

# **Monastic Daoism Transformed**

The Fate of the Thunder Drum Lineage



by

Karine Martin

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This book is dedicated to all the courageous,  
innovating, and indomitable Daoists of China  
who are giving their lives to this  
marvelous, fascinating, and incomparable tradition,  
making sure that it survives and flourishes  
under all different circumstances.

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and most sincerely thanked are

Feng Xingzhao

Huang Shizhen

Liu Shitian

plus

all my teachers, friends,  
and fellow students.



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# Introduction

## Reconstructing Daoism

“When I was young, my life was totally carefree; when I reached middle age, I was also carefree; now that I am nearly seventy, I am so busy! How amusing!” Thus said Feng Xingzhao 馮興釗 (冯兴钊, 1945-2023) on 5 October 2015, as he turned off his cell phone and headed toward his small bedroom to catch up with his meditation practice. He had spent the morning and the early afternoon answering the phone and receiving various local government leaders, juggling to provide solutions for the renovation and development of the various temples he managed in Ziyang 紫陽 county, Shaanxi.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Master Feng witnessed his temple home being damaged and closed down. He himself was expelled and forced to return to his village to work and renounce his beliefs. Thirty years later, at age 69, he had become a well-known figure in the same county, respected by both locals and government officials for his contribution to the redevelopment of Daoism in the area.

Master Feng is a monk of the main monastic school of Daoism, the Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection) order, founded under the Jin dynasty by Wang Chong-yang 王重陽 (1113-1170). More specifically, he belongs to its dominant branch, called Longmen 龍門 (Dragon Gate) and named after a cave where Wang’s leading disciple and successor patriarch Qiu Chuji 丘處機, aka Changchun 長春 (1143-1227), meditated and attained immortality. Having flourished for 900 years, the Quanzhen order with all its many branches ceased to function in 1966 when the Cultural Revolution led to the stoppage of all religious activities, the closure of temples and monasteries, the defrocking of monks and nuns, and the dispersal of congregations.



Religious activities legally resumed in 1979. In 1983, Daoism officially restarted with the registration of twenty-one key monasteries (Huang 2007). Thirty years later, there were 30,000 Daoist temples and 100,000 priests, including 30,000 Quanzhen clerics. Twenty-six provinces had Daoist associations as did 300 cities and counties.<sup>1</sup> Such an impressive resurgence did not happen without a supportive political, legal, and cultural context involving the central government and the Chinese Daoist Association (CDA) but also local and often unknown priests who shifted their practice focus from internal to external, from meditation to temple building (State Council 1997; Guojia 2008).

This book explores the various processes that allowed the redevelopment of monastic Daoism. It begins with the hypothesis that the revival required significant modifications at the structural and doctrinal level of the Quanzhen order. Only in this way could the organization adapt to the new social, political, and legal context. To document the development in detail, I present particularly the activities of clerics involved with a temple (*daoyuan* 道院) known as Leigutai 雷鼓台 (Terrace of the Thunder Drum), located on an isolated peak of the Qinling 秦岭 mountain range in Ziyang county, Shaanxi. It was named after the heroic feat of the legendary general Zhuge Liang during the Three Kingdoms period who led his troops to victory by sounding a big drum from this mountain. The work focuses on the period from 1979 through 2015 and centers on three aspects:

1) the process of the internal transmission of doctrines and practices of internal alchemy, following particularly the methods applied by a young nun named Jingyi 景一;

2) the rebuilding of temples and the revitalization of community, especially examining the activities of two masters, Feng Xingzhao and Liu Shitian 劉世天, who represent different approaches in their views and methods;

3) and the construction of a public image according to the new political context, as represented by the work of Liu Shitian and his attendance of the Third International Daoist Forum in 2014, a major event organized jointly by Daoists and the government.

My main approach is to define a broad general context of the revival process by observing a small section. The activities of Thunder Drum members, especially those of Liu Shitian, present a representative sample to identify the trends of development set up by the CDA and the government.

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<sup>1</sup>The web page in Lin, Xie, and Li 2011 describes the press conference during the second international forum held in Nanyue by Master Lin Zhou 林舟, vice chairman of the CDA, who provided information on the situation of the development of Daoism at the time.



## Materials and Methodology

The work draws on three main sources of reference material: personal field observations, written materials used by contemporary Quanzhen clerics, and websites of the Daoist community as well as the government, including the CDA, to communicate both internally and with the world at large.

As regards field observations, I was a “participant observer” of Daoist monastic life for ten years, myself ordained as a ritual master of the Thunder Drum lineage. In this role, I was able to gather a great deal of information on religious and spiritual training within a close master-disciple relationship as well as in more formal training, such as the three-months-long advanced workshop for ritual masters organized in 2008 by Ren Zongquan 仁宗全 at the Dadao guan 大道觀 (Monastery of the Great Dao) in Wuhan 武漢, Hubei.

In addition, I also undertook the traditional practice of “cloud wandering” (*yunyou* 雲游), that is, moving through the country and staying at numerous different temples. Doing so, I was able to participate in the life of many institutions, both small hereditary temples (*zisun miao* 子孫廟), such as the one shown below, and major public monasteries (*shifang congli* 十方聽林; see Herrou 2005; 2013; Goossaert 2007).



In terms of contemporary print publications, I relied heavily on the journal of the CDA, *Zhongguo dao jiao* 中國國道教, distributed free to all Daoist temples in China. Within this journal, I focused mainly on articles published by Quanzhen priests as they provide a glimpse of the way they understand their doctrine today. In addition, I also made use of websites

run by Quanzhen masters or local Daoist associations, which provided articles or comments on their day-to-day realization and interpretation (*ganwu* 感悟) of the teachings.

Third, numerous websites have sprung up in the Daoist community. Most Daoist associations have their own, updating them regularly, as for example that run by the Shaanxi Daoist Association (Shaanxi sheng daojiao xiehui 2015). They provide information on current events, but also explain their ways of interpreting history and tradition. Beyond that, individual Quanzhen masters have their own blogs, such as the Thunder Drum cleric Liu Shitian (2008a; 2008c; 2009b) and the vice chairman of the CDA at the time, Huang Xinyang 黄信陽 (2008).

Two other types of websites provide a wider range of information. One is *Daojiao zhiyin* 道教之音 (The Voice of Daoism), which still covers most Daoist events and is updated regularly. Be it the latest opening ceremony of a temple, the renovation of a mountain hermitage, or the agenda and participants of a national meeting, this site has it all. It also provides videos of contemporary Daoists, talks and conferences, and a large selection of portraits of the most influential masters. However, it is always good to verify the information provided by comparing it to other sources and personally contacting their authors—masters, representatives, and journalists.

More online resources that present legal and administrative matters on the official level appear in the website of the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) (see Guojia 2008; SARA 2014) and that of the law faculty of Peking University (Beida 2014). Beyond these, I carefully chose sites that officially represent one or the other local association or temple and always cross-examined the information they provided with personal knowledge and observations.

So far, studies of Daoism have rarely utilized internet-based references, but they are not to be neglected and are really essential in order to understand the trends of the current situation.

## Ethnography

Over the last twenty years, the ethnographic study of Quanzhen Daoism has emerged as a new academic field in China, with its own research centers, often established by temples of the order. The first to set up such a center was the Qingsong guan 青松觀 (Green Pines Temple) in Hong Kong in 2000. Since then, it has regularly sponsored publications and conferences as well as provided financial support for the creation of a similar institution at Huazhong Normal University in Wuhan and one at Shandong Normal University in Jinan 濟南.

Research on the Quanzhen order, including many studies in Chinese, Japanese, and Western languages, so far has focused mostly on its early

unfolding. Works tend to explore the doctrinal and self-cultivation writings of the early patriarchs and examine the political and social history of the school (e.g., Eskildsen 2004; Komjathy 2007; Goossaert 1997; 2001; 2007). There are only few studies of its contemporary situation in China, most notably two books published by Li Yangzheng 李養正 (1993a; 2003), which provide information on the history of the CDA and the Quanzhen headquarters during and after the Cultural Revolution.

In Western academia, scholars have highlighted the paradigm of gradual modernization and secularization through the late imperial, Republican, and Communist periods. This paradigm describes the processes through which Daoist clerics, temples, texts, and practices moved into secularized institutions (Palmer and Liu 2012). The book *Quanzhen Daoists in Chinese Society and Culture, 1500-2010* (Goossaert and Liu 2013) was the first to focus on modern Daoism and its transformation in Chinese society and culture.

It contains one article specifically on monastic practice after the Cultural Revolution (Palmer 2013), which reconstructs American encounters with contemporary Quanzhen clerics and examines their self-cultivation regimens and techniques. David Palmer shows that the interest American practitioners take in pilgrimages to centers on Mount Hua 華, stimulates inspiration yet can also be a source of tension and even humiliation for the Daoists. This is because the encounter takes place in a context where Daoists pursue their long-standing efforts to reshape and yet maintain their religious identity, working under conditions of pervasive devastation of the tradition as well as restrictive central and local regulations.

The only thorough study on contemporary monastic Daoism is by the French ethnographer Adeline Herrou (2005; 2013). Her work explains how Quanzhen Daoists construct their identity through discourse, attitude, vestments, and ritual. Based on field work in a temple in southern Shaanxi, it offers a general depiction of life in a Daoist monastery, including the initiation process, by which aspirants to the priesthood leave ordinary life and enter the religious order. It also identifies the unique characteristic of their world, focusing particularly on their break with the kin-based organization of lay society and the establishment of an alternative set of pseudo-kinship relationships, designed to transcend gender divisions (see also Palmer 2006).

The aim of my work in this context is to study the process of revival over the past thirty years, utilizing both ethnographic and textual sources. It differs from Adeline Herrou's focus on identity construction within the order by looking more specifically at the social, political, and legal context of Daoism in China today.

## Textual Resources

Quanzhen texts go back far in history. According to Daoist doctrine, they began even before creation when, as the *Wuliang duren miaojing* 無量度人妙經 (Wondrous Scripture of Limitless Salvation, DZ 1;<sup>2</sup> trl. Bokenkamp 1997) says, “even nothingness was not yet.” At that time, “during the



ancestral eons of primordial beginning, in the highest heaven of Grand Network (Daluo tian 大羅天), in the midst of the inaugural azure realm,” the Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning (Yuanshi tianzun 元始天尊; shown on the left) revealed the *Wondrous Scripture*. Specified in the Qing-dynasty manual *Quanzhen bidu* 全真必讀 (What Quanzhen [Clerics] Must Read) as one of five major texts to recite during daily services, this work still features in the regular morning liturgy (see Paynter et al. 2020), which begins with a poem from it.

Another text recited frequently is the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of Dao and Its Virtue), dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and associated with the sage Laozi 老子 who allegedly transmitted it during his emigration to the west. Riding his water buffalo, he was stopped by the border guard Yin Xi 尹喜 at the Hangu Pass 函谷關 west of Mount Hua and there dictated the scripture in 5,000 words. Under the influence of a descendant of Yin Xi, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, this location was transferred into the foothills of the Zhongnan 終南 range. Later it became the site of the major monastery Louguantai 樓觀台 (Observation Tower), still active today.

Other important texts, as specified by the Quanzhen founder Wang Chongyang, are the *Qingjing jing* 清靜經 (Scripture of Clarity and Stillness, DZ 620; trl. Kohn 1993; Wong 1995) and the *Yinfu jing* 陰符經 (Scripture of Hidden Correspondences, DZ 31; trl. Komjathy 2008), both of Tang origin, as well as the Buddhist *Xinjing* 心經 (*Heart Sūtra*; T 250-57)<sup>3</sup> and *Jin'gang jing* 金剛經 (*Vajracchedikā Sūtra*; *Diamond Sūtra*; T 235-37, 273; both trl. Conze 2001).

<sup>2</sup>“DZ” stands for *Daozang*, the Daoist Canon of 1445. Numbers refer to the annotated catalog in Schipper and Verellen 2004.

<sup>3</sup>“T” stands for *Taishō daizōkyō* (Great Canon of the Taishō Era), the standard edition of the Buddhist canon, published in Tokyo in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1167, moreover, Wang Chongyang received secret transmissions from the immortals Zhongli Quan 鐘離權 and Lü Dongbin 呂洞濱, leading to the incorporation of ideas and texts of the Zhong-Lü tradition of internal alchemy into the Quanzhen system (see Kohn 2020). In their wake, a plethora of texts emerged, so that about sixty early works are still contained in the Daoist Canon of the Ming dynasty (Schipper and Verellen 2004, 412-21). They include poetry collections, discourses, recorded sayings, literary anthologies, hagiographies, and commentaries as well as monastic manuals, such as the *Quanzhen qinggui* 全真清規 (Pure Rules of Complete Perfection, DZ 1235).

Further anthologies and collections followed, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Jiang Yupu 蔣予蒲 (1756-1819) received more teachings of Lü Dongbin through spirit-writing, and his disciple Liu Shouyuan 柳守元 compiled the *Daozang jiyao* 道藏輯要 (Collected Essentials of the Daoist Canon; see Esposito 2009; Lai 2021). To the present day, moreover, Quanzhen groups in Hong Kong worship Patriarch Lü and still receive texts through spirit-writing.

Scholars have worked hard to define Quanzhen on the basis of this extensive textual corpus, but the process has been arduous. They have identified about thirty-two texts works written or edited by the first generation of masters in the Song and Yuan dynasties. Especially Louis Komjathy has examined this set of works, using textual analysis along with methods from comparative religion, mysticism, and psychology. He says:

[This research is] from the perspective of comparative religious studies, specifically in terms of conceptions of self, religious practice, and comparative mysticism. Utilizing classical Chinese source materials from the early Quanzhen textual corpus, this study gives particular attention to textual, interpretative, and terminological issues. Here I examine Quanzhen views and practices in terms of conceptions of self, consciousness studies, psychology, embodiment issues, meditation, and mysticism. (2007, 2)

This contributes to our understanding of the tradition but does not resolve the issue of lineage construction and identity. As Vincent Goossaert notes,

Our lack of a fundamental text defining a Quanzhen identity is not an effect of faulty transmission. There was indeed no such thing as a specific Quanzhen scriptural tradition, because there is no Quanzhen revealed scripture. Of course, Wang Chongyang, later Quanzhen masters, as well as a number contemporary religious seekers not belonging to the order met with immortals and received from them poems and oral instructions. These revelations, however, were of a personal nature and were not meant to be the basis of a written tradition. . . .

The ultimate authority within the early Quanzhen order was not a fundamental text but the action and speech of the patriarchs and masters. . . .

The huge majority of Quanzhen literature is either performative or narrative: it proposes a detailed pedagogy in action, by exhorting adepts and telling the exemplary story of the order's patriarchs and former masters. It aims at convincing auditors and readers to join the order and imitate its patriarchs. As such, this literature can be considered a huge repertory of fragments of contextualized teachings that together form a Quanzhen lore. (2001, 120-21)

Kristofer Schipper echoes this:

The major problem with Quanzhen writings lies in their unsystematic nature. Quanzhen is not a revelation, and there is no founding scripture on which the whole tradition can be said to rest. The fact that the school produced no classic was considered a blemish by the early Ming theoretician Zhao Yizhen [d. 1382]. For a school with a deep sense of its unity and mission, the corpus left by Quanzhen is dispersed and heterogeneous. (in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 1130)

One text, though, the *Chongyang lijiao shiwu lun* 重陽立教十五論 ([Wang] Chongyang's Fifteen Discourses on Establishing the Teaching; DZ 1233; trl. Kohn 2003; 2004b; Komjathy 2008), has been considered a representative expression of the early movement, often cited as a general introduction to its key practices.

Another relevant text is the *Chongyang zhenren jinguan yusuo jue* 重陽真人金關玉鎖訣 (Master Chongyang's Instructions on the Golden Gate and Jade Lock, DZ 1156; trl. Komjathy 2007). It presents a technical discussion of early Quanzhen practice principles, training regimens, and models of attainment and is one of the most representative of its doctrine.

A further group of twenty-two texts, translated by Louis Komjathy (2013), form the backbone of slightly later Quanzhen doctrine, outlining "early Quanzhen as a twelfth-century Daoist religious movement in terms of its own beliefs, practices, goals, and ideals" (2013, 19).

A key scripture of the Qing dynasty is a work on monastic rules by the patriarch Wang Changyue 王常月 (1622-1680). The *Chuzhen jie* 初真戒 (Precepts of Initial Perfection, *Daozang jiyao* 278, 292; trl. Hackmann 1920; Kohn 2004a) begins by requiring ordinands to take refuge in the Dao, the scriptures, and the masters, then swear to obey sets of five and ten precepts. The latter specify, among others, that they should not "be lascivious or lose perfection, defile or insult the numinous *qi*." They should also avoid "ruining others to create gain for themselves and instead stay with their own flesh and blood," as well as abstain from "drinking wine beyond measure or eating meat in violation of the prohibitions."

A complementary work, the *Qinggui xuanmiao* 清規玄妙 (Pure Rules, Mysterious and Marvelous, *Zangwai daoshu* 361), similarly prohibits the consumption of wine and fancy foods, such as luscious mushrooms and meat, and punishes violations of this rule by caning and expulsion (see Yoshioka 1979; Kohn 2003).

Further texts of rules, including also the *Zhongji jie* 中極戒 (Precepts of Medium Ultimate, *Daozang jiyao* 293; trl. Hackmann 1931; Kohn 2004b) and *Tianxian dajie* 天仙大戒 (Great Precepts for Celestial Immortals, *Daozang jiyao* 291), are the subject of Monica Esposito's work (2014; 2016). She analyses the origin of each section in great detail and demonstrates that the more initial parts are strongly influenced by regulations of the Tang dynasty while the *Tianxian dajie* is a pure product of the lay spirit-writing tradition under Quanzhen auspices in the Ming. The latter in particular, as Livia Kohn points out, does not contain a list of rules. Instead, it gives general encouragements to develop wisdom, selflessness, and compassion. It also presents the text of the *Qingjing jing* as well as passages from the *Daode jing* and a number of other medieval texts, together with various holy verses (*gāthas*) and hymns of praise (2004a, 111).

Most Western studies, therefore, approach Quanzhen from historical, sociological, or comparative studies and describing its doctrines and practices in the light of transmitted scriptures. Only few studies have focused on its organization and role after the Cultural Revolution.

## This Book

This book remedies this. It examines how exactly the eradication of temples, the disappearance of old masters and scriptures, as well as the condemnation of religious practices as superstitious has impacted the order, how Quanzhen clerics have rallied after the official reopening of religious activities, and how they fare today. It divides into eight chapters.

The first presents the political and legal context of the revival process of monastic Daoism. It outlines the various national organizations involved, examines the specific regulations applied, and provides a legal definition of what a Quanzhen master is. It highlights just how the current legal doctrine of “freedom of religious belief” contributes to the revival of monastic Daoism, while the SARA exerts strict control on all religious activities.

Chapter two centers on the way alchemical knowledge is transmitted today, examining the training of a young Thunder Drum nun. During her years of cloud wandering, she not only received various textual materials but also encountered two hermits from the Zhongnan range who became her practice teachers. Examining her career, the chapter shows how the transmission of the doctrines and practices of internal alchemy, one of the

most important dimensions of monastic Daoism, embodies both continuity and change.

The third chapter concentrates on temple building. It analyzes how Quanzhen masters, traditionally recluses practicing internal alchemy in remote mountains, under current conditions came to redirected their efforts to rebuild the physical sites and institutional structures that were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. It focuses particularly on the Thunder Drum lineage and the activities of Master Feng Xingzhao.

Following this, chapter four on “Diffusion Abroad” shows the impact of rebuilding in a wider context, focusing on the life and work of Master Huang Shizhen 黃世真 who first spread the tradition abroad and contributed to the founding of the British Daoist Association and other Western groups. It also outlines the temples rebuilt by Liu Shitian at the provincial level, presenting his biography and describing how he came to realize his projects.

The chapter concludes with a comparison of the two modes of rebuilding and revitalizing temples used by the old master Feng Xingzhao and the new master Liu Shitian. It shows a shift in the function of temples. Feng placed priority on developing temples as dwellings for the immortals and places of worship, while Liu put all his efforts into developing temples as centers of transmission of traditional Chinese culture and the development of tourism.

Chapter five discusses the various strategies of rebranding Quanzhen ideology and activities in order to adapt to modern society and the new political context. It highlights how Quanzhen clerics shifted their discourse from the religious to the cultural realm, changing their image from intermediaries of the gods toward transmitters of Chinese culture. It presents especially the activities of Liu Shitian, comparing them to those of the CDA and the SARA.

Chapter six, entitled “Social Relevance,” outlines various activities Daoists have undertaken to make a positive contribution to modern society. They revived orchestras of Daoist music at various temples, making this expression of Chinese culture accessible to wider audiences to great acclaim. They engaged in charitable activities and donations, supporting the poorer segments of society. In addition, they came to support and spread methods of nourishing life—an important aspect of traditional practice—helping people recover and maintain their health. Beyond that, Daoists also engaged in ecological efforts, raising environmental awareness in accordance with their inherent honoring of natural processes. Plus, they established an online presence, fitting temples with Wi-Fi, constructing websites, and participating in social media.

Chapter seven focuses on the Third International Daoist Forum, held in 2014 on Mount Longhu 龍虎. I show that the revival processes described



in the previous chapters at the particular level of a small lineage are a reflection of a general trend within Daoism at large, moving from the description of specific cases to more general observations. The Forum provides a window into the rebranding process of Daoism presented to the world by the CDA, the government, and the academia. Analyzing the content of the event is a way of understanding just how monastic Daoism was redefined as a tool toward the attainment of the China Dream, Xi Jinping's 习近平 dominant political agenda at the time.

Chapter eight, written in June 2024, adds supplementary information about the state of monastic Daoism in China today. It outlines the new policy of "sinicization," a government priority since 2016 that aims to make places of worship and religious teachings better reflect the ideals of Han Chinese culture and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Affecting all religions and executed with particular severity in Tibet and the Muslim region of Xinjiang, it involves restructuring doctrines and practices to tow the Party line while making many religious activities suspect and subject to persecution. Daoists as much as Buddhists try hard to comply, but the effects of the policy are nothing short of devastating, causing clerics to leave, temples to decline or close, and activities to cease.

