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Preface

When giving lectures at Beijing Normal University in July 2017, I also went to Xi'an to explore various Daoist and historical sites. Taking the train between the two cities (about 4-5 hours each way) and walking about in the searing heat, I observed continued unbridled construction of huge, megalithic high-rise complexes in vast stretches of the country, complete with the untrammeled despoiling of nature and intensification of pollution, as well as the ever increasing vibrancy of the Chinese people, glued to their cell phones and actively connected online, always moving about and hustling for yet another deal.

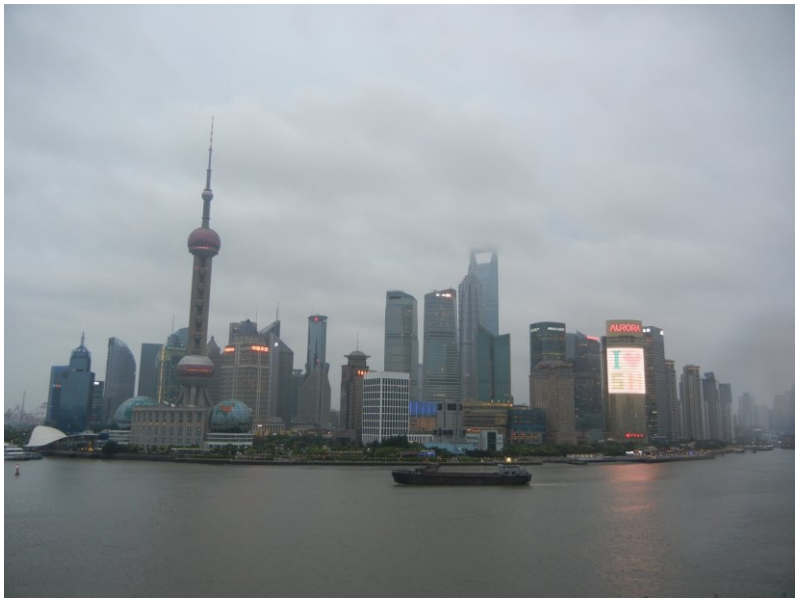
At the same time, using the internet without a VPN and talking to colleagues at the university, I was struck by the massive increase in repressive measures by the state, the tightening of the intellectual control in both content and expression, the fluctuating inaccessibility of information sources that used to be perfectly fine. What, I asked myself, is going on here? Where stands China today and where is it headed from here? And what, in all of this, is the role and place of Daoism?

After returning home, I dove into an intensive exploration, reading anything and everything I could lay my hands on regarding the politics, economics, culture, and religion of China today, focusing particularly on works published in the last two years. I have come to see the Chinese situation in a new and rather disturbing light and am now ready to share my observations in the following sixty vignettes.

Part 1

Governance

1. The China Experiment



Since its founding in 1949, the People's Republic of China has been engaged in the most immense and radical social experiment on the planet: the remaking of an entire civilization, culture, and society in the direction of a utopian, socialist, and modern ideal.

It has done so through a series of campaigns and organized structural changes, beginning in the 1950s with the Land Reform that redistributed all privately owned land, taking it away from established landowners, nationalizing it, then handing it over to poor peasants to farm. By the middle of the decade, pushing to eradicate private ownership, wipe out commercial activities, suppress capitalist thought, and turn all citizens into members of the state, the government enforced radical collectivization, where everyone was assigned to a work unit (*danwei* 单位) and, continuing imperial policy, each family had to obtain a local household registration (*hukou* 户口). All property and all activities became communal, to the point where people's houses did no longer have kitchens as everyone ate in collective dining rooms, or spaces for children since all infants were raised in communal creches.

The Great Leap Forward in 1958 enhanced this development through centrally assigned farming directives, combined with a nationwide effort to produce steel from all kinds of metals, including farm implements, in backyard furnaces. The result was a massive crop failure that led to three years of famine, during which nearly 45 million people died.

The death toll increased during the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 when Mao Zedong 毛泽东 called upon young people, the Red Guards, to destroy everything old—culture, habits, artifacts, even people. Millions of city dwellers were sent into the countryside to learn from the peasants, while innumerable cultural treasures were defaced or destroyed. It ended with Mao's death in 1976.

The Four Modernizations under Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, starting in 1978 with a focus on agriculture, industry, defense and science, embodied a more modern vision of socialist China. Being rich was no longer frowned upon nor were private initiative or individual differences. Opening China to Western investments, first in several Special Economic Zones on the southeastern seaboard, Deng guided it to become the workshop of the world and a major export power. Instituting the one-child policy in 1980, he engineered new family structures and limited population growth. As a result, the Chinese economy tripled over the next thirty years, and a third of its now 1.3 billion people rose into the middle class.

Socialism with Chinese characteristics, as it has evolved since then—interrupted by a period of four more repressive years after a pro-democracy movement was violently suppressed in June 1989—envisions a modern, industrialized, urbanized society made up of well-educated, healthy, and prosperous people who work and live together in harmony and spread peace and abundance. Hu Jintao 胡锦涛, who led China from 2002-2012, formulated it in terms of Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces:

> Love the country; do it no harm.
> Serve the people; never betray them.
> Follow science; discard ignorance.
> Be diligent; not indolent.
> Be united, help each other;
> Make no gains at others' expense.
> Be honest and trustworthy;
> Do not sacrifice ethics for profit.
> Be disciplined and law-abiding;
> Never be chaotic and lawless.
> Live plainly, work hard;
> Do not wallow in luxuries and pleasures.

His successor, the current leader Xi Jinping 习近平, while working hard to extirpate corruption in government and industry, describes it in terms of the China Dream (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦), similarly endorsing the ideal of social justice and overarching harmony. This plays out internationally through the One Belt, One Road (*yidai yilu* 一带一路) initiative that supports major infrastructure projects in developing countries, opening them to commerce while enhancing Chinese influence while securing raw materials.

Internally, Xi Jinping's socialism manifests in an enhanced public surveillance network called the Social Credit System (SCS). Currently tested in various cities, it is scheduled to become mandatory nationwide in 2020. It uses digital technology to monitor people's daily activities: where and with whom they live; what they buy in stores and online; where they go and how they get there; how much debt they have; whether they pay their bills on time; who their friends are and how they interact with them; what they watch on TV; what kinds of websites they visit; and so on.

Based on close observation, CSC classifies behavior according to four distinct categories: honesty in government affairs, commercial integrity, social integrity, and judicial credibility. Government-sponsored companies that combine financial and internet know-how are charged with gathering and evaluating all these data. Eventually they will assign a credit rating of up to 1000 points to each and every member of Chinese society, placing each individual in one of four ranks

The envisioned ideal is, as the original directive states, to "forge a public opinion environment where keeping trust is glorious," where people are being shamed into doing the right thing. To do so, all scores are made public, allowing friends, neighbors, and coworkers to know exactly what each one is doing and how trustworthy they are. The ranking, then, combined with public opinion, in effect creates a new caste system.

People with a low rating would find their lives greatly complicated, making interaction with government offices, health care centers, and other agencies slow and laborious. They would not be able to get passports to travel, purchase airline or high-speed train tickets, stay in posh hotels, or purchase real estate. Even worse, their children would be barred from even applying to better-level schools.

People with a high score, on the other hand, would be the new privileged class, getting the red-carpet treatment wherever they go. For example, a score of 600 or more would allow them to take out an easy loan for shopping, rent a car without a deposit, receive faster check-in at hotels, and get VIP treatment at airports and railway stations. Businesses, too, would be subject to the System, a good score based on government approval securing government support, which then translates into lower tax rates, easier credit, and better investment opportunities. Thus, the great China experiment continues, as always led by the Chinese Communist Party.

YouTube: "Mosaic: The China Dream"

"Social Credit Score"

Read: Benson, Linda. 2016. *China since 1949*. London: Routledge.

Pillsbury, Michael. 2015. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

2. The Party




The driving force behind the great China experiment is the Chinese Communist Party, founded with Soviet help in 1927 and rising to prominence during the anti-Japanese war, when its members cooperated with the peasants rather than suppressing and exploiting them as the Nationalists did. After the Japanese withdrew in 1945, the Communists gained control in a bloody civil war and founded the People's Republic in 1949.

Closely following the Leninist and Stalinist model, the Party under Mao developed into the centrally ruled, authoritarian organization that it is today, with 85 million members or one in every fifteen citizens. The core of power lies with the Party Secretary, selected among nine members of the Standing Committee of the 25-member Politburo. It in turn sits at the center of a vast and largely secret system, controlling both the military and civil administration through Party committees on all five levels of government—provinces, cities, counties, townships, and villages.

The Party is the legislative arm of the Chinese government, setting policies, making all rules, and creating all laws. The government proper is its executive, also entirely dependent on the Party. The Party staffs all ministries and agencies through an elaborate and opaque appointments system; it instructs them on policy through behind-the-scenes committees; and guides their political posture and public statements through the propaganda network. The officials working in public institutions are trained, and retrained at regular intervals, through the Party's extensive nationwide network of 2,800 schools, now called Civil Management Training Centers, before they are eligible for promotion.

The judiciary branch, too, is firmly in Party hands. All decisions and punishments meted out by the courts occur at the behest and direction of Party organs,

which ultimately control the judges directly and the lawyers indirectly through legal associations and licensing.

As well as sitting above state-owned enterprises and regulatory agencies, Party departments oversee key think-tanks, the courts, the media, approved religions, and other organizations as well as all universities and educational institutions. They also exert considerable influence on many private companies. To maintain power, moreover, the Party has eradicated political rivals, eliminated the autonomy of the courts and press, restricted religion and civil society, denigrated rival versions of nationhood, centralized political power, established extensive networks of security police, and dispatched dissidents to labor camps (MacGregor 2010, 15, xxii).

No other central party of a similar nature has survived this long—they were either destroyed through military intervention (as in Germany and Cambodia), collapsed into different forms of authoritarian government (as in Russia) or gave way to democratic institutions (as in Taiwan and the former East Bloc countries). The Chinese Communist Party, too, shows signs of an end-stage Leninist institution. Thus, most leading members have either property or citizenship abroad, ready to jump ship at a moment's notice.

To shore up its power and rally the people's support, the Party today engages in wide publicity campaigns and makes major efforts to curb corruption. As this succeeds and the economy flourishes, more people take pride in being Chinese, and nationalist sentiments grow. Still, protests are numerous, typically centering on real estate, health care, and pollution, and any number of incidents—natural disasters, terrorist acts, economic failure—can potentially set off cataclysmic changes.

Daoists participate in both ends of the spectrum, finding much to improve in the society while also supporting nationalism, especially as they see themselves as the major indigenous organized religion of the country.

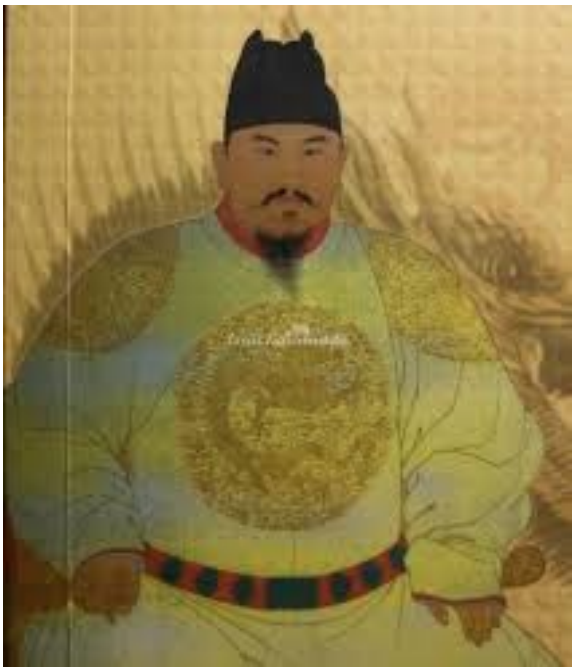
YouTube: "Explained: China's Communist Party"

Read: Li, Xiaobing, and Xiansheng Tian. 2017. *Urbanization and Party Survival in China: People vs. Power*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

McGregor, Richard. 2011. *The Party: 1.3 Billion People, 1 Secret Regime*. London: Penguin.

Shambaugh, David. 2016. *China's Future*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

3. Religious Control



Organized religions, with their power to mobilize large numbers of people for potentially rebellious activities, have long been suspect to the Chinese state. Thus, the first ruler of the Ming dynasty, Emperor Taizu (r. 1368–1399), himself catapulted into power by a religious rebellion, decreed a number of administrative measures of control. Most of these remained in place until the founding of the Republic of China in 1912 and serve as ancestors of religious control today.

For example, he made all religious affairs subject to approval and control by the Ministry of Rites. Within this institution, all members and activities were supervised by the Bureau of Daoist / Buddhist Registration, which had branch offices in each province, prefecture, and district. In this way, even the most remote religious activity occurring in the empire could be monitored and controlled by an arm of the central government.

Among other things, the registration offices were responsible for issuing and monitoring ordination certificates, official passports for monks and nuns, which they had to carry at all times. In addition, they were subject to the All-Knowing Register, an official list with the names of all practitioners who had ever spent any time in a monastery.

Only specially designated monasteries were allowed to hold ordinations, ceremonies were limited to once in three, five, or even ten years, and the number of monks and nuns was restricted to serve the government's needs. Private temples, owned and sponsored by local aristocrats, were severely curtailed and had to have an official stamp of approval. The overall effect of these measures was twofold: it reduced enthusiasm for the religious path among the population and it led to a high level of standardization among institutions and practitioners.

The modern equivalent of the Ministry of Rites is the Bureau of Religious Affairs. It acknowledges five religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism—defining religion along Western models rather than indigenous qualities and strictly limiting approved forms. For example, it does not accept the leadership position of the Pope, so that the official Chinese Catholic Church is separate from Rome. Only groups and organizations properly accredited can run places of worship and make use of their land, goods, and income. Whether a Buddhist monastery, Daoist temple, Muslim mosque, or Christian church, all are subject to state regulations—which they have to post in their reception area. Their inhabitants, moreover, are state employees who receive a monthly stipend from the government.

This limitation has resulted in the flourishing of large numbers of so-called underground churches or temples—of all denominations—which are monitored by the Ministry of State Security, aka the secret police, and for the most part left alone, with periodic bouts of harassment. The pervasive presence and much advanced state of internet technology impacts this in several ways. On the one hand, it makes surveillance and control easier for the state; on the other hand, instant messaging and other apps, like the ubiquitous WeChat, allow practitioners to be in constant contact and take evasive action as needed.

The heir of the Bureau of Registration today is the network of religious associations, counseling committees consisting of religious representatives, prominent lay followers, scholars, and local officials. They serve as the administrative link between the Bureau of Religious Affairs and the people on the ground. Just like in the Ming dynasty established in a hierarchical pattern that reaches throughout the entire country, these associations intensify the interference of the government in religious matters. Thus, for example, all Buddhist temples are controlled by the Chinese Buddhist Association with headquarters in the Guangjisi 广济寺 (Temple of Wide Salvation) in Beijing. Advanced practitioners are subject to its guidance as they train at the Buddhist Academy at the Fayuansi 法源寺 (Source of Dharma Temple) of the Chan school and the Yonghegong 雍和宫 (Palace of Peace and Harmony, i.e., Lama Temple) of the Tantric school.

YouTube: "Is China an Atheist Country?"

Read: Yang, Fenggang. 2012. *Religion in China Today: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. New York: Oxford University Press, chs. 4-5.

Taylor, Romeyn. 1973. "The Social Origins of the Ming Dynasty, 1351-1360." *Monumenta Serica* 22:1-78.

4. The Chinese Daoist Association

The Chinese Daoist Association (Zhongguo daojiao xiehui 中国道教协会) was founded in 1957 to serve as a forum for interaction with the state. Interrupted in its work during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when all religious activity was outlawed and the clergy had to return to the laity, it has since established branches in each province and district, created systematic registration of all monastics, founded several Daoist academies for advanced training, arranged for formal ordinations, and sponsored major rituals. Its recent leaders, Ren Farong 任法融 (b. 1936) and Li Guangfu 李光富 (b. 1955), have expanded its scope and moved toward wider international outreach.

Its organization, just like the Party, is strictly hierarchical. Beijing at the top has authority over the provincial branches, which in turn head the regional subdivisions in charge of county chapters. One does not have a choice in joining the Daoist Association: all monastics and Daoist masters are members by default as well as some lay councilmen. This was the main condition under which they could reinvest in religious institutions after the Cultural Revolution.

Additional participants include scholars of Daoism and representatives of relevant municipal services. Thus, all the principal actors of religious activity—clerics, and monastics, lay followers, scholars, and local officials—are under close supervision of the state, which watches their every move and to which they are accountable.

In Party-speak, the Chinese Daoist Association is, as Adeline Herrou translates, "patriotic religious organization that assists the government in its honorable and far-seeing religious policies, exhorts religious adepts to love the country and its religion while facilitating research on Daoist culture, harmonizing religious activities, organizing participation, and activating followers to serve the economic and cultural construction of the motherland" (2013, 92).

One way it controls the religion is through land management. Since all land belongs to the state and all religious properties were confiscated after 1949, negotiating the return and rebuilding of temples is often a long, drawn-out process that results in various levels of reconstruction and reorganization. Local committees keep a close eye on the reemerging religious community, always making sure that it remains in line with the framework set by the state.

In addition, the Association controls the appointment of religious leaders. Thus, the abbots, especially of larger monasteries are not elected among the brethren in-house but chosen by a council of monastics as well as state representatives in charge of the Daoist Association.

Another way of control is through publications that standardize terminology and approve schools and practices by listing them in the *Daojiao dacidian* 道教大辞典 (Great Dictionary of the Daoist Religion) first published in 1994, as well as in its official journal, called *Zhongguo daojiao* 中国道教 (Chinese Daoism). In addition, headquarters also publishes books for young monastics that are distributed widely through the temple network. They outline monastic rules and regulations together with approved and accepted ritual practices. A prominent example is Min Zhiting's 闵智亭 (1924-2004) *Daojiao yifan* 道教仪范 (Observances of the Daoist Religion; 1986). All local associations are similarly held to publish not only newsletters of their activities but also accounts of the state of their particular institutions and records of local import.

YouTube: "Proponents of Taoism Want to Bring It into the 21st Century"

Read: Herrou, Adeline. 2013. *A World of Their Own: Monastics and Their Community in Contemporary China*. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Three Pines Press.

5. The White Cloud Temple

The Chinese Daoist Association has its main headquarters at the Baiyun guan 白云观 (White Cloud Temple) in Beijing. Also called the First Temple under Heaven, it was founded in the Tang dynasty and came fully into its own under the Mongols, when Kublai Khan (r. 1260-1294) made Beijing the capital.

His grandfather Genghis Khan (1162-1227) summoned the Daoist leader and alchemist Qiu Chuji 邱处机, aka Changchun 长春 (1148-1227), to his Central Asian capital in 1220 and—despite the fact that Qiu did not have a handy elixir of immortality to offer—made him the chief of *all* religions of China. When Qiu settled in the Baiyun guan as his main residence in the capital, it became the seat of the state's overarching religious administration and has remained in this position ever since.

The temple is located about 2.5 miles west and slightly south of Tian'anmen Square in the city center. Like all religious and palatial edifices, it consists of a series of buildings laid out on a south-to-north axis and divided by various open courtyards. After entering the main gate and crossing a narrow stone bridge said to stop harmful winds, the first building honors the Numinous Officials (Lingguan 灵官), the guardian deities of the religion. Next, flanked by bell and drum towers, comes the sanctuary to the Jade Emperor (Yuhuang 玉皇), the head of the celestial administration.

Beyond this are three increasingly sacred halls, honoring Daoist commandments (*laolü* 老律), the patriarch Qiu Chuji, and the Three Pure Ones (Sanqing 三清), the gods of the three central Daoist heavens and their scriptures. They include the creator god Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning (Yuanshi tianzun 元始天尊), the revelatory deity God of the Dao (Daojun 道君), and the hands-on savior Highest Lord Lao (Taishang Laojun 太上老君). At the very back is an ordination platform, where novices receive precepts and scriptures. There are lovely murals and stone steles, including the original version of the famous *Neijing tu* 内经图 (Chart of Internal Passageways), a key document of internal alchemy (see #57 below).

While this makes up the central axis of the monastery, the torso of its body, its sides constitute the extremities. Traditionally that would be where residential and administrative quarters were located, together with bath houses, kitchen, and dining facilities. These are today in a side compound, not accessible to the public.

Instead the sides of the main body house further deities, including on the west the popular group of the good-fortune bringing Eight Immortals (*baxian* 八仙), their chief and master Lü Dongbin 吕洞宾, as well as the influential abbot Wang Kunyang 王崑陽, aka Changyue 长月 (1622-1680), who codified the priestly ranks and precepts in the early Qing dynasty.

On the east, moreover, we find a shrine dedicated to Hua Tuo 华佗 (d. 208), an early master of Chinese medicine best known as the creator of the popular qigong form Five Animals Frolic, together with several more elemental deities. They include thunder gods, the deity of fire, and the Perfect Warrior (Zhenwu 真武), the well-worshiped protector of the north and the state.

YouTube: "White Clouds Temple"

Read: Waley, Arthur. 1931. *The Travels of an Alchemist*. London: George Routledge & Sons.

Yoshioka, Yoshitoyo. 1979. "Taoist Monastic Life." In *Facets of Taoism*, edited by Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel, 220-52. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.