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A Day in the Life of Daoist Monk¹

ADELINE HERROU

Abstract

This article seeks to give an ethnographical description of the everyday life of an ordinary Daoist monk in China today. As it follows Yang Zhixiang from early morning until night, it deals with his current main occupations—in this case, work on the glyphomancical dissection of the Dao 道 character, fate calculation for young fiancés, preparation for a healing ritual, the ascetic practice of self-perfecting through refinement, etc. — as well as more basic scenes such as meals, gestures and postures, various domestic tasks, and the reconstruction of the temple. It also relates fragments of his own past life and implicitly outlines the path that led him to the monastery and the vocation that made him become a monk. Finally, it aims to convey the diversity of the monks' activities and then, by considering them serially as a whole, to arrive at an understanding of the specific texture of Daoist monastic life and its reason for being.

The scene is in Hanzhong, a small provincial town in central China (Shaanxi). It is the hour of the hare (*maoshi* 卯时), between five and seven in the morning. A relatively old monk of about sixty years comes out of his cell, stops in the courtyard and takes a deep breath. He finishes buttoning the cloth straps on his blue cotton vest, which he is wearing with black trousers. It is an ordinary day, and for the sake of convenience, he has not put on his long robe, or even his boots and white gaiters; he wears khaki tennis shoes instead. He goes back into his room and re-emerges carrying a basin, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a towel, and a varnished metal cup visibly chipped around the rim.

¹ This paper is a preview of my new book, *A Life of Dao: Monks and Their Community in Contemporary China* (Three Pines Press, 2010), which is an adaptation of my earlier work (Herrou 2005). I would like to thank Brigitte Baptandier, Sophie Houdart, Wang Yiyao and Livia Kohn for their valuable suggestions.

He makes his way to an outdoor tap that is sticking out of a flower-bed in the middle of the patio like a boundary stake. The water is cold. The man brushes his somewhat decayed teeth, then soaks his towel in the water-filled basin and washes his face. He unravels his small bun – a conspicuous sign of his identity as a Quanzhen Daoist monk² – combs his hair, and then rolls it back up around the jade pin that holds it to the top of his head. He also combs the long but sparse hairs that make up his beard. After getting ready, the monk heads to the refectory carrying his own bowl and a pair of wooden chopsticks.

At Wengongci temple 文公祠,³ Yang Zhixiang is not going to the scripture recitation (*nianjing* 念经), the services.⁴ His seniority exempts him or, as he himself says, he has already done work there in the past. For the time being, he is too busy with other activities to be able to return to the fundamentals of Daoist religion. He has no choice but to leave it in the hands of his younger brethren. Besides, scripture masters (*jingshi* 经师) have been appointed by the abbot to look after these services, though others do help them.

² Yang Zhixiang belonged to the Longmen branch of the Quanzhen order. The history of this order, founded under the Jin dynasty (1126-1234) is now well documented and analysed (Marsonne 2001; Goossaert 1997; 2004; 2007; Esposito, 2004; Yoshioka 1979) and more generally the monasticism in Daoism (Kohn 2003; 2007b; Lai 2003; Schipper 1984). But we still have few descriptions of the daily life of monastics. This article attempts to give a sketch of how an ordinary monk spends a common day in contemporary China.

³ Also called Wengongci daoguan 文公祠道观; its principal deity is Wengong, i.e., Han Yu 韩愈, the Tang Dynasty poet who was raised to the level of god of the Southern Door of Heaven, *Nantianmen* 南天门, and was said to be uncle of the famous Han Xiangzi 韩湘子 of the Eight Immortals. The monastery dates back to the Qing dynasty. Yet this holy place may have been erected on the site of a small, much more ancient temple dedicated to the local Earth God, Tudi miao. It is today inhabited by about fifteen permanent monks and nuns, a significant monastic community considering that many small temples have only two or three monks. Furthermore, it is visited by many monks passing through.

⁴ There are three main *nianjing* services that punctuate the day (morning, noon and evening), and that are sometimes followed by an additional mid-evening and/or nighttime service (Herrou, 2008).

The Morning Meal

A multipurpose in the temple room serves as the refectory—as well as the hall where laypeople are received, community meetings held, and telephone calls made. It is a dark space furnished with two worn, unmatching sofas, a large table surrounded by stools, and a desk with a wicker armchair behind it. The room is empty. The monk enters and serves himself a bowl of sticky rice soup, which the cook, a laywoman who lives in the temple, has prepared and left simmering on the brazier. He grabs a piece of steamed bread before taking his food back to his cell. He carefully moves his books and papers out of the way, puts his bowl down on the desk and gulps the soup down quickly. His quiet slurping are the only sound.

Yang is savoring his food all the more because it marks the end of a long fasting period. He is going back to eating cereals after giving them up completely for six months. He wanted to experiment with avoiding grain (*bigu* 辟穀). Eating no rice or noodles, or any other grain, is no easy task at the temple, where the simple, vegetarian meals are composed of rice or noodles plus vegetables and tofu. Yang managed with only fruit and vegetables. He did this on his own initiative, and in fact he was the only monk in the temple to commit to this dietary practice. He explained that his aim was to be prepared for a food shortage, should one occur in the future, and above all he wanted to put his body's resistance to the test. Even if he did not say so, it was probably also so that he could contemplate it over a longer term. In other words, his diet formed part of his effort to transform his mortal body into an immortal one.

Daoism thinks of grain as feeding the Three Worms, which eat away at the inside of the body.⁵ But *bigu* can also mean a complete fast, abstinence from all food, a practice adopted by some monks in other temples. As Yang explains it, one of the aims of Daoist asceticism is to provide one's own nourishment (*zishen de yingyang* 自身的营养): "The heart (*xin* 心) feeds the heart. Inner nature (*xing* 性) feeds inner nature, the breath (*qi* 气) feeds the breath, the destined body (*ming* 命) feeds the

⁵ On cereals as scissors of life and germs of death, see Levi 1983. See also Despeux 2007a; Mollier, 2007.

destined body.”⁶ Is an immortal not one who eats nothing? Yang did not end up experiencing any health problems and continued teaching and meeting with laypeople. He is happy to joke about this; it was not all that hard and his body handled it well. He just lost a lot of weight!

He comes out to rinse his dishes, then stops at the lavatory before returning to his cell. His bed occupies almost a third of the small room, whose walls are covered with newspaper. He folds his blanket and puts it under his pillow, quickly smooths out the pink sheet covering the thin mattress, and then places the sponge on top of the pillow.

Quiet Times

Yang Zhixiang lights his small desk lamp, since there still isn't enough daylight to read by. It comes from a single window blocked by a metal mosquito screen that is darned here and there by big stitches. His desk is in front of the window. The work surface is covered by sheet of glass, under which he has slid a few photos, mostly snapshots of himself standing alone or next to brethren or disciples in the various temples he has visited. The center of the table – his workspace – is clear, but the surrounding area is cluttered with all the things he uses for his various tasks.

At the back, by the wall, are two jade pots filled with a mixture of pencils, cheap ballpoint pens and wooden paintbrushes (some of which are valuable), a small bottle of glue, an ink stone, a magnifying glass, two varnished, wooden paperweights holding down small piles of paper of different sizes, and other “treasures of men of letters.” To the right is a pile of hand-bound manuscript books; on the left, sheets of paper covered in characters, held together by a black clip, and a large calculator

⁶ Another translation of the expression *yiming yangming* 以命养命 could be “fate feeds fate” or “life feeds life” but here I chose to translate *ming* as “destined body”. In the Quanzhen order, when monks speak of the *ming* in relationship to the *xing*, one must understand, according to what some of them have stated explicitly, the distinction between the *xing* as an inner nature or temperament of the person (*xingge* 性格) and *ming* as a physical body (*shenti* 身体), keeping in mind that it is necessary to cultivate both of them at the same time *xingming shuangxiu* 性命双修 if immortality is to be attained through asceticism. In the same context, the *ming* can also designate fate when, as we will see later in the article, it is a question of calculating fates, *suanming*.

that looks like a toy. There is a ginseng root in a jar, soaking in a transparent liquid, a homemade medicinal preparation. To the side is a wooden bookshelf with closed glass doors, crammed full of books that have been stacked haphazardly.

Before laypeople start arriving at the temple, Yang dedicates a little time to his personal work. He puts on his glasses, their frame patched with scotch tape, and starts working. This quiet time is preliminary to a day that, like those previous and following, will become hectic. Time has to be carved up between various activities, such as community responsibilities, ministering to the gods, and time for himself. How each day is sequenced is partly determined by unforeseen events and partly by fixed routines such as the drum calling them to prayers, the bell announcing dinner. Like his brethren, Yang has frequently changing activities in his life. The way these are managed helps shed light on the monks' *raison d'être* and, on a practical level, on how they reconcile religious values with everyday life. Major rituals as well as ordinary activities put beliefs, convictions and temperaments to the test in an enclosed world that is nevertheless open to laypeople during the day. Discussions about doctrine or rituals and casual conversations illustrate different levels of meaning monks employ to express the many implications of their existence. The monks' activities unfold in a monastic present that cannot help occasionally reviving elements of the monks' previous lives. Nevertheless, like the vocation, life's path is charted over the long term.⁷

Learned Pursuits

Yang lifts a typed document from the pile of papers on the corner of his desk. Its bold title reads: "Ten Thousand Methods to Return to the Origin" (*Wanfa guizong* 万法归宗)—not to be confused with a book of the same title that deals with talismans and incantations.⁸ The text makes use

⁷ The narrative style of the ethnographical description used in this article might be the only suitable style, for restoring monk' diversity of activities and then placing monks' actions, serially piercing together. In the context of the slow pace of time in a monk's life.

⁸ A book of the same title and with the full name *Bichuan Wanfa Guizong* 秘傳萬法歸宗 is said to be a handbook on planchette writing (Despeux 2007b). It is

of special Daoist language, the internal language of the ritual arts. Among other things, it is about Dao. He is not sure how or when he first learned about this text. He received his copy was given to him by a monk he met in Sichuan, but had needed to, he could just as well have ordered it through the mail directly from Beijing Teachers College, known for its extensive stock on Buddhism and Daoism. The college has its own printing service and sells bound photocopied texts.

Yang has ordered other rare Daoist writings through the mail. It is sometimes possible to go through scientific and academic channels rather than Daoist temples. Even if the mail sometimes seem more practical, monks tend to obtain their texts in person and travel some distances for them. Since traveling forms an important part of apprenticeship, it is good to go to other temples to consult archives, libraries and shops, as well as to meet masters willing to share documents they have at their disposal. These “wanderings in the clouds” (*yunyou* 云游) are a chance to discover texts they never knew existed. But journeys take time and resources that Yang does not necessarily have when requiring a text.

There is a title printed in the header of the booklet, but no author’s name. One would have to be well-informed to know who wrote it, or perhaps it is not really important to know this. It is a contemporary version written in simplified Chinese (dated 1992) of a text whose author, according to Yang, is Li Chunfeng 李淳风, an eminent state teacher of the Tang and adviser to Emperor Taizong. A renowned mathematician, he also wrote tracts on divination.⁹

attributed by some publishers (Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, undated) to a certain Shanren 山人, or Man of the Mountain who, if the two characters of his name are contracted, could be called the Immortal (*xian* 仙), the name marked on the edge of the book but not inside. Yang assumes that the booklet in his possession and the book on talismans are two different texts, which I gathered was very likely the case when I read the book.

⁹ Li Chunfeng (602-670) is known for his affiliation with Daoism (Benn 2007, 633-34). According to Yang, he may have collaborated with Biao Tiangang on writing the “The Back Massage Table” (*Tuibeitu* 推背图). One would have looked after the text, the other the chart. However, it is difficult to know if this *Wanfā Guizong* was truly written by Li Chunfeng or if it has been falsely attributed to him, as has apparently been the case for other texts (see Anderson, 2007).

Yang points out that Li lived at the height of the Tang, an era when Daoism was highly developed; he would have been a member of the last generation of Lord Lao's disciples. But above all, Li is a kind of messenger, which explains why his name does not appear in (or on) the document. He merely reports on the method of Pengzu 彭祖, whose name is mentioned at the beginning of the text. The booklet's readers do not have to be reminded that Pengzu is the illustrious immortal, high officer and soothsayer the Shang dynasty (ca. 1765-1122 B.C.E.) (Kaltenmark 1987, 82-84; Sakade 2007, 790-91). The text in question is about his "secret method" (*mifa* 秘法),¹⁰ which includes Daoist ritual techniques and arts or magic of the highest order, at least higher than the practices of ordinary people. The text also reveals the meaning of Dao: this is what interests Yang most.

Why, with so many years of monastic life under his belt, is Yang taking this kind of interest in Dao? It is a basic notion, the "path to follow" sought by all Daoists, the fundamental principle at the heart of their religion, the source of everything. It is what every adept has to study first. However, not only is grasping Dao no easy task, since it has multiple levels of meaning, but understanding it is not enough: one has to reach Dao, cultivate it, win it, become it (since one can become what one seeks to attain).¹¹ And one has to work on it every day.

For now, Yang focuses on one aspect, its connection to the "Book of Changes" (*Yijing* 易經). He is working on a manuscript he calls "General Overview of Studies on the Changes" (*Yixue gailun* 易学概论). Taking Dao to be the source of the Changes (those that shape human beings as well as the universe), he tries to present a comprehensive analysis of it or, more exactly, he deals with the written character for "Dao", easier to understand than Dao itself said to be ineffable. His challenge is to approach Dao as simply as possible so that everyone can understand it, "so the people can follow Dao, and Dao can educate the people" he explains.

¹⁰ The full name of Pengzu's text in the document, is "Ten Thousand Methods to return to the Origin" (*Wanfa guizong mifa* 万法归宗秘法).

¹¹ Whereas for some Daoists, the body can become a "vessel" of the Dao (see Kohn 1989, 197), the monks at Wengongci temple speak more generally of obtaining the Dao (*dedao* 得道) or becoming Dao (*chengdao* 成道).

Yang is sitting perfectly still in his chair, his eyes riveted to the papers in his hands. He is immersed in the short text.

The booklet Yang has in his hands begins with a reminder: the great fundamental texts of Daoism like “Book of Dao and its Virtue” (*Daode jing* 道德經), warn those who would attempt to define them: “The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name” (ch. 1). And at the monastery, the rule stipulates silent teaching and recommends learning by observing (and imitating) the master more than taking the dialectical route. But, as Yang observes it, in order to approach Dao, one at least has to know what it is all about.

The booklet has supplied Yang with a judicious detour: he is deconstructing the character for *dao* as he would if he needed to spell it out, and attempting to decrypt the enigma it contains. Though Dao cannot have a name (*ming* 名), it has a written character (*zi* 字). Meticulously examining the graphical form of it is a legitimate way for Yang to take an interest in Dao and understand the search this entails.

In Daoism decipherment is sometimes a necessity, when one knows that the wording and even the terms themselves are considered to be encoded. And as Brigitte Baptandier notes, in China writing has a connection to the origin, like a “shifter,” so “it is a question of penetrating the secret of the meaning that has always been there, reading the universe’s signs in the written traces” (2008, 1). Therefore some individuals, including Daoist monks, are literally tasked, when the need arises, with “breaking writing open” or “dissect” (*chaizi* 拆字) (Bauer 1979; Baptandier 1991) or, as they say in Hanzhong, “probing” or “conjecturing” it (*cezi* 测字). In other words using glyphomancy.

Absorbed by the text, Yang raises the head and traces the character *dao* 道 in the air mechanically with his finger. He slowly draws its constituent lines, one by one. In the proper order. He starts from the right side, with the head *shou* 首, then adds the slow walk key *zuo* 亠 on the left. He counts aloud: twelve lines. He goes back to reading. The text endeavors to “deconstruct” (*chaijie* 拆解) the character even further.

The Character for “*Dao*”

To begin writing *dao* 道, first you draw two points [丶 丶], whose shape, when you hold it away, looks similar to “man” upside-down 人. One is on the left, the other is on the right: they signify yin and yang, masculine and feminine, one yin one yang, that is *Dao*.

[Since it is upside-down], the earth is above the man’s head, while the sky is under his feet, it is precisely the *Tai* hexagram 泰. The upside-down human shape represents the backward walk [*daoxing nishi* 倒行逆施]. We who practice Daoist asceticism also know that “going against the tide is a fact of the immortal’s life, following the current is the fact of an ordinary man’s life.”

Yang grabs a book, neatly covered with newspaper. Handwritten on the spine in red ink is the title *Yijing*. The reference is doubly implicit: the booklet quotes the famous phrase “One yin, one yang, that is *Dao*”, from one of the appendices of the *Yijing* (*Xici shangbian*, 5) without mentioning the source, or even placing the citation between quotation marks as is often the case in these texts intended for experts. It references one of the hexagrams the *Yijing* analyzes. He does not hesitate to consult this old divination work, which he uses as a life manual, and as an automatism checks the hexagram *Tai*. He stops on the page that deals with the 11th hexagram, the three broken lines of *Kun* 坤 above the three full lines of *Qian* 乾, representing Earth over Heaven.

Yang skims over the paragraph that he well knows : Heaven placed beneath Earth signifies concord, the union of Earth and Heaven: “It is prosperity – the small departs and the great arrives.” Further on, the commentary mentions that *Tai* represents the spontaneous (*ziran* 自然), the perfect harmony (*heshun* 和顺) of society when yin and yang are well positioned.¹² Yang continues reading.

¹² The next, 12th hexagram is its opposite: Heaven above and Earth below: “The big one goes and the small one arrives; this is stagnation,” the moment when opposites do not communicate. The commentary explains that when yin and yang come apart, Heaven and Earth obstruct each other.

The One. “In the character *dao*, under the two points forming an upside-down man, there is the horizontal line of the “One” (*yi* 一) . . . The One is the beginning of numbers and represents a state of equilibrium, that practiced by the ascetic, who must have a well-balanced temperament [*pingheng tai* 平衡态] and achieve the equilibrium of no desire [*wuyu* 无欲].”

Next, he takes a pencil and starts annotating the text in the margin. Its argument becomes mathematical, as the monk details the relational systems. In Daoism, and more generally in Chinese thought, numbers occupy an essential place (Granet 1968, 127-29).

Does the Daoist myth of origins mentioned in the booklet not begin with a numeric formula? “Dao generates the One, the One generates the Two, the Two generates the Three, the Three generates the Ten Thousand Things” (*Daode jing* 42). Yang needs no exegesis. He knows the significance of these numbers: in this context, origins are associated with the power of Dao at the foundation of unity (the One), which is itself the creator of the two principles yin and yang (the Two), of Heaven, Earth, and Man (the Three) and everything else (the Ten Thousand Things).

The series of numbers does not end there. Next come the four emblems (*sixiang* 四象: red phoenix, green dragon, black tortoise, white tiger), the five phases (*wuxing* 五行: metal, wood, water, fire, earth), the six positions (*liuwei* 六位: ruler, minister, father, son, husband, wife), the seven rulers of seasons and time (*qizheng* 七政: sun, moon, five planets), the eight trigrams (*bagua* 八卦), the nine palaces (*jiugong* 九宫: forming a magic square), the ten directions (*shifang* 十方).

Glyphomancy belongs to the “number arts” (*shushu* 数术) and in this context, numbers are seen as special expressions of creative unity and involve particular calculations with their own rules, not always mathematical.¹³ For example, summing up two items enables unity to be obtained. In other words, the operation $1+1=1$ is possible.

The Self. “Under the two points and the horizontal line, there is the character *zi* 自, the self. It is the *zi* of *ziji* 自己, oneself; this is also the basis of the word *ziran* 自然, the very nature of things.”

¹³In this case, to use the words of Marcel Granet, one can say that numbers “evoke arrangements instead of totals.” (1968, 135).

In Daoism, working on the self should not mean being preoccupied with the self (or having a kind of “care of the self”, to borrow the words of Michel Foucault), but rather forgetting the self (*wangwo* 忘我).¹⁴ But how does one work on oneself surrounded by other people, wrestling with the rules and constraints of the community?

At this moment, Yang seems to be in phase with what he is reading : most often, even doing other things or working, he applies himself to quietude (*qingjing* 清靜) that leads to the much-sought state of spontaneous nature *ziran*, the subject he is reading on. And it is sometimes difficult to gain it even within the monastery. Yet there, especially in an urban environment, life is not always restful. There are the other people, first one’s brethren, then the laypeople. One has to compromise with the different individuals that make up the community, men and women from very diverse backgrounds. This heterogeneity can enrich the community, but it is also sometimes a source of tension between members.

For Yang, differences in cultural level are sometimes tougher than age differences. But as he clearly stresses, communal living is what makes it possible for monks to dedicate themselves to personal research and self-perfection; this is thanks to the fact that individually, they do not have to worry about subsistence or even preparing meals. The temple is still a public place, full of laypeople during the daytime. Monks are its guardians, and this places them at the interface between man’s world and that of the gods. And their role as mediators and ritualists means their services are solicited from all corners. But unlike monks, laypeople do not consider reserve and tranquility their duty. They are even sometimes very internally agitated, and contact with them can cost the monks a lot of energy, or at least it can test their temperament, which is supposed to be as *yin* as possible.

The fact remains that even in a noisy environment, and regardless of whether there is an atmosphere of harmony or disagreement, ascetics have to be able to find inner peace and practice “self-perfecting through refinement” (*xiulian* 修炼), since this is the essential meaning behind these lines. The backward walk is nothing but a return (*fan* 反) toward

¹⁴ In this context, *zi* and *wo* are closely related. In the *Wanfa guizong*, *ziji* can include *zishen* (body, person) and *ziwo* (me), which one can see through a kind of introspection, after a long ascetic practice.

the state Before Heaven and the spontaneous nature of things. Returning to the origins means retracing one's steps, reintegrating the Ten Thousand Things into the Three, the Three into the Two, the Two into the One. Rediscovering this essential unity gives one hope of attaining Dao.

On the most cosmological level, it is a question of returning to what preceded the separation of the breaths and the creation of the universe. If this is transposed to the level of one's own body, the microcosm of the universe, then it is a question of asceticism: one must return from agedness to youth, rediscover a previously known state, somewhat like a fetus before birth. In his reading, Yang oscillates between these different significances.

The text does not stop here. It envisages all the cut-out possible of the character, as if each graphical component that can be isolated is necessarily part of the global meaning.

Mirror and Eye. "If we detail the character *zi* 自, we see that it is formed first by a 'cast' line [*yipie* 一撇, meaning a left-falling stroke]. This line is like a mirror reflecting light. It is also like the celestial vault covering the earth. It is about turning vision back upon the self [*huiguang fanzhao* 回光返照], illuminating one's body [*zishen* 自身].

"[Under the cast line, there is *mu* 目, which means 'eye']. Immortality is the fact of long vision (*jiushi* 久视). The eyes can see the light of the radiance. The eyes are the sun and moon. . . whose rays enable an ecological balance to be preserved on earth. . . The sun and moon of man play a similar role: they provide energy, this is what makes the two eyes useful. . . One can see one's own image (*xingxiang* 形象), that is the 'spirit of the valley' (*gushen* 谷神)."

Through asceticism, people no longer only look toward the outside, but contemplate the inner self with a view to perceiving the light each person has within, light being closely associated with vision in this context.¹⁵ When one has achieved this state of clairvoyance, one can see what one really is, one's own image, but also "the spirit of the valley," an expression from *Daode jing* 6 designating what is empty and immaterial,

¹⁵ The expression *huiguang fanzhao* 回光返照, designating inner practices, should be understood as directing one's eyes back onto one's inner radiance. Here light signifies vision. It is about keeping vision inside. When the spirit looks after its center, this signifies a return to inner radiance (Min and Li 1994, 455).

the virtue of Dao. The reasoning underlying this practice is at the heart of the text: “The Dao sought is not outside but within oneself.”

Head and Leader. “The *shou* 首 element, the first, the head, the leader. *Shou* is that through which one understands Dao and that from which one attains Dao: it is the origin, the first or the One, the essential position; it is also man’s head (*renshou* 人首), which enables understanding. It is the most important part of the body. It is commonly said: ‘A man without a head cannot walk, a bird without a head cannot fly.’ It is ultimately the ruler, the leader whom thought (*yinian* 意念) enables to act. *Shou* again expresses the idea of the beginning. In the martial practices, it is important to begin at the beginning, the first step determines the course the practice will take. If one practices blindly (*mangxiu* 盲修), one cannot attain Dao.”

The Slow Walk. “The idea of walking conveyed by the radical *zuò* 走 for ‘slow walk’ evokes the agility of the legs: if one only has the head but not the agility of the legs, one cannot walk. To be complete, man must have a head and legs. . . The walking key designates movement (*dong* 动), the head element designates motionlessness (*jing* 静). The head is related to Heaven, while the walk refers to Earth. *Shou* represents the inside, *zuò* represents the outside. If we only have the idea of asceticism, this is not enough. Practice is needed as well. It is important to simultaneously cultivate the inside and outside, yin and yang, the vital force and the body—this is what *dao* means taken as a whole.”

Strictly speaking, Yang is not an expert in glyphomancy, which he sees as a Daoist divination technique along with fate calculation, drawing talismans, and incantatory spells. His application is simple and limited: he employs it to understand Dao in light of its ideogram.¹⁶

¹⁶ Others use glyphomancy as a reference during divination or fate calculation sessions. For example Zhu Liren in Hanzhong, a Daoist layman and friend of Yang is counted among the “fate calculation masters” (*suanming xiansheng* 算命先生). Zhu asks those who consult him to choose a character – either of their own initiative or by randomly placing their finger on the page of a book with their eyes closed. By analyzing this written sign through the deconstruction of lines and elements, he offers an answer to the petitioner’s problem. Yang does not use this method during consultations. He only uses it in the context of research.

What is Daoism if not yin and yang, the return movement or that of the upside-down man, the search for primordial unity or for the One, vision turned in upon the self, the backward walk, the body and spirit considered together, the self and the spontaneous nature of things? Years of study and practice are often needed to understand it, and yet it is right under our eyes, written succinctly in the word *dao*, condensed into the twelve lines used to draw it. This secret is mainly transmitted by word of mouth, even though some have endeavored to put it into writing with a view to propagating knowledge that, for Yang, has not only been invaluable, but life-saving.

Saved by Culture

This work requires a literate practitioner. Yang is one but not owe this to his family. He was born in 1937. As he likes to recall, this was the year of the Lugou bridge incident, also known as the Marco Polo Bridge, southwest of Beijing, the clash between Chinese and Japanese soldiers that set off the Sino-Japanese conflict during the World War II.

His early childhood was spent in Liuba in northern Shaanxi. From a working-class background, he did not stay in school very long. He deeply regrets this. Nevertheless, he obtained a primary school certificate, and he was able to complete two years of middle school. But then economic realities caught up with him. His peasant parents were too poor to continue financing his education, so he had to leave the classroom and start working. He did not receive any professional training and cultivated the soil like his older brother, but did not give up learning. Since he was lucky enough to know how to read and write, he continued studying on his own. He now considers himself a perfect autodidact. He says that even much later, when he had a master, he learned nothing from him. But he is extremely grateful to his master for having given him the opportunity to study alone in his cell, almost as much as he wished.

It is not unusual to hear a Daoist monk say that he learned nothing from his master. Is it because teaching is ideally done without words that he has this impression? Is this not just a way of keeping the secret? If his master did not verbally explain what Dao was but showed it to him or made him aware of it through readings at services, could it not be said that his master taught it to him? Does silent transmission count? And as

he says himself, his master Zhang Mingshan categorically refused to transmit his medical knowledge beyond his immediate disciples.

Yang and his master were in fact very different. Zhang was a monk most of his life, having entered religion as an adolescent in Sichuan.¹⁷ He was forced renounce monasticism during the Cultural Revolution, but did not marry.¹⁸ This enabled him to resume life as a monk as soon as it became possible, and he spearheaded the reestablishment of monasteries in the Hanzhong region. He was not a man of letters. In fact he was practically illiterate. He had little culture, but this did not mean he was ignorant. He knew a lot about Daoism, and was especially good at treating patients, so laypeople traveled great distances to consult him.

Yang spent only a few years at his master's side, at a time when the cult resurgence was in its early stages and there was a lot of work to be done. They needed to concentrate on the most practical aspect of the phenomenon: rebuilding razed monasteries and renovating temples that had been requisitioned during the total ban on religious activities and the subsequent campaigns against "superstition" in the Maoist period. In the beginning, monks had little time to dedicate to Dao and meditation. They had to focus on getting authorization to reopen holy places, reclaiming land (sometimes involving a tug-of-war with the local authorities), rewriting and promoting local history, summoning back specialists in religious architecture, setting up and overseeing construction sites, and securing finances for the work and managing with the State Taoist Association (Daojiao xiehui 道教协会) of which they have to be members.

Yang and his master may have seen little of each other, but some experiences clearly mark him, such as the practical teachings of medicine. Most of the time he does not apply the same treatments as the Daoists who are regarded as doctors, who take the patient's pulse, conduct a

¹⁷ Zhang, who took the cloth before the Cultural Revolution and became an "old-timer" by returning to monastic life after prohibition, entered Daoism at Jinding guan in the 1940s, one of the few Daoist temples on Mount Emei, Sichuan.

¹⁸ He remained alone in the mountain temple during the Cultural Revolution. He did not renounce his monastic life, although he had to conceal it for a few years. He would come down every day and devote himself to work in the ricefields, to comply with government rulings that required him to give up his religious activities in favor of another (more useful) career.

medical examination and question the patient about his health.¹⁹ When people come to consult Yang, he calculates their fate (*suanming* 算命), and depending on the result, he might decide to use medicines, which he prepares himself and combines with written talismans.²⁰ On a piece of yellow paper he draws a talisman suitable for the pain or evil detected. Either he folds this over the medicine and orders the patient to carry the folded paper with him a certain amount of time, or he burns the talisman, mixes its ashes into the medication, dilutes the mixture in boiled water, and gives the patient the beverage to drink. In this case, the written words are not made for reading but – incorporated by the patient – serve to protect him or even heal him (see Bapandier 1994).

In retrospect, he stresses the importance of culture, the kind of culture that is difficult to acquire when one has had little education, but without which one cannot attain immortality – the kind of culture that saved him. According to Yang, this is needed to study Dao: “Without knowledge of cosmological thought, one cannot understand what the quest for Dao entails. There are Daoist monks who know neither why they are there, nor why they are studying Dao. They are unable to explain Dao. They play it by ear; they advance without any clear reference points. They have fallen into error.”

Yang says one cannot move forward if one does not know what one is searching for. But can one really know what one is seeking? For him, acquiring knowledge is essential, and in his case it is done through book learning.²¹ This is why he did his own reading. Having said that, some

¹⁹ With regard to the medical text, “The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic: Simple Questions” (*Huangdi neijing suwen* 黃帝內經素文), Schipper explains that “the mythical view of the body in Daoism served as a reference for the art of medicine” (1982, 167). On the use of medicine by monks today, see Liu 2008.

²⁰ “Talismans consist of stylized characters, figurative elements, geometrical patterns and symbolic signs, drawn in close combination to create a powerful. Intricate mixture” (Despeux 2004, 533).

²¹ This is also suggested by some Daoist hagiographies, which say that study and personal effort could lead to a long life. Benjamin Penny recalls the debate “that resounds through the history of immortality, namely whether the ability to gain this exalted state was dependent on the fate one received at birth (length of life was, and to some extent still is, regarded as fated) or whether im-

can still go far without making use of books, but these are rare. His master is an example: he is considered destined for immortality, given his accumulation of merits.

Fated toward Dao

Yang himself works hard toward immortality. Although these days he no longer engages in seated meditation or breathing exercises, his research contributes to his progress one way or another. He has a great sense of urgency. In fact, he has to make up for lost time, because he came late to the monastery, “halfway down the road” (*banlu chujia* 半路出家), to use the monks’ own expression.²² He arrived there only in his fifties after having had a family and working for long years in a regular profession. He lost a lot of energy during his life as a layman, energy that he will not be able to dedicate to his asceticism. Since he was educated and lively, he was probably quicker to take up work than his brethren, for whom, for example, Daoist texts were inaccessible, or for whom learning to read the scriptures aloud meant learning reading itself.

Life did not spare him. He would say it is just fate, which has its share of sadness. The playwright Aziz Chouaki would say “Quand elle est gifle la vie!” or “When life is a slap in the face.” After quitting school, Yang worked the fields with his parents for a while before joining the army. He was sent to Guangxi, where he quickly climbed the hierarchical ladder and became a marshal. He got married at age twenty and soon his wife gave birth to two children, a boy and a girl. Then misfortune struck: he lost both children to illness when they were little more than ten years old. His marriage did not survive the ordeal and ended in divorce: his wife left him.

mortality was something that anybody could attain given the right information, sufficient study and apparently boundless enthusiasm” (2007, 42-43).

²² Becoming a monk. In the Chinese context in Daoism and Buddhism literally means “leaving one’s family/home” (*chujia* 出家). The possibility of leaving home halfway down the road had been embodied in Wang Chongyang himself, founder of the Quanzhen monastic order, who exhorted his disciples to “leave their children” (*beizi* 别子) and “reject their wives” (*xiuqi* 休妻). To devote themselves to practicing asceticism, as he did (Marsone 2001, 354).

He remarried, but his pain increased instead of abating and disappearing. His relationship with his second wife was ruined. He still feels resentment. He laments that her character should have made her so difficult to live with. He even implies that her problems were pathological. And then there was her child from a previous marriage, who would not listen to a word he said and roundly refused to obey him. His wife did not give him much credit or take very good care of him. She mostly looked after herself. He acknowledges that he went through a rough patch himself at this time.

Having reached midlife, an age when one comes to understand the twists and turns of human existence, Yang had a nervous breakdown. He also fell physically ill. On top of all this he succumbed to alcoholism. It was all the more difficult to struggle against this addiction in China, where one rarely has to drink alone; one drinks throughout meals when a third party is present, every time someone lifts his glass. And participation in dinking games is a matter of politeness at dinner parties.

He entered religion in order to put a stop to this decline. He and his second wife had had no children, so he was free of parental responsibility. As he says himself, it was either then or never. Already in his fifties, he would soon have been too old to be accepted as a disciple and “get through the door” (*jinmen* 进门). A passionate reader, Yang learned the benefits he could derive from asceticism from the *Yijing* and Daoist books. He made his way to a Daoist temple to improve himself and to serve society, finding a quiet place conducive to meditation. This in turn help him to understand his weaknesses, and make him work to correct them.

He left his wife to go to Mount Tiantai in southern Shaanxi or did he go to Tiantai to leave his wife? But their paths did not diverge completely. His ex-wife followed his example a year later and entered a monastery herself: maybe she was in need of solitude, maybe life had become materially difficult without a man at her side, maybe Yang’s path impressed her, or maybe a combination of these. In China it is not unusual to have serial vocations in a family. Sometimes several family members decide to enter religion at intervals of only a few years. Regulations allow it, on condition that they take separate paths as much as possible and agree to change the terms of their relationship. As Yang’s wife

found a female master in a nearby temple, the two continued to meet or see each other, but things were no longer as they used to be. They had changed their name, and were now “brothers in apprenticeship” (*shixiong/di* 师兄/弟). The marital link that had united them transformed into a ritual kinship. Furthermore, the fundamental gender difference was erased, since the monastery rules require nuns to call each other by the same masculine names used between men – in order to favor group unity and promote the ascetic’s search for the One.²³ As their brethren, if they had now to use yang appellations, they also need to adopt yin temperaments: those usually considered feminine, like tranquility, reserve... They could then, each in their own way, endeavor to transform their metabolism through asceticism, using the techniques proper to each gender.

Explaining his vocation, Yang speaks of a kind of predetermined affinity for the monastery (*yuanfen* 缘分) joined by the desire to be useful to society at some point in his life. Yang was motivated to enter religion after reading the *Yijing*. As he recalls, the role and application of this work is part of a large sphere that could also encompass astronomy, geography, climatology, agriculture, commerce, the art of war, as well as asceticism. It provided a bridge between his military and Daoist careers. As Yang points out: “Daoist *yuanfen* means getting back to a spontaneous nature, uniting with it, getting in tune with it and teaching it to each other. It is about not resisting ‘the course of things.’”

Community Service

Yang has just about finished reading six pages in the booklet when someone knocks on the door. He calls out distractedly: “Come in.” A woman of about fifty. In a fur coat with hair slicked back and rolled up into a finely-combed bun, she sticks her head in and stammers a few polite words before saying she has come for a fate calculation session. He answers with a big smile, and tells her to have a seat.

²³When Yang had to introduce his ex-wife, he would say “she is my brother in apprenticeship.” Yang addressed her as “younger brother” since she entered the monastery after him. On sublimating gender to better manage yin and yang, see Herrou 2001a; on ritual kinship in Daoism, see Herrou 2005, ch. IX.

A young woman, dressed in the latest fashion and made up ostentatiously, slips through the half-open door; the two women have come to see him about her marriage. They have arrived unexpectedly, like most laypeople who come to the temple. Few make appointments, except for important rituals, which are planned a day or two in advance. Although technically Daoists do not perform weddings or birth rituals, marriage is still one of the most common subjects laypeople come to discuss. They often request an assessment of the compatibility of the spouses' fates and ask for this to be optimized or desire help in choosing an auspicious date.

Yang's visitors have explained the reason for their visit: the young woman is engaged to a man who is apparently from a good family, but has shown signs of weak health. They briefly introduce the story's protagonists without saying too much. They are consulting with a soothsayer, after all, who should be able to see things for himself. It is their first time meeting him, on a recommendation from a friend. He asks for the future spouses' dates of birth but not if her fiancé approved of this sort of process. This is how it goes when calculating fate: whoever has someone else's birth date and hour can ask to have that person's fate calculated with their consent, behind their back, or even against their will. The young woman tells him, not without apprehension. After noting this information along with his visitors' telephone numbers, he explains that he uses the "four pillars of destiny" (*sizhu* 四柱) method and asks them to return the following day after he has calculated their fates.

He does not rise from his chair right away. The laypeople take out some money. He refuses at first, but ends up accepting it and sliding it into his drawer. He sees his guests to the door, where they thank him again and assure him they can easily find the way out on their own.

The temple bell rings. It is noon. Through the window, a mixture of monks and workmen can be seen rushing toward the kitchen. Yang takes his bowl and chopsticks and joins his brethren on the first patio. Many of them have chosen to eat lunch outside, taking advantage of the sunshine, which is becoming scarce as autumn advances. He serves himself from the two enormous metal bowls on the kitchen table – one full of rice, the other full of finely-chopped vegetables – and takes a seat at one of the courtyard's immovable tables.

He has not taken monk disciples yet, and not all Daoist masters necessarily do so. Up until then, he had only accepted a few lay disciples, either because he felt he had not reached a sufficient level to transmit his knowledge, or because he had not met the right candidate. Moreover, at the Wengongci, most newcomers take the monastery abbot as master and it is particularly visible in the present time, when few of them care of his lunch, bring it to his cell and ensure on his health. Yang eats by his own. Nobody seems to keep a special eye on him except the cook who refills his bowl, with an authoritative gesture, ignoring the monk's words of refusal. Conversations are lively, two monks share a joke, the ambience is "hot and noisy" (*renao* 热闹), as a welcoming temple should be in China.

After the meal, Yang goes back to his cell and lies down his bed. Although he has a great interest for the booklet, he prefers to have a short rest. He knows the necessity of taking care of his body and he is also aware that man's knowledge is necessarily limited. Laozi did not say: "Renounce study and you will be free from sorrows" (*Daode jing* 20)? But, on the opposite of certain brethren, Yang does not feel the need to stop reading, either temporarily or indefinitely in a kind of literary fast, so that he could dedicate himself completely to the ascetic practice of self-cultivation (Herrou 2007, 191). Maybe, he has not reached this stage yet or has surpassed it.

An hour later, he comes out his cell and stops for a few moments on the second patio to help an older monk scrape a few old red bricks that are to be reused. He crouches down and silently inspects the bricks, verifying that they are reusable, before grabbing a stone and starting to scrape away the cement residue, somewhat clumsily.

Reconstruction

Since reopening its doors in 1993, and even since its land was first returned to the Daoist community after the Cultural Revolution, the temple has been a permanent construction site. There are periods when the workmen (who are housed and fed at the temple) outnumber monks, and times when the monks do whatever work they can manage on their own a few months, until they accumulate enough money to launch more projects. For now, it is time for heavy work on the building's skeleton.

When the head of construction arrives, he does not seem at all surprised to find Yang participating in this kind of work even though he is in charge of planning the Jade Emperor's Pavilion. Yang asks him if he has eaten, and then, without listening to his answer, gets up to inspect the work with him. Wengongci Temple was not destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. It was requisitioned and transformed into a housing complex. When it was returned to Daoist community in the late 1980s, Yang was one of those selected by his master to assist the new abbot in managing restoration and reopening.

Having been involved in the reconstruction from the very beginning, he has seen a first patio being built in the old vegetable garden as former residents gradually vacated the premises, followed by a second patio being enlarged. Now the Jade Emperor's Pavilion is being rebuilt. The monks are not restoring what was left of the old eponymous structure. It was torn down so that a new one could be built, which will not be two stories high like before, but four, so that the temple can grow.²⁴ The topmost floors are almost finished, the cornices at the tips of the swallow-winged roof are already ornamented with finely-painted motifs, like the yin-yang diagram and other bright designs. The ground floor in contrast, is wide open: with no floor or exterior walls, it looks like an empty space under an unfinished ceiling, delimited by supporting concrete beams and covered by scattered piles of materials. Three workmen and a monk are playing cards in a corner. Yang laughs with his young brethren as they pass by.

²⁴ Since it was reopened at the beginning of the late 1990's, Wengongci Temple has become the local office of the State Daoist Association. It was consequently to receive new responsibilities and a higher status. This promotion in the official hierarchy has markedly contributed to the changes in its configuration. Monks themselves speak of a wish to pursue what their predecessors have started, and to try to go further. At least they don't want historical events, and time, to have a too strong hold on Daoist transmission.

Healing Rituals

Yang's meeting with the workmen is interrupted by the monk in charge of the ritual schedule. He has come to fetch him for a healing. They need him to "set up a Daoist ritual area" (*ban daochang* 办道场). In charge of the sick person's family, Yang will calculate their fates while other monks perform the ritual. In addition, he also prepares the ritual documents to be presented to the gods. They will be burned during the ceremony so that their requests can reach the divinities. To this end, he goes to his cell, takes out some yellow rice paper and sits down to compose the formal petition. After that, he takes more paper plus scissors and glue to build a casket about 40 cm or 16 inches in height to hold the documents. After placing the documents inside, he draws a talisman on its top to make sure it has the proper ritual potency.

His task does not end there. After the ritual is concluded and before the sacred area is dissolved, he has to take the laypeople aside for a divination, asking the divinities present: "Will the ritual be fruitful? Will it be effective?" To this end, he gives them a set of divining blocks, a pair of wooden objects shaped like oyster shells, each with a flat and a rounded side.²⁵ He asks the laypeople to throw these on the ground: if both rounded sides face up, the answer is negative; if both flat sides are up, the answer is uncertain; if they land with one flat and one rounded showing up, the answer is positive.

Every day at the temple, a large number of people come looking for Yang Zhixiang. He assesses the seriousness of their situation and chooses the most effective means to remedy it. Not every situation necessitates a formal ritual. "For example, if it concerns fate (*yunqi* 运气), if there are things that people want but are unable to do, and this is very difficult for them, then we arrange for a rite. Also, there are those who are suffering from evil spirits who have attached themselves to them (*chanshen* 缠身), so a *daochang* is needed to exorcise them. Then there are people who experience adversity, are subject to misfortune, have family problems, or lots of other things. There are also those who are unable to have children,

²⁵ These ritual objects are sometimes called *beijiao* 杯琰 or *jiaobei* 琰杯 but Yang Zhixiang prefers to call them *gua* 挂, pointing out that there are different types made of wood, metal, or stone.

but in that case we do not create a ritual area. If it is a matter of illness and the sick person's condition is serious, if a child is not healing or medications from the hospital are having no effect, then we may do a ritual. If the medications work, it is not needed." Monks often resort to fate calculation as well as physiognomy (*kanxiang* 看相), the art of learning about a person through his facial appearance, to determine how serious what kind of problem is and what remedies might be required.

Before he even completes the first task, new laypeople are already knocking on his door. He asks them to wait. He needs time to meet the sick person's relatives so the ritual can begin. A line quickly forms in front of his cell. A young monk in his probationary period who does not participate in the ritual suggests that the visitors have a seat on stools in the courtyard. He serves them tea in plastic cups until Yang can attend to their needs.

Fate Calculation

Night has fallen. Yang lowers the large wooden beam that secures the double doors at the entrance. He has just walked the last laypeople to their bicycles, parked in the narrow street running the length of the temple. The monks are on their own again, until tomorrow morning. Or, to borrow Claude Lévi-Strauss's words, they "keep to themselves" (1969, 497). The dinner bell has rung. After a quick meal, Yang drops in on the nun in charge of finances to give her the money from the laypeople, then he returns to his cell. He still has to calculate their fate.

He tears a sheet from a pad of white paper and positions it vertically. In the top-right corner he writes the names and phone numbers of the two women with a red felt pen, then draws a rough rectangle around it. In black ink, he writes the word for "man" on the left side and that for "woman" on the right, so the sheet is divided in two. Underneath, for each fiancé, he writes their day and time of birth. Consulting the almanac, he converts this information into the traditional eight characters, the year, month, day, and hour of birth (the four pillars) in the symbols of the sexagenary cycle.

For each fiancé, he consults the page dedicated to his/her birth year and reports the sign pairs corresponding to the year, the month and the day of birth (through the combination of the two decimal and duodeci-

mal series, the ten celestial stems and the twelve earthly branches). Then he consults a small manual he created for himself. In which he has transcribed, among other things, the birth time correspondence table. Thus he obtains eight characters for each of the future spouses which, to use Brigitte Baptandier's terms, are "a kind of encryption of the chart of the universe" (1996, 123).

He then calculates each fiancé's fate, noting it in two columns—black ink for "great fate" (*dayun* 大运), the major changes that will occur in each ten-years period, and red ink to mark "future fate" (*liunian yun* 流年运), main annual tendencies for the next few years.²⁶ He also compares the eight characters in terms of mutual harmony and repulsion (*xianghe/chong* 相合/冲). As it turns out, the fiancés have a compatible fate: Firstly, considering the eight characters, the woman was born in the year of the Rooster, which falls under the earthly branch *yu* 酉, and the man, whose eight characters are placed under the sign of the Dragon, corresponds to the *chen* 辰 sign.

Yu and *chen* are in concordance, both being associated with the metal in the five elements and that is fundamental, as Yang stresses, since "to live together, two people really have to be in harmony so that they can be considerate and kind toward one another, feel close and love each other, help each other." Secondly, examining fates, certain combinations are most certainly lucky and that is the case today, as for the *dayun*: since the woman carries the sign of the Mandarin norm (*guanyun* 官运), which (in a man's fate) refers to the spouse, and the man has the sign of wealth (*caiyun* 财运) in his fate, which symbolizes the spouse.²⁷ Yang now knows that they could live in harmony for a long time and the marriage is likely to be fruitful. A study of the *liunian yun* will determine the most auspicious date on which to celebrate the union.

²⁶ The first ten-year period of the "great fate" does not start at birth but at the year from which the person's fate would have begun, a date that Yang has quickly calculated, according to another table in his personal manual.

²⁷ In this context, *guan* and *cai* are complex notions, which translation cannot sufficiently convey. On their symbolical meaning (when *guan/cai* can correspond to what governs a person/that to which he is opposed) and on the kinship and alliance relationship systems they reflect, see Baptandier 2003, 122-23.

The sheet of paper is almost completely covered with writing (in red and black), writing that laypeople would not be able to understand, even though this is the sheet Yang gives them and it holds the answer to their question. They will only grasp a few details out of everything marked there: the corresponding celestial stems and earthly branches will remain nothing but numbers, though some characters might give some slight information about the contents of an element. Looking at what is written on this page, Yang would be able to report several things to the young woman about her own fate, about that of the man she hopes to marry, and about their union. In all likelihood, the result will not be a source of discord but rather something that opens the doors to the wedding ceremony. Yang is relieved; this kind of answer is easier to give than its opposite. Because a suanming master's power is limited.

Still, he is aware that he can suggest only so much. "In fate (*ming yun* 命运)," he says, "there is the part on which one can act (*yun*, good and bad fortune) and another about which nothing can be done (*ming*, life's destiny). Even then, some *yun* remains impervious to all attempts of change." Not to mention the fact that people themselves have a measure of responsibility for how they conduct their lives.²⁸ For example, on the subject of fate at the time of marriage (*hunyun* 婚运), Yang explains that there are people who are made for marriage, others who belong to a kind of resistance (and therefore encounter the difficulties of widowhood, remarriage or bigamy) and still others for whom nothing can be done, about whose problems suanming masters remain totally powerless, and whose only option is celibacy, or, if they are believers, the monastery path.²⁹

²⁸ On the belief in both people's responsibility for their fate and their inborn qualities (or a "destiny") directing their lives and deeds, see Kohn 2007a, 99.

²⁹ As is well-known in anthropology, marriage is above all about families putting matrimonial strategies and established societal rules into play, and these go far beyond the mere consent of the spouses (Lauwaert 1991, 144-70; Wolf 1974a; 1974b; Watson 1986). It is often "a kind of corporate activity reflective of more than family (*jia*) interests," as Susan Naquin says (1986, 226). But often horoscopes also end up intervening to qualify the designated parties for marriage. And dramatic events can occur among cosmically antagonistic or deadly couples — mother and daughter, spouses (Topley 1955; 1974; Lauwaert 2001).

Yang himself is working hard on changing his own temperament. He does everything he can to turn the bad thoughts that still sometimes enter his head into virtuous ones. He also tries to be as helpful to others as much as possible. This is not something he speaks about openly since, to use his own terms, this would amount to tooting his own horn and ultimately giving a poor impression of Daoist monks. However, if someone asks for his help, he will give it.

It is ten o'clock. Practically asleep on his feet, he finally can go to bed. He tries to empty his mind since the work of telling fortunes is a source of tension. He knows this and experiences it every day; not every truth—or at least not every prediction—is nice. Some visitors are reduced to tears, others fly into a rage. Many say nothing, but they are no less affected. Yang himself sometimes feels a certain pain for the people who come to him. Though many laypeople believe the words of the fortune-teller or, if skeptical, are prepared to experiment with his verdict, there are people who are afraid of his potential clairvoyance. Like Ji Xian in the *Zhuangzi*, “he was able to predict each person’s future, life and death, happiness and misfortune, success and failure, premature death and long life. None of this was a secret to him and he could announce the exact date on which events would take place, like a genie. People fled at his sight” (ch. 7).

Epilogue

It has now been a decade since this day took place. Since then, construction of the Jade Emperor’s pavilion is complete. Wengongci has expanded further. Yang’s master, Zhang Mingshan, passed away “transformed into a bird” (*yuhua* 羽化). A statue of him represented as a god or an immortal was recently unveiled at the temple. But also since then, Yang has left Wengongci after a serious disagreement with the abbot.

A local doctor helped him find modest lodgings in the area and he lived there with his ex-wife, who followed his example for the second time, until their disagreements caught up with them again. Then he moved several times, searching for an environment conducive to his Daoist and literary activities. He continued living off his fortune-telling while searching for a new temple. First he returned to Mount Tiantai to serve his old master and lived in a temple not far from him. Only one of

two monks there, he had to share domestic chores like bringing water from the valley and had little time for his passion. So he left. Then he spent some time in a small temple in the south of Xi'an, but had trouble getting along with his superior who was thirty years his junior.

Next, he fought hard to obtain authorization to move into the famous Zhang Liang Temple, now a museum managed by the municipal Department of Culture. He liked it especially since it was located near his hometown in Liuba county. But his relationship with the local authorities was complicated. He finally put an end to his wanderings and settled in a tenement in Hanzhong. He resolved to live alone, but then a young woman joined him as his disciple. For a while she helped with his consultations and learned his Dao, then they fell in love. They are still together today, even though, as he said, things are not always easy, especially for someone whose fate is not favorable to marriage. He has cut his hair and gone back to using his layman's name to symbolize that he is no longer a monk. He explains that he simply changed to another Daoist discipline, to reconcile the conjugal and liturgical elements of life,³⁰ and decided to remain what he is: a Daoist master who still wears his blue cotton vest and receives laypeople in large numbers, mainly to calculate their fates.

³⁰ After considering the Shangqing order, he opted for Zhengyi where masters have always been permitted to marry and sometimes, when their office is hereditary, are even obliged to do so to perpetuate their charge. If Yang was vague on the subject, it is probably because he could be a self-appointed Zhengyi master.

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