Leaving the Mountains

A Daoist Journey from Obscurity to Modernity

Jeffrey S. Reid

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Dedication

To

My father, Stephen James Reid, Jr. (1952-2018)

&

My master, Yuan Xiugang

"We're carrying the fire."
The Road, by Cormac McCarthy (1933-2023)

Never enter the mountains lightly.
—Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343), *Baopuzi* 抱樸子
(Master Embracing Simplicity)

Yuxu Shixiang Xuantian Shangdi Shou Tianming Ming Jianfa Mojing Zhentian Bao 玉虛師相玄天上帝受天明命剪伐魔精鎮天寶符 (The Celestial Treasure Talisman of the Jade Void Master, the Dark Heavenly Emperor's Reception of the Mandate of Heaven to Exorcise Demonic Spirits and Subdue Evil). Protective talisman inscribed by Liu Yuanran 劉淵然 (1351-1432), thunder magician, Daoist priest, and advisor to the early emperors of the Ming dynasty.

Introduction

Peaks and Prisms: Landscape, Lineage, and Language

> When you lose your sense of direction in the mountain forests, . . . then quickly you can lose the grip of yourself entirely.
> —Kevin Barry, *The Heart in Winter*

Mountains are the timeless nexus of heaven and earth. Daoists have long been drawn to those remote havens where the edges of the world spill into the eternal. Yet, the mountains are a reckoning as much as a refuge. And deep within them lies a solitude known only by the hearts of those who have dwelled in their silent hollows. That solitude is a shared one, borne by an enduring line of all who have withstood the same. To enter the mountains is to become another thread woven into that fabric—just as both the mountains and that lineage are indelibly woven into all who cross their threshold.

As the barriers separating the self and the mountains dissolve, bound by that strange alchemy, distance fades and time collapses. A transformation which does not come without great cost, it demands everything, leaving behind only what cannot be taken. Irretrievably altered, even long after the mountains fall away, their solitude endures within—a silent companion that never fades, but only deepens against the grating discord of the world. But that unshakeable truth can't be known until stepping far beyond the mountains' threshold, and by then, it's far too late to turn back.

Hidden Immortals, War Magicians, and a Kid from the Suburbs

I was born in 1984, and grew up in America's provincial northeast. Drawn by some inscrutable calculus, I moved to the Wudang Mountains 武當山 of China at the age of 23. There, I sought out a young Daoist master named Yuan Xiugang 袁修剛 (b. 1971), whose piercing gaze saw through to the heart of me long before I could see it myself.

Within months of my arrival, he recognized me as his spiritual successor and a 16th-generation disciple of the Wudang Sanfeng Lineage 武當三丰派. Bestowing me with the Daoist name Li Mao Zihe 李懋資和, he, like the mountains themselves, embraced me as a lost son returned home.

My master Yuan Xiugang and me at Yuzhen gong 遇真宫 (Palace of Encountering the Perfected), 2007.

Requiring an almost impossible degree of precision, discipline, and resilience, my master's demands of me were unwavering. Under him, I spent seven relentless years training with fanatical intensity in martial arts, meditation, and ritual—a ceaseless, elemental forging which stripped away everything until only the essential remained. Breaking me down, it reshaped me, and left no space for compromise. Molded into a living reliquary, I inherited the entirety of the lineage—a millennia-spanning legacy which shaped the very contours of history.

The Wudang Sanfeng Lineage—more archaically known as the Hidden Immortals Lineage, (Yinxian pai 隱仙派), the Recluse Lineage (Yinpai 隱派), and the Dragon-like Lineage (Youlong pai 猶龍派)—was established by mountain-dwelling hermits who mostly kept to themselves. The lineage is named after its patriarch, Zhang Sanfeng

張三丰, and the line of descendants preceding him includes famous Daoist recluses like Huolong zhenren 火龍真人 (Perfected Fire Dragon), Mayi zhenren 麻衣真人 (Hemp-Clad Perfected), and Chen Tuan 陳摶. With labyrinthine roots sunk further into the past, the lineage's greater origins reach back to Yinxi 尹喜, Laozi 老子, and Xuanwu 玄武, Wudang's central deity.

Acolytes of alchemy, martial arts, and various strains of exorcism, some of the lineage's later generations stood alongside emperors to stabilize their reigns with ritual and thunder magic, while others remained ever-occluded from the world, hidden away in mountain caves. Echoing through the rise and fall of dynasties, the lineage's legacy is as vast as it is enigmatic. So, where exactly do I fit into all of this?

Iron bridge between trees in Chongqing 重慶, 2014.

I was an odd kid with a sensitive constitution and a proclivity for severe head trauma. And though I couldn't articulate it then, I felt like a foreigner in my own home. Stranger to the soil that bore me, I found my only refuge in disparate fragments: exploring the sprawling mythic panels of comic books, obsessively filling sketchbooks with my own drawings, and wandering the haunted stillness so particular to the forests of New England, just behind my childhood home.

But with my first exposures to Chinese culture via *gongfu* movies, landscape painting, and calligraphy, something ancient, colossal, and

formless stirred within me, dormant but unmistakably alive. Later, in high school, I encountered the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang)—a seminal Daoist text that gave language to my wordless yearning. Offering clarity and confirmation, like a vague but undeniable memory resurfacing, that force within me uncoiled further, impatiently awaiting the end of its hibernation. It was clearly too vast to be contained by the quaint provincialism of a New England suburb or the confining two-dimensional edges of my sketchbooks.

Daoism felt more familiar to me than foreign. The surface appeal of its esoteric martial arts was the first tangible hook—the elegant power, the "cool" movements—, but under it all, something else thrummed. And purring with a sympathetic resonance, the ancient memory writhing in my marrow recognized its reflection in those chthonic rumblings. Still adrift in a timeless dream, its final awakening came by the grace of a fateful encounter a few years later. When that messenger spoke the word "Wudang," the cryptic, blazing shadow within me heard its true name. No longer content to lie dormant, it stirred violently, surging against its confines like a caged tiger mad with rage, desperate to tear free.

Arriving in Wudang two years later, I found my master's most fundamental teachings a kind of alchemy. Plunging ever deeper into the mountain wilds over the cascading years, every step upward in the was a step inward, every teaching a transmutation. For years, I'd sought the thread which bound together the fragmented tapestry of my existence. And following it to Wudang, I found it extending into a lineage of mystics whose lives and stories seemed to inexplicably infiltrate my own.

Ten-Thousand Transformations

The Cultural Revolution (1965-1975) is a devastating chapter in the endless cycle of upheaval and renewal which has shaped China for millennia. When I arrived there in 2007, the country was still navigating an unsteady path of reconciliation. For Daoism, the aftermath was stark: centuries-old lineages shattered, sacred sites defiled, and wisdom traditions driven into even-greater obscurity. Yet, amidst the wreckage, a few resolute sentinels emerged, and they seemed to recognize an immanent and unignorable eventuality: in this interconnected new world, Daoism could no longer afford to exist in seclusion, and maintaining the line of transmission meant isolation was no longer an option.

Determined to carry the heart of the tradition into this uncharted future, Yuan Xiugang made an unprecedented and iconoclastic decision: with neither map nor guide to navigate the shifting landscape,

he broke with the lineage's long-standing insularity, and selected a cohort of international students for an intensive five-year traditional training program—a class which I captained. He held those of us in this class to the same uncompromising standards of discipline and devotion as his Chinese disciples—if not more so. Unshakeable in his methods, his transmission was a strict, exacting translation of the tradition. And we were to become interpreters of its relevance to a rapidly changing world.

Yuan's master, Zhong Yunlong 鍾雲龍 (b. 1964), undertook his own monumental task over two-and-a-half decades earlier when he traveled the country to gather the scattered shards of a tradition nearly lost to time. Returning to Wudang after three years, he then set to orchestrating a new symphony—one destined to reverberate far beyond the temple walls. "Amidst 10,000 transformations," the Confucian Xunzi 荀子 says, "the essence remains unchanged" (*wan bian bu li qi zong* 萬變不離其宗), and Zhong took to this truth like a smith to iron. Reviving and redefining the Wudang Sanfeng Lineage, his efforts bound its mysterious past to the uncharted road ahead—the unadulterated essence of the lineage enduring even as the world turned unrecognizable.

In the hyper-transformations of the 21st century—where the borders of East and West blur and artificial intelligence begins dreaming—the Wudang Sanfeng Lineage persists across time and space as an unfolding arcana, a shimmering cipher stitched into the ephemeral fabric of reality itself. A living memory decanted into my very marrow, it spirals forward, just as it spirals backward—through the meta-terrorism of the Cultural Revolution, the demonic warfare which framed the transition from the Yuan (1279-1368) to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), and beyond, to its most veiled, primordial origins.

Despite China's extensive history of turmoil, war, and dynastic revolution, Daoism has been chugging along for millennia. Like the Middle Kingdom's own enduring continuity, through countless iterations and transformations, its longevity has been due in large part to a syncretic tendency of enveloping other traditions. In some ways, the Daoist tradition has acted like an awning for outliers and eccentrics to crowd under in the rain—a quality which has long associated it with the *jianghu* 江湖 (recluses of the rivers and lakes), a term first used in the *Zhuangzi*. Indicating unconventional people on the outskirts of society, the *jianghu* was later popularized in martial fiction (*wuxia* 武俠) to denote society's umbral, lawless underbelly. Like an ancient Mos Eisley Cantina, it included many colorful and sometimes dangerous characters.

"Throughout history, and still in the present day, the Daoist has been viewed as the outsider, the eccentric, the stranger, the subversive introvert, the artist, and even the philosopher," Poul Andersen writes, and continues, "In official government documents, they are frequently referred to as unsettled fringe elements" (2019, 40). From ritual exorcists and monastic liturgists to weather sorcerers and world-weary hermits, Daoism is home to a wide array of eccentric and mystical figures, each uniquely contributing to the rich tapestry of this ancient tradition—one which has transformed history and enfolded other traditions and peoples into its boundless waters for millennia.

Enmeshed in the greater Daoist tradition, perhaps it's not so weird that an existentially dislocated 21st-century American would somehow stumble into this lineage. Then again, considering the origin of the word "weird" implies both the wayward (Davis 2021, 13) and the hand of fate, it's about as weird as weird gets. To enter this lineage is to wade into the dark river of a tradition as timeless as it is elusive. And to engage in its practices is to come face to face with the lineage patriarch, Zhang Sanfeng—a man who may have never existed.

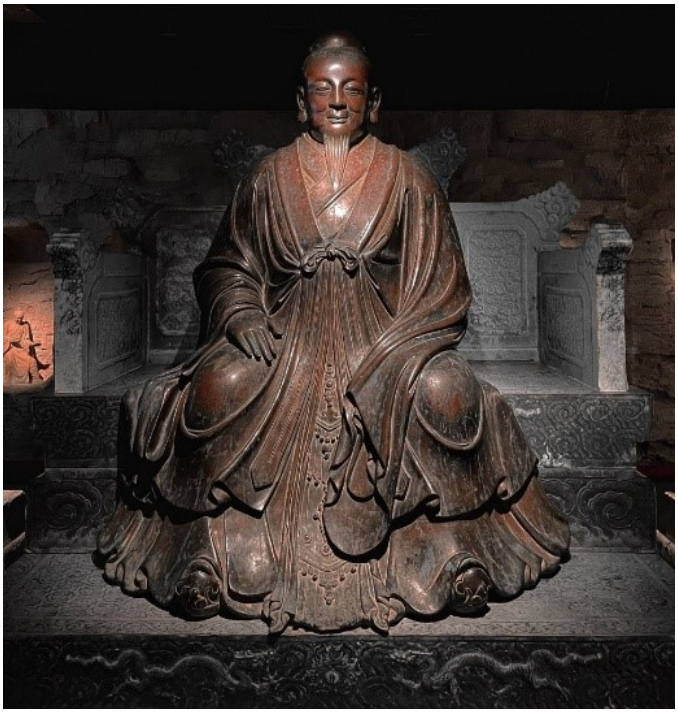
Three generations of the Wudang Sanfeng Lineage: Zhong Yunlong (center), Yuan Xiugang (left), and myself in 2016.

Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth

Through years of practice, study, and sometimes perplexing research, I have come to view Zhang Sanfeng as one of the Daoist tradition's inveterate trickster figures. George P. Hansen, author of *The Trickster and the Paranomal*, outlines a "constellation of characteristics" particular to tricksters (2001, 28), and in light of his list of anti-

structural tendencies, deception, reduced sexual inhibitions, irrationality, liminality, mystical transformation, and so on, Zhang certainly fits the profile.

Numerous biographies and oral histories recount the lives of multiple mytho-historical Zhang Sanfengs bouncing around imperial China. With the various teachings, lineages, and texts attributed to them, history constructs more of a hazyography than a hagiography of the patriarch. While Daoists generally revere the Zhang Sanfeng who supposedly lived during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, it appears is somewhat futile to attempt locating him historically, and apparently literally as well.



Statue of Zhang Sanfeng in Yuzhen gong.

Several Ming emperors sent envoys to Wudang seeking Zhang out, yet to no avail. One who was sent by Zhu Di 朱棣 (1360-1424), the third Ming emperor, apparently did encounter him, but only learned who his mysterious guest was after they parted ways. The envoy's story so moved the emperor, that he commissioned a temple devoted to the event, naming it Yuzhen gong 遇真宫 (Palace of Encountering the

Perfected), and a copper-cast, gilded statue of Zhang was erected in its Zhenxian dian 真仙殿 (Hall of the Perfected Immortal).

Evading the snares of the empire's sticky bureaucratic web, much like the *Zhuangzi*'s divine turtle trapped at court, it seems Zhang preferred to be left dragging his tail in the mud—a subversive and anti-structural trait which some in the lineage still inherit. Despite all the imperial fanfare, the immortal himself continued to remain hidden. Even the most powerful people in the country could not lay their hands on him—is it possible to do so now, over 600 years later? Shunting across instantiations and adrift within a dilating timescape, he seems ever present and yet, always just out of reach—even now in these pages.

The "reality status" of "trickster deities," Hansen writes, is "ambiguous" (2001, 266), and in my view, the mystique and outright confusion surrounding Zhang Sanfeng is kind of the point. He is, after all, a forebear of the Hidden Immortal Lineage, so it should come as no surprise that he left behind such a convoluted legacy. Attempts to pin him down like a butterfly in a glass case prove as perplexing as Zhuangzi's famously bemusing dream.[1]

The true depth of Zhang's cryptic legacy unfolds solely through an intimate engagement with the lineage's alchemical tradition. It is discovered in communing with the celestial and earthly wisdom represented by the two characters of his chosen name, Sanfeng 三丰, which emblemize the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes) trigrams for Heaven and Earth: Qian ☰ and Kun ☷ respectively (Cox 2021). Considering the cosmic intricacies enfolded within the trigrams of this "Heaven and Earth Lineage" interpretation, to truly understand Zhang Sanfeng's legacy, perhaps it is time to start reading between the lines.

Daoist teachings arise from a tripartite cosmology consisting of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity—the latter being the result of the interactions of the former two. Yet, in the Heaven and Earth Lineage, the Human—like Zhang himself—is conspicuously absent. Zhang Sanfeng, the man, is merely an implication, for he is that immortal body of cosmic wisdom articulated through the lineage's continuity. In the Hidden Immortal Lineage, the immortal himself always remains conspicuously veiled, yet, at the same time, revealed within the alchemical practices of his successors. "The gods . . . are discovered both within and without," Poul Andersen writes, and continues, "And the most important discovery of all is made by moving beyond what is

[1] In the famous Butterfly Dream, Zhuangzi dreams of being a butterfly and, upon awakening, he finds himself uncertain as to whether he is Zhuangzi who dreamed he was a butterfly or now a butterfly who is dreaming itself to be Zhuangzi (*Zhuangzi,* ch. 2).

known into that which has no location and exists neither here nor there" (2019, 282).

A particularly apt portrayal of Zhang Sanfeng—his intense gaze rendered with sharp intensity, while the rest of his form dissolves into fading brushstrokes, as if teasing his own elusiveness.

George P. Hansen identifies marginality and irrationality as trickster qualities, and though not all Daoists or Daoist lineages are so confounding or unorthodox as Zhang, the inscrutable immortal has been considered more than a little kooky by some. So much so that at some point, the last character of his name—*feng* 丰—was mischievously switched out for the homophonous *feng* 瘋, meaning crazy. Since then, a joke has circulated in Wudang that he "went crazy (*feng* 瘋) three (*san* 三) times a day." But this is not necessarily intended as derision.

As my *gongfu* brother Simon Cox, like myself a 16th-generation disciple with the Daoist name Ke Mao Ziqian 柯懋資乾, notes, "The combination of the Thrice Crazy reading and the esoteric Heaven and Earth reading is a perfect encapsulation of the role of crazy wisdom in the Daoist tradition. It always conceals profundity" (2021). So, in

asking whether Zhang Sanfeng was wise or crazy, the only answer is "yes"—like all non-dual teachings encountered in the Daoist tradition, it is not a matter of either/or but rather of both/and. To read it as one or the other is to miss the point completely.

From Grimoire to Grammar

Both reflecting and continually constructing a culture's most underlying views, "Language", Poul Andersen writes, "is what constitutes conventional reality" (2019, 24). Pathologically deconstructing and reconstructing words, I have come to find that playing with language is also a way of playing with reality. And studying Chinese catapulted me into a world of prismatic new dimensions previously unexplored in my native English. Encountering an immense "metaphorce" of nature, in that vast sea, I found myself swimming in poetry—that elusive language of mystics, artists, and magicians. "I believe that magic is art and that art . . . is literally magic," Alan Moore says,

> Art is, like magic, the science of manipulating symbols, words, or images, to achieve changes in consciousness. The very language about magic seems to be talking as much about writing or art as it is about supernatural events. A grimoire for example, the book of spells is simply a fancy way of saying grammar. Indeed, to cast a spell, is simply to spell, to manipulate words, to change people's consciousness. (Vylenz 2003)

This immutable relationship between magic and language appears to be a transcultural phenomenon. The ancient roots of Chinese writing clearly indicate that it was a magical tool extracted from the cosmos by priests and shamans. Oracle bone script (*jiaguwen* 甲骨文), the earliest recorded form of Chinese writing, came about through pyromantic divination rituals. Observing the way animal bones and tortoise shells cracked when exposed to fire, a magician interpreted the emergent patterns as immanent messages from the heavens and then made markings on the bones and shells to record for later reference. Thus, the earliest form of Chinese writing was ultimately a cataloging of heavenly communion. And as the oracle bones came to construct the skeleton of China's cosmic body of language, they articulated a "shamanic" reality which, according to anthropologist Chang Guangzhi 張光直 (1931-2001), is quite literally "magical" (1989, 162).

Alan Moore, the bushy bearded warlock of words suggests that all reading is a magical act, one which transforms people's consciousness

and interpretations of reality (Vylenz 2003). Or, perhaps more eerily: what we read writes us. We are, in a sense, living fictions. "Reading and writing," Jeffrey Kripal notes, "are the most powerful paranormal technologies we possess" (2016, 229), and both have long been central access points to the mysteries of Daoism. The cosmogony put forth by the Highest Clarity (Shangqing 上清) school is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon.

In short, the Highest Clarity revelations map the primordial emanations of the cosmos which congealed into celestial, cloudlike sigilic forms before ultimately becoming manifest as sacred scriptures through the binding-matrix of form in the earthly human realm. These scriptures then came to act as transdimensional media between realms and still form the basis of recitation in Daoist lay practice, liturgical ceremony, and so on.

Along with chanting, singing, and the study of sacred texts and their commentaries, the writing of complex magical talismans is a rich and fascinating facet of the Daoist tradition. Many everyday Chinese ideograms themselves even appear to be sigils imbued with kaleidoscopic meaning. Chinese characters, then, are not solid, monolithic pillars of certainty, but rather oracular clouds which, like Zhang Sanfeng, reveal as much as they obscure. Drifting and transforming, they invite their readers to do the same.

Words often determine the paths people take in life, and many teachings in the Daoist tradition are conveyed through idioms and allegories, which act as contemplative prompts to evoke the active pursuit of direct experience. One such example of this allegorical invitation is the title for this book, which is a direct translation of the Chinese phrase *chushan* 出山. But before leaving the mountains, they must first be entered. And with only the wilderness as a reflection, what might be found lurking in those spectral forests and eldritch cliffside caves?

Daoist mystics refer to their ascetic practices as entering the mountains (*rushan* 入山), and archeological records show that the Wudang Mountains have been a site of proto-religious activity for thousands of years. Further affirming their centrality as an important site for early shamanic peoples, in his *Daojiao lungao* 道教論稿 (Discussions on Daoism), Wang Jiayou 王家佑 (1926-2009) notes that the current name is also semi-homophonous with an earlier version—Wudan 巫丹, literally "shaman's elixir," which reflects both the tradition's shamanic legacy (*wu*) and emphasis on alchemy (*dan*).

The mountains themselves symbolize what nature is: wild, unconstrained, and governed by its own self-arising laws. Mirrors of a wild sanity which simultaneously reflect and reveal the same

untainted regal disposition ablaze within the human heart, they are living monuments of the pristine wilds of each person's original nature (*xing* 性). Attuning to the orchestral stillness and ceaseless transformations of that internal landscape, many Daoists devote their entire lives to journeying deep into these misty "mountainalogies."

The Chinese for enter is *ru* 入. While its oracle bone version seems to denote an arrowhead, in contemporary script it also appears to be the mirror image of the character for human being, *ren* 人. This mirror flip may suggest that in order to enter the mountain wilds—and the Dao itself—all unexamined assumptions must be turned around.[2] As Zhang Sanfeng says in the *Wugen shu* 無根樹 (Rootless Tree), "It is all a matter of flipping things on their heads" (只在中間顛倒顛) (Kong ed. 2004).

Daoist recluses must undertake the monumental task of forsaking all they have been conditioned by but rarely questioned. Or, as the *Daode jing* states: "Seeking learning, one must increase [their knowledge] daily. Seeking Dao, one must decrease and again decrease" (ch. 48). Entering the mountains requires peeling back every layer of obscuration and embracing the wilds of nature—both within and without. It is to confront the untamable nature of the spirit. It is to flirt with a transformation both unavoidable and fraught with uncertainty. After undergoing such irrevocable change in the mountains, what then does it mean to leave them?

Mapping the Terrain

Landscape, lineage, and language—these prismatic peaks cast a dizzying, kaleidoscopic light. As that triadic, refracted glow gestures toward yet another historical Zhang Sanfeng 三峰 (220-589)— meaning "three peaks"—the hidden immortal subtly appears again, permeating both the structure and multifaceted title of this book:

First, the two characters which *Leaving the Mountains* translates from are comprised of three mountains—出山—, with the first two stacked atop one another. Reflecting these three mountains, the book is divided into three parts, each focusing on the stories of successive

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[2] The contemporary script of the character for shaman—*wu* 巫—depicts two potentially mirrored people or entities separated by a vertical line and posited between two horizontal lines, perhaps representing heaven and the earth. These two beings (perhaps a human and a spirit) seem to be meeting in some in-between realm or sacred chamber. The central line could also be interpreted as an altar or *axis mundi*—that place where the earthly ritually communicates with the celestial.

generations of the Wudang Sanfeng Lineage and their unique experiences of both entering and departing the mountains. Many of the stories in the first part tell of the forced expulsion of Daoists from their institutions during the Cultural Revolution. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese phrase for forced expulsion from a monastery—*gechu shanmen* 革出山門—contains the characters for leaving the mountains.

Second, leaving the mountains quite literally refers to a renunciant's departure from obscurity and return to society. In imperial China, it was not uncommon for government officials to take extended leaves of absence to enter retreat (or forced exile). Later returning to the kingdom, some carried with them a wisdom which could only be unearthed in the unimaginable silence of profound solitude. As the Daoist tradition itself now leaves the mountains, what wisdom might it bring to the spiraling delirium of modernity? A question which leads into the title's third aspect:

While much of this book is about lineage, transmission, and practice, I incidentally found it mapping the story of how and why a traditionally reticent and, at times, secretive tradition has begun opening its doors to the outside world in recent years. In the present *yinyang* shift between East and West, the Daoist tradition has been leaving the mountains for some time. Awash in what Bing Fan Yeyoung calls the "consumerist monoculture" (2011, 24), China has been looking to the West to improve quality of life, while in the West's postmodern froth of existential destitution, many have been turning to Eastern wisdom traditions to find meaning beyond the fallout of post-Protestant spiritual "colonihilism."[3] Like finding rotten cake beneath fresh frosting, more Westerners are becoming disillusioned with the towering dung heap of materialism's failed promises.

One of the most concrete illustrations of this dynamic change can be seen in Yuan Xiugang's International Traditional Class, which he taught from 2009 to 2014. As the numerological aspects of these things tend to serendipitously go, this cohort was third in the nominal waves of his traditional classes, as well as a central focus of my personal story recounted in the concluding part of the book.

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[3] This term is not intended to reduce all engagements with exogenous wisdom traditions as merely manifestations of colonialism. Rather, combining colonialism with nihilism, it is a critique of post-Protestant distortions of Daoist and Buddhist teachings on emptiness. Covertly reaffirming its doomed cosmology, America's unshakeable Christian ethos has turned emptiness into a despondent, narcissistic nihilism, sometimes referred to as emptiness sickness (*kongbing* 空病). A prime example of this can be found in one of my favorite films, *Fight Club* (more on that in the Part Three).

My original plans for this book did not include anything about myself. I merely aimed to compose an historical documentation of the Wudang Sanfeng Lineage, and felt it somewhat presumptuous to plunk myself into the narrative of such a profound story. But my master insisted I include my personal experience, saying it would be the most important part of the book, and the only one most contemporary readers could relate to. As always, his belief in me outpaced my own. "You've walked the walk," he said, "now it's time to talk the walk." But still, I avoided writing the last chapter, contenting myself with revising and re-revising the earlier chapters ad nauseum.

Schlumping through countless fitful starts and stops, over time I found everything I wrote stale and painfully boring. Dithering in the doldrums of a dry manuscript one day, I decided to take a stab at the last part again. Typing with no direction, I found my writing taking an uncontrollable life of its own. Thunder shook the joists of reality itself and lightning crashed around me, igniting the sky. Talk about writing as a form of magic!

With this mystic momentum, I scrapped everything and basically rewrote the entire manuscript. In authoring myself into the narrative of the lineage, my writing became a mirror—one in which the lineage stared back, reflecting itself through me. Feverishly typing away, I found myself collaborating with my ancestors, and yet, with something much, much grander. Something undeniably felt, but forever unknowable.

It took me over eight years to finish writing this book. Any grain of knowledge and happenstance of wisdom found in the following pages is owed to others, every mistake is my own.