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Waking to Shape One's Life

Pilgrimage at the Southern Marchmount

GEORGES FAVRAUD

Abstract

This article examines Daoist concepts of the relationship between the body and the mountain through the lens of ritual steps and pilgrimage, as observed in the famous Southern Marchmount (Nanyue). The lived relationship between the body and the mountain makes it possible for pilgrims to engage in a process of transformation. Several factors stand out: the immensity of the landscape, where the ritual practitioner or pilgrim progresses; the concentration and effort invested in the walk following the topography; the work of interior sincerity (*cheng*) necessary to engage with the gods in a formal audience; and the fluidification of thoughts. They all contribute to blur common social benchmarks and conventional cognitive processes. The moment of liminality offers the pilgrim the opportunity to reassemble certain representations of his or her existence through first stammering, then gradually uttering a clear and foundational statement about his life.

Dao 道 indicates a permanent cosmological process of creation and revelation: the myriad living forms (*xing* 形) in movement and interaction continuously emerge from the undetermined potential of life, described variously as chaos prime or undifferentiated origin (*hunyuán* 混元), chaos (*hundun* 混沌), or oneness (*yi* 一). In daily language, moreover, the word *dao* has three main meanings: way, road, or path; art or method; and talking or formulating. It is thus not surprising that Daoist masters have long developed techniques of taking steps or walking as essential skills in the fields of ritual, healing exercises, and martial arts. In the field of ritual, steps and other gestures are also central in elaborating techniques of vocalizing and shaping language such as chanting, incantations, and pray-

ers, as well as representations, notably of gods, stars, ideas, ancestors, landscapes, and more.¹

Almost a century ago, in his famous article "Techniques of the Body," Marcel Mauss underlined the importance of Daoist practices for a comparative "socio-psycho-biological study" of "mystique," placing the practice of walking in a central place (1979 [1934]). According to the phenomenologically inspired anthropology of Tim Ingold (2004; 2010), the very human skill of walking on two legs plays a fundamental evolutionary role in the development of perception, cognition, and knowledge. Both—as well as other related works—argue successfully for a vitalist line of inquiry that starts from the body in movement while also working with procedural and relational thought to understand the production of the living and the social.²

Following this line of inquiry, I argue that, if walking generates particular utterances, its study contributes to a linguistic anthropology that considers gesture as more than merely a pre-linguistic kind of syntax or semantic (see Bloch 1998; Cuelenaere 2011). Going beyond that, walking places the subject in a direct and lived relation with the emergence of all life (Stein 1990; Berque 2020) and confronts the subject with the necessity to channel this emergence and to give it, as Daoists would say, an ethical and efficacious form (*de* 德).

This has a long worldwide history. Many religious leaders and prophets were great walkers and lived itinerant lives (Vallet 1996). As the philosopher Frédéric Gros has shown (2011, 17-20), Western philosophers tend to underline diverse potentials of the practice of walking. Plato saw it as both a mode of knowledge and a way to inscribe one's presence onto the landscape. Jean-Jacques Rousseau remembers the walks of his childhood with some nostalgia, noting that the contact with nature allows one to experiment with freedom and to feel one's own strength.

Henry David Thoreau (2000 [1862]) used to walk in "the wild," considering the connection with nature as a spiritual exercise. Similarly,

¹ Any search for technical mastery, and *a fortiori* for walking, is considered as an initiation or "door of entry" (*rumen* 入門) into Dao. On steps with regard to representations see Huang 2013.

² For related works, see Bergson 1907; Bateson 1972; Ingold 2000; Pitrou 2014; and Adell 2015.

Friedrich Nietzsche took notes when strolling, an activity he considered as an occasion to be released from the “weight of erudition;” and Martin Heidegger used to get his best ideas while walking along the fields and even has a whole book called *Der Feldweg* (1953).

Gros continues to distinguish different types of walks and aspects in the act of walking. One can walk alone or with a group; one may remain silent or talk along the way (see Rauch 1997). One can leave home in order to run away from oneself or escape from a devastated place. One can follow an itinerary for a trek in nature or join a protest for a particular cause. One may walk with the goal of reaching a real place or some sort of a promised land. One can move about according to various situations, finding or losing oneself along the way.

Strolls and promenades are slow and short kinds of walks, with several possible meanings, like taking some time with friends or family, maintaining fitness and health, or giving a break to the rhythm of daily life. During longer walks, such as trekking or pilgrimage, the walker adopts himself as a walker, moving beyond his or her socially conditioned identity to uphold and enhance particular values like effort and diligence.

While on a short walk, people may be looking for a deep experience or a feat outside the ordinary space of domesticated existence. During longer walks, moving along the route to the holy place functions explicitly as a process of inner transformation. According to the historian of medieval Europe Alphonse Dupront (1987), the verb “to go” is the primal and free impulsion of the “pilgrim’s progress,” which consists of “leaving in order to reach an elsewhere that makes you another.” Along the way, pilgrims confront the reality of space as it relates to their own lived presence while also grappling with the tension of accomplishment. According to Dupront, this is what makes the pilgrim’s destination sacred.

Matching this overall tendency, in Chinese culture, pilgrimage or spiritual walking is a practice that serves to give shape to human life through the dynamic relationship between the individual’s body and the external landscape, most commonly a mountain. These two are microcosmic and macrocosmic poles where vitality manifests in all its ambivalence, full of contingencies and potentialities.

In this context, Daoist masters have developed particular techniques of ritual steps to come into contact both with their own inner real-

ity and with the environmental powers around them. Their goal is to develop their lived presence at the same time as they activate their "inner landscape" (*neijing* 内景). By extension, they also ritually structure their communities and social networks as they undergo a prepared process of sequences, intended to qualify or transform states of affairs by means of an arrangement of material and language elements. This, in French is described as a pilgrimage ritual *dispositif*, that is, a complex, intentional, and concrete assembly located at the articulation between practice and institutions, people and social structures (Dodier and Barbot 2016).

Pilgrims use walking and other ritual techniques to formulate a sincere and clear utterance about their life, thereby to obtain from divinized powers³ a "remodeling of the dynamic of his destiny" (*gaiyun* 改運; Berthier 1987).⁴ Daoists similarly use the physical activity of walking to gain inspiration and enhance expression, to move beyond perceptual, cognitive, and social routines. Investing their body and mind, relying on devotion to communicate with the divinized powers, they engage in an exploration of liminality (see Turner 1969) that can help transform both themselves and their community (Favraud 2018).

The Southern Marchmount

Hengshan 衡山, the Southern Marchmount (Nanyue 南嶽), located in Hunan province, is a conglomerate of seventy-two peaks. It is home to seven Daoist temples, some twenty Buddhist monasteries, and three Confucian academies (Tan 1996), which are visited each year by about

³ Perceived "powers" (*puissance*) of all sorts can be represented under different forms and logics according to historical periods or cultural groups, such « powers » can be divinized, yet also scientized, militarized, politicized, commodified, and so on.

⁴ Two terms express the concept of destiny in modern Chinese, *mingyun*. Whereas *ming* 命 refers to the overall structural mold of human destiny (often described as "matrixial," *xiantian* 先天), *yun* 運 refers to the localized and specific dynamic in the course of life, such as a disease, a key project, having a child, and the like.

three million “pilgrim-tourists,”⁵ who come mainly from south-central China (Hunan, Jiangxi, Hubei, Guangdong).



“Map of the Seventy-Two Peaks of the Southern Marchmount”
Nanyue qishier feng tu 南嶽七十二峰圖 (1619)

During its long history, the mountain has served as a relay station on both real and ecstatic itineraries. Central to shamans of antiquity as much as to medieval hermits, it served as a source of inspiration for travelers, landscape painters, poets, and more (Robson 2009). Like many other Chinese “famous mountains” (*mingshan* 名山), the Southern Marchmount, although apparently in a peripheral location, is in fact the center of networked territories. While local people and societies seek to deploy their autonomy here, they also influence more central and domesticated areas.

⁵ Ethnographic observation of the practices of these “visitors” on the mountain shows that it is not possible to categorize them individually as “pilgrims” or “tourists.” In other words, they are not people fully or exclusively engaged in activities relating to either ritual or leisure (Brown 1999).

This explains why its ancient politico-religious function continues actively in the contemporary context of the post-Mao era. From the founding of the empire in 221 BCE through the Middle Ages, the mountain served as the ritual marker of the southern border of Chinese civilization within the system of the Five Marchmounts (*wuyue* 五嶽). A place of worship, a trading post, and an advanced military fort in “barbaric” territory until around the 15th century (see Wang 1973), it was a meeting place between various Han and non-Han populations. In the Tang dynasty (618-907), it moreover became a center of monastic knowledge and power, expressed in all three traditions of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Here the “great” Chinese traditions entered into interaction and competition, among each other as well as with local and regional cultures (Robson 2009).



Pilgrim-tourists climbing to reach the temple on the Peak of the Smelter-Invoker (Zhurong feng 祝融峰). Photograph by the author [2008].

In the Song dynasty (960-1279), it turned into an important center of worship and pilgrimage, focusing particularly on the Sage Emperor of the Southern Peak (Nanyue shengdi 南嶽聖帝), and still functions in this role today. Interrupted by the prohibitions and repression of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), pilgrimages have now resumed in a new—more touristy—format (including the use of cable cars), while the mountain

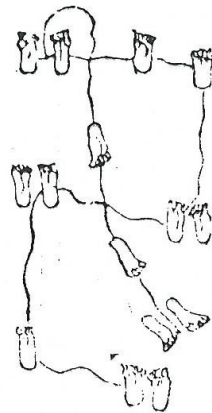
has become the headquarters of the various official religious associations (*zongjiao xiehui* 宗教協會) of Hunan province, providing intermediation between religious and social networks, on the one hand, and the Communist Party and the State, on the other (Favraud 2011).



Pilgrims presenting wishes and prayers to the Sage Emperor.
Photograph by the author (2008).

Modes of Stepping

Daoist body techniques in general divide into two opposite or complementary categories. On the one hand, there are methods of healing and self-cultivation that aim at interiorizing and slowing down movement in order to achieve stillness (*jing* 靜) and stability (*ding* 定). Without this serene presence to inner and outer vitality, the Daoist masters believe, it is impossible to make one's way in the world and in



oneself without going astray. On the other hand, there are body techniques that, on the basis of stillness and stability, aim at exteriorization, action, and movement (*dong* 動). As the masters put it, "The axis of movement is stillness" (*dongzhong youjing* 動中有靜).

Externalization appears most obviously in the martial arts, exorcist rituals, and therapeutic practices such as healing exercises (*daoyin* 導引) and taijiquan 太極拳. More specifically, "stepping techniques" (*bufa* 步法) are commonly used in the construction of ritual areas, such as altars (*tan* 壇) or ritual areas (*daochang* 道場), and land planning through geomancy (*fengshui* 風水).



A young man trains in martial and therapeutic stepping, balancing on bricks that symbolize the eight trigrams (*bagua* 八卦) in the forecourt of a local temple in Liling, Hunan. Photograph by the author (2005).

The oldest known prototype of Daoist ritual stepping, moreover, goes back to ancient shamanic methods and is known as the Pace of Yu (*yubu* 禹步). They imitate the criss-cross walk of the mythical ruler Yu, the alleged founder of the first royal dynasty of the Xia and the ancestral master of geomancers, when he limped across the country to drain the waters of the great flood while also delimiting the nine symbolic territories of China (Granet 1925; Hérítier 1992; Andersen 1990, 46).

Learning from the Feet Up

For Daoist masters, the simplest and apparently most basic techniques are those repeated throughout life, called “foundation-root practices” (*jibengong* 基本功). Their repetition allows adepts to acquire “mastery and self-elaboration by practice” (*gongfu* 功夫). As every infant learning to walk realizes—if not consciously—before one can walk one must first know how to stand on those two feet. The foundation of all verticalization and human ambulation, the feet play a central role in Daoist practice and vision of the body.

This echoes classical Chinese medicine, with its understanding of key areas of the foot reflecting the entire body, its mapping of internal vital forces and souls that animate the body on the soles, and its methods of applied reflexology. Daoists, to give just a few important examples, often metaphorically describe the heels as the lower part of tree trunks reaching into the earth (*jiaogen* 脚跟), while the ancient work attributed to Zhuangzi 莊子 sees them as the very heart of the sage’s breathing. “The true man breathes all the way to the heels, while the common man breathes only as far as the throat” (ch. 6).

Li Jiazhong 李嘉中 (b. 1967), a martial arts master of the so-called internal school (*neijia quan* 內家拳), interprets this to refer to an activation of the Achilles tendon. He connects this view to the conception of the human body as composed of vital forces, breaths or energies (*qi* 氣) and, rather than mentioning the fundamental role of the tendon in the biomechanical propulsion of the flesh body (*routi* 肉體), instead insists that it is the core around which the twelve key pulses of the person beat.

Then again, the “heart of the foot” (*zuxin* 足心), that is, the center of the sole, contains acupuncture point Bubbling Spring (*yongquan* 湧泉).

From here the chthonic powers, present both in the body and the environment, arise through the network of the reno-genital organic system or Kidney (*shen* 腎) meridian. This closely links to the lower elixir field (*xia dantian* 下丹田), a core location of all Daoist internal cultivation, prominent also in internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹). Li Jiazhong uses this point to tame the chthonic powers and streamline them into action and representation.

Another Daoist feature is to link the feet to the trunk—and thus to all the major internal organs and sites of internal alchemy—via the waist-leg (*yaotui* 腰腿) system. According to Li Jiazhong, physical work on this system makes it possible to develop ideal proprioception, good health, and inner peace as well as ritual and martial powers. These qualities then serve as the source of a capacity for action that involves the whole body rather than just the musculature.

The first clear formulation of this understanding of the feet in human physiology appears in the *Taijiquan* classics, a set of texts claimed to have originated in a revelation received by the legendary Zhang Sanfeng 張三豐 of the Ming dynasty. It notes that inner strength “takes root in the feet, develops in the legs, is controlled by the waist, and manifests itself in the fingers. From the feet to the legs and on to the waist, a perfect unity is needed lest the body will be dismantled” (Despeux 1981, 107). This understanding, moreover, is based strongly on the immediate perception of any given situation rather than on pre-established patterns, and thereby allows adepts to practice “acting through the formless” (*wuwei* 無為).

Feet are foundational for human action, yet also sensory organs linked with feelings and rituals in the Chinese conception of ritual efficacy as considered by the Confucian classic *Liji* 禮記 (Record of Ritual). This cardinal reference in the field of ritual, found in the chapter entitled “The Meaning of Sacrifices” (*Jiyi* 祭義), states that the decision of the time for seasonal sacrifices has to be made in accordance with sensations arising from the feet:

When [in autumn, the Superior man] treads on the dew which has descended as hoar-frost he cannot help a feeling of sadness, which arises in his mind, and cannot be ascribed to the cold. In spring, when he treads on the ground, wet with the rains and dews that have fallen heavily, he cannot

avoid being moved by a feeling as if he were seeing his departed friends.
(Legge 1885, j. 1)

The text further insists that ritual is not a mere repetition of outer forms, and that the very idea of reverence and devotion (*jing* 敬) starts from and finds its meaning in inner sensations.⁶

In this Daoist system of representations of human life, the feet constitute the base of all verticalization of what the Chinese call *shen* 身, that is, body-person-identity (Despeux 1996), a character which is often interchangeable in Daoist ritual manuals with its homophone *shen* 神, meaning “spirit, god, or matrixial structure” (Andersen 2001). To explain how kinesthetic abilities interact with more ritual and representational skills, Master Li turns to internal alchemy and describes how vital power goes from bottom to top within the body.

Internal alchemy theory involves three separate yet complementary processes. First, it requires the development of a power both martial-exorcist and therapeutic through the “transformation of sexual and instinctual potentials into activity” (*jinghuaqi* 精化氣). Centered in the lower abdomen, this requires the activation of the genital-kidney system of medicine and the waist-leg system of internal martial arts. Second, adepts have to gain psychic concentration, clear perceptual awareness, and a spontaneous and free intentionality, through the “transformation of vital activity into spirits” (*qihuashen* 氣化神).

This takes place in the area of the heart, the sternum, the diaphragm and the dorsal vertebrae. Third, finally, the process involves the increasing fluidity of thoughts and representations, laying the foundation of the ability to travel spiritually and creating a source of autonomy and creativity, through the “return of the spirits to empty potentials” (*shenhuanxu* 神還虛). This occurs in the heavenly palace located in the center of the brain.

The brain, which has assumed cardinal importance in contemporary science is not an organic system (*zangfu* 臟腑) in its own right in Chinese medicine, but an emanation of the kidney-genital system, *via* the spinal cord, as first documented in the chapter “Relying on the Spirits”

⁶ Béatrice L’Haridon, oral communication, seminar: *Synesthesia: Expérience du divin et multi-sensorialité*, Toulouse Jean Jaurès University, June 2017.

(*benshen* 本神) in the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (Internal Classic of the Yellow Emperor) of the Han dynasty. The text clearly places what we would call psychic or neurological functions today among the five key organic systems (Despeux 2007).

Modern neurological studies on proprioception also argue, through their very different methodology, for such a "bottom-up" model. For example, Jean-Pierre Roll (2003) defines proprioception as the "mechanical sensitivity of the motor apparatus, distributed throughout the muscles and deep within them." He argues that it is the source of the existence not only of kinesthetic, but also "of complex cognitive and symbolic activities." Alain Berthoz (1997) emphasizes that neurological sensors are very complex and cooperative, sending multiple sets of information to the brain, an organ largely dedicated to select and hierarchize sensory information. From here, the sensors then simulate and project possible reactions according to memorized patterns of action.

Common approaches to bodily movement emphasize top-down conceptions, such as the role of thinking (or intention) to guide the body, the central role of cultural structure to model personal and group behaviors, or the capacity of ritual *dispositifs* and ritualists to influence "puppet-like" disciples or worshippers. The previously developed Daoist ideas of the body and of the act of walking gives an opposite and complementary point of view, and informs us on the mastery of an embodied knowledge.

Oneness of Man and Mountain

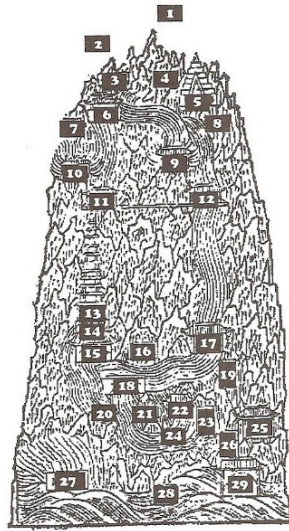
Since ancient times, mountain retreats have been a key feature of Daoist practice and the cultivation of body, vitality, and spirits—known comprehensively as "nourishing the vital principle" (*yangsheng* 養生).

Entering the mountain (*jinshan* 進山) means leaving the common world behind. For many practitioners, often victims of breaks in their life's trajectory (Herrou 2005, 257-62; 2015), it symbolizes the commitment to a process of healing in this world and salvation hereafter, meaning the development of life power and wisdom that makes them immortal, literally a "man of the mountain" (*xian* 仙).

Vice versa, many Daoist representations of the inner landscape of the human being as envisioned in meditation take the form of a moun-

tain populated by vital forces and gods or spirits (Despeux 2018). The representation of the human body and the mountain as pervaded by the same vitality and animated by the same spirits corresponds to the construction of a strategy of commensurability.

元氣體象圖



Body Map of Original Qi (*Yuanqiti xiangtu* 元氣體象圖, DZ 738).

That is to say, the visuals establish a dynamic relationship between these two forces, in modern Western thought largely unrelated. The best known among them are body maps or diagrams (*tu* 圖) that show the body in the shape of a mountain, populated by several animals, plants, stars, human beings, and artefacts.

In the early centuries of the Common Era, when Chinese mountains were largely untamed spaces of threatening wilderness and wrathful demons, the Daoist master Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343) advocated the performance of a set of rituals. In the chapter “Climbing [Mountains] and Crossing [Rivers]” (*Dengshe* 登涉) of his seminal work *Baopuzi neipian* 抱朴子內篇 (Inner Chapters of the [Book of the] Master Who Embraces

Simplicity; trl. Ware 1966; see also Michael 2015), he outlines specific stepping techniques to be undertaken before entering a mountain.

Their goal seems to have been to tread carefully and cosmically while coming into closer contact with the powers of the mountain, both real and hidden, thereby to avoid dangers such as demonic spirits creating confusion, causing accidents, or devouring the traveler while also promoting auspicious encounters, notably with divine immortals, rare medicinal herbs, and powerful alchemical ingredients. Huge, apparently eternal, and simply "other," the mountain environment not only would make people forget the relevance of the usual social order but also open them to a new, more elementary life.

It also could disorient and confuse, cause fear, dizziness, or fatal falls. The fatigue involved in walking, the oceanic feeling provoked by vast spaces, as much as the possible encounter with obstacles or dangerous animals explains how ordinary perceptual, cognitive, and affective processes come to be scrambled and turn inoperative. This may well explain the recourse to strategies of commensurability, composed of body techniques such as conscious and careful stepping, that serve to anchor the senses and the mind in the concrete present of the lived situation. It may also give rise to ritual representations of the human condition and the mountain environment, with the aim of guarding against risk while carrying out a strategy of therapeutic and spiritual ascension.

The commensurability of the landscape and the body is further underlined by the common vocabulary used in body practices, medicine and geomancy: the body-person as much as the topography are both living forms (*xing* 形), animated by the same vital forces running through channels both called (mai 脉) and gathering in the same kinds of hollows or "cavities" (*xue* 穴).

The feet play a central role in this process since they constitute the foundation of stability and coordinated movement, serve as the key factor in the circulation of vital powers within the body, and are the first point of physical contact between the body-person and the environment. Seen from this angle, it makes sense that some experienced pilgrims de-

side to give up not only the paved streets of the cities but also their shoes, continuing their path in bare feet.⁷



Neijing tu 內景圖 (Chart of the Inner Landscape), from *Zhongguo gudai yishi tulu* 中国古代仪式图录. (Despeux 2018; Komjathy 2008; 2009).

The Journey

The Chinese word for “journey” is *you* 遊, indicating as much a spatial (*lüyou* 旅遊) as a cosmic (*shenyou* 神遊) undertaking (Baptandier 1996; Billeter 2002). In other words, people move between different physical and symbolic markers and points of view as and when they walk about.

⁷ See Ingold 2004 for a study of the impact of footwear and cobblestone streets as rupture between social life and the environment in 19th century England.

Building a commensurability between the body and the mountain, means to learn how to travel symbolically through a variety of scales, reference points, and angles of vision. It opens the twofold path toward inner observation (*neiguan* 內觀) and global or distanced viewing (*yuan-kan* 遠看) of world and society (Lauwaert 2007; Favraud 2014).

Once the dangers of stepping across the boundaries between nature and culture are controlled, the encounter with the mountain and its divinized powers makes it possible to release some of the constraints imposed by the dominant models of social reproduction. Daoist stepping techniques, therefore, help to structure the locomotion function and spatialization of the adept as well as his awareness of the environment and his psychic engagement in search of the powers associated with clarity and stillness (*qingjing* 清靜). Beyond this, and in a more communal setting, they also serve to build communal ritual areas (Andersen 1990; Schipper 1990).

During ritual assemblies, Daoist masters often walk in the celestial void where thoughts return to their original fluidity and undetermined state. They symbolically and with deep intention step on fundamental celestial networks: the eight trigrams at the root of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes) as well as certain central constellations, considered as the home of various deities (Schafer 1977). Among the latter, the Northern Dipper (*beidou* 北斗) is most prominent, as it distributes the original life streams emanating from the North Culmen or Pole Star (*beiji* 北極) throughout the world. In the body, this correlates with the root powers of the kidney-genital organ system of medicine, the lower elixir field of internal alchemy, as well as the waist-leg system and its pivotal locomotive and proprioceptive functions.

Daoist meditative and ritual work occurs essentially in silence and isolation, that is to say, it is internalized and personal as well as ascetic and highly demanding. Pilgrims work with a somewhat easier corollary as the ritual *dispositif* invites them to formulate performative utterances addressed to the divinized powers along the way, praying that the latter may "remodel their destiny." I suggest that Daoist masters transfer an inner process experienced in stillness into a ritual *dispositif* opened to the multitude of individuals and social groups.

To better understand this ritual *dispositif* based on the transposition from inner representations to spoken or written utterances, one has first to note that they all resort to the vernacular concept of *yi* 意 (intention, desire, and meaning) (see Schipper 1974; Baptandier 1996; Andersen 2001; Favraud 2018).

The entire process of pilgrimage forms part of the Chinese organization of the divine in the form of a celestial hierarchy, which duplicates the organization of the imperial bureaucracy. Practitioners formulate recollections, demands, sufferings, or thanks from within themselves and utter them aloud in an immediate setting that includes other pilgrims and ritualists, divine statues and mountains. After a long walk, they often present formal requests to an idealized civil servant under imperial rule. In central and southern China, the main deity fulfilling this role is the Sage Emperor of the Southern Marchmount.



The Sage Emperor of the Southern Marchmount, also called Sage Emperor [our] Paternal Grandfather (Shengdi laoye 聖帝老爺). Photograph by the author (2013).

Motivation, Intensity, and Rhythm

To walk for many hours along the pilgrimage route and climb numerous stairs before reaching the summit, the culmination of the pilgrim's progress and place of encounter with the Sage Emperor, requires clear motivation, strong self-discipline, effort, and perseverance. Parallel verses with converging meaning (*duilian* 對聯) carved in stone on either side of the main gate of the Temple of the Mystery Capital (Xuandu guan 玄都觀), located halfway on the pilgrimage path, remind the seeker:

Having respectfully followed the movement of the Way,
Arriving halfway, effort is still necessary.
It is not far to come back to yourself,
But to reach the top, do not hesitate to be persistent.⁸



Climbing the stone stairs of the pilgrimage path. Photograph by the author (2014).

The intense involvement of the body-person in walking is sometimes further enhanced by the practice of "bowing every three steps and genuflecting every nine steps" (*sanbai jiugui* 三拜九跪), as well as in communal songs and dances reminiscent of ritual stepping techniques. The ritual and martial arts master Wang Liyan 王里炎, a resident of the

⁸ 遵道而行, 但到半途須努力。回心不遠, 欲登絕頂莫辭勞。

Southern Marchmount, in an interview with the author, emphasizes just to what degree the body, as the place where movement and speech emanate, is pivotal in the relationship of the person to the world. According to him, walking allows to make the lived and subtle body (*qiti* 氣體) enter into an active relation with the chthonic and celestial powers of the environment or “heaven and earth.”⁹ In other words, the engagement of the body-person in the process of walking implies that the adept directly experiences the path of the pilgrimage. The internal landscape of the walker meets the landscape of the mountain in an experience lived at the rhythm of his body and vital breathes in close connection with the physical and cosmic presence of the landscape. The long-established itinerary, moreover, features within a singular topography, laid out according to geomantic designs connecting the vitality and forms of the body and the landscape.

The walker’s way also follows a path that winds from temple to temple, from altar to altar, traveled many times over the course of history and as such steeped in memory and history (Baussant and Bousquet 2007). Walking thus gives form to a “duration” in the sense of Henri Bergson (1911): it manifests in a continuous rhythmic and melodic flow that constitutes the fundamental basis of consciousness.

The very act of walking participates in a ritual strategy that aims to deconstruct the perceptual, linguistic, and affective processes of daily life. Involving body, vital breaths, and spirits—while also working with various ritual techniques and praying for the protection of the gods, walking with a spiritual purpose in a mountain environment serves to release desires, thoughts, and utterances that are self-censored in the course of daily life. It thereby opens the person to a form of creativity that allows him or her to put unspoken powers dormant in the depth of each human and social subject into images and words (see Freud 1900).

Formulating a Clear and Sincere Utterance

In addition to the thoughts and words that arise spontaneously during solitary walking or conversations with other pilgrims, each stop in a

⁹ Contemporary Daoists often consider the modern term “environment” (*huan-jing* 環境) and the traditional term “heaven and earth” (*tiandi* 天地) synonymous.

temple is an opportunity to address the divinized powers dwelling in the mountain. Bowing deep in front of their statues, pilgrims perform the same fortune-telling rituals common to all temples of China (*chouqian wengua* 抽籤問卦): they help pilgrims formulate and negotiate their desires, wishes (*xuyuan* 許願), and intentions (*yi* 意) in an interactive setting. The ritual typically comes with an offering of spirit money in a manner that materializes the gift of oneself and feeds the account of one's destiny in the celestial treasury (see Hou 1975).

In addition, pilgrims also burn incense sticks (*xiang* 香), watching their smoke rise up—an ephemeral medium that carries their message to the celestial realms (see also Favraud 2018; forthcoming). As the Venerable Li Yuankong 李遠空, a master fortune-teller at the Yellow Court Temple (Huangting guan 黃庭觀) close to the foot of the mountain, put it when I interviewed her, incense smoke has the central role to “transmit messages [from within the person to the gods]” (*zhuanxin* 傳信). A ritual role which is already attested in the Daoist Canon, where the *Yaoxiu keyi jielü chao* 要修科仪戒律钞 (Excerpts of Essential Observances and Rules, DZ 463) clearly states that incense is able to “light up deep obscurity and carry-on intentions” (*zhaoxuan dayi* 照玄达意).

To formulate “an ardent request” (*qiu* 求) to the divine powers and reach ritual efficacy, pilgrims should develop two main qualities. The first is sincerity (*cheng* 誠), a term made up from the graphs for “accomplishment” (*cheng* 成) and “speech” (*yan* 言). It is one of the main canonical principles in Confucianism, notably governing the relationship between society and the state. In such interactions, it is a quality of honesty required in public service, yet also a key criterion to evaluate the capacity of the civil servant to interact efficaciously with divinized powers (Snyder-Reinke 2009). In a context of ritual dialogue with the celestial hierarchy, pilgrims underline that the engagement of the body in walking is cardinal to reach such a state of freedom and alignment within oneself.

The other quality is directness. As Venerable Li insists on the Daoist conception of Heaven being pure and clear (*qing* 清) and spontaneous, she often states: “You must speak clearly by yourself!” (*ni ziji yao jiang qingchu* 你自己要講清楚). Sometimes giving more precise advice, she details that the pilgrim has to identify himself (name, place and date of

birth, etc.), express his fears, obstacles, and sufferings, outline his plans and desires, and express his thanks.

The insistence of the Venerable Li on the concept of the “self-determined speaker” underlines the contrast that Daoist masters make between two ways of understanding the speaking subject. First, they consider the *wo* 我, personal pronoun of the first person (I, me, mine), as a conditioned artifice constructed by and for social reproduction. As such it should be forgotten, that is to say, dissolved through meditation (*wangwo* 忘我; see Billeter 2002; Kohn 2010). This deconstruction emancipates the *zi* 自, cosmic or spontaneous, self. The word also appears in the compound *ziran* 自然, which means “by itself” or “self-so” and refers to the state of natural spontaneity of the Daoist sage, long before the term came to designate the contemporary scientific, political and neo-religious notion of “nature” (Kohn 1992; 2014, ch. 18).

Speech acts and interactions are at the heart of the worship process and stand at the pivot between the conditioned devotion to dominant powers and the elaboration of autonomous statements made on and by oneself. In this process, ritual times appear as means of punctuations, checkpoints or symbolic reminders during the dense, rhythmic duration of the pilgrim’s engagement in walking. Comparable ideas on the elaboration of the human subject appear in the West, where walking is conceived as an act of independence (Thoreau 2000) or, more recently, as a process of examination and elaboration underlying the formulation of a foundational act of speech (Rauch 1997; Le Breton 2000).

The pilgrims of the Southern Marchmount claim that the duration of the walk plays an important role in the process of formulating a request to divinized powers. The effort calls for help unknotting conditioned or jammed wishes, making room for developing their skills in communicating with the gods and improving their virtues. Searching for contact with original vitality and Dao, pilgrims access the depths of their body-person in motion in a living mountain.

At this point, even the importance of divine representations tends to fade. Rather than all-powerful tutelary figures, they take on the role of mediators between body and mountain as two access points to original vitality. The sincerely and clearly spoken utterances, the pilgrim’s symbolization of lived and experienced vitality, constitutes in itself a certain “return on investment.” At a minimum, they have experienced a rela-

tionship with the power of a unique place, clarified their identity and developed a potentially foundational act of speech at this moment. The venerable Li Yuankong expresses this: "Even if the god does not agree to untie (*huajie* 化解) [the problem in] the fate of a pilgrim, it will still have come to its own help."

This idea reflects the adage highlighted in many Chinese temples: "Any heart-felt request is bound to have a response" (*youqiu biying* 有求必應). This shows both the finitude of the gods' power as much as the impact of the walker-enunciator, who returns to original vitality as he or she gives it form through walking, breathing and speaking.

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