11 Daoism in China today

In this chapter

The fate of Daoism in China today is closely linked with politics. Suppressed from the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949 until the Four Modernizations in 1978, it has made a gradual come-back but remains under tight control. All Daoist institutions are state-owned, monastics are paid by the government, several bureaus compete for revenues and administrative power, and training centers require courses in Marxism as preparation for full ordination. Still, temple compounds are growing on the five sacred mountains, on Daoist mountains, and in all major cities. People choose the Daoist life for a variety of reasons: to take refuge from civilian life, do community service, rise in the official hierarchy, become a hermit, or establish a Daoist-based business.

As the religion has grown, so have its ritual activities, the most notable being the Grand Offering to All Heavens, which is now being performed every five or so years. The latest event of this kind was in Hong Kong in 2007, with hundreds of Daoists in attendance. Its cultivation practices, too, are taking off in unprecedented ways, Daoists increasingly adopting qigong while developing traditional martial arts, such as taiji quan.

Main topics covered

• Recent developments
• Structure and administration
• Daoist lives
• Ritual activities
• The Qigong connection

Recent developments

Daoism, together with all other religions of China, was the victim of the political transformation of the twentieth century. After World War II ended with the capitulation of Japan in 1945, the Chinese engaged in civil war, the Communists (CCP) under the leadership of Mao Zedong (1893–1976) battling the Republicans (Kuomintang), led by Chiang Kai-shek (1888–1975). It ended in 1949 with the flight of the Republicans to Taiwan and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China on the mainland.

Throughout the period leading up to this, religion had a difficult time. Monastic life was attacked as a form of escape from a country that badly needed workers and soldiers, while popular practices were condemned as superstitious and wasteful. Traditional myths and stories were debunked while gods toppled and organizations declined. On the other hand, trance activities, health techniques, and martial practices continued to flourish, if on a smaller level and often in secrecy. Communism exacerbated the situation. Its official doctrine followed Karl Marx in seeing religion as an opiate for the people, necessary only while their living conditions were horrendous. Religion would naturally evaporate once the true realm of freedom under the dictatorship of the proletariat was realized.

Communist policies

With no patience to wait for the natural demise of religion, the Communists suppressed it radically. In 1952, private holdings of land were outlawed and all was collectivized into communes. Religious organizations were dissolved, monks and nuns returned to the laity, and temples made into schools, assembly halls, garrisons, or storage facilities. In 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, every commune was encouraged to have its own steel mill, and all metal was confiscated to be used for industrial progress; many statues and religious artifacts found their way into the furnaces.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), young people (Red Guards) were encouraged to do away with all remnants of culture. All sorts of artifacts and what remained of temple buildings were destroyed, desecrated, and defaced. This only ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping (1905–1997), who in 1978 began the Four Modernizations. As a result, since 1980 religious organizations and practices, as well as the academic study of religion, have undergone a revival.

New religions

Exploiting this freedom, in the 1990s various groups under the umbrella of the sanctioned health practice of qigong (lit. “working with qi”) grew into large-scale
organizations and recouped traditional religious patterns. In addition to healing exercises, they taught devotion to deities, chanting of sacred scriptures, taking of precepts, and obedience to group leaders. Typical groups included Zangmigong (Tantric Qigong), essentially a new religion based on Tibetan Buddhism, and Zhonggong (Central Qigong), an organization that led practitioners to Buddhist-style liberation.

There was also the notorious Falungong (Dharma Wheel Practice), founded in 1992, which proposed exercises and meditations in combination with ethical principles for the attainment of supernatural powers and transcendence into heaven. Refusing to bow to government regulations, they were outlawed in 1996. Since 1999, this group— and with it various other qigong and religious organizations— have been actively suppressed, creating once again a repressive atmosphere for personal religious cultivation.

Structure and administration

After 1949, all religions had to organize themselves under state law. Daoists, dominantly of the Complete Perfection school with headquarters at the White Cloud Temple in Beijing, accordingly formed the Chinese Daoist Association (CDA). It began in 1956 with Yue Chongdai as president, who was succeeded by Chen Yingning (1880–1969) in 1962. The association held a national conference of Daoist representatives, which also included the Celestial Masters based on Mount Longhu, and created a basic forum for interaction with the state. Nothing much happened during the Cultural Revolution, when it had to lie low.

Since 1980, the CDA has held national meetings every five years, founded local associations in all major cities and provinces, sponsored Grand Offerings in 1993 and 2001, arranged for formal ordinations, established several training centers for monastics, and developed official contacts with Daoists all over the world.

Training and ordination

While the Celestial Masters on Mount Longhu routinely train priests and have held regular ordinations since 1995, the main training center for monastics (now only monks) is at the White Cloud Temple in Beijing. A second center has recently opened on Mount Qingcheng in Sichuan. A school especially for nuns was established on Nanyue (Hunan), the sacred mountain of the south, in 2005. Training usually lasts for two years, with classes of 50–80 students that are selected upon examination from local temples, where they were apprenticed to an established Daoist.

The system works on two levels: a would-be Daoist finds a master and, after some basic training and with family approval, is officially adopted into his or her lineage. This involves an initiation ceremony with the transmission of sacred texts, a vow to continue the tradition, and the bestowal of a religious name. Both Complete Perfection and Celestial Masters follow this system; there is no requirement to be a monk or nun. Also, masters typically specialize in certain kinds of texts, rituals, or practices, and disciples may decide to study other methods as well. In that case, they move on to other teachers and become holders of multiple lineages. Most Daoists in China remain on this level; so-called “ordained” foreigners, too, participate here.

The second level involves training at a large, state-sponsored center for the full two-year program, studying Chinese culture, foreign languages, temple administration, Marxism-Leninism, as well as Daoist history, ritual, music, literature, thought, cultivation, and so on. Graduates undergo full ordination to Daoist monk or nun, live in temples full-time, and become organizational leaders. Many begin by being religious enthusiasts but come out despising Daoist doctrines and practices, their highest loyalty being to the state. Full, large-scale ordinations were interrupted by war and Communism, and none was held between 1927 and 1989. Since then, three major ceremonies have been organized, each ordaining several hundred Daoists.
Multiple bureaus

Temples and monasteries have a semi-democratic management; they work largely through committees and elect their leaders. Their first supervising agency is the local Daoist association, whose administrators include ordained Daoists as well as supportive lay followers.

Above and beyond this, temples and practitioners are administered by the Bureau of Religious Affairs, which is staffed by hard-core Communists with little patience for religious needs or activities. With an increase in local travelers, foreign visitors, and Overseas Chinese – who were essential in the religious revival after 1980 – Daoist institutions also came to be supervised by the Department of Tourism. Manned by foreign-oriented and more modern officials, the Department is interested mainly in revenue and the smooth entertainment of large crowds. It, too, has no concern with religious activities or the creation of a spiritual atmosphere.

The effect of this multiple administration is twofold. On the one hand, the two agencies tend to squabble over money, and if one gets more from a temple activity than the other, they alert the police and accuse monks of nefarious activities. On the other hand, they channel state and tourist funds toward restoration and expansion, so that many Daoist sanctuaries now have a revived and energized look, are open to the public, and offer a wide variety of Daoist resources (books, charms, herbs, teas, martial training).

There is great regional variation in the degree of support and cooperation between these agencies and Daoist institutions. In some areas (Sichuan, Hubei), Daoists are made very welcome and religious activities and festivals are supported with enthusiasm. In others (Shaanxi, Shandong, Hunan), the politicians are wary of all religious organizations and a restrictive mode prevails.

Important centers

The most important Daoist centers are on mountains. The five sacred mountains of traditional China all have Daoist institutions: Mount Tai in the east (1545m, near Confucius’s birthplace in Qufu), Hua in the west (2200m, near Xi’an), Heng in the north (2017m), Nanyue (Hengshan) in the south (1290m, near Changsha), and Mount Song in the center (1440 m, near Luoyang; south of Shaolin monastery).

Most of these mountains have multiple peaks and include large-scale temples at the bottom as well as numerous hermitages and monasteries perched on mountain tops and built into cliffs.

In addition, there are several important Daoist mountains. They are Mount Longhu, the headquarters of the Celestial Masters in Shanxi; the Zhongnan mountains (west of Xi’an) with Longshan, where Laotzu allegedly transmitted the Daode jing; Mount Qingcheng in Sichuan (northwest of Chengdu), where Zhang Daoling founded the Complete Perfection school; Mount Mao near Nanjing, the location of the Highest Clarity revelations; Mount Lao in Shandong (near Qingdao), where the Complete Perfection school developed; and Mount Wudang in Hubei (near Wuhan), the state-sponsored sanctuary of the Dark Warrior and main Daoist martial arts academy.

In terms of inner city temples, the most prominent is the White Cloud Temple in Beijing, headquarters of the CDA and a major training center; another White Cloud Temple is found in Shanghai, which also houses the popular City God temple now run by Daoists. Beyond the eastern seaboard, there are: the Black Sheep Temple (Qingyang gong) in Chengdu (Sichuan), where Laotzu supposedly met Yin Xi before they emigrated to the west; the Eight Immortals Temple (Baxian an) in Xi’an, the headquarters of the local association; and the Temple of Mystery and Wonder (Xuanmiao guan) in Suzhou, a flourishing institution in the downtown shopping district.

The Complete Perfection school has another important temple in Ruichong (Shaanxi), the alleged birthplace of the immortal Lü Dongbin. Moved due to dam construction to Longquan village in 1959, the Palace of Eternal Happiness (Yongle gong) is the site of exquisite murals from the thirteenth century and a major ritual center.

Daoist lives

Within this overall framework there are five reasons why someone would pursue a Daoist career. The most common is to take refuge from the vicissitudes of civilian life. Statistics show that hardly any Daoists have advanced education, and most have barely made it to a high-school diploma. They often come from low-class families with no resources or from communities with no job opportunities. In some cases, their marriage has turned sour or they have a health issue, and they simply do not know where else to turn.

With little religious motivation and less understanding of the tradition, they just want to be comfortable and enjoy their state stipend. They do their duty manning the entrance gate or selling souvenirs, but most of the time they play games, watch TV, chat, or otherwise hang out.

The comfort-seekers make up about 80 percent of all Daoists. The remaining 20 percent divide into two groups: approximately 16 percent who wish to do community service or advance in the administration, and maybe 4 percent who are in Daoism for spiritual cultivation or business profit.

Community service

A Daoist career lends itself easily to community service, either on the local level, where small temples play an increasingly important role in satisfying the religious needs of
the people, or on the national level, where well-trained (and properly indoctrinated) representatives are needed to run central institutions, Daoist associations, and relevant state agencies.

Local temples have revived continuously since the 1980s. First, priests and monks were allowed to return from their lay occupations as farmers, carpenters, or vendors, and buildings were reassigned from their civilian uses. Then funds were raised for the materials and workers necessary to refurbish the places, add new wings, and create new statues and ritual implements. As time went on and private ownership became possible again, the temples were also given back their land holdings so that they became self-sufficient. Many temples rent out their lands for planting or to be built on, thus ensuring a private income in addition to the state stipends.

As religious restrictions lessened, communities in many places recovered their ritual needs — although often ancestral tablets and ritual manuals had been burned during the Cultural Revolution and are lost forever. Today, all major life transitions (birth, marriage, retirement, death) are marked by religious ceremonies, Daoists taking a large portion of this market. In addition, the old practices of purification, exorcism, healing, and blessings (for houses, cars, and businesses) as well as the production of talismans, amulets, charms, and other gewgaws are flourishing greatly. The numbers of local priests and monks — with the Celestial Masters dominating the southeast (Fujian) area — have increased drastically and the popularity of personal and community rituals is on the rise.

On a more official level, Daoist community service can also take the form of administrative work in one or the other state-sponsored institution, from the local Daoist association through the large training monasteries to government agencies. Daoists on this level have to be ordained centrally and cannot just hold one or the other local lineage. They are accordingly better educated and there is a much higher degree of standardization in doctrine and practices. The tendency is for an increased demand toward such centralization and, as more training seminaries are founded around the country, there will be more officially sponsored religious education.

Hermit life

Another Daoist lifestyle choice is being a hermit outside institutional structures. Daoists have traditionally supported life away from society, and to the present day there are hermits in far-off mountain reaches as well as in the inner cities. Mountain hermits tend to subsist on a minimum of food and drink, often gathering nuts or herbs that they eat and sell for basic necessities such as flour and cooking oil. Almost all had to descend during the Cultural Revolution, take on employment, and even get married. There is only one case reported where a hermit, interviewed by Bill Porter in the early 1990s, upon the question of how he fared under Mao Zedong, said: "Mao who?"

Most mountain hermits choose the isolation intentionally, but there are also situations where a particularly unruly monk, who does not conform to state-imposed discipline, is banished to a distant cliff. Left out of the tourist loop and thus deprived of income, he becomes a spiritual seeker by default. Other hermits do not even retire to the mountains but live in the cities, where they do minimum work to keep themselves alive and otherwise engage in Daoist cultivation. An example is a former vice-abbot of a famous mountain monastery. In 2006, he got tired of continuous politicking and left the official hierarchy for a withdrawn existence in the cities. There he is all but unknown and can live in splendid isolation.

All hermits share the goal of attaining personal realization through Daoist cultivation — unlike martial arts, an activity hardly ever found in monastic institutions today. They are ordained as lineage holders and specialize in specific methods, be they dietary, breathing, exercise, meditation, or a combination of these. Unless they take on disciples who spread the word of their accomplishments, they remain hidden, and there is no way of telling how common this phenomenon is in China today.

Daoism as business

A completely different Daoist lifestyle has emerged recently with the growth of a free-market economy and the rise of newly rich business executives who are in desperate need of stress release and body pampering. This is the path of Daoism as business or the establishment of Daoist spas.

An example is the Intertwined Dragon Temple (Shaolong guan) in the southwestern metropolis of Chongqing. A vast complex of various buildings, nicely refurbished in traditional style, it contains not only worship, lecture, and meditation halls, but also extensive areas dedicated to massages, physical treatments, medical diagnoses, herbal prescriptions, and exercise. It has modern hotel facilities for visitors, spacious rooms and up-to-date dining areas, a computer lab to stay in touch with business affairs, hot tubs and pools to languish in after working out, as well as all sorts of other amenities associated with pricey retreats.

Its infomercial, shown by Abbot Li Jun at the end of the Third International Conference on Daoism in 2006, presents the monastery entirely as a center for the unique acquisition of Daoist secrets of long life, following the ancient model of the Yellow Emperor who, about 5,000 years ago, concocted his cinnabar elixir on this very mountain. Its monks appear as model healers, serving as grand masters of qigong and performing acrobatic moves of taiji quan and other martial arts. They offer a new version of Daoist service by teaching the newly wealthy and accordingly stressed-out class of upscale Chinese businessmen how to relax and keep themselves fit.