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**An Ethnographic Survey of Language Use,  
Attitudes and Beliefs of Singaporean Daoist Youths**

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## BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Daoism is the indigenous religion of China but the word "Daoism" means different things to different people; and hence there is a potential conflict of ideas and opinions. It should be noted that the Daoist religion, or what the scholars term as *ming qian* (folk religion), is very different from the Daoist philosophy. The latter is represented by the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi, documented in the texts ascribed to them. From these classic texts, the Daoists discovered nature, expressed their joy and amazement over it and sought to identify with it, calling it *Dao* – a natural law of the universe. The Dao brings all things into existence and governs their every action. The guiding aim of Daoism is to achieve union with Dao through identification. Since the Dao is perceived as eternal, ever lasting and unchanging, the individual who achieves unity with Dao, is also considered to have reached eternity. This aspect of Daoism is often referred to as philosophical Daoism.

On the other hand, at about the same time that philosophical Daoism was taking shape in the third century BC, there developed another movement, which was primarily aimed at attaining immortal life (Kow 2002). The Chinese people then, and for many centuries before that time, were known not just to have been ardent worshippers of the artifacts of nature, that is, the sun, moon, stars, rivers and the high mountains, but also ardent pursuers of immortality and transcendence. Popular religion at that time depended on the services of shamans who were, by profession mediums who could communicate with ghosts and spirits on behalf of man. They passed the messages of the gods to men and prayed for blessings. They (the *fangshi*) used many techniques, such as alchemy, herbs, talisman and breathing exercises and claimed authority from Laozi to organize religious communities, forgive faults and sins, to heal and most important, to exorcise ghosts, demons and evil spirits. This movement represented a combination of all popular religious ideas, including sacrificial rituals, rampant in Chinese society at that time and came to be known as “religious Daoism”. The amalgamation was easy to effect since the contents of the texts of Laozi and Zhuangzi were ambiguous enough to accommodate its eclectic views. Over the centuries, Daoism branched into various sects – all of them pursuing slightly different interests and adopting a variety of patron saints. The sects focussed on revelations, healing, rituals, oracles and shamanistic practices, developed monasteries inspired by Buddhism, and established a network of temples throughout China (Chew 1997). Understandably, these two strands – religious Daoism and philosophical Daoism – gave rise to much perplexity by outside observers; one being a sophisticated philosophy and the other interwoven with elaborate rituals and fantastic visions of countless gods.

Another noteworthy point is that where the masses of poor Chinese immigrants to Singapore in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were concerned, they were not normally from the professional or educated elites (who being literate would have more opportunities to have been more attracted to philosophical Daoism); rather they were the Chinese masses from the lower and working classes, and were therefore more attuned to religious Daoism which catered to their everyday needs, fears and aspirations. While the more sophisticated Chinese may not be particularly proud of the heterogenous practices of the masses which they widely regard as “superstitions”, it would be difficult for them to deny that it contains much that is meaningful in the culture of the masses of immigrants. It is religious Daoism, rather than philosophical Daoism that has a strong hold upon the religious thought and practices of Daoists in Singapore and which will be the focus of this study.

Last but not least, it must be realized that the Daoist religion is a major part of what may be termed the “Chinese religion” (Chew 1993) It is a “Chinese religion” and one which is eclectic and polytheistic in nature. Hence, it is often exclaimed by scholars that a Chinese can claim to be Daoist, Buddhist and Confucianist at the same time. As a “lover of nature”, he is Daoist, as one “who is serious about his duties”, he is a Confucianist and finally as one who is “aware of the transience of life”, he is Buddhist. This kind of practical wisdom is illustrated in folk temples not just in Singapore but also in the thriving Chinese communities of Southeast Asia, Taiwan and Hong Kong, where statues of Kongzi, Laozi and Buddha are set up alongside those of traditional Daoist immortals as objects of veneration. The most prevalent form of the Chinese syncretic religion is said to be *shen jiao* (Doctrine of the gods). “*Shen*” means “spirit” – and this refers to the worship of the spirit of some deified hero or emperor.

### FOCUS AND RATIONALE OF STUDY

There is a lack of published research works on Daoism in Singapore. It is not easy to offer any explanation for such a phenomenon. As Daoism is mainly practiced by the Chinese, incompetency in Chinese language and dialects tend to hold back an interest in such a research. Further, as Daoism which is truly the native religion of the Chinese is very complex, any study of it requires a certain level of knowledge on the history and essence of Chinese culture. Finally, Daoism is practiced by the lower rungs of the Chinese population in many ways and the rites are shrouded by superstition and mystery. Any field work on Daoism will thus depend much on a researcher’s time, patience, interest, as well as funding.

According to a recent Straits Times survey in 2005, 86% of Singaporeans have a religion and half of these people devote everyday of the week to some religious activity or other. (*Straits Times* 16.7.2005 pp. S1-6). Even then, of the 14% without a religious affiliation, 70% of them believe in God. The Daoist population of Singapore is 8.5 % of the population (Leow 2001) However, in reality, the percentage can be considered to be very much higher since the vast proportion of Singaporeans who claim to be “Buddhists” are in reality Daoists on further investigation. (One notes that in the same report, Leow (2001) listed the percentage of Buddhists in Singapore to be 42.5%). Similarly, the Daoist influence is strongly visible in most Singapore temples, even though these temples may be reputed to be Buddhist ones. Despite its dominant presence in Singapore, Daoism is often studied from the “minority” angle, that is, from the angle of onlookers rather than practitioners. For example, it is not uncommon to find titles of book such as “Chinese magic and superstitions in Malaya or Chinese-medium cults in Singapore” which refers to Daoism from an ostensibly outsider’s Westernized and/or Christian angle.<sup>1</sup> Words such as “cults”, “folk festivals”, “superstitions”, “polytheism” are commonly used in the description of Daoism. Such terminologies carry with them their own connotations, which are often negative. Much research is unfortunately, mostly partisan – that is, they tend to view Daoism from the perspective of their own religious background. In addition, while there is a lot of Daoist religious activity on the ground, there are very few published literature. Whatever literature there is tends to be

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Comber, Leon (1960). *Chinese Magic and Superstitions in Malaya*. Singapore: Eastern University press; Elliott, Alan J. A (1955). *Chinese spirit-medium cults in Singapore*. London: Royal Anthropological Institute. Lee Siow Mong (1963) “Chinese polytheism” *China society Singapore annual 1962-1963* 15-17.; Tan, Szan *The Cult and Festival of the Goddess of the Sea – a maiden encounter with Mazu*. *The Heritage Journal* 1. 1(2004) 13-20; Tjandra, Lukas (n.d.) “Folk religion among the Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia” Dissertation. Fuller Theologies Seminary.

focused only on their respective congregation. Tong (2002) has documented anthropological and sociological studies on Hinduism, Christianity, Hinduism and Chinese religion in Singapore written in English in the last 150 years. These studies have mostly focused on more apparent aspects such as rituals or festivals. In addition, although Christianity was practiced by only 14.6% of Singapore's population in 2000 (Leow 2000), paradoxically more research has been undertaken on it than on other religions.

In view of the above reasons, studies on Daoism should be more actively encouraged, especially those which are ethnographic in nature, utilizing an insider's perspective. This paper is one such effort to fill the vacuum. More specifically, this paper focuses not on the Daoist adherents in general but rather on the active Daoist youths (aged 15 to 30). Important questions of identity and meaning are formed during this period of youth. The youths of today are the adults of tomorrow – their behavior, attitudes and beliefs affect the political, economic and social future of a nation. Youth, especially adolescents, are characterized by many cognitive and social changes, which constitute a transition into adult life. Religion or more generally, religiosity begins to play a large part upon how a potential or young adult views the world.

In the past few decades, much of the religious switching in Singapore has been from Daoism to Christianity and Buddhism. The census of 1980, 1990 and 2000 (Dept of Statistics 1990, 2000) has shown a striking decline in the number of Daoist adherents - from 38.2% in 1980 to 28.4% in 1990 to 10.8% in 2000. Two religions have absorbed the departing Daoists adherents – namely Christianity and Buddhism. For example, Christianity grew dramatically from 10.9% in 1980 to 14.3% in 1990 to 16.5% in 2000. Buddhism has also grown steadily from 34.3% in 1980 to 39.4% in 1990 to 53.6%. Ostensibly then, there has been a marked switch of the Singapore populace, most notably youths, from Daoism to Christianity and Buddhism in the last two decades. Chew (2006) has documented the reasons behind such religious switching but not the perhaps more interesting angle, which is, the reasons behind and/or motivations for the minority of Daoist youths remaining active in their practice of Daoism.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Data have been collected from different sources so that the final picture can be more reliable and valid and efforts have been made to incorporate the contributions of linguistics, political economy, history and sociology so as to provide a wider and more balanced analysis. On the whole, three research tools were utilized: 1) participant observation at Daoist events where youths were involved; 2) case study of Daoist youths; and 3) focused discussion.

Where participant observation at Daoist events was concerned, I attended many Daoist events – anniversaries of particular deities, funereal rites, homages to the Jade Emperor, etc. during the period 2006-7. As a participant observer, I sat through some sessions with temple mediums as they went on with their client consultations, shared meals with devotees, and also networked at entertainments such as *wayangs* (*street entertainment with a makeshift stage*) and street possessions. Some of these informal occasions were recorded and videoed using my hand phone.

In the one-to-one interviews with Daoist youths, I had my notebook whereby I jotted down observations as well as a mini-tape-recorder for use at interviews. Each interview lasted an average of 35 minutes. They were often conducted just before or after a Daoist celebration or religious event and always on the observation site. Most of the youths would already have noticed me in during long-haul Daoist events or would have heard about my research or would have been introduced to me by their friends as a “zealous heritage buff”. Hence they are often relaxed and friendly during these rather spontaneous and informal interviews. The research questions which would be included in these interviews in a non-sequential fashion, among other ad-hoc questions, would include the following:

- At what functions do you participate in the temple?
- How often do you attend temple ceremonies?
- What is Daoism?
- How did you become a Daoist?
- Have any of your friends ever asked you to attend other religious groups?
- Who introduced you to Daoism?
- How long have you been a Daoist?
- What does Daoism mean to you?
- Would you share this religion with your friend?
- What is important to you in your life?
- How is your religion related to the important things in your life?
- How old are you and what do you work as?
- What are your educational qualifications?
- Are you married and/or with children?
- What languages do you speak at home and outside?

The 19 active Daoist youths who were interviewed in this study came from three Daoist temples in Singapore. They are ethnically Chinese and from the Hokkien dialect group. Of these youths, six were either studying in the Polytechnics or had graduated from the Polytechnic, six have terminated their education at either “N” or “O” levels and were in the job market either as employees or self-employed, three were either studying or graduates of ITE and 3 has completed their education up to PSLE level One of them had just graduated from the university and was under training as a priest. Their age ranged from 17 to 29 years of age. Six of them were females and 13 of them were males. Of the 13 males, two of them (graduates of the Polytechnics) were enrolled in either a course or apprenticeship to become either full-time or part-time priests in their temple

In the several focus-group discussions held with Daoist youths, the occasional priest who was available, as well as some friends from the Singapore heritage interest groups, questions generally similar to the interviews were discussed, e.g.: What, for example, is the basis of choice of a speaker’s religious ideology? How does a youth define Daoism? Who are the Daoist youths in Singapore? How do they define Daoism? What are their aspirations? How much does a youth know about Daoism?. As I am a sociolinguist by training, I was particularly interested in the choice of language used both during Daoist events, and among the Daoists themselves. Of special interest to me is the study of the rise of world languages such as English and Mandarin at the expense of Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka – some of the original tongues of Singapore Daoist practice.

In any Daoist temples, one may summarize that there are basically three kinds of devotees, those who:

- help run the temple, are dedicated to particular deities, come every week, know the people, sit on committees (about 10% of the devotees);
- come to consult regarding job, illness, welfare, choosing names, choosing wedding dates (about 80% of the devotees);
- are “opportunistic” – that is, they come to the temple to get lottery numbers and they move from temple to temple to find new experiences, new contacts and new solutions depending on their particular agendas (about 10%).

“Active” youths visit the temple regularly -- about four times a month, are likely to sit on temple committees and are often present in all religious observations at the temple. In addition, they also spend some time each week on some form of personal devotion which they perform at their personal altar in their home. Their hobbies are “normal” youthful preoccupations such as singing, dating, shopping, movies, reading, and swimming.

If there is one underlying and/or thematic concern that permeates all the above-listed questions, it would be “What is the sustaining power for these active youths? and “What is the future of Daoism as practised in Singapore?”

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The following are the summary of some preliminary insights from ethnographic observations as well as taped conversations with the active Daoist youths in Singapore regarding the reasons behind their close affiliation with Daoism both as religion (“a purpose in life”) and culture (“a way of life”).

### **A Sense of Family and Community**

There is an estimated 20% of youth observable in any Daoist temple festivity, making them a minority, in relation to older adherents. Here, it is not so much one youth influencing another youth to attend a fellowship meeting or religious observation, but more a matter of “growing up” in familiar surroundings (Yeo 1997).

Temple visiting, especially on festive occasions, is a opportunity for a chat or gossip, to gamble or to borrow money or merely share a meal together. Here, one has an opportunity to keep up with one’s extended family as well as neighbours and friends. It is a time of news exchange on the family, community or country. These are large-scale communal thanksgiving celebrations marking either the anniversary of a deity or the commemoration of important events such as the completion of a new temple, the visit of the Jade Emperor, and the opening of the Heavenly Gate (see Appendix for two such occasions which the writer had a chance to visit). On such occasions, the Daoist priest(s) conveys the gratitude of the community to the gods and invites them to come and partake of the many ostentatious and generous offerings laid on the altars and tables. There are also street processions, feasting and theatrical performances during such occasions –in short, something for the young and old, the pious and the material, in short, every member of the family. The carnival-like atmosphere helps generate a “way of life”, and a cosmology – in which one may build one’s vista of life.

One youth remarks:

“I look forward to visit the temple ... because as a child, I always see the same people. I have many friends same age as our parents know their parents for a long time. On big occasions we see each other always and we have played together as a child – we see them get boyfriend, then marry and now a baby –”

Another:

“It’s not true to say that we have more friends in school than the temple I know a lot of people in this temple. In fact, we grow up together. For example, there is xxxx and xxxx, we see them almost every week – we usually come with family. We are close.”

Youths are attracted to the dynamic worship ceremonies, which are accompanied by music and elaborate priestly rites. In a typical anniversary celebration of a deity, priests would dress in traditional garment complete with special hats and shoes. In a setting of colourful lanterns and banners, they would chant and/or sing from scriptural texts, ring the bell, blow the horn and burn religious papers at periodic intervals. One can meditate or chant in a private corner or drink and eat with friends at another corner of the temple. There is something to listen to, to watch and to practise. Generally, the religious atmosphere is open, flexible, with independent yet caring events where multiple activities are going on. While the priest is performing some rites, small groups of youths and other devotees may be chatting away. Hand phones are seldom switched off and it is common to find a youth suddenly breaking impulsively into a conversation with a another to discuss some other worldly matter. To devotees, there is after all “no distinction between what is spiritual and non-spiritual ...everything is “one”. Not surprisingly, for these youths, temple visits are positive and relaxing communal experiences and these are revealed through conversational semantics such as: “*open house*”, *friendly*, *companionship*, *helpful*, *peacefulness*, *uplifted spirits*, *steady*, *good character*, *detachment*, *calmness*, etc.

When I asked about the comprehensibility of the chanting, all said they did not (except the two who were in training to be priests) comprehend the meaning, but they felt nevertheless, that the chant being “authentic”, “there is nothing to worry about” because “God would punish them if they sang something that was wrong.” As to the reasons why it was difficult to understand the chant/song even though it was in their dialect (Hokien), the youth who was in training to be a priest explained:

“Because the Hokien pronunciation is different, because of the rhythm and pitch. Because the priest is trained in Taiwan. It must be done in a certain way in line with tradition. However, our believers trust us and there is no problem with that.”

Such events also see occasions where there are miracles of healing, good luck and answered prayers. There is spirit writing, healing and ancestor veneration. Most of all, temple goers all speak in the same language, identifying themselves as a distinct discourse community. During the long rituals, clusters of believers would sit and chat while partially observing the ceremony. The devotees are in normal everyday clothes. The older women are insleeveless garments (because of the tropical heat and temples are not air-conditioned venues), with a jade bangle and a gold necklace; the men are in T-shirts and/or singlets and shorts or long



pants; while the younger youths are in t-shirts and jeans & or shorts. On such occasions I have eavesdropped on small talk on topics such as the how's of applying for a government flat, the problems of an elderly believer who was forced to sell her home to pay her son's indebtedness to a loan shark, tuition fees for a primary school boy, the forthcoming auction for spiritual items, someone's new baby and places to shop for swimming trunks for grandchildren. An average 70% of such talk are conducted in Hokkien, 20% are in Mandarin and 10% are in English. There is ongoing code switching especially between Hokkien and Mandarin. Most of the youth who engaged in such conversations with their extended families are from dialect-speaking homes. In my focused group discussion, we concluded that of households who had switched to Mandarin, most of the youth would prefer to claim affinity with Buddhism; while of those who continued to speak dialect, it was likely that the youth would remain Daoist. This was because more Buddhist than Daoist activities were conducted in Mandarin and the youth interviewed viewed the two religions as complementary rather than antagonistic.

Whatever it is, active Daoist youths are those with strong parental or suffragette parental support. Of the 19 youths, 16 of them confirm that they grow up in a big traditional and spiritual family with a strong Daoist tradition and that they went to temples as a child and were involved with ad hoc temple committees during festive occasions. It is a way of life, a cosmology, it shapes how one sees the world.

### **Coping with Death and other Fears**

Where human fears are concerned, we may generally conclude that there are basically three kinds: the fear of the unknown that leads to the existential question of who we are and what our lives are for; the fear of not being able to discharge our responsibilities in our daily lives and finally, the fear of "the others" at which violence are often directed. All three human fears are addressed in the practice of Daoism.

Where the first is concerned, it is customary for the Chinese to refer to death as the "significant unknown" of their lives and perhaps to dwell on it for longer than it is practical. (Kow 2000). In this respect, Daoist rituals in Singapore are performed both for the living as well as the dead and are complementary in the sense that unless the dead are kept content, lasting peace and prosperity for the living world would not be possible (Chew 1997). If properly cared for, the dead would become caring ancestors and a source of help and blessings; if not, they could turn into malignant spirits. The service of a Daoist priest is employed as he is believed to be able to pacify the soul of the deceased by guiding it, step by step, through the subterranean world, to the courts of judgments. This also gives the young "a necessary depth of perspective" to cope with the phenomenon of death, while living, often with some anxiety, in the present:

"We of course want to live for a long time. We put a lot of attention on funerals and memorial services because we want our loved ones to have a good time in the next life."

Another typical explanation:

“This world and next world is related and our ancestors can help. Also we set an example on this earth –what we do for others, other will do for us. We burn all the things we want to give them because this is symbolism and it builds comfort and we know they are happy as well.”

The second and third type of fears – fear of the failure to discharge responsibilities and fear of others -- can be dissipated with the help of the “tangki” or spirit medium. The 19 youths are all familiar with the temple medium, who acts as a kind of “advisor” and problem-solver. During consultation, the medium would go into a trance and call on a personal spirit to come down to enlighten him or her. One service, which the medium provides is the performance of ritual healing for illnesses or problems such as depression and listlessness, often called “spirit possession”. Questions that are of interest for youth usually concern that of the opposite sex, school work, or choice of career. Nevertheless, some youths are also desirous to communicate to a beloved deceased grandparent for help with a particular problem. Hence, the help of the medium is sought to relay the messages to and from the deceased while in a trance.

As a youth who consults the medium on a regular basis, recounts:

“When I see the *tangki*, and listen to what he says, I feel much relieved as I feel my boss is treating me very badly I want to know how to deal with my boss and whether I should leave my job. Many of the things the *tangki* says will become true as I have experience it before. He will tell me what to do and not to do and also how to treat my boss. Of course, the *tanki* is not speaking to me but some other spirit who will come to help me relieve my anxiety.”

In my interview data, the metaphors around the subject of death tend to cluster around that of *healing, fear, gift, helping, rescue*. Whatever it is, the belief in evil forces as countering the good, the personification of demons in the Daoist religion, and the elaborate measures to exorcise them is a source of comfort to youths facing a problem of sort. To placate all three kinds of fears, there is also the lavish use of *fu*, that is, amulets, talismans and prayer chants, which help generate solace to the youth concerned:

“I wear this charm (shows it to interlocutor) because I need protection from my enemy and also for good luck. My mother and I have got a pair from the medium and this helps us in being brave in all the hardships we face.”

### **A Sense of Order and Morality**

Religious Daoism is essentially preoccupied with basic issues such as life, death and immortality, and pragmatic issues relating to health, wealth, business and marriage. The five important things listed by youths as their most important preoccupations and in which they would expect some spiritual help are: “health, studies, family, money and survival.” To ensure sustainability in these areas, youths and their families would go through the regular performance of rituals which would placate the spirit world and enable them to lead a long, healthy and wealthy life free from unnecessary misfortunes. In this respect, the performance of rituals either by the priests or believers helps placate their fears and also fill their lives with a significance which they would not otherwise have.

Certainly, then, the fear of the unknown are mediated through highly complex rituals involving symbolism, music, and drama in Daoist festivals, all of which contributes to the articulation of sacred mysteries. In the ceremonies I have observed, there is a profusion of icons and symbols. There are images of deities, statues, paper figures, portraits, banners and draperies. Accompanying these are auspicious signs such as dragons, divine beings and the symbol of the Daoist cosmos. The different stages of the ritual performances are signaled by music. The music becomes urgent when action is taken against demons and changes to somber note when noble deities are approached.

The youths understand that these are all symbolism of the sacred mysteries. In the interview, a youth, who is familiar with joss sticks, confidently explains their significance.

“We burn incense because the smoke allows our thoughts to be transmitted to the greater powers. After a while you get used to the smell and the smoke It is a Chinese custom. It is a symbolism. It is helping us to concentrate.”

Some of the youths have learnt to chant, and they practice this during their weekly visit to the temple. One youth narrates the “normal sequence”:

1. Usually light the incense;
2. Kneel in front of the altar of deities;
3. Make your request;
4. Offer the incense in the urn.

Or, if you want it to be more “powerful”, they might chant some mantras as well:

1. Light the incense (take 3 sticks instead of one);
2. Kneel in front of the altar of deities;
3. Recite a mantra (there are an array one can use here);
4. Rise and place the incense in the urn (you can place one stick at a time).

Temple going is accompanied by daily worship at home and both comprise the physical and moral basis on which lives may be built on. One youth recounts the simple worship procedure taught by parents:

“In the morning, I burn one joss stick for the altar. On the first and fifteenth day of each lunar month and especially the seventh, eight, ninth month, I put oranges on the altar. I also put fruits, *xiu tou* (small pau with a pink mark), *mee swa* and flowers during the sixth month (for Kwan Im’s birthday). During the twelfth month (Lunar New Year), I place *huat ge* (brown cupcake) on the altar.”

The youth believe that the performance of good deeds would help in the cleansing of one’s body, that physical illness was a consequence of immoral conduct; and that any cure would therefore require repentance and good work. Good health and long life could also be achieved through the ancient shamanistic arts meditation and exercises.

“What can I benefit from Daoism? Because it teaches me to perform good deeds and to help other people, to have a meaning in life.”

Like the other major religions then, and in its own unique fashion, Daoism teaches that to become a “celestial immortal”, one needs to perform a certain number of good deeds. This idea is made comprehensible through the recount of an invisible ledger, a kind of account book in which daily actions are classified as good and bad deeds, each of which is assigned a fixed number of merit or demerit points.

In their worship, the youth have no objections to the placement of Buddhist deities on their altars. In fact, anything that “works” would be acceptable. This rather “inclusive” or “flexible” attitude towards deities has contributed to the difficulties of a layman to differentiate a Daoist temple from a Chinese Buddhist temple. Like the Chinese Buddhist pantheon of deities, the Daoist pantheon also has a vast number of deities in seemingly endless variation of forms. Both religious traditions also have many schools – “all different paths of practice leading to the same goal,” it is explained. In addition, each school has developed its own method of practice based on particular texts and appealing to different groups of people. Further, since there is no dogma based on divine revelation or a church as guardian of unchangeable dogmatic truth. Everyone is free to believe anything he or she chooses. The Daoist official of a particular temple may be loosely connected, have a regular job and put on priestly vestment only when the occasion arises. In such a situation, it is not surprising that I found great variation in the practice of Daoism in various temples. Not surprisingly, in the Chinese language, there is no specific category called *Zhong jiao* (religion). Instead, the word *jiao* (teaching) includes all religions. The “religion” of the Chinese people is implicit in the word “teach”. Therefore, there is no difference between religion and education. Both education and religion guides people to live a good life. This leads to a certain fluidity in Daoism and enables it to respond to local and regional challenges. As far as I am aware, there is no central canon, overall leader or formal membership records.

The flexibility and ease of worship is something that youth welcomes:

As Daoist, I don’t have to change my life-style – not like other religions. My mother is happy. I can live the way I like ...of course, I must make sure that I have a balance in my life and I don’t anger the Gods or otherwise, I will also suffer.

Another similar comment is:

What is good here is that I have a favorite god who helps me lead my life. Other people may have other gods, but many of us have our favorite ones.

An anthropomorphic pantheon of gods enables devotees to turn to more approachable deities who may be of inferior rank but nevertheless able to dispense blessings or intercede on their behalf. Such a conception of good and evil or opposing forces is one which is easily understood by the youth in my study. It is a popular conception of the world and a solace to his innermost apprehensions. Personified and concrete forms are easily comprehended and not intellectually abstract. Amidst the performance of rituals comes a sense of order and morality.

### **Forces of Attraction and Alienation**

We have seen the sincerity of worship practiced by active adherents, who form about 10% of Daoist youths. We may then inquire into the reason as to the disenchantment or alienation of the majority of Singapore youth with Daoist worship with regards to the departure to other

faiths. Two primary reasons may be discerned. The first has to do with, paradoxically, the existing appeal of Daoism; while the second has to do with the decline of dialects in Singapore.

Daoism's *raison d'être* – the contribution of a unique cultural sense of family and community, is also the reason for its demise. The family, and especially the Chinese extended family, is breaking down. Before, kinship was formed through marriage relationship (in temples, which acted like a form of “community centers”), and clans established through blood relationship. The same respect demanded of children for their elders within the family was extended to apply to teachers, and other figures of social authority. The family hierarchy was translated into social ranking. But the family as an institution is under siege, because of the rise of nuclear families and the onslaught of a materialistic culture which has required both parents to work and the child to be relegated to the influence of peers and state educational institutions. Today, most busy parents living in nuclear families have neglected, even more than in the past, to explain the symbolism behind Daoist practices to their offspring, hence generating comments from youths such as:

“My mother asks me to burn joss sticks to the God or to ancestors (tablets) in the family but I don't know the purpose.” As long as I burn incense in here, its okay but I don't know why.”

Similarly, just as the elaborate rituals accompanying death and death anniversaries are a comfort for many youths, it is also a major drawback for others. Chew (2008) reveals that youths who leave Daoism for Christianity has often referred to their former faith, as unattractively “funereal” and “deathlike”. References to the various deities have included negative emotional references such as “ugly-looking gods” and “idolatry”. The elaborate rituals which are fulfilling for some are on the other hand, “confusing” to others. Chew's study found comments with regards to “confusion and superstition” by former Daoist youths. These comments are a sharp contrast to active Daoist youths who tended to look on these rituals in terms of “tradition”, “culture” and “symbolism”.

Perhaps the exposure to the more “rational” and “materialistic” discourse in Singapore schools, which derives its influence from the “western” scientific tradition, have caused youths to view Daoism as “irrelevant”, “illogical” and “irrational”. Indeed, Chew's (ibid) research found most youths appalled rather than attracted by Daoist practices of spirit medium and occultism. The effects of such practices, which used to contribute to part of the dynamic mysticism of Daoism, are unfortunately no longer fashionable to a more modern, western-educated, and scientifically-oriented generation. Those who have left Daoism for “greener pastures” also tend to be the more highly-educated ones, from the English-medium stream, possessing an ideological leaning which makes them unfamiliar with the “strange” and “theatrical” practices of Daoism. Viewed through Western eyeglasses, Daoist traditional practices are often dismissed as “superstitions” and “idolatry”.

Last but not least, the rather *laissez faire* and relatively disorganized nature of Daoism, while attractive to many devotees, have also worked against it. Indeed, many Daoists prefer to identify themselves as Buddhists because Buddhism appears to be is relatively more united and better organized than Daoism, especially in terms of its community service such as its free health programmes, and its slightly more modern public image. Nevertheless, both Daoism and Buddhism face a threat from an even better organized competitor – the Christian faith. The rise of the mega-churches in Singapore, especially those which preach a gospel of

prosperity and which are mainly aimed at making people feel good about themselves, are their main rivals. These churches defend material success (not met by traditional churches) and have conferences on “effective leadership”. Consumer-driven approaches e.g. music, sermon, self help programmes with positive messages are intended to make people feel good about themselves. Their periodic spectacular Christian festivals with a large choir, are a great draw with youths (cf. Symonds 2005).

### **The Decline of Dialect Use**

The decline of dialect use among Singaporeans is the second main reason for the declining practice of Daoism. According to Sapir (1977), language functions not simply as a device for reporting experience, but also as a way of defining experiences. It directs the perception of the speaker and affects his entire world view. For most Singaporeans, dialects are the true mother-tongues, the vehicles of culture and embodiment of identity. However, in the last three decades, this has become less and less of a reality.

This changing language environment in Singapore, ever since independence in 1965, has had serious implications on the decline of Daoism. A person’s religion and his language are intimately related as key factors in his cultural identity. Since the launch of the *Speak Mandarin Campaign* in 1979, it has been compulsory for all Chinese dialect programmes on free-to-air channels to be dubbed in Mandarin. So successful was this campaign that the percentage of Chinese households using Mandarin as the dominant language rose from 13% in 1980 to 30% in 1990 and to 45% in 2000. On the other hand, the figures for Chinese dialects fell from 76% in 1980 to 49% in 1990 and 30% in 2000 (Dept. of Statistics, 2001). Today, while most young Chinese Singaporeans are bilingual in English and Mandarin, many of them can neither speak nor understand dialect.

While the learning of Mandarin is a pragmatic choice in terms of attaining economic advantages in view of the recent emergence of China as an economic superpower, it is disadvantageous where the maintenance of original southeastern Chinese identity and culture is concerned. This is because Mandarin or *putonghua* (“common speech”) is not a culture bearer where the majority of Chinese Singaporeans are concerned. What has not been stressed, both in government rhetoric and academic writing on the subject (cf. Bokhorst-Heng; 1999, Alatas et al. 2003), is that Mandarin is a Beijing (Northern) dialect selected over Cantonese (a southern dialect) to be the common language of the Chinese people in China in 1912 at the birth of the Chinese Republic.<sup>2</sup> Most Singaporean Chinese are descended from immigrants from South China and their ancestral language is not Mandarin but Hokien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hockchew, Hainanese, Hakka or other Southern Chinese languages, which are not mutually intelligible with regards to Mandarin. Cultures, values and customs, especially those surrounding rites of passage, are passed on through the use of dialects, not Mandarin. Customs and traditions, even in basic practices such as the way of cooking, dances, funeral rites, differ from one dialect group to another.

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<sup>2</sup> Putonghua, the variety favoured, was a low-class variety of Mandarin which came into general use at the end of the Qing dynasty, and had the connotation of being an adulterated form of the standard Guoyu (“national language”).

Worse, the promotion of English as the principal language of instruction, which helps in integrating Singapore with the wider English speaking world, has also led to the decline of the Chinese religion. No other East Asian country has used English as the principal language of instruction to the great extent that Singapore has. The changing home language profile is evident among our Chinese students: 48.6% of resident Primary 1 students speak English as their first or only language at home in 2004, compared to 48.7% who use Mandarin (the rest speak Chinese dialects or other languages). This means that English now has overtaken Chinese as the dominant home language of Chinese P1 student and there is a growing group of Chinese students entering school with limited or no exposure to the Chinese Language at home. In short, the prestige of the Chinese language has declined; and in particular it has lost ground to English, a language with much more “linguistic capital” (Zhao and Lin 2007). Hence, the rise of English education and widespread usage in Singapore will herald the adoption of Western ways of thinking about culture and religion, not all of them synonymous or sympathetic with the Chinese religion.

While the linguistic landscape in Singapore has changed drastically in the last 50 years, that of the temple has remained relatively stable. Nearly all the activities taking place in the temple require the primary use of dialect. Spirit mediumship for instance is a skill passed down from oral tradition by dialect. Mandarin is not (yet) the language of transmission for temple activity. Also Daoist religious gathering is not just for worship but also an opportunity for communal interaction and the common language of interaction among the youth is dialect and only some Mandarin. Dialect is the working language of major temples e.g. Thian Hock Keng temple at Telok Ayer Street, Tua Pek Kong temple at Kusu, Siong Lim Temple at Jalan Toa Payoh. Also clan associations, which support the temple and which are registered with the Registrar of Societies, perform their main duties in dialect. Of the Daoist youths in my study,<sup>19</sup> spoke predominantly Hokkien and Mandarin. When I enquired about the percentages of use regarding different languages, the youths interviewed calculated that it would be 75% Hokien, 20% Mandarin and 5% English at the temples. In their working life, it would be basically more Mandarin -- about 50-60 % -- as that was the lingua franca of their working world. Daoist temples and their assorted clan associations are therefore the last bastion of dialect use.

At this point, it is worthwhile to note that the bulk of Christian converts in the past few decades were taken from Daoist homes, most of whom have considerable exposure to English language and a “modern” lifestyle (Sinha 2008). Clammer (1991, 1993) claims that the increase of materialistic values has also generated a desire to shift to a religion which affords ambitious youths with opportunities not just of spiritual but also material advancement. He estimated that about 30-40% of students at the National University of Singapore are Christians, and a great percentage of them are converts from Daoism-Buddhism (Clammer 1991). The number is probably much higher now especially as Christians are associated with the professional and higher-income English-educated segment of Singapore’s population.

## **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

While the last thirty years have seen a significant decline in Daoist devotional practices, especially amongst its youths, due to economic, social, psychological and linguistic reasons, there are signs of a possible resurgence. The last bastion of Daoist youths has remained solidly behind Taoism because of their keen sense of family and community, the realization of the intrinsic relationship between life and death and their keen desire for a sense of order

and morality in a changing world. To be a youth is to question and engage in a variety of quests. There are at least 6 combinations of fundamental questions. One is survival: “What must I do to survive?“, Next is security: “What can I hold on to? Or “In whom can I put my trust?” Next is to do with quality of life; “How can I be happy”. Another quest for youth is “Who am I?” Daoism is concerned with personal survival and well-being and therefore it can be viewed as an adaptive set of strategies for youths to cope with their relationship to life, death and immortality since it offers personalized attention to them in the form of the spirit medium, the creation of harmony between the different worlds of existence and of the relationship between themselves and the “spirit” of nature.

Singapore youths are deeply interested in religion, especially the phenomenon of death. Indeed, in view of the significant number of teenage suicides in Singapore, as well as other big competitive cities, perhaps the Republic ought to consider introducing death studies into its educational curriculum, replacing the physical education each week with a meditation on the physical demise of the individual. Certainly all the counseling and programming and special services and legal aid and whatever other social and psychological veils it has constructed cannot help avoid this topic. In addition, in view of the keen interest in religious activities, Singapore is an ideal center for the dialogue and study of world religions. In this respect, there has been talk on turning Singapore into an interfaith hub and the Institute of Policy Studies has also published a book on Religious diversity in Singapore (see Lai 2008).

The switch away from the Daoist/Buddhist faiths is because of youths’ disenchantment with the practice of seemingly “senseless” and “endless” rites/rituals and their inability to operate in the youth’s preferred language choice, which is often either English or Mandarin. Daoism is fighting back nevertheless. In the past few years, it is heartening to note that there are more and more English-educated Daoist priests. The younger priests are able to switch to both Mandarin and English, while carrying on a conversation in fluent Hokien. This heralds that the community is able to adapt linguistically to changing times. The spirit medium, who joined one of my focus group discussions, was a young man of about 25. He spoke 90% Hokien and 10% Mandarin but was willing to increase his use of Mandarin in his spirit sessions, if someone could teach him how to. He was also open to the prospects of speaking English but reminisced that all his clients were either Hokien or Mandarin speakers and there was no demand for this as yet. What was striking was his desire to learn to communicate in the two lingua francas –English and Mandarin -- both of which were and still are foreign to the traditional dialects used in the temples. This marks a desire for change and a readiness to adapt. However, it should be noted here that Mandarin is not the traditional language of Daoism, although it has been the traditional language of Confucianism, so this will be an interesting experiment to watch.

One notes too the religious-cultural interchange between Singapore, Taiwan and mainland China. Religious tourism is on the rise and so too exchange of priestly and scriptural knowledge between the clergy of Singapore and Taiwan. Two of my youthful respondents, for example, will be ordained as priests only after their final oral examination on the rite and practices of religious Taoism which is to take place in Taiwan. Relative to Singapore, Taiwan has a longer and more sophisticated tradition in the professional training of priests, having put in place a quality enhancement programme for temples and religious life in general.



More significantly, internet sites on Daoism now abound and which in the last few years, have become an important source of religious activity in Singapore. The internet has been a boon to minority and disenfranchised groups, giving them an economical and convenient platform from which to publicize their individualized philosophies. This worldwide phenomenon has attracted more of the English educated in Singapore not just as potential religious practitioners but also as heritage explorers. Most Daoist websites are in Chinese<sup>3</sup> but increasingly, there are websites on Daoism in the English language.<sup>4</sup> This may be only the tip of the iceberg of even greater changes to come.

Another interesting phenomenon is the return of dialects to Singapore. In the past few years, the Singapore government has not been as vehemently opposed to dialects as it had been before. Indeed, its pragmatic leaders have begun to realize that dialects can also generate foreign exchange for Singapore, especially where trading relations with the south-eastern provinces of China are concerned. Hence, in 2002, with the indirect blessing of the governing authorities, two clan associations started classes to teach dialect for the first time in their 150 year history. This was in response to people who desired to be re-acquainted with their dialect group history and culture, or who simply wished to communicate with older relatives. First off the mark was the 148 year old Hainan Hwee Kuan, which started tongues wagging in 2002 with a \$120 per month for a 3-month course (Clans start courses to teach their dialects” *Straits Times* 9. 9.2002) The Hokien Huay Kuan followed soon after with the teaching of basic phrases in Hokien. Recently, coffee shops, the traditional eating haunts in Singapore, have begun to broadcast songs in dialect in an effort to bring back some “character” to their businesses. Street story-telling in dialect are also no longer as apologetic as before and may soon be promoted as a heritage draw by the Singapore Tourism Board. Hokien songs on hard-scrabble lives, love found and lost and spouses who stray, from film-director Royston Tan movie entitled “881”, have been the rage in neighbourhood shops lately.<sup>5</sup> It goes without saying that if dialects regain favor, so will the practice of Daoism, since the practice of Daoism is basically dialectal in nature. It has a special distinctive flavour when practised in the communal mother tongue.

While the practice of Daoism is responding to modern needs and aspirations and linguistic changes, the question of whether Daoism in Singapore can survive the test of time and prosper in the modern world will depend largely on its effort to rein in excesses, renew its spiritual vigor, tighten its organizational structure and its sensitivity to the needs of a changing society. Today's structure of power is certainly very different from traditional ones experienced between devotees, priests and deities. Is this something that the Daoism of old can deal with? Some aspects of its message, or rather some of the ways it has been interpreted so far would then have to be reconsidered, or rather re-understood. Certainly, the next decade, where the wide-ranging applications of globalization, broadband, and the dominance of the English language will be increasingly significant, will be an interesting one to watch with regards to the changing fortunes of Daoism in Singapore.

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<sup>3</sup> An interesting Chinese (Hokkien) URL where videos on deities can be viewed is <http://www.godbook.com.tw/my/movie.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Some of the websites that have sprung up in the last few years are *Daoism Singapore Forum (TSF)* [http://z14.invisionfree.com/Daoism\\_singapore/index.php?](http://z14.invisionfree.com/Daoism_singapore/index.php?); and *Singapore Pioneers Blog at* <http://singaporepioneers.blogspot.com/> See also <http://groups.yahoo.com/search?query=Daoist> and [www.sify.sg](http://www.sify.sg).

<sup>5</sup> See Tan Hsueh Yun, “Hokien Songs strike a chord” in *Straits Times*, 4. 11. 2007.

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**APPENDIX**

*Reproduced from: Shin Min Daily, Sun 15 Jul 07 6M02, Page 17*

**Yan Long Tan 巖龍壇** celebrates in honour of *Zhong Tan Yuan Shuai*, 5 *Dian Da Er Ye Bo* and main Resident Deities from Mon 16 Jul to 22Jul 07 (0603-06M09) at open field in front of Blk.606, Bedok Reservoir Rd. Yan Long Tan's premise is at Lorong 44, Geylang Road.

**Programme****Mon 16 Jul 07 (6M03)**

8pm: *Zhong Tan Yuan Shuai* "an" tentage, thereafter, invite Jade Emperor

**Tue 17 Jul 07 (6M04)**

Daoist Priest Zhang Qing Hu leads in prayer

3pm: Sends off Jade Emperor

8pm: Go through Tiger Gate and cross PingAn Bridge

**Wed 18 Jul 07 (6M05)**

Open for prayers

**Thu 19 Jul 07 (6M06)**

7.30pm: Grand Dinner

**Fri 20 Jul 07 (6M07)**

8pm: Advisor Cai Guo Ling presides over *Xing Wang You Guo* (Oil Wok)

**Sat 21 Jul 07 (6M08)**

10pm: Sending off Nan-Dou and Bei-Dou Xing Jun and main Deities.

This temple also has a joss-shop at 6-7-8A Geylang Rd (Fa Wei Jin)

***Reproduced from: Shin Min Daily Mon 16 Jul 07 6M03. Page 13 - Report and Advertisement***

Tian Ci Gong 天慈宮 celebrates its 20th Anniversary and in honour of "San Shi San Tian Tong Tian Da Yuan Shuai 三十三天統天大元帅" (Zhong Tan Yuan Shuai 中坛元帅), Xuan Tian Shang Di 玄天上帝, Guan Yin Fo Zu 观音佛祖, Su Fu Qi Ye 苏府七爷, and Jiang Fu Ba Ye 江府八爷. There will also be the five statues of Cai Shen (Wealth Gods - Jing Bao 进宝 (Ru Yi Tong Zi 如意童子), Hong Lian Cai Shen 红脸财神, Wu Cai Sheng 武财神 (Zhao Gong Ming 赵公明), Wen Cai Shen 文财神, and Zao Cai Tong Zi 招财童子 - that will be consecrated on 6M07 (20Jul07) at 3pm, which is also the Tian Men Kai 天门开(Heaven Gate Opens).

**Programme**

**17 Jul 07 Tue 6M04**

9pm: Zhong Tan Yuan Shuai will officiate the setting up of the tentage and invite Jade Emperor

**18 Jul 07 Wed 6M05**

10am: Daoist Ritual

2pm: Sending off Jade Emperor

**19 Jul 07 Thu 6M06**

10am: Daoist Ritual, followed by feast for the Celestial Armies 犒军 (Kao Jun)

**20 Jul 07 Fri 6M07**

10am: Daoist Ritual

**21 Jul 07 Sat 6M08**

7.30pm: Grand Dinner

**22 Jul 07 Sun 6M09**

Nite: Getai (Variety Show)

From 6M05 to 6M08 - four days of Hokkien Opera