

# ***Traditional Religious Practices in China Today***

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## **Introduction**

Before addressing the subject matter of this article, as given in the title above, it might prove useful to give a brief overview of the evolution of religious policy since Deng Xiaoping assumed power in 1978. December 1978 is especially important since it marks the date the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Congress reaffirmed the rights of Chinese citizens to freedom of religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang ziyou*) which officially put an end to thirteen years of total interdiction of all forms of religious activities and the almost systematic destruction of places of worship. Never since the French Revolution had a people and its leaders worked so hard to destroy (pojiu) the old.

The second significant event of the post-Mao era was the proclamation in 1982 of the new Constitution, with its Article 36, which restated China's policy of "freedom of religious belief". In the same year Document 19 was drawn up. Don MacInnis, noted American China scholar, called this "the most definitive statement on religion and religious policy ever issued by the Chinese Communist Party or government" (MacInnis 1989 p. 2). MacInnis did a complete translation of this document (p. 10-26) which begins by stating that, "Those who think that with the establishment of the Socialist system and with a certain degree of economic and cultural progress, religion will die out within a short period, are not being realistic. Those who expect to rely on administrative decrees or other coercive measures to wipe out religious thinking and practices with one blow are even further from the basic viewpoint Marxism takes toward the religions question" (p.11).

The document then analyses the changes which have taken place since 1949 in the five government approved religions: Islam, which is essentially a matter of ethnicity, now has 10 million adherents; Buddhism and Daoism "continue to exercise a considerable influence on the Han population," but they are free

of "feudal" class exploitation; the Protestants who numbered 700,000 in 1949 and 3 million in 1982 and the Catholics (who have gone from 2 to 5 to 7 million and now back to 4 million) have been liberated from colonial and imperialist forces. "Naturally," Document 19 continues, "a considerable number [among the Han] believe in spirits, but the number of those who actually adhere to a religion is not great" (p.11).

After severely criticizing the "leftist mistakes made since 1957" (!) which made the Party deviate from its initial religious policy, the document stresses the enforcement of the policy since 1979. It also mentions that "all banned reactionary secret societies, sorcerers, and witches, without exception, are forbidden to resume their activities. Finally, all who make their living by phrenology, fortune telling and geomancy should be educated, admonished and helped to earn their living through their own labor and not to engage again in these superstitious practices which only deceive people" ( p.22).

"Freedom of religious belief," therefore, is guaranteed only for the five officially recognized religions. All other traditional practices are relegated to the category of "feudal superstitions" and are forbidden. In an article published on 20 April 1981, in the *Guangming ribao*, Ya Hanzhang gives a rather complete list of these practices. "When we talk about feudal superstition, we usually mean telling fortunes by using eight triagrams, feeling a person's bones and looking at his appearance to forecast his future, practicing geomancy, reading horoscopes in search of an elixir of life, exorcising spirits to cure illnesses, planchette writing, offering sacrifices to gods, beseeching gods to bestow children on people, offering prayers to gods to ward off calamities and to ask for rain and so on" (MacInnis p. 403). This long list carries no legal weight but it does represent the distinction that a large number of cadres in the RAB make between religion and superstition. Most of the practices added by Ya Hanzhang are Daoist and are still proscribed today.

Evidently, "forbidden" does not mean non-existent and certain figures make us wonder. In a production brigade near Shanghai only 5% of the population "do not believe" in the existence of ghost or spirits and in a district of Zhejiang, where some 400 temples were destroyed, "no fewer than 500 illicit temples and monasteries could be counted, 256 of these erected since 1984 " (MacInnis p. 388, 393-94). But none of these

statistics are reliable even those given for the five government-approved religions. It is estimated, for instance, that Protestants number from 5 to 100 million (MacInnis p. 313). The last number expresses the thinking of a Hong Kong missionary research center and the first figure is the prudent estimate of Protestant leaders who, undoubtedly, fear to arouse the anxiety of the authorities.

## The Renewal of Daoism

Numbers are certainly useful if we know how to situate them within the correct framework. This is what I will try to do by giving a rapid overview of the history of Daoism since 1949. The study of Daoism is very important since this religion is firmly rooted in the life and traditions of society and frequently confused by the authorities with proscribed "superstitions". Also its vicissitudes since 1949 mirror rather authentically the changing relationships between Chinese culture and the People's Government.

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In a recent book "Daoism in China Today", Li Zhangzheng relates that at the moment of founding the Daoist National Association, some "old Daoist Masters" estimated there were 10,000 Daoist temples throughout the country and 50 thousand Daoist Quanzhen or Zhengyi who lived in them or served them.

"The number of Daoists living among the people is impossible to count" (Li Yang Zheng 1993, p 4). In 1989, by comparison, according to Li Yuhang, then president of the National Daoist Association, there were 400 open temples and 5000 Daoists living in these temples (Zhongguo daojiao) [hereafter ZGDJ] 1992 (1,p.3).

If the first figures are obviously less reliable than the last,

together they, at least, give some idea of the evolution of "public" Daoism--the Daoism of the temple between 1957 and 1989. It is interesting to compare these statistics with some more exact figures for one single province, Shaanxi:

YEAR	TEMPLES	DAOISTS	LAITY
1948	696	1,075	11,432
1965	18	790	3,524
1980	5	310	1,000
1991*	70	500	
1992	86		
1993	70	600	

(Taken from: Sanqin Daojiao 1992.1, p. 12-13; 1993. 1, p. 4; \*ZGDJ 1991. 1, p. 4.)

In Shaanxi, in 1993, the number of Daoist temples was only 10% of the number existing in 1948, a figure comparable to 5% for the whole of China according to the estimate given above. One reason the number of Daoists does not vary in the same proportion, may be because the Shaanxi figures include many Daoist Zhengyi, as we shall see below.

The only other province for which I was able to obtain figures, enabling me to compare the present situation with that prevalent before 1949, is Gansu and these only cover the municipalities of Wuwei and Zhangyi:

PLACE	YEAR	TEMPLES	DAOISTS
<i>Wuwei</i>	1949	6	100
	1993	1	300
<i>Zhangyi</i>	1948	30	300
	1993	1	192

(Taken from ZGDJ 1993. 1, p. 12-13.)

To be more exact, in Wuwei as in Zhangyi there were actually only two Daoist Quanzhen but in Wuwei there were approximately "300 Zhengyi Masters" and 190 in Zhangyi. The rather significant number of Daoists is due to the fact that the Zhengyi masters have been included in the count.

The following table enables us to see the recent changes in the situation in all of Gansu where there are now two provincial Daoist associations and no fewer than nine local associations.

YEAR	TEMPLES	QUANZHEN	ZHENGYI	LAITY
1990	60			
1992	100	300	1,500	
1993	120	300	800	1,200

(Taken from ZGDJ 1990. 1, p. 11; 1992. 2, p. 6; 1993. 3, p. 14.)

These figures are all the more impressive when we realize that in 1990 there were actually only 30 temples officially open; the 30 others served as "places of activities" (*huo dong chang-suo*) but had not yet been approved by the authorities. The 1993 figures represent the Daoist temples recognized by the authorities. The reason the number of Zhengyi masters seems fewer than in 1992 is that the figure of 1500 is an estimate for the whole province, whereas only the Daoist Zhengyi of the cities of Lanzhou, Wuwei, Zhangyi and Baijin had been officially registered.

The number for Gansu can be compared with those of the city of Wenzhou (Zhejiang). A survey done in 1923-24 reported 15,530 Quanzhen monks and nuns throughout the province, with the largest concentrations in the district of Huangyan (1,893), the city of Hangzhou (879) and the districts of Shaoxing (851), and Pingyang (702) (cf. Hahn 1989, p.87). Since Pingyang is part of the Wenzhou municipality, it is especially interesting to compare the last figures with those known for the whole of Wenzhou for 1992: 11 open temples, 688 Daoist Quanzhen and 1605 registered Zhengyi masters (ZGDJ 1992, 3, p. 25). The following year there were 38 open temples (ZGDJ 1993, 3, p.

p. 18). By comparing these figures with those known for the two districts of Wenzhou, we can see that these refer only to duly registered temples: in 1987 in the district of Canguan only, there were 93 temples and more than 600 Daoists (ZGDJ 1987, 4 p. 63); in 1992 in the Leqing district, there were 62 temples, 52 Daoist Quanzhen and 317 Zhengyi masters (ZGDJ 1992, 2, p. 14). Finally, in the municipality of Huangyan (Taizhou), there were 290 Daoist Zhengyi in 1992 (ZGDJ 1992, 4 p. 11). Some research conducted in Fujian reported that there were 160 temples, 170 Daoist Quanzhen and approximately 7,000 Zhengyi masters in this province (ZGDJ 1989.1, p.5. 1991.1,p. 13). Also there are more than 10,000 Zhengyi priests in Hunan (ZGDJ 1990.4, p. 3.)

A quick overview of the history of the Daoist Association will help us better understand the meaning of all these figures. We must remember, first of all, that this Association was founded only in 1957. From 1949 to 1957, according to Li Yang Zheng, the Daoists were totally occupied with the reformation of their "deeply feudal" religion in the areas of politics, economics and culture (Li Yang Zheng 1993 [hereafter LYZ] p. 6). The idea of creating an association was proposed by Yue Chongdai, the priest of Taiqing Guan, Shenyang. His suggestion found a favourable response with the Party as well as with his colleagues and a preparatory meeting with twenty-three persons present took place in Beijing in November 1956. On 9 March 1957, Yue Chongdai was received by "our beloved and respected Prime Minister", Zhou Enlai, and then on 12 April 1957, the Daoist Association was officially founded in Beijing (LYZ, p. 11-12). Among the 92 persons who came from all over China to take part in this gathering, there were 2 Daoist women and 6 Zhengyi Masters (LYZ, p. 57).

One year later, Yue Chongdai, the first president of the new Association committed suicide. He had been the victim of virulent attacks carried out during the Anti-rightist campaign in the Spring of 1958 (LYZ, p.12).

Many Daoist temples gladly participated in the Great Leap Forward (1958) with its "backyard steel furnaces". The Daoists melted their incense burners, their bells and their bronze tripods. Like everyone else they took part in the people's communes and in order to become places of production, the cultural activities of their temple ceased altogether. The Daoist Associa-

tion met again in December 1961. The 99 delegates, among whom 12 were women and 14 were Zhengyi masters, elected Chen Yingning, a famous lay Daoist, president of the Association and voted to open a school and publish a Daoist review (LYZ, p. 59-60).

At the end of September 1962, following the 2nd meeting of the Association's executive committee, Chen Yingming himself went to the Central Committee of the Party to explain how Daoism, in spite of its "continued ancient image" had, in fact, been completely transformed since 1949. Daoists no longer traveled from one monastery to another; now they were part of groups with steady work; they no longer fled from the world but were "optimistic about the future". Above all, after long study sessions most of the Daoists understood "that the destiny of the entire nation was the same as the destiny of each Daoist. It was sufficient to rely completely on the Party, to accept its direction and to participate in a positive way in the construction of socialism and protect the interests of the masses to enable the individual to find his/her own self once again. From now on, no one need think for him/herself" (LYZ, p.14).

The Third Daoist Association Congress took place in May 1980. Li Yangzhen says nothing about what went on between 1962 and 1966, except that on the eve of the Cultural Revolution there were still 637 Daoist temples, 5,000 Daoists serving in them and "many tens of thousands" of "independently practicing" (*sanju*) Daoists.

In 1979 when the Daoist Association resumed its activities, "not one active Daoist temple was left in China." Now (1993), with 400 open temples, 12,000 Daoist Quanzhen, almost 50,000 Zhengyi masters and at least 10 million Chinese resorting to Daoist rituals, "Daoism has essentially regained the position it held prior to the Cultural Revolution" (LYZ, p. 15).

The Third Congress elected Li Yuhang, a Quanzhen Daoist, from the Wenzhou region, president of the Association. The Congress also drafted a letter of friendship to "the Daoists of the province of Taiwan" (LYZ, p.63). From now on Daoism would contribute to the national effort to modernize socialism and "seek truth from facts" (LYZ, p. 62).

In October 1982, the matter of a list of 21 "important temples in the country" (*quanguo zhongyao gongguan*) was raised for the first time as well as the signing of a "contract"

(*gongyue*) promising to support the Party and the Socialist system, to undertake only legitimate religious activities (*zheng chang*) which obstruct neither the social order nor production -- not to require donations from the faithful [to rebuild temples] and not to use religion to act in any way illegally" (LYZ, p. 64). The executive committee meeting in December 1984, invited the members of the Association "to do in depth research on the present situation of local Daoism" (LYZ, p. 65) which was a veiled way of saying that the situation was changing very rapidly and that the facts had gone beyond the rhetoric. Clearly, there was an urgent need to deal with the issue of the "independently practicing" Daoists as well as with the question of the relationship between Daoism and other traditional religious practices which had resurfaced.

Only fifty-two delegates participated at the Third Congress in 1980. At the Fourth Congress, which took place from 8-17 September 1986, the numbers were back to what they were before the Cultural Revolution and the government expressed satisfaction with the changes that had taken place in Daoism. In fact, on 17 September, the ninety-seven delegates were invited to the Great Hall of the People to hear Xi Zhongxun, a member of the Politburo, congratulate them on the work accomplished and express the wish that the Daoists would make "an even greater contribution to the preservation and development of the illustrious cultural heritage of our dear country": as well as to "the realization of the One Country/Two Systems and the peaceful unification of our country" (LYZ, p. 68). Relations between the Government and the Daoist Association were pretty rosy.

At the beginning of Spring, 1987, the Baiyun Guan of Beijing once again celebrated its popular festival (*miaohui*). The *Zhongguo daojiao*, a publication for the general public, replaced the *Daoxie huikou*, which had been for private circulation only (*nei bu*), and a group of five Daoists made an official visit to Hong Kong. The following year, other members of the Association were authorized to visit Toronto to discuss "Daoist philosophy and qigong" (LYZ, p.69). In the same year Daoist leaders announced a plan for setting parameters for Daoist temples in view of "reforming the popular practices of the past" and "continuing the process of normalizing religious activities" (LYZ, p.70). At the meeting of the executive committee of the



Association in November 1988, two "sensitive" matters were broached for the first time. "In the villages, at the present time, many Zhengyi masters have no place to conduct their religious activities, which consequently, cannot be carried out normally. We must do some in-depth research on the Zhengyi sect in the countryside, in order to understand the actual situation and, after studying the results of our inquiry, offer solutions to the problem. We must also study the question of the transmission of Quanzhen (*Chuanjie*) regulations and make concrete proposals regarding these" (ZGDJ 1989.2, p. 9). In fact, for the Party to permit this ritual of transmission to take place at all was tantamount to admitting that religion was not about to disappear soon; to discuss the Zhengyi matter was to open Pandora's box of "traditional' religious practices.

After some discussion, a committee was set up to prepare the ritual of Quanzhen initiation--the first since 1949. This ritual, which previously lasted one hundred days, was celebrated in 20 days in November 1989. Among the seventy-five Daoists initiated, 40% were women (ZGDJ 1990.2, p.4). The first article in the 1990 February issue of the Daoist Review was an editorial which, after explaining the binding and highly ethical character of the proscribed Quanzhen, observed that no Daoist had taken part in the "counter-revolutionary riots" of the preceding year. "We only fear the return of trouble, an unstable society and damage to the people's economy" (p.4). Actually, in the 1989 autumn issue, the editors expressed their "firm support for the measures taken during the counter-revolutionary riots in the capital" (ZGDJ 1989.3, p. 3).

In June 1990, a meeting was held in Hangzhou to discuss what now had become the main concern of the Daoist Association: "How to bring into line all independently practicing Daoists" (LYZ, p.72). More specifically, the Daoists at the meeting discussed the following issues: how to distinguish Zhengyi Daoism from feudal superstition? from Buddhism [!]? - from popular religion? (ZGDJ 1990.4, p. 3). In October 1991 the Zengyi ritual, "the transmission of registers" (*shoula*) was celebrated for the first time since 1946, and not in Sichuan as in 1946, but in Longhu Shan in Jiangxi. Thirty-six Daoists from Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia were initiated. At the beginning of March 1992, during the Fifth Congress of the Daoist Association, the 115 delegates, of whom twenty were Zengyi

Daoist, voted in a text containing a "plan to bring the independently practicing Zhengyi masters in line with mainstream Daoism".

This document began by defining Zhengyi Daoism and declaring as legitimate all Daoists who uphold the Party and the Socialist system, who have been the disciple of a master and who know how to celebrate the Jiao rituals. The Daoists who meet these criteria were to obtain a certificate and proceed to open up "places for Daoist activities". All Jiao and funeral rites performed in a place approved and carried out by a certified Daoist are "legitimate religious activity". The regulation even permits Daoists, "according to tradition" to go to the homes of the faithful to carry out funeral rites. However, the "inspired" writing (*fuluan*), the mediums (*tiaoshen*), fortune telling (*suanming*), phrenology (*kanxiang*), the use of divining rods (*qiuqian*), exorcism (*gangui*), geomancy (*kan fengshui*) "and all other superstitious and feudal activities which are injurious to the physical or mental health of the popular masses must be proscribed" (ZGDJ 1992. 4. 6-7).

This document is actually very subtle, and from the Daoist point of view, very liberal. It fails to address, however, the whole problem of traditional religious practices. If these have never been a constitutive part of Daoism or Buddhism, they have, nonetheless, for centuries been allowed just as much in the temples of both these religions as they have been in the temples of "popular religion".

But, on the whole, the document represents a big step toward the realization of freedom for the Daoist cult. The fact that this problem, which in 1985--even in 1990--came under the Public Security Bureau, could now, under the vigilant eye of the National Religious Affairs Bureau, be regulated by the Daoists themselves, reflects the liberalization of the regime. The return on the scene of Zhengyi Daoism was, moreover, legitimized by the election of one of the vice-presidents of the Daoist Association, Chen Liansheng of Shanghai who, during the Cultural Revolution, had been "dragged through the streets (*youjie*) and who had seen all his manuscripts burned...

Almost all the statistics on the Daoist Zhengyi given above have, since 1992, been published in the *Zhongguo daojiao*. The one exception is Shanghai, which, as early as 1989, announced that there were approximately one thousand Daoist Zhengyi in

the municipal region, of which about one hundred were in the city itself. The same 1992 article also states that beginning in 1983, the leaders in Shanghai had begun to open up temples in various districts of the municipality "in order to resolve the problem of the Zhengyi Daoists and the faithful who had no place to celebrate their rituals" (ZGDJ 1989. 4, p. 5-6). It was Shanghai again that recently insisted on the rights of the Zhengyi masters to celebrate their rituals .... and which recalled that the issue of the ritual of the "transmission of registers" had still not yet been resolved (ZGDJ 1994. 1, p. 7-8).

On the national level, the outflow of statistics based on research begun in 1992, has to some extent, been taken from lead articles edited by Daoists or scholars. Among these is Zhang Jiyu who belongs to the family of Celestial Masters and who holds the office of secretary of the national association. In 1990 he published an article on the history of the Zhengyi registers (ZGDJ 1990. 1, p. 26-33). On the equally sensitive subject of "talismans" and incantations (ZGDJ 1991. 3, p. 22-27), Li Yuanguo, a researcher of international repute from the Academy of Social Sciences of Sichuan, wrote an article stressing the relationship between these two, so often accused of being superstitious practices, and the *qiqong* which is both popular and approved by the government.

Two remarkable things happen along with this justification of the "old": the sudden increase in the number of provincial or local Daoist associations and the development of Daoist institutions for charitable works. In February 1991, for example, the Daoist Association of Wenzhou created a "foundation for public service affairs" (ZGDJ 1992. 2, p. 13); since then they have disbursed as much as 780,000 *renminbi* (ZGDJ 1993. 3, p. 19)! In 1991, the district of Leqing alone (Wenzhou) collected 230,000 *renminbi* and gave a good part of it to the provinces of Jiangsu and Anhui devastated by catastrophic floods. From 17-26 September 1993 the festival of *Luotian dajiao* (the great sacrifice to the whole of Heaven) was celebrated at the Baiyun Guan in Beijing. Thanks to the participation of the Daoists who came from Taiwan, Hong Kong and elsewhere, this festival yielded one million *renminbi* which, during a ceremony held on the morning of 25 September in the Great Hall of the People, was given to *Operation Hope (xiwang gongcheng)*, a foundation which enables peasant children to go to school (ZGDJ

1993. 4, p. 8).

Daoist associations on the provincial or lower levels now number more than 80 (LYZ, p. 77-94), and since 1990, the number continues to increase. Among the 10 provincial or municipal associations, only one (Liaoning) dates back to 1984, two (Shanghai and Gansu) date from 1985, two others (Shaanxi and Hunan) from 1986 and one (Henan) from 1987; and in 1991, three others (Jiangsu, Anhui, and Hubei) have organized preparation committees. Since then, associations have been set up in Guangdong, in December 1992, (China Study Journal, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1993), and Shandong (also in December 1992; it took seven years to bring this about [ZGDJ 1993. 2, p. 4]), in Sichuan, 1993; the association had been formed in 1962 but it took thirty years to re-establish it (ZGDJ 1993. 3, p. 31); the same is true for Jiangsu and Hubei, also in 1993 (ZGDJ 1993. 3, p. 31; ZGDJ 1994. 1, p. 6). A number of provinces, however, still do not have a Daoist association.

### *The Return of Repression*

Daoism has never, since 1949, been so well off as it is today, but what about the traditional practices which remain proscribed? First we must say that police repression of these practices varies greatly. Different forms of divination, even if they are considered "backwards" and "shameful" by some, don't inconvenience anyone and so have quickly resurfaced. Geomancy is also practiced out in the open in the Chinese countryside. These types of practices are not likely to obstruct the public order.

On the other hand, mediums and ouija boards, especially this last one--because of the central role it plays in the sects--remain not only forbidden, but are actually suppressed. For the rest, the Daoists and the government cooperate together. It is in the interest of the Daoists to separate themselves completely from the sects, which was done, for example, in an article published in *Zhongguo daojiao* in 1989 under the title, "A Distinction Must Be Made between Daoism and Secret Religions". Strangely enough, the author demonstrates rather "that almost all secret sects are closely related to Daoism. This is the reason," he concludes, "that we must analyze the differences

between Daoism and the many sects...we must, especially now, when we want to implement the policy of freedom of religion in depth, carefully distinguish between the legitimate activities of approved religions and superstitious activities of the sects" (ZGDJ 1989. 4, p. 19).

Another article which appeared in the Daoist review tells how, after setting up a Daoist association in 1988 in the district of Mei in Shaanxi, the grand master Wang Xingli worked, "together with the religious authorities of the district and the cadres of the townships, to eliminate the control exercised by some sects (*huidaomen*) over the festivals of the five temples and to forbid the activities of the sects and feudal superstition in the [eighteen] open Daoist temples." In 1991, through his "persuasive pedagogy" among the sects and mediums (*wupo shenhan*), he convinced a certain Hu Quanfa to bring the list of the names of some forty persons, as well as their instruments and their ritual books, to the Public Security Bureau. Hu "repented, gave up his participation in the counter-revolutionary sect and converted to Daoism" (ZGDJ 1993. 3, p. 21)!

The "method designed to set parameters around the Daoist temples" of the province of Shaanxi, which dates from June 1987, mentions explicitly that is it "forbidden to deal in mediums (*tiaoshen*), exorcism (*gangui*)...and other feudal superstitions in the temple. It is strictly forbidden to the *shenhan wupo* and the sects to pursue activities inside the temple which mislead the people, such as the invitation to the gods, the descent of immortals and the cure of illnesses and expulsion of demons. No one must use Daoism to enact practices that trouble the mind of the people and upset the social order such as 'conjuring up the spirit of the dead' or 'transmitting their messages from dreams'. Those who after education do not reform and whose case is particularly serious must be sent to the Public Security Bureau" (ZGDJ 1988. 2, p. 6).

This is somewhat like John Calvin who, in the preface to his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, sought to distinguish between "Protestants" and "Anabaptists", the one being good and loyal citizens and the other a public menace. Daoists must, in the same way, more clearly than ever before, differentiate the boundaries of their "religion" from "feudal superstitions" or "sects". The latter are the basis for either shame or fear--shame because these ancient and popular practices do not

correspond to the idea that the elite have of modernity, and fear, in so much as these movements, which can be describe as "messianic", have for some two thousand years been at the origins of political rebellions.

This is why a document drawn up in 1985 by the Ministry of Public Security denounces the "constant increase throughout the country of cases" of sabotage by "sects and reactionary societies". The document maintains that between 1981 and 1983, public order was disturbed in all the provinces except Tibet (!), but especially in the provinces of Henan, Shaanxi, Sichuan and Yunnan (Robin Munro 1989, p. 49-50). The text mentions especially the famous Yiguan Dao sect (the Way of Unification, recently legalized in Taiwan) which allegedly was the source of one third of the forty-four cases of disturbances registered in nineteen provinces or municipalities during 1983. The article in *Zhongguo daojiao* quoted above also treats of the Xiantian Dao (the Way of the Inner Heaven), the Hongsan Jiao (the Teaching of the Three Red [the article in *Zhongguo daojiao* cited above deals with these three sects...]) and many others with exotic names but with characteristics well known to specialists in "popular religion": syncretism (*sanjiao heyi*), vegetarianism, proselytism, messianic eschatology, inspired scriptures, rites of initiation, of recitation and of confession, temple feasts...

These feasts or festivals are sometimes presided over by Daoists (Munro p. 70). Daoist practices of exorcist healings also make their reappearance in this context (p. 71). Certain sects have Party cadres among their members (p. 54-55). Others are manipulated by the Kuomintang, such as Zhenkong Jiao (the Teaching of True Emptiness) which, after having been eradicated in China, has continued to flourish in the overseas Chinese communities and which, since 1978 has tried to get a foothold in Jiangxi: "The sect openly assembles the crowds in order to render worship to Dao and to offer sacrifices to the Patriarch" who must come again to save the world ( p. 81-82). In Zhejiang, since 1980, the Huangji Jiao (the Teaching of the Sovereign Pinnacle) has restored or constructed twenty-three temples and in Hubei has recopied and distributed lost and found books. The sectarians seek to cover all these illegal activities by "raising the banner of religious liberty" (p.77).

Another article in the collection edited by Robin Munro is

entitled "The Rise and Fall of the Emperor Zheng Min: The Case the Zishen Guo" (p. 37), tells the story of a certain Li Guangchang, alias Zheng Min, of the same district of Cangnan (Wenzhou, Zhejiang) where there are many "independently practicing" Daoists. With the help of others, apparently as stupid as himself, he "founded" the Country of Zishen - with himself as its emperor. He recruited "bureaucrats" and "soldiers" first from Fujian, then from Shanxi, Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Guangdong. Energized by mediumistic seances, the rumor mill went wild: "The emperor of the Country of Zishen soon will ascend his throne." The country of Zishen will emerge with an emperor named Li" (as in the best messianic Daoist traditions of the IV-VI centuries!); "The country of Zishen has nuclear arms and, at the given moment will start a world war and bring about a change of dynasty. The troops of Heaven will come to our help" (p. 43-44). Charms "to protect individuals" (*hushen fu*) were distributed among the members, and the peasants sold their belongings to assure a good place for themselves in the new dynasty. In 1984, finally, the year *jiazi*--they, just like their Yellow Turban predecessors in the year 184 A.D.--decided to attack. Having taken the township of Shuiqian in the district of Ninghua by storm, they gathered in the Yunyin temple in the neighboring district of Mingxi. But the Public Security Bureau surrounded the temple and captured all the leaders except Li Guangchang, who was arrested two months later in the province of Shandong.

It is difficult to know how to read a report of this kind: is this story true or a police fabrication? What I do know is that when I went through the region of Sanming in 1989, in which Ninghua and Mingxi are located, the Daoists of this region had a great deal more difficulty with the authorities than their colleagues in the neighboring region of Longyan. In Longyan, I was able to attend village feasts presided over by Daoists in many districts; in Sanming, I met only frightened Daoists who did not even dare talk to me. In the district of Jianning, for example, a Daoist master, that I managed to find only with great difficulty, finally agreed to give me a fifteen minute secret interview, during which he explained that he had been arrested in the fall of 1988 while he was "celebrating the long life ritual" (*zhushou*) in the house of one of the faithful. He and all the other participants had paid a fine of two hundred *yuan* and had

been strictly forbidden from practicing "feudal superstition". "Since then," he concluded, "no one dares to celebrate any ritual."

Two other hereditary masters that I met from the same region, one from the Ninghua district; the other from the city of Yong'an, hastened to distance themselves from "practitioners of feudal superstition which invite the gods and chase away the evil spirits." One thought of himself as a Buddhist; the other, a Daoist, but they shared the same fear of having their practices classified as "superstitions" and so attract the attention of the Public Security Bureau. Further north, in the district of Zhenghe, a Daoist confided to me that the funeral ritual that he was celebrating that very night in the house of one of the faithful was the first of its kind in the city since the Cultural Revolution.

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*In fact, the constantly changing political climate heavily influences the degree of liberty accorded to the people to celebrate their religious festivals.*

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All those who have had the opportunity to do research in Daoism in China between 1985-1990, have met with similar complex and constantly changing situations. Ken Dean movingly describes the anniversary of the god Qingshui Zushi (the ancestral master of Clear Water) celebrated in 1986 in Anxi (Quanzhou, Fujian). The first night two Daoists were arrested at the very moment they were preparing to conduct the opening ritual; a third Daoist celebrated the ritual in a quasi-clandestine manner at three o'clock in the morning. Three other participants were arrested the following day, but nothing seemed to stop the people from going on with the festival. For three days, they carried the statue of their holy patron from village to village without the intervention of the police. In 1987, on the other hand, in spite of the participation of Overseas Chinese, the police intervened several times to prevent the procession from taking place--perhaps, Dean suggests, because of the political climate created by the then recent dismissal of Hu Yaobang (Dean 1993, 101-113).

In fact, the constantly changing political climate heavily influences the degree of liberty accorded to the people to cele-



brate their religious festivals. Between April and September 1989, for example, I made three successive visits to Jiufeng (Pinghe, Zhangzhou, Fujian). These visits allowed me to observe three different kinds of relationships between the authorities and villagers. At the beginning of April, the villagers were feverishly preparing for the mid-autumn festival in honor of the divinity of the city (Chenghuang Laoye). The villagers planned, as they had already done in 1985, to invite master Wang Shaolin, of Longhu Shan to Jiangxi, and they suggested that I also come back to assist at the feast. This was the day I left China and also the very day that Hu Yaobang died.

When I returned to Jiufeng three months later, the organizers brought me to see the Secretary of the local Party who gave me permission to attend the festival and, at the request of the villagers, I also obtained the approval of the United Front Bureau of the district (this bureau replaces the Religious Affairs Bureau when none exists in a given area). In September 1989, when I returned to assist at the festival, the matter no longer came under the United Front but under the Public Security Bureau and Wang Shaolin was asked to return home to Longhu Shan. The local Daoists and the leaders of the community were arrested and required to pay fines. The police released the leader of the community only two weeks later and allowed nothing more than a very truncated celebration of the festival.

The next year, the campaign against the "Six ills"--or feudal superstitions--was in full swing and the streets of Xiamen were filled with big posters explaining to the people why *Pudu*, the ritual to save the souls of those who had suffered a tragic death, a very popular festival in the region of Minnan--was forbidden: it had been organized by people of questionable character looking for profit; it was a waste of money; it suggested belief in the existence of spirits; it disturbed the public order.... In the neighboring countryside, however, the ritual took place nonetheless. Barely a year after Tiananmen, the whole of China was once again bent on economic success and police vigilance towards traditional practices took on a softer line approach. In 1990, at least in the coastal areas, the Christian groups who were receiving illegal financial assistance from abroad were of greater concern to the police than "feudal superstition".

## Conclusion

Since 1990, I have gone back each year to these places for periods of from six weeks to three months and each successive

trip has given me the impression that the authorities are taking a softer line approach towards traditional religious practices. This is not to say, however, that they are everywhere tolerated, far from it; in fact someone told me recently that in the region of Shaoguan (Guangdong) temple festivals were more or less all forbidden, but traditional religious practices now do seem to be gaining ground. Also temples which are neither Daoist nor Buddhist but "popular" are constantly being rebuilt in increasing numbers and a growing number of local cadres seem to have lost their anti-superstitions stance.

If my impression is correct, that attitude signals a radical change in the situation; not only since 1949 but since the beginning of the century, and indeed, the last two thousand years. In fact, Confucian China, for the last two thousand years has periodically destroyed all so-called popular religion temples (*minjian zongjiao*). This devastation became more and more systematic around 1911, and then in 1919 (cf. Duara). It reached its paroxysm during the so-called Cultural Revolution--that is during the period when China's elite sought to give their country a modern image but when China remained hopelessly feudal. It is only since 1978 and especially since 1985, when China really began to modernize, that a more liberal attitude towards popular cults began to develop. In recent years, there has been a real tidal wave of conferences and books on traditional practices. In 1992, a total of one thousand four hundred pages were published on "The History of Popular Religions in China" (*Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi*). The first chapter deals with "Popular Daoism at the end of the Han Period".

Chinese researchers, sometimes still needing to disguise their works, use harmless sounding labels: it is not a conference on "exorcism" but on the "Nuo Theatre", not books that deal with "religion" but with "popular practices" (*minsu*, a term that ties in with the traditional *fengsu* of the Confucianists). A book, published following a conference on temple festivals, emphasized the element of superstition in these celebrations. The authors treat the subject academically, but nonetheless, they manage to make an objective report of an amazing custom: in the hills and the caves behind the temple dedicated to Duke of Zhou in the district of Qishan in Shaanxi, women without children, during the feast of the third moon, come to spend the night with men they do not even know (Liu Hongqi 1992, p. 225)!

In short, there seems to have been some kind of agreed upon change: from now on Chinese of Han origin as well as "ethnic minorities" have the right to live according to their ways and local customs. At least this is on the books, but it is also more and more the case in the real world. In China this new agreement seems only logical within the context of post Tiananmen and the disappearance of Communism in Europe. Western sanctions on the one hand, and the Chinese realization of the important role played by religions in the fall of Communist regimes, on the other, and finally the Westerners' rush for Chinese gold, have brought about a consensus on the necessity to "build socialism with Chinese characteristics". And so, as expressed in the first line of a preface to a book published in 1993 on "The Culture of Fujian" (*Fujian wenhua*), "China, which seeks to develop a socialism with Chinese characteristics, must also develop a socialist culture with Chinese characteristics". Then, "this culture," the author continues, "if it must, of necessity, adopt what is best in foreign cultures, must do so by taking as its fundamental principal the development of our own renowned culture. If we fail to take this as our fundamental principle, we will be unable to create a new culture: this is one rule that cannot be changed" (Xu, p.1).

Even in those places where Chinese culture is already fully modernized--Taiwan, Hong Kong and among the Overseas Chinese, we still encounter, as in the West, a really modern fascination with those social structures, rites and myths of bygone days which still exist among us.

China has entered a time of cultural readaptation.

## Postscript

My visit to Shanghai in mid-October 1994, confirmed for me that the trends I have suggested are indeed correct. First, I would like to mention two successive meetings: the first was held in Shanghai in March 1994, and the second in October, in Beijing. These meetings led to the decision to proceed with the Zhengyi rite of initiation in Longhu Shan at the end of October. The Zhengyi "problem" seems to be heading toward a definitive resolution. Second, and perhaps more important, the government has agreed to give back the temple of the god of the city

(Chenghuang Miao) of Shanghai to the Daoists. This represents an important precedent. Up until 1911, there was a national network of these temples, and the cult of this god, even while lacking the support of government representatives, was one of the high spots of popular religion. To reopen a Chenghuang Miao, especially a temple of the god of the City as famous as the one in Shanghai, and which, to boot, is located in the historic heart of this city, which is clearly in process of modernization, is not only to renew the link with popular traditions but also to prepare for a modernity "with Chinese characteristics".

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