

How Now Tao?

Elusive to define but pervasive in its influence, Taoism is on the rise again in modern China.

By Yenni Kwok



Louguan Temple, near Xian

Nestled on a leafy slope of Zhongnan Mountain, Louguan Temple is a revered place for Taoists. Legend has it that the sage Laozi was last seen here, stopping briefly to leave his last teaching, the Daodejing, before riding on an ox towards the sunset, never to be seen again.

“His five thousands words are so concise, but the connotations are most profound,” historian Sima Qian wrote. “His Tao is of the past, yet it is still a guide for today.”

More than two millennia after the enigmatic figure was said to have lived, Beijing has given its blessing to a seven-day forum dedicated to the ancient book. Hundreds of Taoists priests, scholars and adherents from Greater China and beyond descended onto the temple, some 70 kilometres from Xian, to take part in the “International Forum on the Daodejing”. The event, which opened on April 21 in Xian and will conclude on April 27 in Hong Kong, has an ambitious theme: “Constructing a harmonious world through the Dao.”

As China’s economic might keeps growing, it faces rising social

discontent, ranging from ecological problems to the widening income gap. It is little surprise that the leaders of the Communist Party have resorted to what Marx has called the opium of the masses – religion – in an apparent bid to fill the spiritual void and calm the populace.

“The Daodejing has become a very important book,” says Yeung Hom-bun, secretary-general of the Hong Kong Taoist Association, one of the organizers. “It has a philosophical insight that has attracted not only Taoists but also those in business and government.”

It is difficult to calculate how many Taoists there are in mainland China, though one estimate puts the number to as high as 400 million. Taoist rituals are also popular among the Chinese in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and Southeast Asia.

The Daodejing, roughly translated as the Classic of the Way and its Virtue, has long drawn interests from overseas. In the early 1980s and 1990s, US writer Benjamin Hoff’s interpretations of Taoism, “The Tao of Pooh” and “The Te of Piglet”, were on the bestsellers’ list for about a year, successfully bringing the Chinese philosophy to mainstream America. (Hoff is said to be a Taoist, practicing Taoist meditation and taichi).

At other times, the Daodejing sounds like a Beatnik poetry, as in Thomas Meyer’s translation from 2005. The stream of translations keeps flowing, it is said that the Daodejing is the second most translated book in the world after the Bible.

But only recently has Taoism regained its high-profile in its country of origin, partly because China felt the need to claim its heritage after experiencing a breakneck speed of modernization. “Along with Confucianism, Taoism is considered to be the essence of Chineseness,” says Chad Hansen, chair professor of Chinese philosophy at the University of Hong Kong who has been translating the classic Taoist book.

Yet, in contrast to Confucianism, he argues, Taoism is less rigid, more open and able to accommodate differences in views and opinions that have emerged today. “Taoism is like a big tent,” quips Hansen, author of “A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought.”

Taoist basic tenets, which focus on non-action (wu-wei), humanism and relativism, may also provide some guidance in a time of growing social

pains and chronic environmental problems. Many passages of the Daodejing emphasize balance, peace, spontaneity and the strength of softness. It advocates harmony with both the world and the environment. “Being one with nature, the sage is in accord with the Tao,” the book says.

Yet the Daodejing also contains some brutal remarks. Chapter three, for instance, has advice that would comfort a one-party state like China: “... in governing the people, the sage empties their minds, fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones. He always keeps them innocent of knowledge and free from desire, and ensures that the clever never dare to act.”

“On first look, this may sound like Nazi Germany,” says Hansen. “But you should not read it literally. I think the chapter is being rhetorical, teaching that the fundamental value is not about status and style. If you want to focus on basic needs, you would avoid competition.”

Of the five religions recognised by Beijing, Taoism is the only one indigenous to China yet it is also the most elusive. The religious Taoism consists of different teachings and myriad practices, from cosmology, mysticism, and alchemy to rites and rituals.

There are different views on what should constitute the highest Taoist pantheon, with different regions and areas worshiping different deities.

The people on the south coast, for example, venerate Tin Hau, the goddess of the Sea, while the dragon cult – the mythical animal is associated with controlling the rain and water – began among peasant communities in central China.

Then, there are adherents to the philosophical aspect of Taoism, subscribing to the ideas espoused in the Daodejing and the writings of Zhuangzi, another revered patriarch of Taoist philosophy.

For Yeung, the vague concept of Taoism is an advantage. “You are free to choose,” he says. “You can look at it as a philosophy, but if you think it is a religion, go ahead. You can have it your own way.”

The elusive character, according to Hansen, simply confirms the concept of the Tao (the Way). “After all,” he says, quoting the Daodejing, “the Tao that can be spoken of is not the constant Tao.”

The article was published in Asia Sentinel (www.asiasentinel.com), 27 April 2007.