

Interview with Pang Huaguo and Xu Ze

Interview primarily with Pang Huaguo, a forty-seven year old resident of the village Xiadian to the north of Needle Grinding Well (*Mozhen Jing*). He has lived there his whole life. Our conversation was disrupted on occasion by Xu Ze, a forty-six year old worker for the Cultural Relics Bureau. As a representative of the CRB, he often felt compelled to correct the statements of Pang Huaguo with the ‘official view’.

The interview was conducted one morning in the entryway to the Needle Grinding Well Temple and took on a cautious tone as the local government representative listened in.

Interviewer: To start off, can you tell me your impressions of some of the transformations you’ve witnessed here in Wudang Shan over the last ten or so years?

Pang Huaguo: In what area?

Interviewer: Whichever comes to mind... the environment for example?

Pang Huaguo: Environmental protection has been promoted wholeheartedly. There is a program to protect the forests from logging and to plant new trees where there were once farm fields.

Interviewer: And garbage?

Pang Huaguo: The garbage situation is still no good. There may be more trash receptacles and garbage trucks but there are also many more tourists. Even if there was little infrastructure to handle the garbage earlier, there were also far fewer tourists here to litter. So there really hasn’t been any large change. It’s still no good.

Interviewer: So you’ve noticed an increase in the numbers of tourists. Does this apply to pilgrims as well?

Pang Huaguo: No, there are far fewer pilgrims these days. This is mainly due to the high entrance fee. In general tourists come from far away and have no problems buying an entrance ticket. Why would they spend so much money just to get here if they couldn’t afford the entrance ticket? Pilgrims on the other hand are all primarily locals (from the region) and only those who live in Shiyan County get a discounted entrance ticket. These days most locals from the surrounding area no longer come as regularly as they did before. It is a much larger burden for them to come to Wudang Shan and burn incense in the temples. At most they only come for the major holidays and festivals.

Interviewer: So in your experience there’s been an overall decrease in the numbers of pilgrims visiting the mountain. How do you see the state of religious practice and faith

throughout the area these days? Has there, at least, been any perceptible change with the way your neighbors in Xiadian perceive religion?

Pang Huaguo: Well, of the two hundred or so residents remaining here after the relocation I'd say that about half are still pious Daoists. Several years ago almost everyone believed (*xinyang*), but things have changed as of late. Now that many people have gone to school, watch TV and surf the internet they are no longer as dependent on religion.

Xu Ze: No. That's not right. There are still many people who worship; and there are no less Daoists, though people may not believe with the same faith with which they once did.

Interviewer: Are you making a distinction between 'people who worship' and 'Daoists'? If so, could you elaborate on the difference?

Xu Ze: Yes, there is a difference. Daoists live in monasteries and the majority of them are monks and nuns while the 'people who worship' live outside monasteries and do it solely to bring blessings upon themselves.

You see, of the guests who visit Wudang Shan the majority are tourists and not Daoists, but many of these tourists are still believers. Most of the people that come from the surrounding region are believers, while those that come from beyond the region are most often simply interested in tourism. They come from places like Xi'an, Beijing and Shanghai. Those who come from the farthest regions though, like Southerners and overseas Chinese are most often devote and some are even Daoists.

The local common people (*laobaixing*) don't come for tourism or amusement; they come strictly to worship. And as they are local they get a discounted admission ticket.

Interviewer: Have you seen the booklet entitled *Trustworthy People of Wudang* (Chengxin Wudang Ren)? And if so, have you read it?

Pang Huaguo: No.

Xu Ze: No.

[Xu Ze leaves us for a few moments and Pang Huaguo appears relieved. This gives us an opportunity to discuss matters more openly without Xu Ze's overbearing presence seemingly affecting Pang's ability to provide direct and straightforward answers regarding his impressions.]

Interviewer: Earlier you mentioned the program for the relocation of mountain residents here in Xiadian. Could you elaborate on some of the specifics of this and give me some of your impressions?

Pang Huaguo: It was rather sudden. They [Xiadian residents] were only given about one month's notice and then were forced out. There used to be around one hundred families living in and around Xiadian, but two years ago about 40% of them were moved, leaving roughly two hundred people here today. Those that were moved were primarily located along the main road, but soon everyone will be moved.

Interviewer: What about the compensation package?

Pang Huaguo: The compensation was far too little. I know of some who went to Beijing to appeal for more money, but there still hasn't been a decision made on the subject.

Interviewer: Are you still in contact with some of those who've been relocated? If so, what has become of them?

Pang Huaguo: Many that have left have had problems finding work and a new place to live. As such, they've become hooligans (*liumang*). They cause lots of trouble in town.

The relocation program truly upset our way of life, even for those who stayed behind because many had to close their shops and lost their jobs.

Interviewer: Did you lose your job as well?

Pang Huaguo: Yes, but I was not a shopkeeper. I grew crops, but now I've been out of work for almost two years.

Interviewer: How did the relocation program upset you in your agricultural profession?

Pang Huaguo: Actually the relocation program itself didn't. But the new policy returning the forests to old farmlands has essentially prohibited us from growing crops. At least we can no longer grow crops commercially.

Interviewer: How then have you been getting by?

Pang Huaguo: The government provided those forced out of agricultural work with a five-year supply of grain. It's considered 'aid for the poor' (*fupin*). But who knows what will happen when these five years are up?

[Xu Ze returns and the topic changes]

Interviewer: Can you explain for me the gravesite policy and how it might apply for those relocated to Laoying?

Pang Huaguo: The policy? I'm not quite sure.

Xu Ze: Burial is still allowed and those in the area around Wudang Shan still primarily bury their dead. But since there are less people in the mountain area these days there are likewise fewer graves.

The rule is that city residents must be cremated while rural residents can still opt for burial. Since relocated residents still retain their rural residency permit they are still allowed to be buried here.

Interviewer: So they retain their rural residency. Doesn't this make it even harder for them to find jobs in the city then?

Xu Ze: Well, if they move to a city like Shiyan or Danjiang Kou, yes. But Laoying is not considered a city. Anyway employers don't pay much attention to residency permits these days.

Interviewer: What about relocated residents? What will happen when they die?

Xu Ze: Burial for them simply depends upon where they die. Those who die in Laoying may be buried. But even if you have rural residency and you die in a hospital in the city – you must be cremated and are not allowed to be buried upon the mountain.

[With the call to lunch, the interview ends abruptly]