

## In Brief

**Party chiefs re-elected in three more provinces**

Three more provinces have re-elected their party secretaries, state media reported. Wei Liucheng (衛留成) was re-elected as party secretary of Hainan province (海南省) yesterday. Mr Wei, 61, a native of Henan (河南省), was named Hainan governor in February 2004 and appointed party secretary last December. He is a well-known businessman, formerly working for decades in the oil industry before moving to Hainan. Lu Hao (陸昊), a 60-year-old native of Hebei's (河北省) Changli county, was re-elected party secretary of Gansu (甘肅省) after being elected party secretary for the first time last year. In Guizhou (貴州省), Shi Zongyuan (石宗源) was also re-elected over the weekend. The 61-year-old native of Hebei was appointed party secretary in December 2005. He had been chief and party secretary of the General Administration of Press and Publications since October 2000. The new appointments are part of the personnel arrangements planned ahead of the 17th Party Congress to be held in autumn, when more young party leaders are expected to be promoted to the leadership. Staff Reporter

**Chen protests after WHO rejects Taiwan application**

Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian yesterday protested against the World Health Organisation's rejection of the island's latest bid for membership, which had angered Beijing. Mr Chen wrote to WHO director-general Margaret Chan Fung Fu-chun on April 11, but the WHO secretariat insisted the island was not a sovereign state and not eligible to apply for membership of the international body. Mr Chen told a seminar on the island's WHO efforts: "Taiwan is an independent sovereign state and has the right to join the WHO. Neither the WHO nor its director-general have the right to deny or strip the human rights of 23 million people. The WHO secretariat has no right to unilaterally decide if Taiwan is a sovereign state or if it is entitled to apply for WHO membership. Therefore, I, on behalf of the government and 23 million people, am filing the strongest protest to the WHO secretariat." Taiwan had launched a new bid to join the World Health Assembly, the highest decision-making body of the WHO, and also apply for WHO membership. AFP

**Child killed, 55 fall ill as vendor adds nitrite to stew**

A seven-year-old boy died and 55 others fell violently ill after eating poisoned beef in Yunnan province (雲南省), state media reported. The victims, all residents of Zhadian township, last week ate beef stew spiked with the chemical nitrite, which is toxic in excessive amounts, Xinhua said. The street vendor who sold the stew had run out of salt when cooking the dish and grabbed "something that looked like salt" instead, the agency reported. Sample tests of the stew showed more than 12 grams of nitrite per kilogram of beef, four times the fatal amount, Xinhua said. Nitrite is used in very small quantities as a food additive, but high amounts can cause headaches, vomiting, unconsciousness and death. Food poisoning outbreaks emerge frequently on the mainland. AFP

**Firm gets staff to pose as buyers in pirate DVD sting**

A Taiwanese company is using its employees to pose as online buyers to stop people selling pirated foreign films on the internet in an unusual way of controlling the fake DVD market. Basic International, a sales agent for Japanese and Korean film distributors, has been catching people trying to sell pirated DVDs on auction sites since 2005. The company's employees present themselves online as interested buyers, but then take police officers with them when they go to pick up their purchases. AP

# Ancient faith has more support from a government than in centuries

## Rebirth of Taoism fills spiritual void in rush to consumerism



A Taoist ceremony in Xian, Shaanxi province, where the government last week sponsored a show (as well as in Hong Kong) to promote the ancient indigenous Chinese faith. Photo: Kristine Kwok

**Kristine Kwok**

The core concept of the *Daodejing*, the founding canon of Taoism by Chinese philosopher Lao Zi (老子), is arguably the suggestion that doing nothing is the most effective action.

It is because of this philosophy of non-action and its promotion of re-treating from society and government that Taoism has been ignored by the nation's rulers for centuries. But in a move seen as part of its campaign to heal social problems and filling the mainland's ideological void by rediscovering Chinese culture, the government threw an extravagant show last week in Xian (西安), Shaanxi province (陝西), and Hong Kong to promote the 5,000-character classic, which is the basis of the only indigenous faith among the five sanctioned religions.

Taoist leaders praised the forum for demonstrating an unprecedented level of support from a Chinese government in centuries, with some estimating it to have cost US\$1 million.

But doubts have also been raised over whether the promotion was just another ideological talking shop.

Divided into two parts, in Xian and Hong Kong, the six-day forum was backed by the State Administration for Religious Affairs and the two regions' governments.

With a theme of "constructing a harmonious world through the Tao", the forum was also hailed by some speakers as adding weight to China's "soft power" as an emerging nation.

Among dignitaries attending the event was Liu Yandong (劉延東), a member of the Communist Party Central Committee, Xu Jialu (許嘉璐), a vice-chairman of the National People's Congress, and Ye Xiaowen (葉小文), head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs. Taoist leaders and experts from 17 countries also took turns to discuss the significance of the *Daodejing* and Taoism.

Taoism came closest to being a state religion in the Tang dynasty. But Zhang Jiyu (張繼禹), a vice-chairman of the China Taoist Association, said the 2,000-year-old faith was now seeing its best time in centuries.

"For hundreds of years, the essence and meaning of Taoism had never been properly promoted," Mr Zhang said.

"It has been marginalised because Chinese people think it's backward and superstitious, especially since the May 4 movement. People in modern times prefer things from the west as more superior and consider all Chinese things as inferior."

Mr Zhang said the number of Taoists was on the rise and temples were being rebuilt nationwide.

A better economy and a change of perception had allowed Taoist groups to do things not possible in the past, such as compiling literature on Taoism, said Mr Zhang.

The priest from the Daoyi sect,

**True words**

The approximate number of characters in the *Daodejing*, Taoism's founding text

# 5,000

which allows priests to marry and stay at home, said he hoped the forum could help to promote a message that Taoism was more sophisticated than *fung shui* or fortune-telling. The other sect is Quanzhen, which forbids marriage.

Like most religious leaders on the mainland, Mr Zhang is a delegate to the National People's Congress,

while the China's Taoist Association's chairman and most of its 10 deputies are also members of the congress or the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

They boast their official roles are an endorsement of China's religious freedom, although the faith encourages retreat from government.

For Martin Palmer, general secretary of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) in Britain, rediscovering traditional culture and religion is the right course for rebuilding a better China.

"In the past, when dynasties collapsed in China, they were mainly because of internal processes," said the Christian, who attended the forum in Xian.

"Now China is mimicking the west and picking up the worst from the west, such as consumerism and rampant individualism," Mr Palmer said.

A scene rather contradictory to the harmonious notion was on view a block away from the Xian venue, as scores of petitioners staged daily sittings at the government office hoping to get redress for their problems.

"I've listened to politicians and businessmen [at the forum] telling us how the *Daodejing* is the centre of Chinese culture. If one in 10 of those people really believes and actually acts on that, I think those will be the model that China would follow."

But he said a cultural change from the top could be helpful.

"When you have the vice-chairman of the National People's Congress ... saying that *Daodejing* is important, that's a huge cultural change."

The sign of change first came in 2003 when the ARC was approached by the central government to discuss how traditional Chinese religions could help to create a better China, Mr Palmer said.

"The government approached us, said that something had gone wrong and asked who it could turn to to create a culture that is communal for the needs of everyone."

Tradition appeared to be the way

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Martin Palmer, general secretary, ARC in Britain

out as the Communist Party lost its ideological grip.

"The Communist Party should be grateful [to the religions]. Nobody believes in communism in the country. They might believe for individual promotion, but they don't believe communism is going to create a workers' paradise; they don't believe it's going to solve all the ills."

Buddhism and Confucianism, which make up the three major Chinese philosophies with Taoism, have been given various forms of official support in recent years.

An international forum on Buddhism was held in Hangzhou (杭州) last year, while Confucian schools are sprouting across the country.

The promotion of Chinese culture is also seen as a move to counter the influence of western religions, especially Catholicism and Protestantism. Advocates of traditional values also hope "soft power" can improve China's international influence.

Tian Chengyang (田成陽), who was among the first Taoist priests to preach the religion in the west by setting up a temple in Barcelona in 2001, said the time was now ripe to boost Taoism as an international religion.

"Now China is rising, we should make use of this opportunity and promote our civilisation to the world. It will be very useful in boosting China's international status," he said.

## Taoist master recalls his tryst with hardships

To live in harmony with the universe is the essence of life, says Master Ren Farong (任法融), head of China's 25,000 Taoist priests.

By following this course Master Ren, 71, has upheld his spiritual pursuit as a Taoist monk in Shaanxi province (陝西) for more than 50 years, surviving 15 years of hardship during the Cultural Revolution, and maintaining a good relationship with both the central government and the likes of Hong Kong's Henderson Land chairman Lee Shau-kee.

"I had suffered a lot [during the Cultural Revolution]. Everyone looked down on me because they think Taoist priests are monsters and demons," the native of Gansu province (甘肅省) said.

To escape the turmoil, which saw

Taoist temples destroyed and priests forced to resume secular life, Master Ren retreated to tilling farmland in Shaanxi's Zhouzhi county. But a reclusive life did not spare him the humiliation of public denunciations.

He said: "But it was a good chance for me to mould my temperament. I see this as a good practice."

Master Ren, who also runs Lougantai, or the Outlook Tower, near Xian (西安), first found his passion for Taoism after reading the classic Chinese philosophical treatise *Dao De Jing* as a child. The youngest of three sons in his family, he decided to become a Taoist monk at the age of 19, despite strong objections from his family.

Amid a revival of religious pursuits on the mainland, Master Ren said China

still needed to put in more effort to build a harmonious society by narrowing the gap between the western and coastal regions and saving the environment. "Of course, it's going to be difficult," he said.

As a delegate to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Master Ren said his roles of a religious head and a political figure were in harmony with each other.

"They are not conflicting roles. When problems occur in our religion, we can pass our concern to the government," he said.

Master Ren was selected as president of the China Taoist Association in 2005 to succeed his predecessor, Min Zhiting (閔智亭), who died at 80 in 2004.



Taoist Master Ren Farong

## Olympics may be used 'as a pretext' to abuse human rights, warns Amnesty International

Tom Miller in Beijing

The central government's preoccupation with creating a "harmonious" environment raises fears that the Olympic Games will provide a platform for human rights abuses, according to a report published today by Amnesty International.

The latest issue of "The Olympics Countdown" report, which judges the mainland's recent record on human rights according to the core principles of the Olympic Charter, also expresses concern for the continued suppression of political activists and raises doubts about the effectiveness of reforms to the death penalty.

February's announcement that drug addicts in the capital may have to undergo an extended, one-year "enforced rehabilitation" in the lead-up to the Games heightens "concerns that Beijing's hosting of the Olympics is being used by the authorities as a

pretext to expand the use of abusive forms of punitive administrative detention", the report says.

Mainland police retain the power to detain petty criminals and other undesirables without charge or trial. One punishment that remains common, despite repeated attempts to reform the system, is "re-education through labour".

The report highlights the case of Falun Gong practitioner Bu Dongwei, who it says is doing forced packing work at the Tuanhe correctional labour facility in Beijing. Mr Bu, a former employee with a US aid organisation, was assigned 2½ years' of re-education through labour last summer after a police raid on his home found material about the Falun Gong, which the government labels as an "evil cult".

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Fears remain that these abusive systems are being used to detain petty criminals, vagrants, drug addicts and others in order 'to clean-up' Beijing ahead of the Olympics

Amnesty International

jing ahead of the Olympics," the report says.

Although Amnesty points to "signs of growing tolerance for individual rights activism" - citing the

successful attempts by some individuals to win better compensation in return for the forced demolition of their homes - it says that abuse of activists who defend wider human or political rights is on the increase.

"Arbitrary detention, harassment and surveillance of such activists and their families has continued since the publication of the last Olympics update, with the convictions of several key rights advocates and the growing use of informal forms of 'house arrest' against others," the report says.

"It is likely ... that the Chinese authorities will employ similar tactics at the time of the Olympics in 2008," it concludes. The report also finds that, despite the restoration of the Supreme People's Court's right of review for all capital punishment from January 1, at least 13 individuals have been executed by local courts this year without proper judicial review. This came after a dramatic rise in executions in December last year.

Agence France-Presse in Montreal

Ottawa's top diplomat is heading to the mainland this week amid rising tensions over a Canadian imam's life prison sentence on terrorism and separatism charges.

Foreign Minister Peter MacKay will meet his counterparts today and tomorrow.

After a closed trial, Huseyin Celil, a 37-year-old mainland-born Uyghur with Canadian citizenship - was sentenced on April 19 to life in prison for "the crime of splitting the motherland" and involvement in terrorism.

His sentencing sparked anger in Canada, which has protested at the central government's failure to allow diplomatic visits and expressed concern over allegations that Celil may have been subjected to torture and unfair trial proceedings.

Beijing has warned that Celil's sentence was "related to anti-terrorism" and did not concern Canada.

Mr MacKay has criticised mainland authorities for their refusal to "recognise that Celil is a Canadian citizen" and asked them to investigate allegations he was tortured in custody.

After fleeing the mainland to escape prison in 1996, Celil sought refuge in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkey before settling in 2001 in Canada, where he was granted citizenship. He was arrested during a trip to Uzbekistan in March 2006 and was extradited to the mainland.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao (劉建超) said last week he hoped Canada "would not interfere in the internal matter".

Mr MacKay hopes the two-day visit will allow him to "set priorities for productive co-operation".

The Celil case is the latest in a series of events that have soured relations between Ottawa and Beijing since the rise to power of the Conservatives in Canada in January 2006.

Beijing has bristled at Mr MacKay's accusations of corporate spying and criticised Ottawa for showing little will to extradite Chinese people wanted for crimes back home.

After the Canadian Parliament decided to give honorary citizenship to the Dalai Lama in November, President Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) cancelled talks with Prime Minister Stephen Harper during the Pacific Economic Co-operation summit in Hanoi.

In response to the snub, Mr Harper said: "I think Canadians want us to promote our trade relations worldwide ... But I don't think Canadians want us to sell our important Canadian values - our belief in democracy, freedom, human rights. They don't want us to sell out that out to the almighty dollar."

Last week, Ottawa asked to take part in World Trade Organisation consultations on the application of intellectual property rights in China after the US lodged complaints.