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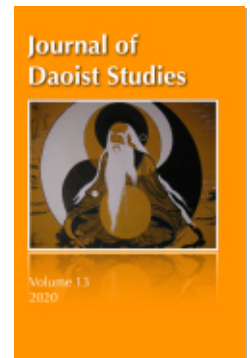
Return to My Peach Blossom Spring: A Daoist "Paradise" in China Today

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Return to My Peach Blossom Spring

A Daoist “Paradise” in China Today

ADAM CHANZIT

I am in a double haze—my own jet lag plus the mix of smog and rain outside the car window—as we lurch through endless outskirts of Xi’an. If all goes well, this journey will total thirty-six hours—two flights, three car rides, and a few hours of rest at a small hotel, all for a half day at my destination. But it’s not just the length of the trip that makes me wonder if it is a bad idea to try and return to the mountain that has long been connected to my Daoist practice.

In my early twenties, I received a Yale fellowship to examine living Daoism. I was based at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, but soon learned that my professors focused on texts and history rather than contemporary practice. I’d have to find cultivators on my own. I eschewed major city temples and the most famous (and most crowded) Daoist mountains. I felt it would be easier to connect with practicing Daoists in quieter areas.

I ended up in the Zhongnan range 终南山, a historical haunt for practitioners, and chanced on Mount Taixing 太兴山. A lush land of peaks and waterfalls, giant ferns and small Daoist temples, including some perched impossibly on the ridge, it attracts serious cultivators more than tourists. Here I found a teacher, Master Lin (name changed to protect privacy), and lived in his dilapidated temple guesthouse. After trying many types of meditation, I found my practice soar under his tutelage. I connected with his soft-spoken personality, his lilting voice, his sparse but effective guidance. I would wake early and stay up late medi-

tating, spend my days wandering the paths, chatting with other monks or lay cultivators. In my youthful exuberance even the spiders in the guesthouse that devoured me every night felt like part of the experience.

I still dream of the place and often wake expecting to see the temple rafters. Other dreams blend the Zhongnan range with the Colorado mountains of my childhood, where I hiked, cross-country skied, and hunted for gemstones with my father.

That I had stumbled on this mountain, was among the first foreigners to visit, and felt that it was impervious to modernization, made me think of the Peach Blossom Spring (*taohua yuan* 桃花源)—the enchanted land of Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 3rd-century Daoist-inspired tale.

A fisherman of Wuling once rowed upstream, unmindful of the distance he had gone, when he suddenly came upon a grove of peach trees in bloom. . . . The wild flowers growing under them were fresh and lovely, and fallen petals covered the ground. . . . It [the grove] came to an end at the foot of a mountain . . . There was a small opening, and it seemed as though light was coming through it.

The fisherman left his boat and entered the cave, which at first was extremely narrow, barely admitting his body; after a few dozen steps it suddenly opened out onto a broad and level plain where well-built houses were surrounded by rich fields and pretty ponds. Mulberry, bamboos, and other trees and plants grew there, and criss-crossed paths skirted the fields. The sounds of cocks crowing and dogs barking could be heard. (Hightower 2000).

The story further relates how the happy villagers in this "utopia" have lost contact with the outside world. They are generous with the visitor, offering food and drink. When he is ready to leave, they tell him there is no need to mention this place to others. But the fisherman marks his route back and when he reaches the city, tells the magistrate who sends others to return. However, they can never find the marks or the magical place again.

I believe the story endures because of the allure, especially in grim times, of a paradise outside time, but also because it has so many meanings. I have often been struck by how the language implies that the cave passageway is just wide enough for a person (*caitong ren* 才通人), sug-

gesting that mystical epiphany is a solitary experience; you cannot share it with others or even return to it yourself.

I can return physically to Taixing (with GPS and cell phone that should not be a problem), but it will not be the same Taixing to me. You cannot step in the same river twice.

The stakes of my return feel strangely high. I often meditate on this mountain, especially when in turmoil. Why risk returning and sapping the magic from a place that has such importance to me?

Mainly because it is a rare opportunity. I have been back to Beijing for work as a screenwriter, but the producers pay for my travel and are strict with my schedule. This trip I manage an extra day on the front end. It might be my last chance for a while. In a few months I will be a father and it will be hard to take this kind of pilgrimage. (Tomorrow I will miss my wife's visit to the ultrasound technician). And the remote, rustic mountain, lacking anything resembling a hotel, is not an obvious destination for a family trip. On a deeper level, I long to visit the mountain again before I embark on a new phase of life.

Arrival

So far, nothing looks familiar. In the past, I would catch a local bus from the train station with just my backpack. Now I am in an air-conditioned car, with all my bags for a business trip. Back then, the bus would bump along the plains and I would see the mountains rise like a green dragon on the horizon. Now I see just smog. Back then, I refused a cell phone and never reserved lodging. Now I am tracking progress on the taxi app to the hotel I booked on Expedia.

When we arrive, the hotel turns out not to be a hotel anymore. I smile at the irony: planning ahead only set me back. When I finally find somewhere to stay—an eerie “spa” with flickering lights à la David Lynch with the rooms all below the lobby—no one at the front desk has heard of Mount Taixing. It does not show up on Google Maps either. I cannot help but think of the etymology of *utopia*: “no place.” The rain is pouring, and I wonder if the trip is star-crossed, if I am falling into Tao Yuanming's vortex.

I revert to my old ways of just asking around and eventually a clerk at the convenience store says her husband is a driver. She puts me on the

phone with him. He knows the place! We arrange to meet at 5 am the next morning.

Maybe the inverted hotel is a portal into the enchanted because after a few hours of fitful rest, I find myself heading in a car through the dark, through what is now a gentle rain. Dawn breaks, starting to illuminate the shape of the mountains. We make our way up the ravine, the river beside us flowing fast and white. I see the giant river boulders. The thick vegetation. But it's the air that truly brings me back.

We roll down the windows, not minding the wet. The driver who tells me he is not religious, says the air up here is special. I remember Master Lin, on summer days, when the valley was hot and dusty, say that his mountain temple has "natural air conditioning." Despite being introverted, preferring the company of a few close disciples and his litter of white cats, he had a quiet sense of humor. In his practice, I felt connected to the air, to the energies of the sun, the rushing water, the lush forest where we lived.

Thinking of him, my heart beats faster. After coming so far, it feels sudden. I hope he is there, but wonder what it will be like to see him. I feel bad for being out of touch. My practice has not been strong lately. I am coming to look at the mountain but the mountain—and Master Lin—can also look into me.

We enter the gate to the mountain and drive past small homes to Grinding the Needle Temple (Mozhen guan 磨针观)—legend has it that a wandering monk saw a peasant woman grinding away at a piece of metal to make a needle, an apparently futile endeavor that yet would get results if pursued long enough. Here I used to visit Master Huang, Master Lin's then 90-year-old master, who lived at this temple virtually his whole life, grinding away at enlightenment.

When we reach the end of the road, I get my poncho and backpack and set off. Up the path, I see a giant golden buddha at the base of the trail. It looks gaudy, out of place: cultivators on Mount Taixing claim that it has been home to Daoists since the Western Han. There are other half-finished structures. Some makeshift homes. A man in his twenties with a ponytail wearing a red shirt, carries a water bucket. I wonder if he is part of a construction team. I ask him if Master Lin still lives at the temple. He nods.

Soon I approach the gate to the temple courtyard. Where Master Lin's quarters used to be, I now see a three-story building. I peek into the courtyard. The temple and guesthouse look similar. Then a middle-aged man emerges from the three-story building. I tell him I am looking for Master Lin, that I am from the United States.

"Oh. You're his American disciple? He's mentioned you."

I am a little surprised. It has been so long. But it makes me think there have not been too many foreign visitors over the years.

"I'm honored. Would you let him know I'm here?"

"He's still resting. Why don't you come back a little later?"

I consider saying, "It's been a long time, I'll just wait until he's ready." But something in the man's tone, the fact that he does not invite me in to wait, makes me wonder what is going on. Is he running interference? It seems better not to argue.

Encounter

I head further up the mountain, elated to be here, to know that Master Lin is here, to have an early start. The steep incline brings me back to reality: I am soon gasping for air. I used to bounce up the trail. Maybe it is the travel. A decade of rather sedentary life.

Ahead, in the mist, I see an older man porting a heavy load up the slick rocky path. I approach, careful not to startle him as I pass.

I slip every few steps, heart pounding. I hear a dog bark. It sounds large and not friendly. And it is disconcerting to hear the sound come out of the mist. Glancing around to determine its location, I slip and land hard on my wrist, my hip. I lie there, feeling the patter of rain against my face, the disorientation of being on my side. I wait for a long moment. The pain subsides. I'm okay. The mountain has greeted me with a jolt, brought me back to my body.

I walk more carefully now but wonder how far up I will walk in this rain. The dog's bark carries in the fog. It is hard to tell how close it might be. I used to be fearless. Now I feel a weight of caution. I stop again to catch my breath, drinking in the dewy air.

Below, I see the old man approaching. I am embarrassed that he is catching up to me, even with all his goods. But I am also comforted to

have someone around. As he nears, he looks at me. I look back at him through the rain. Then it comes to me, but he speaks first:

"Aren't you the one who was staying at the temple with Master Lin. . . so many years ago?"

"Teng?" I ask, unsure. He breaks into a wide smile.

We shake hands vigorously for some time, both genuinely happy. I apologize for not recognizing him. He does look older and it is raining. But mostly I saw him as a man carrying goods.

Teng, not a monk, but a serious adept, was one of my favorite people on the mountain: easy to talk to, with a genuine smile, he was the one I would go to for perspective on my practice or any puzzling happenings on the mountain. We'd sit around and eat *mantou* bread and drink tea and I'd always feel better. I tell him I still think about our chats.

I ask about the mountain, how it has changed. "What about that big buddha?"

Teng laughs. Apparently someone came in with "a lot of investment, but no taste." The money ran out. He goes on to say, "These blemishes have little effect on us cultivators. Perhaps it's better. We don't want the mountain to be too crowded." Then he asks if I've seen Master Lin. I shake my head, no.

I sense more behind his words. "Is something the matter?" I ask.

Teng sighs: "He . . . ran into some difficulties with his cultivation."

"What do you mean? Is he okay?"

"He's not well."

My mind is spinning. It is painful to hear. "What happened? Has he been diagnosed?"

"Cultivation . . . this thing . . . it is very mysterious."

"Was there something wrong with his technique?" I ask. Of course, I am thinking about myself too, as I learned much from Master Lin.

"It's not so simple. His practice is very strong."

"What happened?"

He smiles, sheepish. "These things," he says, "are not easy to say."

I wait for him to say more, give me the grounded perspective, but he nods me along and we start up again through the drizzling rain.

Finally, he speaks: "You saw that three-story building . . . his Daoist center . . . He'd been trying to get it built for a long time. . . .But it brought him trouble."

Toward the end of my stay, Master Lin had begun trying to raise money. I ask Teng if he fell in with bad people.

"Cultivation," he begins, seeming to dodge my question. "It's a deep and mysterious thing. If you can receive great benefits. . . you can also be harmed. Master Lin, he cultivated to a very high level, but the higher your level, the closer you are to the sages. . . the higher the standards, the more they observe you."

We head higher through the drizzling rain toward the Gate to the Southern Heaven (Nantian men 南天门), which leads to the temple where he has lived for over twenty years. There he pulls out two stools and we sit out of the rain, just listen to the patter on the roof.

He asks if I have come to live here again. I explain I am only here for a short visit. I hope to be able to see Master Lin.

"He will be glad to see you."

We talk for a while. He says his understanding of cultivation is much deeper than before. He says meditation is only part of it. You should not get too caught up in the esoteric. Good deeds are very important, too.

I tell him he has always had wisdom for me. Back in the day, I thought I might just live in the mountains. But he said that I was young, I should go out in the world. Have a career. A family. Focus on meditation later. I tell him, "That's what I've done. I have a kid on the way."

He nods, but does not have much reaction. Maybe it feels remote to him. I'm not sure.

At one point, I glance at my phone to check the time. I have had no reception since heading into the mountains, but oddly several messages and an ultrasound image have come through. My wife is upset because the technician revealed the sex of our baby. We were hoping to keep it a surprise.

I text her back: "So . . . what are we having. . . ?"

But my message will not send. How strange that the messages came through and now I know that she knows. I stare at the image, trying to decipher the sex myself in the hazy black and white shapes of this budding life, but I cannot.

Out of the mist comes the young man with the ponytail in the red shirt. Teng introduces him as a young cultivator. I smile. I took both of them for day laborers.

Teng tells him that I used to live on the mountain, that I am a serious practitioner. The kid seems surprised. He took me for a tourist—although I suppose that's what I am today.

He has an open, kind energy. I ask why he came. He said he read a book by an American. I figure it must be Bill Porter's *Road to Heaven* (1993), which has grown more popular in China in recent years. Extreme consumerism, smog-choked cities, progress at breakneck speeds, it all creates a backlash, a desire to return to nature, quiet contemplation, cultivation. He tells me the mountain is his school.

His words remind me of a hermit I met on the back of the mountain who lived in a cave and had a small garden of greens and potatoes. He told me the mountain was his "Harvard Graduate School." He planned to study for several years before returning to the "world of dust" and reform the education system. Like a graduate student, he would progress more quickly while immersed in this place, in the presence of all the practitioners who've cultivated in the same air, the same forest.

I felt this in my own modest way, how the time I spent here brought intensity of sensation, quicker "progress" (though some would argue with that word).

Teng tells me what's happened to other cultivators. The old man, Hu, who lived at the Eight Immortals Tower (Baxian lou 八仙楼) has left. No one knows where he went. He looked the part of a wise Daoist, but I never connected with him. He would utter some saying and then vocalize a deep "Ooooh" as if astonished by his own insight. People said he had an awful temper. They said cultivation was helping him, but not enough.

Teng remarks that there is now a practitioner who has lived for years in one of the tiny temples on the peak's ridge. I'm amazed. There is nothing up there and it is incredibly steep. It would be easier to live in a cave, especially during the frozen winter months.

When Teng talks about those who have died, he grows more pensive. "I need to keep practicing diligently. I'm sixty. I don't have forever."

Forever to do what? I wonder. When I ask if he hopes to become immortal, he laughs, but does not answer.

The Mountain

Alone again, I climb on. The news of Master Lin's condition hits me hard. I think about heading back down the mountain to see him sooner, but I know I will not have time to come back up here again. I also wonder how long he will have the energy to talk with me today.

Maybe I am avoiding the situation. It will be strange and difficult to see him in his condition. I check my phone to see what time it is, but of course I also wonder if by some chance a message has come through from my wife. But my own message still has not sent. I put the phone away. I never used to have one here and I do not like its pull.

I find myself walking.

I walk.

And walk.

And walk.

The rain has slowed, the fog thickened. The dewy air seems to just hang. I cannot see more than a few feet ahead.

I walk.

And walk.

And walk.

The mist blurs earth and sky, present and past.

I remember during the mountain festival a local troupe carrying chests of costumes and props, drums and stringed instruments up the hill, readying to "open the eyes" of the temple gods with a consecration opera. I can almost see the actor with red spirals from eyes to ears striding out, the gongs building, as he dances and kicks, his wild black hair shaking in a tempest of sound.

I glance around for a temple structure built into the trees. I imagine the shaman's song. The man in an army jacket, eyes half open, vacant, and all of us packed into that small space in the trees to soar on the sounds that came from his mouth but seemed to come from elsewhere.

All these images emerge from the mist, from my mind, the fog giving them mystery, giving them life.

I remember the penance ritual: a tiny lady, wrinkled face, half-singing, half moaning as she slaps herself hard on her chest and back, before a small crowd.

And I remember . . . around midnight, the figure of Master Lin in his white frock, coming to fetch his disciples, disapproving of us watching what he considered false and superficial practices. He did not care for the annual festival when his temple—the whole mountain—was overrun.

I remember the fiery-eyed festival leader who tried to convince me that I should study with him, not my Master.

I remember distance opening between me and Master Lin.

I breathe deep, faint memories returning. I exhale, letting them roll away.

I walk up and up into the mist.

The whole landscape is dripping. I feel so far from the cranes and terminals. I realize I had been feeling heavy. The weight of struggles, failures, regrets. The weight of a child on the horizon. What would happen to dreams not yet fulfilled? Would I no longer have time and energy to pursue them? Or worse, would I become a different person and no longer care? I realize that I have come here in part to address those questions, to return to the place where I lived during another transition.

I feel the mist, the cool green. I'm warmed by movement, cooled by gentle mist. The green canopy filters light. The gray mist spreads light. The trees and ferns, the rocks and flowers, the air itself all glow green and gray.

Spider webs hang from the ends of branches, catching and refracting light. Nature's glowing ornaments.

With temples appearing out of the mist, white water gurgling past, I feel inside a fairy tale.

What the spiders build. What people build. The stone path. The caves. The temples. The patterns of the branches. Every view, every angle is a marvel.

I learned a practice where you imagine the universe is thick soup . . . and you move through it slowly. As I step up and up, I notice all the sensations, feel the moisture, warm against me, the *qi* of the place filling me with energy, boundaries between skin and environment dissolving into one mist.

When the fog is thick enough you feel you're entering the void. They say the Inuit have scores of words for "ice"; well, Daoists have many for the void: *hundun* 混沌, *huanghu* 恍惚, *wu* 无, *xu* 虚, *kong* 空. . .

The rhythm of my breath, every inhale and exhale is now smooth and calm. A breeze comes, the fog opening then closing, revealing then concealing. The mountain's breaths. I breathe with the mountain as I make my way into the thick emptiness, the vibrant gray.

Lines from Tao Yuanming's poem, "The Peach Blossom Spring," float to me:

Let me ask you who are convention-bound.
Can you fathom those outside the dirt and noise?
I want to tread upon the thin thin air
And rise up high to find my own kind.
(Hightower 2000, 517)

I reach the Eight Immortals Tower, nestled halfway up the mountain. I stroll around, enjoying the solitude of this beautiful place. It will be as far as I go today. I need to return to Master Lin.

But first I try a sitting meditation.

There is value in separation from mundane life, space outside time. Maybe this is why we need pure places. But can we find them simply by closing our eyes? Can we create them from home?

When I open my eyes, I notice a purple butterfly on the stone. When you're versed in Daoism and you see a butterfly you think of Zhuangzi's famous butterfly dream (ch. 2; see Ziporyn 2009). And for a moment I wonder whether I really am here on this enchanted mountain, contemplating what it will be like to return home, to create a new home and family? Or am I still at home, having another mountain dream?

Master Lin

When I return to the courtyard, the rain has stopped. It is warmer now, nearing midday. I look at the old temple, the guesthouse where I spent so many nights.

The three-story structure looming above the temple now represents, in my mind, the problems Master Lin has encountered—the problems he invited.

I step in. Am I here to lend sympathy to an ill mentor? What kind of person will I encounter and in what state? Should I offer him money for his recovery? Part of me wants to walk away, to avoid seeing him like this. To remember him a certain way.

The disciple emerges. "Master Lin is eager to see you," he says, and leads me up a few stairs and inside. The place is messy: papers and books and foodstuffs. The same books, scrolls, and talismans from before. I do not see his white cats.

The disciple has me sit down at the table and goes into a backroom.

As I wait, I feel a chill, guilt about having lost contact for too long. I hear the rustling first. A few groans. A clacking.

Turning, I see him in the threshold. He looks focused as he moves. He steps with crutches, then drags his back leg along. He is wearing his white frock, a gray shirt underneath, and black sweatpants. His hair is longer and he has a scraggly beard.

This man I exalted. This man who walked so light. Here, in this state. A feeling of tremendous sadness comes over me.

He does not look at me, stays focused. Until he finally sits and looks up. Then he smiles wide, so wide, exposing his now mostly toothless grin.

We talk for a long time. Asking each other many questions. It starts out with the logistics, his illness, how he feels. He had a stroke I ascertain, but he has been out of the hospital for months and is feeling much better.

It is more difficult to understand his slurred speech. Sometimes I have to ask the disciple to translate.

We reminisce. We talk of cultivation. But it does not go deep. Not the words at least.

As we talk, I realize I am holding on to an idea of how I should interact with him, that I should feel sad. He, however, seems happy. Very happy. There is an ease to him that—if memory serves—was not there before.

While Daoist practice usually aims to maintain supple youthfulness, I think now of Zhuangzi who exalts some men deformed in body like Shu whose shoulders rise up above his head (ch. 4; see Moeller 2015).

Am I fetishizing his happiness? Perhaps. Is he putting on an act while I am here? Perhaps. Do I romanticize the dilapidated temple, the remote and poor mountain? Perhaps. But I was happy living here. And the practitioners here seem happier to me than most in well-heeled temples that feel more like museums.

Master Lin tells me that our time together was a great joy. I express again my gratitude for all he has done for me, for working with me, how much it has meant.

Departure

When it is time to go, Master Lin stands using his crutches, ready to see me off as he usually does. I tell him there is no need, but he continues to struggle to come down the steps to the courtyard. I raise a hand to finally stop him.

As I cross the courtyard, waving goodbye, I choke with emotion, trying to reconcile his physical state and his apparent happiness which as I walk away feels like a teaching too profound for me to comprehend. . .

I return to the car and wake the sleeping driver.

"*Wan de hao ma?*" he asks as we start back down. "Did you have good fun?"

It feels impossible to speak with him right now. He seems to be from a different world. And I suddenly feel the exhaustion—lack of sleep, the intense hike, the emotions of seeing Master Lin.

I open the window, try to take in every aspect of this place. The rushing white water, the green. The cool air. I imagine spirits in it, the spirits of all who have cultivated here. I want to breathe it in, absorb it. . .

We ride in silence. Returning to the valley, I feel the pull of my device. I take out my phone. Not only did my message to my wife finally go through, but she's texted back: we're having a boy. A son.

I am just looking at words on a screen. But they mean much. A future. I swallow once.

The driver glances over, sensing something.

"I, I, I'm having a son," I say.

A huge grin comes over his face. "Congratulations! Truly! Congratulations!"

It feels appropriate to be having this conversation with the down-to-earth driver. He connects with me about family in a way that did not seem to interest Master Lin or Teng.

I feel grateful for the future, for today. While it may be futile to chase a past experience, I had a new encounter with my Peach Blossom Spring. Just as the mountain was part of my transition into early adulthood, it will now forever be connected to fatherhood. How fortunate to have a place where you can connect to the purer realm, a place to return to, a place that can return you . . . to you.

Some scholars point out a curiosity in Tao Yuanming's story. He decides to place the peach blossom forest of the title *outside* the mountain grotto, *outside* the magical village, *outside* paradise (Bokenkamp 1986, 69). Perhaps it's just a detail, but in such a short story, every choice seems intentional. Perhaps he is asking whether we should seek enchantment in far-flung lands and through solitary exploration. Perhaps enchantment is already here, before us, in our shared world, if only we know how to cultivate ourselves to experience it.

As we descend into civilization, I look around at the ramshackle homes—the children playing, cocks crowing, dogs barking—and I feel ready to merge with the dust of the valley, the city haze, the enchantments of this impure realm . . . until the mountain calls again.

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