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Towards ICCS 2022

The Taoist Way Towards Togetherness

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SYNOPSIS

Taoists in Singapore have adapted their practice and outreach to stay relevant to the younger population. This is also to contribute to the resilience of the multi-racial society where social harmony and cohesion are key components for the nation's progress and success.

COMMENTARY

ALTHOUGH TAOIST practices were brought over to Singapore by Chinese immigrants in the 19th century, the first Taoist priests only came between the early to mid-20th century. The bilingual education system in Singapore that was implemented post-independence played an instrumental role in helping the younger generations of Taoists introduce Taoist teachings to the masses using the English language.

With the language barrier bridged, younger generations of Chinese Singaporeans could understand and appreciate what many of their forebears believed in and practised. This benefitted the Chinese community, and enabled Taoism to be understood by the other ethnic communities in the multi-racial city-state.

Taoism and Temples

With Taoism, other cognate Chinese cultural beliefs were also brought in. For instance, in the context of Singapore as a major seaport, Mazu worship was introduced by Chinese immigrants. Mazu is believed to be a tutelary deity of seafarers who ensures safe sea passages for her worshippers.

Mazu temples became familiar structures that reminded the Chinese immigrants of

their respective ancestral hometowns, drawing them to congregate at these sites of worship.

Temples eventually evolved to become community gathering places for the newer immigrants to seek job opportunities, find spouses, and establish social networks that allow them to ease into the Chinese community in Singapore.

Unlike in China where temples are historically manned by Taoist priests, almost all the temples in early Singapore were managed by an elected executive committee comprising key office bearers with management skills.

Genesis of Taoism in Singapore

The early Taoist priests came to Singapore from China's southern coastal provinces, and mostly from the Taoist Zhengyi Tradition. They were largely from the Cantonese, Hainanese and Hokkien dialect groups. The first united Taoist organisation was the San Ching Taoism Association formed in 1979.

The national census reported that the Taoist population in Singapore fell significantly in the 1980s. Therefore in 1989, the San Ching Taoism Association rallied 79 temples to meet and discuss how to unite the community and promote Taoism. This led to the establishment of the Taoist Federation by some 30 Taoist temples and prominent practitioners in 1990. Meanwhile, the Taoist Mission was registered in 1996.

Taoism became a constituent faith member of the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) in 1997. The IRO was formed in 1949 by religious leaders from different faiths to promote goodwill and understanding between the different religious communities. Today, there are 10 religions represented in the IRO.

More Taoist associations were established over the years to promote Taoism, leading to more organised efforts to explain Taoism to the public, especially the beliefs and practices which are often misunderstood by Singaporeans.

Relevance of Taoism

Taoism has conventionally been perceived as a superstitious, mysterious, and outdated Chinese religion. Many regard Taoism as an ancient religion for the elderly bearing no appeal to the young and trendy. This belief is misconstrued. Taoist teachings remain relevant today.

Taoists regard the magnum opus of Lao Tzu (Laozi) – the *Tao Te Ching* (Dao De Jing) – as the most revered scripture. Along with *Nanhua Jing* by *Chuang Tzu* (Zhuangzi), these are two main texts that many Taoists refer to for guidance and inspiration.

Between the two scriptures, the Dao De Jing is a more familiar text amongst the lay persons. It teaches age-old but relevant philosophy and Taoist principles. Its relevance to contemporary society lies in the guidance it offers to believers in adopting the "way" of life, which is characterised by virtue, ethics, and integrity.

Taoism has established philosophical thoughts and principles; it is not simply a religion

that is obsessed with lighting incense and visiting temples. Neither is it a religion that solely operates using the Dao De Jing and admits believers as Taoists simply from having read the said scripture.

Quan Zhen School: Harmoniously Together

The Complete Reality School of Taoism (also known as the 'Complete Perfection School' or 'Quan Zhen Dao'), came to Singapore in the 1990s. It encourages practitioners to read beyond the Taoist texts by appreciating Buddhist and Confucian texts.

Its popularity grew as younger Singaporeans learned the Taoist scripture and chanting while appreciating other teachings and relating them to their contemporary environment. Being schooled in the bilingual education system, they could translate Taoist texts to English and interpret their meaning to others in interfaith dialogues and engagements. This clears up misconceptions of Taoism amongst Taoists as well as non-Taoists.

The three fundamental tenets of Compassion, Frugality, and Humility set the foundation for inter-faith dialogues and intra-faith engagements between Taoism and other religious beliefs. Taoists follow the way of '*wu-wei*' – the practice of taking no action that is not in accord with the natural course of the Universe, and living in harmony with the Universe, nature, and humanity.

Lao Tzu mentioned in the final chapter of the Dao De Jing that wise men do not argue with others and reminded believers to benefit others, harm none, and do their best not to strive with anyone.

Adapting Taoist Practices in Internet Age

The advent of the Internet offered a series of social media platforms that provided new avenues for Taoism to be transmitted amongst the masses. Several Taoist associations, priests and practitioners in Singapore have used social media to set up classes to share Taoist beliefs and practices, and to clarify any misconceptions to non-believers.

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Internet became a popular avenue for temples and priests to connect with their members and devotees.

Practising Taoism in Singapore means to live a life that is fulfilling and purposeful, assist others who are in need, and minimise any inconvenience to others. For example, Taoists must be mindful of practices such as incense burning so that they may fulfil their religious obligations yet minimise any inconvenience to others. Taoist rituals for the deceased were adapted significantly.

Many temples in Singapore constructed environmentally friendly burners to significantly reduce the ash from burning joss papers and paper effigies, while other temples have significantly reduced the quantity of incense and joss paper burning.

Today, Taoists number about 10 per cent of Singapore's resident population of more

than four million. Not an insignificant demographic, they believe their contribution to social cohesion and harmony to date is evident from their ability to manage the new challenges and opportunities ahead.

This is alongside a willingness to engage in dialogue and adapt to the multi-religious and multi-faith nature of Singaporean society.

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