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# NEITHER BUDDHIST NOR TAOIST, BUT BOTH (AND EVEN MORE)

## EXPLORING ‘THE HALL OF INFINITE PRINCIPLE’ (GUANGLI

## FOTANG): A CHINESE TEMPLE IN THE ROMANIAN CAPITAL

By Șerban Toader

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### Abstract

This ethnography regards the sole Chinese temple in the Romanian capital Bucharest, its people and activity, as well as the thinking that supports this new religious movement (Maitreya Great Tao, Mile Dadao 弥勒大道). It is common knowledge that Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism appear, at least in the official discourse, as a braided rope of unified Chinese tradition, each of the three at the same time preserving their particular features. Nevertheless, Mile Dadao not only seems to implicitly unite the three traditions in one (to which other foreign or popular traditions may be added as well), but also aims to act as a next-level movement of global importance. This messianic and missionary movement may also be understood as a Sinicized version of Buddhism that ceases to call itself ‘Buddhist’ (or ‘Taoist’) while expressing the role of spiritual supra-structure in which every earthling, member of any religion, may find their place on Earth and eventually salvation.

Keywords/key syntagma: Taiwan/China, emerging religion, Buddhism, Taoism, salvationism, veganism.

### 1. Characteristics of the Movement

Academic research on *Mile Dadao* is rare. However, its links to another religious movement, *Yiguandao* 一贯道, and published research regarding it<sup>1</sup> may open a door to a deeper

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<sup>1</sup>Tsu-Kung Chuang, “Yiguandao: An Old Popular Religion”, in *Debates on Truth – Heresies and Paganisms*, (Burlington: American True Light Ministry, 2020) [莊祖鯤. 2020. “一贯道：源遠流長的民間宗教”. 真

exploration, as articles and books on the latter have proved highly helpful on understanding *Mile Dadao's* pre-founding history and its doctrinal elements. Moreover, certain researchers explicitly mark the former as a later development of *Yiguandao* and as one resembling the later in its main lines,<sup>2</sup> a fact usually not mentioned by the people interviewed in the Bucharest Temple. Neither is this mentioned on the official site of *Mile Dao*.<sup>3</sup> As soon as the website is open, a pop-up window states that *Mile Dadao* and *Yiguandao* represent two different religious systems (宗教體系) and disapproves the usage of photos belonging to the former to illustrate activities related to other religious movements.

The content of the official site uses contemporary terminology regarding its organization, divided into three criteria: principles, objectives, and mission. Its principles are simply put as being peace in the world and among families, empathy, and compassion. Its objectives are that the world is one family--beyond national ideologies, dogmas, skin color, beliefs, customs, language, and writing system. In this universal family, the animal and vegetation kingdom are also included. Its mission and action are to fulfill Maitreya/Mile's desire to transform Terra into a paradise on Earth. The post-natal world (後天) is not meant to be abandoned. Instead, a new culture (新文化) is to be established, surmounting cultural differences. The aim is a single universal family in accord with the Great Nature (大自然) and respect for all living beings. This respect includes all human life; the life of a state leader is not more precious than any other individual's life. The goal is practicing the Tao of the salvation of humans and of the world, helping Maitreya in accomplishing the ideal of the world as one family (世界一家), and making this a lifetime mission.

*Mile Dadao* considers the present state of humanity as being confused. In order to keep it living (and living forever), it needs a new kind of ethics (新道德), common to the humanity as a whole. Therefore, the core principle is "the world as one family." How? The separating walls, that create antagonisms, should be abolished. Then, regarding individual consciousness, one should

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道辯一論異端、別異教派與異教。伯靈頓: 美國真光協會: 251-258; Edward A. Irons, *Tian Dao: The Net of Ideology in a Chinese Religion*, (Ann Arbor Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Guihong Su, *From Yiguandao and Xiantiandao to Mile Dadao: Discussing the Development of Cultural Groups*. (Tainan: State University of Tainan, 2012) [苏桂弘. 2012. 从一贯道、先天大道到弥勒大道: 谈文化组的发展. 台南: 国立台南大学], p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> 彌勒大道 Maitreya Great Tao. Accessed 16 August 2021. <https://maitreya.org.tw/index.html>.

become aware that we are precious by who and what we are, not according to social status, wealth, and similar characteristics. If one does possess a higher status and fortune, one should use them to benefit others, not as the final aims in life.

## **2. First Encounter with the Temple in Bucharest**

I went to the Temple for the first time in the summer of 2010 to working on a research (and support) project regarding the Chinese workers in Romania. That year, the memory of the dramatic events through which many of them had passed was still fresh. A colleague in sinology connected me with one of the workers. He was one of the few still in Romania after the building sites had been shut down. One year earlier, the temple offered to dozens of them shelter and food. Starting in 2006, the number of Chinese merchants residing in Bucharest and the surrounding vicinity (about 4,000) had been nearly equaled by the number of workers coming from China, more specifically, female workers in the textile industry and male workers in constructions.

There have been generally not been more than 8,000 Chinese residents in Romania (concentrated in 2nd district in Bucharest, NE, and in neighbouring Ilfov county). Precisely, there are 7,248, of which 3,363 are permanent residents and 2,134 are family members. There are 1,646 employed and 105 students or those who declared other purposes. Of the total, 5,578 reside in the capital Bucharest and in Ilfov county (SE of Romania).<sup>4</sup>To this number one may add about 2,000 declared ethnic Chinese with Romanian citizenship, according to the 2011 census.<sup>5</sup>

I had heard about the existence of a Chinese temple in Bucharest for the first time before 2010. Initially, there was another temple arranged in a smaller rented place not far from the area mentioned above (named Fundeni). The new temple in the present location came into existence in 2007.

## **3. The Temple Space and Its Gods**

A carriage-shaped house with only a ground floor on the left side of the patio (serving as the private part) is located on a 400 square meters land. A ceremonial hall was built on the right side of it subsequently. Another part of the building contains the kitchen, the cantine, and various annexes which unites the two wings, forming a u-shaped compound. The compound contains a

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<sup>4</sup> Data provided via e-mail by the General Inspectorate for Immigration as for 31 July 2021.

<sup>5</sup>Institutul Național de Statistică. <http://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-2/>. Accessed 16 August 2021.

yard closed on three of its sides, resembling (at least conceptually) a classical residence in urban China. It takes a bit of effort from outside to notice that behind the tall fence there is no usual home at all. Looking upwards one may finally notice, arranged in a circle bow, the four ideograms comprising the name of the temple, *Guangli Fotang* (廣理佛堂).

Many of the households in the neighbourhood still retain a rural look, frequently seen in the outskirts of Bucharest or in the nearby counties. Neighbours are generally polite and helpful, but nevertheless they do not attend the activities in the Temple. The reasons are multiple and understanding them requires additional ethnographic work and analysis. The most likely explanation is that the ceremonies are held in the Chinese language. But a plausible hypothesis may be related to local inhabitants' commitment (either social or religious) to the local belief, which is the Orthodox Christian one.

The temple is not a meditation space, although H., the priestess (點傳師, initiator and transmitter of the *Tao*) and manager (經理), also mentions Chan Buddhism as one of the roots of *Mile Dadao*. The public practice is mainly devotional, consisting of countless prostrations and prayings, three times a day, for global and local peace and prosperity. The participants start by invoking the supreme deity, The Venerable Mother (*Lao Mu* 老母), the Maitreya Buddha (彌勒佛), the founding couple of the movement (represented by the Sun and Moon characters respectively), the various other Buddhas, and then the priestess and even one's own parents, whether still living or deceased. There is no anthropomorphic representation for *Lao Mu*, but the deity is graphically symbolized by a stylized and specialized version of the character 母 (mother):



Nevertheless, the title *Shangdi* (上帝), God (as used in Christianity), is also used to express her name. Researching the origin of the Mother, a supreme/first god could become a research project in itself and the literature on the subject is actually abundant. Particularly regarding my research on *Mile Dadao*, it appears as commonsense that identifying precisely *Lao Mu* with one of the female figures of Chinese mythology, such either *Nü wa* (女媧) or *Xi Wangmu* (西王母), or with any other female goddess in Taoism would actually narrow the path of research. Instead, the

choosing of the figure of a generic mother-goddess, that created the Heaven and the Earth and the myriad of beings and things, a deity both ancient and modern, beyond or before any religion, may be more plausible. H. also hints at the matriarchal system as basis of the selection. H. mentions that the pictograph Mu, used as a symbol today, existed previously and was discovered during archaeological research, therefore it does not specifically belong either to Buddhism or Taoism.

In the back of the yard, in the center, one may also notice, sheltered by a gazebo, the statue of the Buddhist goddess of mercy, *Guanyin* (觀音). There is a lack of protectors, door guardians, etc., which are usually found in Buddhist or Taoist temples but one may notice at the base of one window of the veranda the dwarf statue of Land Grandpa, *Tudi Gong* (土地公). H. explains that the statue of *Guandi* (關帝), protector of commerce, was left by someone prior to their return to China. Between the entrance to the yard and *Guanyin's* statue one can see an incense urn dedicated to the Taoist governor-god Jade Emperor, *Yuhuang Dadi* (玉皇大帝). This is the extent of the pantheon at the Temple. As stated earlier, identifying the origin of Lao Mu would require additional research. Similarly, classifying the Jade Emperor as simply of Taoist origin may not be correct. Instead, viewing this deity as a pre-Taoist or a pan-Chinese one may broaden the perspective on understanding *Mile Dadao*.

One motive for which the movement renounced to use the multitude of anthropomorphic representations (either statues or paintings), especially the terrifying guardian figures, is explained, or rather suggested, by the effort of adaptation to the Romanian environment and the desire to be accepted in a cultural space where, not so long ago, the non-Christian adepts were simply labeled as idol-worshippers. Regarding the representation of Maitreya due to its ubiquity, H. occasionally also uses the term “messiah” to make his role more understandable in a Christian environment.

#### **4. A Short History of *Mile Dadao***

According to the official internet site, the initiator of Maitreya Great Tao Society, *Wang Haode* (王好德, surnamed 高山愚人) began work in the year 1987, in Hsinchu, Taiwan, the consortium “Heavenly Grace Maitreya Hall” (財團法人天恩彌勒佛院), where he “actively trained talents and also carried out various noble missions of consciousness salvation.” At the end of 1999, after he “attained Tao” (成道), his mission was continued by two members of the managing staff, Yan Miaoru (顏妙如) and Wang Ciguang (汪慈光). In 2000, the

Temple moved to the current address, that is Emei Town in Hsinchu County. The same year, in July, the organization “Maitreya Great Tao” registered as a new/emergent religious movement (新興宗教) at the Ministry of the Interior, after which the movement started to plan its mission. To the elements presented above, one should add awakening of other beings’ consciousness about the pre-natal state (先天), where there were no racial/ethnic differences, only the ideal state of the authentic self (先天真我). The pre-natal state is the objective and the foundation of life as well, not only for humans, but also to all beings that are part of the “world as one family.” The adepts’ mission is to assist Maitreya in saving the world and the individuals (救世渡人), while compassion (慈) is the key, the means. As the official site explains, 慈 is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit ‘Maitreya. ‘It can be understood as action to the benefit of the other (利他), here comprising not only beings but also plants, etc. The popular online encyclopedias <sup>6</sup> indicate Maitreya as the object of veneration and categorize the movement as a new religious movement. Nevertheless, as stated below, the highest object of veneration is the Venerable Mother.

The founder Wang Haode, himself the follower of Sun Huiming (孫慧明), was respected as Mother-Master in Yiguandao and female partner of Zhang Tianran 張天然 of the same movement. Wang Haode stayed with the former as an apprentice for around 20 years, starting in 1948. As stated above, the formation of Mile Dadao does not officially appear as a split from Yiguandao, but rather a continuation of the mission previously set up by Sun Huiming. At the same time, Zhang Tianran remains a respected (venerated) figure within Mile Dadao. On the other hand, according to H., the relationship between the two movements may be described as “same Tao, different paths”(同道，不同路). H. adds that the Yiguandao practice is based upon the Confucian canons (四書五經) and has a humanitarian scope.

From a broader perspective on China’s religious movements, one may assert that there has never existed any completely “new religion” since the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD), but a continuous renewal and re-interpretation of autochthonous traditions—Taoism and Confucianism—and also by absorbing imported elements coming from the West—Buddhist and even Manichean

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<sup>6</sup> <https://baike.baidu.com/item/张光璧/53116907?fromtitle=张天然&fromid=648383>, accessed August 16, 2021; <https://baike.baidu.com/item/弥勒大道/5804148>, Accessed August 16, 2021; <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/弥勒大道>. Accessed August 16, 2021.

ones.<sup>7</sup>An interesting turn is that, with Mile Dadao, this historic line not only continues within the Chinese cultural space, but also aims to spread to a global level, making the “heavenly mandate” (天命) of building a new era a common mission of humankind.

## 5. Beliefs and Practice

As the official narrative goes, the voice of the people against all suffering of the human condition moved Maitreya; therefore, he decided to descend to the world. He feels compassionate (慈) towards the earthlings and thus, by his great will of goodness changes the world into one of unity (大同) and the society into Pure Land (淨土); changes the world into a kingdom of Heaven 天國 and transforms the sea of bitterness into a kingdom of Buddhahood 佛國. The adepts voluntarily and consciously help him in achieving the important mission of marking the end of the current era. Besides rituals and temple activities, the communities organize cultural activities (choruses, choreographic performances, etc.) to promote the ideal of the movement. Based on the humanistic principle of unity, Mile Dadao’s social mission is to cultivate a societal aware of the importance of the spiritual side of life not only in certain societies, but all countries, and a world as a place of peace and prosperity. To our lifestyles—the material life and the intellectual life, one should also add the spiritual component (心靈) of life, in order to live a life in accord with the principle of “unity of Heaven and human” (天人合一). *This way of life is in fact considered the way home, particularly from the post-natal state back to the pre-natal one.*

What is a life in spirit? A life beyond senses, body, and intellect. One starts by prostrating and repenting (從叩首禮節, 叩首懺悔開始). This is not an empty ritual, instead, it is transposing into life and into action the “three treasures of the pre-natal world” (先天三寶). Prostrating represents a pre-natal type of attitude, specific to the innocence of a newborn child (赤子), who has not been contaminated by post-natal life. To whom does one dedicate such an attitude? To the Venerable Mother. For practicing adults, this is the means to restore the pre-natal state. By

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<sup>7</sup> Jiyu Ren, *History of Chinese Daoism*. (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1990 [任继愈. 1990. 中国道教史. 上海: 上海人民出版社], p. 9.

prostrating and repenting, one eliminates the ballast accumulated in the post-natal life. One does not actually reject and forsake the post-natal life but lives in it with a pre-natal kind of heart.

## 6. Teaching the Concepts

For interested non-speakers of the Chinese language, the *Mile Dadao* Temple in Bucharest provides English and Romanian flyers containing the basic message of the movement, and mentions “The Three Treasures” to be received at initiation. “The Three Treasures” are something that an initiated person is not allowed to give away. What one may surely and clearly say is that they regard neither the Buddhist treasures (Buddha, *dharma*, *sangha*), nor the known alchemical trio (*jing*, *qi*, *shen*). Nor are they the three treasures so dear to Lao zi (Lao Tze) as mentioned in the *Daodejing*, chapter 42 (孤/寡/不穀). Another name for receiving the initiation is “obtaining the Tao” 得道. H. is the only person who has the mandate (天命) to initiate new adepts. According to H., about 3,000 persons have received the initiation since Temple’s foundation. While staging the initiation in the main hall of the Temple, the non-initiated are not allowed to watch.

Is the core teaching based on any canonical text, be it Buddhist or Taoist? To my question regarding this issue, H.’s answer was that throughout history there have been countless canons (經典) of world religions, while *Mile Dadao* teaches about a way to Heaven reachable by a good-hearted (良心) attitude. In other words, one’s good heart takes the place of the good book. In H.’s words, our aim is returning to our ancient home (先天老家), where the Venerable Mother resides, and there is a paradise (天堂) there. One must obtain Tao first, so that the numinous part within us (靈) will be able to recognize the way home.

## 7. Principles of Life and Temple Activities

The adepts plead for vegetarianism, respect for environment, and global friendship. The hot issue of global warming is also a cause of which the adepts should be aware. The rising of the level of the planetary ocean and other extreme meteorological phenomena can be seen as warnings to change our way of life, otherwise we and our planet would not be able to survive. A path to avoid the catastrophe may start with changing our food habits. *Mile Dadao* proposes the “Maitreya vegetarianism” (彌勒素食) as a solution to equilibrium—reducing the pollution level and also

thereby leading a harmonious inner life. Such a diet represents food “with compassion,” that benefits both body and spirit (精神), based on vegetables, fruits, and cereals, rather than on products of animal origin, such as meat, eggs, and milk, namely food that does not require lengthy processing.

Among adepts, veganism depends on personal choice (因缘). According to one’s nutritional needs (and likely urged by cold weather), one may also include milk, eggs, honey, etc. Before eating, the adept must express gratitude to the creator of all things (造物主). While eating, one must be conscious of the goodness offered by nature and of the fact that grains have been obtained with sweat (the *Mile Dadao* site uses a famous *Tang* verse to illustrate this: 粒粒皆辛苦, “grain by grain, they all [come here with] toil”).

Regarding the criteria of selecting products, besides the vegetal vs. animal criterion, they also use the concept of pure vs. impure food. Vegetables, such as onions, garlic, and leeks, are considered impure and therefore are not part of the recipes. Regarding the curious classification of such vegetables as “meat” (葷), during the fieldwork an adept told me a legend that suggests they literally belong to the meat ingredients and should be avoided being highly impure. On the other hand, the habit of not eating the vegetables mentioned may be traced back to a Hindu notion that arrived in China together with Buddhism. Also worth mentioning is that in *Bencao Gangmu* (本草綱目), the classical compendium of medical matters, in the plants section there exists a rubric named “meat and pungent types” (葷辛類), that includes not only onion and garlic, but also ginger. Nevertheless, ginger is widely used in the temple cuisine.

The community does not lack the element of ethnic solidarity, as mentioned previously, but, in fact, the community hosts not only ethnic Chinese (they naturally are the majority), but also Vietnamese residents and, occasionally, local people. What motivates certain Romanians to respond or not to the initiation would be a research subject in itself. Nevertheless, certain empirical data collected from the field suggest an attitude of polite refusal regarding the initiation and even entering the shrine. For instance, R., a Romanian male in his early forties, who came with a Chinese visitor, accepted (out of politeness) to enter the patio and wait for his companion, but excused himself from entering the main hall because he “made love last night,” implying he was being impure and therefore unfit for entering a sacred space. Another instance regards an episode when a Chinese resident, married to a Romanian woman, and with whom I am friend, insisted to

accompany him to the Chinese market in the NE of Bucharest where his wife worked and persuade her to take the initiation. Upon meeting her in the shop, she sociably yet firmly refused, and proposed both should remain on his/her respective “planet” (her own metaphor) and live on as a couple just under such circumstances. Both situations suggest acceptance of the other’s religious frame of action while reluctant to accept the other’s spiritual offer. However, one may find among the Romanians who have obtained the initiation collaborators of the Temple (professionals who offer services necessary for the administration and legal functioning of the association that runs the Temple, such as lawyers, accountants, translators, etc.), spiritual seekers interested in Asian practices, and also chance visitors who do not live in the vicinity of the Temple. Not being a meditation space or, for example, a Taijiquan practice spot, to which one may add the unpractical condition of being located near the outskirts of the capital, probably make the Temple a place seldom accessed by local spiritual seekers.

During the liturgical days, on every first and the fiftieth day of the lunar calendar, according to a system established previous to the coming of Buddhism to China in the first century AD, as well as during other Chinese traditional holidays, one may notice dozens of people visiting the Temple, praying, kowtowing, and enjoying a vegetarian lunch. The dishes in square metal plates are arranged in the dining room, beside the pot with cooked rice and a cauldron of thick soup. Adepts and visitors serve themselves, but they are not allowed to use personal chopsticks to fill their bowls. Many vegetables used (some of which are donated) cannot be usually found in local Romanian marketplaces, but are cultivated here by Chinese residents, usually in the neighbouring Ilfov county, with seeds brought from China. Among them one may count the bitter melon (*Momordica charantia*). The *doufu* is also processed locally, except for other soy products that require a certain degree of sophistication, such as the kind that imitates the taste of fish or seafoods (probably with algae).

Regarding the personal life of the adepts, celibacy is not required, but may be practiced as a personal choice. During liturgical days and Chinese holidays, one may notice visitors of all ages: couples, families with infants or adolescents and even small groups comprising three generations, taking bows and burning incense.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

The Hall of Infinite Principle in Bucharest is a general Chinese temple, rather than particularly a Buddhist one. Mile Dadao brings together in its teachings both Buddhist and Taoist elements, but also Confucianist ones (a much older political, social, and spiritual ideal of moral unity in China). Regarding H.'s way of expressing this characteristic, she does not deny the Buddhist or Taoist elements in Maitreya Great Tao, but at the same time avoids describing the movement in a definition that makes it more/less Buddhist/Taoist.

On the other hand, it is a temple belonging to a messianic and missionary movement that aims to make its message of salvation known to the whole world. We have noticed that the current ecological crises which are facing the entire humanity, such as global warming and all disasters related to it, are regarded as warnings of a future catastrophe that can be avoided solely if humans change their attitude towards nature and all of its beings, and *Mile Dadao* offers its own vision and solutions, including compassion, repentance, and a vegan/vegetarian diet.

Therefore, even though the movement may be understood as a Sinicized version of Buddhism (which, actually, ceases to call itself "Buddhist"), it also seems to be claiming (ideally speaking) a role of a spiritual supra-structure where any human, member of any religion or not, may find a place for themselves.

In Europe, *Mile Dadao* temples can be found in Budapest, Vienna, Paris, and Barcelona. The Hall of Infinite Principle in Bucharest functions as a non-profit religious organization. There is a long-range plan of moving the Temple closer to the central ring of the city, but not outside the area where most of the Chinese residents are concentrated (NE of Bucharest). Meanwhile, at the time of concluding this paper, regarding the project of building the *Mile Dadao*, the expected date of completing the building project is 2022, however it is not the headquarters (already finished for some time, in Hsinchu), but the "General Culture Shrine" in Taipei. Its impressive architecture and monumental statuary art may represent an effort to avoid future fragmentation of the movement and separation from the central body. It represents an identity mark and a call for unity as well.

During the pandemic (declared in mid-March 2020 in Romania), the temple stopped all public activities. While tuning down to survival mode, temple responsibilities have been accomplished by C.L. (known as "Elder Sister C.") from Zhejiang, China. Sadly, after devoting herself to the benefit of the shrine for two years, she passed away in a Bucharest hospital in October 2021.

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