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Infiltrating the Tao

United Front Influence Operations Targeting Quanzhen Taoist Communities in Taiwan and the West

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Cover photo: A security guard patrols inside of the White Cloud Temple in Beijing, where the Chinese Taoist Association is headquartered. With a security camera keeping watch above, the wall is emblazoned with the "Core Socialist Values" promoted by the CCP following the 18th National Congress in 2012. These twelve values are ubiquitous on walls all over China. Just above the guard's shoulder are "democracy" and "freedom," with "civility," "equality," and "patriotism" filling in the next column. Credit: A. Chen

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This paper investigates recent and ongoing efforts by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to instrumentalize the Quanzhen sect of religious Taoism as a tool for generating soft power and spreading its influence. Although it is an ancient sect, the Quanzhen order's internationalization is a recent phenomenon. Aspects of this sect began being transplanted from China to Taiwan in the late 1980s, after Taiwanese citizens gained the right to travel to the PRC. Additionally, the sect has taken root in a number of western countries in the 21st century. Quanzhen's history in China and its current condition in the PRC are examined in depth in this paper; we find that this form of Taoism is a highly institutionalized religion directly administered by the Chinese Taoist Association (CTA), a subdivision of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) United Front Work Department (UFWD), a department that exists to "co-opt and neutralize sources of potential opposition to the [CCP's] policies and authority."[1] In order to understand the religious sect's appeal in Taiwan, this paper sketches the history of the Taoist religion among Taiwan's Han population, demonstrating how several different Taoist sects established themselves in the near-total absence of Quanzhen, while also explaining how this sect attracted Taiwanese converts in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

1 Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work," 3.

This paper's second section draws upon a dozen interviews conducted in 2024 with Quanzhen Taoists from all parts of Taiwan in order to ascertain the original motivating factors, ongoing experiences, and future goals that inform these religionists' participation in the Quanzhen movement. The discussion then turns to the "Taiwanization" of Quanzhen Taoist teachings and practices during their process of blending into the local religious milieu. The Chinese government's attempts to implicate itself within and take advantage of cross-strait Taoist religious exchanges via the UFWD and the CTA are examined in detail, in order to ascertain whether and to what degree Quanzhen Taoism might be exploited in order to spread the CCP's influence in Taiwan, as well as to identify the ways in which Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoism proves to be resistant to such efforts. The work of Taiwanese political scientists Ray Wang and Kuei-min Chang is drawn upon to shed light upon the complex array of factors at play in the UFWD's efforts to infiltrate and influence Taiwanese religious groups.

Finally, this paper briefly introduces Quanzhen and Quanzhen-affiliated activities involving individuals and organizations located in Switzerland, Mexico, Australia, and the United Kingdom, all of which took place after the founding of the World Federation of Taoism (WFT), an offshoot of the CTA, in 2023. An eye is turned toward the ways western Taoist outposts are affected by political actors, as well as the ways in which western Taoists and Taoism enthusiasts who come into close contact with the CTA and UFWD frame their relationships with the political power structures surrounding those institutions. The brief history and *raison d'être* of the WFT are considered, followed by speculation about what the future may hold for a globalized Quanzhen Taoism.

Key Findings

• The Chinese Taoist Association (CTA), which oversees Quanzhen Taoist religious activities in China and presides over the newly established World Federation of Taoism (WFT), is a branch of the United Front Work Department (UFWD), which is itself an arm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Although many of the CTA's leaders live as Quanzhen Taoist monks or nuns, these individuals are charged with political responsibilities reflecting the CCP's goals, which include "Sinicizing" the religion at home and spreading the PRC's soft power abroad.

• Working through the CTA and local Taiwan Affairs Offices, the UFWD—the leadership of which openly and aggressively calls for the annexation of Taiwan—has created conditions that compel Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists to attend government-run, politicized activities, and submit to a high degree of surveillance and oversight when they travel to the PRC to interact with their Chinese coreligionists.

• Across the board, Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists remain autonomous, financially independent, disunified, and often skeptical of the CCP. Additionally, although Quanzhen Taoists have established presences in all regions of Taiwan in recent decades, their sociopolitical and cultural influence is limited by the small size of their membership.

• A "Taiwanization" process has substantially altered the face of Quanzhen Taoism in Taiwan and may make the religion organically resistant to attempts by the UFWD to wield the sect as a tool of influence. However, the UFWD has already demonstrated a willingness to adapt its religion-centric tactics targeting Taiwan and may find novel ways to exploit its connections to Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists in the future.

• Taoist groups throughout Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia regularly come into contact with high-ranking members of the CTA and UFWD, especially through their interactions with the World Federation of Taoism, which was established in China in 2023. The WFT has established links with politicians in Australia as well as a financial consultancy registered as a charity in the United Kingdom that focuses on "faith-based investing." The WFT's western affiliates interviewed for this paper insist on their financial and ideological independence from the CTA. However, it is clear that membership in the WFT implies, at minimum, a willingness to remain silent regarding issues considered "sensitive" by the CCP.

• Quanzhen Taoism is a tiny, obscure religious sect in all countries other than China. However, the fact of many of its members' frequent interactions with organs of the Chinese party-state may in future attract attention from media or governments, especially in countries with tense relationships with the PRC. An exercise of "sharp power" organized by a Quanzhen Taoist monk from the PRC studying as an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University in 2020 illustrates how a future flashpoint might arise.

01

The Histories of Quanzhen Taoism in China and Religious Taoism in Taiwan

Visitors make their way into the entrance of White Cloud Temple in Beijing during the 2025 Lunar New Year celebrations. Six security guards stand beneath banners welcoming Spring Festival celebrants.
Credit: A. Chen

The Quanzhen (or Complete Reality, from 全真) sect is a form of religious Taoism that was established in the 12th century during the Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties. Contrasted with China's other forms of religious Taoism, which began taking shape during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) and whose "priests" or officiants were free to marry and mingle with lay society, Quanzhen Taoism has always stood apart by maintaining a monastic order whose strictures and institutional norms are strongly influenced by those of Chinese Buddhism.[2] Due to this distinction, other well-established forms of religious Taoism, such as the Zhengyi (or Orthodox Unity, from 正一) and Lingbao (or Numinous Treasure, from 靈寶) sects, are sometimes described as being "community focused" because their activities center around rituals and spiritual services, such as exorcisms or the creation of talismans, which are rendered on behalf of the laity in exchange for a fee. Conversely, Quanzhen Taoism's image is heavily colored by praxes and lore that place a strong emphasis on activities with no direct links to the lay community, such as meditation retreats undertaken in isolation and long periods of wandering between geographically disparate monasteries. These factors imbue the sect with an aloof and rarefied mystique in the eyes of those who view it from afar, and grant it competitiveness on the spiritual marketplace. So, although Quanzhen Taoist temples and monasteries do offer ritual services to the laity, the monks and nuns performing these rituals have traditionally been forbidden from marrying, taking lovers, eating meat, imbibing alcohol, gambling, and otherwise engaging in activities widely considered secular or profane, or at least strongly discouraged from openly doing so in the areas of China on which most scholarship on the sect focuses.[3]

The government of the People's Republic of China employs the notion that there

2 Despeux, "Chuzhen Jielü," 284.

3 Goossaert, "Monastic Code," 105; Goossaert, "The Quanzhen Clergy, 1700–1950," 741–742. In the first text referenced here, Goossaert points out that in pre-modern Quanzhen Taoist communities, the specifics of monastic code could be determined on a temple-by-temple basis instead of following a nationwide program. In the second reference, he asserts that Quanzhen communities comprising married householder Taoist priests and priestesses in the region south of the Yangtze River (Jiangnan) and Guangdong province may have begun to become prevalent in the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. This belies the commonly held conception that there has always been a hard line between monastic clergy and laity (who cannot serve as clerics even if they have Quanzhen masters who teach them meditation or other arts) in Quanzhen Taoism. In parts of contemporary China where Quanzhen is still commonly conceived of as having a clergy that strictly adheres to monastic precepts, I have observed a tremendous degree of flexibility with regards to how these precepts are actually followed (or not, as such). For instance, in Beijing in the early 2010s, I observed one Quanzhen monk who lived in White Cloud Temple who semi-surreptitiously received visits from his wife and (on separate occasions) his paramour on the monastery grounds, including at night in his private living quarters. A different Quanzhen monk at the same monastery invited me to his cell, where he promptly offered me a beer from a six-pack sitting in his cabinet. In rural northern China, I observed an elderly nun whose ex-husband and adult children often resided in her monastery, albeit in separate quarters and with the explicit understanding that she and her former spouse were now "friends in the Tao," with the ex-husband accepting his wife's decision to maintain strict celibacy. In the Taiwanese Quanzhen community examined in this paper, a similar blurry line between strict monasticism and looser interpretations of the rules for monks and nuns was observed. Nevertheless, despite the ambiguity of what exactly it means to be a monk or nun, interviewees frequently and passionately emphasized the importance of Quanzhen's monastic culture.

Taken in the 2000s or 2010s, this photo shows the placard for the headquarters of the Chinese Taoist Association at White Cloud Temple in Beijing. The placard has since been removed.
Credit: Creative Commons (under GNU Free Documentation License)

are two distinct approaches to religious Taoism (i.e. one approach that is more "outward facing" and intertwined with the secular world, and another that is more "inward facing" and centered around monasticism) in order to classify and supervise practicing religious Taoists. Thus, for administrative purposes, the Chinese Taoist Association[4] (中國道教協會, CTA) recognizes only two sects of Taoism, Zhengyi and Quanzhen. In practical terms, what this means is that all sects that allow ordained Taoists to marry and otherwise lead largely secular lives are lumped into the Zhengyi category, even if the actual sects into which these Taoists were ordained are not actually a part of Zhengyi Taoism. Similarly, monastic manifestations of religious Taoism are lumped into the Quanzhen sect. That being said, the overwhelming majority of formally designated Quanzhen Taoists in the People's Republic of China are, in fact, members of two subsects, Dragon Gate and Mount Hua (龍門 and 華山, respectively), which have always historically been a part of Quanzhen Taoism and which trace their origins to two of the religious movement's founders. Thus, the government-designated Quanzhen label does indeed accord with most adherents' actual religious self-identity, and the Chinese government has inherited conditions favorable to the creation of a centralized system for managing monastic (and putatively monastic) Taoists that is not unlike the systems it uses to control other major religions, public educational institutions, journalism, and so forth.

4 Although the word "Taoism" is often spelled with a D in English language materials originating in the People's Republic of China as well as in western writings that adhere to the Hanyu Pinyin system of transliteration, the Chinese Taoist Association still retains the older English spelling. This paper uses the T spelling throughout, except when referring to organizations or quoting texts that use the D spelling.

The centralized management of Quanzhen religious affairs is the responsibility of the Chinese Taoist Association, whose headquarters in Beijing are conjoined with the White Cloud Temple (白雲觀), the capital's largest, oldest, and best-known Quanzhen monastery. The Chinese Taoist Association is itself an arm of the United Front Work Department (統一戰線工作部, UFWD),[5] which in turn is a department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (中國共產黨中央委員會). While it is impossible to comprehensively discuss the UFWD's history, structure, and functions in this paper, it suffices to review University of Canterbury political scientist Anne-Marie Brady's breakdown of its core duties in the Xi Jinping era, which includes the following:

> 1. Efforts to control the Chinese diaspora, to utilize them as agents of Chinese foreign policy, and to suppress any hints of dissent.
>
> 2. Efforts to coopt foreigners to support and promote the CCP's foreign policy goals, and to provide access to strategic information and technical knowledge.
>
> 3. Supporting a global, multi-platform, pro-PRC strategic communication strategy aimed at suppressing critical perspectives on the CCP and its policies, and promoting the CCP agenda.
>
> 4. Supporting the China-centered economic, transportation, and communications strategic bloc known as the Belt and Road Initiative.[6]

Operating through a pyramidal organizational structure with the Chinese Communist Party at its pinnacle, the CTA sees to it that directives originating with the UFWD are implemented at the provincial and city levels by local Taoist associations, all of which were established by and answer to the core Taoist association in Beijing. Numerous examples of what this means in practical terms appear later in this paper.[7]

Despite Quanzhen Taoism having a centuries-long history and a broad geographical footprint encompassing most of the historically Han-dominated areas of the Chinese mainland, records suggest that the Quanzhen sect had only a miniscule presence in late-imperial era Fujian, a province located in southeast

5 The full name of the UFWD is 中共中央統一戰線工作部, which English-language Chinese government websites translate as the "United Front Work Department of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee." English translations obscure the presence of the character 戰, which refers to "war," "warfare," "battle," "fighting," and "combat." A closer translation of the United Front's name might read "United Battlefront."

6 Brady, "On the Correct Use of Terms."

7 The author of this paper witnessed this power structure in action in 2016 when visiting a rural Quanzhen Taoist temple that had been ordered to rid itself of all Buddhist publications, CDs, and VCDs that were produced by Taiwanese Buddhist associations and mailed to the temple in bulk so that they could be distributed to visitors for free. As a part of a nationwide effort to reduce the influence of Taiwanese Buddhist organizations in China, these media had to be turned over to the State Administration of Religious Affairs (國家宗教事務局 or SARA — renamed National Religious Affairs Administration or NRAA and merged with the United Front Work Department in 2018) for incineration. The monastery's leadership explained that they received multiple visits from cadres working for SARA (which prior to 2018 administered the Chinese Taoist Association), who made it clear that any failure to turn over all of the Taiwanese Buddhist materials in the monastery would lead to serious consequences. The Taoists reluctantly complied with the orders.

A follower of Taiwanese "folk Taoism," possibly under spiritual possession, practices self-flagellation at a temple in Taichung. The anarchic nature of Taiwanese folk Taoism differs greatly from staid, institutionalized versions of the religion, especially Quanzhen Taoism.

China.[8] It was from Fujian province that successive waves of Han immigrants came to Taiwan, first in the mid-1600s, when parts of Taiwan were a Dutch colony, and again in the late 1700s, when parts of Taiwan were under the control of the Qing dynasty. These Han immigrants brought the Taoist religion with them, but it came primarily in the forms of the Zhengyi and Lingbao sects, in addition to the Three Dames of Mount Lü (閭山三奶) sect, a non-institutionalized approach to Taoist religion with pronounced mediumistic and shamanic elements that is sometimes described as being a form of "folk Taoism." Indeed, the only ordained Quanzhen Taoist known to have come to Taiwan in the imperial era was Yuan Minggao (袁明高), a monk in the Quanzhen Dragon Gate sect from Sichuan province who settled in the city of Tainan in 1854 but passed away there without having taken any known disciples.[9]

Hsiao Chin-ming (蕭進銘), professor of religious studies at Aletheia University, describes the Taoist scene in the regions from which Taiwan's early Chinese colonizers emigrated as follows:

> Before as well as during Taiwan's period of colonization by Japan [1895–1945], the majority of the main island of Taiwan's population—aside from a small number of indigenous ethnic groups whose languages belong to the Austronesian language group—were members of the Han ethnicity from the Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. Among these Han people, the majority were speakers of Hokkien from Zhangzhou and Quanzhou prefectures in southern Fujian. The second-largest population consisted of Hakka people from Tingzhou prefecture in western Fujian as well as Chaozhou and Huizhou prefectures in eastern Guangdong. Given how the main island of Taiwan's population took shape, quite naturally the form of religious Taoism that its ethnically Han members believed in was entirely transplanted by immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong. Research into Fujianese and Guangdongese religious Taoism has shown that the Zhengyi Taoist sect based on Dragon-Tiger Mountain in Jiangxi province has held primacy ever since the Song and Yuan dynasties. Although Quanzhen Taoism—which originated in Shaanxi and Shandong in northern China during the Jin dynasty, was founded by Wang Chongyang, and revolves around the practice of internal alchemy—was transmitted to Fujian in the Yuan dynasty and Guangdong in the early Qing dynasty, it remained concentrated in northern Fujian, and was quite scarce in the province's southern regions. Moreover, after the Ming dynasty, as Quanzhen Taoism's influence waned, Taoists in this sect became even rarer [in Fujian], and as a result historical gazetteers and district records very seldom make mention of Quanzhen Taoist religionists' activities. As for Guangdong, although Quanzhen Taoism remained more influential there than

8 Goossaert, "Counting the Monks," 60–61. Goossaert provides census records from 1737 to 1739 showing that there were only 44 registered Quanzhen monks or nuns in a province with a total population of over 7,620,429.

9 Hong, "Tradition and Adaptation," 117.

> it did in Fujian, there are no records of Quanzhen Taoists from this province among the immigrants who came to Taiwan. As such, Zhengyi Taoism maintained its primacy in the religious Taoism brought to Taiwan by immigrants from southern and western Fujian and eastern Guangdong. This situation has continued through to the present day, and prior to the Japanese colonial period Quanzhen was not transmitted to Taiwan.[10]

Some publications have quoted the same paper from which the above passage was drawn to advocate the idea Quanzhen Taoism arrived in Taiwan in the late 1940s in the period of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's retreat to the island, when approximately one million Republic of China soldiers and civilians migrated across the Taiwan Strait. For instance, in his paper "In the Shadow of the Spirit Image: The Production, Consecration, and Enshrinement of a Daoist Statue in Northern Taiwan," Aaron K. Reich writes:

> According to Hsiao Chin-ming, several Quanzhen lineages made their way to Taiwan from the southeastern coastal regions of mainland China during the waves of immigration between 1945 and 1987. These lineages formed schools primarily in Taipei, several of which endure to the present day, though priests belonging to these lineages are fewer in number as compared to priests of the Orthodox Unity (Zhengyi 正一) tradition, the dominant sect of Daoism in Taiwan.[11]

While Reich is not incorrect in pointing out that Hsiao notes the arrival of migrants affiliated with Quanzhen Taoism in Taiwan between 1945 and 1987, of key importance is that the three individuals who Hsiao states "made transmissions that spread quite widely, were sectarian in nature, and continue to be inherited without interruption in the present day in the form of Quanzhen lineage teachings" were Jinfeng Shanren (金風山人, 1880-?), Chen Tun-chao (陳墩超, 1896-1993), and Chen Chih-pin (陳志濱, 1913-1990).[12] Hsiao points out that "Jinfeng Shanren and the two Chens were all lay disciples of Quanzhen Taoism who led secular lives, and moreover they were inheritors of teachings in the tradition of Dragon Gate Taoists Wu Chongxu (伍沖虛, 1573-1644) and Liu Huayang (柳華陽, 1736-?), whose primary teachings revolved around

10 Hsiao, "An Investigating Study of the Wu-Liu Branch of Quanzhen Longmen School in Taiwan," 240–241. The above text was translated by the author of this paper; the bracketed contents are my own. The original Chinese is as follows:
台灣本島居民在日治時期（含）以前，除少數南島語系的原住民族外，大部分皆屬來自中國廣東、福建之漢民族；漢族當中，又以閩南漳、泉二州之福佬人為大宗，來自閩西汀州及粵東潮、惠二州之客家人為次。如是的一種族群構成，自然也導致台灣本島漢族所信仰之道教，皆全盤移植自移民之閩、粵祖籍地。考閩、粵二省之道教，自宋、元以降，即一向以江西龍虎山之正一道為主流。源自金代中國北方的陝西及山東，由王重陽所創立，並以內丹修煉為主之全真道，雖早在元代及清初，即分別傳入福建及廣東二省，惟前者集中在閩北，閩南地區較為少見，且明代以後，因全真教勢的衰頹，全真道士更是稀少，相關史志亦絕少提到有關全真道士活動的記錄。至於廣東一省，全真的影響，雖遠比福建來的大，但其遷徙至台灣的移民，亦未聽聞有全真道士。是以，由閩南、閩西及粵東各地移民所帶來台灣的道教，仍然是以正一道為主流，至今依舊是如此；在日治之前，全真道似未曾傳播到台灣。

11 Reich, "In the Shadow of the Spirit Image," 295.

12 Hsiao, "An Investigating Study of the Wu-Liu Branch of Quanzhen Longmen School in Taiwan," 242. The passage above translated by the author of this paper. The original reads, "傳衍較廣且具教派性質、現今仍在不斷傳承的全真法脈…"

internal alchemy."[13] Crucially, although Jinfeng Shanren, Chen Tun-chao, and Chen Chih-pin did indeed teach certain practices derived from Quanzhen Taoist praxis to denizens of Taiwan in the mid-to-late 20th century, none of these men lived as Taoist monks or priests, nor did they embark on religious careers as semi-lay Taoists offering ritual, talismanic, or exorcistic services in Taoist temples or at domestic altars. Instead, they served their communities and students by teaching meditative or health-promoting "internal alchemy" self-cultivation practices. As such, while these men and others in their era can be credited with introducing elements of the Quanzhen tradition to Taiwan, it would be overreach to call them "priests" and to directly compare them with the Taiwanese Zhengyi Taoists of their day.

The history cited above shows that although a small number of people who joined the Republic of China's exodus to Taiwan in the late 1940s could claim to be "lay disciples" of Quanzhen Taoism or its offshoots, and although a small number of the Taoist ritual masters who fled China performed liturgies borrowed from Quanzhen Taoism,[14] this religious movement remained effectively absent in Taiwan until the ending of martial law and the thawing of Taiwan-PRC relations in the late 1980s made travel between the two countries possible. The long absence of Quanzhen religious institutions in Taiwan came to an end almost as soon as Taiwanese citizens were permitted to travel to the PRC. The first temple to send its members to China to study Quanzhen teachings was the Temple of the Compassionate Sage (慈聖宮) in Nantou County, which was founded in 1985 as a part of Taiwan's homegrown Tzu-Hui Society (or Compassion Society, from 慈惠堂) religious movement, and which had a member travel to Beijing to become a disciple of the White Cloud Temple's then-abbot Huang Xinyang (黃信陽), a Quanzhen monk who went on to serve as a vice chairman of the CTA from 1998 until 2020.[15] The fact that the Nantou Temple of the Compassionate Sage was originally affiliated with the Tzu-Hui Society religion bears consideration, as this point of overlap between two distinct religious movements augurs how Quanzhen Taoism's transmission onto Taiwanese soil would unfold in the years that followed and on into the present day, a point explored in detail in subsequent sections. The Tzu-Hui Society religion spread from its base in Hualien County after 1949 and encompassed hundreds of temples with thousands of adherents all over Taiwan by the mid-1980s.[16] Although its tutelary deity, the Golden Mother of the

13 Ibid., 242. Quoted passage translated by the author from "金風山人及陳敦甫二人，皆為全真在家居士，且都同屬龍門宗伍沖虛及柳華陽一系以下的傳人，主要傳承的內容為內丹。" Dates of birth and death in parentheses added by the author.

14 Lee, "The Daoist Priesthood and Secular Society," 140.

15 Cheng, "The Transplantation and Inheritance of Religious Music," 86–94.

16 Jordan and Overmyer, The Flying Phoenix, 129.

Demonstrating the close link between religion and electoral politics in Taiwan, then-president Tsai Ing-wen visits a Tzu-Hui Society temple in 2019.
Credit: Taiwan Presidential Office, licensed under CC BY 2.0

Jasper Pool, is seen as an emanation of the Queen Mother of the West, a goddess revered throughout the long history of Taoist religion, the Tzu-Hui Society does not claim to be a Taoist sect and is generally not seen as such. Nevertheless, in keeping with contemporary Taiwanese religion's remarkable openness to syncretism and collaboration, the Nantou Temple of the Compassionate Sage's turn toward Quanzhen Taoism did not lead it to renounce its ties to the Tzu-Hui Society, nor was it in any way "excommunicated" from its original fold.[17] Moreover, when a group of Chinese Quanzhen Taoist monks and nuns was invited to Taiwan in 2017 to ritually transmit "lay precepts," the three-day ceremony was hosted at one of the Tzu-Hui Society's largest temples in Hualien County—in a shrine room dedicated to the seven founding saints of the Quanzhen religion, no less.[18]

These abovementioned points of interaction between the Tzu-Hui Society and nascent Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoism in the late 1980s and again in the late 2010s give a sense of the overall flavor of Quanzhen's transmission into Taiwan. That is to say, even though formal manifestations of Quanzhen religion were absent in Taiwan prior to the late 1980s, when the sect finally arrived on the nation's shores, it did not encounter a vacuum waiting to be filled with an all-

17 Reported to the author during an interview in Nantou in 2024.

18 Quanzhenjiao Penglai Xianjing, "Penglai Immortal Isle Quanzhen Taoist Transmission of Precepts Announcement," Facebook, November 15, 2017.

new form of Taoism, nor did it find virgin soil in which to grow its roots. Additionally, because Taiwan's Sinitic religions (a category including large, organized phenomena such as Zhengyi Taoism, the Tzu-Hui Society, Mazu worship, and I-Kuan Tao, as well as innumerable small-scale iterations of "folk religion") tend to be extremely catholic in outlook and practice, the newly arriving Quanzhen faith did not come up against the kinds of "hard edges" that can wall off religions in other countries, and which might have led Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoism to develop a solid, independent identity with a clearly defined "in-group" and "out-group." Instead, in its brief history in Taiwan, Quanzhen Taoism tends to have been adopted by individuals and groups who already held beliefs and roles in other facets of the Taiwanese religious scene, and who did not necessarily relinquish those roles in order to join Quanzhen Taoism.

As this paper will show, these newcomers time and again found ways to maintain multiple religious roles suited to different settings, or to simply blend their former roles together with their new roles as Quanzhen Taoists. Finally, unlike other forms of Taoism, which were brought to Taiwan as integral parts of successive waves of Han immigration in the 1700s and 1800s, Quanzhen Taoism has been brought to Taiwan almost entirely by native-born Taiwanese citizens who traveled to China, often repeatedly and for extended periods of time, in order to obtain the formal initiations, theoretical knowledge, ritual training, texts, clothing, and sacred implements of this tradition, and then brought these things *back* to Taiwan. Upon returning home, these newly minted Taiwanese Quanzhen disciples have tended to act independently, seeming to take little or no direction from their masters and coreligionists in China as they go about setting up altars, initiating and training disciples, offering courses to the public, and offering ritual services in their home communities.[19] As such, Taiwanese Quanzhen is neither a religion belonging to migrant communities, nor a religion that was brought from abroad by missionaries. On the contrary, it is a religion that was sought out and obtained by self-motivated locals who have maintained an extremely high level of autonomy (both within the growing Taiwanese Quanzhen community, as well as with respect to the Chinese Taoist Association) throughout this entire decades-long transplantation process. The next section of this paper will paint a picture of this religious community, identify the ways in which Quanzhen Taoism is being "Taiwanized," and to consider the relationship between Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists and the UFWD and its subsidiary, the CTA.

19 The word "master" is used throughout this paper in the religious sense. It derives from the word *shifu* (師父), which Taoists use to address and refer to the teachers they have formally entered into preceptor-disciple relationships with; no political overtones are implied.

Paper effigies created for a Zhengyi Taoist ritual delivering a deceased Taoist priest to the heavenly realms held in Keelung, Taiwan in 2019.
Credit: Mattias Daly

02

Why does Quanzhen appeal to Taiwanese Taoists?

Members of the Tucheng Quanzhen Divine Temple (土城臺灣全真仙觀) on a pilgrimage to southern Taiwan in 2012. Regular inter-temple visits are an important way Taiwanese Taoists build and maintain community. (No members or affiliates of the Tucheng Quanzhen Divine Temple were interviewed for this story)
Credit: Tzuhsun Hsu, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

A little-studied area of religious activity

Very little scholarly research into Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoism has been conducted. Aside from Hsiao Chin-ming's aforementioned paper, which focuses on 20th century lay Taoist teachers of internal alchemy, the only other academic paper I have located is Peng Chia-Wei's (彭嘉煒) "The Revivement Movement of Quanzhen Daoism in Taiwan: Taking as Examples the Zhuang-Yen Sanctuary in I-Lan and Quanzhen Divine Temple in Tu-Cheng," which documents a temple founded in 1987 in the city of Sanchong (now a district of New Taipei City) by Jeung Ming-gaai (張銘佳 , 1928-1994), who temporarily relocated to Taiwan from Hong Kong.[20] Peng's paper provides a fascinating glimpse into the functioning of this temple, which was later moved to Tucheng in New Taipei City and taken over by Jeung's Taiwanese disciple Wu Ping-jen (巫平仁), but it tells us little about the circumstances of Jeung Ming-gaai's attempt to transmit a Hong Kong-based form of Quanzhen Taoism to Taiwan (which was cut short by his death only seven years after establishing the temple) or Wu Ping-jen's training and initiation into

20 Peng, "The Revivement Movement of the Quanzhen Daoism in Taiwan," 114–116.

the tradition.[21] Additionally, Peng leaves as a stone unturned the question of whether or not Hong Kong's primarily non-monastic Quanzhen tradition should be regarded as a distinct religious movement that operates independently of the monastic form of Quanzhen Taoism currently headquartered in Beijing.[22]

The paucity of research into the development of Taiwan's post-martial law Quanzhen Taoist religious movement makes this an area ripe for inquiry. It would require a book-length effort to comprehensively tell the story of Quanzhen's recent arrival in Taiwan—a task that will hopefully be taken up by future researchers—but this paper might provide a stepping stone on the way towards better understanding how Quanzhen came to Taiwanese shores, who its members are, what their motivations look like, how they practice and perform their roles as Quanzhen Taoists, and how cross-strait politics affect their ideologies, affiliations, and religious lives. With these points in mind, this section will draw upon oral interviews conducted between January and November of 2024 in an attempt to report on how these Taiwanese Quanzhen initiates see themselves and their religion. The majority of the interviewees spoke freely on politically sensitive topics. Because all of them expressed the intention of continuing to make journeys to the People's Republic of China (which has almost zero tolerance for dissenting speech on issues pertaining to Taiwan's de jure or de facto status as an independent nation-state) in order to congregate with other Taoists, receive teachings, and take part in religious ceremonies, the interviewees' names and geographic locations have been obscured so as to ensure their privacy and safety.

Why Quanzhen?

In a country like Taiwan, where the spiritual marketplace is already crowded with numerous Taoist and Taoist-adjacent sects (and which is remarkably open to the founding of new sects and the

21 Hsiao Chin-ming offers some additional insight into Jeung's religious activities during his brief time in Taiwan, stating that he primarily taught Quanzhen religious ritual. See Hsiao, "An Investigating Study of the Wu-Liu Branch of Quanzhen Longmen School in Taiwan," 243–244.

22 Regarding this question, Lai Chi Tim (黎志添) writes in "Hong Kong Daoism: A Study of Daoist Altars and Lü Dongbin Cults":

> In Hong Kong, organized monasticism has never been practiced in Daoist temples or altars, although many people worship Wang Chongyang and Qiu Chuji (1148–1227), the first founders of the Longmen lineage of the Quanzhen order. According to Shiga Ichiko's collected data, at least 29 Daoist temples or Daoist altars in Hong Kong are predominantly devoted to the worship of Patriarch Lü. Today, if one asks Daoist priests and devotees of these Daoist temples and altars to which lineage they belong, most will answer "Longmen"—just as Buddhist monks are likely to answer "Linji." Nevertheless, the truth is that almost all of these "Longmen" Daoist altars and temples are the offspring of Lüzu tan parents that flourished in the Pearl River Delta from the late Qing dynasty until the early Republican period. Not only were they founded without any direct link to the official lineage of the Quanzhen order, but they also retain the appearance and characteristics of their Lüzu tan parent institutions. (465)

In the above passage, the term "Lüzu tan" refers to spirit-writing altars devoted to the Taoist deity Lü Dongbin, also known as Patriarch Lü. On page 463 of the same paper, Lai writes, "We should be aware that the origin of most Hong Kong Daoist temples and institutions cannot be disassociated from the larger Lü Dongbin cults that flourished in Guangdong in late imperial China." On the provenance of the "cults" in Guangdong that claimed Quanzhen affiliation, Lai writes on page 468, "we have no evidence to prove that these temples were established on the basis of Quanzhen tradition, such as having an organized monastery, a joining ordination platform, and taking Quanzhen's precept program." (Lai, "Hong Kong Daoism," 463, 465, 468.)

reinterpretation of old ones), the question might arise as to why people with an interest in Taoism would seek membership in a sect that until recently could not be directly accessed without traveling outside of Taiwan. Before presenting the interviewees' own takes on their motivations, it is worth pointing out, while formal religious Quanzhen Taoist organizations were absent in Taiwan prior to the late 1980s, the sect's lore and prestige were by no means absent. Quanzhen Taoism has proselytized among lay populations since its inception in the 12th century, first by establishing lay societies and putting on public theatrical performances, and much later—when advances in printing and literacy allowed for the mass production of texts—through Taoist literature distributed widely as a part of charitable efforts.[23] Not only did Quanzhen Taoist texts printed in late imperial and early Republican China make it to Taiwan, they were reproduced and made widely available. Some texts, such as those telling the legends of Quanzhen Taoism's founder Wang Chongyang and his seven main disciples, were placed in temples throughout Taiwan as proselytizing "morality books," meant to be taken home free of charge.[24] Others were compiled and sold in bookstores, as with the massive tranche of Taoist texts entrusted to the Kuomintang official Hsiao Tien-shih (萧天石, 1909-1986) by a Taoist in Sichuan province, which he and his family brought to Taiwan at the end of the Chinese civil war and then published between 1953 and 1983.[25] At the same time, fictionalized and highly fantastical caricatures of Wang Chongyang and other early Quanzhen Taoists appeared as swashbuckling heroes in Hong Kong author Louis Cha Leung-yung's (查良鏞, sobriquet Jin Yong 金庸, 1924–2018) epic kung-fu novels, which were wildly popular in Taiwan in the 1970s and 1980s. In short, although Taoism enthusiasts would have been hard pressed to locate a Quanzhen temple in Taiwan before 1987, they might well have found Quanzhen texts being handed out for free at other Taoist denominations' temples or on sale in bookstores, and they could easily have encountered Quanzhen-derived meditation and health-preservation practices taught by local internal alchemy groups. This meant that, prior to the end of martial law, despite the absence of its priests and temples, the Quanzhen sect already occupied a place in

23 On Quanzhen Taoist theater in the Yuan dynasty, see Hawkes, "Quanzhen Plays and Quanzhen Masters," 153-70. On book printing and distribution through Taoist communities in late imperial China see Goossaert, "The Jin'gaishan Network," 95–97 and Valussi, "Printing and Religion in the Life of Fu Jinquan," 1–52.

24 On the contents and distribution of these books, see Durand-Dastès, "A Late Qing Blossoming of the Seven Lotus," 78–112.

25 See Valussi, "War, Nationalism, and Xiao Tianshi's [Hsiao Tien-shih] Transmission of Daoist Scriptures from China to Taiwan," 143–189. Hsiao's compilations of Taoist texts remain in print in Taiwan today.

the minds of many if not most Taiwanese people interested in Taoism.

Early post-martial law enthusiasm for traveling to China to learn Quanzhen Taoism can be seen with Interviewee A, who oversees a Taoist temple with monastic quarters in a major Taiwanese municipality. In our interview she stated that she began visiting China in the early 1990s (she could not remember the exact year) in order to make pilgrimages to holy sites and visit internal alchemy practitioners. According to Interviewee A, "In the years after the Reform and Opening-up [policies enacted under Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping], the economy [in China] wasn't in great shape. I supported [Quanzhen monks and nuns] with the odd red envelope [containing a cash gift] in order to gain an understanding of how well people were cultivating Taoist alchemy." Interviewee A was originally trained in both the Taoist rituals of the Lingbao sect as well as a form of internal alchemy taught by a lay teacher in Taiwan—it was in large part her interest in internal alchemy, which is still practiced by some Quanzhen Taoists in China, that impelled her to cross the Taiwan Strait in the early 1990s. Her point about freely slipping red envelopes (a traditional way to politely offer monetary gifts) to the people she visited at a time when Taiwan's economy was booming and the PRC's economy was still struggling echoes statements made to me by Interviewee B, an elderly lay Quanzhen Taoist who has run a qigong and internal alchemy meditation group in northern Taiwan since the 1980s. According to Interviewee B, many of the ostensibly secret internal alchemy methods he teaches were transmitted to him by impoverished Taoists in China in the late 1980s and 1990s, when a sincere interest in Taoism combined with the gift of twenty American dollars in a red envelope was often sufficient to spur the revelation of esoteric teachings.

Although some interviewees described relationships with their Chinese preceptors that are not colored by monetary exchanges, the generosity of Taiwanese pilgrims visiting Quanzhen temples in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s may well have played a role in leading many Chinese Taoists to embrace their Taiwanese visitors, thereby facilitating the establishment of ongoing relationships and ensuring that future Taiwanese seekers could reasonably hope to receive a friendly welcome from Quanzhen monks and nuns when visiting holy sites in China. Additionally, the fact that rare esoteric teachings could be obtained during relatively short visits to China may have been attractive to Taiwanese seekers who would otherwise have had to enter into lengthy discipleships with Taoist teachers from established lineages in Taiwan before being granted access to closely guarded "inner door" teachings. And it was not simply teachings that Taiwanese visitors sought in exchange for their munificence. Interviewee C, a relatively young Quanzhen Taoist monk who attends to an old Taoist temple not previously associated with

Quanzhen Taoism in southern Taiwan, told me that quite a lot of money flowed into Chinese temples in the 1980s and 1990s at a time when Taoist-adjacent mediumistic temples became extremely popular in Taiwan. Although these temples tended to operate independently of each other and of larger religious organizations, some of their officiants still desired to gain imprimatur by tying themselves to centuries-old institutions. Attaining a formal Zhengyi Taoist identity in Taiwan would require years of apprenticeship followed by arduous tests, including climbing "sword ladders," while receiving recognition as fully fledged Quanzhen Taoist monks or nuns could require a yearslong stay in a temple in China. According to Interviewee C, some Taiwanese folk religious spirit mediums seeking a shortcut to status made large "donations" to Taoist temples in China in exchange for antique statuary and other relics from Quanzhen temples, the possession of which conferred these individuals enhanced religious legitimacy back home in Taiwan.

One interviewee's comments suggest that even though Taiwan's economy is now dwarfed by China's, the displays of largesse by early Taiwanese seekers have not been forgotten and continue to color the relationships between Chinese and Taiwanese Quanzhen adherents. Interviewee D, a monastic Quanzhen Taoist who founded and oversees a small suburban temple, complained to me that even though China is now much richer than Taiwan, Taiwanese disciples are still seen as a source of hefty donations and payments. She pointed out that some of the massive bronze incense burners located in the plazas in front of Taoist temples on Mount Wudang in Hubei province were donated by moneyed Taiwanese citizens. According to Interviewee D, thanks to this history of monetary exchange, some Chinese Quanzhen Taoists actively angle for donations, either by allowing those Taiwanese visitors who are willing to part with their money to take part in ceremonies and initiations they are not qualified for, or even by having their acolytes directly inform Taiwanese visitors that red envelopes containing specific sums of money are expected in exchange for establishing a relationship with a master. Not only did Interviewee D find these practices distasteful, she also noted that they are part and parcel of a general lack of interest in the Chinese Quanzhen community when it comes to supporting the growth and development of Quanzhen Taoism in Taiwan.

That traveling to China to study Quanzhen Taoism can be an easier way to formally enter the Taoist religion than joining an established Taiwanese denomination continues to be a consideration in some Taiwanese Taoists' decision-making processes in the present day. One factor that can be a barrier of entry to local Taiwanese sects is language. For example, Interviewee C reported to me that he chose the Quanzhen sect in part because a high degree of proficiency in the Taiwanese Hokkien language is required to chant and sing the scriptures used in Zhengyi rituals,

Monks and nuns from the Southern Mount Wudang Taoist Association pose with miniature PRC flags in 2019 during a "United Front work" session in which they are shown video of Xi Jinping addressing the People's Liberation Army.
Credit: Hubei Provincial Committee of the UFWD of the CCP 中共湖北省委统一战线工作部

and he simply lacks the linguistic ability. Conversely, the ceremonies he learned in China are performed in Mandarin, which is his mother tongue.

While language was one factor that helped Interviewee C decide to take up residence as a full-time monk in China in the late 2010s, he reported another issue that came up in multiple interviews with other informants. According to Interviewee C, Taoists in general had a fairly poor reputation in Taiwanese society when he was a boy. People often looked down on them as men of questionable morals, and for this reason his parents never took him to visit local Taoist temples. Interviewee D made a similar observation in 2018 when she hired a troupe of Zhengyi Taoist priests to perform a ritual at a Taoist temple in northern Taiwan where she was a resident and volunteer. Interviewee D was dismayed by the lack of comportment in the Zhengyi ritual masters, who slouched around and chain smoked during breaks in the ritual service, much at odds with her understanding of the deportment befitting a Taoist priest. In fact, according to her recollection, it was this specific observation that triggered a spur-of-the-moment decision to register for a half-year course in Quanzhen Taoist ritual in a major Chinese city that she saw advertised on Facebook, thus beginning her formal religious career.

In a conversation at his home, religious studies scholar Hsiao Chin-ming expressed thoughts that resonated with Interviewee C and Interviewee D's comments. According to Hsiao, Quanzhen Taoism's potential to continue advancing in Taiwan emerges from two interrelated factors. The first of these is that Quanzhen practitioners tend not to "clock out" at the end of the day (compared with religious Taoists in

other sects, who usually switch to civilian clothes after officiating a ritual and spend the rest of their day busy with secular activities), and instead may spend a significant amount of their personal time engaged in meditative self-cultivation practices while upholding varying degrees of asceticism. These activities deepen Quanzhen adherents' engagement with religious life and can strengthen bonds within their community. Secondly, Hsiao predicts that Taiwanese people searching the religious marketplace for Taoist ritual masters will take note of Quanzhen groups' evident vegetarianism, temperance, and chastity (though it should be acknowledged that most Quanzhen adherents in Taiwan are not monks or nuns in the strictest sense, and many are married or in romantic partnerships). These traits compare favorably with the general image of Buddhists in Taiwan, who are often considered to be more disciplined and wholesome than their Taoist counterparts, and thereby increase the Quanzhen sect's competitiveness, suggesting it has the potential to continue attracting followers and become an enduring local presence.[26]

26 It should be added that some Taiwanese people prefer to engage the services of a Taoist priest who gives off an air of swagger and flamboyance. Professor Hsieh Tsung-hui (謝聰輝) of National Taiwan Normal University pointed out to me that when a Taiwanese person who has commissioned a ritual sees the lead Taoist officiant arrive in a large, late-model Mercedes Benz, this both indicates that the priest's rituals must be quite efficacious (thus allowing him to make enough money to afford such a car), just as it increases the prestige of the patron who was able to secure the services of a busy, expensive ritual master.

03

The coopting of Quanzhen Taoism as a tool for soft power in Xi Jinping's China

Many Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists may prefer not to think about contemporary politics and may even see themselves as participants in a sacred mission that has managed to outlive the rises and falls of countless dynasties precisely because it transcends worldly affairs. Be that as it may, as interviewees' recollections throughout this paper make clear, this does not mean that there is an easy way for Taoists to actually avoid politics. Not only are all formal Quanzhen Taoist sites and events in China sanctioned, managed, and surveilled by cadres belonging to the NRAA and the UFWD, additionally, Taoist activities have even caught the attention of China's top leadership. For instance, on 24 September 2023, Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Wang Huning (王滬寧) released a letter of congratulations to the 5th International Taoism Forum, where the World Federation of Taoism was officially founded.[27] In addition to chairing the CPPCC, Wang is a member of the seven-person Politburo Standing Committee (the most powerful political entity in China after Xi Jinping himself). The *New York Times* recently reported that Wang "has been overseeing efforts to deepen Chinese influence over [Taiwan], through selective displays of good will and covert influence activities."[28] The *New Yorker* describes him as "one of Xi Jinping's closest advisers, the preeminent craftsman of Xi's

27 National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, "Wang Huning Sends Congratulatory Letter to 5th International Taoism Forum."

28 Buckley, "China's Strongman Rule Has a New Job: Winning Taiwan."

CPPCC chairman Wang Huning addresses a nationwide meeting of religious leaders on 2 February 2024 in Beijing. Credit: Ezhou City United Front Work Department (中共鄂州市委統一戰線工作部)

authoritarian ideology."[29] Indeed, both the CPPCC's English-language website and *China Military*, an official English-language mouthpiece of the People's Liberation Army, reported on 16 June 2024 that Wang took to the stage at the 16th Straits Forum in Xiamen, Fujian, and "stressed that China has the resolve, the confidence and the ability to smash separatist attempts for 'Taiwan independence' in any form."[30] Given Wang's position in the Chinese government, his congratulatory letter to the 5th International Taoism Forum is clearly rife with subtext—a point that is driven home by the fact that Shi Taifeng (石泰峰), who is both head of the UFWD and a member of the Politburo, delivered a keynote address at the opening ceremony of the same religious event.[31]

That the United Front sees Quanzhen Taoism as a tool to be used in its efforts to strengthen the CCP's power and influence both at home and abroad is not a matter of speculation; rather, it is a strategic policy that the United Front loudly broadcasts through its leadership's and subordinates' speeches and public writings. Case in point, in February 2024, Quanzhen Taoist monk Li Guangfu (李光富), current chairman of the Chinese Taoist Association, published a communique entitled "Thoroughly and Persistently Enacting Patriotic Education in the World of Taoism" in which he declared, "We will proactively develop relationships with friendly organizations in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and abroad, so as to bring Taoism's function as a spiritual link into play, lending our strength to help establish a community of common destiny for mankind and to safeguard our country's peaceful reunification."[32] Li's statement is loaded with what Australian Sinologist Geremie R. Barmé calls "New China Newspeak"—seemingly innocuous language that is in fact deeply politicized.[33] For instance, rather than being a vague bromide calling for world peace, the "community of common destiny for mankind" Li invokes is actually a well-worn CCP slogan tied to Xi Jinping's desire to abolish the norms of the post-World War II international order. *The China Media Project's* Stella Chen writes:

29 Che, "The Father of Chinese Authoritarianism Has a Message for America."

30 National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. "Wang Huning Stresses China's Resolve to Shatter 'Taiwan Independence' Attempts"; China Military, "Senior Official Stresses China's Resolve in Smashing 'Taiwan Independence' Attempts."

31 Renminwang, "Wang Huning Sends a Letter of Congratulations to the Opening Ceremony of the Fifth International Taoist Forum Held at Mount Mao." Shi Taifeng's public pronouncements regarding Taiwan fall in line with those of Wang Huning. For example, at the annual Overseas Chinese World Conference for Promoting Peaceful Reunification of China, a United Front-organized event held in Hong Kong in August 2024, Shi declared that Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party is "stubbornly holding onto Taiwan independence and recklessly inflaming antagonism across the strait," but, "the initiative to solve the Taiwan problem is in the grip of the mainland side." (see Tse, "Top Beijing Officials Urge Resolution Against Taiwan Independence at Hong Kong Conference.")

32 Chinese Taoist Association, "Li Guangfu: Thoroughly and Persistently Enacting Patriotic Education in the World of Taoism." The original Chinese, translated above by the author of this paper, reads, "我們積極開展與港澳台及國外道教界和其他友好團體的交往，發揮道教的精神紐帶作用，助力構建人類命運共同體和維護國家的和平統一。"

33 Barmé, "New China Newspeak."

> In the Chinese political discourse, Xi's "community of common destiny for mankind" has been characterized as offering "a Chinese Solution and Chinese wisdom to the reform and innovation of global human rights governance." The innovation lies in relegating all questions of individual rights to matters of peace and security, development, national sovereignty and state-to-state equality.[34]

Similarly, Li's invocation of "peaceful reunification" is an unambiguous reference to the PRC's ceaseless efforts to subjugate Taiwan—this exact term even appears in the name of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (中國和平統一促進會), an anti-Taiwanese independence organization active in 91 countries that is run by the United Front Work Department.[35]

Further unpacking the allusive "New China Newspeak" in apparatchik-monk Li Guangfu's public statements proves to be an excellent way to gain an understanding of how government-run Taoism actually works. In a 2023 press release hosted on the official UFWD website entitled "The Fifth International Taoist Forum Will Be Held on Mount Mao in China in September," there appears a sentence reading:

> [CTA chairman Li Guangfu] expressed that the Fifth International Taoist Forum will deepen the achievements of the previous four forums; continue to thoroughly unearth Taoism's modern values and philosophical wisdom; better persevere with Taoism's move towards Sinicization; highlight the characteristics of Taoism's internationalization and its adaptation to the times; exhibit the status of modern Chinese freedom of religious belief and the situation of Taoism's healthy intergenerational transmission; and promote communication and cooperation between Taoist associations in China's regions of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan as well as abroad.[36]

As insipid as this sentence might appear at first glance, it actually contains another sharp political statement. The comment about Taoism's "Sinicization" (from 中國化) might cause readers to do a double take—why on earth would a religion that was born in China two thousand years ago need to be *Sinicized?* Do baseball and rap music need to be Americanized? But this word is no typo. Rather, it is a common term found in Xi Jinping-era PRC political rhetoric, in use since 2015. Writing for the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Naoko Eto of Gakushuin University elaborates:

34 Chen, "Community of Common Destiny for Mankind."

35 Dotson, "The United Front Work Department Goes Global."

36 United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee, "The Fifth International Taoist Forum Will Be Held on Mount Mao in China in September." The original Chinese, translated above by the author of this paper, reads, "他表示，第五屆國際道教論壇將深化前四屆論壇的成果，繼續深入挖掘道教的當代價值和思想智慧，更好地堅持道教中國化方向，彰顯道教國際化和時代化特點，展現中國當代宗教信仰自由狀況與道教健康傳承的態勢，增進與中國港澳台地區及國外道教團體、文化及學術界的交流與合作。" It is worth noting that Li Guangfu—a religious leader who could not have risen to the top of religious Taoism's power structure in China without United Front-approval—was "elected" chairman of the World Federation of Taoism in 2023.

Headquarters of the United Front Work Department in Beijing.
Credit: Zheng Zhou, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

A key phrase in the religious policy of the Xi Jinping administration is the "Sinicization of religion." This phrase was first used by Xi Jinping at the Central United Front Work Conference in May 2015. The conference was held by the Communist Party's United Front Work Department (UFWD) at a national level for the first time in about nine years. Because of the sense of crisis concerning changes in the domestic and international climate, the conference decided to strengthen its control to make socially influential groups and individuals conform to the policies of the Communist Party. Here Xi Jinping announced, as a means to govern the people, that the Communist Party could give active guidance to religions so that they could adapt themselves to socialist society, adhere to the direction of Sinicized religion, and increase the standard of the regulations controlling religion.

At the April 2016 National Conference on Religious Work, Xi presented the policies that would involve the Party and the state in religious activities. Here Xi Jinping proposed that "religious affairs carry special importance in the work of the CPC and the central government" and that the "relationship of national security and the unification of the motherland" has a place within "socialist religious theory with Chinese characteristics." This can be interpreted as an instruction to incorporate religion itself into the Party's theory and interpret it. Furthermore, in his speech, Xi Jinping boldly put forth a posture to "lead" religion, emphasizing that the leadership would come from the Communist Party.[37]

To boil Eto's explanation down to a single sentence, "Sinicizing" religious Taoism actually means bringing it to heel and compelling it to carry the CCP's water.

French Quanzhen Taoist nun Karine Martin offers an invaluable boots-on-the-ground

37 Eto, "Why Does the Xi Jinping Administration Advocate the 'Sinicization' of Religion?"

description of the changes wrought by the decade-long Sinicization campaign. Over the course of five months in 2023, Martin traveled thousands of kilometers while visiting more than 100 Taoist temples in provinces all over the PRC, including Guangdong in the south, Gansu and Qinghai in the far northwest, Heilongjiang in the far northeast, and Hubei and Shaanxi in the country's interior. In her book *Monastic Daoism Transformed: The Fate of the Thunder Drum Lineage*, Martin tersely describes the overall atmosphere as one of "desolation and despair" with "temples in a state of decline and disarray."[38] Her observations are worth quoting at length to give a sense of how Taoist life has changed to accommodate Xi Jinping's quest for absolute power:

> …Daoists are forced to leave their temples to attend local meetings and resident training courses in Xi Jinping Thought. Every week there is at least one meeting and every month there is at least one course. During the latter, attendants stay for three to fourteen days in government-run hotels rented by the [CTA] that may even be in other cities or faraway provinces. Notice given is always very short: just ordering a certain monk or nun to show up at a certain place at a certain time within a day or two. Topics are not revealed until the event starts, which also involves exams and reports on the subject covered…
>
> The intensity of the meeting schedule combined with political indoctrination and the prevention of in-depth cultivation causes many monks and nuns to leave the order, especially if they are well educated and thus able to train or work in a secular profession. Temples that had thirty to forty residents are now down to four or five, if that, causing more closures. Another bureaucratic restriction is the addition of the epithet "religious personnel" (*zongjiao yuan* 宗教員) to the passport, which makes it impossible for Daoists to travel abroad, even on vacation, without obtaining various permits. All this makes life so difficult that some Daoists, including ones I met personally last year, fall into deep states of depression and, in some cases, seriously contemplate suicide.
>
> …Daoists are not allowed to interact with foreigners unless they file a large number of permit forms. During my entire stay in China, while I had many meetings with Daoists, they were always semi-secret and there were absolutely no pictures taken—in sharp contrast to the photo mania of previous years. Some even warned me to never tell the [CTA] that they had seen me, emphasizing the political and restrictive nature of this organization, which essentially is the executive arm of the United Front [Work] Department.[39]

Offering a glimpse of how the United Front's uncompromising monitoring of religion extends into the digital realm, Martin describes an "official policy that only allows four Daoist temples in Shaanxi province to have an online presence." This

38 Martin, Monastic Daoism Transformed, 130.

39 Ibid., 133.

policy dictates that "every single post must obtain approval through a formal authorization process." As a result, the "temple websites—so strongly developed just a decade ago—now only speak about Xi Jinping Thought and ways of complying with government guidelines."[40]

The Sinicization campaign does not merely aim to mold Taoism in the CCP's image within China's borders—it also demands that Taoists contribute to the PRC's international ambitions. This orientation was evident on 10 October 2023 in the city of Shiyan in Hubei province, at the "Opening Ceremony for the Eighth Taiwanese Taoist Temple Supervisors' Study Group." Co-organized by the Shiyan City United Front Work Department and the Danjiangkou City United Front Work Department, this event saw Hubei province's Taiwan Affairs Office Director Cheng Liangshen deliver a speech expressing "hopes that the many Taiwanese compatriots—especially those in the Taoist world—will thoroughly recognize the dangers brought by splittist 'Taiwan Independence' activities, and that they will hold fast to ethnic righteousness, clearly see the grand historical trends, participate proactively, and strive to make mental and physical contributions towards the peaceful progress of China-Taiwan relations and the glorious future of the nationality's rejuvenation."[41] The unconcealed politicization of a gathering held in China for the heads of Taiwanese Taoist temples stands in sharp contrast with a belief stated by many of this paper's interviewees: that Taoists should walk away from politics. In the 21st century, the world of politics refuses to let them go.

40 Ibid., 131.

41 Hubei Provincial People's Government Taiwan Affairs Office, "Opening of the Eighth Taiwanese Taoist Temple Supervisors' Study Group." The original Chinese, translated above by the author of this paper, reads: "他希望廣大台灣同胞特別是道教界人士，充分認清'台獨'分裂活動帶來的危害，堅守民族大義，看清歷史大勢，發揮積極作用，為兩岸關係和平發展和民族復興的美好未來貢獻心力。"

CTA chairman Li Guangfu attending a meeting announcing the "Buddhist and Taoist Clerical Personnel Information Query System" on 2 February 2022 at Guangji Buddhist Monastery in Beijing.
Credit: Hubei Wenli College United Front Work Department

A Taoist monk keeps watch over crowds of tourists at White Cloud Monastery in Beijing during the 2025 Lunar New Year celebrations. The banner next to him reads, "Ardently Love the Ancestral Country," a euphemism for the PRC.
Credit: A. Chen

04

The "Taiwanization" of Quanzhen Taoism

Shades of grey

Within China's borders, Quanzhen Taoists currently have little choice but to accept the United Front's overbearing presence or else leave the religious life. This creates a state of affairs that invariably colors Taiwanese Taoists' interactions with their Chinese coreligionists. That being said, this paper finds that we should not conclude from the current situation that Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists' willingness to travel back and forth to the PRC indicates support for the CCP's revanchist designs on Taiwan, nor that these Taoists are abetting the CCP's well-documented efforts to infiltrate, influence, and weaken the integrity of Taiwanese society. On the contrary, we find that Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists do not operate as a cohesive, unified bloc within Taiwan, and that few of them give signs of coordinating their faith-based work at home with their religious preceptors in China, much less with the UFWD or its subsidiaries. In this part of the paper, we hear directly from Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists who recall their experiences of traveling to China. We then examine the implications of Quanzhen Taoism's dramatic transformation as localizes in Taiwan, and end by exploring how Taiwanese Taoists frame their relationships with their interlocutors in China as they reconcile diametrically opposed conceptualizations of their country's status and sometimes even subtly push back against PRC propaganda.

The lives of Taiwanese Taoist seekers in the PRC

Although all of the interviewees who spoke with Religioscope for this paper succeeded in establishing master-disciple relationships with members of the Quanzhen Taoist clergy in China, their experiences as students of the Tao proved to be a mixed bag, the contents of which range from moments of inspiration and meetings with highly cultivated monks and nuns, to instances of disappointment and encounters with unsavory coreligionists. Much of what my informants described could be expected in the experiences of any seeker wandering between Taoist temples and teachers in China, regardless of his or her country of origin; other experiences reflect tensions emanating specifically from the intricacies of Taiwan-China relations.

We heard from Interviewee D above about acquisitive Taoists, but the Quanzhen community in China is quite large (with over 4,000 affiliated temples by one count[42]), giving seekers a wide variety of teachers to choose from. Most of the Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists I interviewed spoke positively or even reverently of their teachers in China. Interviewee E is the head of a small temple-cum-self-cultivation group in a large Taiwanese city. He primarily teaches Taoist meditation, but he has traveled to China repeatedly in the last several decades to visit Taoist teachers and holy sites, and he had the distinction of being one of only a handful

42 Pew Research Center, "Measuring Religion in China."

of Taiwanese Taoists invited to attend the 5th International Taoism Forum held in Jiangsu province in September 2023, where the founding of the World Federation of Taoism (世界道教聯合會 , WFT) was formally announced.[43] In one of his sojourns in China, Interviewee E became a disciple of an elderly monastic Quanzhen Taoist. He explained to me that he never learned Taoist ritual or meditation from his master, and that although he donned religious Taoist garb to take a group photo on the day of his initiation, he was never more than a lay disciple. When asked what attracted him to this master, Interviewee E responded that he was simply impressed with the older Taoist's virtue and integrity. Similar admiration could be heard in the way one of Taiwan's most successful Quanzhen monks (in terms of the number of local disciples he has himself initiated), Interviewee F, described his teacher. According to Interviewee F, his master solicitously offered to allow him to adapt the liturgy he learned in Mandarin in China into the Taiwanese Hokkien language if this would increase Quanzhen's appeal in Taiwan (Interviewee F declined to make the change out of concern that doing so would make it difficult for his disciples to travel to China and further their studies there).

Interviewees' reports of negative experiences with Quanzhen Taoists in China generally fell into two categories. The first included a variety of distasteful behaviors, as with the aforementioned explicit requests for "donations," but also in the form of sexual advances made by Quanzhen monks (of whom celibacy is formally demanded) toward female Taiwanese students in monastic settings. These reports were centered around two Taoist centers in a province in Central China. Several women reported being directly approached by monks while lining up at mealtimes, and described being complimented on their looks and invited to visit the monks' private quarters. They also complained of a European Quanzhen Taoist monk bragging about his sexual exploits and showing off photos of his "girlfriends" (some of whom may also have been his students) on his mobile phone during a month-long ceremony they attended with him in one of these centers of monastic training. That the reports of sexual advances and lewd behavior all originate in two Taoist centers in the same province may simply be because they were all made by three young to middle-aged female Taiwanese Taoists who regularly visit that province for training with their preceptor; it is also possible that younger female Taoists have similar experiences elsewhere in China (indeed, while in China between 2008 and 2017, I heard numerous tales of affairs and even sexual scandals involving monks and nuns in Quanzhen monasteries, including some that were narrated to me by people directly involved, and others that were so salacious as to become online

43 Lemaître, "In China, the Political Correctness of Taoism." The spellings "Taoism" and "Daoism" are both used for this organization's name in English language press releases issued by arms of the PRC government. It is also referred to as the World Taoist Federation (WTF)—see Baidu Encyclopedia, "World Taoist Federation" (link in bibliography), but the acronymic titillation this rendering provides seems to be underappreciated, and it appears with far less frequency.

sensations). That being said, the Taiwanese nuns described how they were eventually warned by older Chinese nuns that one of the monasteries they were staying in is known for serving as something of a halfway house, where Quanzhen monks who have been expelled from the Wudang Taoist College for repeated infractions, such as soliciting prostitutes, end up if they wish to remain monks. These anecdotes are insufficient to paint a picture of Quanzhen Taoism at large, but the Taiwanese nuns' experiences and the warnings they received from Chinese nuns indicate that Quanzhen Taoism is plagued by the same contradictions that seem to arise in all religions.

The second type of negative experience was explicitly political. Two interviewees, Interviewee D (who was one of the most outspoken people I talked to) and Interviewee G, a monastic Taoist who officiates rituals and teaches Quanzhen liturgy at a family temple, also spoke at length about the tense atmosphere at the recent month-long ceremony that they both attended. This ceremony was the first of its kind in which Taiwanese Quanzhen monks and nuns were allowed to participate, but their participation was kept partially secret, inasmuch as the nationality of the Taiwanese attendees was never publicly acknowledged. Somewhat surprisingly, given the PRC government's fixation on insisting that Taiwan is a part of its territory, the Taiwanese participants were not listed as Chinese, either. Instead, they were anonymously lumped into the "international" category alongside its sole other member, a participant from Europe.

Interviewee G described the discipline to which the monks and nuns participating in the January 2024 ceremony were subjected as both "military" and "carceral." She, the other Taiwanese participants, and all of the Chinese monks and nuns were under constant surveillance and being constantly told what they could and could not do by plainclothes, non-religious cadres sent by the China Taoist Association or National Religious Affairs Administration. The only person exempted from this regime was the European Taoist, who enjoyed the freedom to do as he pleased throughout the month—most glaringly by constantly taking breaks from the long hours of chanting and bowing to wander around taking photographs and video in the ritual spaces where the other monks and nuns were strictly forbidden from bringing any electronic devices (this exemption could possibly reflect an old habit of treating foreigners as "outside" of the rules that apply to Chinese people in China, but I suspect it also reflects the CTA's calculation that the European Taoist's footage would help project a certain image of China through social media). Interviewee D, who was also present, described the specter of the UFWD looming over the ceremony as "very scary" and making things "not feel right." She said that she knew that, as a Taiwanese attendee, she was under surveillance, and that Chinese acquaintances would be asked to write reports on the Taiwanese contingent's speech and behavior. In this atmosphere, which she described as "repressive," normal friendships with Chinese monks and nuns were impossible to establish. Interviewees D and G both recalled how

The opening ceremony of the First Taoist Ceremony of the World Federation of Taoism (WFT) in March 2024. Credit: Chinese Taoist Association (中國道教協會)

their Chinese counterparts "don't even dare to so much as look at Taiwanese news if we show it to them on our phones."

Needless to say, the atmosphere in China leads Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists to self-police. I conducted my interview with Interviewee D in Interviewee G's presence; at one point, the latter interjected to say that she and a third Taiwanese Taoist had to counsel the spirited and opinionated Interviewee D to tone down some of her rhetoric while they were in China. Similarly, when I was speaking with Interviewee C, who has been back in Taiwan since the start of the COVID pandemic, he made an aside that he might not be able to return to China because he has criticized both PRC politics and socialism in general in posts on social media. When I expressed surprise, Interviewee C quickly said that he would "probably be fine" because he has been careful not to be too strident with his public posts. When I pressed for more information, he commented that it seemed like we were veering from a conversation about Quanzhen Taoism into a political discussion, sending a subtle signal not to pursue this line of questioning.

When conversing with Interviewee A, I could not help but wonder whether I was witnessing self-policing firsthand. Out of all of my informants, Interviewee A was one of the earliest to start visiting China after the end of Taiwan's martial law period, and she has also participated in numerous government-sponsored Taoist "cultural events" in China. These include a five-day "Cross-Strait Cultural Exchange Activity" held in the late 2010s, where she took to the same stage as two prominent monastic Taoists with close links to the United Front, one of whom was then chairman of a provincial-level chapter of the CTA, and the other chairwoman of

a municipal-level chapter. In an online video of the event, Interviewee A can first be seen thanking the National Religious Affairs Administration and United Front Work Department, and later attributing a possibly apocryphal admonition for members of the Chinese Communist Party to study the *Tao Te Ching* to Chinese premier Xi Jinping.[44] When I asked her in person about her relationships with her coreligionists in the PRC, Interviewee A answered abruptly and succinctly, saying, "They're all my good friends, my Tao friends, [we're] free!" This clipped response followed by silence made it clear that further inquiries on this topic were not welcome. Throughout the rest of our conversation, Interviewee A came across as a deeply religious person, offering long and passionate responses to spiritual questions, but never speaking about temporal issues. Similarly, when she was interviewed on video during a "Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait Tao Culture Exchange Forum" hosted in Taiwan in the late 2010s, she spoke only about her temple's charitable work helping people affected by earthquakes and typhoons, thereby maintaining some distance from the politically charged atmosphere of an event where other participants actively criticized the Taiwanese government and literally sang the praises of China. While it is possible that Interviewee A's coyness about her relationships with Chinese Taoists (and the cadres who oversee them) indicates a savvy pro-PRC operator keeping her cards close to her chest, it seems equally possible that she avoids risking making any statements that could have ramifications in the political realm, lest the perception that she leans pro-PRC or pro-Taiwanese independence derails her cross-strait pilgrimages and other religious missions. In either case, it seems reasonable to wonder if Interviewee A is consciously maintaining "strategic ambiguity" when asked questions whose answers could be interpreted as revealing opinions on Taiwan-China relations.

44 Links to the videos mentioned in this paragraph are withheld in order to protect the interviewee's privacy.

Faces of Taiwanization

Any religion transplanted to a new land changes in the process, and Quanzhen Taoism is no exception. An issue raised by almost every informant interviewed for this paper was "Taiwanization," namely the idea that Quanzhen Taoism has already transformed considerably in its short existence in Taiwan, and that it will almost certainly continue to do so. An unintended irony arises from the lexical similarity between the "Taiwanization" and the abovementioned "Sinicization," as the former term, far from being a slogan created by propagandists, is instead simply a word used by Taiwanese people to describe the way anything from abroad changes as it is absorbed into the local milieu. This is an organic, free (in both senses of the word), and authentically grassroots process that affects everything from cuisine to music to fashion, and it may, in the end, thwart many of the United Front's expensive, top-down efforts to have a say in what Quanzhen Taoism does in Taiwan.

A Medium-sized Problem

The most frequently and passionately discussed feature of Quanzhen's Taiwanization is its blending with local folk religious customs. The custom that drew by far the most attention from interviewees is Taiwan's thriving practice of spiritual mediumship, a practice that was not engaged in by Quanzhen's historical founders and which is excluded from monastic Quanzhen Taoist praxis in contemporary China.[45] As Jordan Paper documents in "Mediums and Modernity: The Institutionalization of Ecstatic Religious Functionaries in Taiwan," mediumship received government recognition as a legitimate religious practice shortly after the end of martial law in Taiwan, when the Republic of China Association of Mediums formally registered their society, which aimed "to raise the public image of ecstatic religious functionaries." In 1996, when Paper was writing his report, the association already included hundreds of temples.[46] In the present day, as Fabian Graham reports, "large-scale [mediumship] festivals to help people overcome fears of economic downturns, catastrophic events, and escalating cross-strait tensions … are now a regular feature of Taiwan's religious landscape."[47] Indeed, Taiwanese spiritual mediumship is flourishing to such a degree that it has spread abroad, finding new adherents in Singapore and Haiti.[48] This is an impressive state of affairs, given that these mediums' forebears "were labeled as heterodox and heavily prosecuted by the Qing (1683–1895) and Japanese (1895–1945) colonial governments" in Taiwan,[49] and treated as "uneducated charlatans practicing superstition" in the martial law era.[50]

The Taoists interviewed for this paper subscribed to a broad spectrum of viewpoints regarding mediumship. At one extreme were Taoists like Interviewee G, a Taiwanese nun who performs Quanzhen religious services at a family temple where one of her relatives, a medium who channels a Buddhist deity, is in fact the temple's main draw to visitors, many of whom come to consult the channeled bodhisattva for help with life's troubles. Although Interviewee G's Quanzhen Taoist ritual practice and her relative's channeling are never performed at the same time, they are conducted in the same space, and the medium often attends the Quanzhen rituals, stepping forward at the end to offer "*siu-kiann*" (收驚,

45 On the basis of direct interactions with Taoists in China as well as conversations with Taiwanese Taoists who regularly visit China, I can report that small number of Chinese Quanzhen monks and nuns do, in fact, semi-clandestinely practice mediumship, but this remains a source of friction in the monastic community. I am not aware of any scholarly research into this aspect of contemporary Quanzhen Taoism.

46 Paper, "Mediums and Modernity," 109.

47 Graham, "Healing the Past, Shaping the Future," 299.

48 Graham, "Across Borders," 125–145; Kan, "Haitian Group of Pilgrims Praying with Incense Comes to Taiwan to Bow Before the Golden Mother."

49 Graham, "Healing the Past, Shaping the Future," 299.

50 Paper, "Mediums and Modernity," 108.

On 20 July 2024, the Kaohsiung Kuan-ti Temple (高雄關帝廟), also known as the Warrior's Temple (武廟), welcomed visiting delegations from numerous other temples around Taiwan to participate in the "Kaohsiung Kuan-ti Temple's Ceremony Celebrating the Donation of an Ambulance to the City of Kaohsiung" (proudly announced in the banner in the first photo). Representatives from some visiting temples arrived in cars tricked out with huge sound systems blaring festive religious music. Troupe after troupe of costumed officiants performed elaborate martial dances before the temple's front entrance. A number of practitioners of mediumship channeled gods who paid their respects to the temple via the mediums' borrowed bodies (as with the man wielding the massive halberd). All the while, scores of drummers filled the neighborhood with booming rhythm, drowning out even the cars' massive speakers—but not the noise of exploding firecrackers. Meanwhile, just thirty meters away from the cacophonous celebration taking place outdoors, a small retinue of Quanzhen Taoists chanted scriptures on the first floor of the temple in hushed tones (they declined to be interviewed for this article). The simultaneous sharing of a space such as this one by mediums, folk Taoists, and Quanzhen monks and nuns (not to mention the Buddhists who chant sutras on the temple's second floor!) is an extremely "Taiwanized" phenomenon. It is almost impossible to imagine such a scene unfolding in a temple used by Quanzhen Taoists in China, especially during the staid and subdued chanting of scriptures.
Credit: Mattias Daly

pronounced *shoujing* in Mandarin), a form of spiritual cleansing akin to smudging using burning incense sticks, the name of which roughly translates as "recalling the frightened soul." The *siu-kiann* ritual is enthusiastically participated in by all of the Taoist semi-clergy (i.e. laypeople trained by Interviewee G in Quanzhen ritual music and chanting, and who temporarily don the garb of monks and nuns when they gather at the temple) who perform the rituals in Interviewee G's temple, as well as the rituals' lay audiences. At the other extreme is Interviewee E, who not only repeatedly decried the blending of Taiwanese mediumship practices with Quanzhen Taoism as an unacceptable form of heterodoxy, but also specifically brought Interviewee H up by name in order to disparage that Taoist for supposedly dabbling in the mediumistic practices of the Tzu-Hui Society. Interviewee E even declared that his outspokenness against mediumship has made him so notorious in Taiwanese Quanzhen circles that many other Taoists refuse to appear at fora where he is present.

Occupying a middle ground between Interviewees G and E is Interviewee F, who told me that he estimates approximately 60 percent of Taiwan's Quanzhen Taoists were already practicing spiritual mediums before becoming Taoists, and said that 20 percent of his own Quanzhen Taoist students (some of whom live as monks and nuns and attend to small temples scattered throughout Taiwan) practice mediumship. Interviewee F said that his students "should be clear on what their roles are" and never engage in mediumship during a Quanzhen ritual, but that he otherwise accepts their dual affinities. Another middle ground approach is that of a Quanzhen Taoist monk named Peng Chih-hsiang (彭至相), who heads the Azure Cave of the Source of Immortals (碧洞仙源), a temple in Taiwan's Hsinchu County. In May 2024 he and a disciple released a YouTube video that has garnered over 205,000 views, in which Peng frames mediumistic practices as the spiritual equivalent of kindergarten and elementary school; according to Peng, such practices *do* offer people the opportunity to develop actual spiritual capability, and yet the practices should still eventually be transcended and discarded.[51] Thus, although Peng does not entirely write off mediumship in his video, he details how he accepts students who were previously trained as mediums, but generally instructs them to abandon their ways and follow the rules of orthodox Taoist practice, lest their spiritual cultivation end up being "meaningless." Still, Peng offers a small olive branch to committed mediums near the end of his video, stating that his temple still offers two types of teaching: that of Quanzhen Taoism and that of "Taoist Immortal Officiants," which he clarifies is none other than mediumistic practice. Interestingly, the video's title ("We're Orthodox Taoists, Why Should We Be Speaking with You About Mediumistic Cultivation?") and pointed comments made in its 23-minute runtime (such as "even if you belong to orthodox

51 Wuliangguan, "We're Orthodox Taoists, why should we be speaking with you about mediumistic cultivation?"

Taoism, and you totally disapprove of spiritual mediums, we hope our conversation will inspire you to give this topic more consideration … ") suggest that Peng's video is a self-conscious response to other Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists who utterly reject mediumship.

Interviewees offered different theories as to why so many Taiwanese mediums have gravitated toward Quanzhen Taoism. Professor Hsiao Chin-ming mentioned that quite a few mediums have a very straightforward explanation for the paths they've taken: they say deities they commune with told them to join the Quanzhen sect. Peng Chih-hsiang suggests in his video that mediums hit a plateau in their spiritual development that orthodox Taoist practice has helped them transcend. There are, of course, more mundane explanations. As mentioned above, Interviewee C pointed out how, in the 1980s and 1990s, numerous Taiwanese mediums obtained antique relics from Chinese Quanzhen temples in exchange for cash donations, and thereby succeeded at elevating their status in the folk religious community after returning to Taiwan with these numinous acquisitions. In time, he said, many Taiwanese mediums found it advantageous to join Quanzhen Taoism outright, creating a controversy that continues to simmer in the local Taoist community. Interviewee I, an older nun who officiates a Quanzhen temple with a formidable online presence based in rural Taiwan, complained bitterly that the majority of these mediums-turned-Taoists never actually received the formal training necessary to become Taoist ritual masters, and therefore prevent genuine Quanzhen teachings from taking root in Taiwan by hoodwinking laypeople with inauthentic, unauthorized religious services. While her accusations would surely meet pushback if heard by their intended targets, they suffice to demonstrate how Quanzhen's Taiwanization unfolds in unique ways in each different temple.

Quanzhen Taoist monks march with a PRC flag in front of UFWD officials at an event in the city of Ningde in Fujian province in October 2023.
Credit: China Internet Information Center (中国互联网新闻中)

A Monastic Tradition without Monasteries

Among interviewees, the second most concerning aspect of Quanzhen's Taiwanization is Taiwan's lack of monasteries and fully ordained monks and nuns to fill them. While Quanzhen Taoism has offered teachings to laypeople since its inception and evolved in ways that made room for non-monastic ritual officiants in late imperial China, this paper's interviewees were all in agreement that Quanzhen is at its core a monastic religious movement, and that Taiwan's failure to replicate this aspect of Quanzhen's organization constitutes a major weak point in the religion's transmission to their country. Interviewees suggested a number of reasons why monastic Quanzhen Taoism has little appeal in Taiwan, despite the country being home to thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns, many of whom live in palatial monastic centers whose grandeur suggests a healthy flow of donations. Several interviewees pointed out that Buddhism's comparatively large monastic population notwithstanding, it too has struggled to attract new monks and nuns in recent years, a symptom of Taiwan's increasing secularization, younger generations' access to an ever-increasing variety of religious and spiritual paths, as well as the plummeting of the country's birth rate since the 1980s.[52]

Interviewees also noted that Taiwan has no cultural memory of monastic Taoists. Interviewees H and J both mentioned that because members of Taiwan's major Taoist sects only don their robes to perform rituals, a Taoist monk or nun wearing his or her topknot and religious garb on the streets might attract strange looks, in stark contrast with the respect generally afforded to Buddhists. The newness of monastic Taoism in Taiwan means that there is no tradition of making donations to provide food and shelter for mendicant Quanzhen monks and nuns, which forces them, as Interviewee D explained, to "adopt the transactional approach of Zhengyi and other local lineages, rather than hope to be supported by the sorts of people who support Buddhist temples." None of the interviewees expressed much optimism about the local culture becoming more supportive of a Quanzhen monastic community. Every interviewee who formally teaches Quanzhen liturgy acknowledged that most of their disciples live with their families and have no intention of becoming monks or nuns. Interviewee D even changed the time of her temple's morning services from 4 or 5 AM (standard times at Chinese Quanzhen monasteries) to 9 AM, so that her disciples who follow their families' schedules can actually make it to the temple. Even Interviewee F, who boasts the greatest number of disciples in Taiwan and is able to provide simple monastic quarters on his plot of land in the countryside, only claimed to have three followers who have actually become monks or nuns. Their stories illustrate how hard it is for monasticism to exert a stronger pull than secular life. One of Interviewee

52 Interviewees' comments about Buddhism are anecdotal—readily available statistics on the Buddhist monastic population in Taiwan are more than thirty years old.

F's disciples, a woman in her 60s who has been a nun for five years, waited until both of her parents passed away before taking vows; another, a man in his early 30s, relinquished his vows and returned to lay life during the course of this research.

Interviewees expressed a variety of anxieties about what the lack of a monastic establishment in Taiwan means for Quanzhen Taoism's future there. Interviewee F stated that rituals are less effective when they are performed by lay Taoists instead of by monks and nuns, because the spiritual potency of rituals is directly proportionate to their officiants' adherence to monastic precepts. Interviewee C reported that he traveled to China to formally become a monk because he came to feel that Quanzhen Taoists who have not taken monastic vows are "fake." Interviewee H is an older monk who has no disciples of his own but is perhaps Taiwan's most active Quanzhen Taoist networker—he has devoted two decades of his life to attempting to forge links between Taiwanese and Chinese Taoist communities, as well as between disparate Quanzhen groups within Taiwan. He emphasizes that all of the spiritually realized and culturally significant Quanzhen Taoist masters in ancient times derived their greatness from the crucible of ascetic practice. A man with grand plans, Interviewee H holds that the Quanzhen sect needs to incubate a figure capable of triggering a Taoist renaissance that will rescue the religion from its centuries-long decline in China and spread it to the wider world. Were a monastic community in Taiwan allowed to develop for a generation or two, he believes it could produce such a sage. And yet, despite his optimism, Interviewee H was involved with a collaborative attempt to build a Quanzhen monastery in central Taiwan that fell apart in the early 2020s, before ground could be broken on a collectively purchased parcel of land. All signs seem to point to the religion continuing to develop as a primarily non-monastic movement for the foreseeable future in Taiwan.

Quanzhen-lite

A final item of note in the Taiwanization of Quanzhen is found in recent efforts by a small number of Taoists to teach in a way that will attract young, urban professionals who have no interest in learning to perform religious ceremonies (much less join the monastic fold), but may be curious about Taoist approaches to meditation, philosophy, and self-care that can be integrated into their busy lives. Interviewees C and K, both of whom are in their thirties, have made forays into this area, encouraged along by Interviewee H, the tireless networker in the older generation. In our interview, H stressed that other Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists' focus on ritual reflects "old ways that no longer appeal to younger generations." He went on to say that Quanzhen will fail to expand in Taiwan unless it mimics local Buddhist groups that offer "lifestyle teachings" to the laity (it is not uncommon to find major Taiwanese Buddhist groups' outreach centers offering courses and lectures on tea ceremony, flower arranging, yoga, jogging, art, environmentalism,

and even Taoist approaches to self-care acknowledged as such). For his part, Interviewee K seems to have proven both the viability and profitability of such an approach—he offers weekly two-hour classes on a variety of Taoism-related topics in a major city, charging the equivalent of approximately 25 US dollars per class, a not insubstantial sum for young Taiwanese strivers. It is still too early to say whether or not others will follow in C and K's footsteps, but if they do, this will represent an even further break from Quanzhen's traditional structures, and likely continue the trend towards highly individualized interpretations of what it means to follow this religion. Interestingly, the results of C and K's efforts may even end up resembling a 21st-century version of the non-monastic, non-religious Taiwanese Taoist organizations discussed earlier in this paper.

Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists' views on the "Taiwan question"

The lion's share of this paper's interviewees insisted that Taoists should stay aloof of politics, but many of them revealed strong political leanings in subtle and overt (and sometimes quite humorous) ways. In an effort to avoid eliciting guarded or scripted responses to questions about sensitive topics, in all but one instance I refrained from asking direct questions about politics unless an interviewee first steered the conversation in that direction. It is impossible to know how candid interviewees were being when they offered glimpses of their political inclinations (the simple fact that it was an American conducting the interviews could have been enough to prompt a certain type of dialogue), much less predict how opinions held in peacetime might change if the PRC ever attacks or blockades Taiwan. Even so, it is fair to say that none of the Taoists who

Monks studying at the Guangdong Taoist Academy line up for military training in September 2023.
Credit: China Internet Information Center (中国互联网新闻中心)

spoke to Religioscope expressed affection for the PRC's government, the United Front, or even the Chinese Taoist Association.

Interviewee A makes for an interesting study of a Taiwanese Taoist who appears in public with political figures whilst managing to maintain what might be called "strategic ambiguity." As described above, in the late 2010s she appeared in video taken at a Taoist event in China where she thanked the NRAA and UFWD on stage before exhorting the CCP cadres in attendance to study the *Tao Te Ching*—supposedly because Xi Jinping wanted them to. One might infer that Interviewee A's cordial public interactions with CCP functionaries indicate tacit approval of the PRC's designs on Taiwan, were it not for a confounding factor arguing in the exact opposite direction: Interviewee A was photographed in late 2023 with William Lai, then Vice President of Taiwan, as he made a campaign stop at her temple. President Lai is deeply loathed by the Chinese government, which refers to him as a "splittist" and "secessionist." Reflective of Beijing's stance, the *Global Times*, one of the CCP's most bellicose English-language mouthpieces, declared in 2024 that "Lai's separatist provocations are the root cause of turmoil and instability in the Taiwan Straits, and this threatens disaster for the people of Taiwan"[53] and "if Lai insists on making irresponsible secessionist moves, forcing the mainland to resolve the question by force, the [People's Liberation Army] is always

53 Global Times, "Lai's Fire of Provocation."

Monastic Taoists on Mount Wudang in Hubei province line up for a flag-raising ceremony, a requisite daily activity in Taoist temples in the PRC following the UFWD's 2018 restructuring.
Credit: China Internet Information Center (中国互联网新闻中心)

ready."[54] Interviewee A's public mingling with representatives of the UFWD as well as President Lai, a self-described "political worker for Taiwanese independence,"[55] illustrates how allegiances cannot reflexively be read into Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists' interactions with political players.

Interviewee K's divulgences drive home the above point. I was careful not to ask this informant any political questions because he appeared on stage as the "Taiwanese representative" at a politically charged meeting for Taiwanese Taoists held in China in the early 2020s, and I wanted to avoid putting him on the defensive. To my surprise, Interviewee K spontaneously began discussing the event, which was organized by local offices of the UFWD and featured cadres' speeches laden with baroque anti-Taiwan independence rhetoric. He laughed as he recalled his own speech, which used Taoist philosophy to guilefully push back against calls for Taiwan's annexation by China by describing the two countries as yin and yang—inextricably linked halves of the same whole, sure, but distinct and separate nonetheless. Interviewee K portrayed the cadres who listened to his speech as somewhat dimwitted, relating how they slapped him on the back and complimented him for brilliantly using Taoist thought to demonstrate that Taiwan belongs to China, without realizing that his speech could also be interpreted as saying that Taiwan is an independent entity on equal footing with China, or that China belongs to Taiwan. During our conversation, Interviewee K also pointed out that the Chinese government's investment in the Quanzhen sect emanates from its anxieties, reflecting its keen awareness that less otherworldly forms of Taoism are harder to control and have historically been involved in efforts to overthrow various imperial dynasties. The CCP, he holds, is quite terrified of religious movements that cannot be cloistered and monitored. He ended our conversation by saying, "the Taoism I've come into contact with belongs to the world; it's not 'Chinese Taoism.'" Describing his vision for Taiwan's role in Taoism's future development, he compared Taiwan to Penglai, the island of Taoist legend inhabited by sages and immortals. "The spirit of Penglai is one of crossing oceans, which is a metaphor for transcending limits," he said. "In this spirit, might we be able to establish a Taoism that belongs to the entire 'ocean,' so to speak, and not simply to China?"

Interviewee K's use of the yin-yang to describe Taiwan and China's relationship reflects a tension underlying many Taiwanese Taoists' sense of self-identity. According to a 2023 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, "While the Chinese government views Taiwan as a breakaway province, only 3% of people in Taiwan think of themselves as primarily Chinese. Nearly three-in-ten (28%) think of themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese, but the largest share by far (67%)

54 Yang and Liu, "Taiwan People Call for Peace as Secessionist Lai to Formally Take Office."

55 Taipei Times with Central News Agency, "Lai Explains Approach to Independence."

see themselves as primarily Taiwanese."[56] Religioscope did not ask interviewees about their senses of national identity, but many of them alternated between referring to themselves as Taiwanese or Chinese in conversation. I spoke with Interviewee H days after he returned from a trip to China to try and establish links between non-Quanzhen temples dedicated to an important Taoist deity that can be found all over Taiwan and parts of southern China, during which time he attended numerous "cross-strait cultural exchange" events with heavy UFWD presence, where attendees cannot avoid hearing speeches filled with pro-annexation boilerplate. Interviewee H sighed as he explained how he has come to view Taiwan and China's relationship after twenty years of bouncing between the two countries as something of a Taoist missionary. "There's a 'cultural China' and a 'political China.' Recognizing the validity of the former does not imply pursuing the latter." He then pointed out how absurd it would look in the eyes of the world for the UK to start demanding dominion over the US or Singapore on the basis of their colonial histories.

Another take on Taiwan and China's relationship came from Interviewee L, who was among the generation of Taoists that began visiting the PRC immediately after the end of martial law in Taiwan. Though she still maintains ties with China's Quanzhen community and was recently invited to participate in a ceremony in Shanghai, she was also among the more cynical interviewees in terms of her assessment of many Taoist temples in the PRC, which she believes have become little more than businesses employing people to wear the costumes of monks and nuns

56 Huang and Starr, "Most People in Taiwan See Themselves as Primarily Taiwanese."

A Taoist holds up a book entitled *The Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Rules and Regulations* (中國共產黨統一戰綫工作條例) at the Yulin Municipal Taoist Association's "Management and Safety Training Lectures on the CCP's History and Religious United Front Work" held in Shaanxi province in June 2021.
Credit: Shaanxi Province Taoist Association (陝西省道教協會)

and sell tickets and trinkets to tourists. During the formal part of our conversation, Interviewee L, who has a small number of lay and monastic disciples in a rural part of central Taiwan, adopted a teacherly tone and told me that Taoists should refrain from so much as having opinions about politics. Later, however, after I put my notebook away and her students gathered for lunch and tea, the atmosphere suddenly lightened. Interviewee L launched into a freewheeling discussion of politics that reached its climax when she laughingly sang the praises of President Lai's proclamation at the ROC National Day celebrations on 1 October 2024 that "it is absolutely impossible for the People's Republic of China to become the motherland of the Republic of China's people. On the contrary, the Republic of China may be the motherland of the people of the People's Republic of China who are [only] 75 years old."[57]

It seems improbable that the words quoted above would have spilled from the mouths of people whose adventures in China convinced them that Taiwan would be better off under the PRC's control. Despite this, this paper by no means concludes that no Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists fall into the "pro-unification" camp, nor that those who are ambivalent about China's irredentism would join resistance efforts were the PRC to attempt to annex Taiwan. What can be determined, however, is that prolonged exposure to government propaganda during repeated visits to China has not created an army of Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists who return home and parrot United Front talking points.

57 Guardian, "Communist China Not the Motherland, Says Taiwan's President, Because Our Republic is Older."

Chi Nan Temple (指南宮), which is loosely affiliated with Quanzhen Taoism, seen beneath the iconic Taipei 101 skyscraper from the hills of Muzha District.
Credit: Awoisoak Kaosiowa, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

05

Analysis

Ready to mobilize?

For years the CCP has openly taken advantage of a small number of Taiwanese citizens' enthusiasm for Quanzhen Taoism, corralling religious pilgrims from across the strait into meetings and ceremonies serving up heavy doses of ideology meant to convert these "Taiwanese compatriots" to its cause. According to several people who spoke to Religioscope for this paper, the CCP has also used these interactions as an opportunity to lure Taiwanese visitors closer into its orbit by offering a variety of enticements. On condition of anonymity, a Taiwanese academic who occasionally participates in cross-strait religious fora told Religioscope that reimbursed round-trip plane tickets, free accommodation, travel, and dining within China, as well as "travel stipends" ranging from thousands to tens of thousands of Chinese yuan are the norm for the more politicized events, with perks on the higher end reserved for Taiwanese visitors the UFWD considers especially useful.[58] That cross-strait Quanzhen Taoist dialogues are important enough to be featured on United Front's own website may give the impression that it believes these efforts are paying off.[59] However, it is worth questioning whether the Chinese government's eagerness to gloat about influence operations in its propaganda actually means that those operations are succeeding. Addressing American readers, *The Atlantic's* Michael Schuman wrote, "With China, things aren't always what they seem. Many apparent Chinese strengths—including education, manufacturing, and technology—aren't quite as strong as many Americans believe… something policy-makers and pundits in Washington should keep in mind as they fret over Beijing's ostensibly growing might."[60] In the spirit of this advice, this section focuses on two factors mitigating the likelihood of Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoism becoming a tool of the UFWD. The first is that intrinsic structural features of "Taiwanized" Quanzhen Taoism may make it largely immune to the United Front's attempts to influence the religion, and the second is that the Chinese government may not actually be making concerted efforts to control or pervasively influence Quanzhen's Taiwanese followers.

It is difficult to overstate just how different Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoism is from the institutionalized version of the sect superintended by the National Religious Affairs Administration in China. Signaling just how strictly the NRAA monitors Chinese Taoists, in early 2023 it unveiled "the Buddhist and Taoist Clerical Personnel Information Query System."[61] According to the *China Daily*, the PRC's flagship

58 Political scientist Kuei-Min Chang echoes this figure, writing, "So-called 'travel stipends,' the function of which is more akin to 'payments for service,' sometimes reach to hundreds of thousand Taiwan dollars." (Chang, "Deconstructing the China Factor," 129; the original, translated by the author of this paper, reads, "名為「交通費」用途更像是「業務費」，有時多達數十萬臺幣…").

59 United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee, "Welcome Home!"

60 Schuman, "Don't Believe the China Hype."

61 National Religious Affairs Administration, "Religious Worker Information Query."

state-run English-language newspaper, the query system holds "information on religious personnel, including their legal name, gender, photo, religious title, sect and registration number," "provides an authoritative and credible channel for the public to verify the identity of religious personnel," and "will help the [official religious] associations perform their statutory duties, strengthen the management of Buddhist and Taoist religious personnel, and improve their self-restraint."[62] While the query system ostensibly exists to help Chinese citizens avoid giving donations to conmen posing as Buddhists or Taoists, He Yuyan of *Bitter Winter* writes, "The new system, however, has ulterior aims … Those [monks and nuns] who refuse to join the associations and operate independently, including in the 'gray market' of unregistered temples, are branded as 'fake' clergy. The CCP can also further control monks and priests by threatening them with being removed from the database."[63]

Illustrating how much freedom Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists enjoy relative to their PRC counterparts, such a database would be impossible to establish in Taiwan. The Taiwanese government does not have an office that closely monitors or supervises religious organizations. The guarantee of religious freedom in the country's constitution is taken seriously, barriers to establishing temples and associations are extremely low, clergy are not required to register with the government, and there exists no legal definition of what constitutes a "real" or "fake" Taoist. At the same time, there are no widely recognized formal associations

62 Yang, "Public Database to Help Verify Accredited Monks."

63 He, "The 'Buddhist and Taoist Clergy Database,' Another CCP Imposture."

Taken on Mount Mao in Jiangsu province on 9 September 2023, this photo's caption reads "The World Federation of Taoism's Founding Meeting's Group Photo." As Interviewee G pointed out, no Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoist monks or nuns were invited to participate in this meeting.
Source: World Federation of Taoism, Chinese Taoist Association

in the Taiwanese Quanzhen community. Instead of belonging to a centralized organization or even an informal hierarchy, most Quanzhen temples are either fully independent or else informally affiliated with a small number of friendly temples, with which they occasionally collaborate to perform large ceremonies. This means that there is no institution that can confer or revoke religious legitimacy via certificates or rosters, much less advance or undermine individual Taoists' careers by granting or denying access to finances, publicity, real estate, or other forms of support. Even if the United Front were to thoroughly infiltrate (or establish) an association of Quanzhen Taoists in Taiwan, it would have little to no leverage over any monks, nuns, and laypeople who rejected its agenda.

Additionally, as many of the interviewees' statements quoted throughout this paper suggest, the Taiwanese Quanzhen community is both fractured and fractious. Due to the community's small size, most Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists are aware of each other's temples, yet few of them actually share close links in terms of the lineages of spiritual transmission they joined in China. The interviewees who spoke to Religioscope for this paper received their religious education in provinces scattered all over the PRC, including Fujian, Hubei, Liaoning, Shandong, Sichuan, and Zhejiang. As a result of this geographic disparity, the Chinese monks and nuns who initiated these Taiwanese believers into Quanzhen Taoism may not have even heard of one another, making it next to impossible for them to try to bring their Taiwanese disciples closer together. This is not the only way China's vast geography influences Quanzhen Taoism in Taiwan; because they learned to play regional versions of the sect's liturgical music and chants, many of Taiwan's clergy have no way of joining together to conduct rituals. Furthermore, showing how little cohesion there is in this community, even among those who did learn similar liturgies, clashes of personalities and divergent ideas of what constitutes "authentic" Quanzhen Taoism can lead to permanent rifts between individual Taoists as well as their flocks of students. One such rift was brought to the fore when an interviewee mentioned the name of another Taoist trained in the same Sichuanese liturgical style as he was, only to bellow that he does not interact with the other monk because "he does not engage in honest work."

Notably, it is not only Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists and their Chinese religious preceptors who have shied away from attempting to create a unified, coherent community in Taiwan. With their stated goal of fashioning Taoism into a tool that will help the PRC government pursue its political agendas at home and abroad, it seems logical that the UFWD and the CTA would stand to benefit by investing in the creation of a well-organized community of Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists. Such a community, one might reason, would be far easier to mobilize as a surrogate voice for the CCP than the current hodgepodge of autonomous Quanzhen temples operating independently of one another. However, Religioscope came across no evidence

The iconic Grand Taipei Hotel.
Credit: Michael Rehfeldt, licensed under CC BY 2.0

or anecdotes suggesting that arms of the Chinese government have pursued such a goal. Quite the opposite, multiple interviewees scoffed exasperatedly at questions about how the Chinese side might be investing in the Quanzhen sect in Taiwan. It seems unlikely that these were calculated answers meant to obscure the flow of Chinese funding or institutional support into the hands of Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists, as the interviewees clearly felt that they were being deprived, and seemed willing to accept donations if they were actually offered.

Most vocal on these issues was Interviewee H, who called three decades of government-sponsored cross-strait Taoist exchanges in China "a complete waste of time" comprising an endless series of "pointless banquets, photo-ops, and speeches" that have done nothing to actually promote the religion's development in Taiwan. When asked if he expected the Chinese government would ever contribute money to assisting Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoism, his answer was an emphatic "no." Responding to the same question, not only did Interviewee D offer a similar reply, she then elaborated by complaining that even today members of the CTA still view Taiwanese Taoists as people to be solicited for donations, not to be given them. Interviewee J reacted with incredulity to the notion of Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists receiving funding from China, replying tersely, "Why the heck would they support us?" Similar reactions

arose to questions about the fact of there being no Taiwanese Quanzhen monks or nuns invited to participate in the founding of the World Federation of Taoism in 2023. Regarding this snub, Interviewee G mused, "You [the PRC] so strongly desire to annex our country, and yet you totally lack any understanding of us, it's bizarre." As for why the Chinese government does not even try to organize Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists, Interviewee E offered a plausible explanation: "They'd be incapable of demanding that we do anything for them. After all, Taiwan is just too free." In the following pages, we will turn to political science research in search of a framework that allows us to make sense of the seeming lack of a coherent strategy in the UFWD's targeting of Taiwanese religions.

Shifting Sands

Evidence exists suggesting that the UFWD may previously have intended to take a more hands-on approach to Quanzhen Taoism within Taiwan's borders. On YouTube there is a nearly two-hour-long video with the grandiloquent title "The Magnificently Arranged Opening Ceremony for The Ninth 'Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait Tao Culture Exchange Forum,' Hosted by the Taiwan Province Taoist Association on 6 August 2017 at the Grand Hotel Taipei."[64] This event, which had an audience of hundreds, was sponsored by the Taiwan Province Taoist Association (臺灣省道教會), an organization that includes members of several Quanzhen-adjacent Taoist temples (meaning that although they have clergy who formally joined Quanzhen lineages in China, the temples still remain primarily affiliated with other forms of Taoism or folk religion) as well as the Tzu-Hui Society.[65] The ceremony was loaded with symbolism, beginning with the decision to hold it in the Grand Hotel Taipei. Established under Chiang Kai-shek's direction in 1952, this hotel has hosted countless foreign heads of state including several US presidents, thereby becoming an icon of Taiwan's engagement with international power brokers. The event was kicked off by the performance of a song entitled "The Two Sides of the Strait are a Single Family" performed by Peng Li (彭立), a Taiwanese singer who took her career to China in the 2010s. The song's title and chorus are based verbatim on the name of a United Front propaganda campaign with a high enough profile that Taiwan's Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau hosts a paper about it on their website.[66] Keynote speeches were delivered by local Taoist

64 Taiwan Province Taoist Association, "The Magnificently Arranged Opening Ceremony for The Ninth 'Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait Tao Culture Exchange Forum,' Hosted by the Taiwan Province Taoist Association on 6 August 2017 at the Grand Hotel Taipei."

65 See Taiwan Province Taoist Association, Facebook profile (link in bibliography). Religioscope attempted to contact this organization via Facebook direct message and email but received no response.

66 Liu and Tang, "The Effect of Mainland China's United Front Propaganda 'Both Sides as a Family.'" For a vivid description of how Taiwanese United Front work targets are bombarded with this propaganda tagline while being wined and dined in China, see Rednexela, How Xi Jinping Exploits Religious Freedom to Undermine Taiwan's Democracy (in bibliography), 00:13:20-00:14:25.

figures; three Kuomintang politicians (Wang Jin-pyng 王金平, a member of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan until 2016, Tseng Yung-chuan 曾永權, Secretary-General of the KMT until 2014, and Lin Join-sane 林中森, chairman of the Straits Exchange Foundation, the Taiwanese government's de facto representative office in China, until 2016); Zhang Jintao (張金濤), then head of the Jiangxi Province Taoism Association in China, who can be seen being escorted to the stage by bodyguards at minute 00:22:00 in the video; and Zhang Fuqing (張福慶), then the acting vice mayor of the Yingtan municipality in China's Jiangxi province, where Dragon Tiger Mountain, an important Taoist religious and administrative center, is located.

The presence of a Chinese politician and the head of a provincial branch of the Chinese Taoist Association at the 2017 event are not the only signs of a high level of UFWD engagement—more importantly, this annual series of meetings has bounced back and forth between locales in Taiwan and southern China since its inception, marking it as a part of the Chinese government's long-term influence strategy. But what is equally notable is how only one post-2017 "Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait Tao Culture Exchange Forum"—the comparatively muted 2019 gathering—was held in Taiwan. According to PRC media, the November 2020 forum was originally scheduled to be held in Taipei, but was compelled to become a videoconference based in Jiangxi province because Taiwan's Republic of China Mainland Affairs Council (中華民國大陸委員會) declared that the forum was a United Front activity and blocked it from going forward.[67] Indeed, in September 2020 the Mainland Affairs Council formally declared that all "Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait Fora" are "large-scale platforms for the United Front orchestrated by the Chinese Communist Party, which has for years used them both to offer enticements and sow seeds of division in Taiwan in pursuit of its 'One China' political ambitions. It also uses these fora to issue propaganda about the fruits of United Front work and to criticize and harm Taiwanese society."[68]

That post-2019 installments of these fora have all taken place in China indicates a setback for the UFWD's involvement in the Taiwanese Taoist community, but the prohibition of these activities on Taiwanese soil under back-to-back Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administrations could be rescinded should China-friendly political forces return to power in Taipei. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether or not the United Front and its Taiwanese fellow travelers would attempt to replicate the 2017 forum's ostentatiousness. The intervening years have seen Taiwanese citizenry's credulity regarding PRC

67 Strait Herald Agency, "The Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait Tao Culture Exchange Forum Nearly Cancelled Due to United Front Accusations."

68 Mainland Affairs Council, "Explainer on the Chinese Communist Party's 'Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait Fora' Policies." The quote above, translated by the author of this paper, reads, "中國共產黨主辦之大型對臺統戰平臺，歷年來藉由活動拉攏及分化臺灣，以達其「一中」政治目的，也將宣傳統戰操作成果，並批判傷害臺灣社會。"

promises of a "one country, two systems" approach to governing them be shattered by the crushing of democracy and civil society in nearby Hong Kong. The Chinese government's obfuscations surrounding COVID's origins and the deleterious effects of its harsh zero-COVID policies are well known in Taiwan, and as China's economic engine sputters the idea that annexation would create an economic miracle for Taiwanese people loses its persuasiveness. At the same time, China has steadily turned up the pressure its air force, navy, and maritime militia place on Taiwan, and homegrown organizations such as the Forward Alliance and Kuma Academy (founded in 2020 and 2021, respectively) have emerged to increase awareness about the threat of an attack on Taiwan and to train civilians in wartime disaster response. Indicative of how charged of an issue Chinese influence operations have become, a YouTuber and a rapper's forty-minute video about United Front efforts to compromise Taiwanese musicians was viewed more than 3 million times within a month of its release in December 2024.[69] All of this is to say that perceptions of the Chinese government have changed dramatically in Taiwan since 2017. In future, were another PRC politician invited to address a crowd of Taoists at the Grand Hotel Taipei, the optics would be very different.

Failure is Success

Two Taiwanese political scientists offer helpful lenses through which to view the limitations of the United Front's strategies for influencing Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists. Professor Kuei-Min Chang (張貴閔) of the Department of Political Science at National Taiwan University documents the United Front's ability to adjust its methods for drawing Taiwanese Taoists into China's fold. In one example she discusses, Taiwanese Zhengyi Taoists who began traveling to Dragon Tiger Mountain in Jiangxi province in 2015 to obtain official religious certifications called "registers" (*lu* 籙) quickly noticed that the registers could be bought by anybody who could afford them, regardless of whether or not they possessed Zhengyi Taoist bona fides. This observation quickly stripped the registers of their symbolic weight, disincentivizing Taiwanese Taoists from traveling to China to acquire them and diminishing Dragon Tiger Mountain's usefulness as a bridge between Taiwan and China. However, CTA officials were soon made aware of the registers' poor reputation by their Taiwanese collaborators, and by 2019 the registers could only be obtained in ceremonies conducted in strict adherence with the Zhengyi sect's precepts, a change that both increased the registers' sacred value and advanced the UFWD's interests.[70] In an interview with Religioscope, Professor

69 Fun TV, "China's United Front Exposed."

70 Chang, "Deconstructing the China Factor," 132.

Chang emphasized that the United Front's past clumsiness with Taiwan's Quanzhen Taoists does not predict the future—the Chinese side has proven itself capable of strategic adaptation.

In "Shaping and Expanding the Cross-Strait Authoritarian Public Sphere: The CCP's Religious United Front Work [on] Taiwan," Professor Ray Wang (王韻) of the Graduate Institute of East Asian Studies at National Chengchi University and independent scholar Yu-Chiao Chen (陳宥喬) show that there can be actual cunning hidden beneath the seeming inelegance of many of the United Front's efforts. If we return to the question of what might happen if China attempted to replicate an event like the ninth "Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait Tao Culture Exchange Forum" in the near future, it is not hard to imagine it being thrown under a harsh spotlight by pro-independence politicians, activists, and alternative media personalities in Taiwan. However, according to Wang and Chen's understanding of United Front work, even were this publicity to result in protests or outright cancellation of the hypothetical event, not only would that not count as a loss, it might even work in the UFWD's favor. Because the United Front's remit includes internal efforts targeting China's own citizenry as well as external efforts aimed at foreign societies, when its "exports" fail, they are simply repackaged as "imports." For example, whenever efforts to draw Hong Kong or Taiwanese citizens closer to Beijing generate public backlash, China turns this backlash into internal propaganda used to promote the paranoid narrative that "interference from foreign powers" is the root cause of

Secretary general of the Taiwan Province Taoist Association Chang Chao-heng is received by CTA chairman Li Guangfu in China in January 2023. The watermark on the photo's lower right is the CTA's logo.
Source: China Internet Information Center (中国互联网新闻中心)

all anti-PRC sentiment in Hong Kong and Taiwan, in addition to being a threat to China generally.[71]

Counterintuitively, Wang and Chen assert that the United Front may even intentionally trigger governmental or civil society backlash in Taiwan with clumsy "export" operations that are designed to fail spectacularly enough that they trigger public or policy reactions. This is done because the image of a recalcitrant Taiwan in cahoots with hostile international forces can be "imported" to create internal propaganda justifying the many bitter pills the CCP compels rank and file Chinese citizens to swallow.[72] A related dynamic can also unfold within China's borders. When I mentioned Interviewee H's complaint about "pointless banquets, photo-ops, and speeches" to Professor Wang in conversation, he replied that in the United Front's eyes these events are far from useless. The photos, videos, and news reports they generate—which invariably feature Taiwanese Taoists posing beneath banners printed with CCP slogans, respectfully listening to cadres' speeches, or being serenaded with ballads like "The Two Sides of the Strait are a Single Family"—are published at home to convince Chinese people that Taiwanese citizens actually yearn for Beijing's dominion. Moreover, these images also provide Beijing with a plausible explanation for why it has not yet attacked Taiwan, in spite of decades of hawkish propaganda and military buildup. According to Wang, such events send the message that war is not necessary because the CCP is slowly but surely succeeding at its goal of achieving "peaceful reunification." Thus, religious exchanges that seem pointless to the Taoist community can actually serve as valves through which the Chinese government releases excess pressure it builds up in pro-war segments of society with its famously jingoistic "wolf warrior" propaganda.

The UFWD's technique of failing strategically can be found in action within Taiwan's borders, too. In their paper Wang and Chen identify the six primary tactics of United Front work.[73] The first three are "integration" (creating financial, ideological, and emotional links between disparate groups in order to establish an "authoritarian public sphere"), "cooptation" (fostering a population of enthusiastic supporters of authoritarianism who legitimize the system and push elites closer to the organs of state power), and "mobilization" (directing successfully integrated and coopted parties to participate in pro-authoritarian activities or spread messaging on behalf of the party state). There is naturally no way to enact the first three of these strategies in the absence of well-coordinated efforts—were the UFWD attempting to use them in the realm of Taiwanese Quanzhen

71 Wang and Chen, "Shaping and Expanding the Cross-Strait Authoritarian Public Sphere," 54.

72 Ibid., 69.

73 Ibid., 55–57.

Taoism, we would not expect to see the fragmentary, self-directed religious milieu described earlier in this paper, nor hear multiple interviewees gripe about the dearth of funding and organizational support.

The remaining three tactics described by Wang and Chen are a different story. "Interference" (infiltrating non-coopted groups with agents or trusted representatives who will introduce the United Front's agendas as well as perform surveillance and data gathering, and then use the intelligence they gather to support other UFWD activities), "attrition" (placing obstacles and gatekeeping costs in the way of non-coopted groups' activities), and "division" (seeding distrust and friction between the CCP's primary enemies—such as the DPP, in the case of Taiwan—and other elements of society) can all be effected without investing in integration, co-optation, and mobilization. In our interview, Professor Wang emphasized that not only does the United Front have no need to train highly skilled operators in order to pull off these goals, it even exhibits a preference for semi-incompetent collaborators (here he mentioned the attention-seeking pro-China agitator Chang An-lo 張安樂, better known as "White Wolf"). The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, messy debacles that reveal the UFWD's hand are perfectly capable of sowing discord beyond China's borders, and the highly visible backlash these debacles generate can be "imported" to create internal propaganda, as described above. Secondly, the CCP instinctively fears grooming charismatic, intelligent, and disciplined collaborators—especially in the religious realm—lest they create loci of power that could later turn against it. With these points in mind, Professor Wang said, there is nothing surprising about the United Front's thus-far halfhearted approach to Taiwan's Quanzhen Taoists. Indeed, if we return to the ninth "Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait Tao Culture Exchange Forum," we find that the tactic of "division" was in full effect. On a stage shared with KMT and CCP political figures, two members of the Taiwan Province Taoist Association took the microphone to complain about their government's treatment of religious groups[74] and decry policies that "de-Sinicize" the country.[75] Notably, representatives of three temples whose members were interviewed for this story were filmed attending the 2017 forum. In this setting, they were exposed to an ample dose of "division," the sixth tactic listed above, without having to first be "integrated," "coopted," or "mobilized."

74 Taiwan Province Taoist Association, "The Magnificently Arranged Opening Ceremony for The Ninth 'Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait Tao Culture Exchange Forum,' Hosted by the Taiwan Province Taoist Association on 6 August 2017 at the Grand Hotel Taipei." At 00:15:12 Chang Jung-chen (張榮珍), director general of the Taiwan Province Taoist Association (TPTA), complains that the government uses environmentalism as an excuse to interfere with religions; at 00:15:22 he complains that Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior ignores religious groups' future development; at 00:15:37 he says that the TPTA totally opposes the establishment of laws governing religion.

75 Ibid. At 01:24:26 Chang Chao-heng (張肇珩), general secretary of the TPTA, declares that Taiwanese Taoism is facing a "huge crisis" due to the Taiwanese government's "de-Sinicization" (*qu zhongguo hua* 去中國化) efforts and the proposed "Religious Group Act" (宗教團體法), which ultimately did not become law.

Monks and nuns from the Yunnan Provincial Taoist Association line up beneath a statue of Mao Zedong at a major CCP pilgrimage site in Yan'an, Shaanxi province in 2023. Their banner identifies them as taking part in "patriotic activities."
Credit: China Internet Information Center (中国互联网新闻中心)

06

Looking Forward

What might the future hold in Taiwan?

In a chapter in *China's Influence and the Center-Periphery Tug of War in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Indo-Pacific,* Ying-ho Kwong (鄺英豪) of Hang Seng University of Hong Kong writes that in post-1997 Hong Kong, "the Chinese government adopted different strategies and co-opted different religious leaders in order to make people comfortable within China's resumption of sovereignty … leaders from eastern religions [Taoism and Buddhism] are frequently rolled out to mobilize public opinion and support in times of major political confrontations. Their strategies are to legitimate the decisions made by the Chinese and [Hong Kong Special Administrative Region] governments."[76] According to Kwong, this process of co-optation began in the 1980s because "the Beijing government had to groom local collaborators to exert influence" in preparation for the peaceful handover from the United Kingdom to the PRC, conditions of which stipulated that "the Chinese government could not send official intervention to religious affairs in Hong Kong after 1997."[77]

At first glance, it might appear as though the Chinese government is attempting to replicate this process of co-optation in Taiwan's religious scene. However, the information presented in this paper strongly suggests that the UFWD's efforts would not allow it to mobilize the Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoist community in an organized and coherent way. Even were all of this paper's interviewees to begin preaching a pro-annexation gospel, present-day Taiwan has so little in common with pre-handover Hong Kong that the Taoists' words would likely do the opposite of legitimating the PRC's stance on Taiwan. Indeed, it seems questionable whether grooming Taiwan's Quanzhen Taoists as local collaborators who would use their platforms to spread pro-PRC messaging in Taiwan during or after an invasion is even one of China's long-term goals. Speaking to Religioscope, Ray Wang cast doubt on this possibility and stressed that there are essentially two types of "United Front work" — one conducted in peacetime, and the other engaged in during open conflict and its aftermath — and that they operate under entirely different sets of rules. Wang speculates that, were Taiwan to become an occupied territory, the United Front would not attempt to win the hearts and minds of Taiwan's religious faithful with the types of "carrots" it currently uses, and would instead turn to an arsenal of "sticks" wielded in tandem with other arms of the party-state. This would result in a postwar predicament similar to the current reality faced by the PRC's Tibetan, Uyghur, Hui, and Christian communities, with imprisonment awaiting clergy and laity who are suspected of placing their faith in religion above their faith in (or fear of) the CCP, and demolition or shuttering awaiting countless places of worship.

76 Kwong, "China's Influence on Hong Kong's Religions," 158, 163.

77 Ibid., 155.

All of the above suggests that there is no easy way to predict what ultimately might emerge from Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists' present interactions with the UFWD and its subsidiaries. The strategies employed in 2017 were markedly different from those employed in 2024, and could easily change again in response to new developments at local, regional, and global levels. It is true that the United Front loudly and publicly calls for Taiwan's subjugation, and that the CTA slavishly toes the line. This does not, however, guarantee that each and every move they make is a part of a coordinated master plan that inevitably brings us closer to seeing an occupied Taiwan, much less a "community of common destiny for mankind." The fluctuating relationship between Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists and organs of the Chinese state will need to be observed cautiously in future, both to remain vigilant against actual attempts to coopt members of the Taoist community, as well as to avoid paranoid reactions to seemingly suspicious interactions that may in fact pose negligible risk to Taiwanese society.

The Journey to the West

The UFWD's involvement in religious Taoism's spread beyond the PRC's borders has the potential to come under scrutiny in a growing number of countries in the coming years. Hot on the heels of the World Federation of Taoism's founding in late 2023, delegations of Chinese Taoist Association monks and nuns traveled to Switzerland, Mexico, and Australia the following year. In the former two countries, they took part in multiday rituals consecrating temples founded by western converts to Taoism, while in Australia a group led by CTA chairman Li Guangfu hobnobbed with local Taoists of both Chinese and non-Chinese descent, academics (including a former director

Centre Ming Shan, a Taoist education center and shrine in Bullet, Switzerland in September 2024.
Credit: Mattias Daly

of the University of Sydney Confucius Institute, Hans Hendrischke), and members of the overseas Chinese business community at the "2024 Australia-China Taoism Culture Festival."[78] This event, hosted in the City of Willoughby in Northern Sydney, was officially co-presented by the Willoughby City Council and attended by Deputy Mayor Nic Wright, and even received a formal congratulatory letter from politician Peter Dutton, then-Leader of the Opposition in the Australian parliament.[79]

A source who spoke to Religioscope on condition of anonymity who was involved in the orchestration of one of the three international events mentioned above said that the Chinese government's recent willingness to support the globalization of religious Taoism stems from a desire to find new means of generating soft power. According to this source, in the wake of the Confucius Institute's fall from grace in numerous western countries and the ill sentiments generated by years of wolf warrior diplomacy, Taoism presents the PRC government with an opportunity to drum up positive feelings by promoting a cultural export that is already viewed favorably in the West thanks to popular translations of the *Tao Te Ching* and associations with tai chi and traditional Chinese medicine. This source further posited that the UFWD may be anxious to insinuate the Chinese Taoist Association into overseas Taoist groups before the religion has a chance to grow much bigger "because it's a religious movement the CCP thinks they can actually control abroad."

In late 2024, Religioscope interviewed Sarah Blanc, co-founder of Centre Ming Shan, a Taoist academy located in Bullet, Switzerland, and Hervé Louchouarn, founder of the Mexican Taoist Association (la Asociación Mexicana de para el Desarrollo del Daoísmo) and the Eternal Spring Temple (Templo de la Eterna Primavera) in the Mexican state of Morelos. Continuing a trend that stretches back to the 2010s, the CTA dispatched contingents of monks and nuns to both locations last year to officiate shrine consecration rituals. The group that traveled to Switzerland in May 2024 was led by Zhang Gaocheng (張高澄), a Quanzhen monk and CTA vice chairman, while the group that traveled to Mexico in November 2024 was led by Wu Chengzhen (吳誠真), and Quanzhen nun and CTA vice chairwoman. Blanc and Louchouarn both asserted that the Taoist troupes paid for their own international travel, were adamant that the CTA does not provide them with any financial support, and emphasized their organizations being free from Chinese oversight in spite of their affiliation with the World Federation of Taoism. According to Blanc, "We are not dependent, they don't tell us you can do this, you can't do that… we're completely free to do what we want, and we only use local money." Louchouarn reported receiving 33,000 yuan (approximately USD 4500) worth of

78 Mu, "'2024 China-Australia Taoist Culture and Arts Festival' International Taoist Culture Forum Comes to Completion."

79 Su, "2024 China-Australia Taoist Culture and Arts Fair Opens."

donations from private parties in China for the Eternal Spring Temple, but added, "I received some help because it's traditional to receive some help. But nobody buys the temple and says 'this is our temple.' It's on private land and the building is our home." Louchouarn went on to add that, at present, neither the CTA nor the WFT have tried to establish rules meant to govern the behaviors of foreign religious Taoists, saying, "the only thing I have to accept is a rule created by my [Quanzhen Taoist] master, that my temple should have a special place with food for visiting monks."

Blanc and Louchouarn offered differing perspectives on the World Federation of Taoism's origins. According to Louchouarn, in 2011 he and representatives from seven other countries attended an international meeting for Taoists held by the CTA on Mount Heng in Hunan province. There, they met with the then-head of the CTA, the late Quanzhen monk Ren Farong (任法融), and a minister from the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (later renamed the National Ethnic Affairs Commission 國家民族事務委員會, absorbed into the UFWD in 2018[80]). The group submitted a petition requesting clarity on whether or not foreigners would be allowed to become Taoist initiates in China, and were granted this permission during the meeting. Louchouarn believes that the WFT grew from the 2011 meeting in Hunan. He said, "We began it. We began it because foreigners wanted to go to temples, we wanted to take courses, and we wanted to receive some formal education. We needed an answer from the government: can we or can we not be Taoists?"

80 Joske, "Reorganizing the United Front Work Department."

Hervé Louchouarn on the steps of the Templo de la Eterna Primavera in Morelo, Mexico during a ceremony in November 2024. The ceremony was joined by a group of Taoists sent from China by the CTA. Credit: Alina Yussif

The late chairman of the CTA, Quanzhen monk Ren Farong (1936–2021). Very active in politics, Ren also served as vice minister of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission. He was a member of the 8th, 9th and 10th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference as well as the 11th and 12th Standing Committees of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. When he died in 2021, the UFWD issued a communique calling him an "intimate friend of the CCP" and demanding that "individuals in the Taoist community learn from Taoist Monk Ren Farong's patriotic spirit, and gather tightly around the CCP with Xi Jinping at its core." (Niu and Yue, "Taoist Monk Ren Farong has Died.")
Credit: J. M. Hullot, licensed under CC BY 2.0

It may have been foreigners who approached the Chinese Taoist Association in 2011, when the PRC was still under Hu Jintao's leadership. By the 2020s, however, the CTA moved from passive interactions with foreign pilgrims to proactive engagement with the international Taoist community. This shift toward outreach coincides with the UFWD's 2018 restructuring, which, according to Alex Joske's research for the Jamestown Foundation, has meant that the United Front's religious divisions have taken on "international responsibilities, seeking to influence religious activities around the world" at the same time as there has been "an extreme turn in the CCP's approach to religion."[81] Sarah Blanc's recollections reveal the effects of the UFWD's reorientation. Speaking of the period leading up to the WFT's inception in 2023, Blanc recalled, "Europe has many Taoist associations that were all looking for help from China, and they wanted to do something more coherent by confederating." In 2023, she said, when these European Taoist groups began to create a formal affiliation, the Chinese side offered to help by bringing them into the WFT's fold.

Strikingly, the World Federation of Taoism's global ambitions go well beyond religious outreach. FaithInvest, a UK-based charity-cum-financial consultancy that aims "to grow the scale and impact of faith-consistent investing worldwide by supporting faith groups to invest in line with their values,"[82] announced on its website in 2023 that it would collaborate with the WFT and Hong Kong University to create a "Daoist Investor Hub."[83] Martin Palmer, a sinologist and former secretary-general of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, was FaithInvest's CEO until 2023 and currently serves as its founding president. Speaking to Religioscope in an interview in January 2025, Palmer described how the Chinese Taoist Association actively sought out FaithInvest: "As a consequence of the work I'd done with [the CTA] for years when I was at the Alliance for Religions and Conservation, they came to me as the doorway to the West, but also as somebody who understood at quite a deep level what Taoism actually is. They know me from the early 90s, when they were looking to come back into the world." Palmer explained the Daoist Investor Hub's role in detail:

> It already has two different levels. Within China, the hub's role will be to advise the SOEs [Chinese state-owned enterprises] who are investing around the world, causing huge problems because of their arrogance and their exploitation of resources. The hub's role there will be to advise the Bank of China on Chinese cultural values underlying investment, because there is a massive problem with the Belt and Road, that this is being

81 Ibid. For a detailed examination of the UFWD's intensified approach to religions in China after 2018, see Batke, "Holding Sway."

82 FaithInvest, "Our Mission."

83 Weldon, "A Busy year and Exciting Opportunities."

> done essentially by individuals with their own companies who claim to be part of the government, who undertake vast programs, regularly fail to deliver, and therefore the debt falls back onto the Bank of China. Basically, much of the Belt and Road Initiative has failed monumentally, and it's costing China a huge amount in debt relief. Yes, there's the land that they've taken, but it's gone badly awry, so there's a huge reform program of the Belt and Road Initiative, putting a major focus on greening the initiative. So, part of that is that they have looked to the Taoists to guide traditional cultural values. Then there's the second level. The business world is looking to the Taoists for guidance. Jack Ma[84] is a very devout Taoist who has poured money into Taoist events. The [CTA] estimates that there are at least a thousand millionaires in China who are Taoists, and probably a quarter of the billionaires are Taoist or Taoist-influenced. So, part of the role of this hub is to speak to them. Outside of China, where you have Taoist organizations that have got very substantial investments—take Hong Kong, Singapore, Laos, or Indonesia—then we are looking with them to join in with the Multi-faith Just Transition Fund, which essentially is an instrument for really serious investments. No organization is going to be looking at investors that can put in less than $100 million. Smaller religious investment houses, Taoist ones in particular, don't have that amount of money. If they join the Multi-faith Just Transition Fund, then they could put in $10 million, and then you've got another twenty organizations, and that makes an investment pot possible that could put half a billion into a prospect in sub-Saharan Africa or wherever it is.

By his own telling, that the Chinese Taoist Association would choose to approach Palmer's organization stems in part from his longstanding relationships with members of the UFWD. Speaking of his early collaborations with former CTA vice chairman and Zhengyi sect Taoist priest Zhang Jiyu (張繼禹), he said, "many of the minor officials I worked with [in the early 2000s] are now in charge of the United Front."

It is well beyond the scope of this paper to predict what, if anything, will come of a nascent investment program that will theoretically draw together the Chinese Taoist Association, the United Front, the Bank of China, Hong Kong University, the Belt and Road Initiative, and Taoism-friendly millionaires and billionaires looking for places to put their money. What the FaithInvest project does tell us, however, is that Taoism's spread beyond China is potentially entering a new phase, one in which the Chinese government may attempt to use the religion for much more than simply generating soft power abroad and feel-good propaganda at home. In fact, there is reason to believe that, under the restructured UFWD, the CTA may even be called upon to participate in attempts to exercise "sharp power," defined by Christopher Walker of the National Endowment for Democracy as "an approach to international affairs that

84 A Chinese entrepreneur who co-founded Alibaba Group, among other ventures.

Professional Network of Zhang Mingxin

Quanzhen Taoist Nun and CCP Apparatchik

Zhang Mingxin (張明心), born in 1952 in Sichuan province. Entered a Quanzhen Taoist monastic order in 1981 on Mount Qingcheng.

Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

- CCP Central Committee
  - United Front Work Dept.
    Zhang began UFWD training in 2000
  - Ethnic & Religious Work Bureau
  - Chinese Taoist Association
    Zhang has served as a CTA vice chairwoman since 2020
  - Mount Qingcheng Jianfu Temple
    Zhang is abbess of this temple
  - Mount Qingcheng Taoist College
    Zhang is dean of this Taoist college
- Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)
  - Sichuan Provincial CPPCC
    Zhang is a member of the Sichuan CPPCC Standing Committee
  - Sichuan Provincial Committee for Ethnic and Religious Affairs
    Zhang is a vice director of this committee
  - Chengdu Municipal Committee for Ethnic and Religious Affairs
    Zhang is a vice director of this committee

Image Credit: CNR (PRC State-Owned Broadcaster)

Western disciples and int'l connections

December 2024:
Zhang spoke at "Daoism, Ecology and Sustainable Investing" forum at the University of Hong Kong, also attended by Martin Palmer of FaithInvest.

Patrick Lovitt (1975-2022):
Founder of the now-defunct Four Dragons Institute, a Taoist academy ordaining Quanzhen "priests" in Houston, TX. Brought study groups to study with Zhang on Mt. Qingcheng.

Harrison Moretz:
Founder and president of the Taoist Studies Institute, which runs Taoist temples in Seattle and Snohomish, WA. In 2018, Zhang led a Taoist troupe to consecrate the Snohomish temple.

Josh Paynter & Jack Schaefer:
Co-founded Parting Clouds Daoist Education, offering intensives on Mt. Qingcheng, online courses, and ordination.

Bernard Shannon:
Zhang's student since 2004; runs the Temple of Peace and Virtue in Tennessee, organizes study trips to Mt. Qingcheng, and serves on the WFT.

typically involves efforts at censorship, or the use of manipulation to sap the integrity of independent institutions … [thereby] limiting free expression and distorting the political environment."[85]

A former Johns Hopkins University teaching fellow described to Religioscope how, in 2020, an ordained Quanzhen Taoist priest from the PRC who was studying in the US as an undergraduate was asked by the CTA to organize a direct political action on the university's campus. This scholar, who asked to remain anonymous, reported that he and the Taoist undergrad "had many conversations in which he explained a lot about the role of the Party in the Taoist community." In February 2020, in the midst of the tumultuous Anti-Extradition Bill Movement in Hong Kong, high-profile HK political activists Nathan Law Kwun-chung (羅冠聰) and Joshua Wong Chi-fung (黃之鋒) were invited to speak at a Johns Hopkins Foreign Affairs Symposium event. The anonymous lecturer told Religioscope, "My Taoist friend was the key organizer of a pro-CCP mob who stormed the meeting … the Chinese Taoist Association asked him to be a patriotic activist," as a result of which "he agitated an aggressive mob to intimidate pro-HK students."[86] Notably, the Taoist student "was careful not to criticize the CCP, but made it clear that he was not a communist. He was also careful to distance himself from the senior Taoist leaders in China, whom he called hardline nationalists." Though the Taoist student typically wore traditional Quanzhen attire with his hair in a monks' topknot while on campus, he dressed as an unremarkable college student on the day of the protest. Afterwards, he told the teaching fellow that "he was not proud of his role, nor ashamed." The lecturer reflected that the Taoist university student "always said his commitment was to Taoism, Chinese medicine, and to alleviating the suffering of people in the world, so it seemed so incongruous that he led an aggressive group of young people behaving eerily like the Red Guards of the 1960s … He clearly acted as though his place in the 'organization' depended on playing a public role, thus passing a loyalty test." If the student's denials of ideological commitment to the CCP and pro-PRC nationalism are to be believed, this incident gives insight into a way in which even independent-minded Quanzhen Taoists may find themselves compelled by CTA leadership to actively participate in politics. Regardless of the student-monk's actual political leanings, this anecdote drives home the need to regard the CTA and WFT as being far more than simple religious organizations.

A Call for Caution and Circumspection

As Quanzhen and other Taoist sects continue to spread in Taiwan, other parts of Asia, Europe, North America, and Oceania, the Chinese government has made no secret of its intent to play a decisive role

85 Walker, "What is 'Sharp Power,'" 11.

86 Scenes of the protest can be seen at 00:01:59 in Xu and Yu, "Dozens of Students from the PRC Protest During Nathan Law Kwun-chung and Joshua Wong Chi-fung's Talk at American University."

in the Taoist religion's globalization. The UFWD's inevitable involvement in any international activities orchestrated by the CTA will consequently increase the likelihood of Taoist groups around the world facing intense scrutiny in their home countries. Two recent examples reflect this reality. On 12 January 2025, Taiwan's National Security Bureau caused a stir when it issued a press release entitled "Analysis on the Infiltration Tactics Concerning China's Espionage Cases." This document lists religious groups as one of five primary channels used by the UFWD and other arms of the PRC government to "infiltrate various sectors in Taiwan, recruit Taiwanese nationals to assist in developing organizations, or obtain sensitive intelligence from the Taiwanese government." The press release went on to state that "China also provides funding to Taiwanese temples and religious groups, leveraging religious activities to approach active service members. Those individuals are enticed to film videos of defecting to China while wearing military uniforms and holding the Chinese five-star flag."[87]

The CTA's connections to the UFWD have drawn public scrutiny in the west, as well. On 30 January 2022, the UK tabloid newspaper *The Sun* published an article entitled "Spies in Palace: Chinese Intelligence Officers Infiltrate Charity Inspired by Prince Philip." According to the article, spies "operating through the China Taoist Association," which "is controlled by Beijing's United Front Work Department," "met the Prince on several occasions through the Alliance of Religions and Conservation [ARC], which was also set up by Mr. [Martin] Palmer, before he founded FaithInvest." Stating that these secret agents "wheedled their way into FaithInvest by partnering with them and its founding organization to conduct operations and buy influence," the article alleges that they "teamed up with [FaithInvest's] founding body, the ARC, to meet the Duke of Edinburgh [Prince Philip] at Windsor Castle."[88] Palmer wrote to Religioscope that "the story was completely false and giving it credit would be foolish." Rebutting *The Sun*'s story on FaithInvest's website, Palmer proposed the less than infallible rationale that possessing religious credentials precludes a person from being a government operative, stating, "I find it laughable that Daoist religious leaders, who've spent years studying their faith at Daoist temples, are described as agents

87 Secretariat, National Security Bureau, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Analysis on the Infiltration Tactics Concerning China's Espionage."

88 Reilly, "Spies in Palace."

of the Chinese state."[89] *The Sun* published a partial correction on 2 February 2022, acknowledging that, "Although FaithInvest was inspired by the Duke, and grew out of a project set up by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), it did not yet exist when he and FaithInvest's founder attended the meeting through ARC" at which Chinese secret agents were allegedly present.[90] However, aside from correcting the timeline of FaithInvest's founding, it did not retract the allegations of espionage.

Although *The Sun's* allegations were repeated in *The Daily Mail*,[91] *The Express*,[92] and a Chinese-language outlet called *Vision Times*,[93] there was no subsequent follow-up in the media. Religioscope takes no position on the story's veracity, but presents it as an example of how easily international religious exchanges involving the UFWD can become incendiary, potentially thrusting people with ties to groups like the Chinese Taoist Association into the public eye. The high probability that other PRC-centered international religious exchanges will become flashpoints in the future suggests the need for both observers and participants to adopt an attitude of caution and circumspection.

On the side of observers, it is worth heeding voices who counsel against overreacting to the United Front's activities. As Robert Ross of Boston University wrote for the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft in 2022, in "Washington's emerging Cold War policy-making environment … policy makers consider every Chinese diplomatic initiative, whether it is an international lending program, a free-trade agreement, or educational cooperation with American universities, as a strategic maneuver that challenges U.S. security and that

89 FaithInvest, "The Sun Finally Corrects its False Story about Us." As Karine Martin vividly illustrates in her book *Monastic Daoism Transformed*, religious clergy in the PRC are in fact compelled to regularly attend government-mandated trainings (see note 39), and as this paper has shown, the CTA has been an office of the UFWD since 2018. The UFWD-CTA connection did not begin in 2018, however. For example, on 2 December 2024 the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at Hong Kong University hosted "Daoism, Ecology, Sustainable Investing," a forum featuring Professor James Miller, a Taoism researcher, as its keynote speaker. Martin Palmer appeared as a discussant, and Quanzhen nun Zhang Mingxin (張明心), currently a vice chairwoman of the CTA, provided opening remarks (see ASIAR—Asian Religious Connections, "Daoism, Ecology and Sustainable Investing."). Zhang Mingxin has been especially active in international outreach, ordaining several western Taoists. One of her disciples, Bernard Shannon, is currently a board member of the WFT (see World Federation of Taoism, "Organizational Structure."), while two of her other American disciples have opened Taoist temples in Houston, Texas and Seattle and Snohomish, Washington. Religioscope has archived a biography of Zhang Mingxin, screenshotted but no longer available online, stating that she began training with the UFWD in the year 2000, indicating that the United Front has had an interest in grooming Quanzhen Taoist personnel since at least the turn of the century.

90 Ibid.

91 Feehan, "Chinese Spies 'Infiltrated Charity Inspired by Prince Philip and Met the Duke at Windsor Castle.'"

92 McGleenon, "Queen on Alert as Windsor Castle Under Attack."

93 Cheng, "A Spy Movie in the Palace."

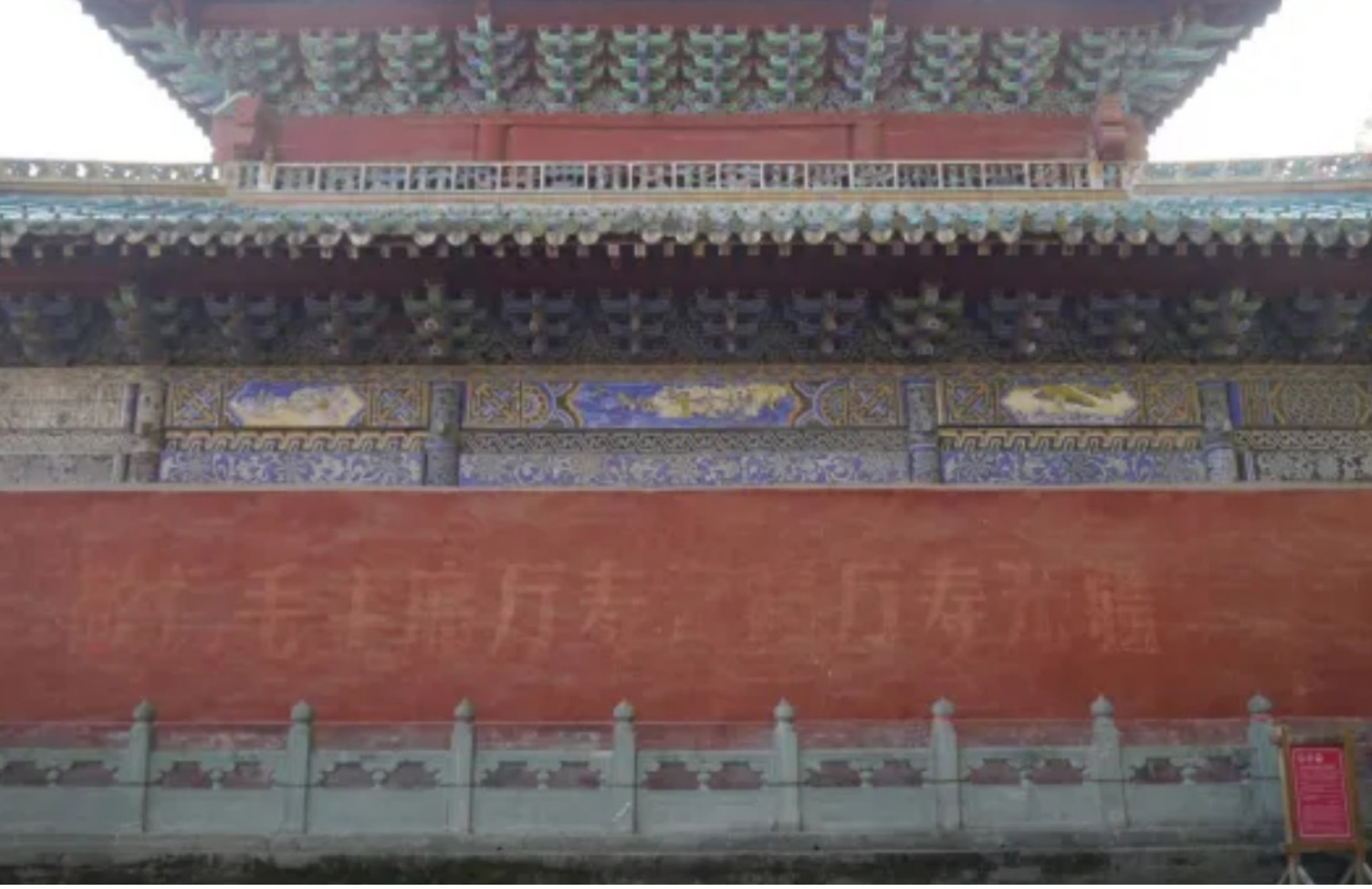
Date	Host(s)	Ranking CTA Quanzhen Taoist Clergy-Official	Type of event
December 2024 (Hong Kong)	Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at Hong Kong University	Zhang Mingxin (張明心) CTA vice chairwoman 2020-present	"Daoism, Ecology and Sustainable Investing" forum, also attended by Martin Palmer of ARC/ FaithInvest
November 2024 (Mexico)	la Asociación Mexicana de para el Desarrollo del Daoísmo	Wu Chengzhen (吳誠真) CTA vice chairwoman 2015-present WFT council member 2023-present	Shrine consecration ritual at a Taoist temple in the state of Morelos; according to Chinese news media was also attended by NRAA bureau chief Kuang Sheng (匡盛)
September 2024 (Malaysia)	Tow Bo Kong Temple	Li Guangfu (李光富) CTA chairman 2015-present WFT president 2023-present	Celebration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of Tow Bo Kong Temple (鬥母宮) in Butterworth, Seberang Perai, Penang
June 2024 (Switzerland)	Centre Ming Shan	Zhang Gaocheng (張高澄) CTA vice chairman 2015-present WFT council member 2023-present	"Tao Art Festival 2024," featuring shrine consecration ritual
April 2024 (Australia)	Australian Taoist Association	Li Guangfu (李光富) (see above)	2024 China-Australia Taoism Culture Festival
May 2023 (Italy)	Taoist Church of Italy (TCI)	Meng Zhiling (孟至嶺) CTA vice chairman 2015-present WFT general secretary 2023-present	Celebration of the 30th anniversary of the founding of the TCI; according to the CTA's press release was attended by officials from 12 branches of the UFWD as well as visitors from Singapore, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Romania, and Australia
June 2019 (Italy)	TCI	Zhang Fenglin (張鳳林) CTA vice chairman 2005-2020	International interfaith forum
May-June 2018 (USA)	Taoist Studies Institute	Zhang Mingxin (張明心) (see above)	Shrine consecration rituals at two Taoist temples in Seattle and Snohomish, WA
2017 (UK)	ARC	Zhang Gaocheng (張高澄) (see above)	Meeting with Prince Philip at Windsor Castle, attended by Martin Palmer of the ARC/FaithInvest
January 2015 (Taiwan)	Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan Quanzhen Divine Temple Management Committee (台灣全真仙觀管理委員會), Taiwan Orthodox Quanzhen Daoist Association (台灣正宗全真道教會)	Huang Xinyang (黃信陽) CTA vice chairman 2005-2020	"Both Sides of the Strait Quanzhen Religious Exchange" (兩岸全真宗教交流) symposium at Fu Jen Catholic University, visits to several Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoist temples

requires an adversarial response."[94] Following a similar train of thought, Michael D. Swaine, a senior research fellow in the Quincy Institute's East Asia Program, wrote, "threat inflation is a major problem in evaluating… military security-related intentions of China's leadership. With some notable exceptions, U.S. authoritative assessments (and especially nonauthoritative ones) often employ inadequate, distorted, or incorrect evidence, use grossly hyperbolic language, display sloppy or illogical thinking, or rely on broad-brush assertions that seem to derive more from narrow political, ideological, or emotional impulses than from any objective search for truth."[95] In this light, it is easy to imagine a paranoid or opportunistic demagogue in any country with febrile relations with the PRC scapegoating a local Taoist community for its interactions with United Front personnel, or calling for a ban against participation in the World Federation of Taoism. While it cannot be denied that the long shadow of Xi Jinping loyalists like Wang Huning and Shi Taifeng looms over the CTA and WFT, it remains a real question whether or not chauvinistic speeches delivered by CCP cadres at international or cross-straits Taoist meetings will translate into actual attempts at power grabs, espionage, or foreign interference, and if so, what these attempts would look like. In short, it behooves observers of the growing worldwide Taoist community not to confuse rhetoric with reality and to avoid assigning guilt by association.

On the other side of this coin, Taoists in Taiwan and beyond would be wise to take care not to allow themselves to be taken advantage of by the UFWD. While there is little risk that people whose lives revolve around meditating, chanting scripture, and practicing tai chi will be asked to steal their nations' nuclear secrets, there are other ways in which religionists could be compelled to knowingly or unknowingly support the United Front's mission. The PRC has mostly approached Taoists with a variety of "carrots," but to those who have become accustomed to receiving benefits like free plane tickets, free lodging, or cash-stuffed "travel stipend" envelopes, the threat of these benefits' removal becomes a kind of stick. Any individual or group who chooses to actually invest in financial products sponsored by the Chinese Taoist Association may find hidden costs to such a bargain, for instance the requirement of silence on sensitive issues of import to the CCP. Taoists around the world who already have close links to the CTA and reject the idea that they could ever be backed into such a corner might ask themselves: today, were they invited to participate in a local vigil meant to show interfaith solidarity with persecuted Uyghur Muslims or Tibetan Buddhists, would they attend? If the answer is no, why not?

94 Ross, Robert, "Solomon Islands-China Deal Punctures US Complacency."

95 Swaine, "Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military."



According to one local's recollection, at the height of the Cultural Revolution a quick-thinking Taoist monk hastily had "Reverently Wishing that Chairman Mao Will Live 10,000 Limitless Years" painted on the wall of this major temple on Mount Wudang in Hubei province when he realized that Red Guards hell-bent on smashing up the temples and shrines were making their way up the mountain. According to the tale, when the Red Guards arrived and found Mao's name on the building, they spared it, and the statues within, from destruction. These characters remained visible at least until the 2010s. They may by now have been painted over, but politics is as intertwined with religious Taoism as ever.
Photo: Sudhir Vadaketh

Any attempt to envision what Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoism or worldwide religious Taoism in general might look like in another five or ten years is bound to miss the mark. However, just as the UFWD's efforts with Taiwanese Quanzhen Taoists have failed to produce an army of robed, topknot-wearing minions, it seems probable that new converts to Taoism around the world will remain a diverse, contentious, and mostly autonomous bunch. While the passage of time may yet prove me wrong, I offer three pieces of evidence to support this prediction: one, the anonymous western Taoist quoted above observed that the international Taoist community, despite a widespread willingness to engage with the CTA and WFT, is full of China skeptics who quietly share opinions very much in line with those found in Karine Martin's book. Secondly, in a move hardly indicative of pro-Chinese government sympathies, one of the other three western interviewees featured in this paper quietly provided Religioscope with links to excerpts from Martin's book that appeared in *Bitter Winter*, a fiercely anti-CCP online magazine devoted to supporting freedom of religion in China. Thirdly, behaving in a manner similar to several of their more

curmudgeonly Taiwanese counterparts, yet another of this paper's western Taoist interviewees made a digression to cast aspersions at other western Taoists, happily naming names in the process. In sum, not only does it remain to be seen whether or not the United Front Work Department will succeed at using the World Federation of Taoism to substantively further its goals, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that this very group could one day break away from the Chinese Taoist Association, or even, like many other religious groups, become an outright opponent of the Chinese Communist Party.

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Infiltrating the Tao

The Quanzhen sect of religious Taoism has existed for over 800 years, but it only began to spread to Taiwan and western countries at the end of the 20th century. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has taken notice of Quanzhen Taoism's spread beyond China's borders and now administers the religion directly through the United Front Work Department (UFWD), in an attempt to influence this religion's adherents both at home and abroad.

This report, written for Religioscope by Taiwan-based Taoism researcher Mattias Daly, looks at the historical circumstances surrounding Quanzhen's spread to Taiwan and numerous western countries. It also analyzes the UFWD's successes and failures at using the sect's religious activities to spread pro-CCP messaging, generate soft power, and even exercise sharp power in foreign lands.

This paper draws upon a large number of interviews conducted with Taoist monks and nuns, scholars in the fields of political science and religious studies, and westerners directly involved with the Chinese Taoist Association, the arm of the UFWD that oversees the Quanzhen sect. It documents how the Chinese government embeds itself in religious movements both locally and globally, while also stressing the limits of the CCP's attempts to control religion.

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