

# **The Unintended Consequences of Religious Suppression: Understanding the Growth of Suppressed Religions<sup>1</sup>**

Yunfeng Lu

*This paper extends the religious economy model to oriental data which are largely ignored by the model in spite of its universal ambition. Mainly drawing on the source of Yiguan Dao, the biggest sect on Taiwan which was once suppressed by the authoritative state, this article develops a framework that seeks to outline the unintended consequences of religious suppression which contribute to the success of suppressed religions. While proponents of the religious economy model hold that state regulation on religion constrains competition and thus creates inefficient religious firms, this empirical study suggests that suppression can act as the energizing force which drives the suppressed sect to be innovative, adaptive and aggressive; suppression is helpful not only because it induces the sect to increase the supply of other-worldly rewards but also because it reduces the risk of religious goods offered by the suppressed sects; and third, suppression makes the suppressed religions immune to the free-rider problem through creating a social barrier that filters out half-hearted members. All of these unintended consequences of religious suppression imply that the regulatory effects of suppression are not only beyond the prediction of religious regulators, but also more complicated than what previous studies have revealed.*

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By viewing religion as a market phenomenon, the religious economy model has directed much attention to state regulations which “play a key role in defining how religious economies operate and in predicting the level of religious activity” (Finke 1997: 50). From the perspective of religious economy theorists, a free religious market can benefit the religious prosperity through promoting competition while state regulations tend to decrease the vitality of religious economy through restricting competition (Finke 1990, 1997; Iannaccone 1991; Iannaccone, Finke and Stark 1997; Stark and Finke 2000). Two forms of regulation have been discussed by proponents of the religious economy model: suppression and subsidy. Subsidy, which is usually adopted by the state to enforce a monopoly religious economy, tends to produce a lazy clergy and consequently a less religiously socialized population. Suppression not only prevents the formation of new religions which are a source of innovation and growth, but also makes dominant religions become inefficient. In short, “regulation restricts competition by changing the incentives and opportunities for religious producers (churches, preachers, revivalists, etc.) and the viable options for religious consumer (church members)” (Finke 1997: 50).

The current discussion of state regulation on religion, however, mainly focuses on the state-religion relations in contemporary America, where the state acts as the role of guaranteeing religious freedom, and in Europe where a religious monopoly is largely enforced. Though core religious economy theorists (Finke 1997; Iannaccone, Finke and Stark 1997) have briefly discussed state regulation of the religion in Japanese society, they mainly try to use Japanese data to support the argument that suppression restricts the growth of religious firms and deregulation leads to religious prosperity. Up to now, the operation of suppressed religions in restricted religious economies and the regulatory

influences of religious suppression have remained unexplored in a large degree (Lang 2003).

This article investigates the regulatory influences of religious suppression through a case study of Yiguan Dao (hereafter, YGD), a once-suppressed sect<sup>2</sup> on Taiwan. Making use of empirical data of Chinese religion which are largely ignored by the religious economy model in spite of its universal ambition, this paper develops a model that seeks to understand why suppressed religions are strong.

Methodologically, this study is based primarily on the analysis of field data I collected during a three month period of field research in Taiwan between September and December 2002. During this period, I visited a couple of important YGD temples, participated in the sect's activities, collected the sectarian publications, and interviewed more than forty YGD believers ranging from the sectarian leaders to ordinary sectarians, from the old to the young.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO YIGUAN DAO**

Imperial China had a long history of sectarian movements which focused on providing a theory of personal salvation and a synthesis of Confucianism, Taoism and

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<sup>2</sup> Some scholars (e.g. ter Haar 1992; Dean 1999) think that the word "sect" is inapplicable to Chinese society because it contains notions of protest and resistance so central, suggesting that alternative terms such as "religious group", "teachings" or "branch" are more value-free. Those who incline to using the term "sect" to describe certain Chinese religious groups are very cautious about the notion of rejection the term inherently owns in Christian society. To reform the term sect to be a universal one, Overmyer purposely ignored some factors of the term sect which he thinks is inapplicable to Chinese society, such as "exclusiveness and detachment" and the notion of rejection (Overmyer 1976: 62). Overmyer uses the word sect "to mean 'a founded voluntary association, oriented toward personal salvation'" (Overmyer 1976: 62). I use the term "sect" in this sense.

Buddhism, though these sects were regarded as political threats and suppressed by imperial officials (De Groot 1903; Yang 1967; Overmyer 1976, 1996; Naquin, 1976, 1981; ter Haar 1992; Lang 1998)<sup>3</sup>. As a modern successor to this sectarian tradition, YGD devotes itself to the worship of Eternal Venerable Mother (*wu-sheng-lao-mu*), the personified deity of the primordial force of the cosmos. According to the mythology of YGD, the Mother created ninety-six billion original spirits (*Yuan-ling*) which were sent down to earth. However, these spirits lose their primary spirituality and become worse and worse because of the world temptation. To save these primordial spirits, the Mother sent three Buddhas to the world, and thus human history is divided into three stages: the Green Sun period (*qingyang qi*), the Red Sun period (*Hongyang qi*) and the White Sun period (*baiyang qi*). Four billion primordial spirits had been saved in the former two periods and the rest ninety-two billion primordial spirits will be saved by the Maitreya Buddha who will preside over the White Sun Period, which began in 1912, corresponding with the founding of the Republic of China. Catastrophes will accompany the final salvation: there shall be widespread disasters everywhere; darkness shall prevail and the whole world shall be in chaos. This is called “the last disaster at the end of the third period” (*Sanqi mojie*) by the sectarians (Mu 2002).

Against the eschatological background, YGD put much emphasis on salvation. It stresses that only those who convert to YGD can survive the doomsday. While other religions were perhaps useful in a period, from the perspective of the sect, they are out of

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<sup>3</sup> The persecution drastically influenced the long-term development of Chinese sectarian movements. China had been dominated by a strong central power in most of its history. Thus, Chinese suppressed sects never became church-like because the lack of competitive political forces made impossible “the secular recognition and support which is vital to the establishment of a denomination” (Overmyer 1976: 63). In addition to preventing the-sect-to-church tendency, the persecution by a central power also made Chinese sects organizationally unstable, intellectually underdeveloped and doctrinally syncretic. An extensive analysis is available in Lu 2004.

time now and can not offer valid salvation which is dominated by the sect. In this sense, the sect claims that “Dao is not a religion” (*Dao-bu-shi-jiao*) but something superior to any religion.

One salient characteristic of YGD is that it is rarely equipped with professional clergies; every YGD sectarian can act as a missionary; all of them make their livings through doing their secular businesses; and they do not earn a salary from their missionary work (Li 2000: 72-76)<sup>4</sup>. This is called “simultaneous cultivation of the sacred and the secular” (*Sheng-fan jian-xiu*) by the sectarians (Yang 1997: 79-80). The more neophytes one recruits, the more merit he/she would gain. With these merits, one not only can enable himself/herself to gain a high status in the Heaven, but also can save his/her past ancestors’ souls. Encouraged by such explanations, many skillful and persistent missionaries dedicate their energies to winning new adherents to the sect. In this point, YGD is different from Buddhism and Daoism, both of which tend to let non-believers find them, rather than actively seeking converts.

Though the sect traces its organizational origination to the Prior-to-heaven Dao (*Xiantian Dao*), a sect emerged in the eighteenth century (Mu 2002), it is Zhang Tianran who built the sect from a small local sect in *Shandong* province to the most influential sect of China in the 1930s (Lu 1998). When the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter, CCP) came into power in 1949, the sect suffered a ruthless suppression. Regarded as the biggest “Reactionary Society, Dao Organization and Community” (*Fan-dong hui-dao-men*) by the CCP, YGD became the target of repression: many YGD sectarian leaders

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<sup>4</sup> In YGD, there are a small number of professional celibate clergies who do not have secular work and devote themselves to the missionary work. They are usually supported by the sect, living and eating in YGD temples, but they do not get a salary from their religious services.

were executed, more sectarians were put into jail, and the sect was nearly destroyed in mainland China in 1953 (Deliusin 1972; Lu 1998)<sup>5</sup>.

## **SUPPRESSION OF YIGUAN DAO ON TAIWAN**

YGD began to spread on Taiwan in the middle 1940s when Japanese retreated from the island. When the Kuomintang (hereafter, KMT) state lost the Chinese civil war in 1949, more YGD sectarians took refuge in Taiwan together with the defeated state. Although Article 13 of the constitution of the Republic of China claims a right to “freedom of religious belief,” the KMT state did not fully implement such freedom on Taiwan. In practice, state control of religious institutions “became more subtle and, in some ways, more effective” (Rubinstein 1991: 41); western missionaries of Christianity were welcomed and supported by the state (Rubinstein 1991); the Buddhists were strictly regulated through the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (hereafter, BAROC), an official Buddhist organization controlled by the state (Jones 1999); the popular religion became the target of reformation and restriction (Feuchtwang 1977); and traditional sectarian movements were still under suppression (Song 1983).

YGD became the main victim of sectarian persecution and was prohibited by the authoritarian regime in 1951 on Taiwan. In the following three decades, YGD was criticized by the Buddhism, stigmatized by the state-controlled press, and repressed by KMT.

The Buddhists played an active role in lobbying the state to suppress YGD. They produced many pamphlets to attack YGD. The main theme of those books is to claim

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<sup>5</sup> For an extensive English introduction of YGD, please refer to Jordan and Overmyer 1986: 213-323; For an English analysis of the CCP’s suppression of YGD in mainland China, please refer to Deliusin 1972.

that YGD is heterodoxy and an offspring of the dangerous and rebellious White Lotus Sect (*Bai-lian Jiao*)<sup>6</sup>. As we will see, these charges were readily accepted by the authoritarian state. Even when the authoritarian state considered lifting the suppression of YGD in 1981, the BAROC still tried to cooperate with other “orthodox” religions to attack YGD and urge the state to insist on continued suppression of YGD (Song 1983). Religious economy theorists (e.g. Finke 1997) say that dominating religions tend to use political power to restrict competition. This theory is strongly supported by the behaviors of BAROC.

The state-controlled press also attacked Yiguan Dao. Since the sect was prohibited in 1951, it had to operate underground. As Jordan and Overmyer (1986: 246) points out, “underground sects are subject to extravagant suspicions, and hence to unrealistic legal charges, which are easily believed by a populace that lacks firsthand knowledge of them.” Social stigmas accompanied YGD after it became secret. Because the sectarians only eat vegetarian foods and eggs, some people called YGD “the sect of duck eggs” (*Yadan Jiao*). This disparaging nickname soon became popular together with the rumors that the followers of “the duck egg sect” held naked congregations and raped the female believers. Moreover, these charges were echoed and exaggerated by newspapers run by the state. For example, *Xinsheng News* (*Xinsheng Bao* Feb. 2. 1963) reported that one YGD leader committed adultery with female believers; *Minzu Evening Paper* (*Mizu Wanbao* March.8. 1963) reported that Yiguan Dao, the duck egg sect, held naked congregations and raped female believers.

Though scholars’ investigations have found the above charges to be ridiculous and

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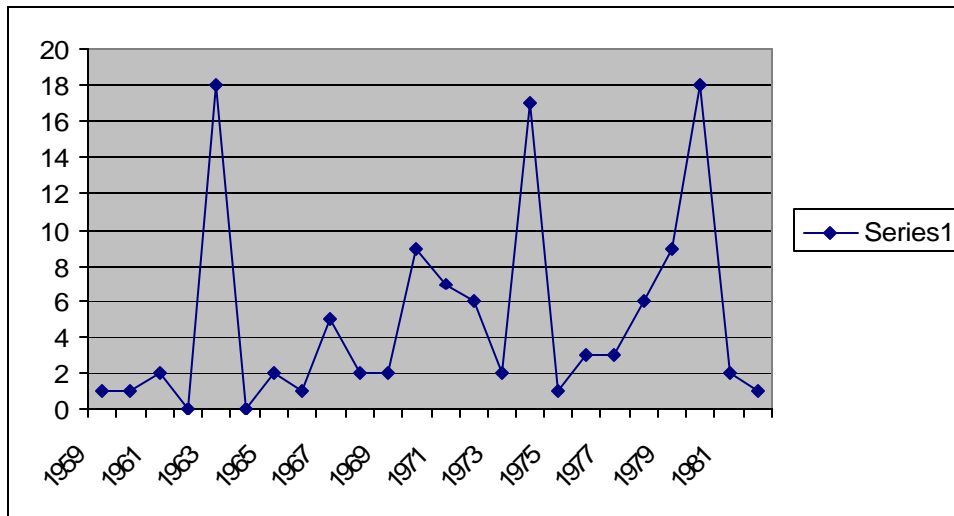
<sup>6</sup> The White Lotus Sect was regarded as a representative of rebellious sects by the imperial state in the *Ming* and *Qing* dynasty. For extensive analyses of this sect, please refer to Naquin 1985 and ter Haar 1992.

not supported by any evidences (Qu 1982; Song 1983; Lin 1990), the authoritarian state still utilized these charges to justify the repression of YGD. In a pamphlet “*Why Yiguan Dao must be Prohibited*”, the police listed the following reasons: (1) Politically, YGD was an offspring of White Lotus sect, so the sect was rebellious in nature; (2) doctrinally, YGD distorted orthodox teachings; It is superstitious and heretical; (3) Morally, YGD violated the social morality through holding naked congregations (*Luoti Juhui*); (4) The sectarian leaders threatened the public security through cheating the gullible mass, accumulating wealth by illegal means, raping female believers and terrifying believers; (5) The existence of YGD did harm to national security, because it was used by the CCP to spread rumors which were helpful to the CCP; it violated the policy through operating underground; and finally the sect controlled elections.

The sectarian activities became targets of the police who frequently swept down Yiguan Dao’s congregations and took sectarians into custody. “Sectarian leaders, to the extent that they are successful in building followings, are also ready targets for blackmail and charges of fraud” (Jordan and Overmyer 1986: 241). A high wave of persecution occurred in 1963 when 13 sectarian leaders were arrested on charges of being rogues and the sect had to publicly disband itself; some of them were beaten by the police during the custodies (Song 1983). Song (1983: 186) points out that there are at least 118 crackdowns on Yiguan Dao from 1959 to 1982, as the chart 1 shows. This figure, however, is not a perfect measurement: it includes only those crackdowns that had been reported in newspapers from 1959 to 1982. Some persecution cases were not revealed by the official press and there are still many sectarian repression cases which occurred before 1959. Consequently, these suppression cases are not reflected in Song’s figures. Anyway, the

figure provided by Song gives a general impression of the suppression of YGD.

Chart 1: The number of reports about repressing YGD from 1959 to 1982



Source: Song 1983: 186.

Though the KMT state regarded YGD as a political threat and tried to restrict the sect's activities, the suppression was somewhat moderate. As Ding Renjie (forthcoming: 50) argues, "although the KMT authoritative state suppressed YGD, the suppression was a moderate one compared to the traditional empire states' regulation of sects, and YGD could still develop in local societies." Indeed, the KMT state was more moderate in the process of suppressing YGD than the CCP state in mainland China: the former did not kill a sectarian because of the faith even during the most severe period of suppression, while the latter executed most of important sectarian leaders on mainland China in the early 1950s (Lu 1998).

Periodic government campaigns against YGD on Taiwan forced the sect to cease its activities or even disband temporarily, but the sect tended to continue where it had left off as soon as government pressure eased. Actually, the sect steadily developed during the

period of suppression. Though it is difficult to estimate exactly how many YGD sectarians were on Taiwan when it was prohibited because of its underground nature, we can make sense out of the following data: according to police investigations, the sect had about fifty thousand believers in 1963 (Song 1983: 27); in 1982, Qu Haiyuan estimated that the sect included more than three hundred thousand believers (Qu 1982: 41); Song Guangu estimated that the number of YGD believers in 1983 is about five hundred thousand (Song 1983: 1). Though these numbers are not quite precise, what is certain is that YGD successfully developed from a minor immigrant religion into the biggest sect on Taiwan even under suppression (Wang, Zhou and Lin 1997: 48). The sect finally gained its legal status in 1987. Now YGD not only is the biggest sect on Taiwan but also spreads all over the world.

Why could YGD be so successful even under suppression? In the following sections, I will focus on investigating the unintended consequences of religious suppression from the perspective of rational choice theory. Keep in mind that we are discussing moderate suppression.

## **THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF SUPPRESSION**

### *Suppression Facilitating Innovations*

An important argument of the religious economy model is that competition, or sometimes conflict, is the energizing force which drives religious firms to be creative, while suppression reduces the vitality of religious organizations (e.g. Stark and Finke 2000). Religious economy theorists have demonstrated that the dominating religions in a

restricted religious economy tend to become inefficient in providing religious services because they used to utilize political power to restrict competition (Iannacone 1991; Finke 1997). But the regulatory influences of suppression towards the suppressed religious firms need further investigation. This section will argue that suppression could not stultify the repressed sect. On the contrary, in the case of YGD, suppression to some extent drove the sect to be aggressive, innovative and adaptive.

When YGD was suppressed, the sect gradually developed a special organizational structure, as Chart 2 indicates. When YGD spread to Taiwan in the middle 1940s, eighteen divisions carried out their missionary works independently<sup>7</sup>. Each division, which was led by a Senior Master (*Qianren*)<sup>8</sup>, included many independent units which are led by “initiators” (*Dian Chuanshi*)<sup>9</sup>. Thus YGD was actually a gathering of thousands of small initiator-disciple cliques respectively managed by individual initiators (Jordan 1983). We must note that this organizational structure is not an innovation by YGD; according to Song (1990), the same organizational structure has existed in Chinese sects since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Developed against the background of religious suppression, this organizational structure was helpful for the suppressed religious firms to avoid persecution, sustain the sectarians’ morale and motivation, generate religious pluralism and promote innovations.

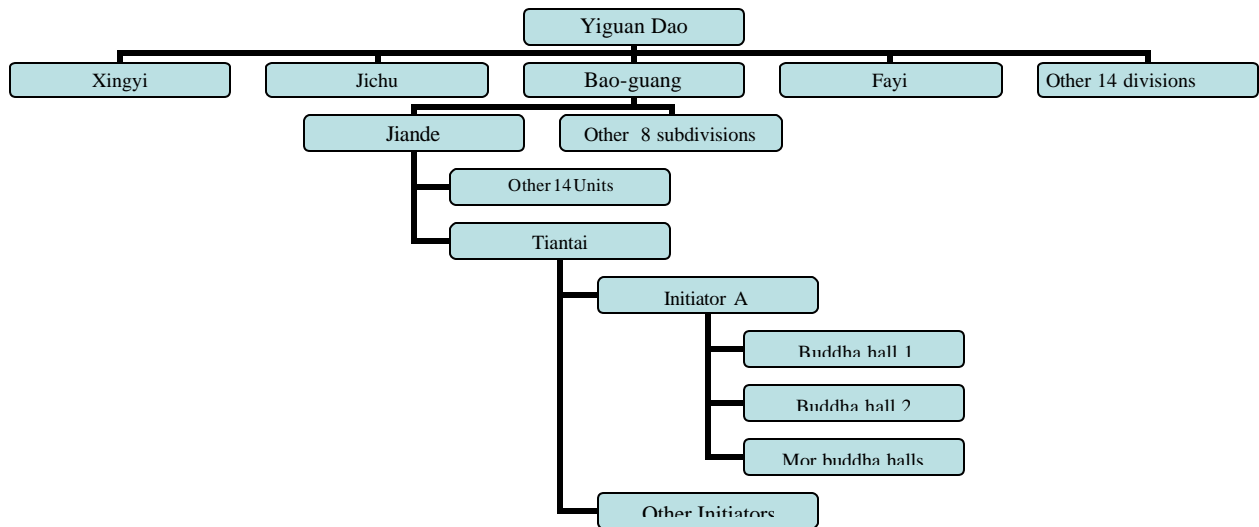
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<sup>7</sup> They are: *Bao-guang*, *Xing-yi*, *Fa-yi*, *Ji-chu*, *An-dong*, *Hao-ran*, *Chang-zhou*, *Wen-hua*, *Tian-xiang*, *Hui-guang*, *Zheng-yi*, *Zi-guang*, *Ming-guang*, *Jin-guang*, *Peking*, *Li-zhi*, *Tian-zhen*, and *Pu-guang*.

<sup>8</sup> The term “Senior Master” did not occur until the sectarians fled to Taiwan, referring to chief leaders of YGD divisions. Though “Senior Masters” are also initiators, they hold the right of appointing other “initiators” and make the final decisions.

<sup>9</sup> The term “initiator” refers to the senior sectarians who could serve as the representative of “the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianmin*)” and hold the ritual of initiation. It usually spends an YGD sectarian ten or more years to get the position of initiator. When one successfully gets such position, he/she can develop his/her own initiator-follower group.

Chart 2: The Organizational Structure of YGD



The organizational structure of YGD, which stressed “the single-line leadership” (*Dan-xian Ling-dao*), was originally designed to avoid persecution (Song 1996). Principally, an ordinary YGD sectarian could only get in touch with the sectarians who belong to the same Buddha hall (*Fo-tang*)<sup>10</sup>; and he/she had no access to know other sectarian leaders except the Buddha hall master who presided over the congregation. According to this principle, a Buddha hall master could only access the specific initiator who served as the supervisor; and initiators were respectively supervised by a senior master, the chief leader of an YGD division. Due to “the single-line leadership,” the vertical relationship within the sect is in particular strengthened. Meanwhile, horizontal

<sup>10</sup> As the basic unit of YGD, the Buddha hall has two forms: the family Buddha hall (*Jia-ting fo-tang*) and the public Buddha hall (*Gong-gong fo-tang*). While the former is small and locates in their private houses, the latter is usually big and serves as a center for holding the large-scale activities.

interactions within the sect are largely reduced. The absence of horizontal communication is helpful to keep the sect in a secret status: A secret police in a Buddha hall knew little about the information of other Buddha halls even if these halls are led by the same initiator (Song 1996). In fact, to avoid the possible persecution, such YGD divisions as Xingyi deliberately reduced the horizontal interactions between Buddha halls (Song 1996). At the same time, because of the existence of Buddha halls, two or three people could gather together and formed a small religious group; families or groups of neighbors can meet in secrecy in a Buddha hall; congregations can be addressed by itinerant “initiators” or they can be self-supervising; and various religious activities--such as rituals, spirit-writing, and research courses--held in the Buddha hall. In short, the organizational structure not only made the sect very flexible in providing services but also reduced persecution to a large degree<sup>11</sup>.

The organizational structure of YGD was also helpful to sustain the sectarians’ morale and motivation to do missionary work. One important principle of YGD is that “who plants, who harvests” (*shui-zhong shui-de*). Under this principle, each YGD sectarian holds a good chance to establish his/her own initiator-disciple group by means of missionary efforts. Suppose there is a sectarian X who recruits member Y and Z. Then Y and Z become “pupil believers” (*Houxue*) of X. In addition, the sectarians recruited by Y and Z are also A’s pupil believers. If Y and Z set up their own Buddha halls, then these halls becomes the “son-halls” (*Zitang*) of X’s; and the later becomes “the mother hall”

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<sup>11</sup> Protestantism in contemporary China also adopts a flexible organizational structure similar to the YGD’s, in order to avoid the persecution. For details, see Hunter and Chan 1993: 71. It seems that the organizational structure plays a vital role in sustaining religious vitality by promoting the incentives of religious producers. It is interesting to note, however, that this type of organizational structure became a roadblock of innovation after the religious market of Taiwan was deregulated in 1987. The sect is actively and purposely reforming its organizational structure to accustom to the free market. A detailed study is available in Lu 2004.

(*Mutang*). When more and more pupil believers are recruited, and when more and more “son halls” are established, X stands a chance to be promoted as an “initiator”. Initiators are actually independent religious entrepreneurs who are responsible for managing their followers and Buddha halls respectively. When X is appointed as an initiator, it means that a new initiator-disciple clique comes into being by fission from the mother branch, though X’s group is still supervised by its mother branch. When the group size of Xs group increases to a certain extent, X stands a chance to serve as a senior master who holds the right of appointing other initiators. Thus the mechanism of “who plant, who harvest” stimulated the sectarians to be active in doing missionary work, especially when the sectarians were suppressed.

The organizational structure also produces an internal pluralism within YGD. Iannaccone points out that the internal diversity of the Catholic Church is helpful to “introduce additional competition within the Catholic church that substitutes for competition between Catholicism and other denomination” (Iannaccone 1991: 170). Similarly, the internal pluralism derived from the organizational structure of YGD is the major source of competition and innovation within YGD. The divisions of YGD were not free of competition even when the sect was under suppression. As Jordan and Overmyer observe, “directing a Unity branch is not easy. Success ...depends upon one’s ability to attract followers from other sects or other Unity subsects” (Jordan and Overmyer 1986: 221). Clart (1998) also reveals that competition, or sometimes conflicts, existed between the different divisions of YGD before 1987 when the religious market of Taiwan was still strictly regulated. In fact, some division leaders of YGD self-consciously made use of such internal diversity to promote the competition of recruitment. For instance, He

Zonghao, the chief leader of *Xingyi* division shrewdly held a missionary competition every year to encourage the sub-divisions to recruit members actively. The top three sub-divisions in recruitment would be honored with medals by He Zonghao. Since receiving the medal was regarded as a big honor by the sectarians, they were very aggressive in doing missionary work. As a result, a competitive atmosphere was created in *Xingyi* division which quickly became the biggest division of YGD (Song 2002: 372).

Though whether religious pluralism and religious participation are positively associated or not is still a controversial topic (Finke and Stark 1988; Olson 1998, 1999; Olson and Hadaway 1999; Stark and Finke 2000), it is true that the internal pluralism within YGD was very helpful to keep the sect's organizational vitality when it was under suppression. The internal competition forced the YGD divisions to update their religious products to keep followers. In the battle for survival, some divisions, such as the *Jinguang* division, disappeared, while others were able to gain many followers and expanded both geographically and socially. For example, the *Jichu* division established a good social network among merchants of cities; the *Xingyi* division and the *Baoguang* division were famous for their missionary work in factories; the *Fayi* Division was good at recruiting members from college students (Song 1983). At the same time, a couple of important innovations were introduced into the sectarian practice. YGD as a whole was so innovative that scholars (Song 1983; Lin 1990; Wang, Zhou and Lin 1997) regard the sect as the most innovative religious group on Taiwan during the period of suppression. We can see this point from the innovation of "the combination of missionary work and business activities" (*Shang-jiao He-yi*).

Taiwan had experienced a high rate of economic growth beginning in 1960 and industrial development produced an urban revolution. In the 1970s, *Taipei* and *Kaohsiung* became world-class cities, boasting commercial centers and industrial facilities. Smaller cities, such as *Tainan*, also moved out of a pre-industrial rural economy and into manufacturing industry. As a large number of factories were built around the cities, many people moved to the suburbs and to the cities, making their livings as workers.

Under the trend of urbanization, some divisions of Yiguan Dao began to focus their missionary work on the work forces: managers, workers and engineers. As mentioned before, YGD is a religious group made up by laymen; nearly all of its clergy have their own secular businesses. Many sectarians became big capitalists with the economic development. For example, Yao Wunian, a leading initiator of *Baoguang Jiande* division, primarily began his business career as a repairman and became one of the richest men on Taiwan, managing a big steel factory. Zhang Rongfa is the founder and chairman of Evergreen Marine Corp (*Changrong gongsi*) and the chief leader of a *Xingyi* sub-division; his company also developed from a small enterprise to one of the most influential companies on Taiwan in the past decades (Song 2002). Besides these influential sectarian capitalists, more sectarians managed small or middle scale enterprises (Song 1987); about 21 percent of Yiguan Dao initiators were entrepreneurs (Li 2000: 75). The sect also directly put sectarians' donations into the secular business investments. Song Guangyu labels these phenomena "the combination of missionary work and business activities" (Song 1995: 204).

The model of combining missionary work and business activities facilitated YGD's

expansion in several ways. First, these sectarian leaders could make use of their entrepreneur identity to recruit new sectarians from their employees. Usually, they added some religious contents into the training courses, promoted the trainees' religious interests, and then encouraged workers to be initiated. Since most of, if not all, management staffs in these enterprises are YGD sectarians, employees are easily converted to the sect (Li 2000)<sup>12</sup>. Second, the identity of entrepreneur, to a significant extent, protected the sectarian entrepreneurs' religious activities. They often built big Buddha halls in their factories and held religious meetings in the name of training workers. Accordingly, these sectarian congregations could successfully avoid the government's attention. In the field work, I was told that this strategy is still used in the mainland China today by the YGD sectarians<sup>13</sup>. Thirdly, the sectarian enterprises could give financial support to the missionary work. For example, in 1974, the *Baoguang Jiande* branch of YGD utilized believers' donations to build "Tianran Chemical Plant," a factory manufacturing corn mint in Singapore. Within a few years, this factory became one of top five mint factories of the world. With its business success, this sectarian company routinely uses a part of its profits to support the sect's missionary work in return (Song 2002: 367-370). In sum, the model of combining missionary work and business activities is a great innovation which helps YGD to run secretly and efficiently in a strictly regulated religious market.

The above analysis indicates that YGD was adept at taking hold of every chance to

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<sup>12</sup> For example, 99.8 percent of managers in the Evergreen Marine Corp are YGD sectarians (Guo 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Song (1995) also reveals that YGD has been spreading in mainland China by means of business activities since the 1980s. Perhaps the local officials in mainland China actually know the existence of YGD in some Taiwanese factories, but in order to accelerate the local economic development, they would tolerate their religious activities if the sectarians do not violate the state publicly.

extend its missionary work and adapting itself to the changing environment when it was under suppression. The moderate suppression could not restrict the vitality of the suppressed religions. Instead, such suppression was helpful to drive the sect to be innovative and adaptive.

### *Suppression Increasing Religious Rewards*

Suppression did not decrease the sectarians' enthusiasm of spreading their faith. Instead, a set of new explanations were developed to cope with the persecution. According to YGD, in the process of cultivation, one must experience tests (*kao*) such as "official tests (*guankao*)" which refer to "suppression and violence from government officials" (Guo 1985: 120). These tests are especially arranged by the Mother to judge who are eligible to enter Heaven. The sectarians who pass the tests are believed to be able to reduce "karmas" (*yezhang*) and accumulate merits. From the perspective of Buddhism, the karmas are accumulated because of a person's wrong actions and conducts during the successive phases of the person's existence; the merit is the positive matter which can help people to get rid of the circle of birth, death and rebirth. YGD borrowed these ideas from Buddhism and added new contents, arguing that the more the sectarians suffered, the more karma they would reduce; and then the more merits they would accumulate (Guo 1985: 118-120). These explanations were helpful to strengthen the believers' faith. During my fieldwork, a female believer told me: "Each time after I was released by the police, I would go to the Buddha hall, burn a big bundle of incenses, kowtow to the Mother, and thank the Mother for offering me a great chance to get rid of the 'karma' I

accumulated in my past lives.”

Many YGD sectarians shared these ideas. Actually, it is a common phenomenon that repressed sects would develop a set of explanations to cope with the suppression and strengthen their believers' faith. An imperial official of the *Qing* dynasty once gave the following comments in the *Poxie xiangbian* (A Detailed Refutation of Heresies)<sup>14</sup>:

The current evil religions (*Xiejiao*) hold that “if one is punished but without execution, he will be free of falling hell but can not go directly to heaven; if one is sent to the gallows, he will go to heaven without red followers; if one is decapitated, he will ascend to heaven with red followers; if one is put to death by dismembering the body, he will directly ascend to heaven with a big red robe.” Now I have read more than forty heterodox scriptures produced in the *Ming* dynasty, but I fail to find such ideas in these scriptures. Followers of evil religions in the *Ming* dynasty were not executed, so they did not need to produce these words. However, from the establishment of our dynasty [the *Qing* dynasty] on, evil religions have been strictly prohibited. The followers of evil religions are bastinadoed, exiled, garroted, beheaded or executed by dismembering the body, according to the degree of their crimes. Though the followers of evil religions are foolish, they also fear death. To conquer the fear of death, the current evil religions developed such ideas as “the sectarians being executed can directly ascend to heaven.” As a result, the current sectarians regard execution as a treasurable opportunity to ascend to heaven and thus punishments can not forbid the activities of evil religions. However, the stupid followers of evil religions do not know that there are no such ideas as “one being executed can directly ascend to heaven” in the past evil religions. These ideas were added by the current evil religions recently (Huang1972: 113).

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<sup>14</sup> This book was produced in 1834 by Huang Yubian, a magistrate in Hebei province. Huang collected sixty-eight sectarian scriptures, most of which were written near the end of the sixteenth century. In order to refute the teachings of these texts, Huang wrote this book. Though this book is full of official prejudices, it contains rich materials about sectarian beliefs because Huang quoted long passages verbatim from scriptures.

The above quotation includes much valuable information which suggests that in history persecuted sects tended to manufacture innovative teachings to transform sufferings into religious rewards. With regard to this issue, *Falun gong* provides us a recent case. After this group was outlawed by the Chinese state in 1999, Li Hongzhi, the founder of *Falun gong*, keeps producing new explanations to encourage the practitioners to confront the CCP, arguing that such resistance could increase the practitioners' merits<sup>15</sup>. Equipped with these innovative explanations, repressed sectarians believe that it is worth running the risk of confrontation with the authoritarian state to insist on their faith. For the sectarians, punishments are the very way to gain religious rewards: traditional sectarians "call death 'Recovering the Origin' (*shou-yuan*) and believed they ascended straight to heaven" (Yang 1961); YGD believers regard imprisonment as a good opportunity to gain merits; and today *Falun gong* practitioners view resistance as a way towards "Spiritual Accomplishment" (*Yuanman*). Due to the innovative theories invoked by persecution, sufferings can be imaginatively transformed into religious rewards and thus suppression unintentionally increases the other-worldly rewards offered by the suppressed religious organizations.

### *Suppression Reducing the Risk of Religious Commodities*

The religious economy model regards religious commodities as highly risky other-worldly rewards which lie beyond the range of empirical proof. Due to the risk and uncertainty of religious rewards, "religious consumers are tempted to backslide, thereby

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<sup>15</sup> For teachings newly developed by Li Hongzhi, one can download them from [www.falundafa.com](http://www.falundafa.com) For cases about resistance of *Falun gong* believers to CCP, please refer to <http://media.minghui.org>.

reducing their levels of participation and commitment” (Stark and Iannaccone 1996: 266). Therefore, religious firms must take measures to reduce the risk of religious commodities to maintain high levels of commitment. In the case of YGD, I find that suppression is helpful to decrease the risk of religious commodities in the following ways.

Rational choice theorists hold that the less the clergy benefit materially from their followers’ faith, the more persuasive the clergy are (Iannacone 1994; Stark 1996). As I have stated, YGD provided no salary to the missionaries who made their livings through their secular businesses. Moreover, suppression made these missionaries lose rather than gain from their religious services. They encountered ridicule from the society and persecution from the state. How could one doubt the credibility of the sectarians’ faith if they would like to sacrifice time, money and even freedom to insist on their faith? Indeed, “[b]y voluntarily accepting torture and death rather than defecting, a person sets the highest imaginable value upon a religion and communicates that value to others” (Stark 1996: 174). Thus, sacrifice is helpful to reduce the risk of religious commodities and strengthen the believers’ confidence, as Stark (1996: 163-191) reveals in *The Rise of Christianity*.

Proponents of the religious economy model also point out that members in higher-tension religious groups are active in missionizing, bringing their friends, relatives, neighbors, and fellow workers into the church (Stark and Finke 2000). Such observations are applicable to YGD. As a suppressed sect that was in a high tension with the authoritarian state, YGD actively encouraged its followers to do missionary work, arguing that the more neophytes one recruits the more merits they gain. At the same time, in order to keep secret and avoid persecution, YGD used to stress that the sectarians

should obey the rule that “relatives convert relatives and friends convert friends” (*qin-chuan-qin, you-chuan-you*) when they do missionary work. Undoubtedly, this strategy helps the sect to reduce the uncertainty of religious commodities because “friends and fellow congregants have fewer incentives to overstate the benefits of religion than do clergy” (Stark 1996: 174).

Finally, the differences between the social stigma and the reality the believers experienced made YGD become more believable. When recalling the process of becoming a sectarian, an informant who joined Yiguan Dao in 1974 told me that

One of my cousins first joined Yiguan Dao, then my uncle and aunt followed her. They told me that Yiguan Dao was very good. “Is it really good? You close the door when you congregate. How do I know what you are doing?” I asked them. ... However, I was a little curious to see what Yiguan Dao on earth was, so I followed them to the Buddha hall of YGD. The Buddha hall and the rituals were very sacred. I had visited a large number of temples before. Although those temples were also sacred, people in temples were not serious and they usually walk disorderly and speak loudly. The Buddha hall of Yiguan Dao was quite different. People in Yiguan Dao’s Buddha hall never speak loudly, and they just stood there quietly and smilingly, with the male on one side and the female on other side. They were also very polite. They would say “good morning” to you after you entered the Buddha hall and then politely gave you a clean wet towel to clean hands. In short, the situation was quite different from what the rumors described. I realized that Yiguan Dao was good. From then on, I kept on going to the Buddha hall and introduced the Dao to others.

A female informant who joined Yiguan Dao in 1971 stated:

Before receiving the Dao, I had heard rumors that Yiguan Dao was the duck egg’s

sect and that Yiguan Dao held naked congregations. But after I received the Dao, I was amazed that the real situation was extremely different from what the hearsays described. Why was there such a big difference? So after receiving the Dao, I was not influenced by the rumors. On the contrary, the rumors increased my faith in the Dao because the difference between the reality and the rumors was too big.

Such statements are typical of converts. As mentioned before, to justify its religious persecution policy, the KMT state declared that Yiguan Dao violated the social morality through holding naked congregations. The sect was described as an immoral group full of rogues, cheats, lecherous male leaders and ignorant female believers. These negative images were exaggerated and widely spread by the state-controlled press. However, the reality strongly contradicts the widespread hearsays: the Buddha halls of YGD are very clean and tidy; no disturbing noise exists in the temple; the sectarians in Buddha halls are neat and formally dressed, modest and pious; they are divided into two parts when performing rituals, with the males on one side and the females on the other side; they greet visitors with smile, bows and a clean warm towel which is used to clean hands. All of these facts convince potential YGD sectarians that both the KMT state and the press are liars, while YGD is believable and dependable. Accordingly, the negative hearsays contrarily strengthen the sectarians' faith and increase their commitments, as suggested by the interviewees.

When discussing the regulatory influences of suppression, previous studies (e.g. Finke 1997) usually stresses that suppression tends to increase the cost of membership, such as “the additional costs of concealing their membership or facing public harassment” (Finke 1997: 50). Undoubtedly, this observation is still valid. But this is just one side of the coin; the other side is that suppression also result in some unintended

consequences which are helpful to reduce the risk of religious commodities offered by the pressed religious firms, as this section reveals.

### *Suppression Reducing Free Riding*

Iannacone's excellent analysis has demonstrated that religion, like other collective activities, is susceptible to the free-rider problem (Iannacone 1994). The free-rider problem is really a dilemma for religious groups. On the one hand, in order to recruit member in a large scale, religious institutions must tolerate free riders who are "potential consumers", or even "inviting them to enjoy the benefits of the church as 'quasi-public goods' -- to experience the benefits of the church as 'free samples' with the promise of even better things to come (after a free-rider becomes 'serious')" (Hadaway and Marler 1996: 201). On the other hand, religious groups must reduce the number of free riders either through screening out half-hearted members or through turning free riders to serious believers. Otherwise, the large scale of free riders would wreck religious firms (Iannacone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000).

In the case of YGD, suppression mitigated the free-rider problem by the following means. First, the suppression created a social barrier that filtered out half-hearted members. Iannacone (1992) has demonstrated that religions may benefit from stigma, self-sacrifice, and bizarre behavioral restrictions which can overcome free-rider problems. Stark (1996: 174-184) also argues that sacrifice and stigma made early Christianity immune to free-rider problems by creating a barrier to group entry and increasing participation. These arguments are applicable to the case of YGD. As mentioned before,

social stigmas, such as “naked congregation” and the nickname of “duck egg sect,” were attached to YGD when it was suppressed by the KMT state. Against this background, few people, if any, would try to free ride in an illegal and infamous sect which could provide few practical supports to believers. Accordingly, both suppression and social stigma directly helped YGD to overcome the free-rider problem.

Another unintended consequence of suppression which has proved to be helpful to mitigate the free riding is the innovation of “research courses (*Yanjiu ban*).” In the 1970s, to respond to the “cultural revolution” in mainland China, the KMT state on Taiwan launched the movement of “cultural renaissance” and encouraged people to study Chinese traditional culture. In order to build a good relationship with the authoritarian state, most of YGD divisions devoted themselves to holding “research courses of traditional Chinese culture (*Guo-xue Yan-xiu-ban*)” (Song 1983). Actually, the sect put so much emphasis on these courses that “the Unity Sect is perhaps second only to the public school system in its pursuit of education for its members” (Jordan and Overmyer 1987: 237).

The research courses are classified into different levels, ranging from the primary to the highest. We can get a basic understanding of these courses from the data of the *Fayi Lingying*, a sub-branch of YGD, as table 1 shows.

Table 1: Research courses in *Fayi Lingyin* (in 1992)

Course Name	Time	Number of participants
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1. Ordinary research course	No limitation Five months; once a week;	unclear About 3000, divided into 42 groups
2. <i>Ming-de</i> Course	7: 30 p.m.-9: 30 p.m.	groups
3. <i>Xin-min</i> Course	Five months; once a week; 7: 30 p.m.-9: 30 p.m.	About 2000, divided into 40 groups
4. <i>Zhi-shan</i> Course	Five months; once a week; 7: 30 p.m.-9: 30 p.m.	No data
5. <i>Xuan-de</i> course	Five months; once a week; 7: 30 p.m.-9: 30 p.m.	No data
6. The course for studying classics I	One year; once a week; 7: 30 p.m.-9: 30 p.m.	About 1200, divided into 12 groups
7. The course for studying classics II	Two years; once a week; 7: 30 p.m.-9: 30 p.m.	About 800, divided into 7 groups

Source: Lin 1992: 162

At the beginning of each course, an initiator presides over a ritual in the name of gods; when the course is over, a formal ritual is performed. The most important content of the commencement ritual is to “make a vow” (*Xuyuan*)<sup>16</sup>; a big bundle of incenses is burned in the ritual; the attendees will receive a form listing the vows which include “removing bad habits and refining bad temper” (*gai-piqi qu-maobing*), “prioritizing holy affairs over worldly matter” (*Zhong-sheng qingfan*), “contributing material wealth and spreading Dao” (*cai-fa shuang-shi*), “leading people to receive the Dao” (*duren qiudao*), “becoming a vegetarian” (*qing-kou ru-su*), “establishing a Buddha hall” (*she-li fo-tang*) and “doing missionary work overseas” (*haiwai kaihuang*); the attendees are required to choose a vow to fulfill and sign on the form; then the form recording the vow is burned (Yang 1997).

After being initiated, the neophytes of YGD are usually invited to attend the family congregations, worshiping gods and listening to missionaries. Then they are encouraged

<sup>16</sup> In traditional China, making a vow (*Xuyuan*) and fulfilling a vow (*Huanyuan*) are the basic behavioral forms of the masses to interact with the gods. For details, please refer to Yang 1961: 86-88.

to attend the primary course and make a vow. After finishing the course, they are usually encouraged to take part in the higher level course and make a new wish. This process continues. Guided by the courses and vows, a neophyte would learn more explanations of YGD and became a core member step by step. Of course, only those willing to make further vows go on to higher level courses<sup>17</sup>.

As Iannacone points out, in mixed populations where levels of religious commitment vary from person to person, “people with low levels of religious commitment tend to free ride off those with higher levels; they tend to take more than give”, although “they may do so unintentionally” (Iannacone 1994: 1184). In the case of YGD, we find that the research courses, together with the mechanism of “vow”, successfully classified the mixed population into different levels and the attendees in the same course usually have a similar degree of commitment. The vows act like entry fees, thus discourage anyone not seriously interested in “buying” the product. At the same time, the courses are very patient and adaptive in religionizing members. Therefore, the mechanism of research courses can not only keep all of the potential believers in a large degree but also mitigates the free-rider problem. Keep in mind that this innovation is also an unanticipated consequence of suppression: it was not purposely designed to reduce the free riding but to earn the authoritarian regime’s trust and to establish a positive social image (Song 1983).

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<sup>17</sup> Iannacone (1994) makes a distinction between strict churches and liberal churches, but the mechanism of vows in YGD suggests that religion, at least Chinese sects, can be both liberal and strict simultaneously: while new recruits are rarely restricted and enjoy the liberality offered by the sect, the veteran sectarians are ruled by strict requirements, such as no smoking, no drinking, no eating meat or even no sex. A model of “gradual strictness” exists beyond the dualism of “strict vs. lenient.” An extensive exploration is available in Lu 2004.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This article theoretically extends the religious economy model to the Chinese religious phenomenon which is of great significance in shaping the contours of the theory. A couple of unintended consequences of religious suppression are discussed. First, I propose that suppression tend to drive repressed religions to be innovative, adaptive and aggressive. In order to avoid the persecution, YGD adopts the initiator-centered organization. Unexpectedly, this institutional innovation is very helpful to sustain the sectarians' morale and to promote innovations. The "single-line leadership" decreased the possibilities of suppression because it kept the sect in a secret status to a large degree; the principle of "who plant, who gain" encouraged the sectarians to be active in doing missionary work because each of them stood a chance to build his own group; and finally the internal diversity and competition which stemmed from the sect's organizational structure drove the sectarians to be innovative and efficient in providing services. In sum, while previous studies (e.g. Finke 1997) stress that state suppression creates inefficient religious suppliers through constraining choice and muffling competition, this empirical study shows that suppression could unexpectedly create innovative and repressive religions.

Second, this study reveals that state suppression can not only increases the otherworldly rewards provided by the oppressed religions but also reduce the risk of such rewards. These unintended consequences make the conversion to suppressed sects become a reasonable choice: though the suppressed sectarians have to sacrifice more, they can gain more other-worldly rewards and more credible religious products. This finding is helpful to understand the long-standing puzzle that why people would like to

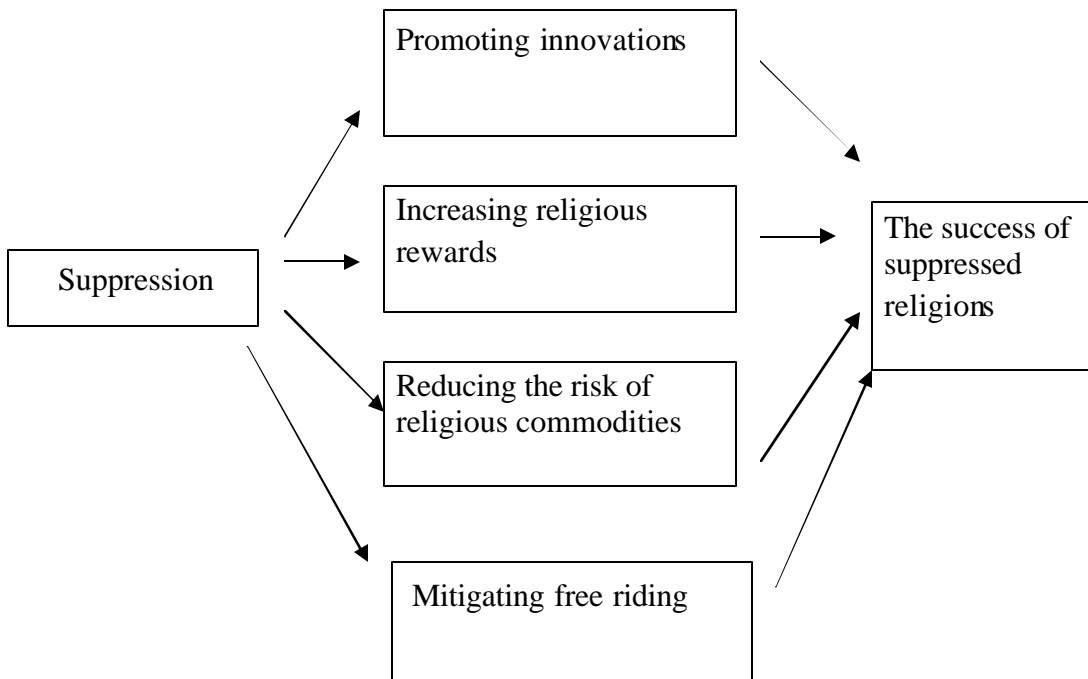
contribute their time, enthusiasm, money and even lives to a suppressed and stigmatized religious group. When addressing why people join sects, Chinese imperial officials always held that the mass of sectarians is stupid, ignorant and gullible (Overmyer 1976). Officials used to directly call sectarian believers “stupid people” (*Yumin*) and put “the constant emphasis on the ‘ignorance’ and ‘confusion’ of the people” (Overmyer 1976: 38). By contrast, this study shows that people convert to repressed sects at least partly because the suppression unintentionally increases both the otherworldly rewards and the certainty of such rewards by suppressed religious firms. In other words, state suppression makes the religious rewards more profitable and more dependable, so it is reasonable for people to convert to the suppressed religions. This finding sharply contrasts with the official view that conversion to suppressed sects is a consequence of ignorance and irrationality.

Finally, this paper proposes that suppression can mitigate the free riding. Suppression, along with sacrifice and social stigma, may act to filter out half-hearted members. Therefore suppression was helpful for the sect to overcome the free-rider problem. Specially, in the case of YGD, the mechanism of research courses, which was invoked to build a good relationship with the authoritarian regime, unexpectedly reduces free riding.

Let us take stock. I have argued that moderate suppression can act as the energizing force which drives the sect to be innovative, adaptive and aggressive; moderate suppression was also helpful to increase the religious rewards and the certainty of such rewards; and thirdly, suppression can mitigate the free-rider problem. All of these are unintended consequences of religious suppression. Undoubtedly, these unintended

consequences benefit the survival and growth of suppressed religions, as Chart 3 shows. Though these observations are mainly derived from the case study of YGD, they are extendable to other suppressed religious firms. Most of, if not all, strong religions today were once suppressed. Similar logics exist under the success of these once-suppressed religions.

Chart 3: A model of unintended consequences of religious suppression



But this analysis does not imply that repressed religion always benefit from suppression, no mater how extreme the suppression. This analysis, instead, applies mainly to the religious economy where a moderate religious suppression exists. Whereas moderate suppression may be salutary, the regulatory influences of more extreme

persecution are still to be investigated in future researches<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to compare the different fate of YGD in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The sect nearly disappeared in mainland China because of strict suppression; it did not have much influence in the Hong Kong religious market where state regulation was weak; and the sect is most successful in Taiwan where moderate suppression existed before 1987. The different developments of YGD in these three Chinese societies indicate that state regulation play a vital role in influencing religious vitality.

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