

Interview with Xia Liqing and Huang Wangu

Interview with Xia Liqing and Huang Wangu, both residents of Five Dragon Temple. The former is a Daoist nun and the latter a Daoist monk. Perhaps the most inaccessible temple in the Wudang Shan scenic area, necessitating a five hour trek at minimum from Crow's Ridge, Five Dragon Temple enjoys a glorious history as the first temple complex in the area and the original center of religious activity for the mountain.¹ It has since fallen into a state of disrepair.

Interview conducted in the temple eatery over breakfast.

Interviewer: Can I ask you your name and how long you've been here at Five Dragon Temple?

Xia Liqing: My name is Xia Liqing and I've been here since Five Dragon Temple was re-opened for religious worship in 1992.

Huang Wangu: My name is Huang Wangu and I arrived here last year. I came here from Zhejiang Province.

Interviewer: What led you to come here?

Huang Wangu: At first I came here just to have a look around. I was very impressed and decided to stay here. My master here is amazing.

Interviewer: I'd like to start off by asking you a few questions concerning the protection and preservation of the greater Wudang Shan area. Has the program for the relocation of mountain residents been applied to the villages surrounding Five Dragon Temple?

Xia Liqing: Yes, families living within the temple grounds have already been moved and there have been a few families in the surrounding area moved to Laoying.

Interviewer: I've noticed several families still living in the area. Will they be moved in the future?

Xia Liqing: I'm not sure.

Interviewer: What about the program to slowly eliminate the practice of burial? Do local people still bury their dead and how has the relocation program affected this?

¹ For discussion concerning Five Dragon Temple's history as the nexus of religious worship at Wudang Shan see John Lagerwey, "The Pilgrimage to Wu-tang Shan," in: Susan Naquin and Yü Chün-fang eds., *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*. University of California Press: Berkeley, CA. 1992.

Xia Liqing: Almost everyone still buries their dead, but I suppose that those who are moved to the city won't return once they die. But I'm really not sure. The prohibition on burials really hasn't affected us much. Only some places enforce the rule.

Interviewer: What about the costs of burial?

Xia Liqing: This is very expensive, but nonetheless very important to people. They amass as much money as possible for the ceremony in the hopes to greatly respect the newly dead.

Interviewer: And cremations?

Xia Liqing: There are none.

Interviewer: In your estimation, to what extent have government programs to protect the surrounding environment been implemented?

Huang Wangu: Well, they've stepped up efforts to collect rubbish. There's also been a drive to prevent deforestation. Nowadays, people don't dare cut trees down from the surrounding forests for firewood. This is quite different from the Cultural Revolution when people recklessly cut the largest and oldest trees in the forest.

Interviewer: Now I would like to ask you a few questions about the temple itself. It was once the center of religious activity on the mountain yet today it is rather inaccessible and primarily in ruins. What brought about its deterioration?

Xia Liqing: Not long after liberation the main building was burnt down. It burnt for three days and three nights until almost nothing remained.

Interviewer: Which liberation? 1911? 1949?

Xia Liqing: It burnt down in 1931.

Interviewer: How did it get set on fire?

Xia Liqing: It was arson. Bandits burned it down.

Interviewer: Being such a prominent Daoist monument, it seems arson of that kind must have been premeditated and purposeful. Are you familiar with their reasoning?

Huang Wangu: At that time the whole country was in a state of disorder. Bandits lived in strongholds throughout the hills as they sought cover in their fight against government forces. They were violent and uncivilized, so they just burnt it down.

Interviewer: Were efforts made to rebuild after that?

Xia Liqing: Not really, since there was no money. People made a makeshift altar at the location where the temple once stood, but this and many other parts of the temple complex were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate on the damage incurred during the Cultural Revolution?

Xia Liqing: Well, the Red Guards primarily destroyed idols. They took hundreds of the bronze and gold-plated idols and smashed them in their craziness. Before the Red Guards came, the temple grounds were far larger.

Huang Wangu: Yes, when the conflict occurred many scared idols were destroyed and shrines torn down. We are still feeling the effects of this today and it's only slowly coming back now. But they underestimated our extensive spiritual vigor (*boda jingshen*). Even though they destroyed idols and shrines, they did nothing to harm the spirits who occupy them. The idols themselves are simply physical matter - destroying them doesn't affect the spirit inside. Moreover, they invited the wrath of these spirits through their reckless actions. They have invited bad fortune for themselves.

Interviewer: [To Xia Liqing] Were you here at that time?

Xia Liqing: Yes, but that was before I became a nun. I stayed within the house most of the time back when religion couldn't be practiced openly.

Interviewer: Beyond damage to the temple grounds, were there other effects of the Red Guards on the Wudang Shan area that come to mind?

Xia Liqing: Yes, they cut down all of the ancient trees within the complex and in the forests surrounding. After the Cultural Revolution the destruction ebbed, but there still remained many problems like people stealing cultural relics and such. The government set up a unit to guard the temple's treasures, but no monks inhabited the grounds. Daoism wasn't being practiced here in the temple at that time. It wasn't until they re-opened the temple to religious worship in 1992 that Daoists returned and practiced openly.

Interviewer: Since then, has there been much of a religious revival in the area?

Xia Liqing: Yes there has been but it hasn't been very large.

Interviewer: In your estimation, how do the total numbers of visitors today compare to those from the past?

Xia Liqing: We get maybe five pilgrims per day on average. This is much less than before but still better than ten years ago.

Interviewer: What, in your opinion, are the main reasons for the fact that there are so few visitors to the temple?

Xia Liqing: Many more may want to come but the path is far too difficult. There is still no road and the few visitors that do come must walk many kilometers to get here on a mountain path. I think this keeps the majority of visitors away.

Interviewer: You have elaborated on the numbers of visitors to Five Dragon Temple. What is your impression of the total numbers of Daoist practitioners in general in the entire area these days compared with what you remember from the past?

Huang Wangu: I feel that there've been many more Daoists these years and even many foreign friends practicing Daoism. In fact, my master, Xu Yushen has foreign disciples from Germany, Russia, the US and Canada. He had a German disciple, a woman, living here for several months studying under him. He's got disciples from all over the world. He truly has supernatural abilities (*hui shenxian shu*).

Interviewer: Do you practice Daoist martial arts here?

Huang Wangu: Yes we do, but not *gongfu* or *taiji*. Mainly we practice meditation and qigong. We do this not for fighting but for good health and longevity.

Interviewer: What other practices to you perform?

Huang Wangu: We conduct ceremonies and chant prayers. Everyday we spend much time growing and tending vegetables in the gardens as well as keeping the temple grounds tidy. We would like to teach *gongfu* here one day. If the road finally gets fixed and the temple renovated we would enjoy setting up a *gongfu* academy here.

Interviewer: A *gongfu* academy here would certainly alter the feel of this place.

Huang Wangu: Yes, it would. It would also bring in revenue to help with the upkeep of the temple. It is our hope to help spread the Wudang style of *gongfu* throughout the world and invite both Chinese and foreigners here to learn it.

Interviewer: What are the primary means for financing the upkeep of the temple these days?

Huang Wangu: Well, as you can probably see from the dilapidated state of the temple today we get very little money for maintenance. What little money we do get comes from the Wudang Daoist Association as well as the small donations we get from visitors. But as you can probably imagine, this adds up to very little.

Interviewer: And the local government?

Huang Wangu: The local government provides no assistance.

Interviewer: How then do you anticipate funding costly renovations of the temple?
[Restoration in this case would amount to an almost full reconstruction as the entire complex is virtually in shambles]

Xia Liqing: We wholeheartedly invite investments from the outside. If anyone you know wishes to invest we would certainly welcome it.

Interviewer: From what I've heard from other visitors who've come here in the last couple years (admittedly mostly foreign), the most appealing aspect of the temple is the fact that it *is* in shambles and hasn't yet been rebuilt. This most certainly reflects a bias on their part, but I've heard that the disrepair actually lends an air of authenticity to the place. I've heard concerns that a complete makeover would invite hordes of tourists, hotels and shops and alter the appearance of the 'ancient' and 'sacred'. How would you respond to this sentiment?

Xia Liqing: Well, renovation wouldn't happen overnight, it's part of a long process. Renovation would do nothing to alter the 'authenticity' or 'sanctity' of the temple for Daoists. It's a necessity. As for the surrounds, we hope to raise several modern-looking buildings like those you see in the city to replace the old one. The area would still have a Daoist flavor to it (*daojiao de weidao*) though.

Anyway, hotels and shops would be in the surrounding area and not within the temple grounds and therefore wouldn't interfere with our ceremonies. All we need are investments to make this happen. If you or anyone you know would like to invest, we strongly welcome it. There is no question that any investments for Five Dragon Temple are good for its development.

Interviewer: You would, I assume, likewise welcome a road connecting the temple to the town, hotels and shops?

Xia Liqing: Certainly. The roads now are in very bad condition and it's very difficult to get supplies in. New roads, as well as hotels and shops would invite tourism and therefore more investments for the temple.

Interviewer: Have you heard similar opinions from other visitors?

Xia Liqing: Oh yes. The more money the better. Everyone who comes here says we should prioritize fixing the place up. It's simple: new temples are good and old temples are no good. When you return to your country you can help us spread Daoism and help bring in investments from overseas.

Interviewer: You have been speaking about future hope for change. What changes have you noticed since the temple was re-opened? How do you feel about these changes?

Xia Liqing: Yes, there's been a very noticeable change. We were very poor here and life was hard, but now look we have many new things - we have electricity! The change has been welcomed. It suits us well.

Huang Wangu: Even though the exterior (*waimao*) has undergone change, the practice hasn't changed much. We still practice meditation and do exercises for longevity. The primary purpose of Daoism is to lengthen peoples' lives and if you maintain good health, you can extend your years greatly.

Look at her [points to Xia Liqing]. She's almost one hundred years old but hardly looks it. Living longer one can learn more and more; and the more you learn the more you can refine yourself. The more refined one is, the more they can pass on that information to future generations. In this way the quest for longevity is not just to selfishly extend one's own life, but good for humanity.

Daoism is spreading all over the world. Are you familiar with the Korean flag? It has the eight trigrams and the *taiji*. It's a pity, but in many cases foreigners know more about Daoism than we Chinese. We've had many foreign disciples here. Politics in China don't leave much room for religion, so the Chinese people don't know about the Dao like the way they did before liberation. Many other countries know about the Dao though. The *Yijing* and the eight trigrams - this is the pervasive spirit of Daoism that has spread everywhere, even if it's hard to spread here in China. We hope you take Daoism and *Taijiquan* with you back to your country in a cultural exchange.