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Sectarians, Smokers, and Science

The Zhenkongjiao in Malaysia and Singapore

Based on historical research and ethnographic documentation, this article discusses the institutions, beliefs, and rituals of the sectarian religion the Zhenkongjiao in Malaysia and Singapore throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although the Zhenkongjiao originally rose to prominence as a result of its opium rehabilitation tenets, the organizations described in this article have long abandoned such a premise and have realigned themselves to contemporaneous needs. In this study, I challenge previous scholarship that historicized the Zhenkongjiao within convenient rise-and-fall mythemes by showing how the Zhenkongjiao's leadership had been proactively situating itself within changing ontologies, epistemologies, and social needs throughout these two centuries. In particular, by comparing and contrasting the Zhenkongjiao's approach to "science" in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I shed light on the agency exercised by the supporters of a Chinese sectarian religion, who demonstrated maneuverability in reigniting and recontextualizing interest in their activities.

Keywords: Zhenkongjiao—opium—Chinese charities—Chinese religion in Southeast Asia—science—sectarian religion

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The Zhenkongjiao, alias *Kongzhong Dadao* (Way Within Emptiness), translated into English as the Religion of the Void (Xu 1954)[1] or literally True Emptiness Teachings, refers to a Chinese sectarian religion (Broy 2015)[2] whose rise to fame in twentieth-century southeast China and Southeast Asia was characterized by its rehabilitation of opium addicts with meditational regimes and tea drinking rituals. Some Zhenkongjiao temples, such as the Tiannantan Jieyanshe in Singapore, preserved their opium rehabilitation functions in their names (figure 1), whereas others—notably the Tianling Zong Daotang in Changi Road, Singapore—had their names used interchangeably with secular-sounding titles such as the Opium Addicts Treatment Association by the press throughout the 1950s (*The Straits Times* 1956b). Today, Zhenkongjiao temples still offer cups of prayed-over tea to visitors and worshippers seeking a cure for their own ailments. Based on historical research and ethnographic documentation, this article discusses the institutions, beliefs, and rituals of the Zhenkongjiao in Malaysia and Singapore throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, temples operating under the Zhenkongjiao's name were once proliferate throughout the twentieth century (Liao 1968).

Figure 1. Interior of the Tiannantan Jieyanshe. Note the stylized spelling of the organization's opium curing appellation on the altar table. Photograph by Esmond Chuah Meng Soh, March 2020.

As a sectarian religion, the Zhenkongjiao saw itself as a distinctive community that stood out from—despite drawing upon—the *sanjiao* (Three Teachings) of China, namely Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. In many ways, the Zhenkongjiao's history paralleled the fortunes of vegetarian halls affiliated with the *Xiantian Dadao* (Great Way of Former Heaven) in Singapore and Malaysia. Both traditions were inspired by the syncretism of the *Luojiao* (Luo Teachings) (Luo 1962, 127–68; Show 2018b, 17), a Ming-dynasty (1368–1644 CE) sectarian religion (Overmyer 1978). Similarly, both the Great Way of Former Heaven and the Zhenkongjiao originated from Jiangxi province, China (Xu 1954; Show 2018a, 38; Show 2020, 237). Like the Zhenkongjiao's opium rehabilitation temples, the Great Way of Former Heaven's vegetarian halls also gained prominence in the socioreligious environment of twentieth-century Southeast Asia, albeit by appealing to a different niche, where women were empowered to develop their spiritual and personal careers (Freedman and Topley 1961; Show 2018a; Show 2018b).

Unlike the Great Way of Former Heaven, the Zhenkongjiao—perhaps due to its relatively late entrance into Singapore and Malaysia—had escaped the scrutiny of English scholarship. In 1954, Xu Yunqiao published an article detailing the Zhenkongjiao's beliefs, scriptures, and its possible sources of inspiration. Less than a decade later, Luo Xianglin published his monograph (1962) to mark the centenary of the Zhenkongjiao's founding. Luo's book remains an important study referenced by later researchers. From the 2000s, shorter pieces of Chinese scholarship have described the Zhenkongjiao in the context of overseas Chinese Southeast Asian communities (Shi 2014, 34–76; Chen 2016, 321–95)—notably Singapore (Tham 2011; Shi and Ouyang 2012), Malaysia (Ngoi 2016), and Thailand (Chen 2009).

Much of this existing body of scholarship, however, assumes an evolutionary teleology in the history of religion when contextualizing the Zhenkongjiao's fortunes. This framework continues to influence the postcolonial outlook of the Chinese intelligentsia (Yang 2011). Xu compared the Zhenkongjiao somewhat favorably with Islam and Christianity before noting that "(readers) cannot deny that as compared to other religions, the scriptures, the teachings and philosophy of the Zhenkongjiao pale in comparison" (1954, 32). Chen Jinguo surmised that the Zhenkongjiao exhibited traits of a "mature but incomplete religion" (2009, 83, 94). By elaborating upon this notion of incompleteness, Chen later suggested that the Zhenkongjiao was not only undergoing a "religious involution" but was trapped in a "deathlike and isolated" state since 1949 as well (Chen 2016, 394–95). Ouyang Banyi's dissertation concurred with this assumption of imperfection (2013, 3), whereas research by his supervisor Shi Cangjin depicted the Zhenkongjiao's leadership as responding belatedly to a decline in fortunes after the 1960s (Shi and Ouyang 2012, 96–99; Shi 2014, 64–76). Similar impressions of decline in Singapore after an initial wave of success in the first half of the twentieth century were also foregrounded in the works of Tham Wen Xi (2011, 16–55) and Ngoi Guat Peng (2016, 136–37, 142). Characterizations like these, whether in terms of a structural deficiency or a reactiveness inherent to the Zhenkongjiao, left actors with little or no agency in captaining their own future. This article seeks to temper this interpretation by showing how the Zhenkongjiao's supporters had

been proactively situating it within changing ontologies, epistemologies, and needs throughout these two centuries.

This article also problematizes a supposition that Chinese sectarian religion—with the possible exception of the *Yiguandao* (Unity Way) (Billioud 2020)—had experienced difficulty transitioning into the postwar years and beyond. From the 1960s, sectarian religious organizations, doctrines, and rituals appeared anachronistic with socioeconomic change and structural transformations within Chinese societies. Growing literacy and rapidly changing intellectual environments, coupled with competition from better-organized institutional religions, as we shall see, had undercut the popularity of sectarian religion. The Zhenkongjiao had experienced dwindling followership, alongside the *Wuweijiao* (Non-Action Teachings) (ter Haar 2014, 218) and the Great Way of Former Heaven (Show 2018b, 43), among others.

However, contrary to Chinese scholarship on the Zhenkongjiao, modernity is not an inevitable road that sectarian religion needs to tread—namely disappear entirely or become assimilated into institutionalized religions. Drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008) and Daniel Goh's (2009) discussion on how modernity can be "provincialized" as an alternative system of thought susceptible to assimilation into sectarian religion (rather than the other way around), I discuss how the Zhenkongjiao had attempted to realign its doctrines and rituals within a discursive setting inspired by "science." By comparing and contrasting the Zhenkongjiao's approach toward "science" across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I shed light on the agency exercised by the Zhenkongjiao's supporters, who have demonstrated maneuverability in attempting to reignite interest in their activities.

Primary sources consulted for this article include oral history interviews with the leadership and followers of the Zhenkongjiao in Singapore. From August 2018 to March 2020, I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews in the form of informal conversations with twenty-eight leaders and members of the Zhenkongjiao in Singapore.[3] Questions revolved around their personal history with the Zhenkongjiao and their past religious experiences. All conversations were conducted in either English or Mandarin. Most of my informants are above the age of fifty, and at least half of them are retirees or are semi-retired. In addition to oral history, I also drew upon educational pamphlets and booklets published and freely distributed under the auspices of various Zhenkongjiao organizations in Singapore since the twenty-first century. Likewise, hagiographies, meditational manuals, commemorative volumes, and newspaper articles published throughout the twentieth century were also examined to better understand how the Zhenkongjiao's leadership negotiated with continuity and change over time.

Historical background of the Zhenkongjiao in China

Before going into the Zhenkongjiao's activities in Malaysia and Singapore, I will provide some context into the origins and sources of inspiration for its beliefs in China, with a particular emphasis on how the Zhenkongjiao was backgrounded by two different sociopolitical regimes, namely the late Qing (from the reign of the Xianfeng and Xuantong emperors, 1850–1911) and Republican China (1912–49). Incumbent

scholarship and hagiographical traditions recognized that the Zhenkongjiao was founded by the charismatic leader Liao Diping (1827–1893) (among others, see Luo 1962), whose religious center was originally based in Xunwu, Ganzhou (present-day Jiangxi). In 1857, Liao found spiritual tutelage under Liu Bifa (n.d.), a master from the *Dacheng Jiao* (Great Vehicle Teachings, another designation of the Non-Action Teachings). In the process, Liao was introduced to the Five Books in Six Volumes (Wen 2014 [1935], 3–8), an anthology compiled by the semi-mythical founder of the Non-Action Teachings, Luo Qing (n.d.) (ter Haar 2014).

The political and sociocultural environments that provided the backdrop of the Zhenkongjiao's origins lend credence to these claims. Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang (2004, 917–23) noted how Ganzhou had long been a target of surveillance by imperial authorities as a hotbed for "heterodox" activity associated with the Great Vehicle Teachings. More recently, Barend ter Haar noted the prominence of the Non-Action Teachings in Xunwu throughout late imperial and Republican China (2014, 200–1). Liao's history with the Great Vehicle Teachings probably refracted into the Zhenkongjiao that he founded in 1862, which shared a distaste for idol-worship (ter Haar 2014).

Despite these conceptual overlaps, three key departures from the Great Vehicle Teachings reflected religious innovation on Liao Diping's part. Firstly, the Zhenkongjiao's devotees can consume meat freely, in contrast to the strict vegetarianism typically associated with the Great Vehicle Teachings and other like-minded sectarian religions (see ter Haar 1999, 44–63). After a divine revelation, Liao abandoned vegetarianism, earning him the ire of his former colleagues from the Great Vehicle Teachings. Liao's departure from the Great Vehicle Teachings' vegetarian regime extended to a ritual devised by him, where livestock can be sacrificed to avail his devotees of their this-worldly misfortunes and illnesses (Yun 1924–25, unpaginated). Animal sacrifice, euphemistically known as *fanghua* (releasing of flowers), would present complications later.

Secondly, Liao was originally propelled to fame as a religious leader after he claimed that he could cure people of their opium addictions and illnesses (Wen 2014 [1935], 14–15). Liao's approach vis-à-vis his devotees closely resembled what Susan Naquin (1985) termed "meditational" groups and ter Haar's (2020) characterization of sectarian religious networks that operated along "vertical" lines.[4] The initial renown of the Zhenkongjiao was thus closely associated with the thaumaturgical powers of Liao and his successors, in contrast to a basic knowledge of scriptural and religious tenets that wove a "horizontal" religious network together (ter Haar 2020).

Finally, after Liao experienced some success as a religious leader, he compiled his own canon (Wen 2014 [1935], 14), the Four Books in Five Volumes, a title that was probably inspired by Patriarch Luo's Five Books in Six Volumes (see Overmyer 1999). Like the Non-Action Teachings, the Zhenkongjiao's rituals revolved around the recitation of the Four Books in Five Volumes, which promised to "bring prosperity to its reciters, promote wisdom among its expositors and to eliminate opium addiction and illnesses among its listeners as per their hearts' desire" (Wen 2014 [1935], 14). Liao's recompilation was probably inspired by—and drew upon the renown of—Luo's career, where the Five Books in Six Volumes served "as an anthology that united

the essential works of the entire Buddhist canon" (ter Haar 2014, 4). Liao's imitation of Luo extended to integrating parts of the Five Books in Six Volumes into his own compendium of the Four Books in Five Volumes (Luo 1962, 134–39).

Other aspects of the Zhenkongjiao's rise to prominence reflected broader sociopolitical needs and trends. By the nineteenth century, the consumption of opium in China became branded as a societal and financial scourge by the Jiaqing (1760–1820) and Daoguang (1782–1850) emperors of the Qing dynasty (Windle 2013, 1191–92). Liao's declaration that he would rid his devotees of opium smoking occurred between 1862 and 1863, approximately two years after the end of the Second Opium War (Wen 2014 [1935], 14). The Zhenkongjiao, however, did not possess a monopoly on the promise to cure patients of their opium addictions and illnesses. Advertisements taken by other religious authorities and self-proclaimed experts in Republican Chinese newspapers touted similar claims (*Minguo Ribao* 1917; *Shishi Xinbao* 1933), which suggested that a societal-wide demand for such services was common then.

Nevertheless, the injunction against opium smoking was emphasized in Liao's *Bao'en baojuan* (Precious Scroll of Repaying Gratitude), which promised that those who give up opium smoking "would not be allowed to enter hell for all eternity" (Liao 2015 [1862], 138). Characteristics like these—where sectarian religions reinvented themselves to fit contemporaneous concerns—were common throughout late imperial and early Republican China (Clart and Scott 2014; Clart, Ownby, and Wang 2020). By riding upon late Qing and early Republican China's anti-opium crusade (Zhou 1999), the nascent Zhenkongjiao gained some breathing space from state curtailment. Yet circulated sources hinted that the Zhenkongjiao's supporters had to win official recognition and did not receive it by default (Ling 1935, chap. 17).[5]

By the mid-1930s, the Zhenkongjiao expanded from southern Jiangxi into the Meizhou and Xingning areas in Guangdong, as well as Fujian further east and, more broadly, "in the *Nanyang* (southern seas)," namely Southeast Asia (Ling 1935, chaps. 12, 13). Joyce Madancy (2003, 89–91) had also drawn attention to how the Zhenkongjiao was one among many other providers of opium rehabilitation regimes in Chaozhou and Fujian throughout the late imperial and Republican Chinese periods. The genesis of the Zhenkongjiao within these historical circumstances and its spread into the coastal ports of Fujian and Guangdong (Madancy 2003) eventually sowed the seeds of the Zhenkongjiao's expansion abroad.

Chinese and Southeast Asian circulations, 1900s to 1950s

The first Zhenkongjiao temple established in colonial Malaya was the Pili Hongmaodan Zhenkong Zushi Daotang, established in 1906 in Ipoh. One of the temple's pioneers Huang Shengfa (n.d.), a native of Jiaoling in Guangdong, came to Malaya in his youth and became addicted to opium during his sojourn. Shengfa returned to China in search of a cure, where he was not only cured of his addiction by a master from the Fubenyuan lineage known as Huang Daoyun (1870–1918) but invited the latter to return to Malaya with him to spread the Zhenkongjiao's teachings as well. From Ipoh they both expanded the Zhenkongjiao's influence in Malaya, via two

different directions. Huang Daoyun made his way southward to Singapore to establish the Xingzhou Fubenyuan Daotang (founded 1910), whereas Huang Shengfa made his way to other parts of the Malayan peninsula and southern Thailand to proselytize (Huang 1965, 38).

Three points from the Zhenkongjiao's initial genesis in Southeast Asia are relevant to our discussion. Firstly, the Fubenyuan lineage that popularized the Zhenkongjiao among the overseas Chinese initially was headquartered in northwestern Guangdong adjacent to Xunwu in Jiangxi, namely the Hakka-dominated regions of Meizhou and Jiaoling (Huang 1965, 21–22). As Zhong Jinlan (2015) has shown, many temples associated with the Fubenyuan lineage in Southeast Asia can trace their place of origin to Meizhou. Although the exact nature of Huang Shengfa's relation to Huang Daoyun was unclear, we can infer that place-of-origin affiliations may have catalyzed their mutual introduction and Shengfa's decision to support his master's trek abroad.

Secondly, the Zhenkongjiao did not enter Southeast Asia from scratch but tapped into preexisting networks, opportunities, and contacts to facilitate their entry into the region. It was the constant traffic of people between China and Malaya that set the stage for the importation and localization of new ideas and personalities—as embodied by the Zhenkongjiao and Huang Daoyun, respectively—from abroad into the region. The invitation and introduction of foreign masters into Southeast Asia via overseas Chinese intermediaries appears to be a strategy common among the first batch of masters who entered the region. Huang Dazhong (1885–1950, figure 2), for example, was born and raised in Ganzhou, but he left for Singapore in 1926 after he was—in a manner reminiscent of the two Huangs—"persuaded by seven 'Nanyang gentlemen' to come and raise a Chen Kung temple in that city" (Chin 1977, xv).

Figure 2. Niche holding Huang Dazhong's remains in the columbarium of the Changi Tianling Zong Daotang. Photograph by Esmond Chuah Meng Soh, December 2019.

Finally—a point that is relevant to the Zhenkongjiao's original rise to fame overseas—was the proliferation of opium consumption among the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Prior scholarship had rightly noted how the region provided a supply of opium addicts receptive to the Zhenkongjiao's rehabilitative regimes (Luo 1962; Shi 2014; Chen 2016). These works, however, had never accounted for a gap of over fifty years between the Zhenkongjiao's genesis in 1862 and its initial landfall in Malaya by the early 1900s. Time lags aside,

I believe that the Zhenkongjiao's belated presence in Malaya and Singapore was precipitated by a shift in colonial and international attitudes toward opium smoking by the first decade of the twentieth century (Reins 1991; Su 2009; Abdullah 2005). Although the British administration and Chinese businesses in Malaya were originally complicit in the trade and tolerance of opium smoking throughout the 1800s (Trocki 1990), it was only the early 1900s that marked a societal and political turn against opium consumption (Abdullah 2005, 43–50). When opium became relabeled as a problem that necessitated active tackling instead of an indispensable part of the colonial political economy (Kim 2020), the Zhenkongjiao was presented with a window of opportunity to establish itself in Southeast Asia. Ipoh's history as a mining town with a population drawn from Guangdong may have provided the two Huangs with a demographic of potential opium addicts to draw from (Carstens 1996, 129), given place-of-origin affiliations and an occupational predisposition toward opium smoking. The founding of the first Zhenkongjiao temple in Ipoh not only reflected these demographic patterns but also testified to how historical patterns of Chinese migration and religiosity were conditioned by British colonialism in Southeast Asia.

The rest of the twentieth century provided a favorable setting for the Zhenkongjiao to extend into the rest of the Malayan peninsula, as well as into the Dutch East Indies (later Indonesia) and southern Thailand (Liao 1968). In Singapore and Malaya, official support latched upon the Zhenkongjiao's anti-opium stance and faith healing rituals. In an episode reminiscent of the Non-Action Teachings' claim that they were protected by a proclamation conferred upon them by imperial authority (ter Haar 2014, 182–87), the *Kongzhongjiao Fazhan Shilue* (Supplementary Histories of the Kongzhongjiao; henceforth, Supplementary Histories) (Huang 1965, 34) described a similar episode, where "an official certificate giving master Huang the permission to proselytize in both Singapore and Malaya" was presented to Huang in 1912 after the latter had cured a number of terminally ill patients referred to him by the British in Singapore. This anecdote about a certificate of entitlement bestowed upon the first Zhenkongjiao master to enter Southeast Asia (which was lost when it changed hands in Kuala Lumpur), however unverified, suggests some extent of meaningful interaction between the then British authorities and the Zhenkongjiao.

Partnerships like these were occasionally punctuated by short-lived wars of words between the Zhenkongjiao's defenders and doctors, who labeled the former's rituals as "nonsense" (Lim 1952; *Singapore Standard* 1952). Prescribing the Zhenkongjiao's opium rehabilitation regime to convicted addicts was also an option exercised by the judiciary (*The Straits Times* 1956a). By 1956, official opinion seems to have turned in the Zhenkongjiao's favor, where a Dr. Leong, who represented the British authorities' survey of the temple's methods vis-à-vis the Opium Treatment Center on St. John's Island, proclaimed that he was not only "impressed" but "conceded the 'logic of the treatment'" prescribed by the temple's leadership (Eastley 1956). In the same year, the second chief minister of Singapore Lim Yew Hock (1914–84) graced the reopening of the same temple (*The Straits Times* 1956b), again testifying to the overlapping interests shared between the Zhenkongjiao and the authorities in Singapore.

Continuity and change in the second half of the twentieth century

Paradoxically, the initial boom in the Zhenkongjiao's fortunes in the 1950s sparked new insecurities from within the Zhenkongjiao about the sustainability of its opium rehabilitation credo. Far from being abruptly confronted with societal and political change, the Zhenkongjiao's leadership had attempted to find new niches to appeal to in both Singapore and Malaya. Having noted that the number of opium addicts was already dwindling by the end of the 1950s, the Supplementary Histories (Huang 1965, 72) argued that they "still had a core duty to cure its devotees of illnesses," even if the "'addicted gentlemen' (opium addicts) were a thing of the past." The same text later mused that "the methods of curing people were too simplistic, and in the past ten years or so where medicine and cultural knowledge were underdeveloped and rural, it was not difficult to convince people of its efficacy; yet, with advances in medicine, and the flourishing cultural environment of today, circumstances are different" (Huang 1965, 74–75). Besides having to deal with changing societal needs, tracts like these reflected how the Zhenkongjiao recognized the birth of an increasingly literate audience, who stopped taking the Zhenkongjiao's ontology for granted.

A decade later, the Zhenkongjiao Federation of Singapore presented its masterplan for the future by declaring its allegiance and support for the state's campaign against drug abuse (Xu 1976, 1–8). Interestingly, these texts allied themselves with Occidentalist tropes embraced by the post-independence state, where Singapore's morality was besieged by "yellow culture" and ideas imported from "the West and Europe" (Xu 1976, 3), including lackadaisical attitudes toward societal responsibilities alongside recreational drugs such as methoxetamine. Similarly, an effort was also made to link the Zhenkongjiao's prior opium rehabilitation efforts with the incumbent movement against drug abuse, where the sheltering of orphans and the construction of nursing homes were discussed alongside fundraising projects for a drug rehabilitation center since 1974 (Xu 1976, 1–8).[6]

Through such rhetoric, the Zhenkongjiao's leadership attempted to put their prior experience to purposes beyond the narrow purview of opium addiction. One congratulatory foreword proposed that drug addicts "could make their way to the Zhenkongjiao's temples, where they could stay for a short time under the guidance of the temples' masters and caretakers" to be rid of their compulsions (Xu 1976, 5), which suggested that the Zhenkongjiao considered modifying their opium rehabilitation regimes as well.[7] Contrary to characterizations that presented it as a passive agent predestined to fade into obscurity with the growing availability of healthcare and the fall of recreational opium use (Shi and Ouyang 2012, 95; Shi 2014, 70), the Zhenkongjiao demonstrated due resourcefulness when charting its path for the future.

Divestment from opium rehabilitation programs in Singapore and Malaya took similar forms, where the leadership of both countries' Zhenkongjiao Federations started to pivot toward secular and charitable activities. The Supplementary Histories, for instance, noted how a nursing home in Perak, Malaysia, was constructed in 1964 as part of the turn toward newer initiatives, before stressing how this project was the "first of its kind" that "provides specialist treatment services" in a manner that wins "the praise of many others." In addition, readers were promised, the Federation would

"assist other local charitable organizations financially as well" (Huang 1965, 26–27). These efforts have taken on cross-border incarnations as well. The stela dedicated to the construction and refurbishment of the retirement home behind the Tianling Zong Daotang in Changi Road, Singapore, for example, recognized contributions from various Zhenkongjiao temples in Malaysia (figure 3).[8]

Figure 3. Commemorative stela embedded in the wall of the retirement home attached to the Tianling Zong Daotang, Singapore, undated. Note the contributions by Zhenkongjiao temples in Malaysia as well. Photograph by Esmond Chuah Meng Soh, December 2019.

Stressing the Zhenkongjiao's support of secular charity was neither new nor unique and remains a legitimizing strategy within the toolkit of Chinese religious institutions (Weller et al. 2018; Yang 2020). Tan Chee-Beng (2012, 77) had pointed out how Teochew Benevolence Halls were dually represented by their religious and charitable activities, where supporters who "wish(ed) to present a cosmopolitan, non-superstitious image . . . emphasize(d) the charity component" of the Benevolence Halls' activities. The same went for the Dejiao: as Formoso (2010) notes, the Thye Hua Kwan Foundation latched itself onto the discourse of "Asian values" to advocate a brand of religious philanthropy in line with statist visions.

However, some paper blueprints did not manifest in practice. The case of Singapore testifies to a lack of success in the Zhenkongjiao's leadership at transiting away from opium rehabilitation to other aspects of socially acceptable charity from the 1960s to 2000s. Recall that the Zhenkongjiao, in 1976, had couched itself along the lines of resistance against the encroachment of (stereotyped) Western decadence and recreational drug users (see Kong 2006). Yet, despite attempts at linking its activities with the ongoing pushback against "yellow culture," little success was observed.

We can infer why this attempted intertwining of interests between the post-independent state and the Zhenkongjiao did not bear fruit in the 1970s and beyond. Firstly, the rehabilitative regimes endorsed by the Zhenkongjiao may have been seen as incognizant of a sociopolitical culture that prided modernity and scientific advancement. This coincided with a shift in religious outlook, where younger and more educated Singaporeans turned away from "superstitious" rituals in favor of

ethically practical and philosophically rigorous religious traditions (Tong 2007). In this regard, the Zhenkongjiao's ritualistic focus appears to have worked against its claims to modernity. For example, despite aligning itself with anti-drug campaigns, tea, exercise, and meditative regimes were promoted without adequate and convincing contextualization (Xu 1976, 12–15).

In other aspects, the Zhenkongjiao's lack of success seems to have more to do with efficient statist bodies that pushed the Zhenkongjiao's attempt to build bridges into irrelevance, rather than the latter's want of creativity and agency. With a zero-tolerance approach adopted toward drug abusers by drug rehabilitation centers and the police force (Ng 2019–20), the Zhenkongjiao's attempt at transiting toward drug rehabilitation programs was outperformed by the post-independence state and its associated agencies. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, at least three members of the Singapore parliament commended the Zhenkongjiao's effort in the rehabilitation of drug addicts, which suggested that the state was cognizant of the Zhenkongjiao's attempt at realigning itself with incumbent social concerns (*Nanyang Shangbao* 1979, 1981; Xingzhou Ribao 1981). However, there was no discussion about how the Zhenkongjiao's initiatives could expand with tangible state-sanctioned support, where both national and societal actors could coordinate their policies rather than pursuing a common goal in parallel streams. This silence was instructive, for it seems that beyond recognizing the existence of these activities, state actors were content to maintain the status quo, rather than offering the Zhenkongjiao's drug rehabilitation efforts greater momentum by integrating them into nationwide antinarcotic campaigns.

Another aspect under-addressed by the present scholarship was the challenge presented to the Zhenkongjiao by better organized and reformed Chinese religious denominations, where lines between overlapping beliefs were now drawn between so-called "pure" and "syncretic" traditions. The Zhenkongjiao's repertoire of syncretistic scriptures was thus scrutinized by reformers, who sought to purge Chinese religion of its ritualistic and "superstitious" dimensions. Given the constraints of space, this section discusses the challenge presented by reformist Buddhism in Singapore (Chia 2016) and, to a smaller extent, Malaysia (Tan 2020). Buddhists who participated in this reformatory wave not only championed "canonical fundamentalism" (Chia 2016, 145) but advocated for a decoupling from un-Buddhistic practices as well. The Zhenkongjiao, with its allowance for meat offerings, animal sacrifice, and recitation of Buddhist sutras embedded in the Four Books in Five Volumes, presented an affront to stauncher Buddhists in post-1970s Singapore and Malaysia.[9] To be sure, interreligious conflict over the Zhenkongjiao's dietary habits was not new: Liao not only refused to resume his vegetarian diet, despite the urging of his former colleagues from the Great Vehicle Teachings, but proceeded to "recite from the Diamond Sutra" with "a mouthful of chicken meat" (Wen 2014 [1935], 12). Likewise, the Zhenkongjiao's hagiographies documented the persistence of such disagreements vis-à-vis other Buddhists and sectarians, who criticized the Zhenkongjiao's affiliates for "reciting scriptures without keeping a vegetarian diet" (Wen 2014 [1935], 34–35).

Suffice to say, the Zhenkongjiao's acceptance of meat eating and promotion of animal sacrifice contradicts a longstanding Chinese mentalité that associated compassion for animals with religious cultivation (see, among others, Goossaert 2018). From the 1970s onward, modernized institutional religions that presented a more attractive religious cosmology and ethical codes (including vegetarianism), such as reformist Buddhism, managed to grow at the Zhenkongjiao's expense. A master who was once attached to the Tianling Zong Daotang admitted to me that newcomers tend to "suffer from a lack of confidence" after they got wind about the centrality of animal sacrifice.[10] Till today, the contradiction between the Zhenkongjiao and the Buddhist injunction against meat eating remains unresolved. A ritual specialist attached to a Zhenkongjiao chanting troupe told me about his verbal scuffles with Buddhist monks, who admonished him for eating meat despite reciting Amitabha Buddha's name.[11] Interestingly, some of the Zhenkongjiao's leadership considered abandoning their sectarian affiliation for Buddhism as well. After an administrator of a Zhenkongjiao temple was caught red-handed with a portrait of three Buddhas while playing taped Buddhist sutras in the temple he managed, he was criticized as "arrogant," "ignorant," and "uneducated" (Lin 1998, 10–11). Unlike the Great Way of Former Heaven's vegetarian halls, which could undergo Buddhicization in Malaysia and Singapore (Show 2020, 239–48), the Zhenkongjiao maintained its hybridized stance toward the Three Teachings. Even though the Zhenkongjiao did uphold some Confucian and Daoist tenets (Ngoi 2016), integration into these postcolonial denominations remains difficult. Till today, the Zhenkongjiao in Malaysia and Singapore remains very much a religious category of its own.

Finally, the Zhenkongjiao's shrinking membership was also reflective of the ill-institutionalization of charismatic authority by the Zhenkongjiao's first few batches of masters in Singapore and Malaysia (most of whom had passed away as of the early 1970s). The circumstances surrounding the breakdown of this web of traveling charismatic leaders are beyond the scope of this article and the subject of another ongoing study.[12] According to a still-practicing *xiansheng* (mister; the term is gender-neutral in the Zhenkongjiao's context), when her predecessor had passed away, devotees of old would refrain from returning after they noticed the absence of the previous mister.[13] In retrospect, the drifting away of devotees who ordered themselves around a singular master was unsurprising, given that vertically organized religious affiliations were dominated by strong master-follower relations (ter Haar 2020).[14] Characteristics like these were a key part of the Zhenkongjiao's organization since the nineteenth century, as evinced by a consistent focus on the miracle-working capacities of the Zhenkongjiao's patriarchs and leadership.

A short-lived newsletter that circulated in Singapore and Malaysia also noted a decline in the Zhenkongjiao's ability to uphold its own tenets. For instance, a temple in Johor Bahru housed a pair of fortune tellers who were accused of operating under the Zhenkongjiao's name to swindle devotees of their money (Ling 1999, 11). Similarly, a now defunct temple in Yio Chu Kang had its leadership replaced by ruffians, whose lack of accountability eroded prior confidence in the institution (Ling 1998, 7–9). Admittedly, publications like these where opposing factions were demonized should not be taken at face value. Yet, such tracts testified to the lack of a

centralized authority—the Federations in Singapore and Malaysia notwithstanding—that was able to bring its influence to bear, a phase that dovetailed inconveniently with the deaths of a preceding batch of miracle-working leaders.

Historical and incumbent appeals to "science"

I have elaborated upon the broader constraints that hampered the Zhenkongjiao's institutionalization in Southeast Asia by the last quarter of the twentieth century. Despite researching the Zhenkongjiao in the twenty-first century, Tham (2011), Chen (2016), Ouyang (2013), and Shi (2014) had repeated Luo's (1962) findings without addressing the possibility that the Zhenkongjiao's beliefs and rituals could have been repackaged within novel ideologies. Existing research thus essentialized the Zhenkongjiao's practices and exegeses as timeless and unchanging, which this section challenges, through an ethnographic investigation of how "science" was deployed in the Zhenkongjiao's post-2000s exegeses.

The rest of this article discusses an ongoing attempt at scientizing the Zhenkongjiao's beliefs and rituals through in-person proselytization and freely distributed publications.[15] By "scientization," I am referring to the "processes by which adherents of religions align their religion with the natural sciences" (Aukland 2016, 194). My approach is shaped by Philip Clart's (2003) interrogation of the autonym "Confucian" vis-à-vis popular religion's appropriation of the term in Taiwan. Instead of engaging in a fact-checking exercise that answers the question, "To what extent are the Zhenkongjiao's doctrines and rituals scientific?," this section provides an emic perspective of how the Zhenkongjiao's promoters engaged with "science" on their own terms (Clart 2003, 36).[16]

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the Zhenkongjiao's publications presented a hybridized image, namely one that championed once-foreign notions about what a Protestant-inspired "religion" should be (Goossaert 2008). Statements of the Zhenkongjiao's position as a "religion" that was "newly invented" in contrast to "superstitions" reflected an institution anxious to protect itself from a "modern Chinese iconoclasm" (Luo and Ling 2014 [1916]; Yang 2011, 15).

Notwithstanding the Zhenkongjiao's apologetic attempt at claiming cognizance with modernity, a closer look at its publications reveals an ambiguous relation with "science," a concept intertwined with an ontologically tenuous modernity by advocates of the May Fourth Movement (Uberoi 1987). In a manual titled *Wuwei Jingzuo Fa* (Methods of Sitting in Non-Active Meditation), the authors contrasted their guidance against "superstition," which included those who "consulted spirit mediums, (and) spoke of gods and ghosts" (Xu and Yang 2007 [1947], 24). However, even though *kexue* (science) was foregrounded (Xu and Yang 2007 [1947], 10–11), the concept was not wholeheartedly embraced:

> Chinese medicine in our country has referred to qi [life force] very often, but this concept has been ridiculed by Western doctors as unnatural. . . . In today's age of science, once ancient philosophical terms are mentioned, they are simply mocked as nonsense. . . . Today, as the authors wish to discuss the actual meaning of the term, if we simply abandon the terminology of old and use modern day terms, we

> fear that we would be missing the forest for the trees and ignoring the knowledge of our forebears.[17]

The rest of this quotation continued with a discussion about how the human body belonged to a metaphysical universe that included, among all else, the elements of fire and water (see Schipper 1993, 62). Nevertheless, the quotation is revealing, because the authors argued against a sociocultural environment dominated by scientism in the twentieth century (Shen 2016). Another section—which grew from a list of problems associated with the prescription of medicine in a "scientifically prosperous era"—concluded that an already-established cure to illnesses was found in the manual's prescribed instructions (Xu and Yang 2007 [1947], 24–26). Scientism and an overzealous faith in medicine were thus countered as inadequate as far as the Zhenkongjiao's therapeutic practices were concerned.

The Zhenkongjiao's hagiographies do testify to the claim that medicine was unnecessary, an argument that could hardly qualify as "scientific" to previous observers. In the *Zhenkong Jiaoshi* (History of the Zhenkongjiao), a disciple of Liao fell ill after he gathered medicinal herbs. Liao not only admonished him for doing so but implied that the disciple's illness was retribution for the latter's actions as well (Wen 2014 [1935], 19). Examples like these testified to how the Zhenkongjiao remained nested within a paradigm of health that existed outside of medical science, as the Methods of Sitting in Non-Active Meditation had made clear via its displeasure at mis-prescriptions and science's scorn toward the notion of *qi* (life force).

This ambiguous relationship with science continued into the twentieth century, where no thorough effort was made at engaging with the term. This contrasted with other early twentieth-century case studies where meaningful—albeit largely unsuccessful—attempts had been made to scientize Chinese religious beliefs (Ownby 2020; Schumann 2020). Cursory and sporadic efforts at situating the Zhenkongjiao within the discursive environment of science continued in 1959 and 1976, where terms such as "carbon dioxide," "oxygen," "physics," and "psychology" were mentioned passim without appropriate contextualization (Xie and Huang 1959; Xu 1976, 12–13). Such claims did not convincingly strengthen the Zhenkongjiao's claim that they were cognizant with modern-day scientific paradigms. In the twentieth century, the Zhenkongjiao did not manage to concertedly reconcile its concepts with those of science, besides stating and absorbing neologisms reflective of the time.

The present phase of the Zhenkongjiao's scientization only gained ground since the 2000s. It is tempting to correlate the third phase of the Zhenkongjiao's scientization with the STEM-centric (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) culture of Singapore and Malaysia. The STEM emphasis, however, had played a significant role in shaping the economic policies of Singapore and Malaysia since the 1990s. It seems unlikely, then, that the STEM-centric environment and the Zhenkongjiao's scientization project are correlated.

More convincing explanations can be found in the specific discourses that the Zhenkongjiao's proselytizers had coopted. One aspect that has been heavily capitalized upon was the rise in attention—particularly in the popular press—toward mental wellbeing and stress associated with urban living and a sedentary lifestyle. The term *xinwu gua ai* (no obstructions in your mind-heart) described a higher state

of consciousness entered by those who had participated in the Zhenkongjiao's meditative regimes (Xu and Yang 2007 [1947], 16; Huang post-2013, 10).[18] However, in its most recent incarnation, the same term has been deployed prescriptively:

> TS told me that he wanted [the temple] to have a "mind" program. He cannot explain it in words, but the answer to mental problems "like stress" experienced by younger Singaporeans can be dealt with by the Zhenkongjiao. Answers can be found in *xinwu gua ai wu gua ai* [there are no obstructions in your mind-heart] in the opening of the Precious Scroll of Repaying the Void. TS said that when he was younger, he also had these problems and when he chanted from this book, he felt much better. Told me that he got to know a psychiatrist "in the Buddhist organization." He wanted this psychiatrist to write something in support of the Zhenkongjiao's ability to cure mental illnesses. TS then told me about how chanting works to stabilize the magnetic field within us. That's why people go to the temple when they are in trouble, because their "magnetic field" is being disturbed.[19]
>
> TS told me about how meditation stabilizes the magnetic field in your body to create positive energy. He commented that youngsters are not interested in the Zhenkongjiao but "all religions are the same, they teach you to stabilize your emotions." Recommended me to chant the Precious Scroll of Repaying the Void if I lost my temper because of the lines "*xinwu gua ai wu gua ai* [there are no obstructions in your mind-heart]," where it may "Only [be] one sentence but it encompasses a lot."[20]

Given his reference to subtle healing energies, mental powers, and magnetic fields, this informant's appeal to "scientificity" appears to have reflected influence by New Age beliefs (Albanese 2000). Other temples have also capitalized upon a similar logic of mind-over-matter when promoting the Zhenkongjiao's rituals to a potential base of mentally weary devotees. Flashbulb events that made international headlines—such as the Tham Luang Cave collapse in 2018—were assimilated into the Zhenkongjiao's promotional material to justify its practices (figure 4), even if the key ritual implements, such as the Four Books in Five Volumes and the ceremonial tea drunk, had not changed since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Figure 4. A promotional notice for meditational classes hosted by a temple in Singapore. Note the poster's reference to Huang Dazhong's meditative position (see figure 2). Part of it reads, "Meditation can strengthen your physique, adjust your *jing* (essence), *qi* and *shen* (spirit), alleviate stress . . . which is not only beneficial but fruitful to your family and career. Recently, in northern Thailand, thirteen teenagers were trapped in a cave, and (it was) because of meditative techniques that they were able to preserve the physical capacities, (before) they were rescued." Photograph by Esmond Chuah Meng Soh, April 2021.

Although meditative rituals remained a part of the Zhenkongjiao's practice and had received their own fair share of scientization, the subject—at least in printed form—of demystification shifted toward the process of "making" ceremonial tea, where the Four Books in Five Volumes were recited over cups of tea on the Zhenkongjiao's altars. In a freely distributed educational booklet, the process of making "holy-tea" was described as (Huang post-2013, 36–37):

> Since 1999, there is a Japanese hydo-researcher [*sic*] and author named as Masaru Emoto who wrote on the healing power of water. . . . According to Masaru Emoto's research, the molecular structure of water will form into a beautiful cum perfect crystal shape under harmonious environment. . . . These water molecules are believed to be highly energized and could heal our bodies with harmonized vibrations. . . . many studies in the past have been conducted on the same characteristics of water that has been chanted by religious prayers. While water is a very unique element that can absorb and dissipate energy, it will be logical for it to synchronize with faithful prayers that can be treated as "Holy water."
>
> In our religious practice, Grandmaster ZhenKong [Liao Diping] initiated the tea-drinking ceremony after every prayer session since he began preaching. . . . Using his supreme wisdom, Grandmaster ZhenKong fully comprehended the significance of water properties that aligned to his objective for healing ailments. Therefore, he used holy-tea as a miraculous antidote to detoxify, purify, and cure many opium addicts and the sicknesses without medication. . . . Chanting this Holy Text carries highly energized power that can dissipate evils, remove obstacles, rectify negativity, and develop positive energies. It is this miraculous effect that we believe the prowess of DAO has injected into the tea, in curing umpteen sicknesses for more than last 100 years.

Similarities between the discussion of beneficial vibrations in this passage and earlier references to healing energies associated with New Age thought can be discerned. Likewise, soundbites in this booklet mirrored its 1959 counterpart, where terms such as "energized," "molecules," and "research" were referenced in-text. Yet there are key differences between what the authors chose to demystify in 1959 and 1976 as compared to today. Before the 2000s, claims about the benefits of tea drinking merely stressed the substance's inherent physiological benefits, such as promoting digestion and tea's detoxifying properties (Xie and Huang 1959, 9; Xu 1976, 15). However, since the 2000s, the discursive focus pivoted toward the ritualistic performance that tea had to undergo before it could be endowed with curative effects. Mounting professional and public debate over the existence and worth of water memory in the twenty-first century, we can suspect, provided the catalyst for reinterpretation (Enserink 2014; Vithoulkas 2017).

To be sure, the Zhenkongjiao was not the first to realign itself according to the logics of healing water. Dominik M. Müller (2018), for example, noted how the healing water hypothesis scaffolded research of Zamzam water's supernatural properties in Brunei Darussalam's brand of bureaucratized Islam. The notion of "bureaucracy"—in contrast to the spontaneity of charisma—as Müller described can explain why the Zhenkongjiao chose to structure its scientization along the healing

water hypothesis. Broadly, the healing water hypothesis provides a rhetorical conduit that contextualized Liao Diping's rehabilitation of opium addicts alongside the continued relevance of the tea drinking ritual today. Practitioners were not only assured of the tea's curative effects but the tried-and-tested historicity of the ritual through analogical reasoning as well. As Liao had injected his hostility toward opium smoking into the tea that was imbibed by his patients, practitioners could channel their healing aspirations through the same process today.

Moreover, as noted previously, the Zhenkongjiao's initial success in Southeast Asia was intertwined with the thaumaturgy of its initial batches of masters and misters. Ceremonial tea, in both hagiographical and present-day retellings, was an indispensable adjutant to successful cures and rehabilitations (Wen 2014 [1935], 55–56; Eastley 1956; Huang 2016, 72). Yet, these masters existed as an afterthought that harked back to a mythologized past that contrasts with the Zhenkongjiao's struggle to maintain its relevance today. Against this context of fleeting charisma, the present-day pivot toward water memory could be contextualized as a renewed attempt at institutionalizing—while still paying homage to—the legacy of leaders who are no longer alive.

With water memory providing the point of departure, the efficacy of ceremonial tea was simultaneously decoupled from the Zhenkongjiao masters' personal powers and reinvested within scientific-sounding language that provided a "powerful vocabulary of legitimation" (Müller 2018, 174). In this reinterpretation, the Zhenkongjiao's masters of old merely abided by a process that was consistent with universal principles, rather than parochial techniques found within themselves. No longer was a specific actor—much less substance (bottled water had sufficed in some temples)—quintessential to the ritual's success. Tea's antioxidant properties were still referenced (Huang post-2013, 37), but its importance was dwarfed by the "science" of water memory. As of the 2000s, it was the ritual itself and the effects of water memory that guaranteed the curative effects of the liquid. Water memory thus simultaneously served to demystify and relegitimize a ritual that was associated with "superstition" by unconvinced observers while justifying its continued practice.

The discussion here is relevant not only to Singapore but Malaysia as well, where the same books have been endorsed by (and possibly distributed under the auspices of) the Zhenkongjiao's other regional centers (Huang 2016, 9–12). Similarly, after a conference about the Zhenkongjiao's future action plans in Hat Yai, Thailand, in 2012, a mug emblazoned with the *Kongzhong tu* (Diagram of the Central Emptiness) was sold to those who wanted to make holy tea at home according to the aforementioned logics (Huang post-2013, 33–34).

The present-day scientization of the Zhenkongjiao's rituals and activities seems to have less in common with the alternative scientific paradigms associated with various Qigong masters than it does with Hindutva historicism. Unlike Li Hongzhi (born 1951) of the Falun Gong (Farley 2010), none of the Zhenkongjiao's promoters had attempted to construct a parallel (and rivaling) paradigm to justify their claims to "scientificity." In the introductory text *Kongdao Liuxing: Ruwei* (A Journey into the Void: A Comprehensive Explanation) (Huang 2016, 46–47), Liao Diping's thought was

connected to the historical Buddha (fifth to fourth centuries BCE) and the scientific notions of Albert Einstein (1879–1955):

> In Buddhism, the Buddha had noted that the myriad of ways are born from the mind, and everything is the product of the mind. All living beings and their fates are all the products of one's self cultivation, and [thus] all decisions lie in one's hands, and have nothing to do with a Creator [god]. . . . Einstein made a similar point before, [where] the religious philosophy that is closest to science is Buddhism. My view as an author is that Einstein had yet to know our old Patriarch's [Liao's] meditative insight and knowledge of the "journey into the void," and what a regret it was [to Einstein?]! Otherwise, this great and world-renowned scientist would have looked at our Patriarch Liao very differently! . . . What Einstein did not know was that even before he had conceived of the theory of relativity, our patriarch [Liao] had already understood this theory in depth! It was only at that time when nobody can use the terminology of science to explain the mysteries of *Chan* [Zen] in a manner suitable for exposition.[21]

A key difference between this text and its twentieth-century predecessors lay in how the authors conceptualized the Zhenkongjiao's relationship with science. The Methods of Sitting in Non-Active Meditation, although acknowledging the contributions of science, frowned upon the latter's derision of life force, despite the concept's centrality in the Zhenkongjiao. Similarly, from the 1950s till 1970s, although findings from science were referenced to validate the efficacy of the Zhenkongjiao's rituals, both schools of thought lived within—but coexisted as—different paradigms. In contrast, this post-2000s quotation insists that the Zhenkongjiao was "science," as evinced by the juxtaposition of Liao's thought with Einstein's. Reinterpretations like this mirrored attempts at historicizing science through Hindutva lenses, where arguments were made for a past permeated with modern-day technology and knowledge (Kapila 2010; Arnold 2000, 169–85). Similar claims can be detected in this case, where Huang stressed that the gulf that separated Liao Diping from the Buddha and Einstein was not related to a difference in intellect but the incommensurability of historical contexts.

Another pertinent element that underpinned the Zhenkongjiao's newest wave of scientization lay in a persistent—but inhomogeneous—attempt at representing the Zhenkongjiao's meditative rituals and exercises as a panacea to the lifestyles of people (see similarities with Rao 2002, 7–8):

> ZT told me about how senior citizens do not find it meaningful to bend or kneel in temples, because they claim that they are old. She complained that [they should], since "you [they] do not come daily to kneel and worship, but only when they happen to come to the temple." She then told me about how in this time and age people take everything for granted and do not exercise. She told me about how "blood does not circulate as often in our bodies with the advent of washing machines, and how the Patriarch [Liao Diping] had foreseen this." I asked her to clarify this point: does she mean that Liao Diping had predicted we will have washing machines and how we can use the method of worship for better health? She corrected herself: "This is based on what I know, and I am merely explaining it to you."[22]

Likewise, environmentalism and the "law of attraction"—again reflective of how New Age beliefs provided a source of inspiration (Smythe 2007)—also gained a foothold in the Zhenkongjiao's repackaging of its ethical and belief systems:

> TM explained to me about how the Zhenkongjiao "is a modern religion, which the Patriarch [Liao] had [already comprehended] a century ago. Why do devotees of the Zhenkongjiao abstain from burning joss paper? It's because we are environmentally friendly. We sit in meditation and drink tea, [in contrast] with people living hectic and modern lives, where they are easily agitated [before] they hit and scold others." Told me that the Zhenkongjiao is a religion that is ethically rigorous with the *wugui sikao* [Five Dedications and Four Tests]. It is a religion that allows you to "communicate with the universe," and sitting in meditation serves this purpose. He told me that an Australian author who had already discovered a means of communicating with the universe wrote *The Secret*. He admitted to me that he had not read the book in its entirety, but he still found it comparable to the Zhenkongjiao's teachings.[23]

Despite the specific context (urban and sedentary Singapore) within which both informants had actively couched their exegeses, both sidelined the historical genealogy of the Zhenkongjiao's origin from the Great Vehicle Teachings. Breathing and meditational exercises were a key component of the Chinese sectarian experience since the late Ming and Qing dynasties (Chiu 2007; Zhuang 2002, 491–512), although they may be conceptualized along soteriological and eschatological lines in addition to or in contrast with practical health benefits.

I end by shedding light on how animal sacrifice was quietly retired from public prominence by the 2000s. Throughout the twentieth century, the Zhenkongjiao appealed to karmic metaphysics to justify the ritual's continued relevance (Yun 1924–25, unpaginated; Xie and Huang 1959, 3–6). How did this turn out in the post-2000s? Although organizations in Singapore still request their Malaysian counterparts to perform the ritual for them in proxy,[24] the ritual's significance was downplayed to a newer generation of potential converts (Huang post-2013, 20–21):

> Back then, sacrificing of animals was common practice in China among all cultural festivals. Grandmaster [Liao] preached such methodology to suit the nation's culture as well as providing food to the poor. In fact, there is no preaching of killing animals in all the 4 major Holy Texts of our sect. Therefore, *fanghua* [animal sacrifice] ritual is not a compulsory practice and should NOT be debated upon! . . . In modern society, killing of animals are restricted to authority license [*sic*] and appointed venue. . . . However, the Baokong holy text [one of the Four Books in Five Volumes] says, "The Buddhas are always efficient in umpteen manifestations". This reminds us to be versatile and select alternative [*sic*] when we are restricted to *fanghua* activities!

Reconceptualizing animal sacrifice as optional rather than a central part of the Zhenkongjiao's beliefs could thus be understood as a pragmatic attempt at resituating the sectarian religion within a Chinese religious discourse that favored compassion toward animals. As Huang himself may have noticed, and as his predecessors may have realized since 1959, it was difficult to convincingly reconcile the karmic

metaphysics of animal sacrifice with the scientized discourse that the Zhenkongjiao embraced as of the early 2000s and beyond.

Conclusion

This article served to problematize linear rise-and-fall narratives regarding the history, beliefs, and practices of the Zhenkongjiao in Singapore and Malaysia from the twentieth century till today. Global forces and an abrupt turn in societal attitudes toward opium smoking opened a window of opportunity for the Zhenkongjiao to enter Southeast Asia, where it eventually entered a marriage of convenience with the then-British government in Singapore and Malaysia. From this article, it is clear that even though the Zhenkongjiao originally rose to prominence as a result of its opium-curing credo, the leadership of the movement in Singapore and Malaysia had recognized the unsustainability of its opium-curing enterprise and sought to divest it into other concerns of the day. However, for the case of Singapore, the transition toward these secular causes was largely unsuccessful as a result of rapidly changing and larger forces beyond the Zhenkongjiao's control. Unlike other more successful instances of religious charity and philanthropy in Singapore, the Zhenkongjiao lost its initial edge to other competitors, such as the Thye Hua Kwan Foundation and Buddhist Free Clinics (Formoso 2010; Kuah-Pearce 2009, 182–86).

Nevertheless, my ethnographic documentation of the contemporaneous realigning of the Zhenkongjiao's activities, rituals, and beliefs within the mold of "science" testifies to the resilience and continued agency exercised by the Zhenkongjiao's promoters. As the scientization of the Zhenkongjiao's rituals and beliefs has shown, sectarian religions were not necessarily trapped by their obligation to the past. Discourses, knowledge, and re-representations from early twentieth-century China can be creatively redeployed to navigate the present in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Interestingly, and despite (in spite of?) the absence of a charismatic leader, the Zhenkongjiao's reinvention along "scientific" lines since the 2000s appears to have taken root from within already institutionalized actors and mediums, such as the misters of various temples and freely distributed educational materials. While "science" and "modernity" as legitimizing concepts were claimed and interpreted differently, they were consistently referenced by the various members of the Zhenkongjiao, again hinting at how this pursuit of "scientificity" developed independently instead of being conditioned by a centralized figure or authority. This article provides a glimpse of what sectarian movements can do to innovate in the present, but it remains to be seen if the Zhenkongjiao's re-representation (and truncation) of its own discourses within "scientific" paradigms will bear fruit in the days to come. Only time will tell.

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Notes

1. This article is dedicated to the memory of two scholars who specialized in the history of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia: Xu Yunqiao (1905–81) and Luo Xianglin (1906–78). The author would like to thank the *Asian Ethnology* editors and anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. This article is drawn from my Master's thesis "Sages, Smokers, and Sojourners: Revisiting the Religion of the Void (19th Century–Today)," whose writing was supported by the NTU Research Scholarship. I am grateful to my supervisor, Professor Koh Keng We, for his encouragement and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. I would also like to thank Professors Park Hyung Wook and Lisa Onaga for introducing me to the history of science and technology, as well as Professor Els Van Dongen, who introduced me to the history of the overseas Chinese and the intellectual history of modern China. My fieldwork in Singapore and Malaysia received the gracious hosting of the Benyuanshan and Fubentang temples in Singapore. Among everyone else, I would like to thank Francis Lim, Linda Leow, Huang Chunsheng, Leow Jingwen, Michael, Toh Shou'de, Huang Jiawei, Ng Aik Siang, Richard Lee, Lin Jinchun, Uncle Minghua, and the anonymized informants. Similarly, I would like to thank Uncle Liu Kim Beng and Sister Chen Yuezhu for showing me around the Tianling Zong Daotang and Tiannantan Jieyanshe, respectively. Nicholas Lua and Richelle Chia also commented on earlier drafts of this article. All Chinese characters are transliterated according to the *hanyu pinyin* convention, except for verbatim quotations. Xu Yunqiao's article was translated into English in the same issue of the *Journal of the South Seas Society* by Chiang Liu, who titled his translated and eponymous work as "The Religion of the Void." Here, I have preserved the English translation of the Zhenkongjiao's name by Liu, but I will refer to the original Chinese piece by Xu in the rest of this article.

2. The characterization of religious groupings like the Zhenkongjiao remains disputed. Chinese scholars have continued to adopt terms that include, but are not limited to, "salvationist religions" and "secret religions." As Broy (2015) has noted, these labels remain problematic, and he proposed the use of "sectarian religion" instead. Since this has been problematized elsewhere, I will adopt Broy's characterization throughout this article in favor of consistency.

3. According to Chen (2016, 330–37) there are still 125 functioning Zhenkongjiao temples in Malaysia. In Singapore, seven temples are open for public worship. Many of the Zhenkongjiao's leadership in Singapore featured in more than one temple. For example, the facilitators of the Benyuan Xulingshan Temple (Bukit Batok) were also involved in the running of the Benyuanshan Temple (Pasir Panjang) in between religious festivals, whereas another informant who helped out in the Zhenkongjiao Fubentang (Yishun) concurrently held a leadership role in the Xianchuan Zong Daotang (Tampines).

4. According to ter Haar's typology (2020, 21), vertically connected networks were characterized by strong master-disciple relations and did not include "separate (impersonal) institutions." People belonging to horizontally organized groups, in contrast, were characterized by a higher

degree of homogeneity in their belief and rituals, since they met on a consistent basis and "form(ed) integrated local groups" (ter Haar 2020, 19).

5. This reference is unpaginated. The chapters are provided to aid bibliographic consultation.

6. This was mentioned in passing by Shi (2014, 75), but without any substantiation.

7. Shi and Ouyang (2012, 95) suggested that the opium curing techniques did not work on recreational drug abusers. This hypothesis lacks substantiation and is contradicted by the Zhenkongjiao's attempt at rebranding itself as a part of the post-1970s anti-drug campaigns.

8. There are no clearly stated reasons offered for this area of specialization, although two possibilities exist. Firstly, because the Zhenkongjiao possessed a rhetorical injunction against the use of medicine, it did not develop its own professionalized medical services, unlike other religious charities such as the Singapore Buddhist Free Clinic (see Kuah-Pearce 2009) and the Thye Hua Kwan Foundation. The second reason is historical. Newspaper articles noted that many Zhenkongjiao temples once provided lodging for the aged who were left without dependents, hence justifying the Zhenkongjiao's continued investment in this aspect of secular charity (*Nanyang Shangbao* 1981).

9. This was mentioned in passing by Shi and Ouyang (2012, 95; see also Shi 2014, 70) but without any substantiation.

10. Interview with SG, ex-master attached to Changi Tianling Zong Daotang in Bedok, Singapore, January 14, 2020. This interview was performed in Mandarin. The translation presented here is my own. To protect the identity of my informants, pseudonyms will be used throughout this article.

11. Interview with HM, ritual specialist attached to a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, December 25, 2018. This interview was performed in Mandarin. The translation presented here is my own.

12. This historical question will be addressed in my upcoming dissertation.

13. Interview with ZT, resident mister of a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, March 13, 2020. This interview was performed in Mandarin. The translation presented here is my own. The title of "mister" is elusive to characterization. On the one hand, the term describes a Zhenkongjiao temple's resident ritual specialist. On the other hand, some misters enjoyed renown as the founder of multiple temples, whereas the terms "mister" and "master" were used interchangeably elsewhere. As such, the translation provided in this article remains an arbitrary one.

14. Shi and Ouyang (2012, 94–95) argued that the Zhenkongjiao's decline in contemporary Singapore can be traced to the first batch of masters, who may have ignored the Zhenkongjiao's philosophical tenets in favor of rehabilitating opium addicts and curing illnesses. This hypothesis is unconvincing, for it presupposes a divide between the Zhenkongjiao's "high" philosophy and "low" pragmatic rituals. This argument also sidelines the sociology of vertically ordered sectarian religions (ter Haar 2020), which organized themselves around the patronage of miracle-making personalities. Convincing substantiation on both authors' part is also lacking.

15. The initiative discussed in this section is still ongoing since the 2000s, and not every part of the Zhenkongjiao's opus has been scientized. For example, the Zhenkongjiao's cosmology was still explained within the language of its 1950s counterparts (Huang 2016, 15–42). The absence

of scientized abstract ideas (such as the eponym "Emptiness") may reflect the difficulty of realigning such concepts with contemporary concerns. The Zhenkongjiao's intellectual history will be addressed in detail in my upcoming dissertation.

16. Some of the sources consulted for this article may have referred to various claims as "science," even though other scholars and professional bodies have labeled these ideas as "pseudoscience." Given the pejorative nature of the latter autonym, I will not be adopting the term in this article out of respect for my informants' beliefs.

17. This quotation was originally in Chinese. The translation presented here is my own.

18. This stanza, although attributed to Liao's Precious Scroll of Repaying the Void, has its roots in the Buddhist Heart Sutra (seventh-century CE onward). The reference to this Mahayana Buddhist text is not surprising, since the Zhenkongjiao's opus was inspired by the Five Books in Six Volumes of the Great Vehicle Teachings (which also included a portion of the Heart Sutra).

19. This quote is from my fieldnotes after I had undertaken an interview with TS, committee member of a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, January 12, 2020.

20. This quote is from my fieldnotes after I had undertaken an interview with TS, committee member of a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, July 26, 2019.

21. This quotation was originally in Chinese. The translation presented here is my own.

22. This quote is from my fieldnotes after I had undertaken an interview with ZT, resident mister of a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, March 13, 2020. This interview was performed in Mandarin. The translation presented here is my own.

23. This quote is from my fieldnotes after I had undertaken an interview with TM, committee member of a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, March 15, 2020. This interview was performed in Mandarin. The translation presented here is my own. The Five Dedications and Four Tests are precepts that adherents of the Zhenkongjiao are expected to pledge obedience to.

24. I am currently digitizing a collection of handwritten records regarding monetary contributions to animal sacrifice rituals from the 1970s to the early 2000s in Singapore, which shows how the practice is still upheld, even if the activity is physically performed elsewhere (see Tham 2011).

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