

God's Salvation Church: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

In March of 1998 God's Salvation Church, also known as Chen Tao, held the attention of the international media with their prophecies that God would physically descend in the town of Garland, Texas, on the last day of the month. The group's leader, Hon-Ming Chen, and the group's spokesperson, Richard Liu, held many press conferences to handle the overwhelming demand for interviews. Following the events of March 31 the media interest subsided. Although they are still practicing their religion, the church has received relatively little attention since the apparent failed prophecy of March 31.

The following is an attempt to explain the history of Hon-Ming Chen and God's Salvation Church. Included is a discussion of the group's current status and their possibilities for the future. Due to the length of this article, Chen Tao theology, which is a mixture of Chinese folk religion, Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, UFO beliefs and scientific theories, will not be discussed in very great detail.¹

1) Hon-Ming Chen and the Beginnings of Chen Tao

Hon-Ming Chen was born April 22, 1955 in Chai'i in southwestern Taiwan.² During Chen's childhood his father worked as a farmer and later as a merchant.³ Chen's mother was a traditional Chinese housewife.⁴ She died when Chen was very young, and his father died of a stroke years later. According to Chen, he and his parents observed many customs of Chinese folk religion and his parents were Buddhists but religion was not stressed heavily in his home life.⁵ Chen graduated from the Taiwanese compulsory education system and then went on to earn a bachelor's degree in political science. He studied social science in graduate school.⁶ In 1983, at the age of twenty-eight, Chen got a job as an associate professor at Chai-Nan Junior College of Pharmacy where he taught social science until 1993.⁷

1 A detailed analysis of Chen Tao theology is forthcoming.

2 R. Liu, personal communication, 28 March 1998. Hon-Ming Chen, *The Practical Evidence and Study of the World of God and Buddha*, (Self-published, 1996), 192.

3 R. Liu, personal communication, 28 March 1998.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 R. Liu, personal communication, 13 May 1999.

7 R. Liu, personal communication, 20 August 1998. "Taiwanese Cult Members Move to Texas, Await God's Arrival in

Hon-Ming Chen had identified himself as an atheist during most of his life.⁸ However, in 1992 he had a religious revelation; he believed that he had received a message from God instructing him to pursue the religious life.⁹ He began reading various religious texts such as the Buddhist Sutras, the New and Old Testaments, and the Tao-Te Ching.

Chen found many teachers of new age religion who would teach their religious precepts in exchange for large fees. Chen became a student of one such UFO religious group in 1992. He paid large sums of money to his religious teacher but eventually decided becoming wealthy on God's message was sinful and harmful to one's spiritual perfection. He concluded that teachers who gain worldly wealth in the name of God are actually "heavenly devils" in human guise. Chen accused his teacher of being part devil and left his group with several other displeased followers.¹⁰

Some of the defecting students joined with Chen and created the Soul Light Resurgence Association (SLRA). Hon-Ming Chen opened a church, referred to as a practice site, in Tainan city in southern Taiwan. Chen urged Ma Tao Hung, a friend with similar religious views, to open a practice site in the north. Hung founded a practice site in Taipei and gained a following there. The SLRA grew, opening eastern and western practice sites in 1996. Chen and the other three teachers periodically visited the other practice sites to give speeches on religious concepts.¹¹

In 1995 Chen began to preach that North America is the "Pureland of God."¹² In 1996 Chen wrote and self-published a large book entitled *The Practical Evidence and Study of the World of God and Buddha*. This book is an explication of Chen's worldview and apocalyptic religious ideas, including the notion that followers of God's message should move to the United States to survive the Great Tribulation. In addition to being used as proselytization literature, the book was distributed to the members of the four practice site to present them with the details of Chen's theology.

Teacher Chen, as he is called by the group members, attempted to convince the members in all four practice sites of the need to move to the United States. Some members agreed with the idea of moving while many more did not. Chen pulled members from all four practice sites and started what he called Chen Tao, the "True Way."

A UFO," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 23 December 1997. James Covert, "Group believes God to appear here, save the world March 31," *Garland News*, 25 December

8 R. Liu, personal communication, 28 March 1998.

9 James Covert, "Group believes God to appear here, save the world March 31," *Garland News*, 25 December 1997.

10 S.K. Lo, personal communication, 12 April 1999.

11 R. Liu, personal communication, 19 March 1998.

12 This is a reflection of the church's roots in Pureland Buddhism.

2) From Taiwan to Garland

Chen continued to convince other followers of the need to move to the United States and in the first few months of 1997 he and about twenty-five other members permanently moved to San Dimas, a northeastern suburb of Los Angeles.¹³ The group rented space and officially established God's Salvation Church.¹⁴

The group had been in San Dimas for only a few months when Hon-Ming Chen and his followers began looking toward Texas. In March 1997 Chen announced to his followers that Garland, Texas had become the new headquarters for God's Salvation Church, a few days after this announcement Chen's house at 3513 Ridgedale Drive in Garland was purchased.¹⁵ From March 1997 to December 1997 followers in San Dimas and Taiwan relocated to Garland, Texas. Nevertheless, the church's activity remained centered in San Dimas for many months.

In April and May of 1997 Chen's neighbors on Ridgedale Drive began to notice that he had moved in but no one was aware that he was a religious leader.¹⁶ Several other houses were purchased shortly after the one at 3513 Ridgedale Drive, but no one occupied them right away. Teacher Chen and some of his followers traveled back to San Dimas and to other places in the US on an extended religious pilgrimage. During all of the religious pilgrimages made by the group they continuously videotaped their religious rituals and the 'signs from God' that they saw in clouds and contrails in the sky. The church members were not seen in Garland again until late July or early August.¹⁷

In June of 1997 Chen drew some media attention when he and a small group of his followers were searching Vancouver, Canada, for the "Jesus of the West."¹⁸ In a vision Teacher Chen was told that this 'reincarnation of Jesus' would be a six-foot tall, 28-year-old man resembling Abraham Lincoln and that he would be residing in Vancouver. The search for the Canadian Christ was foretold in the *The Practical Evidence and Study of the World of God and Buddha*; "As to the two spiritual light bodies of Jesus Christ, one was born in Canada of North America, and the other in Taiwan."¹⁹ The group placed a personals ad in *The Province* and *Vancouver Sun* in an attempt to find the Canadian Christ.²⁰ No one ever came forward.

In late August or September the group returned to Garland with more of the members from San Dimas and Taiwan. Although there was still a large number of people at the established church in San Dimas, most of Chen's supporters were out of Taiwan.²¹

13 R. Liu, personal communication, 28 March 1998.

14 This is when the group began to use the name God's Salvation Church but they still refer to themselves also as ChenTao.

15 James Walker and Jason Barker, "CESNUR's Watch Page of Chen Tao- God's Salvation Church." *CESNUR* (23 March 1998): 4 pp. Online. Internet. 25 March 1998.

16 C. Amyx, personal communication, 27 March 1998; Wiseman, personal communication, 29 March 1998; J. and L. Crawford, personal communication, 29 March 1998.

17 This is based on a composite of interviews with several neighbors and Garland city officials.

18 James Covert, "Group believes God to appear here, save the world March 31," *Garland News*, 25 December 1997.

19 Hon-Ming Chen, *The Practical Evidence and Study of the World of God and Buddha*, (Self-published, 1996), 197.

20 David D. Rogers, "God's Salvation Church Defined." *Trancenet* (26 March 1998): 4 pp. Online. Internet. 2 April 1998.

21 James Walker and Timothy Oliver, "Press Conference Interview with Hon-Ming Chen on March 12, 1998." *Watchman Fellowship* (25 March 1998): 20 pp. Online. Internet. 3 April 1998.

In Garland the group self-published a second book. The 178-page *God's Descending on Clouds (Flying Saucers) to Save People* was printed in Garland in September of 1997. In this book Chen states that God will descend in human form at 3513 Ridgedale Drive on March 31, 1998, at exactly 10:00 a.m.²² This human incarnation of God will have all the physical features of Chen but he will be able to speak all languages (xenoglossia), walk through walls, and he will replicate himself as many times as necessary to greet everyone simultaneously.²³ According to the book, God will announce his descent by taking control of the television airwaves six days earlier. At 12:01 a.m. on March 25, 1998 God will be seen on channel 18 all across North America.²⁴ The book further elaborates the other significant world events that are expected to happen in late 1998 and 1999 as the Great Tribulation approaches. During the time that I was in Garland, copies of this book were given out freely to media and others who asked for them.

In mid-December several key members flew from San Dimas to Taiwan to convince other members to come to the US. In late December they returned to the US with the last group of followers from Taiwan.²⁵

In mid and late December the Taiwanese media began to report many negative allegations about the group.²⁶ On December 15, the *China Post* wrote an editorial about them in which it alleged that the group was controlling its members through "brainwashing" and accused Chen of extorting fees from people.²⁷ Other reports in the Taiwanese media stated that the members were planning on a mass suicide in Texas.²⁸

On Monday, December 22, God's Salvation Church fully captured the attention of the international media after a police incident in San Dimas. Nan-Hua Chiang, a 16-year-old member of God's Salvation Church lived in San Dimas with her father, Chai Chuan Chiang, and uncle who were also members of the group.²⁹ Apparently her mother did not approve of involvement with the group and had stayed in Taiwan even though this meant separation from her husband and daughter. On December 10, 1997, Chai Chuan Chiang died of cancer in a San Dimas hospital. According to members of God's Salvation Church, Chai Chuan Chiang had willed that his daughter stay with her uncle and remain with the group until the Great Tribulation of 1999.³⁰ Being a committed believer, Nan-Hua Chiang wanted desperately to stay in the group and live with her uncle.

Nan-Hua Chiang's mother learned of the death of her husband and that the group was planning to

22 Hon-Ming Chen, *God's Descending on Clouds (Flying Saucers) to Save People*, (Self-published, 1997), 174-178.

23 Sam Howe Verhovek, "UFO cult waits for God in Texas town," *New York Times*, 5 March 1998.

24 Hon-Ming Chen, *God's Descending on Clouds (Flying Saucers) to Save People*, (Self-published, 1997), 174-178.

25 H.M. Chen and R. Liu, personal communication, 28 June 1998. The SLRA had about five hundred people, when Chen separated from them and created the "True Way," he had about three hundred followers, only 150 of which came to the United States.

26 Doug Fox, "Former professor believes he's the father of Jesus, will become God," *Associated Press*, 23 December 1997.

27 *China Post*, 15 December 1997.

28 Doug Fox, "Former professor believes he's the father of Jesus, will become God," *Associated Press*, 23 December 1997.

29 Scott Gordon and Alan Boyle. "Garland cult makes news revelation." *MSNBC* (23 March 1998): 2 pp. Online. Internet. 3 April 1998.

30 James Covert, "Group believes God to appear here, save the world March 31," *Garland News*, 25 December 1997. Such a statement in a will cannot be upheld if there is a living parent or guardian who wants to take responsibility for the child.

relocate to Texas. Many of the Taiwanese media reports suggested that the group was going to commit mass suicide and this must have influenced the actions of Nan-Hua Chiang's mother who flew to Los Angeles and contacted the police on December 22, 1997.³¹

On the evening of Monday, December 22, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputies visited the group's San Dimas based church in response to claims made by Nan-Hua Chiang's mother that her daughter was being held against her will.³² Upon arrival at the church, "the deputies recognized one of the individuals as the possible kidnapping victim," said Lt. Alexander Yim of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.³³ "They took custody of her at that time and transported her to the San Dimas sheriff's station, where she was reunited with her mother."³⁴ Her mother said that she and her daughter planned to return to Taiwan the following day.³⁵

Despite evidence to the contrary, many reporters covering this story presented it as a dangerous cult kidnapping. Information from various sources illustrates that this case can hardly be called a kidnapping. According to Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy Joe Lomonaco, Nan Hua Chiang was visibly disappointed that she would not be able to be in Garland on March 31.³⁶ Lomonaco said, "It wasn't a kidnapping. At the most it would have been child concealment... There was no crime."³⁷ Nan-Hua Chiang is a minor and as such she is subject to the wishes of her parents until she reaches the age of eighteen. Had she been eighteen there would have been no story. No one physically held Nan-Hua Chiang against her will except the LA County Sheriff's Department when they forcibly removed her from the church.

The Sheriff's Department had to work with the information given to them by Nan-Hua Chiang's mother.³⁸ She had been influenced almost exclusively by the Taiwanese media coverage which was filled with doomsday scenarios and suggestions of 'cult suicide'. According to Deputy Lomonaco, the girl's mother, "feared she would never see her daughter again."³⁹

The Sheriff's Department was lead to believe that this was a "suicidal mind-controlling cult." Los Angeles Sheriff's Department spokesman Thanh Ly said, "We got information ... that there might be [an] attempt to [commit] suicide, so it was urgent for us to really contact the church and get a hold of her."⁴⁰ This information caused the police to react quickly and forcefully, which gave the media a seemingly more serious situation and a more newsworthy story.

After the girl had been returned to her mother a department spokesperson stated that Sheriff's

31 Jenny Taylor, "Southern California Authorities Move on Flying Saucer Cult, Group's Actions Lead to Fears of Another Mass Suicide," *Associated Press*, 23 December 1997.

32 "Police retrieve girl from apocalyptic sect, Group's leaders deny future plans of mass suicide," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 1997.

33 Doug Fox, "Former professor believes he's the father of Jesus, will become God," *Associated Press*, 23 December 1997.

34 "Police retrieve girl from apocalyptic sect, Group's leaders deny future plans of mass suicide," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 1997.

35 Doug Fox, "Former professor believes he's the father of Jesus, will become God," *Associated Press*, 23 December 1997.

36 James Covert, "Group believes God to appear here, save the world March 31," *Garland News*, 25 December 1997.

37 "Despite Uniforms and Spaceships, UFO Cult Denies Suicidal Tendencies," *Associated Press*, 24 December 1997.

38 There is some evidence that the Taiwanese government had contacted the LA authorities due to pressure from Nan-Hua Chiang's mother.

39 "Police retrieve girl from apocalyptic sect, Group's leaders deny future plans of mass suicide," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 1997.

40 "Southern California Authorities Move on Flying Saucer Cult," *Associated Press*, 23 December 1997.

detectives who investigated the group did not believe God's Salvation Church members would kill themselves.⁴¹

The removal of Nan-Hua Chiang by the LA County Sheriff's Department came during the chaos of relocating to Garland, Texas. By the end of the day part of the San Dimas group had already left California, by bus and car, for Texas. The rest of the San Dimas group was making its final preparations for permanently moving out of southern California. On the morning of Tuesday, December 23, the last group of members emerged from God's Salvation Church and stated that they were headed for Texas to join the rest of their church.⁴²

Meanwhile, in Garland, at the religiously significant time of 11:18 on the morning of December 23, Teacher Chen and Richard Liu held a news conference.⁴³ Richard Liu had received many calls from reporters requesting Chen's comments on the events that transpired in San Dimas. They held this press conference to refute the reports of a suicide plan, the alleged kidnapping of Nan-Hua Chiang, and the alleged extortion of funds from members.

At the press conference Chen stated to the media that Nan-Hua Chiang's father Chai-Chuan Chiang, had willed that his daughter stay with the church, showing the assembled reporters a copy of the man's will. Chen challenged reporters to investigate the various accusations against him and his group and restated that suicide is forbidden for members of God's Salvation Church. Richard Liu, said, "I think [talk of kidnapping] is ridiculous. Nobody is restricted to go or from going or coming."⁴⁴

In addition to defending himself from the accusations made about him, Chen also gave a brief outline of the group's belief system, including their expectation that God would descend in the image of Hon-Ming Chen on March 31, 1998. The press conference attracted dozens of reporters from around the country. This flock of media was due, in part, to the major media attention that the group received in the police incident in San Dimas just one day earlier.

By the end of December 23, all 150-160 members of God's Salvation Church were settled into 21 homes in Garland.⁴⁵ The group members eventually owned 29-31 houses, all within a 2-1/2 mile radius of Chen's house at 3513 Ridgedale.⁴⁶ Richard Liu and his family lived directly across the street at 3510 Ridgedale. As far as can be discerned from public records and statements from members, the group did not consolidate money, and each member was buying for themselves and their extended families. Most of the instances of the doubling up of people were several generations of the same family in a single house.⁴⁷

41 "Last cult members leave California for end-of-world rendezvous in Texas," *Associated Press*, 23 December 1997.

42 Ibid.

43 James Covert, "Group believes God to appear here, save the world March 31," *Garland News*, 25 December 1997.

44 Ibid.

45 James Covert, "Sect leader denies suicide plan: spotlight, concern and more members landing in Garland," *Garland News*, 25 December 1997.

46 Esther Wu, "Amid media frenzy, group keeps faith that God is coming soon," *Dallas Morning News*, 19 March 1998.

47 This cohabitation of children, parents and grandparents is a normal feature of Taiwanese culture.

3) Garland: The Chosen Land of God

In late December a neighbor complained to Garland code enforcement that one of the Garland homes owned by the group was legally overcrowded. Group members were living together while looking for their own homes in the area. Garland's director of code enforcement, Chris Gorham, notified the group of the city codes pertaining to living conditions.⁴⁸ The group quickly responded by moving some members into other houses that were less crowded. This incident is one of many in which it would appear that the Garland neighbors were less than tolerant of God's Salvation Church.⁴⁹

In the last week of December, the church purchased a truckload of concrete and lumber at a local home supply store.⁵⁰ Chen's next door neighbor, Charles Amyx saw the group bring in the truckload of cement.⁵¹ Amyx, a member of the Church of Christ, walked over to find out what they were doing. Richard Liu spoke to him for a few minutes about their plans to build a gazebo in Chen's backyard. After returning to his house, Charles Amyx called the city to find out what sort of permit is required to build with concrete.⁵² A city of Garland building official, Dale Smith, said, "We had a complaint by one of the neighbors, saying they were building a landing site or something like that."⁵³ The city investigated the matter. There would not have been an issue except that the back of Chen's house abuts Duck Creek. "He was building a gazebo, but the site was on a flood plain. The group complied with the code when we told them they couldn't build it," said Dale Smith.⁵⁴

There were humorous reactions to Chen's presence as well. A woman named Jaime Massey, who owns a pawn shop in Garland, held an "end of the world sale."⁵⁵ Her pawn shop was well decorated with models of UFO's hanging from the ceiling and display cases full of items that were on sale until the end of the world, March 31. Some of the group members had shopped at her store prior to the sale decorations.⁵⁶ According to Mrs. Massey some of the members of the group entered the store after the decorations and advertisements were put into place. She welcomed the group members and stressed to them that she wasn't trying to make fun of them. She explained further that she was just poking fun at the idea that UFO's would come to Garland as part of some grand plan of God. The members of God's Salvation Church did not return to the pawn shop after this encounter.⁵⁷ On the morning of Tuesday, January 6, 1998 a group of twenty-one adults and eleven children including Teacher Chen, Richard Liu and two children thought to be the reincarnations of Buddha and Christ embarked on a religious pilgrimage.⁵⁸ The group left Garland in six white sedans, headed

48 James Covert, "Garland sect travels to Lake Michigan," *Garland News*, 11 January 1998.

49 A Chinese-American woman angrily confronted Chen at a nearby shopping mall, Charles Amyx called the city about the solid fence that Chen constructed, and later about the gazebo they tried to build, hecklers and religious conservatives were at virtually every press conferences, there were signs about the group posted on the marquee at a local church, etc, etc.

50 James Covert, "Garland sect travels to Lake Michigan," *Garland News*, 11 January 1998.

51 C. Amyx, personal communication, 29 March 1998.

52 Ibid.

53 James Covert, "Garland sect travels to Lake Michigan," *Garland News*, 11 January 1998.

54 Ibid.

55 J. Massey, personal communication, 30 March 1998.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Rick Miller, "UFO cult gathers in Gary, anointing new headquarters," *Knight-Ridder News Service*, .

for Gary, Indiana.

On Friday, the thirty-two members arrived at Lake Michigan, which they believe is sacred.⁵⁹ Chen and his followers drove to Gary's Lake Street Beach and immediately began a religious ritual on the beach. Media personnel from several news organizations soon arrived at the beach to observe and question the group. Standing on Lake Street Beach, Hon-Ming Chen, said through Richard Liu that "God told us to come here."⁶⁰ He prophesied that survivors of the Great Tribulation next year would come to this sacred spot to be saved. He added, "After the Great Tribulation happens in 1999, God's flying saucer will carry off the survivors that come here."⁶¹ Speaking through Richard Liu, Teacher Chen said that all the Great Lakes are sacred places.⁶² The group returned to Garland on Monday, January 12, 1998.⁶³

In February of 1998, about three weeks after the trip to Gary, Charles Amyx was told that he was no longer welcome in the backyard of Chen's house.⁶⁴ The following day signs prohibiting non-vegetarians from coming into group members' homes were placed on the doors of each home. According to the church, if non-vegetarians were to enter the home of a church member they would suffer from divine retribution. This is clearly a reaction of the group to the pressures received from the larger community. The group reacted to the tension with the Garland community by emphasizing the distinction between members and non-members.

During the three weeks prior to March 31 Richard Liu fielded about ten calls per day requesting interviews, photo opportunities and updates on God's plan.⁶⁵ In response to the many requests for interviews the group began to hold regular press conferences and send out press releases to the local media organizations.

A press conference was held on March 12 to answer questions about connections to Heaven's Gate, the possibility of suicide, the details of Chen's divine expectations for the rest of the month and the next year, and allegations of wrongdoing by the group.⁶⁶ Chen also allowed a handful of reporters to come into the backyard to see the various religious implements and shrines. Chen did reiterate the group's belief that God would appear at his house at exactly 10 a.m. on March 31, 1998. He also stated, as is printed in his second publication, that this would be preceded by a divine television broadcast on channel 18 at 12:01 on the morning of March 25. Chen allowed all the reporters to photograph the gazebo shrine and said that even the photo of the shrine has religious power. According to Chen, anyone who cuts the photo out of their newspaper and frames it or places it close to their heart will feel the effects of the holy spirit.⁶⁷

The first press release entitled *God's, The Heavenly Father, Declaration- The Salvation of Billions of People from Abroad*, was sent out on March 14, 1998 and outlined the group's belief that during

59 "Chen Tao seeking salvation -- in Gary," Gary, Indiana, 10 January 1998.

60 Ibid.

61 Rick Miller, "UFO cult gathers in Gary, anointing new headquarters," *Knight-Ridder News Service*, .

62 "Chen Tao seeking salvation -- in Gary," Gary, Indiana, 10 January 1998.

63 Ibid.

64 C. Amyx, personal communication, 29 March 1998.

65 Esther Wu, "Amid media frenzy, group keeps faith that God is coming soon," *Dallas Morning News*, 19 March 1998.

66 Transcription of a March 12, 1998 Press Conference with Chen and Liu. Copyright 1998 Watchmen Fellowship.

67 James Covert, "Prepared for flight with God: Group talks about beliefs that Christ is coming to visit," *Garland News* 15 March 1998.

the Great Tribulation of 1999 God will commandeer space aircraft (UFO's) to save all those who believe in Him. Each press release was accompanied by an identical billboard posted outside Teacher Chen's house. The group had many passers-by stop to read the billboards.

The days just prior to March 25 were a mix of frantic media activity, city officials planning and preparing for crowd control, and church members conducting spiritual preparations for God's imminent arrival. Whenever an aircraft flew overhead, group members could be seen excitedly pointing and watching the patterns formed by the contrails. The city of Garland was concerned about crowd control and safety. In addition to taking measures to control the media, the police visited several of the church members in response to rumors of a suicide plan.

The church members did several things in preparation for God's arrival. Early on Tuesday, March 24 church members conducted a baptism-like ritual. Wading in Duck Creek, directly behind Chen's house, the group claimed that it is good for their spiritual cultivation. Among other symbolic preparations, about twenty of the male followers shaved their heads in preparation for God's arrival.⁶⁸

Tuesday afternoon the Garland police held a press conference at Garland's City Hall. Lt. Don Martin of the Garland PD said:

We don't know what's going to happen... We're working on assumptions...Chen has said that he would come out of his house after midnight Tuesday to reveal what happened on TV. But if Chen does not emerge, police plan to knock on the door, and telephone the house. If they hear sounds of distress or violence or get no response, police will break the door down and enter.⁶⁹

Martindownplayed the possibility of violence, citing that they had been "model citizens." But, he added, "We would be remiss in our duties if we didn't consider the option [of suicide]."⁷⁰

The city mobilized between fifty and seventy police officers and emergency personnel to make sure events would proceed with as little trouble as possible.⁷¹ The Garland Police issued bright orange press credentials to legitimate media representatives and cordoned off a 165-house section of Chen's neighborhood.⁷² Only residents of the neighborhood and official press pass holders were allowed on the street. The police had dozens of personnel along the bank of Duck Creek to prohibit reporters or other people from approaching the street on foot. The Garland police had to elicit the help of the neighboring Dallas Police Department because of the need for added personnel.⁷³ The police also set up what they called a "media corral" near Chen's house. At least thirty news organizations signed up to camp out at Chen's home.⁷⁴

By ten o'clock on the evening of March 25, the media was swarming on the street, crews were setting up equipment and getting ready for the show.⁷⁵

68 *Dallas Morning News* , 25 March 1998.

69 Justin Bachman, "Title," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* , 25 March 1998.

70 "God a no-show on TV," *Associated Press* , 24 March 1998.

71 Jim Jones, "More apocalyptic groups expected as millennium nears," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* , 27 March 1998.

72 Justin Bachman, "Title here," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* , 25 March 1998.

73 John Gutierrez Mier, " *Neighbors of Garland sect hoping the spotlight will fade*," *Express-News*, 26 March 1998.

74 Justin Bachman, "Title here," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* , 25 March 1998.

75 Jim Henderson, "Heaven can wait: Taiwanese cult leader concedes prediction about God coming to Texas was

By eleven the church members had assembled in Chen's backyard in a circular type formation. The church members alternately prayed silently and chanted prayers in Chinese. Under the direction of Teacher Chen the group performed a short ritual during which they all bowed toward the gazebo shrine.⁷⁶

Around eleven thirty they filed out of the sanctuary of Chen's backyard, gathering informally on the front yard or across the street at the home of Richard Liu.⁷⁷ However, as midnight approached most of the church members disappeared into the homes of Teacher Chen and Richard Liu.

At midnight on broadcast 18 there was nothing but RF static. The media, the police and curious onlookers waited in suspense. Some speculated that Chen and some part of the group were going to commit suicide inside Chen's house. Despite this fear, Chen emerged about twenty-five minutes after midnight to a host of awaiting cameras and reporters.⁷⁸ Chen was met with dozens of camera flashes as he approached the podium in front of his house. All the billboards mirroring their various press releases stood behind him. Police and other uniformed officers, media personnel, curious onlookers and group members crowded the corner of the suburban neighborhood with more than 350 people.

At the press conference Chen spoke through Richard Liu, "Even though God's image was not captured on television, I want everyone to believe that God is alive."⁷⁹ He added, "I hope that everybody can feel a true belief in God... even though the image doesn't show on television, I don't have any reason to doubt the existence of God in the universe."⁸⁰ Throughout the press conference Chen conceded that God did not show Himself on the television. He referred to his earlier statements as "nonsense" three times during the forty-five minute briefing.⁸¹ However, he also maintained his firm belief in his religious convictions and stated that he would continue to lead his church. During the press conference Chen repeatedly referred to photos of aircraft contrails as proof of God's existence.⁸² "In these months there have been so many flying craft in the sky flying over our head, we don't have any reason to suspect they might be aircraft from the United States airforce."⁸³ He also stated, "I will stay here to try to research what we have witnessed in the pictures."⁸⁴

Chen said he remained faithful to God and hoped the media coverage of his group would attract more people to follow God. "God's revelation to me is that if I want to take the responsibility of preaching the kingdom of God, I have to take the scorn and insults along with it... Otherwise the media will pay no attention... This is the holy arrangement of God," Chen said through Richard

'nonsense'," *Houston Chronicle* , 26 March 1998.

76 J. Crawford, personal communication, March 29, 1998.

77 Jim Henderson, "Heaven can wait: Taiwanese cult leader concedes prediction about God coming to Texas was 'nonsense'," *Houston Chronicle* , 26 March 1998.

78 James Covert, "Religious group leader faces failed prophecy," *Garland News* , 26 March 1998.

79 John Gutierrez Mier, " *Neighbors of Garland sect hoping the spotlight will fade,*" *Express-News*, 26 March 1998.

80 Ibid.

81 Justin Bachman, "Predictions are called 'nonsense'," *Star-Telegram Dallas Bureau* , 25 March 1998.

82 James Covert, "Religious group leader faces failed prophecy," *Garland News* , 26 March 1998.

83 Ibid.

84 Jim Henderson, "Heaven can wait: Taiwanese cult leader concedes prediction about God coming to Texas was 'nonsense'," *Houston Chronicle* , 26 March 1998.

Liu.⁸⁵ He also noted that, "The mass media printed the news that we were going to commit suicide. But we didn't. We won't."⁸⁶

Initially Chen evaded the question of what he now expected to see on March 31 since God had not shown Himself on television as previously prophesied. He gave indirect answers, "It has become insignificant to discuss whether God will show up on March 31 since the prophecy concerning today's program is not realized."⁸⁷

When pressed about the arrival of God and what the church expects with regards to the coming of the Kingdom of God, Chen stated:

I want to emphasize that God's kingdom has already descended, God has already descended. But the pity is that the gospel of God's coming is known to too few people... Because we did not see God's message on Channel 18 tonight, my predictions of God arriving on March 31 can be considered nonsense... I sincerely hope everybody can keep an eye on the further developments, and don't call us liars or something like that. Please trust what we say, because God really wants to save a billion people from the Great Tribulation.⁸⁸

The group members were mostly somber, staring expressionlessly at the press conference. Many reporters wanted to know what the followers of God's Salvation Church planned to do. Unaware of how many people still supported him, Chen said, "They have always enjoyed their individual freedom," adding, "Tomorrow they have the freedom to go where they want."⁸⁹ He acknowledged that group members had sustained personal financial setbacks as a result of following him. "I personally take responsibility to support them for the period they were unemployed"⁹⁰, Chen declined to elaborate on exactly how or when he would do this.

As the press conference drew to a close a reporter asked, "Do you consider yourself to be a false prophet?" To which Chen cleverly replied, "I have never referred to myself as a prophet."⁹¹ He added, "I would recommend anybody not believe what I said anymore."⁹²

After answering the reporters questions Chen vanished into his backyard, guarded by a group of uniformed Garland police officers.⁹³ Long after the street was vacant Garland police remained on duty, blocking road traffic to the neighborhood. They removed the road blocks and traffic cones sometime during the night. Ambulances were kept on standby and at least one fire truck was ready for action. A spokesperson said, "We're going to stay here until at least noon, just in case, you just never know with groups like this."⁹⁴

Between March 26 and March 31 things were rather quiet in Garland. The billboards stood in front

85 *Garland cult makes news revelation*. MSNBC March 23, 1998. By Scott Gordon and Alan Boyle.

86 Justin Bachman, "Predictions are called 'nonsense'," *Star-Telegram Dallas Bureau*, 25 March 1998.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Jim Henderson, "Heaven can wait: Taiwanese cult leader concedes prediction about God coming to Texas was 'nonsense'," *Houston Chronicle*, 26 March 1998.

90 Ibid.

91 Justin Bachman, "Predictions are called 'nonsense'," *Star-Telegram Dallas Bureau*, 25 March 1998.

92 Jim Henderson, "Heaven can wait: Taiwanese cult leader concedes prediction about God coming to Texas was 'nonsense'," *Houston Chronicle*, 26 March 1998.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

of Chen's house, and various church members wandered about in the front yard. The police drove by rather frequently to see if any unscheduled activity was brewing.

On Friday, March 27, after two days of relative silence from the group, Chen sent out a press release entitled *Announcement >From God The Heavenly Father: You Yourself Are God*. In this press release Chen outlines the theology that would save his predictions for March 31 as well as explain what happened on March 25. This theological innovation maintains that we each have the ability, through spiritual cultivation, to become God or a part of God. "In truth, human soul and conscience are homogeneous to the structure of God's holy character... Therefore, please seek the perfection of conscience in your soul. God will help you become God."⁹⁵

Chen again asserted, in a circular fashion, that God will stand beside him in the same image as him on the morning of March 31, but he cautioned his audience, "Please do remember to watch 'God's disappearing and reappearing' with the conscience of your soul. If you have any further questions, you will find your answers on the morning of March 31."⁹⁶ At the end of the press release Chen gave his thanks to the media for helping to spread God's message and warned the public of the coming dangers of the apocalypse.

The precautions that the city of Garland took on the morning of Tuesday, March 31, were identical to those on the evening of March 24. The police cordoned off the neighborhood and posted over a dozen police officers around Chen's house and along Duck Creek. No one could get in without a press pass or a driver's license with a Ridgedale address on it. The media turnout was less impressive than on the evening of March 24 but there was still a sizable crowd. Many curious neighbors came out from their houses including two people wearing alien costumes.⁹⁷

A few minutes before ten o'clock Hon-Ming Chen came out of his house to meet the crowd. Chen asked all of the people in the crowd to shake their own hand. After most of the audience had complied Chen began to explain the newly revealed theology of "You yourself are Gods." He declared that God did indeed descend and multiply enough times to shake everyone's hand. By declaring that everyone has the ability to become gods Chen could also claim that instantly "God" was able to speak all languages.

"The Kingdom of God has descended and God has already changed into human beings... You yourself are God. You are human beings as well as God. This is a chance given to us to play the role of God," Chen declared in front of media, police and his decimated group of followers.⁹⁸ Chen added a warning, "If you think of yourselves as nothing more than a pile of bones and flesh, you are going to die, to perish in the Great Tribulation".⁹⁹

Chen then gave a demonstration to prove his own godhood. He stared directly into the sun for several moments and then turned to reporters, explaining that a mere mortal would have been blinded. Some reporters seemed less than impressed, one noted that Chen was blinking profusely

95 March 27, 1998 Press release from Hon-Ming Chen.

96 Ibid.

97 This is another example of the community reacting to this highly unorthodox group.

98 "Taiwanese sect says that God landed after all: No visible signs, but leader says 'you yourself are God'," *Reuters*, 31 March 1998.

99 Ibid.

after the divine demonstration.¹⁰⁰ Through his interpreter, Richard Liu, Chen blamed the mass media for ridiculing him and failing to accurately portray his messages. He told the reporters that they have a divine responsibility to begin accurately broadcasting his message.

Although Hon-Ming Chen apologized for God's non-appearance on television, at this press conference he said that it was only a minor error and that God had instead declared his intentions in strong winds and unusual cloud patterns.¹⁰¹

Throughout the press conference Chen seemed genuinely concerned for the spiritual wellbeing of his audience. He said that to attain salvation in the Great Tribulation we should repent for our sins, stop eating meat and train ourselves to see beyond the third dimension in which most beings live. According to Chen, anyone who eats meat will face retribution from the spiritual world and may be visited in their dreams by animals seeking explanations for their deaths.¹⁰² "If you often eat the buttocks of chicken, you will soon find you have a pain in your ass," said Chen.¹⁰³

Chen announced that the next day, April 1, 1998, he and nine followers were going to the Great Lakes area to seek out a new training ground to prepare his followers before the coming tribulation in 1999.¹⁰⁴ Chen also stated that by May 10, all of his followers would leave the Dallas suburb of Garland.¹⁰⁵

The press conference ended dramatically when Chen offered to be stoned or crucified. He said that for the next ten minutes he would allow anyone to crucify or stone him to death. For weeks Chen had been saying that he would be willing to suffer the death penalty from his own followers or the general public should his March 31 prophecy fail. In fact, it was printed in his second book that he staked his life on the validity of his prophecies. Immediately following his invitation to be harmed a half a dozen Garland police officers surrounded Chen in a semicircle.¹⁰⁶ No one attempted to kill him, everyone simply stared at the unusual scene.

When asked if they would continue to follow Teacher Chen, every Chen Tao believer in sight, which was no more than forty, indicated they would by raising their hands and shouting in unison.

100V. Balaban, personal communication, May 3, 1998.

101 "Taiwanese sect says that God landed after all: No visible signs, but leader says 'you yourself are God'," *Reuters*, 31 March 1998.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.

104 Paul Stephens, "Is God Coming to Olcott?," *Lockport Journal*, 2 April 1998.

105 Transcription of Garland Press Conference on March 31, 1998.

106 "Taiwanese sect says that God landed after all: No visible signs, but leader says 'you yourself are God'," *Reuters*, 31 March 1998.

4) Exodus to New York

The very next day, April 1, Chen and about nine others flew to Buffalo, NY and rented a minivan. They claim to have been guided by God to drive to Olcott, New York, a small town on the shores of Lake Ontario.¹⁰⁷ That morning Chen had a prophetic vision in which he saw the numbers 17 and 78. The city of Olcott is located at the junction of highways 17 and 78. Upon arrival in Olcott the group parked and held a religious service on Olcott Beach, attracting some onlookers and eventually several local reporters.¹⁰⁸

Wearing their usual white cowboy hats, white sweatsuits and white sneakers, the small group prayed and celebrated on Olcott beach. Their religious ritual included dancing, kneeling in prayer and throwing objects into the water.¹⁰⁹ "This is where God will transfer people from the third dimension to the fourth dimension," Liu said as he gestured toward Lake Ontario.¹¹⁰ Liu said the group was considering relocating to Olcott to be closer to the Great Lakes, where they believe life evolved. "This is a very good place for people to find eternity," Chen said through Richard Liu.¹¹¹

During their week long trip Teacher Chen and Richard Liu looked into the real estate in both Olcott and nearby Lockport and visited Niagara Falls.¹¹² Chen and his small group returned to Garland on April 9, 1998.

Although more than two-thirds left the church to return to Taiwan, many of the group did stay with Chen despite the fact that his prophecies were not fulfilled exactly as described prior to March 25. Chen began to persuade the remainder of his devoted followers to move with him to New York. They spent the next month selling their properties in Garland and relocating to Lockport, New York. On May 13, 1998 four families took up residence in rental housing while looking for permanent residence.¹¹³ Eventually about twelve families (about thirty-five people) settled in New York with the church.

In June of 1998 I visited the group at their new location of Lockport, New York. They were very welcoming and friendly and seemed genuinely glad to see me even though my visit was unannounced. In addition to watching the sky for religious signs and conducting daily religious rituals, Chen told me that he was working on his third book. Later, in September of 1998, I received a copy of the new book and a letter from Hon-Ming Chen.

The third book entitled, *The Appearing of God and Descending of the Kingdom of God --Saving Human Beings by Means of God's Space Aircrafts*, is 79 pages long and represents an attempt to explain the events of March 1998 in religious terms. Chen also reaffirmed his apocalyptic views in this third book including the belief that a global nuclear war will occur in the last months of 1999. I returned to New York to visit the group in early January of 1999. Their daily routine included working on their spiritual cultivation and holding rituals at Olcott beach and at other locations.

107Paul Stephens, "Is God Coming to Olcott?," *Lockport Journal*, 2 April 1998.

108Ibid.

109Ibid.

110Ibid.

111Ibid.

112J. Pease, personal communication, June 28, 1998.

113Ibid.

Chen and other key members were still studying the sky for religious signs. Chen and his followers have remained fairly low profile since their move to New York, living life day by day and keeping a watchful eye for further instructions from God.

Reactions to the Failed Prophecies of January and February 1999

There were several other minor prophecies that Chen predicted for January, February and March of 1999. The opening lines of *God's Descending in Clouds (Flying Saucers) on Earth to Save People* reads:

The kingdom of God has descended! The great tribulation of this generation is going to happen. In January of 1999 when the Communist China starts its military blockade against Taiwan, followed by the Korean War in February, the process of the great tribulation will be initiated. In June and July, East Asia will be struck by the floods just like "the ark of Noah." The countries in East Asia, including China, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Philippines and so on will experience the collapse of their economic structure. As soon as Taiwanese blow up the three nuclear power plants on the island, the schedule of the great tribulation will speed up. In October to December, the breakout of the nuclear war will throw the whole world into throes and woes, and the civilization of the earth generation shall thus come to the end.¹¹⁴

It is clear that Chen is expecting a radical, physical transformation of life on earth. He and his followers expect to transcend the Great Tribulation by 1) being on the North American continent, and by 2) being picked up by God's spacecraft just prior to the Nuclear War. Later in the book Chen elaborates on the details of his eschatological chronology.

In a word, the Communist China will begin its military blockade and assault against Taiwan in the beginning of 1999. In January, it will notify the foreign countries to evacuate their people before the attack and blockade. In March, because of the shortage of food in the island, cannibalism will happen. The ruler of China will take military actions against Taiwan regardless of any consequences.¹¹⁵

The apparent failed prophecies in Garland did not change Chen's belief that the other prophecies were going to literally come true. On the second page of the preface of *The Appearing of God and Descending of the Kingdom of God* Chen writes:

In the first two months of 1999, when warfare breaks out in Taiwan Straits and Korean Peninsula, the curtain of great tribulation is thereafter lifted. The first nuclear bomb shall be dropped in Asia.¹¹⁶

February 1, 1999 marked the first failed prophecy since March 31, 1998. January 1999 passed and China did not attack Taiwan in any fashion. During the first week of January 1999, I had several interviews with Teacher Chen and Richard Liu. When I asked him if he still expected China to

114*God's Descending on Clouds (Flying Saucers) to Save People*, page 1.

115*God's Descending on Clouds (Flying Saucers) to Save People*, pages 106-107.

116*The Appearing of God and Descending of the Kingdom of God*. Preface.

attack Taiwan by the end of the month he stated that they expected some form of military tension on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. It would seem that Chen was preparing for the possibility of a failed prophecy by making his prophecy more abstract.

March 1, 1999 marked another failed prophecy; the Second Korean War did not begin during February of 1999. In February the US was expected to pull its military forces out of South Korea, thus allowing North Korea to invade and initiate the Second Korean War.

Following the passing of February 1, and March 1, Teacher Chen began to study all the old videotapes of 'God's sky writing' looking for an explanation of why the prophesied events did not occur. Teacher Chen and Richard Liu produced a compilation of video clips intended to explain why Taiwan was not blockaded by China and why war did not break out in the Korean peninsula. Richard Liu narrates the two hour long video:

From October the ninth to October the twelfth [1997], while we followed God's instructions and performed God's holy services by a lake near Baltimore, Pennsylvania. Waving the national flag of the Republic of China in Taiwan was already in the making so that the true destiny of Taiwan's being attacked by the military forces of the Communist China in January of 1999 can be thus avoided... The tenth day of the tenth month of the year, is the national birthday of the Republic of China [Taiwan]. The double tens in Chinese characters, which has the same shape with the twin crosses, were drawn that day by God's airplane in the sky. The services done from October the ninth to October the twelfth served to bestow God's salvation on the East Asia by dismissing the prophecies of crisis in the Taiwan Strait and the Korean peninsula in the beginning months of 1999. It is proof that **when men are in one with God they are capable of changing human destiny** . The crisis of Taiwan Straits and Korean peninsula have been postponed, but whether they will be eventually dismissed depends upon whether the people in these areas can use the holy conscious in their soul to resolve their military conflicts.¹¹⁷

After learning of this theological rationalization I discussed the details of the ritual with Richard Liu and asked him if he thought that the global nuclear war prophesied for later this year would similarly be avoided by the actions of a religious ritual. "I have no reason to believe that God will change his plan, I still expect the nuclear war to begin later this year," said Liu.¹¹⁸

Currently the group members spend almost everyday, from eight in the morning until six in the evening, watching the skies of Lockport, NY for signs from God in the clouds. They expect the collapse of the Asian economic systems in June and July 1999. The nuclear war is expected to begin in November and December of this year.

117GSC self-produced video entitled *God's Flying Human Great Ancestor's Airplanes Performing Signs of Miracles* . [Emphasis added].

118R. Liu, personal communication, May 13, 1999.

The Future of God's Salvation Church

How will this small group react or adapt on January 1, 2000? Teacher Chen has at least three possible reactions.

First, he could admit a mistake in the calculation of his apocalyptic chronology and then calculate a new date for the end of time. This has been done by many groups in the past including the Millerites of the 1840's and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Sociologically, this is not a long term solution, it only creates another eventual failed prophecy to deal with.

Second, he could spiritualize the event. Teacher Chen spiritualized the prophecy for March 31. He claimed that the prophecy did actually occur however, you must see it with your spiritual eyes not your physical eyes.

Third, he could prevent the prophetic failure by conducting preventative rituals or by claiming to have received a divine message that God has decided to be merciful to humans. The apparent prophetic failures of January and February were explained by looking to a ritual performed a year earlier. The use of a preventative ritual to alter what could be considered the plan of God illustrates the authority and spiritual power that Teacher Chen claims. That his followers believe in the efficacy of the ritual illustrates their strong commitment and their belief in Chen's unique relationship with the divine. The ritual also indicates that Chen Tao theology allows for a good deal of human agency. Teacher Chen may use this element of Chen Tao theology to head off another failed prophecy before it occurs.

A combination of these options is also possible. Teacher Chen may wait until the last minute of December 1999 and then attempt to spiritualize the Great Tribulation. He may attempt to illustrate how the Great Tribulation did happen but perhaps in a different dimensional world or in a spiritual way. This could result in a recalculation of the date for the actual physical apocalypse.

If Chen prepares for an uneventful closure of the millennium by doing preventative rituals, this may simultaneously head off the ill effects of another failed prophecy while giving the movement a new theological focal point. Chen may claim to have saved the world from the Great Tribulation of nuclear destruction. This theological shift would give the religion a new central theology to build on in the next few years; Chen as the savior of the world.

After Teacher Chen reacts to what will probably be the uneventful end of 1999 his followers will either leave the movement disappointed or they will believe in Chen's rationalization and continue to practice the religion.

If a failed prophecy doesn't destroy a group it functions as a filter for weeding out the less devoted followers. Immediately following the failed prophecies of March 25 and 31, God's Salvation Church lost two thirds of its members. By April 1999 the group had been reduced to between thirty-five and forty members. The people who left the movement were not sufficiently entrenched in the belief system to allow for a secondary elaboration of belief. Most of the people who could have their beliefs shaken by an apparently failed prophecy left the group after March 31. The failed prophecies in Garland left Chen with a much smaller but more devoted group of believers. This is evidenced by

the low number of defectors following the failed prophecies of January and February 1999.¹¹⁹

After December 31, 1999 other members will likely react by leaving the group, but many will probably stay with Chen and try to understand the events that have occurred (or not occurred) within the preexisting cosmological framework of God's Salvation Church. The current members have now invested many years of their lives in this movement. The time, money, and energy the members invested in the movement gives them more reason to want to believe a new theological rationalization.

The history of apocalyptic new religious movements shows us that more often than not a group will rationalize its prophetic failure and continue to operate and grow. However, I have not seen many historical case studies of movements this small in number. The status of this group next year and beyond will be very informative for the study of apocalypticism, the study of small group dynamics and the study of new religious movements in general.

Link Section

Note: Some of these sites are more scholarly, others are very "anti-cultish" and exhibit a strong bias.

- www.mille.org/chentao.html
- www.watchman.org/chentao.html cti.itc.virginia.edu/~jkh8x/soc257/nrms/chentao.html
- www.rickross.com/groups/chen_tao.html
- web.tin.it/cesnur_org/Chen.htm
- www.factnet.org/headlines/headlines1.html
- members.tripod.com/~tokyoboardwalker/UFO.html
- www.abcnews.com/section/us/DailyNews/chentao320.html
- www.hotweird.com/~fj/pentaradial/chen_tao.html
- www.forteantimes.com/article/109/chen.html
- www.csj.org/links/links_ufo.htm
- www.trancenet.org/groups/gsc/gscdef.shtml
- www.trancenet.org/groups/gsc/index.shtml
- www.pathfinder.com/asiaweek/98/0501/feat7.html

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¹¹⁹The number of people that left the church after the failed prophecies of January and February is very low, perhaps less than five.