

# Knowing the Time, Knowing of a Time

3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the Center for Millennial Studies  
Boston University, December 6-8, 1998  
Conference Proceedings

---

## Chen Tao and the Mass Mediation of Prophetic End-time Dating

University of Chicago Chen Tao Research Cadre

Ryan J. Cook, *Department of Anthropology*

Dereck M. Daschke, Carrie B. Dohe, Matthew J. Goff, *Divinity School*

---

Chen Tao is a Taiwanese religious movement of recent provenance, based on an amalgam of Buddhism, apocalyptic Christianity, and prophetic revelation. The group has come to the United States because it was revealed by their leader to be the Kingdom of God and the site of their salvation from the world's destruction. We in the University of Chicago Chen Tao Research Cadre have done ethnographic and bibliographic research on this group since January, 1988. What has engaged us about Chen Tao is the relationship the group and its leader have developed with the mass media, a relationship that is neither as simple nor as straightforward as it appears. We suggest that the Chen Tao-mass media relationship is actually a mutual instrumental symbiosis in which both parties achieve part of what they want through each other, and in which each is compromised by the actions of the other. This has an effect on the process of making known end-time dates that is worth investigating.

### Historical and Sociological Background

We can trace the origins of Chen Tao back at least forty years. According to current member Ching-wei Wang, Chen Tao grew out of a quasi-academic group known as the "Research Group of Soul-Light."<sup>1</sup> It was dedicated to discovering, quantifying, and cultivating the spiritual "light energy" of living beings. Wang reported that the Research Group had as many as 3000 participants,<sup>2</sup> and was headed by at least two people before the arrival of its current leader, Hon-ming Chen, referred to as "Master" or "Teacher". Chen cites a Ms Yu-hsia Chen - whom he believed to be an incarnation of the Holy Spirit and the Maitreya Buddha - as his teacher.<sup>3</sup> We believe it is safe to assume she was also his predecessor in the leadership position.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview, Wang-Ching-wei, 4/1/98, Garland TX, UCCTRC

<sup>2</sup> We do not refer to those involved in the Research Group as "members" because that implies a level of commitment on their part, and a level of demands placed up on them by the group, that we are not certain characterized the pre-Chen group.

<sup>3</sup> Hon-ming Chen. N.d. *Practical Evidence and Study of the World of God and Buddha: God's Salvation and Education*. Privately printed, p.251. Hereafter "PE".

<sup>4</sup> Perkins and Jackson (1998) assert that she was the group's first leader.

Teacher Chen, formerly a sociology professor employed by Chianan College of Pharmacology and Science,<sup>5</sup> reorganized the Research Group around a revelation that God was coming to Earth. According to Richard Liu, group translator (and former professor of American literature), as a child Teacher Chen had the ability to receive divine messages, often in the form of a golden ball hovering in front of him.<sup>6</sup> It was only later in life that Chen understood this gift to have religious significance. After joining the Research Group it was revealed to him that, on 11 February, 1996, “all heavenly Gods and Buddhas” would descend on “the temple of God’s Salvation of All Living Beings,” the group’s headquarters in Pei-pu village, Hsin-chu county, southern Taiwan.<sup>7</sup> We believe it was at this point that Chen introduced flying saucers as the means of divine travel to and from Earth. There was then (as there continues to be) immense popular interest in UFOs in Taiwan, which have found their way into other new religious movements. This was also the time when the Research Group came to be known as Chen Tao—the True or Right Way, a combination of Christian apocalypticism, Jai-ling (“Perfect Heart”) Buddhist spiritual cultivation, and divine revelation.

The revelations called for a move to North America, and so Teacher Chen went ahead of his group to establish the first American “church” in San Dimas, CA, in mid-1996. That continent has in each world-cycle<sup>8</sup> been the site of God’s (re)creation and salvation of humanity, and Chen was to found the majority of seven churches (a theme also found in the biblical Book of Revelation) there.<sup>9</sup> By February of 1997, Chen learned of the location and date of God’s descent—Garland, TX in March of 1998. In letters and public pronouncements, Chen has said that Garland (which he says sounds like “God-Land”) was the location of the divine creation of humans nine million years ago.<sup>10</sup> Thus it is fitting that it should be “the place for the final...the closing speech” from the Heavenly Father. On 26 March, 1997, Chen purchased a house at 3513 Ridgedale Drive in Garland, later the exact site of God’s appearance. Most of the 150 members in California moved to Garland during August and September, purchasing 21 homes in the vicinity of Chen’s house.<sup>11 12</sup>

During their time in the US, Chen and his followers have traveled extensively. They went to Vancouver, BC during June-July of 1997 in search of a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, whom they would recognize because he resembled Abraham Lincoln.<sup>13</sup> Chen identified 10-year-old member Chi-jen Lo as a reincarnation of Sakyamuni Buddha (i.e. Siddhartha Gautama), and attempted to arrange a meeting with Christ, a synthesis of Eastern and Western deities that formed a significant part of the group’s prophetic mission. This Canadian Christ never turned up, but Chen identified Che-yu Chiang, 11, as the incarnation they had sought. In August, around

---

<sup>5</sup> Cited elsewhere as Chiayi Pharmaceutical College. Covert 25 Dec 1997; Central News Agency 20 Dec 1997; AAP Newsfeed 22 Dec 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Richard Liu. Garland TX, 31 Mar 1998. UCCTRC.

<sup>7</sup> *God’s Descending in Clouds (Flying Saucers) on Earth to Save People*. 1997. Garland, TX: privately published (hereafter “GD.”)

<sup>8</sup> Chen uses the term “world,” but we will substitute the more awkward “world-cycle,” since it conveys the cyclicity of which Chen writes more clearly to Anglophones.

<sup>9</sup> Hon-ming Chen, letter to Garland City Council, 31 Mar 1998; *GD; The Appearance of God and the Descending of the Kingdom of God: Saving Human Beings by Means of God’s Space-Aircrafts*. 1998. Lockport, NY: privately published (hereafter “AG.”).

<sup>10</sup> Chen, letter to Garland City Council, 31 Mar 1998.

<sup>11</sup> With cash, it should be noted; the considerable financial resources of Chen Tao, both individually and collectively, were the subject of no little gossip among their neighbors.

<sup>12</sup> R. Cook fieldnotes, 29 Mar 1998; Covert 25 Dec 1997:7A.

<sup>13</sup> Perkins and Jackson, Apr 1998.

100 members traveled to various US sites also carrying out divine instructions. Among them was the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, where they paid their respects to the president Chen reported to be a *bodhisattva*, or enlightened teacher. In October group members went to Inuvik, NWT, Canada, which they treated as the “North Pole,” to establish one of the seven “churches.”<sup>14</sup> In all of these trips, and most major decisions, Chen Tao members keep their personal schedules open, because Chen may receive instruction only days before they must perform the instructed task.<sup>15</sup>

## Cosmos, Soul, and Prophecy

To put the prophetic orientation of the group in perspective, we will summarize what Teacher Chen has laid it out in his publications and press releases about the nature of existence.<sup>16</sup> Humans are able to receive messages from God because of two factors: first, their possession of a “main spiritual light,” the only one of three posited soul bodies to originate in (and to share the qualities of) the Void, or Tao, the realm of the Supreme Being; and, second, the cultivation of this main spiritual light’s divine capabilities under an instructor in the “True Way”.

Prophetic messages that Teacher Chen has issued revolve around four themes: (1) the nature of existence; (2) the nature of the cosmos; (3) the nature of historical time; and (4) the nature of salvation.

- (1) Living beings at the human level are composed of three souls: a “main spiritual light;” a “conscious soul” that governs cognition; and a “physical soul” that governs the corporeal body.<sup>17</sup> As beings undergo multiple incarnations, their main spiritual lights record good and bad actions (karma).<sup>18</sup> The circumstances of each incarnation are determined by God’s reading of this karmic record. In order to be reborn in progressively higher realms,<sup>19</sup> and ultimately to rejoin the Supreme Being - as is the destiny of the Heavenly Father’s creations - beings must “cultivate” their three souls.
- (2) The cosmos all beings inhabit was created by God and emanated from the Void into lower states of material existence. The collective karma of individual beings corrupts and destroys the cosmos, but material existence clouds the recognition of karma and its consequences. As a loving but principled Creator, God wishes for all living beings to begin the process of cultivation of their own free will. He therefore sends teachers of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Richard Liu, interview. 30 Mar 1998, Garland, TX. UCCTRC. Liu also reported to interviewer Daschke that the “Fortress of Solitude” prominent in the movie *Superman II* had great “spiritual significance” for their trip.

<sup>15</sup> “Ruey,” interview. 31 Mar 1998, Garland, TX. UCCTRC.

<sup>16</sup> We draw from the three major publications (*Practical Evidence, God’s Descending, Appearance of God*), as well as Chen’s statements at press conferences (principally those of 12 and 31 Mar 1998) and in press releases (which are presented as verbatim messages from the Heavenly Father).

<sup>17</sup> *PE*:25-36.

<sup>18</sup> In several places, Chen has likened the main spiritual light to “the delicate memory body of a computer” (*PE*:21). It is a quantity of radioactive energy whose constitution – i.e. the material basis of spirit - human science has been extremely close to discovering since Rutherford’s discovery of the electron in 1911 (*PE*:165).

<sup>19</sup> There are at least 18 celestial realms, which Chen terms “dimensions,” though Richard Liu intimated that there may be more beyond the 18<sup>th</sup> dimension, the realm of Void (God, Tao). We in North America are currently in the third dimension; by 1999, humans outside the continent will have dropped to the second dimension, the level of higher vertebrate animals, due to the effects of collective bad karma (*GD*). The Chen Tao cosmology is reminiscent of schemes found in classical Chinese religious literature (viz. *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, [1997]).

“True Way” (e.g. Sakyamuni Buddha, Jesus Christ, Teacher Chen) to enlighten people and guide their cultivation.<sup>20</sup>

(3) The interaction of karmic causality and divine love – in which God creates, karma destroys, and God creates again - imparts a cyclical but progressive movement to time. Beginning with the creation (or re-creation) of the cosmos, each world-cycle<sup>21</sup> moves through stages called “abiding,” “destruction,” and finally “annihilation.” These are determined by collective karma, not by God.

(4) At certain points in a world-cycle, God sends teachers and, later, saviors to help living beings. “Salvation” in this context is removal from the destruction of the cosmos and transport to the next higher “dimensional world” for continued cultivation. Like cultivation, salvation must be freely chosen, because with it comes the responsibility to “take on the role and responsibility of God”--assisting in the salvation of other beings.<sup>22</sup>

This knowledge is delivered to humanity with some urgency, because Teacher Chen has learned through divine communication that the time in which beings can cultivate is short. Bad human karma has irreversibly undermined the delicate ecosystem of gods, devils, humans and animals. Chen cites natural disasters, moral decay, and socio-political tragedies as evidence of both the weight of collective karma and the imminence of the Great Tribulation - the chaos leading up to the final destruction - somewhere between September and December 1999.<sup>23</sup>

Chen offers people a way out of the karmic predicament they have brought on themselves. He promises that God is sending Christ and a convoy of “God’s space aircrafts” to rescue those who accept the truth of his revelation. Shortly before the rescue (which will occur at the Lake Street Beach in Gary, IN, some months before the Great Tribulation), God will apprise humans of His plans via the electronic and print media.<sup>24</sup> Chen also learned that God would appear visibly in Garland, first on Channel 18 at midnight of 25 March, then at 3513 Ridgedale 10 A.M. 31 March to officially announce all this. In his book *God’s Descending in Clouds (Flying Saucers) on Earth to Save People* (1997), Chen explained how God would on that date demonstrate three divine powers: invisibility; duplication of His body to shake hands with all present; and answering everyone’s questions in their own languages.<sup>25</sup> Our more and more rapidly decaying world will be destroyed in late 1999; a nuclear war between Taiwan and China will trigger the destruction.<sup>26</sup> North America – “God’s Kingdom” – will be extracted from the Earth and grafted into a fourth-dimensional existence on the surface of Mars. Total annihilation of the world will be complete forty-four years later, in 2043.<sup>27</sup> Until then, it is Teacher Chen’s

---

<sup>20</sup> We have yet to find evidence that Teacher Chen places himself on the same level of spiritual cultivation as Christ or Buddha, which he says are equivalently ranked. He has claimed to be a reincarnation of Jesus’ father Joseph, however, and is said by members to be much more highly cultivated than they. The fact that Christ, rather than Chen, is the awaited savior in the spaceship suggests that Chen is just what he is called—a teacher.

<sup>21</sup> This is the fifteenth world-cycle, according to Chen.

<sup>22</sup> Chen, press conference. 31 Mar 1998, Garland, TX. UCCTRC transcript.

<sup>23</sup> PE:164-5.

<sup>24</sup> Chen, press conference, 12 Mar 1998. Watchman Fellowship transcript.

<sup>25</sup> GD:xx.

<sup>26</sup> GD. Taiwan, reacting to Chinese aggression under the influence of bad karma and demons, will detonate its three working nuclear power plants, provoking a tactical nuclear response from China. Other events fitting into the karmic chain-reaction are a second Korean War, the remilitarization and aggression of Japan, and a massive battle between European and Asian powers at Meggido.

<sup>27</sup> Forty-four, which sounds like “death-death” in Mandarin Chinese, has highly inauspicious overtones for many Taiwanese, according to Chen. The end times are gauged by three cycles of forty-four years, beginning with

responsibility to make the prophecies as widely known as possible, which is also best performed through the mass media.

## **Garland, Prophecy, and the Mass Media**

On 31 March, this potentially spectacular prophecy either failed to come true or was fulfilled in an unexpected manner, depending upon one's point of view. Having been there, we can affirm that God was not visible to everyone in the form of Teacher Chen, as advertised. Chen accounted for this by stating that God was already present in all people surrounding the house, indeed, in all humans. (This was not some new development, but the topic of a prior prophecy already in circulation as a press release and a billboard in front of Chen's house.) Individually, we can perform all the tasks Chen ascribed to God, thus demonstrating our divinity. If we sincerely believe, as Chen insisted, that we "are all gods," then "the spaceship has already descended" for us.<sup>28</sup> Those who were sufficiently spiritually developed to have use of the "third eye"<sup>29</sup> could perceive other dimensions, including the "fifth dimensional world" in which God was simultaneously present nearby. When asked by Chen if they had witnessed God, Chen Tao members in attendance affirmed by raising their hands.

What became clear at this meeting – actually even before the 31<sup>st</sup> – was that relatively few members of Chen Tao were so disillusioned by the outcome of the March 25<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> prophecies that they were leaving the group. One member whom we interviewed found her belief in the accuracy of Chen's prophecy for 31 March reinforced by the events of 25 March--the convergence of so many media representatives on Chen's house, the drama with which Chen led his followers out to meet the press, the lighting and cameras and Chen's image on so many TV monitors.<sup>30</sup> While many of her compatriots were disappointed, only about twenty left immediately after the 31<sup>st</sup>.<sup>31</sup> It is, however, significant that around half of those remaining in Garland decided not to renew their visas, effectively preventing them from moving to the group's latest headquarters in Lockport, NY to continue cultivation under Chen's direct tutelage.<sup>32</sup> Another member, for whom the 25 March press conference was the latest and most aggravating example of Chen's disproven prophecy, cited it as the reason he expected the 31 March prophecy to fail.<sup>33</sup> He did not, however, abandon belief in the coming Great Tribulation because of it. In fact, his was a common response; members appeared to be much more invested in the prophecy of the 1999 Great Tribulation than in those of March, 1998. This makes sense, as it is the prophecy for which the most (i.e. salvation) is at stake.

Journalists, however, overwhelmingly subscribed to the failure explanation. Fully half of the questions lobbed at Teacher Chen on 31 March went something like: "You said God would appear beside you. He isn't here. How do you explain this failure?" Despite Chen and Richard Liu's patient answers and clarifications, the media sensed an end to their reportage, which Chen's plan to move the group to the Great Lakes made more or less final. In fact, no one from the domestic media, and only a handful of Asian press, bothered to follow Chen Tao to what we

---

Rutherford's discovery in 1911; the incarnation of Christ in Canada in 1955; the salvation of the faithful in 1999; and total annihilation in 2043 (*PE*:165).

<sup>28</sup> Chen, press conference, 31 Mar 1998. UCCTRC transcript.

<sup>29</sup> Technically, the "heaven eye," the first of ten visual faculties that "True Way" cultivators develop (see *PE*: 60-2).

<sup>30</sup> Ruey, interview. 31 Mar 1998, Garland, TX. UCCTRC.

<sup>31</sup> Wang, interview. 1 Apr 1998, Garland, TX. UCCTRC.

<sup>32</sup> Chi-Chia Chen, interview (telephone). 10 Nov 1998. R. Cook.

<sup>33</sup> Wang, interview. 1 Apr 1998, Garland, TX. UCCTRC.

considered a much more significant gathering in a local park, at which Chen and his followers hashed out their collective future.

## **Chen Tao and the Mass Media**

What makes Chen and his group so interesting for us is their reliance on the mass media as the major means for the dissemination of prophecy. This is significant both for what the media, as means of revelation, do to the message and for what this relationship with the press does to the group itself.

Early on in the group's residence in Garland, media representatives learned they were to be instrumental in spreading the Chen Tao message of apocalypse and salvation. All of Chen's major pronouncements to the public took the form of press releases and press conferences (tailored, in other words, to the requirements of the media). The releases were presented as verbatim copies of "God's, the Heavenly Father (sic)" messages to humankind also found on billboards in front of 3513 Ridgedale.

Chen also directly courted the representatives of the mass media. At the 31 March conference, he said that

From now on, from today on, all the journalists, as well as the policemen, will take on much more important responsibilities, since the Kingdom of God has already descended in our world...Here I want to ask a special favor of the mass media: to spread the message about the descending of God, as well as God's Kingdom...It is also hoped that the mass media can preach this message back...to Taiwan: Try to save yourselves, your friends, your people from Taiwan.<sup>34</sup>

He included a note to media representatives with a copy of his latest book, which promised spiritual rewards for serving as part of the salvation project:

Much gratitude is felt for your having helped broadcast the message of the descending of the Kingdom of God in the past months. In the process of promoting the evolution of all living beings, you have achieved virtually unsurpassable [karmic] merits.<sup>35</sup>

The technological basis of the electronic mass media was an important aspect of Teacher Chen's portrayal of the media as divinely motivated messengers. This is especially evident in the television theophany of 25 March:

After God comes to the world everything will be instructed on the television, all through the houses [in] which people are living.... [O]n March 25<sup>th</sup> there won't be any channel which can be received by the television set, because God's power will send His own program into every channel...

At first people can see the picture of the neighborhood on their television. Then there will be the captions advertising God coming down March 31<sup>st</sup>. And from [the] 25<sup>th</sup> through March 31<sup>st</sup>, God's program will teach people how to do and what to do in preparation for the day [of His arrival], March the 31<sup>st</sup>...<sup>36</sup>

The Chen Tao-mass media relationship could be described as a symbiosis, but one that operated due to mutual misrepresentation. Chen seemed to expect a simple dissemination of the message through a relatively passive technological medium. However, the relationship he developed with the international press corps became complex, and did not allow any degree of

---

<sup>34</sup> Chen, press conference. 31 Mar 1998, Garland, TX. UCCTRC transcript.

<sup>35</sup> Chen, letter to C. Dohe, UCCTRC. 24 Sept 1998, Lockport, NY.

<sup>36</sup> Chen, press conference. 12 Mar 1998, Garland, TX. Watchman Fellowship transcript.

control on his part over the shape or distribution of his message. There were indications that Chen and others felt “burdened by misrepresentation” (as Chen put it in a letter to the Garland city government) as a suicide-prone cult.<sup>37</sup> Whatever Teacher Chen’s awareness of his affiliation with Heaven’s Gate *et al*, that affiliation brought him the media attention he required. As one of the members we interviewed told us, no one in the press or the public paid attention to Chen Tao until its press releases featured dates for God’s appearances. But this attention was a mixed blessing, especially when headlines like “Talk of divinity, rumors of suicide”<sup>38</sup> kept the affiliation with Heaven’s Gate fresh.

For their part, we assert that the press did not flock to Chen Tao because the group provided an intrinsically compelling, or even exceptionally odd, story. They covered the group because of dramatic events surrounding groups like the Branch Davidians, Solar Temple, and especially Heaven’s Gate—all tragedies that, in journalistic minds, associated millenarian movements with violence, principally mass suicide. These associations had little to do with Chen Tao in and of itself, but resonated with what one journalist has called the major “*topoi*” news stories must include to be relevant to their audience, the most relevant in this case being “false prophecy”.<sup>39</sup>

The first notice Chen Tao received in the American press was a December 1997 police intervention in San Dimas to recover a girl supposedly “kidnapped” by the “cult.” This fits a “stream of controversies” pattern in journalistic treatment of new religious movements noted by sociologists van Driel and Richardson (1988), a pattern in which only negative events involving NRMs get reported. This stream would have dried up, had not rumors of suicide kept the (albeit manufactured) controversies flowing.

Structural reasons operative in the mass media also influenced the sensationalist tenor of coverage of Chen Tao, as well as other new religious movements. We cannot forget the requirements of employment as a mass media representative: to cover what are, or what have *the potential to become*, newsworthy events. Even when the prospect of drama (i.e. mass suicide as a response to failed prophecy) began to appear unlikely, reporters continued to respond to every Chen Tao press release; for most, their jobs depended on not missing a tragedy in the making.

## Summary

Approximately one hundred members of the press were stationed in the police-erected “media-corral” on 25 March, around sixty on the 31<sup>st</sup>. In the week leading up to the 31<sup>st</sup>, crews from Dallas TV stations cruised the Ridgedale neighborhood for footage of Chen Tao and interviews with concerned neighbors. A question we could ask these reporters – one that at least some have asked themselves – is what exactly they personally expected to happen at those press conferences.<sup>40</sup> At both events, the journalists’ own build-up was such that anything short of God materializing or a mass suicide would likely have been a let-down for them. Teacher Chen never

---

<sup>37</sup> Chen, letter to Garland City Council. 31 Mar 1998.

<sup>38</sup> In a *New York Times* article, no less (4 March 1998:A10).

<sup>39</sup> Silk 1997:137.

<sup>40</sup> One neighbor with whom we spoke related his impressions of the 25 March press conference, which showed how press personnel could get caught up in the drama of the moment without necessarily sharing Chen Tao’s expectations. Just prior to Teacher Chen’s midnight announcement, those awaiting it were surprised by swiftly gathering storm clouds and gusts of wind, followed shortly by crackling and static on TV monitors. Whatever heightened anticipation the media had was deflated by Chen’s admission that they could consider his prediction of God on TV “nonsense”; the neighbor reported a visible disappointment among reporters.

stopped to inquire about his media partners' expectations, and that failure had a profound effect on his prophetic program.

While Chen Tao's expectations for the Great Tribulation and further dimensions of existence rely heavily on the divine revelation of Teacher Chen, the group remains an extremely media-friendly – if not perfectly media-savvy – player in the global mass-mediated marketplace of religion. Chen Tao is an exemplar of a type of information-age prophecy of which we may see more in the near future: television as means of revelation, press conference as site of theophany. The specific contents of the prophecies, such as date-setting, were not geared toward the mass media, *per se*. However, their substance often took a backseat to the style of their presentation for the mass-mediated global audience. Whether inadvertent or not, the mere announcement of prophetic events involving God and flying saucers generated the interest Chen sought for his message - giving it a relevance in the American social context it perhaps lacked - but inflecting it in a manner Chen would never have wanted.