Reviving Taoism
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2500 year old faith blooms after 50 years of communist suppression

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An elderly monk, dressed in the traditional blue robe and jade-studded black cap of his Taoist sect, carefully places a burning joss stick in a large black urn. He pauses to watch a thin coil of smoke rise from the fragrant incense. Age belies the monk's physical energy; he goes about his many monastic duties with the stamina of a young man. But the passage of time has not been so kind to Taoism, an ancient tradition with many affinities to Hinduism and now threatened with extinction. After a long absence, the monk--one of China's remaining "Lao Tao" masters--has been brought back to this monastery on sacred Wudang Mountain after decades under house arrest. The same government that once repressed the open expression of his beliefs now wants him to pass along his knowledge to the next generation of Taoist monks. Similar former prisoners, with growing international support, give Taoism a crucial chance for survival in its homeland.

The decline of Taoism began late in the last century, during the Qing Dynasty. On the cusp of a new China, Qing emperors were religious patrons who struggled with a certain skepticism of Taoism. While they reserved a portion of their annual budget to support the monasteries, imperial enthusiasm for

organized Taoism began to wane. When the monarchy finally fell in 1911 and the Nationalist government was installed in 1912, Taoism lost the long-standing financial and institutional support it had received from China's emperors. The new government regarded Taoism as mere folklore and myth. It allowed the religion to struggle on its own, and stood by as ancient temples, shrines and monasteries began to decay.

War between Japan and China destroyed Taoist sites in the 1930s, then came Mao Zedong and his communists who, following a destructive civil war, toppled China's government in 1949 and soon outlawed religion altogether. The following year, the new People's Government suppressed all faiths. Buddhist and Taoist monasteries were destroyed or requisitioned as government buildings. Monks and nuns were imprisoned in labor camps, reducing the clergy from several millions to about 50,000--the same fate to later befall Tibetan Buddhists.

By the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Taoist sites throughout the country had been closed to religious activity and plundered for their ancient bronze statues. Remaining monks and nuns were forced into work camps; others were tortured and killed.

Mao's death in 1976 heralded a new mindset in China--a more liberal attitude which sees Taoism both as an important part of traditional Chinese culture and a source of revenue, since temples and shrines attract tourists. The Chinese government has even apologized for the Cultural Revolution, calling it "an error comprehensive in magnitude and protracted in duration."

Non-Chinese took an interest, too, especially the US-based Taoist Restoration Society (www.taorestore.org). "We thought Taoism was a dead religion," says TRS president Brock Silvers. He founded the non-profit organization in 1990 after visiting China and seeing for himself how Taoism was threatened with extinction. TRS's head office is in Chicago, with an branch in Beijing, China. TRS supports the restoration of monastic institutions and assists Taoist communities. "We are not interested in exporting, altering or Westernizing Taoism," Silvers says, "nor in gaining converts to any religious cause. TRS believes that it is vital that we protect the world's vanishing cultures and ancient traditions." To that end, the organization helps rebuild Taoist sites and supports the revival of organized Taoism. It is especially involved in the restoration of temples, almost all of which--some tens of thousands--were seized or destroyed by the government.

History: Taoism refers to both a philosophy and a religion, and dates from the Han Dynasty (206 bce?220 ce). Taoism's central concept is the Tao, which means both "the way" and "teaching." Metaphysically, the Tao is the reality that gives rise to the universe, the primordial source of all life; its function is simply being. It is akin to the Hindu concept of dharma. The same universal law that says all things originate from the Tao also dictates that everything must return to the Tao. To realize this law of returning to the Tao, say the Taoists, is to achieve enlightenment. Religious

Taoism, taojiao, incorporates the worship of many gods, the veneration of nature, simplicity and a mystical viewpoint. Taoists regard matter and spirit as inseparable, so the goal is not to liberate the soul from the body, but to realize the truth within oneself, thus attaining the Tao.

Philosophical Taoism, taojia, focuses on nature as the provider of everything. The Tao is both the creator and creation itself. Since the Tao is without purpose and continually changing, say Taoist philosophers, this should also be the nature of human beings. Unlike followers of religious Taoism, they are not in pursuit of immortality; instead, practitioners of philosophical Taoism seek to form a mystical union with the Tao through meditation and by following the nature of the Tao through thought and action.

Taoism's central principles of Yin-Yang and Wu-wei are elucidated in the Tao Te Ching of Lao-tzu, who lived 2,600 years ago. Yin and Yang are polar energies--complementary yet contradictory--in constant fluctuation to achieve harmony. Yin is feminine, receptive and soft, while

Yang is masculine, creative and hard; Yin represents night, shadow, moon, water, even numbers and death, while Yang represents day, light, sun, fire, odd numbers and life. Nothing is purely one or the other; everything is a balance of Yin and Yang. Wu-wei is the principle of non-action. Wu-wei, the saint's attitude, is nonintervention in the natural course of life, thereby allowing for things to unfold in accordance with their own nature.

Restoration: Perhaps no one in China is more devoted to the fight to save Taoism than its clergy. Monks and nuns alike--what is left of them--are helping out with the painstaking restoration effort. Yin Xin Hui, the Abbess of Mao Mountains Qian Yuan Guan Nunnery, is currently working to rebuild a section dedicated to meditation, which was destroyed by the Imperial Japanese Army in 1938.

Another clergy member, a young Taoist monk whose name translates as "Mysterious Secret," has spent the last eight years traveling across China and rebuilding its Taoist infrastructure. He

worked three years restoring the Heng Mountain Temple before moving on. At 28 years old, Mysterious, who was ordained at age 18 in the Complete Reality sect, represents the first generation of post-communist monks now reaching spiritual maturity. His efforts also include the establishment of a temple on Mozi Mountain, a hill in downtown Yueyang.

Assisting in many of these projects, TRS hopes to see at least one major Taoist place of worship in every large Chinese city. There is no official restoration plan. Taoist clergy and volunteers usually handle smaller projects. The government runs some projects and funds for other reconstruction come from supporters throughout Asia, Europe and the US.

Silvers notes that it is difficult to follow traditional use of Taoist iconography and symbols as the sites are rebuilt. "From what I have seen," he says, "the government doesn't really care about authenticity. And even those who do care--officials and monks alike--are often hampered by a combination of poverty and ignorance."

The government's National Taoist Association and local religious affairs bureaus across China are also working to save the tradition from extinction, with varying degrees of success. Last January, for example, the government opened a renovated temple dedicated to the God of Tai Shan. A local tourist bureau rebuilt the ancient temple, one of the largest in Beijing. But, rather than being renovated as a place of worship, the temple now stands as a cultural museum. No Taoist clergy are allowed to engage in religious activity there.

"Taoism is a mystical religion relying on oral transmission of many teachings," explains Silvers. "The number of monks remaining from Taoism's pre-Mao days, the so-called 'Lao Tao,' is small and dwindling. These masters are generally 70 to 100 years old." It is not so easy to coax them back into practice after so many decades of repression and fear. Most have learned to keep their religion to themselves.

After a decade of fighting to save Taoism, Silvers is hopeful but pragmatic. He sums up the religion's chance for survival by invoking the Lao

Tao masters. "The ability of organized Taoism to continue as an authentic religious tradition," he says, "rests squarely on the aged shoulders of a small number of monks and nuns battered by time, who may or may not remember the rituals they were forced to abandon or the scripture they were forced to burn fifty years ago."

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CHINA

China Shackles Falun Gong

Religious freedom yet remains a tenuous policy

China's recent crack down on the Falun Gong sect has received worldwide attention. Last April more than 10,000 members of the group, which claims about 70 million members--nine million more than the Communist Party and

probably an inflated figure for a group founded in 1992--gathered in Beijing to demand official status for their religion. They use meditation and tai chi-like exercises to aid spiritual and physical well-being. In July, the government banned the group as a threat to communist rule, claiming it was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Falun Gong practitioners who failed to seek proper medical care. They issued an arrest warrant for founder Li Hongzhi, who lives for safety reasons in New York, but the US refused to extradite him.

Falun Gong (also called Falun Dafa--see www.falun dafa.org) is one of many schools of qigong, a traditional Chinese system of exercises to regulate the body, mind and breath. Although not a Taoist organization, Falun Gong ("the Law Wheel

Exercises") draws on the Taoist principles of activating one's qi (energy) and cultivating truth, and it uses four Taoist Yin-Yang symbols in its emblem. As with qigong, it also borrows from Buddhism and martial arts.

In July, Li called on the government "not to use a policy of suppression against the innocent Falun Gong populace. People practice Falun Gong simply because they want to become healthy and good people."

Brock Silvers of the Taoist Restoration Society, Beijing, views the crackdown with concern. "While

the Falun Dafa controversy has no direct impact on the work of TRS," he says, "it has made the Chinese government more wary of religion in general and has contributed to a decline in the overall atmosphere."