larger audience. Still today, it is one of the best-selling Daoism-related books on Amazon.[38]

By being familiar with both "orthodox" Yiguandao teachings and practices that highlight individual moral cultivation, persistence, and hard work based on a relatively strict conduct of life on the one hand, and the American "Tao pop culture" that stresses individuality, nonchalance, and a "just go with the flow" mentality on the other, Derek serves as a cultural mediator who brokers between the two circles of interaction.[39] His message appeals to a considerable cohort of Western sympathizers, because he portrays Yiguandao as the form of spiritual and moral self-improvement that many seekers are apparently looking for. Here, prior knowledge of or longing for authentic "Asian spiritualties" appears to have set the stage for Derek's success. Similar observations have been made among other Yiguandao groups in Paris and London, where most non-Chinese practitioners found their way to Yiguandao through earlier engagements with Daoist philosophy (such as the *Zhuangzi*), East Asian healing practices (such as Japanese *Reiki* 霊気), or Buddhist meditation.[40] However, unlike these other examples it appears that the Tao Talks group is predominantly if not almost exclusively non-Chinese in

**36** E.T. Siegler, "Chinese Traditions in Euro-American Society", in: J. Miller (ed.), *Chinese Religions in Contemporary Societies*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006, pp. 257–280, at 277.

**37** Siegler, "The Dao of America", pp. 314–317.

**38** Ibid., pp. 227–228, 265–269.

**39** See N.C. Schubert, "'Gatekeeper' und 'Broker' als Schnittstellen zwischen religiösen Organisationen", in: A.-K. Nagel (ed.), *Diesseits der Parallelgesellschaft: Neuere Studien zu religiösen Migrantengemeinden in Deutschland*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2012, pp. 207–240, 212, 216; A. Dietze, "Cultural Brokers and Mediators", in: M. Middell (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 494–502.

**40** S. Billioud, "De Taïwan à Maison-Alfort, réflexions sur la globalisation du Yiguandao", La Religion des Chinois en France, Colloque international, Paris, 18 May 2016, https://www.gsrl-cnrs.fr/colloque-18-20-mai-2016/ (accessed 29 January 2019); Yang H. 楊弘任, "Zongshe yu zhuanyi: Yiguandao zai Yingguo de xingdongzhe wangluo fenxi 綜攝與轉譯：一貫道在英國的行動者網絡分析" [Syncretism and Conversion: An Actor-Network-Analysis of Yiguandao in England], in: Huang Y.黃應貴 (ed.), *Richang shenghuo zhong de dangdai zongjiao* 日常生活中的當代宗教 [Contemporary Religion in Everyday Life], Taipei: Qunxue chubanshe, 2015, pp. 235–274, at 269.

terms of its composition. Thus, with a few exceptions, all the Tao Talks people I spoke to or whom I read about in Yiguandao materials do not have a Chinese familial background.

Derek's, his collaborators', and the listeners' inclination towards Dao-related topics is also mirrored in the Tao Talks series, which predominantly focuses on Daoist topics. Usually, Bill – who was mentioned briefly above and whom I will discuss below – begins the session by discussing in a fairly practical way how to apply the Dao in one's daily life. Half an hour later, another online participant – usually it will be Ed (see below) – adds the "message of the week". Then, Derek will join in to discuss at length one chapter of the *Daodejing* for about one hour. Compared to Taiwanese classes about this and other traditional Chinese scriptures, the discussion is fairly lengthy, which is most probably due to the cultural gap, as most Taiwanese Dao cultivators are quite familiar with the text already from their primary or secondary socialization. Before and after the class, there will be basic ritual gestures, such as bowing three times towards the main altar of Quanzhen temple. This is perfectly in line with similar Yiguandao events in Taiwan and elsewhere. After the class is finished, each lecture is uploaded to the YouTube channel. For the future, Derek is also preparing translations of the *Scripture of Clarity and Quiescence* (*Qingjingjing* 清靜經) and the *Platform Sutra* (*Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經) – both of which are popular Daoist and Chan/Zen Buddhist texts. The group's focus on Daoist contents constitutes a fascinating difference to the Chinese-language classes provided at Quanzhen temple. Thus, judging from topics depicted in the bimonthly newsletter, the Chinese community prefers to discuss Confucian classics and Buddhist texts: for instance, in 2018 the community discussed *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), *The Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經), and the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), but also the aforementioned Buddhist *Platform Sutra*. There are, however, no Daoist texts listed. This separation in terms of what is discussed in the classes is also mirrored on the social level. Thus, the "offline" participants of Tao Talks usually remain predominantly among themselves. Even during the communal vegetarian lunch, which is served right after the collective ritual at noon, English-speakers would usually group together. Yet, several rather advanced non-Chinese cultivators also join larger events of the entire congregation, such as Chinese New Year celebrations.

## From Lurking to Commitment: Networks and Interactions

Derek's various online enterprises serve an important function for the group, as they help to condense vague interest and online lurking into commitment and interaction – both online and offline. Thus, all the people I spoke to or whom I read about on Derek's and other websites or in Jichu Zhongshu's mouthpiece bulletin were first acquainted with Derek and the temple through his online services. In addition, because computer-based interaction is not restricted to specific locales and enables sympathizers to participate in the class and the forums from basically all over the globe, it makes it possible for Derek and his peers to establish a transregional and even transnational network of like-minded people. Judging from what I experienced at the temple and what I learned from Derek, most participants of the Tao Talks are not located in the greater Los Angeles area. For instance, on the two occasions when I attended the class, less than ten people would show up in person. However, according to Derek, there are usually "thirty plus connections" in the webinar, which results in approximately fifty listeners every Sunday, because some connections have more than one listener.

According to Derek, there are participants across the United States, but also in Canada, South America, and in Europe. Some of them have turned from interested sympathizers into committed Dao practitioners, and a couple of them have even set up their own congregations and domestic shrines. For instance, there are English-speaking chapters in Indianapolis and Seattle, all of which go back to initial contact made by Dao-interested seekers with Derek's online enterprises.[41] In addition, there are even occasional visitors from other countries, such as a young man from the Netherlands, who had been a fervent listener to Derek's class and was glad to take the opportunity to visit the temple in person in 2012.[42] Computer-mediated communication and the involvement of new media is particularly strong in Derek's English-speaking congregation. Other Yiguandao groups, such as the fellow Jichu Zhongshu temple Zhongshu daoyuan 忠恕道院 in San Francisco, also imitate Derek's model by providing a similar web-based programme.[43] Likewise, other Asian new religious movements in the United States,

**41** See JCZZ 11 (2005) 203, pp. 24–28; 7 (2017) 343, pp. 40–43; 10 (2017) 346, pp. 20–25; 11 (2017) 347, pp. 18–25; 12 (2017) 348, pp. 14–25.

**42** "Temple Visit in Los Angeles", https://taoism.net/ikuantao/templevisit.htm (accessed 5 November 2018).

**43** Informal conversation at the temple, 10 March 2018.

such as Vietnamese Đạo Cao Đài 道高臺 – commonly known as Caodaism – also invest in online engagements, and Californian activists have been equally successful in generating "internet converts".[44]

While the extent of online participation is apparently more significant than its offline counterpart, most committed participants have at least once taken a journey to attend the meeting in person. For instance, during my first visit there was a young man of Latin American origin in his early thirties who came all the way from San Diego (approximately 200 km further south) in order to join the class that he had listened to online for quite a while. Upon his first encounter with Derek and the entire atmosphere of the temple, he almost immediately went through the initiation procedure and formally became a member of Yiguandao. This pattern is mirrored in the experiences of most other members of the Tao Talks group, who usually participated in the online meetings for months or even years before finally coming to the temple in person and joining the community. While most regular participants (both online and offline) at one point in their Dao-related career chose to be initiated into Jichu Zhongshu and to become full-fledged members of the group, some prefer to stay unattached even after participating in the classes for years. One of these was a man in his late fifties, whom I encountered twice during my fieldwork: having been born in Honduras, he became acquainted with Daoism when he studied in Paris (he was a student of the well-known professor Kristofer Schipper, one of the leading scholars in Daoism), and after he moved to Los Angeles about twenty years ago, he has regularly participated in the Tao Talks, either in person or online. Yet he prefers not to be formally initiated, as he considers himself too much a maverick to become an official member of this congregation.

Despite the significance of Derek's activism, the Tao Talks series is not a "one-man show", but there are several collaborators, some of whom live far away and cannot attend the class in person. Yet all participate online on a regular basis and several are actively involved in teaching. One of them is Bill, who began training in martial arts (including Okinawa Karate and several Chinese martial arts) in 1971.[45] Having shared a profound interest in the spiritual

**44** J. Hoskins, *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, pp. 197–208.

**45** If not noted otherwise, this section draws on the following articles and essays from the website of Bill's Taijiquan school: "Press Release: Tao Practitioners Dedicate First Ever Authentic I-Kuan Tao Shrine in Indiana", http://indianataichi.com/press.htm (accessed 6 November 2018); "Taoists will gather to dedicate shrine in Carmel", by J.J. Shaughnessy, originally published in the "faith and values" section of the local newspaper *Indianapolis Star*, http://indianataichi.com/indystar.htm (accessed 6 November 2018); and Bill's own account "On Opening the Shrine", http://indian

aspects of East Asian martial arts for years, Bill finally made his way to Derek's websites after a long period of seeking. One year after his initiation into Yiguandao, he chose to open a household shrine on his own. Today, he also runs a Taijiquan school, which according to his website is intended to be a place "where the deep spiritual values and wisdom as well as the physical aspects of genuine Asian martial arts could be preserved."[46] Being profoundly inspired by Derek's interpretations of the *Daodejing*, he adopted a vegetarian diet one year before founding his household shrine – a choice that proved to be instrumental in curing a long-standing skin disease.[47] In Yiguandao theology and practice, vegetarianism plays a pivotal role as a measure of commitment to the course of cultivating one's inherent moral nature and saving the world. For the consecration ceremony of his temple two Taiwanese-American transmitting masters and a couple of helpers travelled from Los Angeles to Indiana. The religious artefacts and emblems required for a Yiguandao shrine – e.g. an incense burner, religious effigies, Chinese calligraphies, and a "Mother lamp" (*mudeng* 母燈), which symbolizes the supreme deity "Eternal Venerable Mother" (Wusheng Laomu 無生老母) – were sent from the LA temple by UPS.[48]

Eventually, Bill's shrine became the centre of a local "Tao study group", which is basically a circle of people (some of whom have received the Dao) who regularly listen to the Tao Talks at Bill's place on Sunday afternoon (due to the time gap of three hours).[49] While being part of Quanzhen's temple network, Bill also invests in expanding his own network. According to his account, only two years after consecrating the temple in 2005, he had already engaged in various proselytizing activities in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin, Kentucky, Tennessee, Florida, Georgia, and Michigan. Eventually, by using the Internet, person to person communication, and business travel, he was able to attract "21 souls to the Great Tao."[50] In 2017, a Taijiquan student of Bill's also established his own household shrine. Having visited Quanzhen temple in

ataichi.com/openshrine.htm (accessed 6 November 2018). This essay has also been published in the monthly journal of the Yiguandao General Association of the Republic of China: *Yiguandao zonghui huixun* 一貫道總會會訊 [Yiguandao General Correspondence] 1 (2005) 160, pp. 39–49. Jichu Zhongshu's bulletin also reported about the event, see JCZZ 11 (2005) 203, pp. 24–28, equally reprinted in *Yiguandao zonghui huixun* 9 (2005) 168, pp. 50–55.

**46** See his slightly outdated website http://indianataichi.com/instructors.htm (accessed 6 November 2018) and also his rather recent blog: http://indianataichi.blogspot.com/.

**47** JCZZ 11 (2005) 203, p. 25.

**48** Ibid.

**49** See the blog: http://carmeltao.blogspot.com/ (accessed 8 November 2018).

**50** "Two Years in Indiana, by Bill Bunting", http://greattao.org/english/2008-01.htm (accessed 15 November 2018).

2015 in order to obtain the Dao, he also joined a group trip to Taiwan the same year, which left him so impressed that only one year later he decided to become a vegetarian. Finally, in April 2017 his temple was consecrated by the two transmitting masters who travelled from LA to Indiana along with Derek and a couple of helpers.[51] Only slightly later, a third private shrine opened, and now the Indiana community hopes to establish the first public Yiguandao site in the Midwest.[52]

As this brief excursus demonstrates, Derek and Bill were successful in establishing a local community of Dao followers who are connected to their principal temple Quanzhen daoyuan primarily through computer-mediated interaction. Bill serves as the core node within the network of Indiana's English-speaking Jichu Zhongshu congregation – as he is personally acquainted with all members and is also responsible for having attracted most of them; yet Quanzhen temple represents the sole source of legitimacy: with both Derek as the core node within the entire network of English-speaking members and the transmitting masters as those who are allowed to initiate neophytes into the teachings.

The other member of the group is Ed, a high-profile martial artist who trained with Bruce Lee's major student Jerry Poteet (1936–2012) and who has been an initiated member of Quanzhen temple since 2004.[53] Having been trained in various martial arts for more than four decades – including Bruce Lee's Jeet Kune Do (derived from Cantonese *jiht kyùhn douh* 截拳道, Ch. *jiequandao*), *Shōtōkan Karate* 松濤館空手, Muay Thai, Shaolin Kung-Fu, Japanese and Brazilian Jujitsu 柔術, Kali (a Filipino martial arts), Qigong, and Taijiquan – Ed is an extraordinarily well-known martial artist who also trained a number of Hollywood celebrities and movie stars. Since 2007 he and his wife run their own sports centre "Ekata" in the Santa Clarita Valley, about 80 km northwest of Quanzhen temple.[54] Because Ed wanted to convey Yiguandao's crucial message of unity, Derek recommended this name, which in Sanskrit means "one" or "oneness" (from Skt. *ekatā*). Designed to teach "adults and children to live a healthy, balanced life by training not only the body, but the brain" (website blurb), Ekata centre focuses on merging modern sports with purported Eastern holistic approaches to integrate mind, body, and spirit. Consequently, the

**51** JCZZ 7 (2017) 343, pp. 40–43.

**52** JCZZ 10 (2017) 346, p. 21.

**53** This section draws on my interview with Ed at his sports centre in Santa Clarita, 28 February 2018 as well as on his essay "The Journey of a Thousand Miles", http://greattao.org/english/2014-04.htm (accessed 6 November 2018). If not designated otherwise, all information and citations are from this interview.

**54** See the centre's website https://ekata.net/ (accessed 15 November 2018).

centre emphasizes mindfulness very much. In addition, Ed proclaims: "We feel that by providing a family-based series of activities that incorporate eastern health practices, philosophy, western science and universal spirituality we can help bridge the worlds of east and west."[55] Furthermore, he sees the significance of the Dao not only in individual cultivation, but also for the entire society: "Our western society is fraught with aggression, stress and fear. I feel our new approach to fitness and well-being might be an instrumental method by which principles of the true Tao might be introduced in a non-threatening manner."[56]

Having been raised as a Roman Catholic in Kentucky, Ed considers himself an open-minded Christian who already during his youth developed a profound interest in what he calls the "Eastern philosophies". Like many other members of Derek's circle, he used to be a spiritual seeker and has studied with various Zen masters and Tibetan Buddhist Lamas. However, he never felt quite accomplished until he eventually came across Derek's website Taoism.net in 2004. Being impressed by the "authenticity" of what was written there, he and his wife visited Quanzhen temple on the following Sunday, participated in Derek's class, and received the Dao the same day. After a couple of years, Ed and his wife adopted a vegetarian (and his wife even a vegan) diet, and in April 2014 their shrine was consecrated on the upper floor of Ekata sports centre.[57] Today, the shrine is used for all mediation sessions – as it is also advertised in the caption to one photograph on Ekata's homepage. Because Ed did not want to scare away his customers – the gym is located in a predominantly white and Christian neighbourhood that another informant even described as "Trump-supporter white" – he chose not to display typical Yiguandao-related idols on the altar, so that the shrine cannot be mistaken for a "worshipping entity". Consequently, there is only a simple altar with an incense burner, the "Mother lamp", and Chinese calligraphy at the back. While he was able to attract eight to ten people to Yiguandao, he was not as successful as Quanzhen's transmitting masters had hoped. Thus, Ed is convinced that Yiguandao is appealing to most of his students as a philosophy and not as a religion. Just a couple of weeks before I met him in February 2018, he had started a pilot group of about twenty people in the local Catholic church that he also belongs to, in order to study what Eastern philosophy and mindfulness have to add to the Christian faith.

**55** "The Journey of a Thousand Miles".
**56** Ibid.
**57** JCZZ 8 (2014) 308, pp. 20–25.

From this brief description of the religious careers of Bill and Ed there emerges an interesting pattern: practitioners of East Asian martial arts appear to be drawn to Derek's interpretations of the Dao. Thus, he sees an innate connection between the physical practices and what he teaches about the Dao, because he asserts that "these martial arts oftentimes embody the philosophy of the Dao in physical action." It is about diligent hard work and dedication, while the "Americanized version" of Dao cultivation merely urges people to "go with the flow" and "just let things be".[58] In his study of Yiguandao practitioners in 1990s Vancouver, Philip Clart noted that many non-Chinese participants had a background in Chinese martial arts and related bodily practices as well.[59] Judging from my fieldwork experience, this seems to be a typical non-Asian phenomenon, which is not visible in contemporary Taiwan, but which I found occasionally in Austrian and South African Yiguandao congregations.[60] Whereas quite a few dedicated activists and leaders in the early history of Yiguandao were involved in bodily practices – such as one of Zhang Tianran's leading disciples Sun Xikun 孫錫堃 (1883–1952), an authorized master of *baguazhang* 八卦掌 and head of the martial arts school "Morality Martial Arts Academy" (*Daode wuxuehui* 道德武學會) in Tianjin before he joined Yiguandao in 1934[61] – this link appears to have been lost during Yiguandao's transition to Taiwan. As outlined above, many Daoist-oriented seekers and practitioners in the United States found their way into the field through Taijiquan, Qigong, and Kung-Fu.[62] In the case of Derek's circle, not only Bill and Ed, but also some of their students joined the group. Moreover, the aforementioned participant in the Sunday classes who prefers not to be initiated into Yiguandao also experienced Daoism first through martial arts during his adolescence. In another case, an Indiana native who was in his early twenties at the time of his initiation in 2005 was a student of Korean *taekwondo* 跆拳道 from the age of five. Just by accident, he read about the opening of Bill's temple in the *Indianapolis Star* and went to participate the next day out of pure curiosity. Having been initiated right away, he also joined a Taiwan tour organized by Quanzhen temple.[63]

**58** Interview with Derek Lin, Quanzhen daoyuan, El Monte, 25 February 2018.

**59** Clart, "Opening the Wilderness for the Way of Heaven", p. 139.

**60** Ethnographic fieldwork in Vienna (June 2016) and Johannesburg (October – November 2017).

**61** See Song G. 宋光宇, *Tiandao chuandeng*, p. 60. On his martial-arts career, see B. Kennedy and E. Guo, *Chinese Martial Arts Training Manuals: A Historical Survey*, Berkeley: Blue Snake, 2005, pp. 270–272.

**62** Siegler, "The Dao of America", pp. 329–339.

**63** "Fish Out of Water, by Tommy Datzman Jr.", http://greattao.org/english/2005/2005-11.htm (accessed 6 November 2018).

## Conclusion: Transnational Spaces of Religious Interaction at the Intersection of Online and Offline

Studies in computer-based interaction have shown that users of the Internet tend to have larger social networks than non-users. In addition, they tend to be exposed to other sources of information and resources. Consequently, they are not restricted to building meaning and establishing social relationships based on location, occupation, and social class: interpersonal ties are usually produced on the basis of affinities.[64] Thus, "strong ties" – such as family and friends – are more likely to be socially similar and to know the same persons, and consequently they are more likely to possess the same information. On the other hand, "weak ties" of internet communication are not necessarily related to living in the same place or working in the same company, and they hence enable actors to connect to more diverse social circles.[65]

Similarly, the case of the Tao Talks group shows how the use of computer-mediated communication enables Derek and his peers to transcend traditional ways of proselytizing in Yiguandao and thereby to open new geographies of circulation. Usually, Yiguandao activists tend to proselytize primarily within the "strong ties" of family and friends on the one hand, but also along the lines of "weak ties" of co-workers and colleagues on the other. Yet both sorts of ties are still predominantly based on location and social features, such as education, profession, and income. Hence, it is no wonder that most other Yiguandao communities in Los Angeles that do not employ computer-mediated communication in their outreach (or do so to a lesser degree) are more likely to be spatially bound: most members of the congregation live in the LA area. On the other hand, the Tao Talks group uses its websites, forums, and first and foremost its regular webinar instalment in order to transcend these rather narrow circles of interaction and to reach out to sympathizers and Dao-related spiritual seekers on a transregional basis. The focus on shared interests rather than on similar social characteristics enables specialized communities, such as the Tao Talks group, to foster cognitive homogeneity and to develop a community of people

**64** M. Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 121, 126; B. Wellman, "Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalized Networking", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25 (2001) 2, pp. 227–252, at 234.

**65** See Wellman, "Physical Place and Cyberplace", p. 246; D. Easley and J. Kleinberg, *Networks, Crowds and Markets: Reasoning About a Highly Connected World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 46–51.

**66** See Wellman, "Physical Place and Cyberplace", p. 246.

who are like-minded but more diverse in terms of location, culture, and social class.[66] Thus, this case study shows that the Tao Talks group is comprised of spiritual seekers, Catholics, practitioners of East Asian martial arts, and curious individuals from various places and countries. In addition, it also demonstrates that the network created by Derek and his peers extends from El Monte to its major chapters in Indiana and Seattle, as well as to more loosely related listeners and sympathizers located in North America, Europe, and even Africa.[67] It appears that the use of new media is a particular strength of the Tao Talks approach, as the internet provides a safe space for interested sympathizers to explore Dao-related teachings and to familiarize themselves with the group at their individual pace and without much pressure.[68] Thus, whilst first-hand contact in cyberspace does not demand many individual resources (time, energy, effort), Chinese Dao cultivators' missionary zeal often leaves Western practitioners bewildered.

While the computer-mediated activities of the Tao Talks group provide an almost deterritorialized approach to religious proselytization and community building, which has clearly facilitated the propagation of Yiguandao in the United States and beyond, specific places – such as Quanzhen temple and Bill's Indiana temple – still play a pivotal role in maintaining, managing, and expanding the online and offline networks of interaction. Thus, as the famous sociologist Manuel Castells noted in the first volume of his classic trilogy *The Information Age* (1996): "The space of flows is not placeless, although its structural logic is. It is based on an electronic network, but this network links up specific places, with well-defined social, cultural, physical, and functional characteristics."[69] Furthermore, he added: "other places are the nodes of the network; that is, the location of strategically important functions that build a series of locality-based activities and organizations around a key function in the network. Location in the node links up the locality with the whole network. Both nodes and hubs are hierarchically organized according to their relative weight in the network."[70]

The case of the Tao Talks community corroborates this view: whereas the internet facilitates cross-boundary communication and interaction, actual

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**67** For instance, there are numerous posts and essays of a certain Jos Slabbert on Derek's websites, such as http://www.taoism.net/theway/home.htm and http://www.taoism.net/theway/taoistao.htm (accessed 6 January 2019). The author appears to have been active in the late 1990s and early 2000s and at that time was based in Namibia.

**68** See Easley and Kleinberg, *Networks, Crowds and Markets*, pp. 43–76.

**69** M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, vol. 1, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p. 443.

**70** Ibid.

places are still important for the overall network: first, these are the places where the classes are being taught. While it would be easy and probably even more convenient for Derek to broadcast the Tao Talks directly from his home, he still chooses to come to Quanzhen temple every Sunday – which doubtlessly contributes to his charisma and aura of authenticity. Second, the Tao Talks group is far from becoming an "online religion", as there need to be places – temples and shrines, but also small niches established by individuals in their private residences and dedicated to religious cultivation – where the Dao cultivators can practise what is preached.[71] The emphasis on offline interaction and practice helps to hinder the online networks from becoming too loose and fragile. Even though many participants in the Sunday Tao Talks may feel merely loosely committed, Derek's and his collaborators' commitment is instrumental in aggregating or condensing these individual-centred networks in the "offline" world.[72]

**71** On private "sacred spaces" as individual sanctuaries for religious cultivation, meditation, and mindful practices see Derek's talk "The I Kuan Tao Shrine and Creating Your Own Sacred Space", https://youtu.be/FoCDhwcETnc (posted 28 September 2014, accessed 6 January 2019).
**72** See Castells, *The Internet Galaxy*, pp. 128–131; H.A. Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society", *Theory, Culture & Society* 80 (2012) 1, pp. 64–93, at 83.