

A Daoist Career in Modern China. Wang Xin'an of the Southern Peak

Georges Favraud

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A Daoist Career in Modern China

Wang Xin'an of the Southern Peak¹

GEORGES FAVRAUD

Abstract

Alive for most of the twentieth century, Wang Xin'an 王信安 (1918-1993) lived through the deep and violent social changes from which emerged the Chinese nation-state, technology, and modern economy. In the 1930s, he had been healed of his weak health and initiated in a monastic community by a master of the Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Authenticity) school. Then he became a master of Daoist liturgy, practicing both personal ritual techniques of internal alchemy and healing as well as the collective recitation of scriptures and offerings to the celestial hierarchy. Master Wang accomplished virtuous achievements and established his meritorious existence and identity.

After 1949 he moved to Hunan province and became a leading official representative of the Daoist community of the Southern Peak. As the new state endowed Daoism with a national administrative hierarchy and a globalized leisure class and tourism industry developed, the Southern Peak was reinvented as a site of natural, cultural, and intangible heritage. Master Wang dedicated his life in this changing milieu to build official Daoism in Hunan.

¹ I am deeply grateful to Li Jiazhong and all the Daoists who welcomed me in China. This paper could not have been written without them, nor without the help of my doctoral advisor Brigitte Bapandier and the members of the China Workshop in the Laboratory of Ethnology and Comparative Sociology of CNRS, Paris. I also want to thank Catherine Despeux, Ian Johnson, and James Robson for their corrections and suggestions that improved the paper. For financial support I am indebted to the French Center for Studies on Contemporary China (Hong Kong) and the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation (Taipei).

Wang Xin'an was the "transmission father" (*shifu* 師父) of Li Jiazhong 李嘉中, who kindly accepted me as a foreign disciple and anthropologist, welcoming me several times between 2005 and 2009 in his village temple in rural Hunan. He is one of my prime sources for Wang Xin'an biography, supplementing three written biographies in public sources which focus on his institutional career and appeared in *Nanyue quzhi* 南嶽區誌 (Annals of the Southern Peak District; hereafter NYZ 1996), an official public report published by the local government of the Southern Peak; the official website of the national Chinese Daoist Association (Ouyang and Zhang 2008);² and a website called *Zhongguo Lishi Renwu* 中国历史人物 (Historical Celebrities of China; hereafter ZLR 2010).

In addition, I had the opportunity to share the daily life of some of Wang Xin'an's disciples, to participate in the practice of their body techniques, and to listen to their oral testimonies. However, yet another text allowed me to connect the dry official discourse of the biographies and the profusion of personal experiences: a ten-page biography with a hagiographic dimension, by Wang's disciple Li Jiazhong and approved by Wang himself a year before his death. Li later completed the text and published it in the *Nanyue wenshi* (Li 1995). Li uses technical and ritual discourse of medicine and internal alchemy (*neidan* 内丹) as well as concepts and images from the classical Daoist mythology and hagiography to open the Daoist world (*daojie* 道界) and the life of his master. His work is a narrative in memory of his beloved master, showing him as a model Daoist, practicing and transmitting his teachings.

To produce a comprehensive narrative of Wang Xin'an's life, I have placed these various data into context with the help of Western secondary studies and other sections of the *Nanyue quzhi*, specially with regard to the institutional and technical milieu surrounding Master Wang. The localised, lively perspective of a specific life narrative thus becomes a mirror of the institutionalisation of Daoism in China today, revealing how the religion has been reorganized in the course of the twentieth century under the influence of modern China.

² I accessed this web article on April 7, 2008. In August 2010, it was not available any longer.

To make this clear, I have rejected the opposition commonly drawn between “conservative tradition” and “innovative modernity” (Boyer 1990),³ and instead considered the way traditions participated in, and were adapted to, a changing eco-techno-symbolic milieu (Berque 2000). I thus define “tradition” as a canonical body of representations made up of norms, principles, genealogies, and narratives (symbolic level), transmitted and reinterpreted through the ritual and technological interactions of persons in communities and networks (technical level), yet also structuring the daily social and economical relations of persons and local communities both among themselves and with their natural environment (ecological level).

Leaving the Family

Wang Ying 王莹 was born in northeast Hebei on the 6th day of the 6th month of 1918, the day of the Festival of Cleansing Light (*xishai jie* 洗曬節) when people spread clothes, sheets, and books in the sun. It was the 7th year of the Republic. The young Wang received his personal name Ying, literally “Jade Shining,” from his father, a poor peasant in Kuancheng district 寬城縣. According to Li (1995), Wang’s health was weak as a “sickness demon had attached to his person,” a concept matching the beliefs of the early Celestial Masters (see Strickmann 2002).

At age twelve, his father died and he was sent to a private village school (*sishu* 私塾), run probably by his family lineage, to study for three years. However, his vitality was still weak and he tended to “feel rather depressed” and was often “anxious and worried” (Li 1995). Then he en-

³ In *Tradition as Truth and Communication*, Pascal Boyer argues that “tradition is a type of interaction which results in the repetition of certain communicative events” (1990, 23), communication being conceived “as a type of interaction which modifies people’s representations in a relatively organized way” (109). In consequence, the author challenges the “common assumptions” that “traditions are conserved because people want to transmit them unchanged,” and that “they are held together by some underlying ideas” (1990, 5). According to him, unlike a modern expert, “a traditional specialist is not someone who has an adequate picture of some reality in her or his mind, but someone whose utterances can be, in some contexts, directly determined by the reality in question” (112).

countered an old man who announced to him: "Often ill in youth without efficient treatment, go and leave your family to cultivate the Dao. This will save your life." Despite objections by his family and knowing that he was violating his duties to continue the family line, he decided to join a monastery.

This occurred in 1933, two years after the Japanese invaded north-east China and created the Manchu puppet-state. Wang was sixteen. He left on the 3rd day of the 3rd month, the day of Offering of the First Tenda (shangsi jie 上巳节), a ritual first described in the *Zhouli* 周礼 (Rites of the Zhou) as part of an exorcistic cycle, and headed to nearby Capital Mountain (Dushan 都山), climbing to Turtle Shell Terrace (Kejia tai 壳甲台), the site of the Monastery of Great Concord (Datong guan 大同觀), the home of local heirs of the techniques of internal alchemy, martial exorcism, and healing practices of the Flower Mountain tradition (Huashan pai 华山派), one of the major branches of Quanzhen Daoism.

He humbly requested the local master, Li Zhishan 李智山, to help him heal his disease. The master told him to sit in meditation while waiting for the visit of a knowledgeable healer, scheduled three weeks later. After waiting with a "sincere heart" (*chengxin* 诚心), he heard the tinkling of the life-saving bell—which rescues souls from the underworld—in the form of an old bearded Daoist riding up on a donkey. He gave him two sessions of acupuncture and *moxa* and prescribed a further practice of meditation. This effected a complete cure.

Li's description of his master's initiation provides more details. When sitting in meditation, Wang had to practice inner observation to overcome "demonic hardships accumulated for ages" and "let his heart-mind quiet down." He had to maintain a specific physical and mental posture by concentrating on specific agencies (*yi* 意, i.e., intentions and meanings) and by visualising and incorporating Daoist deities and pure *qi* inside his body. This practice was to restructure Wang's person (*shen* 身) through a "painful process of cultivation" (*kuxiu kulian* 苦修苦練), requiring strong efforts of will (*kuzhi* 苦志).⁴

⁴ According to the Chinese medical tradition, a cultivated and conscious will, the focused beam of a mental intention, is concentrated and calmed until it dwells (*cun* 存) in the kidneys (*shen* 肾) and becomes a matrix of personal thinking and behavior. The process is described in the medical classics. See *Huangdi*

Li's biography refers to this process as "Cultivating the Mysteries" (*xiuxuan* 修真). The word *xuan* is a cornerstone concept in the Daoist tradition, designating the obscure color of heaven, the unfathomable "undifferentiated origin" (*hunyuan* 混元) that evades discursive thought. *Xuan* is also associated with the cosmic body of Laozi 老子 and with the person of the alchemist who, in the manner of a pregnant woman, gives birth to the immortal embryo of his spontaneous nature (*zi* 自). The knowledge springing from this process relies less on the clarification of concepts (*zhi* 知) than on an immediate consciousness of self and environment, based on the ability to keep watch and to conserve (*shou* 守) oneself (Baptandier-Berthier 1979; 2008). From this point of view, there is no gap between the healing process initiated for Wang when he arrived at the monastery and his practice of internal alchemy. Moreover, this inside journey into the obscure aimed to "accomplish meritorious deeds and establish a virtuous existence" (*xinggong lide* 行功立德).

Apprenticeship

According to the Quanzhen school, "virtuous achievements" (*gongde* 功德) have three aspects. The practice of internal alchemy, consisting of interactions with one's own spontaneous nature and the celestial realm; the practice of collective studies and the chanting of ritual scriptures (*nianjing* 念經); and the benevolent actions one does in daily life (*zuo haoshi* 做好事).⁵ Wang Ying's healing depended on personal cultivation as well as on joining the Daoist community with its daily life structured by the canonical precepts (*jie* 戒) and the ritual practices of the local tradition. This in due course evolved into further participation in local society and the greater Daoist world.

The material conditions in the monastery were basic, but not uncomfortable for the son of poor peasants. Its income came from dona-

neijing lingshu 黄帝内经灵枢 8: "Rooting in the Spirit" (*Benshen* 本神); Larre and Rochat de la Vallée 2002; Despeux 2007.

⁵ The link between internal alchemy and the accomplishment of benevolent actions became clear when Master Meng Zhilin told me: "If the practice of internal alchemy is the tree, doing benevolent actions is like accumulating earth around its stump." Personal communication, May 2007.

tions by local patrons, practitioners, believers, and guests often came for divination and medical services. The money was used to buy salt, oil, and fabrics, and to maintain the temple's infrastructures. For food, the Daoist fellows (*daoyou* 道友) cultivated vegetables and rice around the temple. Under the supervision of Li Zhishan, they also took care of housework, probably aided by lay disciples. Cleaning, cooking, sewing, and other activities usually done by women also formed part of Wang's daily life.

As heirs of the Quanzhen school, the Daoists of the Monastery of Great Concord also practiced abstention from food and sex as a basic requirement for ritual practice. They gathered four times a day to chant the scriptures, using copies they had transcribed by hand. Since the liturgy also required other forms of ritual writings—memorials, petitions to the celestial hierarchy, and talismans (*fu* 符)—Wang is said to have become a good calligrapher and even poet during his apprenticeship.

After a few years, he took another step forward and asked to venerate Li Zhishan as his personal master (*baishi* 拜師). This made him a 19th-generation heir of the ritual genealogy of the Flower Mountain (Huashan) tradition. The word *xin* 信, in the 19th position in its genealogical poem (*paishi* 派詩)—which forms part of each family and religious line's identity (see Herrou 2007)—thus became the first character of his Daoist name: Xin'an 信安, which means "at peace in faith" or "settled in peace." He received the liturgy through canonical texts in a ritual and communal context, learning the right gestures and postures, words and music by continuous, steady imitation, repetition, and study. He thus grew in the religious tradition for seven years.

During this time Wang practiced "respecting the masters" (*zunshi* 尊師), a necessary condition for transmission, both by his immediate and the ancestral masters (*zushi* 祖師). Li describes this with the metaphor of the feminine skill of sewing: Wang was so close to his master that he could make cloth shoes for him with only his feet a model (Li 1995). Patient and in deep concentration, almost meditating, he displayed respect and gratitude to the masters by reinventing the form of his master's feet. Needle and thread allowed him to instil a new vitality to an old, inherited form, harmoniously gathering disparate pieces of fabric in a comprehensive and efficient manner (Choron-Baix 2000). "Struck in his

mind's eye" by this work, Li Zhishan transmitted to Wang what he himself had learned step by step: ritual, internal alchemy, and healing.

The latter included orthodox medical skills, such as acupuncture, moxibustion, and herbal remedies—involving collection, prescription, and preparation of herbs. It also meant personal practices, such as the recitation of scriptures and mantras, the visualisation and internal activation of celestial agencies and pure *qi*, as well as the calligraphy of talismans, memorials, and petitions.⁶

In the Greater Daoist World

In 1940, when Wang Xin'an was twenty-two, his master Li Zhishan transformed into an immortal. Wang in due course decided to leave his old temple (*laomiao* 老廟) to join the greater Daoist world. He went to several cities in northeast China to study the administration of religious affairs and became a copyist in the religious networks, which at the time were organized according to the modern concept of "associations"—or better, "state associations." He practiced what he had learned and gained new insights by interacting with his Daoist fellows.

In 1943, considered to have reached the "correct ritual behavior and understanding of the principles" (*yili* 义理) of "the pact of purity" (*qingjie* 清戒) structuring the Daoist world (Schipper 2008, 127-60), he was sent to Heilongjiang to take part in a collective ordination. After 100 days of initiatory ritual, he received the Great Precepts of the Three Altars (*santan dajie* 三壇大戒), i.e., of the Three Officials (Sanguan) in charge of Heaven, Earth, and Water. In the life of a Daoist, this kind of superior ordination marks a new step of engagement, after living the family and revering a master. Until the 1950s, such huge rituals were also the main venue of Quanzhen gatherings; they played a key role in the building of macro-regional networks between local monastic communities (Dean 2003; Latour 2005; Skinner 1977), facilitating mutual support and exchange, and

⁶ This follows Li 1995. The more official biographies, more focused on his institutional career, mainly state that Wang entered a life of "clarity and stillness" (*qingjing* 清靜) and cultivated the Dao (*xiudao* 修道).

helping Daoists travel from place to place.⁷ Afterwards, Master Wang directed the liturgy of a local temple—a travel palace (*xinggong* 行宮)—on Mount Tai 泰山, the Eastern Peak, not far from his old home in north-east Hebei.

In 1947, he decided to leave his native region and engaged in the "traveling like the clouds" (*yunyou* 雲遊; Baptandier 1996; Demiéville 1965; Herrou 2011; Naquin & Yü 1992; Ward 2000), going to different masters and thus fulfilling another part of Quanzhen training. According to Liu Xuanwen 刘玄文, a Daoist who lived for six years in the White Cloud Temple (Baiyun guan 白雲觀), "when Daoists travel, they are like clouds, always moving and changing," implying that the physical travel of Master Wang was also ritual, nourishing and transforming his person.

Making his way south, Master Wang was searching for teachings from knowledgeable Daoists and sacred sites, rambling along the margins of society. Li's biography describes him melting with the wind and rain. Sustained by alms from the people, he could also ask for shelter in local Daoist temples, where he could "hang up his registration" (*guan* 掛單) for a few days or for a longer period to receive teachings if the "karmic affinity" (*yuanfen* 缘分) between him and the local master was right (see Herrou 2011). During these stays, Master Wang shared the daily life of the monastic communities, whether urban, rural, or natural, sometimes participating in their administration and receiving transmissions from local masters. Travelling further, he discovered famous monasteries, places of knowledge and power situated in the big cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou. He also climbed peaks and forded streams, experiencing the natural, sacred milieu where the Daoists pick herbs and concoct elixirs, withdraw as hermits to nourish life and practice internal alchemy. Sometimes he also reached auspicious places (*fudi* 福地) and grotto-heavens (*dongtian* 洞天), natural and historical sacred sites where Daoists of the past achieved immortality that serve as junction points between nature and paradise.

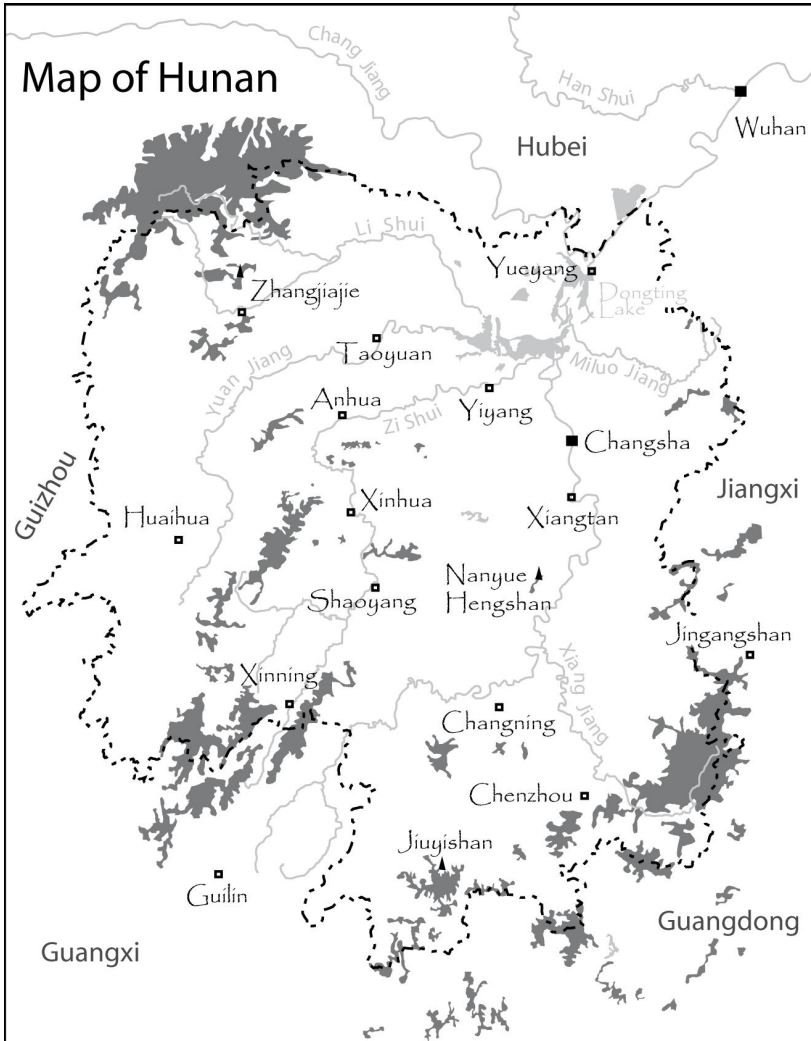
⁷ The White Cloud Temple (Baiyun guan) in Beijing housed thirty-one such high-level ordinations between 1807 and 1927, an average of one every four years, gathering Daoists from all over northeast China (Goossaert 2007, 144-57). Since the opening policy of the 1980s, only two collective ordinations, gathering Daoists from all over the country, have taken place in Beijing.

All this allowed Master Wang to perfect his techniques of meditation and healing. As Li puts it: With a sincere and open heart-mind he learned from masters of “the gate of the mysteries” (*xuanmen* 玄門), deepening his “esoteric knowledge” (*mizhi* 秘知) of the “ritual techniques of life cultivation” and “methods of nourishing the heart-mind elixir.” At the same time he also displayed “a deep concern and high ideals regarding the hardships which arise in society.” Joining the administration of monastic communities and religious networks, he carried his Daoism into the social realm. “To heal” and “to administer” are closely linked in Chinese, both expressed by the word *zhi* 治, which also indicates the parishes of the early Celestial Masters. A Daoist healer and administrator thus sees social hardships from the perspective of internal alchemy and treats them as diseases of the social body. Participating in the administration of the Daoist world thus helped Wang develop a meritorious cycle of virtuous accomplishments, making him, at the age of thirty-one, a respectable master in the Daoist world.

On the Southern Peak

Early in 1949, Master Wang arrived on Mount Heng 衡山, literally meaning “Transverse Mountain,” in the Xiang River basin of eastern Hunan (see NYZ 1996). In the Qin-Han period (221 BCE–220 CE), this river was the main route for the Han people to subdue ethnic groups in the south, i.e., today’s Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, and was accordingly a very urbanized and developed area. Later the river became an important artery of communication between the central plains and the Yangtze (Skinner 1977).

In the sixth century, Mount Heng was integrated into the imperial liturgy as the ritual axis of the south; it was then given the official title Nanyue 南嶽 (Southern Peak). In accordance with the correlations of the five phases, summer offerings associated with fire and the south were held here (Robson 2009). On the mountain, networks of monasteries and hermitages welcome Daoist and Buddhist practitioners into a natural milieu where they can practice among rocks, plants, and animals to explore the spontaneous movements of nature. Over the centuries, the mountain has featured in numerous literary works by travellers, poets, officials, and pilgrims (Ward 2000; Strassberg 1994).



Map drawn by Georges Favraud, from *Hunan Ditu* 2006.

	Streams	
	Lakes	
	Mountains (above 3000 ft)	
	Peaks	
	City / Provincial capital	
	Provincial boundaries	

Because of its natural and ritual position, Hengshan is a pivotal site in the macro-region of south-central China (today's provinces of Hunan, Jiangxi, and Hubei). In this greater area, the deity of the Southern Peak is worshiped widely in travel palaces as well as in local temples, ritually affiliated to the monasteries of their "capital" mountain.

Climbing the stone stairs of the Southern Peak, stopping to rest and to pay respect in temples and shrines, Wang Xin'an reached the main summit of the mountain range, a height of 1290 meters. Since the sixth century, the highest peak has been called Zhurong 祝融, the "Melter-Invoker" (Cook and Major 1999), a complex deity especially famous as "fire regulator" (*huozheng* 火政). One of the three high gods of the antique Chu kingdom, the deity is often associated with the "stove god" (*zaoshen* 灶神), a celestial administrator of domestic life (Chard 1990). Daoists say that Zhurong descended on this peak upon orders by the Jade Emperor (Yuhuang 玉皇) to transmit fire and the cooking food to the human world while the stove god is the ancestral master of alchemists (Schaffer 1975).

Exploring the valley, Master Wang discovered the Yellow Court Monastery (Huangting guan 黃庭觀), whose name refers to the *Huangting jing*, a key scripture of internal practice and the visualization of deities. The text was supposedly revealed by celestial immortals to the early libationer Lady Wei Huacun 魏華存 (252-334), who later became Mistress of the Southern Peak (Nanyue furen) and has been worshiped in the monastery since the Tang (Robson 2009).⁸

⁸ The *Huangting jing* and Lady Wei mark the evolution from the Celestial Masters to Highest Clarity. The Celestial Masters rituality was based on agnatic or uterine transmissions, sexual rites of passage called "harmonization of *qi*" (*heqi* 和氣), and cyclical community gatherings in natural sacred sites. Highest Clarity Daoists, inspired to a certain degree by Buddhism, left the family to experiment with celibacy and sexual abstinence, replacing *heqi* with ritual techniques of refinement and of marriages to divinities (Despeux 1997). From the sixth century onward, Daoist communities settle in the mountains, bringing their residence closer to the ancient sacred sites and building the first monasteries of Daoism (Schipper 2008, 179-98). Epigraphic sources testify to this (Robson 2009).

Next, he stayed in the Mystery Capital Monastery (Xuandu guan 玄都觀), situated in the middle of the mountain. Until the mid-nineteenth century, this site was called the Hermitage of Breathing Clouds (Xiyun An 吸雲庵) and served as home for a Buddhist community, then became the seat of a community of the lay-based Zhengyi 正一 (Orthodox Unity) school. During the Republic, Chen Mingshan 陳明山 and over sixty Daoist families owned an important agricultural estate here. However, at some point—left unclear in the Annals—they left the mountain to live among the people and provide them with ritual services. Most probably this move had to do with the Quanzhen development of a modern Daoist organization coming to dominate the area. But it may also relate to the reinvention of the ritual genealogies of both schools into administrative categories, characteristic of religious policy to the present day. In this context, Zhengyi Daoists are expected to live “at home” (*zaijia* 在家), remaining in their native villages.

Wang Xin'an's biographies insist that the Daoists of the Mystery Capital Monastery invited him to stay and that he soon got engaged in community life by becoming the estate's accountant. He was also reaching a turning point in his life, quite like the parallel verses on the sides of the temple gate, about half-way between the valley and Zhurong Peak:

Respectfully following the movement of the Dao to this half-way point, effort is still necessary.

Return to the true heart-mind is close, but to reach the summit never shy from diligence.

In August 1949, Hunan province was “peacefully liberated” (*heping jiefang* 和平解放). After decades of political revolution, cultural destruction, civil war, and Japanese invasion, a government promising a “New China” was established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Its leader, Mao Zedong, was born in Shaoshan 韶山, about forty miles north of Mount Heng. Due to this development Master Wang's life was about to change significantly, away from a focus on the social and symbolic organization of Daoist liturgy and community life toward the Daoist adaptation to the institutions and emblems of Chinese Communist modernity.

The Collective Ecology Manager

Beginning in late 1949, and peaking after the agrarian reform of June 30, 1950, the great “feudal” land estates were dismantled and taken over by the people. The Daoists on the mountain, too, had to shift their efforts away from ritual transmission and toward reclaiming and cultivating the land around the temple. New state regulations required religious communities to develop “self-subsistence” (*ziyang* 自养), with the overarching goal of reorganizing monastic economies.

As new activities imposed by the Communist government came to transform the daily life of Daoists, they were forced to accept a linear concept of time and the mobilization of all workers toward material progress. These trends were superimposed on their traditional administrative vision, which focused on a “natural government” with a cyclical liturgy and the implementation of quietude in the social realm (Kalinowski 1982). However, the Daoists still carried on their daily services (*xiu gongke* 修功課) and were allowed to receive “incense income” (*xianghuo shouru* 香火收入): donations from believers, pilgrims and rich patrons who wished to accomplish a meritorious action by helping the monastic community or to reward it for ritual services (NYZ 1996).

According to Li, Wang Xin’an found a compromise that allowed him to honor both the Daoist and Communist conceptions of virtuous accomplishment. He retreated to a remote mountain area above the monastery, about a kilometer behind the Purple Bamboo Forest (Zizhulin 紫竹林), where Guanyin supposedly had come to teach. There he built a small altar from wood and stone, protected by a hut which he called the Thatched Hut of Pure Emptiness (Qingxu maopeng 清虚茅棚). In this “border place” (*bianshang* 边上), he “welcomed emptiness like a valley,” practiced clarity and stillness (*qingjing* 清静) as well as spontaneous nonaction (*wuwei* 无为), and reached out to “elevated realms” (*gao jingjie* 高境界).

This practice reflects the Daoist conception of the mountain as the purest environment for self-cultivation, where the hermit can be in full interaction with the stillness and spontaneity of nature he seeks to incorporate. However, Li describes his practice in such a way as to reconcile

Communism and Daoism in this episode of Wang's life not noticed in official sources (1995). Interestingly, Master Wang refined his "spontaneous nature" (*zi* 自) and "nourished his life" (*yangsheng* 養生) through inner cultivation, yet also followed the Communist principle of self-subsistence (*ziyang* 自養) by clearing a piece of land around his altar to cultivate his own food. He even provided some surplus to the old and handicapped Daoists of the monastery.

In 1952, two officials from Nanyue Township came to the monastery. They organized a meeting and proclaimed: "The Mystery Capital Monastery is famous and its natural environment is excellent. There is no capable manager here to apply the administration's guidelines . . . , so is it possible to choose a skilled administrator from among you? If you cannot find somebody, the government will requisition the temple and transform it into an inn."

The monks duly recalled Wang Xin'an from his hermitage to serve as official administrator of the community (Li 1995). A few months later, "responding positively to the call of the party and the government" (ZLR 2010), he accepted a position as vice-director of the "Buddhist-Daoist agricultural mutual-assistance team of the Southern Peak" (*Nanyue fodao nongye huzhuzu* 南嶽佛道互助組), established as part of the first national plan launched in 1953. During that period, the monastery was called the dormitory (*sushe* 宿舍) of the local production team. This new organization is said to have been successful in the application of the principle of self-subsistence, because both Daoists and Buddhists could "provide for their needs without relying on public grain, even producing a surplus they sold to the state" (NYZ 1996).

In the 1950s, Wang Xin'an, the mutual-assistance team, and the neighbouring villagers were further involved in a policy of "reforestation" (*lühua* 绿化), with the goal of developing "a high efficiency forest industry and maintaining greenery all over the district" (NYZ 1996).⁹ The technological solutions implemented unfortunately upset the balance of the eco-techno-symbolic milieu of the area, which was duly sub-

⁹ Forestry farms were set up, using seeds first (in the 1950s) locally picked, later (in the 1970s) imported from other provinces, and eventually (in the 1980s) from abroad. In 1938, 138 species of trees were inventoried on the mountain, reaching 644 species in 1994 (NYZ 1996, "Forestry" 林业: 210-228).

ject to several invasions of parasites, leading in turn to massive bombings with chemical substances (NYZ 1996, 210-28).¹⁰

Besides developing the forest industry, reforestation was to transform the mountain: for aesthetic reasons, for an increase in leisure potential, and for the prestige of the Communist elite. In the early 1950s, the government built a huge hotel with conference rooms on a back peak. At the same time, Master Wang organized a small inn in the Halfway Pavilion (Banshan ting 半山亭) to provide room and board for pilgrims—in a spot which in 1995 became the starting point of the cable car. All these rather artificial and technological ways of interacting with the mountain stood in deep contrast with the Daoist concepts of spontaneous nature and the Daoist relation with the environment as rooted in internal transformation. The modern Chinese word for “nature” or “ecological environment” (*ziran* 自然) has always been a key term in Daoism, meaning literally “self-so” and referring to both the natural cycles of the macrocosm and the microcosmic state of the sage who has attained Dao (see Schipper 2001).

Coordinating the “Frontline”

As a leader of both Daoist liturgy and the production team of the Southern Peak, Master Wang played a decisive role in the adaptation of the local economy and ecology to Communist modernity and soon came to be charged with various political responsibilities. In 1954, he was chosen to represent the Daoist community in the consultative congresses of both Nanyue Township and Hengshan County. These organizations, which still exist today, had been established at that time as the legislative *alter ego* of the United Front of the CCP—literally the “Department of the Coordination of the Frontline” (*tongyi zhanxian bu* 同一战线部).¹¹ Its mission is to delimit and organize the ideological and institutional marches of the

¹⁰ Plane bombings of BHC took place on the Southern Peak in 1960, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1988, and 1990 (NYZ 1996: 221-222).

¹¹ During the Republic, the CCP created the United Front as part of their effort to build circumstantial alliances with the Guomindang against the Warlords (1923-1927) and later against the Japanese (1937-1946).

Party: religious organizations, minority nationalities, democratic parties, and groups of the Chinese Diaspora abroad.

Soon other official work awaited. Because of its lack of international networks and its being embedded deeply in local society, Daoism was the last of the five Chinese official religions (the others being Buddhism, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam) to be institutionalised in the national Chinese Daoist Association (Zhongguo Daojiao Xiehui 中國道教協會). Founded in 1957, this organization also prolongs Republican efforts to develop a nationwide network around short-lived religious associations representing the imported concepts of "religion" (*zongjiao* 宗教; see Goossaert 2007) and "religious freedom" (*zongjiao ziyou* 宗教自由). In April of that year, its founders called Wang Xin'an to Beijing to take part in the inaugural meeting, held at its future headquarters, the White Cloud Temple in Beijing: a "gathering of the rambling pure clouds where dwell the immortals."¹² For the first time in Chinese history, Daoism was endowed with a national organization integrated in the administrative hierarchy of the state and supervised by the United Front department of the CCP and the Bureau of Religious Affairs of the Chinese State Council.

To the present day, the Chinese Daoist Association is dominated by the Quanzhen order which is centered around monasteries and consists of numerous communities and networks—thus easily identified for governmental supervision. Its administrative hierarchy and territorial divisions are superimposed on regional and larger networks among local communities. Connecting the various levels, the Chinese Daoist Association works according to three principles of autonomy: ecological self-subsistence, self-administration (*zizhi* 自治), and self-transmission (*zichuan* 自传).

This remaking of Daoist institutional structure, then, complicated the transmission of ritual techniques and liturgical power—previously the domain of master-disciple interaction. It also severely curtailed the interaction of Daoist liturgy with the wider social world. Some Daoists like Wang Xin'an were forced to use their transformational know-how in restructuring their institution in the newly emerging technical and symbolic milieu, lest it disappear. Taking on the leadership of the Daoists

¹² According to Liu Xuanwen, personal communication, 2008.

of the Southern Peak in this key period, Master Wang came to participate in a sweeping historical movement that promised the Chinese people relief from material suffering. His tasks involved integrating and mastering new constraints, often in dire opposition to the traditional Daoist way of life

Rightist Dissident and Barefoot Doctor

Just before the Great Leap Forward, in 1957, the Chinese Daoist Association launched an anti-rightist meeting where Wang Xin'an, "enthusiastic and in full ascension, received a traumatic shock . . . Having frankly expressed his personal opinions during the meeting, he was identified as a rightist" (Ouyang and Zhang 2008). He returned to the Southern Peak, relieved of his responsibilities and officially marginalized from his community. According to some disciples' testimonies, he once again felt deeply depressed.

In 1961, during the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward, with Mao retreating to Shanghai and lands being redistributed among the peasants, the state also instituted a new religious policy. The general secretary of the Party of the South-Central administrative area of China announced that "the Buddhist and Daoist practitioners of the Southern Peak should concentrate on the religious life, whose priorities are academic research, the protection of the temples' cultural patrimony, the construction of certain forest parks and embellishment of the famous mountain. They should not take part in agricultural production work anymore" (NYZ 1996, 452). This decree again transformed the Daoists' institutional setting, marking another mile stone in the continued reinvention of Daoism since the end of the 19th century (see Goossaert 2006). It also established a new level of patrimonialization, the process of institutionalizing the natural, material, and intangible heritage—a key prerequisite of the tourist development of the sacred mountain—a process that can be clearly discerned already in the early stage of the People's Republic.¹³

¹³ The 1996 descriptions of the *Nanyue quzhi* contain reinvented historical data, or at least emphasize specific aspects important to the redactors. The 1961

Although repudiated, Master Wang "did not ignore the hopes the people had placed in him, fearing neither effort nor criticism and devoting himself fully to production work and unit cooperation." Li describes it by saying that Wang had already "woven the cloth of Hengshan by transmitting the Dao with great depth of sentiments" (*ganqing dushen hengshan budao* 感情笃深横山布道). In China, weaving is traditionally a woman's activity, and the Weaver Maid (*zhinü* 织女) is the female partner of the Cowherd Boy (*niulang* 牛郎) in a myth marking the different tasks of the genders, differentiating sexual roles as matching the inherent nature of heaven and earth. By using a metaphor related to the feminine qualities of the weaver, Li emphasizes the meritorious achievements of Master Wang both in internal alchemy and administrative and healing work: both require what Catherine Despeux defines as major feminine qualities, i.e., mediation and transformation (1990).

In 1966, the Cultural Revolution began and with it the overall destruction and vandalizing of religion: deities' statues, sacred scriptures, the Daoist canon, ritual vestments, liturgical instruments. The monastery suffered greatly. According to oral testimonies, Master Wang was arrested by the Red Guards and "locked up for three days with a Buddhist nun; they were both naked and had only meat to eat." "The Daoists were left penniless, thrown out of the monastery and ordered to return to secular life (*leling haisu* 勒令还俗), often deported (*qiansong* 遣送) back to their native district" (Li 1995). Resettling the population in their "original [district] of registration" (*yuANJI* 原籍), the authorities struck at a mainstay of monastic Daoism, the institution of *chujia*, "leaving the family."¹⁴ While the Mystery Capital Monastery, previously transformed into a workers' dormitory, now became the "Southern Peak Inn" (Nanyue zhaodaisuo 南岳招待所), Master Wang was forced to leave the mountain and, at age 48 headed back to his native Hebei.

Many Daoists at the time stopped all self-cultivation and got married, some never returning to the monastic life. And even if Wang Xin'an

declaration, however, is compatible with the economic and political reforms of the time.

¹⁴ A traveling Quanzhen Daoist is does not refer to his home by "old home" (*laojia* 老家) but by old temple" (*laomiao* 老廟). The temple and its ritual parent-hood replace home and family. See Herrou 2005; 2011.

is said to have been “hit hard by this stroke” (Ouyang and Zhang 2008), Li insists that he was determined to respect the precepts: he was a model practitioner, able to prove that the social pressure of the time was not inexorable. He also portrays Wang as working in the fields during the day and meditating to refine the cinnabar at night, even allowing himself to discuss sacred issues or “engage in pure talk” (*qingtan* 清谈) with his fellow villagers. The latter respected him, “knowing that he was honest and generous and that he could cure the sick and select medicinal herbs” (ZLR 2010). They asked him to exercise his healing skills, and soon came to consider him a barefoot doctor (*chijiao yisheng* 赤脚医生)—a local practitioner of traditional medicine trained in elementary Western healthcare and supplied with basic equipment.¹⁵

Although an experienced Daoist healer, Wang Xin’an was placed in this category at the bottom of the new medical hierarchy. His methods involved alchemical and ritual techniques in combination with the orthodox medical skills of acupuncture and herbs. Like many other Daoists (see Herrou 2011), he was also a practitioner of self-healing, connecting self-care through internal alchemy with care for others through healing and administration. As the methods were divided sharply into new official categories—religion, medicine, sports, qigong, and superstition—Master Wang’s healing and cultivation methods fell into the cracks and his identity was lost. However, understanding his virtues and seeing the obvious results, the community wanted him to proceed. It is one of the ironies of history that Master Wang continuously practiced Daoist medicine throughout the Cultural Revolution, thereby transmitting the “intangible heritage” of Daoism at the local level, both within and yet beyond all official categories and institutions.

¹⁵ In the 1950s, the government began to organize national health, creating healthcare centers at the local level. “Traditional Chinese Medicine” (TCM) developed at the time: standardized and applied by doctors trained in Western medicine and purified of all ritual and religious content. Because they were considered “conservative” and their practices imbued with “superstitions” (*mixin* 迷信), traditional therapists had to study modern science and improve their technical level (Taylor 2005). They came to be called “barefoot doctors.”



Master Wang Xin'an at the end of the 1980s.

The Come-Back

In 1979, Deng Xiaoping declared the opening of China and gradually installed a policy of religious freedom, allowing the practice of the five officially recognized creeds under the control of state-run associations and working under the slogan "love the country, love the religion" (*aiguo aijiao* 爱国爱教). In Li Jiazhong's words, "a spring wind was blowing both within and outside of the Great Wall," making "old traces come back to light."

In 1980, Wang Xin'an, 62 years old, was amnestied as a rightist and, together with other religious personalities, "stepped forward, his head

held high." Pushed by the government of his home town, he participated in the foundation of the district's United Front. In the fifth lunar month, he went to the White Cloud Temple to participate in the third national meeting of the Chinese Daoist Association and came to serve among the thirty nine members of its administrative council. The following fall, after fourteen years in Hebei, he left again his family and village to move to Beijing. The Bureau of Religious Affairs put him in charge of administering the "restoration" (*huifu* 回复) of the Daoist heritage. He stayed for years, also working as a guest prefect of the monastery (*zhike* 知客) and teaching courses on Daoist knowledge in specialized classes (*zhuanxiu ban* 专修班).

In 1985, he was officially invited to return to the Southern Peak as head of the Mystery Capital Monastery. The previous year, Nanyue Township had become a special section within of Hengyang City 衡阳市, dedicated to the development of the cultural and natural site under the slogan: "The famous mountain as a footboard, tourism as a dragon head" (NYZ 1996:357). After all of twenty years, he again was able to climb halfway up Hengshan, only to find the monastery abandoned and destroyed, quite like a "body affected by numerous diseases" (Li 1995).

However "the morning following his arrival, one could again hear the sounds of scripture chanting in ritual" (Li 1995). The liturgy that marks the life blood of the monastery was launched again, instilling the destitute site with renewed vitality. Aged 67 and filled with deep emotion, Master Wang declared that "he wanted to dedicate all the vitality he had left to developing Hunan Daoism." His disciple, however, notes that this involvement "occupied him too much so that he would not consider the health of his own person" (Li 1995). Soon after, Master Wang participated in the foundation of the Provincial Daoist Association of Hunan and became its president. The following year, 1986, he was elected a member of the People's Congress of Hengshan City and also of the Hunan Consultative Congress. The Mystery Capital Monastery in due course became the official Daoist center of the province.

Li depicts Master Wang as criss-crossing the Southern Peak on foot, his hair in a top knot, a gourd on his belt, and straw sandals on his feet—just like the immortals (see Kaltenmark 1953; Ngo 1976). His various biographies also recount several anecdotes, insisting on his simple, healthy

way of living in the Daoist community. In the late 1980s, he had barely enough to live on, but he "never used his position to personal advantage" (Ouyang and Zhang 2008), however large the administrative responsibilities and the amounts of money he had to handle on behalf of the monastery and the Daoist Association.

Closely interacting with the high officials of the province, Master Wang also developed connections (*guanxi* 關係) which allowed him to send requests to the hierarchy and garner support from powerful networks, but even these he never used to further himself personally. In addition, the biographies emphasize his healing practice, time and again recounting how he healed both mountain Daoists and visiting pilgrims without asking for rewards. As soon as he found out that a Daoist was ill, he "immediately took time to apply needles and moxa, fire up his decoction pot (*huoguan* 火罐), or treating his patient with other methods" (Li 1995). These "other methods," mentioned marginally, give a brief hint to the ritual aspects of his "meticulous" healing practice.

Daoist Tourism

As leading administrator of Hunan Daoism, Wang Xin'an developed a four-step plan. Li describes it as his own, but it was in fact the provincial application of a nationwide plan the government implemented to channel regional social forces, reinvent Chinese identity in the midst of globalization, and develop tourism. The first step involved the restoration—or, more properly speaking, the appropriation—of several temple properties in the provincial capital of Changsha and on Hengshan to the newborn Daoist Association. Yet "resistance to the implementation of this policy was strong" and "numerous meetings, oral instructions, and written documents were necessary" (Li 1995). The temples had been converted to factories or workers' accommodations during the Cultural Revolution, and the government agencies that held them tended to be unwilling to let go of them, being great sources of income.

As regards the development of tourism, the Daoist communities stood in competition with official institutions and private entrepreneurs, hoping to dominate the ecological sphere of the mountain through technical and symbolic actions and eager to profit from it. Developers built roads and, in 1995, opened the cable car, thereby allowing the tourist-

pilgrim to ascend the heights without effort. They set up restaurants, hotels, and a “village of folk culture” (*minsu wenhua cheng* 民俗文化城) and revived the temple fair of old.¹⁶ They also enhanced boulders, caves, and other mountain sites, setting them up for tourism. Sometimes they gave the places new names to create “an abundance of tourist attractions,” able to accommodate large numbers of tourist-pilgrims who were to be “so happy they would forget to go home.”

The methods and symbols used in this development often stood in direct conflict with Daoist concepts and traditions which involve a long history of metaphorical storytelling, connecting specific mountain sites to religious events and handing down specific teachings to later generations. Daoists traditionally also transmit ritual techniques to protect pilgrims from demons, beasts, and other dangers of the mountain, guiding them “to recover” a direct way of interaction with spontaneous nature. This could not be further from the purpose of the tourism entrepreneurs, whose main goal is to keep large groups of tourist-pilgrims in a technologically secured, “coin-operated” setting, shielding them for a short while from the vicissitudes of daily life and enveloping them in an abundance of entertaining, often newly created, “attractions” (*neihan* 內涵).

This is the context in which Master Wang and the Daoist Association had to reinvent the Southern Peak as a Daoist sacred space, restructuring ancient legends and narratives to enchant and educate the visitors. Wang’s second step was more specific. He hoped to restore the three palaces and living quarters of the Mystery Capital Monastery so that it could recover its “original appearance” and become a worthy and efficient provincial headquarters of the Daoist Association (Li 1995).

Federating Hunan Daoism

The third step of Wang Xin’an’s plan involved building up Daoist Associations on the city or district level by federating the various communities around Daoist liturgical sites, especially within the province but also beyond it in the greater ritual region of the Southern Peak. To do so, the

¹⁶ According to official data, in 1984 the mountain had 17 restaurants and 117 hotels, and sold 667,000 entrance tickets. Ten years later, in 1994, the mountain had 184 restaurants, 302 hotels, and 1,480,000 visitors (NYZ 1996, 357).

Association had to obtain the property of temples located in secondary provincial cities such as Yueyang 嶽陽, Zhangjiajie 張家界, and Xiangtan 湘潭.¹⁷ As far as the United Front was concerned, the policy aimed at integrating the ritual communities of Hunan into national religious agencies, thereby establishing surveillance and control over civil society. Comparable policies had already been implemented during the Song dynasty, but the government at the time was rather more liberal and chose to establish a ranking and control system by bestowing official titles on deities emerging from regional ritual networks (Hansen 1990). In the second half of the twentieth century, the government's aim was to channel similar social forces into hierarchical state institutions, to set up standardized liturgies under the dominance of the Quanzhen school, which has been reinvented as an official administrative agency. Within this framework, married and family-centered Zhengyi Daoists came to serve as a second administrative category: they became a buffer zone, allowing local traditions to be integrated in, or eliminated from, official religious institutions.

Ever since it began to be formally institutionalized, Daoism has grown and unfolded through the transformation of local ritual communities into levels allegedly equipped with a higher level of purity. This continued effort at conversion—not unlike the work of Confucian officials (see Lévi 1987)—meant that ritual activities judged as excessive (*yin* 淫) or heterodox (*xie* 邪) “were sublimated and enclosed in a firmer and better-organized framework” (Stein 1979, 59). In the 1980s, Master Wang similarly hoped to federate Zhengyi Daoists under the Quanzhen umbrella, noting that, even though they were often engaged at the local level of society, they could be part of “a full and sound team” (*banzi jianquan* 班子健全)—as political parlance has it—and become an important branch of the new Daoist “troop of life” (*shengli jun* 生力军) of the province (Li 1995).

Generally, the functioning of the Daoist Association and of the networks surrounding the Mystery Capital Monastery depended on the

¹⁷ Yueyang is near Lake Dongting, north of the Southern Peak. Here the cult surrounding the immortal Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 first appeared under the Song (960-1279). See Baldrian-Hussein 1985. Zhangjiajie with its spectacular mountain scenery is a major tourism center of the province.

federation of grassroots-level ritual communities. This was not an easy task, because as the history of the Southern Peak demonstrates, different Daoist traditions were often in competition or conflict for control of its liturgical transmission. This meant that numerous local provincial communities of vastly different natures had to be gathered into a centralized institution. As a result, the Daoist Association was both an inescapable institution that alone allowed the religion to exist in the modern context and an institutional tool for Master Wang and other organizers to extend the networks administered around the liturgy of their core temples.

Besides the diversity of local communities and various internal breaches, difficulties also arose from the local officials' attitudes and practices towards traditions in general and Daoism in particular. In some districts, officials of the Departments of Culture or of Religious Affairs combined their efforts to develop their heritage,¹⁸ in others, as one of Wang's disciples notes, "they tried to maintain the temples under their administrative control in an inactive status or even to extort funds from them."¹⁹ Master Wang's political rank and connections were very helpful when he had to deal with lower-level government agencies in the province, but they did not always suffice.

Since the condition of a local ritual community depends on the district officials, "a temple without a *bona fide* Daoist to direct a regular liturgy and with no connection to the Daoist Association is much more profitable to unethical notables," Wang's disciple continues. In the modern institutional environment, becoming part of the Daoist Association network was thus a safeguard for a ritual community. It also ensured its official recognition and gave it the right to restore a local temple, re-establish a regular liturgy, and sometimes invite Daoist masters to live there.

In addition, the deities worshiped by local communities had long been part of cultural, social, and administrative networks and requests offered to the celestial hierarchy matched those addressed to the imperial administration. The technical and symbolic milieu having changed according to new conceptions, the Daoist Association serves as the modern

¹⁸ The central part of Hunan is an example of such a kind of development around the regional identity of Meishan 梅山 (Favraud, forthcoming).

¹⁹ Anonymous personal communication, 2009.

intermediary between state and communities, allowing them to formulate and submit requests through the administrative hierarchy. In other words, for Master Wang, federating the ritual communities of the province was a way to protect them and give them a voice, to gather their social and economic forces under the auspices of the Mystery Capital Monastery, thereby to build a provincial Daoist organization able to interact with both private entrepreneurs and state agencies.

Daoists as Managers

The fourth step of Master Wang's plan involved creating training classes for a new generation of Daoists. In the late 1980s, he first started such classes, hoping to train "professionals in religious administration" (*jiaowu shiye* 教务事业), but he also organized specific courses on the *Yi-jing* 易經 (Book of Changes) (Li 1995). These classes later formed the foundation for a two-year seminary program that allows promising Daoists to be trained as local managers and presidents of district associations. The first seminary of this kind was set up in 1989 at the White Cloud Temple in Beijing, later followed by one on Mount Qingcheng in Sichuan—both for male practitioners. Wang Xin'an's school on the Southern Peak, on the other hand, in 2005 became the national "Academy of Daoist Nuns" (Kundao xueyuan 坤道學院) (see Wang 2008), continuing a long history of renowned women Daoists.²⁰

Besides creating these training classes, Master Wang was authorized to accept personal disciples to share the daily life of their master and receive the transmission of what he had learned "step by step." There is a clear distinction between these traditional "disciples" (*tudi* 徒弟) and the "students" (*xuesheng* 學生) of the academy. While "transmission brothers" (*shixiongdi* 師兄弟), i.e., disciples of a same master, have ritual kinship mutual bounds, the others are just schoolmates (*tongxue* 同学). Daoist academies are modern training institutions, never replacing the

²⁰ The Southern Peak has long been associated with Daoist women. It is the site of a cult to Xiwangmu 西王母, the Queen Mother of the West; the center associated with Lady Wei Huacun, Zhengyi libationer and revealing deity of Shangqing (Highest Clarity); and the site of a sixth-century monastery directed by a woman (see Despeux 1990; Despeux and Kohn 2003; Robson 2009).

transmission of the Mystery through ritual parenthood and esoteric techniques.

Immortality

A candle burned until late in Wang Xin'an's room. His disciples were worried that he was going to collapse under the pressure of his administrative work. He, however, said: "During the day I have so many little tasks to deal with that I cannot get quiet. Now, when nobody comes to bother me is the best time to work" (Li 1995). Convinced that the administration of Daoism was not yet satisfactory, he worked in dark of night by candle light, drawing plans to improve regulations and making them more "specific and reasonable" (*juti heli* 具体合理; Li 1995).

Still worried, a lay disciple once suggested that he retire, but he answered: "I am involved in Daoism, my heart is involved in Daoism, and I want to die being involved in Daoism. . . You may think about your master's body, but your master thinks about the years I have left to improve Daoism in Hunan" (Li 1995). He saw his body as inseparable from the social body of Hunan Daoism. In the event he never retired and died in early 1993 at the age of 74.

At the conclusion of the biography, Li Jiazhong writes that the memory of "this master of his generation who served as the pillar of the restoration of Daoism on the Southern Peak will be cherished and venerated" for a long time (Li 1995). His physical body may have died, yet the master refuses to abandon his disciples. As Li has it, Wang's followers continue his quest to improve Daoist institutions, both for the sake of the country and of the Chinese people, but also as a personal Daoist practice, aiming to "polish our will and give shape to our strength (Li 1995)." As for Master Wang, has "ascended and become an immortal" (*dengxian* 登仙). As Li notes, if "the ancestral masters respond positively [to the request for promotion]," he will even become "an official in the land of the immortals." He winds it all up with a poem:

Heaven's fertilizing rain falls on Melter's Peak,
The Purple Pavilion, the Mystery Capital, soaking ancient pines.
As evening drum and morning bell sound anew today,
Cinnabar haze and purple *qi* happily come together.
Held in clarity, we never tire to transmit authentic secrets.
Awakened in stillness, we always carry on the master's teachings.
At night fall hardly lonely—dreams come on the pillow,
The mountain empty and serene—white clouds [immortals] gather.

Conclusion

Holding on to the central axis of the Daoist discourse on Wang Xin'an's life, his Daoist liturgy, and the various social environments he participated in, in this paper I have contrasted personal, devotional, official, and academic sources, examining them through the lens of anthropological categories. It has become clear that for a Daoist master of the 20th century the practices of internal alchemy, healing, and administration are as closely interconnected as are the levels of canonical principles (concepts, precepts, and narratives), ritual practices (personal and collective), and community interactions.

In his early years Wang suffered from physical weakness, so that for him becoming a Daoist was a question of life and death. His Daoist modes of healing, moreover, integrated his personal history into his Daoist career, making his life's experiences inseparable from his community and tradition. Fully participating in and, despite strong pressures, never letting go of Daoism, Master Wang took on official functions and realized an institutional career in the midst of violent social change. This may well be why his disciples feel both sorry for him and deeply grateful for his efforts.

From the central position Wang Xin'an occupied on the Southern Peak, he lived a deeply virtuous life and created a new and transforming identity both for himself and for official Daoism in Hunan. Today Daoists, both monastic and lay, as well as scholars and officials regard him as having accomplished a tremendous lot and reached a high level of virtue. Even beyond the death, he is still thought able to participate in the "fertilization" of the ever-changing environment of Chinese Daoist communities today.

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