

Introduction, Establishment, and Transformation: An Initial Exploration of the Cultural Shifts and Influence of I-Kuan-Tao in Malaysian Chinese Community

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Abstract

Yi-Kuan-Tao has been developing in Malaysia for nearly 60 years. It was initially introduced from mainland China and later from Taiwan starting from the 1970s. Yi-Kuan-Tao was considered a 'new religion' for the local Chinese community in Malaysia in its early stages, as Chinese immigrants primarily practiced Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, or Catholicism upon settling in the region. The overseas propagation and development of Yi-Kuan-Tao today primarily occur through Taiwanese temples, which began spreading abroad as early as 1949. Particularly since the 1970s, with the rapid economic growth of Taiwan, various branches of Taiwanese Yi-Kuan-Tao have gained economic strength to propagate abroad, further expanding the influence of Yi-Kuan-Tao overseas. Southeast Asia is the region out from Taiwan where the propagation and development of Yi-Kuan-Tao are fastest and most concentrated. With approximately over 6 million Chinese inhabitants, Malaysia's pursuit of traditional Chinese culture has led to a flourishing interest in Yi-Kuan-Tao, particularly its advocacy of the unity of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, with an emphasis on promoting Confucian thought. Moreover, Taiwan's rapid economic development since the 1970s has enabled Yi-Kuan-Tao to allocate significant human and financial resources for external propagation efforts. Additionally, Malaysia's government has adopted a relatively tolerant policy towards religion since that time, further fostering the flourishing development of Yi-Kuan-Tao in Malaysia. By examining the different origins and ethnic backgrounds, it investigates how the Malaysian Chinese community has experienced different changes through the cultural baptism of religion, thus delving into the religious influence of Yi-Kuan-Tao.

Keywords: I-Kuan-Tao, Fa Yi Chong De, Malaysia, Chinese, Culture, Transformation, Ethnicity

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Introduction

Research Background and Motivation

Malaysia is a country with a diverse coexistence of religions, with Islam being the official religion. Other religions practiced by Malaysians include Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, and indigenous religions. Malaysia primarily consists of three major ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The annual celebrations of the New Year festivals of these three ethnic groups are designated as national public holidays, symbolizing the nation's cultural diversity.

Islam spread throughout Southeast Asia for a thousand years, from the 7th to the 17th century, leaving a profound influence on Malaysia. The Malaysian constitution stipulates that all Malays are Muslims, constituting 55% of the total population. Malays live according to Islamic teachings, adopting Arabic names, and mosques are prevalent throughout urban and rural Malaysia, with believers gathering for prayers daily, particularly on Fridays, which are considered the main prayer day for Malays.

Buddhism once flourished on the Malay Peninsula, and with the influx of Chinese immigrants in the 19th century, especially Mahayana Buddhism saw significant development. Kuala Lumpur and Penang are Buddhist centers in Malaysia, with the Malaysian Buddhist Association and the Malaysian Buddhist Institute established in Penang. Hinduism, also known as Brahmanism, witnessed a decline on the Malay Peninsula as Islam became dominant, with many Hindus converting to Islam during the 15th century. Today, only Indians in Malaysia adhere to Hinduism, which is characterized by a strict caste system.¹ Christianity was introduced to Malaysia with the colonial invasions by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, each bringing different Christian denominations, including Catholicism and Protestantism. Christians in Malaysia comprise mainly Filipino immigrants, indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, and some Chinese. Indigenous religions worship various deities and practice animism. However, nowadays, only some indigenous ethnic minorities still adhere to indigenous religions.

In the early stages, I-Kuan-Tao was considered a "new religion"² among the local Chinese community in Malaysia, as most Chinese immigrants from mainland China settled in

¹ The caste system (Hindi: हिन्दू वर्ण व्यवस्था, English: Caste system in India), also known as the Indian caste system, is a social system that was prevalent in India and other parts of South Asia. Centered around the Brahmins, it divides society into numerous endogamous groups based on occupation, known as castes. These castes are further subdivided into many sub-castes based on regional differences, and within these sub-castes, there are further divisions based on settlement locations, ultimately leading to clans with different marriage practices. This hierarchical system is deeply integrated into Indian society, its social structure, worldview, religious practices, and interpersonal relationships. It is considered one of the most important traditional social systems and norms in India.

² The term "new religious movement" refers to religions that have emerged outside of traditional religious frameworks or have arisen under new historical conditions. It has specific usage in the West, known as "new religions," in Japan as "new religious organizations," and in Taiwan as "new religious groups." There are generally two main forms: one involves reforming doctrines and rituals within traditional religions and actively promoting them, while the other integrates various traditional religious concepts, undergoes new interpretations and transformations, and constructs a new religious form. Almost every era has seen the emergence of new religious movements, with their numbers being too numerous to quantify. However, they have had a certain influence on world religions and have gained a significant number of followers. Currently, Japan has over 700 new religious organizations, including Soka Gakkai, Rissho Kosei-kai, and Tenrikyo, each claiming over a million followers. Korea has Won Buddhism. In Taiwan, there are several new religious movements registered with the Ministry of the Interior, including I-Kuan-Tao, Tenrikyo, Tzu Chi Foundation, Xuanyuan Teaching, Baha'i Faith, and Tianti Church.

Southeast Asia with beliefs predominantly in Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, or Catholicism. With nearly 60 years of development in Malaysia, Falun Dafa was initially introduced from mainland China and later from Taiwan since the 1970s. It primarily spread in areas with a large population of Malaysian Chinese, gradually integrating into the local cultural characteristics and developing a religious culture that incorporates local elements.

Although I-Kuan-Tao's propagation in Malaysia began earlier in East Malaysia, its flourishing development has predominantly occurred in West Malaysia to date. Moreover, it has expanded gradually towards Indonesia to the south and the southern region of Thailand to the north. In recent years, due to the migration of multinational workers to Malaysia, I-Kuan-Tao has started to spread to countries such as South India and Nepal. Hence, it is evident that Malaysia plays a crucial role in the global dissemination of I-Kuan-Tao.

Today, the dissemination and development of I-Kuan-Tao overseas primarily occur through practice centers in Taiwan. The overseas propagation began as early as 1949 and gained significant momentum, particularly after the 1970s, with Taiwan's rapid economic development. Various branches of I-Kuan-Tao in Taiwan have had the economic resources to propagate abroad, further expanding its influence overseas. Under the promotion of various branches of I-Kuan-Tao in Taiwan, significant milestones were achieved: the establishment of the Cambodian I-Kuan-Tao Association on September 4, 1995; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao World Association in Los Angeles, USA, on October 6, 1996; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in Thailand on March 26, 2000; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in Indonesia on June 21, 2000; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in Malaysia on December 14, 2003; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in the USA on April 29, 2006; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in Japan on August 26, 2006; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in Paraguay on April 29, 2007; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in Austria on October 21, 2007; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in the UK on November 1, 2007; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in Australia on September 27, 2009; the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in South Africa on September 18, 2011; and the establishment of the I-Kuan-Tao Association in Brazil on September 25, 2011. It is reported that I-Kuan-Tao has spread rapidly to more than 80 countries and regions worldwide.

In Malaysia, the first I-Kuan-Tao practice center was established in 1948, and now there are over one million practitioners across East and West Malaysia. Numerous large temples and public Buddhist halls have been built, such as the Chong De Dao Yuan (崇德道院) in Alor Setar, the Tian Wei Tao Temple (天威佛堂) in Penang, the Zong Xin Tao Temple (宗心佛堂) in Ipoh, the Yu Hua Sheng Mu Gong (育化聖母宮) in Kuala Lumpur, the Confucius and Mencius Holy Tao Academy (孔孟聖道院), the Chong De Cultural and Educational Hall (崇德文教館), the Kang Le Book Academy (康樂書院), the Zhi Cheng Tao Temple (至誠佛堂) in Pahang, the Tian Xuan Tao Temple (天宣佛院) in Muar, and the Tian Li Tao Temple (天理佛堂) in Malacca. These magnificent structures, from north to south, have become new landmarks of religious significance in Malaysia.

The predecessors of various branches of I-Kuan-Tao have been cultivating in Malaysia for many years and have received recognition from the government authorities. Since the establishment of the association, directors and members from all 13 states of Malaysia have been continuously promoting lifelong learning, especially in moral and ethical education, and bringing Confucian thought into daily life, households, and society. On December 14, 2003, a

grand founding ceremony was held, attended by over 5,000 delegates from various countries, high-ranking officials, diplomatic envoys, and other distinguished guests. From then on, the Malaysian association has been actively promoting beneficial activities. For example, on November 7, 2004, a "Illuminate Hearts" anti-vice campaign was held, with over 1,300 representatives from various sectors of society, government agencies, and the police attending.

Southeast Asia is the region outside Taiwan where the dissemination and development of I-Kuan-Tao have been the fastest and most concentrated. I-Kuan-Tao's spread to Southeast Asia generally follows three different paths. The first path began in 1949 and subsequent years, originating from Yunnan and passing through the China-Myanmar and China-Thailand borders to spread into Myanmar, Thailand, and other areas. These branches include three major groups, Chun Yi Tan (純一壇), Chan De Tan (闡德壇), and Dao De Tan (道德壇), as well as smaller groups like Tong De Tan (同德壇), Hua Ji Tan (華基壇), Tian Du Tan (天渡壇), and Tian Yi Tan (天一壇), mainly distributed in countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Indonesia. The second path originates from Hong Kong, where early I-Kuan-Tao practitioners spread to Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and other areas, establishing some I-Kuan-Tao temples, but with limited subsequent development. The third path originates from Taiwan, where among the over 70 branches of I-Kuan-Tao, at least 30 have developed organizations and missionary activities in various Southeast Asian countries, each with its own unique development opportunities.

With Malaysia boasting a population of over 6 million ethnic Chinese, their pursuit of traditional Chinese culture has fostered a vibrant interest in I-Kuan-Tao, particularly in promoting the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, with a predominant emphasis on Confucian ideals. Additionally, Taiwan's rapid economic development since the 1970s has encouraged I-Kuan-Tao to invest significant manpower and resources in overseas propagation. Concurrently, Malaysia's government adopted a more tolerant policy towards religion around this time, facilitating I-Kuan-Tao's highly successful missionary efforts in the country. Although missionary activities by various I-Kuan-Tao branches, such as Bao Guang Tan (寶光壇) and Changzhou Tan (常州壇), had begun as early as the 1940s and 1950s under the banner of the "Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism Moral Society" (儒釋道道德會), modern I-Kuan-Tao's flourishing in Malaysia can be traced back to the 1970s. Since then, over 24 branches from Taiwan, including Bao Guang Jian De (寶光建德), Fa Yi Chong De (發一崇德), Xing Yi (興毅), Ji Chu Tian Ji (基礎天基), Hao Ran Hao De (浩然浩德), Changzhou (常州), Fa Yi Ling Yin (發一靈隱), Fa Yi Tian Yuan (發一天元), Fa Yi Tian En (發一天恩), Qian Yi (乾一), Tian Xiang (天祥), Bao Guang Shao Xing (寶光紹興), Hao Ran Yu De (浩然育德), Bao Guang Ming Ben (寶光明本), Fa Yi De Hua (發一德化), Fa Yi Tian En Qun Ying (發一天恩群英), Ji Chu Zhong Shu (基礎忠恕), Fa Yi Hui Yin (發一慧音), Fa Yi Tong Yi (發一同義), Fa Yi Guang Yao (發一光耀), Wen Hua (文化), Bao Guang Chong Zheng (寶光崇正), Bao Guang Yuan De (寶光元德), and An Dong (安東), have successively ventured into Malaysia for development. Each branch has established temples across Malaysia, with many majestic I-Kuan-Tao temples towering from north to south on the Malaysian peninsula, spreading I-Kuan-Tao's teachings to all 13 states. Notable Malaysian government officials such as the Minister of Transport, Weng Shijie (翁詩杰), and the Minister of Health, Liao Zhonglai (廖中萊), are I-Kuan-Tao practitioners who actively support the various activities of I-Kuan-Tao in Malaysia.

In 2003, the "Malaysian I-Kuan-Tao Association" was established, with its headquarters located at the Chong De Tao Center in Kuala Lumpur. I-Kuan-Tao primarily recruits practitioners from the Chinese community but also includes many Indians. Respecting local Islamic laws prohibiting proselytization to Malays, I-Kuan-Tao refrains from missionary activities targeted at Malays but welcomes their participation in cultural and educational activities organized by I-Kuan-Tao organizations.

I-Kuan-Tao's missionary activities in other Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia, Brunei, and East Timor each have their unique characteristics. I-Kuan-Tao's entry into Vietnam began in 1988, with various branches including Wen Hua (文化), Hao Ran Hao De (浩然浩德), and Fa Yi (發一) attempting to spread the teachings in Vietnam. However, due to Vietnam's restrictions on religion and activities involving foreigners, I-Kuan-Tao's missionary efforts in Vietnam "mostly remain at an initial stage." The situation in Laos is similar to that of Vietnam, with several branches including Fa Yi Chong De (發一崇德) entering Vientiane and other areas to establish temples for missionary work since the 1990s, but significant development has yet to be achieved. On the other hand, I-Kuan-Tao's development in Cambodia is relatively advantageous. Since its introduction from Taiwan in 1986, the Wen Hua branch has established dozens of temples in Cambodia, while the Bao Guang Yuan De branch has over 120 temples. Together with other branches, there are currently over 200 temples in Cambodia, with an estimated number of practitioners exceeding 100,000.

Growing up under the influence of the Fa Yi Chong De since childhood, I was exposed to the production of "Holy Revelations" texts for Fa Hui (Holy Seminar) from an early age. Even during secondary school, although attending the government secondary school, years of involvement in "Holy Revelations" production and training in traditional Chinese characters at the temple's document team awakened a latent awareness of Chinese culture. Hindered by limited opportunities to learn Mandarin in government secondary school³, with only three periods (90 minutes) of Mandarin classes per week, I am exposure to classical education at the temple, participation in the five-year Tao class, involvement in the production of "Holy Revelations" during Holy Seminar. Consequently, I was cherished the opportunity to learn Mandarin in secondary school even more. Therefore, starting from secondary school, I was resolved to uphold the three great vows of the Ji Gong Living Buddha⁴ as the motto and purpose of life cultivation.

An Initial Exploration of Cultural Changes of Fayi Chongde in Malaysia

Chapter 1: An Initial Exploration of the Cultural Changes of I-Kuan Tao in the Malaysian Chinese Community

Malaysian Chinese (or Malaysian Chinese descendants, referred to as Malaysian Chinese) refers to descendants of immigrants from provinces such as Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan in China who migrated to Malaysia from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the Republic of China for several hundred years. Malaysian Chinese are the second-largest ethnic group in the country. According to the 2010 census, the total population is 6.96 million, accounting for approximately 21.9% of Malaysia's total population. They are mainly

³ The main language of instruction in Malaysia government secondary school is Malay.

⁴ Ji Gong Living Buddha is the appointed master of heavenly mandate in I-Kuan-Tao, and also the teacher of disciples.

distributed in major cities such as Kuala Lumpur (the capital), George Town (Penang State), Ipoh (Perak State), Johor Bahru (Johor State), Kuching (Sarawak State), Kota Kinabalu (Sabah State), and Malacca City (Malacca State). Additionally, Chinese Malaysians are the second-largest ethnic group in Kuala Lumpur, accounting for 43.2% of the total population (with Malays accounting for 44.2%).

The communication among Malaysian Chinese (or Malaysian Chinese descendants) is generally conducted in Mandarin Chinese or some Chinese dialects, such as Hokkien (divided into Penang Hokkien in the north, Kuala Lumpur Cantonese in the central region, and Johor Hokkien in the south). The younger generation who receive Chinese education mostly speak Mandarin Chinese, and Chinese language courses in schools use simplified Chinese characters. Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) and English are compulsory languages in Malaysia. In daily life, Malaysian Chinese use a more localized version of Malaysian Chinese, while in formal occasions (such as local Chinese media), a more formal standard Mandarin Chinese is used. Additionally, some Chinese Malaysians are educated in English and use English as their daily language. Furthermore, in a multicultural environment, the use of multiple languages is common, known locally as "rojak" or mixed language.

Malaysian Chinese generally classify themselves as Buddhists, but in reality, most of them also practice Chinese folk religion and Taoism. Additionally, local Chinese also have mixed indigenous beliefs, such as worshiping Datuk Gong. Around 11% of Malaysian Chinese are Christians or Catholics, but an extremely small number of people have been assimilated into Islam due to their belief in Islam. When Chinese immigrants first arrived in Malaysia, they mostly established private schools to educate the next generation. These schools mainly used textbooks such as the San Zi Jing (三字經), Qian Zi Wen (千字文), or the Four Books and Five Classics. After Malaysia's independence, the federal government adopted the 1955 Razak Report and the 1961 Rahman Talib Report to promulgate the 1961 Education Act, which greatly weakened the development of Chinese education, leading to significant backlash from the public. In order to uphold the right of Chinese people to receive Chinese education, the Malaysian Chinese Association and the United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia began promoting the revival of independent Chinese schools in 1977. Currently, there are more than 1,200 national-type Chinese primary schools ("SJKC"), over 60 independent secondary schools, and three private multi-lingual colleges in Malaysia.

However, I-Kuan Tao encompasses the entire traditional Chinese Confucianism. The temple is a good learning environment, and learning can change a person's quality and connotation. If a person is willing to learn, there will be a day when they become more mature. I-Kuan Tao will inevitably become a global belief in the foreseeable future. Wherever there are Chinese people, there are I-Kuan Tao temples. The number of believers is increasing, and there is an urgent need for teachers. I-Kuan Tao is a Chinese-style religious belief that embodies all of Chinese traditional Confucian thoughts. Chinese culture is fully revealed in I-Kuan Tao. Restoring Chinese traditional culture must start from the roots and exert educational power.

Chapter 2: Exploring the Predicament of the Chinese Community and the Religious Culture of I-Kuan Tao

In the previous chapter, we discussed the organizational and operational models of Fa Yi Chong De, which have been systematized and institutionalized in Taiwan. However, upon their introduction into Malaysia, these operational models encountered numerous challenges. Although Chen Da Gu advocated for "local people managing local affairs" during her lifetime,

it inevitably raises questions considering the differences in ethnicity, culture, and customs between Taiwan and Malaysia, as well as many other overseas countries.

Furthermore, we can explore several aspects:

1. Differences in the Five-Year Tao Studies Program: Due to the lack of qualified instructors overseas, some practitioners must deliver lectures even before becoming certified teachers. Additionally, due to inadequate training, the quality of instructors may be inferior compared to those in Taiwan. Moreover, the curriculum design of the Five-Year Tao Studies Program may not keep pace with societal changes, leading many new practitioners to lose interest in attending classes.
2. Asynchrony in the Unity of the Three Realms: Overseas branches often lack certain features found in Taiwan due to cultural differences. For instance, there may be no high school classes or as frequent meal gatherings as in Taiwan, reflecting geographical factors to some extent.
3. Challenges in Absorbing the Classics: Overseas practitioners may not possess the same level of proficiency in Chinese as those in Taiwan, requiring more time to digest and comprehend classical texts.
4. Variances in the Ten-Group Operational Model: The structure of the ten operational groups may differ between domestic and overseas branches, with most overseas branches having fewer operational groups, typically ranging from six to eight.
5. Rigidity in the Temple System: Some senior practitioners with traditional mindsets may find themselves constrained by the institutionalization of the temple system, lacking flexibility in their actions. This is a common challenge faced by religions as they become more systematized.
6. Manifestation and Non-Manifestation: Chen Da Gu began advocating for the cessation of spirit possession during her lifetime. Previously, every Holy Sermon assembly would witness the manifestation of Holy Medium, where Holy Medium would temporarily inhabit the bodies of practitioners to provide guidance. However, as the Holy Medium landscape evolved, Chen Da Gu encouraged practitioners to cultivate reason and cease relying on Holy Medium possession for guidance. This shift in approach aims to discourage supernatural beliefs and focus on rationality and self-cultivation.

However, understanding I-Kuan Tao requires examining it from two perspectives: the sacred and the secular. Looking at it from the sacred perspective helps to grasp the essence of religious beliefs. However, viewing it solely from the secular perspective might be akin to observing a watermelon from the outside, noticing its roundness, oval shape, or angularity without knowing the color and depth of its flesh inside, let alone tasting it. Although I-Kuan Tao in China is said to have originated from Wang Jueyi and was named by Liu Qingxu, its religious essence existed as early as the Song and Ming dynasties. So why does the lineage of I-Kuan Tao need to connect with the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism's six ancestors, establish a linkage from the Eastern 18 Patriarch to the Western 28 Patriarch, and then to the Eastern former 18 Patriarch. This seemingly disjointed chronology actually serves to maintain the sacredness of the lineage because Tao is the creation of heaven and earth, existing since ancient times.

The main deity worshipped in I-Kuan Tao, Ming Ming Shang Di (Heavenly Mater), is believed to be the true creator of heaven, earth, the three realms, the ten directions, and all souls. Therefore, I-Kuan Tao's lineage in Taiwan gains its sacredness by inheriting from China, and one could say that I-Kuan Tao in Taiwan originated from China. However, the

religious rituals themselves are not entirely inherited from China, so it cannot be said to originate from China. It adapts to social changes and constantly evolves with the changing society, perhaps for survival and growth, or to become more secular. Under the spiritual legacy left by Chen Da Gu in Taiwan, Fa Yi Chong De is no longer the same as the I-Kuan Tao passed down in China. Whether it is in terms of the content of beliefs and thoughts or the external forms of ritual operations, there have been reforms. If one were to trace its origins, one would only see the simplest, most primitive, and closest to the essence of I-Kuan Tao

Conclusion

In summary, the development of the Fa Yi Chung De Tao temple in Malaysia, from its initial stages to its expansion into a global Tao institution, should serve as a historical mirror for the establishment of new temples. Lessons should be learned from past conflicts, such as the distinction between "Tao" and "religion," which can lead to religious opposition. Believers should be allowed to experience and comprehend these differences. Emphasis on the value and function of "innate" beliefs should prioritize holy medium elevation over faith-based value systems. Avoiding the practice of "borrowing celestial holy medium" for divine revelation and focusing on textual study and interpretation are recommended. Additionally, the importance of reading and understanding scriptures should not be overshadowed by the belief that "reading thousands of classics is not as good as a clear master." Before becoming a global religion, emphasis should be placed on the completeness and integrity of scriptures, doctrines, rituals, organizations, and institutions, as well as the openness of information, to facilitate better understanding of Tao.

Finally, rather than adhering to the concept of "doing good deeds without seeking recognition," it is suggested to encourage acts of kindness through processes of recognition and to promote the religious belief of "persuading people to do good." The purpose of Tao is rooted in the ideal of "saving the world," lamenting the societal ills, the decline of conscience, and the degradation of human nature, leading to natural disasters and man-made calamities. Inspired by the Confucian ideal of "self-cultivation, family harmony, state governance, and world peace," Tao aims to be a guiding force for societal improvement and harmony, drawing from traditional Chinese cultural heritage and promoting Confucian ideals. Despite the challenges, the transmission of religion inevitably undergoes changes and adaptations to local cultures and characteristics, resulting in the loss of original cultural elements. However, regardless of the religion, innovation and reinvention are necessary. As researchers, it is essential to analyze objectively the benefits and drawbacks that religions face after undergoing cultural transformations. Tao, after enduring numerous hardships and sacrifices from predecessors, is finally gaining recognition and respect in society.

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