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INQUIRE=DOC12D
ITEM NO=00558869
ENVELOPE
CDSN = LGX579 MCN = 90316/03240 TOR = 903160522
RTTUZYUW RUEKJCS3831 3160523-UUUU--RUEALGX.
ZNR UUUUU
HEADER
R 120523Z NOV 90
FM JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
INFO RUEALGX/SAFE
R 120303Z NOV 90
FM FBIS HONG KONG
TO AIG 4581
RUEHBF/AMEMBASSY BEIJING
RUHHHMA/CDRWESTCOM FT SHAFTER HI//APIN-IN//
RUMJBP/FBIS OKINAWA JA
ACCT FBHK-EWDK
BT
CONTROLS
UNCLAS 1Q

SERIAL: HK1211030390

BODY

COUNTRY: PRC

SUBJ: RETURN OF SECRET SECTS ALARMS SICHUAN AUTHORITIES

SOURCE: HONG KONG SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST IN ENGLISH 12 NOV 90 P 21
TEXT:

(((BY JOHN KOHUT)))

((TEXT)) THEIR WORLD IS FULL OF GHOSTS AND DEVILS. THEY RAPE, AND THEY SWINDLE. BUT IN THE MIST-COVERED HILLS OF SICHUAN, INHABITED BY SIMPLE TOWN FOLK AND SEMI-LITERATE PEASANTS, THE YIGUAN DAO'S SEDUCTIVE PROMISE OF A NEW MILLENNIUM HAS WON IT FOLLOWERS, AS WELL AS A POWERFUL ENEMY.

"THEY WANT TO BE KINGS!" SAID LIANG CHANGFEI, MAYOR OF NEIJIANG, WHERE POLICE HAVE BEEN TRYING TO CRACK DOWN ON THE YIGUAN DAO, OR "WAY OF BASIC UNITY SOCIETY," A SECRET SECT WHOSE PHILOSOPHIES CONTAIN ELEMENTS OF TAOISM AND BUDDHISM.

AFTER THE COMMUNISTS CAME TO POWER IN 1949, THEY STRUCK WITHOUT MERCY AT SECRET SECTS LIKE THE YIGUAN DAO, WHICH, DESPITE ITS PHILOSOPHICAL PRETENTIONS, WAS PRIMARILY A NETWORK OF THUGS THAT TYRANNISED PEASANTS AND WORKERS IN CHINA'S UNGOVERNABLE CITIES BEFORE LIBERATION.

IN THE NORTHERN PORT CITY OF TIANJUIN, FOR EXAMPLE, SOME 4,000 YIGUAN DAO LEADERS WERE ROUNDED UP IN 1950. BY THE END OF THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST SECRET SECTS IN 1951, MORE THAN A QUARTER-MILLION PEOPLE IN THAT CITY ALONE HAD ADMITTED, AND THEN DUTIFULLY RENOUNCED, THEIR AFFILIATION WITH THE YIGUAN DAO.

THE SECT WAS SILENCED, UNTIL THE 1980S, YEARS OF RELATIVE POLITICAL RELAXATION WHEN FIVE RELIGIONS--BUDDHISM, TAOISM, ISLAM,

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CATHOLICISM AND PROTESTANTISM--WERE GIVEN A CHANCE TO REVIVE, ALBEIT UNDER STRICT GOVERNMENT CONTROL.

THOUGH BRANDED BY THE COMMUNIST PARTY AS A SUPERSTITIOUS RATHER THAN A RELIGIOUS GROUP, THE YIGUAN DAO NEVERTHELESS HAS RE-EMERGED LIKE A GHOST FROM THE PAST TO HAUNT CHINESE OFFICIALS.

AN OFFICIAL SURVEY AT THE END OF LAST YEAR FOUND THAT 90 PER CENT OF CHINA'S 800 MILLION PEASANTS WERE SUPERSTITIOUS AND 60 PER CENT OF THEM ENGAGED IN SUPERSTITIOUS PRACTICES.

THEY YIGUAN DAO HAS CLEARLY CAPITALISED ON THE NAIVETY OF RURAL AND EVEN CITY PEOPLE IN SICHUAN, THOUGH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ESTIMATE HOW MANY FOLLOWERS IT HAS GAINED.

ONE OFFICIAL REPORT SAID THE ACTIVITIES OF THE YIGUAN DAO AND OTHER SECRET SOCIETIES IN SICHUAN OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS HAVE BEEN "EXTENSIVE," COVERING WIDE AREAS WITH MANY PEOPLE INVOLVED. THE YIGUAN DAO HAS PENETRATED EVEN THE BIG, RELATIVELY SOPHISTICATED SICHUAN CITIES OF CHENGDU AND CHONGQING.

"THEY (YIGUAN DAO) HAVE ENROLLED MANY FOLLOWERS AND SET UP "WORSHIPPING HALLS," HELD SERVICES OF WORSHIP AND GATHERING, AND SPREAD THE RUMOUR THAT IN ANOTHER DECADE OR TWO, THE TIMES OF THE TAO WILL COME...A SAINT WILL EMERGE, WHO IS NONE OTHER THAN AN EMPEROR," ACCORDING TO THE SAME REPORT.

SOME OF THEIR SECRET MEETINGS HAVE GATHERED CROWDS OF MORE THAN 100, IT NOTED.

ALL OF THIS HAS ALARMED LOCAL AUTHORITIES. IN NOVEMBER LAST YEAR, AFTER 10 MONTHS OF INVESTIGATIONS, POLICE UNCOVERED THREE SECRET SECTS, ARRESTING SIX OF THEIR CHIEFTAINS, TWO OF THEM FROM THE YIGUAN DAO.

NEIJIANG OFFICIAL KANG XIANWEN SAID THE YIGUAN DAO RING HAS NOW BEEN BROKEN, THOUGH SOME OF ITS LEADERS ARE STILL AT LARGE.

NEITHER KANG NOR MAYOR LIANG, WHOSE AUTHORITY EXTENDS BEYOND THE GREY INDUSTRIAL CITY OF NEIJIANG INTO SURROUNDING RURAL COUNTIES AND DISTRICTS COVERING A TOTAL AREA 12 TIMES THE SIZE OF HONG KONG, WOULD REVEAL WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO THE SIX ARRESTED LEADERS, SAYING THAT WAS A MATTER FOR THE POLICE. BUT KANG CITED THE OFFICIAL POLICY: "WE EXECUTE THE ONES THAT SHOULD BE EXECUTED, AND JAIL THE ONES THAT SHOULD BE JAILED. WE DON'T" HE WAS CAREFUL TO NOTE, "EXECUTE EVERYONE."

"OUR COUNTRY'S LAWS PROTECT LEGAL RELIGIONS, BUT THE YIGUAN DAO IS A POLITICAL ORGANISATION," SAID MAYOR LIANG. "IT'S FEUDAL, SUPERSTITIOUS PHENOMENON AND A COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY ORGANISATION. THEY OPPOSE SOCIALISM, THE PARTY AND THE FOUR CARDINAL PRINCIPLES (THE TENETS OF MODERN-DAY CHINESE SOCIALISM)."

MOREOVER, ACCORDING TO MAYOR LIANG, THE YIGUAN DAO HAS CHEATED PEOPLE OUT OF MONEY BY, AMONG OTHER THINGS, SELLING MIXTURES OF ASHES AND MUD AS MAGIC POTIONS TO CURE DISEASES. HOLDING PEOPLE AGAINST THEIR WILL AND RAPING WOMEN ARE TWO CRIMES OF WHICH THE YIGUAN DAO HAS BEEN ACCUSED.

WHY THE YIGUAN DAO AND OTHER SECTS HAVE MADE A COMEBACK, AND WHY IN SICHUAN, HAS TO DO IN PART WITH THE "LOW CULTURAL LEVEL OF MANY PEASANTS AND CITY DWELLERS," ACCORDING TO MAYOR LIANG.

BY OFFICIAL STATISTICS, ABOUT 23 PER CENT OF CHINA'S ADULT POPULATION WAS STILL ILLITERATE DURING THE 1980S. THE PROBLEM OF ILLITERACY IS MOST ACUTE AMONG PEASANTS. SICHUAN, CHINA'S MOST

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POPULOUS PROVINCE, HAS A HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF FARMERS THAN ANY OTHER PART OF CHINA--82 PER CENT OF THE PROVINCE'S 107 MILLION PEOPLE.

THE YIGUAN DAO'S RETURN FROM THE PAST IS ALSO DOUBTLESSLY LINKED TO THE DISILLUSIONMENT WITH SOCIALISM THAT HAS SPREAD ACROSS CHINA, NOT ONLY AMONG THE YOUTH AND INTELLECTUALS WHO HAVE CLAMoured FOR MORE POLITICAL FREEDOM, BUT ALSO AMONG THOSE IN REMOTE, IMPOVERISHED AREAS OF THE COUNTRY WHO FEEL THAT HAVE BEEN LEFT BEHIND AS OTHERS PROSPERED UNDER DENG XIAOPING'S ECONOMIC REFORMS.

MANY HAVE TURNED TO THE OFFICIALLY-RECOGNISED RELIGIONS, YET SOMETIMES THE LINES BETWEEN RELIGION AND SUPERSTITION BLUR.

AT THE SHENGSHUI BUDDHIST TEMPLE IN NEIJIANG, FOR INSTANCE, A MASTER OF QIGONG, A MYSTICAL TRADITIONAL ART APPROVED BY THE GOVERNMENT, OFFERS A BACK CURE WITHOUT AS MUCH AS TOUCHING HIS PATIENT. INSTEAD, THE DOCTOR MAKES THE PATIENT STAND WITH HIS EYES CLOSED, FEET TOGETHER, AND ARMS STRETCHED OUT.

IT ALL SEEMS LIKE MAGIC AS HE MAKES INCANTATIONS AND BLOWS AND WHISTLES, THUS TRANSMITTING HIS "QI." THE DOCTOR HAS ORDERED THREE LOCAL OFFICIALS TO STRIKE THE SAME POSE AS HIS PATIENT. THE OFFICIALS, WHO HAVE TAKEN NOTE OF THE DOCTOR'S PHOTO OF VETERAN CHINESE LEADER BO YIBO BEING TREATED IN ZHONGNANHAI BY A QIGONG MASTER, COMPLY WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A WHIMPER.

ON THE STREETS OF THE PROVINCIAL CAPITAL, CHENGDU, DO-IT-YOURSELF FORTUNE-TELLING IS ON SALE. FOR INSTANCE, ONE CAN BUY WHAT IS CALLED A "PSYCHOLOGICAL RHYTHMIC SLIDE RULE" TO CALCULATE, BASED ON ONE'S BIRTHDATE, AUSPICIOUS AND INAUSPICIOUS DAYS. IT MAY LOOK LIKE SUPERSTITION, BUT THE "RHYTHMIC SLIDE RULE" BUSINESS IS NOT LIKELY TO COME UNDER POLICE SCRUTINY: THE DEVICE IS MANUFACTURED BY THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY.

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