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## Article

# A Preliminary Study on Taoist Hermits in Contemporary China: From the Perspectives of Literary Works and We-Media

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## Abstract

This study directs its focus towards contemporary Taoist hermits in the Zhongnan Mountains and Huashan, located in Shaanxi Province, China, via the perspectives of literary works and we-media. Initially, it delves into the motivations underlying the adoption of a hermitic lifestyle among these Taoists. Subsequently, it analyzes the diverse means by which these hermits sustain their livelihoods in the mountainous regions. Next, it conducts an examination of the various religious practices and extraordinary experiences of these Taoist hermits. Also, this study contends that some Taoist hermits do not live in complete isolation from secular society; rather, they sustain a tangible connection with the external world. This study unveils a distinct contemporary Chinese Taoist group, which has hitherto been overlooked by previous scholarship that predominantly concentrated on the scrutiny of urban or rural Taoist groups in contemporary China.

**Keywords:** Chinese Taoism; hermit; Zhongnan Mountains; Huashan

## 1. Introduction

The developmental trajectory and evolutionary processes of Taoism in mainland China following the initiation of the reform and opening—up policy in 1978 have garnered substantial attention within the academic realm. Previous research themes have encompassed institutionalized Taoism in urban settings, the interplay between Taoism and various social factors, as well as the forms of Taoism prevalent among the populace, particularly in rural areas, which often integrate elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, and indigenous beliefs. (Guo 2003; Gong 2005; Miller 2006, pp. 101-122; Lai 2007; Ely 2009; Huang 2011; Dean 2014; Martin 2015)

Nonetheless, in contemporary China, there is a specific Taoist group that has attracted scant attention from the academic community. At present, thousands of hermits reside in the deep reaches of the Zhongnan Mountains (zhongnan shan 終南山) and the adjacent Huashan Mountains (huashan 華山) in Shaanxi Province. They lead a life detached from modern civilization, adopting a lifestyle reminiscent of the ancient Chinese. Among these hermits are a number of Taoists. In the late 20th century, the American scholar Bill Porter paid a visit to these hermits and subsequently penned the book *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits*. (Porter 1993) Since then, these hermit communities have gained widespread recognition. Nevertheless, the section in Porter's book depicting the lives of hermits, with Taoist hermits among them, bears more resemblance to narrative prose. As such, it cannot be deemed as academic research and discourse. In terms of academic research on China's hermit groups, prior scholars have primarily concentrated on the examination of these groups within the pre-modern era (Vervoorn 1990; Hu 2011; Han 2015; Wang 2014; He 2006), with little attention given to the study of hermit groups from the modern period onward. In recent years, the collaborative research of David A. Palmer and Elijah Siegler has centered on a cohort of Europeans and Americans who engaged in a temporary residence in Huashan, during which they

embraced a hermit-like lifestyle. (Palmer and Siegler, 2017) Nevertheless, these individuals diverge significantly from the genuine hermit communities in contemporary China.

It is worthy of note that subsequent to Bill Porter's endeavors, in the present century, some journalists, writers, along with individuals intrigued by traditional culture and hermit lifestyles, have paid visits to the hermits in Zhongnan Mountains and Huashan. Some of Them documented the lives of these hermits and published works presented in the form of news articles and prose. (Chen 2011; Zhang 2013; Zhang 2018) These books also document the lives of various Taoist hermits. Furthermore, a number of individuals, predominantly those with a penchant for hermit culture, document their conversations and interviews with these Taoist hermits and subsequently produce publicly-accessible videos. The published works, incorporating verbatim transcripts of dialogues or straightforward chronicles of the recluses' lives, maintain a commendable degree of objectivity, refraining from the imposition of overly subjective value-laden appraisals by the authors. As for the videos, they merely present a question-and-answer format, devoid of copious subjective evaluations of the creators. This article will utilize these sources, in conjunction with Bill Porter's publication, as primary materials to investigate the motivations underlying the adoption of a hermitic life, religious life, and experiences of Taoist hermits residing in the Zhongnan Mountains and Huashan.

## 2. The Motivations Underlying the Adoption of a Hermitic Lifestyle Among Contemporary Chinese Taoists

The initial inquiry this paper aims to delve into pertains to the motivations behind some contemporary Chinese Taoists' choice of secluding themselves in the Zhongnan Mountains and Huashan. As posited by Zhaoqi Han, within the context of ancient Chinese history, certain hermits opted for seclusion due to the prevalent corruption and iniquity within the officialdom. Disinclined to conform to unethical practices and constrained by the shackles of official life, they withdrew from the public sphere. Furthermore, since the Wei and Jin dynasties, the status of hermits had elevated significantly. Consequently, some individuals resorted to a life of seclusion as a strategic means to enhance their prestige. By doing so, they anticipated the possibility of attracting the attention of the imperial court and eventually securing a position within the government apparatus. (Han 2015, pp. 12-23) Evidently, contemporary Taoists do not embrace the life of seclusion for the aforementioned historical reasons. The majority of Taoists have already embarked on a religious path prior to becoming hermits and have no experience in officialdom. Furthermore, in modern-day society, the strategy of attaining fame and securing an official position through hermitage is no longer viable. At best, the act of hermitage might attract public attention. Indeed, on Chinese social media platforms like Douyin 抖音 and Xiaohongshu 小紅書, there exist certain individuals purporting to be "hermits" who upload videos sharing their fabricated hermit-like lives, merely to boost their popularity.

One of the primary reasons why some contemporary Chinese Taoists choose to seclude themselves in the Zhongnan Mountains and Huashan is their desire to eliminate worldly distractions, thus enabling them to focus more intently on religious cultivation. For example, a Taoist hermit with the monastic name Ruxin 如心 in the Zhongnan Mountains pointed out: "the environment in the mountains is relatively quiet. This tranquility allows for a more concentrated observation of the heaven, earth, sun, moon, and stars, thereby facilitating a better understanding of the natural environment. In contrast, the urban environment is often noisy and bustling, making it difficult for both the body and the mind to achieve a state of calmness." (Editorial Department of *Wendao* 2018a, pp. 140-141) Analogously, a Taoist hermit bearing the surname Wu and dwelling on the Zhongnan Mountains articulated that "within the secular sphere, the human mind remains in a state of constant restlessness. The profusion of mundane affairs is overwhelming, and this condition extends equally to Taoist temples and Buddhist shrines... It is indeed the case that individuals must pursue spiritual cultivation within the mountainous environment." (Zhongnanshan miaoyingtang 2025)

The choice of seclusion by these Taoists might represent a pursuit of certain living and spiritual cultivation tenets within Taoism. As Pan Xuanwei has noted, Taoism places significant emphasis on "life cultivation" (xiuming 修命), with particular regard for health preservation. Taoism posits that

the inability of individuals to attain longevity often stems from various desires and addictions that diverge from the serene, placid, and non—action—oriented mental state of the “Tao”. Such deviations harm both the body and the mind, thereby precluding the achievement of long life. Pan further contends that the minimalist lifestyle prevalent among the Taoist community in recent years bears resemblance to Taoism’s emphasis on “desire-lessness, emptiness, and tranquility”(wuyu xujing 無慾虛靜) (Pan 2017, pp. 55—56). Evidently, secluding oneself in the remote mountains serves as a means of actualizing such a “minimalist lifestyle”.

The appeal of the Zhongnan Mountains and Huashan as sites for the seclusion of numerous Taoists can be attributed to their perception of these locations as “sacred spaces.” This inclination towards seclusion in these areas is, to some degree, driven by what Mircea Eliade referred to as “the desire to enter a sacred space.” As posited by Eliade, human existence unfolds on two distinct planes: the sacred and the profane. The profane realm encompasses the quotidian affairs, consisting of elements that are mundane, haphazard, and predominantly of little significance. In contrast, the sacred sphere pertains to the supernatural, encompassing phenomena that are extraordinary, memorable, and momentous. The profane, characterized by its ephemeral and fragile nature, is replete with shadows, while the sacred, in its essence, is eternal, embodying substance and reality. This fundamental dichotomy serves as the very origin of religion. (Pals 2015, p. 232) Individuals who adhere to religious beliefs often experience a significant sense of separation. They contend that from the moment humans attain consciousness of their existence within the world, they are overwhelmed by a feeling of absence, accompanied by a profound sense of disconnection from the sacred realm, which they believe is their rightful and desired place. Consequently, they aspire not only to reflect the characteristics of the sacred realm but also to attain a genuine presence within it. (Pals 2015, p. 237)

For contemporary Chinese Taoists, the Zhongnan Mountains have long been closely and indissolubly associated with sacred religious figures and occurrences. As the Taoist hermit Ruxin has pointed out:

In the realm of Taoism, the Zhongnan Mountains hold a hallowed and venerated status. Historically, this was the very locale where Laozi expounded upon the *Tao Te Ching*. Moreover, the Zhongnan Mountains stand as the cradle of the Quanzhen School of Taoism. An adage within the Taoist community proclaims, “Throughout the ages, countless immortals have emerged from the Zhongnan Mountains.” As a result, in the eyes of Taoists, the Zhongnan Mountains occupy a position of utmost esteem. It is counted among the Thirty—six Grotto—Heavens and the Seventy—two Blissful Lands.....The Zhongnan Mountains gather the spiritual energy (lingqi 靈氣) of heaven and earth. Practicing cultivation here can bring peace and open—mindedness to one’s body and mind. I came here to live in seclusion and cultivate myself to obtain the spiritual energy of the Zhongnan Mountains. (Editorial Department of *Wendao* 2018b, p. 137; self-translation)

A Taoist surnamed Hou espouses a similar perspective: “When it comes to Taoist cultivation across the land, the Zhongnan Mountains are unparalleled. Since antiquity, the Zhongnan Mountains have been renowned as a celestial abode for immortals.” (Zhang, 2011, p. 84) “The Zhongnan Mountains are indeed one of the renowned mountains in Taoism. Historically, numerous Taoists have engaged in their spiritual cultivation here. A prime example is Wang Chongyang, the patriarch of the Quanzhen School.” (Editorial Department of *Wendao*, 2018a, p. 126) The aforementioned Taoist hermit Wu is firmly of the conviction that, in light of the fact that a great number of ancient sages once visited and dwelt in the Zhongnan Mountains, these mountains are imbued with an ethereal aura and arcane energy. (Zhongnanshan miaoyingtang 2025)

Similar to the Zhongnan Mountains, Huashan is also regarded by Taoists as a sacred place. The five peaks of Huashan have been interpreted as the five fingers of the cosmic Laozi. Taoists believe that ascending and delving into the mountains symbolizes the transformation of the body into an immortal state. Also, they hold the belief that since ancient times, immortals have often been present on Huashan. (Palmer and Siegler 2017, pp. 50-51)



These mountains are often closely intertwined with legends of the visits of some Taoist patriarchs (who were subsequently deified) and of the appearances of immortals. This long—standing association has substantially enhanced their sacred stature in the perception of Taoists. As a result, secluding oneself in these mountains is regarded as a means of entering a sacred space and re-establishing a connection to the sacred traditions of the past. As noted by previous scholars, urban Taoism in contemporary China is experiencing a degree of commercialization and secularization. (Huang 2010; Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 12; Chau 2016) This scenario may instill in Taoists who initially reside in urban areas a more acute “sense of disconnection from the sacred realm.” Consequently, it compels them to embark on a quest for a sacred space beyond the urban boundaries. For instance, a Taoist surnamed Sun residing on Zhongnan Mountain asserted that subsequent to the Industrial Revolution, the sanctity of the Earth has been impaired. As a result, attaining accomplishments in cultivation within the secular realm has become arduous. Consequently, he was compelled to opt for a reclusive life in the remote mountains for his cultivation pursuits. (Liahuo shenyoun 2024)

Not all Taoists opt for seclusion in the mountains out of their own volition. Some are compelled to do so due to certain inescapable circumstances. For example, a female Taoist priest surnamed Jiang has once secretly taken vows as a Taoist priest at the foot of Huashan, unbeknownst to her family. Her family, upon discovering her whereabouts, forcefully retrieved her and brought her back home. However, she managed to escape and return to Huashan. In the past, Huashan had a regulation that forbade female Taoist priests from residing on the mountain. Under the cover of night, she scaled the mountain and concealed herself in a cave. Fearing discovery, she remained deep within the cave. Only at night would she stealthily emerge to dig potatoes and pick eggplants from the vegetable plots outside the cave, and this way of life persisted for a long time. (Zhang 2011, p. 237) Similarly, a Taoist priest surnamed Cao was compelled to seclude herself in the remote mountains. Since 1959, numerous religious practitioners on Huashan had been forced down the mountain to join production teams. In order to remain undetected and continue her spiritual cultivation, she found a large rock niche deep in the mountains, where she lived in seclusion for several decades. (Zhang 2011, p. 260) Even when the circumstances changed later, rendering it unnecessary for them to deliberately conceal themselves to avoid detection, they have become so accustomed to the hermitic life that they continued to lead such a lifestyle. It can be discerned that the objective of both types of Taoists in their seclusion in the mountains is to pursue a more propitious environment for religious cultivation. This is in stark contrast to ancient hermits, who chose seclusion either out of disgust for the officialdom or for the utilitarian purpose of attaining fame.

Undeniably, there are some Taoists for whom seclusion is not motivated by the intention of evading something or concealing themselves. Instead, they are impelled to retreat to the mountainous areas by factors external to their spiritual cultivation endeavors. A female Taoist priest Rushi 如是 asserted that the principal objective of her seclusion in the Zhongnan Mountains was to administer treatment for her father’s ailments. Her father was afflicted with a diverse range of diseases. Propelled by her deep-seated filial piety, she resolved to secede from the urban environment, leading her father and family to the Zhongnan Mountains. The intentions were to offer a serene setting for her father’s recovery and to facilitate her in collecting herbs on the mountains for the alleviation of her father’s infirmities. (Shenqing biaobai 2019)

### 3. The Religious Life and Experience of Taoist Hermits

Despite the assertions of these Taoist hermits regarding their pursuit of the spiritual and enigmatic domain of eternal life and immortality, they remain, fundamentally, ordinary individuals possessing mortal bodies. In their secluded existence within mountainous regions, they are inevitably required to address fundamental survival necessities, including food, clothing, and shelter. Within contemporary urban institutionalized Chinese Taoist communities, including Taoist temples, various strategies are employed to generate financial support for the sustenance of Taoist priests. For instance, adherents may voluntarily contribute property and financial resources to these temples,

thereby materializing their reverence for the sanctity of Taoism. Furthermore, Taoist priests may engage in specific professional religious activities that yield economic returns. Additionally, Taoist temples may engage in commercial enterprises, such as tourism and publishing, to secure revenue. (Luo 2007, p. 61-2) For these Taoist hermits residing in the mountains, it is evident that some methods of earning a livelihood in urban environments are not applicable.

Some Taoist hermits opt to lead a self—sustaining life through the utilization of the slash—and—burn agricultural approach, emulating the practices of ancient peasants. For instance, a Taoist priest with the surname Tan indicates that he sustains himself solely through cultivating the land in the mountains. (Zhang 2011, p. 172)

Some of these Taoists exhibit a relatively diverse array of livelihood—seeking strategies. For instance, the Taoist priest Hou not only cultivates vegetables on the mountain as a means of attaining self—sufficiency but also descends the mountain to procure food supplies. Additionally, on some occasions, he embarks on itinerant journeys to solicit alms. (Editorial Department of *Wendao* 2018a, p. 112) As articulated by the Taoist Ruxin, a necessary precondition for Taoists to descend the mountain to acquire food supplies is the accumulation of ample savings prior to their seclusion. (Editorial Department of *Wendao* 2018b, p. 138)

Furthermore, some Taoists established a remunerated labor—based association with tourists and visitors as a means of sustaining their livelihoods. For instance, the Taoist priest surnamed Xie noted that the Taoist practitioners residing on the mountain would disburse labor remuneration to the individuals at the foot of the mountain. In return, these individuals would transport supplies up the mountain. (Porter 1993, p. 67) Tuanjie Chen has observed that on Huashan, a distinctive group, namely porters (tiaofu 挑夫), has persisted over time. These porters are tasked with transporting supplies from the base of the mountain to the locations where hermits dwell, thereby offering material support to the hermits. In exchange for their labor, they are compensated monetarily. Given their typically disadvantaged economic circumstances, this occupation serves as their principal means of livelihood. (Chen 2013, pp. 109-115) Evidently, to a certain degree, the community of Taoist hermits and the group responsible for transporting supplies up the mountain have attained a scenario of mutual benefit.

Moreover, as the Taoist Ruxin has pointed out, some lay believers also make donations of food and daily necessities to Taoist hermits. (Editorial Department of *Wendao* 2018b, p. 138) On Zhongnan Mountain, there is a Taoist priest bearing the surname Huang. Should he refrain from descending the mountain for an extended period, his devotees will supply him with sustenance and daily necessities. (Chen 2013, p. 45) Presumably, the intention behind such actions is akin to that of the donation behavior of urban Taoist believers, embodying a materialization of their devout religious belief. Furthermore, as Bill Porter has indicated, given that the Chinese have always held the past in high esteem, and hermits have conserved the most fundamental element of that past—its spiritual heritage. Consequently, within the Chinese context, hermits have consistently remained among the most highly revered individuals. (Porter 1993, p. 23) Undoubtedly, this has augmented the religious charisma of those Taoists who have embraced a hermitic life in the eyes of the believers. In the context of commercialization and secularization of urban Taoism in contemporary China, Taoists who are able to reside in isolation within mountainous regions and engage in solitary ascetic practices tend to garner greater respect from adherents.

Having resolved the fundamental issues of survival, the daily lives of Taoist hermits are predominantly shaped by some conventional Taoist practices. For instance, the Taoist priests Hou and Ruxin often engage in reciting scriptures and sitting in meditation. (Editorial Department of *Wendao* 2018a; 2018b) A Taoist priest with the surname Hu in the Zhongnan Mountains expounded that those in seclusion within the mountains do engage in some regular practices, such as the reading of scriptures, similar to their counterparts in urban areas. Nevertheless, they do not rigidly adhere to a strictly regimented procedure. This is because the very act of seclusion is aimed at pursuing what Taoism terms as “carefree and unrestrained existence (xiaoyao 逍遥)”. (Qinling Zhongnan shanju 2024c) Both Hou and Ruxin are followers of the Quanzhen School of Taoism. As a result, they attach

great importance to some classics of the Quanzhen School. For example, the Taoist priest Hou adheres strictly to the precepts outlined in Wang Chongyang's *Fifteen Theses on Establishing the Teaching* for his cultivation. (Editorial Department of Wendao 2018a, p. 112) He also claims that cultivating in accordance with these precepts represents a return to tradition. "Throughout the generations, the patriarchs of the Quanzhen School have all practiced cultivation in this way. The core admonition they left behind is to cultivate in tranquility, which is precisely what is expounded in the *Fifteen Theses on Establishing the Teaching*. Therefore, in our current cultivation, we must not deviate from the path set by our patriarchs. We must never abandon the traditions handed down by our predecessors." (Editorial Department of Wendao 2018a, p. 125)

Beyond their routine spiritual practices, Taoist hermits undertake some Taoist health—preservation techniques and martial arts. (Editorial Department of Wendao 2018b, p. 147; Zhang 2011, p. 89) Given that Taoism places a high premium on life and endeavors to achieve physical longevity, a number of practice methods are intertwined with disease prevention and treatment, as well as physical fitness enhancement and life—span elongation. (Xiao and Cheng 2020, p.55) Due to the harsh environment in the remote mountains, where accessing medical treatment is arduous, Taoists place even greater emphasis on fortifying their physical strength through these health—preservation techniques. Taoist martial arts is not merely a self—defensive combat technique. It is, rather, a means of both fortifying the physique and preserving well—being. (Xiao and Cheng 2020, p.55) For those Taoists who lead a secluded life in the mountains, engaging in combat with others appears to be an unnecessary endeavor. Instead, their practice of martial arts is predominantly oriented towards the goal of enhancing physical fitness. Furthermore, playing musical instruments such as the guqin (a plucked string instrument) and the xiao (a vertical bamboo flute) is also a daily activity of Taoist hermits. (Zhang 2011, p. 163; p. 176)

Interviews conducted with a cohort of Taoist hermits reveal that some practitioners engage in the practice known as "abstaining from speech" (zhiyu 止語). For example, the Taoist priests surnamed Wang, Hou and Sheng, who dwell in seclusion within the Zhongnan Mountains, have engaged in the practice of this particular cultivation approach. (Zhang 2011, p. 82; p. 166; (Liahuo shenyou 2022b) This practice, defined as the intentional maintenance of a non-verbal state, may appear superfluous for hermits residing in remote mountainous areas, where they ostensibly sever all human interactions. However, there are several compelling reasons for their adherence to this practice. Firstly, the presence of multiple hermits in the same mountainous region makes incidental encounters unavoidable. Secondly, the media's interest in these hermits has led to an influx of curious visitors, further complicating their efforts to maintain solitude. Consequently, to minimize external disruptions, these hermits find it necessary to consciously practice restraint in their verbal communication. Despite refraining from initiating verbal communication, these hermit Taoists will still resort to written means, such as pen and paper, to interact with others. For instance, the Taoist priest Hou once responded to the inquiries of visitors by writing on paper. (Zhang 2011, pp. 83-4)

The reasons why these Taoist hermits engaged in the practice of "refraining from speech" are largely to eliminate, as much as possible, the distractions of miscellaneous thoughts through silence, and to facilitate more effective introspection. As Hou notes, "The practice of refraining from speech aims primarily to mitigate distractions. In the course of spiritual cultivation, extraneous thoughts may surface, potentially impinging upon the purity of one's cultivation endeavors. Some individuals undertake this practice to evade such distractions. Moreover, there are those who engage in it to conduct a more profound exploration and comprehension of their inner selves." (Zhang 2018, p. 123-4) Hou further posits that the advantages of practicing abstinence from speech in spiritual cultivation are corroborated by specific passages within the *Tao Te Ching*, as exemplified by the statement "many words lead to failure" (duoyan shuqiong 多言數窮). (Zhang 2011, p. 82)

It is worthy of note that grain abstention (bigu 辟穀) represents a religious practice that has been widely embraced within the community of Taoist hermits. The practices of grain abstention were prevalent in the ancient Chinese Taoist Immortalist tradition. Ancient Taoists envisioned immortals as beings as light as sparrows, with fragrant and pure bodies, resembling maidens, able to soar

through clouds and wander freely in mountains and rivers. To achieve immortality, one was thought to need to expel impurities and consume refined, light—weight substances. Consumption of fish, meat, grains, and vegetables was believed to cause weight gain due to fat accumulation after digestion, along with excretory activities considered unclean. Taoist texts thus state, “To live long, cleanse the intestines; to avoid death, keep the intestines free of dregs.” Consequently, grain abstention became methods for cultivating immortality. (Hu 2009, p. 385) Prior to practicing grain abstention, Taoists typically ingested medicinal substances such as mallows, sesame, lard, and castor beans. These substances serve to lubricate the intestines and facilitate defecation, preventing food from adhering to the intestines and stomach and averting toxicity from feces. Grain abstention generally follows a gradual process of reducing food intake. When experiencing hunger, one might consume small quantities of medicinal broth prepared from ingredients including sesame, black soybeans, dates, chestnuts, tuckahoe, polygonatum rhizome, asparagus root, ginseng, biota orientalis twig, and honey. (Hu 2009, p. 386)

A significant number of these Taoist practitioners adhered to the practice of grain abstention. A Taoist hermit with the surname Xue once pointed out that certain Taoist practitioners engaged in grain abstention as a response to the challenges of food scarcity in mountainous regions, with the intention of minimizing their food consumption. (Porter 1993, p. 80) A Taoist hermit on the Zhongnan Mountains, bearing the religious appellation Zhenru 真如, averred that he had, at one time, initiated the practice of grain abstention as a consequence of food scarcity. (Zhenru jiang zhihui 2025) This indicates that the limited availability of food served as a motivating factor for hermits to adopt the practice of grain abstention as part of their spiritual development. One of the primary instinctual impetuses for ancient Chinese Taoists to engage in the practice of grain abstention was to address the potential occurrence of famines in the world. (Gai 2005, p. 400) This motivational factor, in the context of food scarcity, bears resemblance to that of some Taoist recluses’ decision to adopt the practice of grain abstention. Nevertheless, in contemporary China, the latent crisis of famine, which was prevalent in ancient times, no longer exists. Instead, the recluses have proactively opted for a lifestyle characterized by potential food insufficiency.

Conceivably, as a consequence of the limited availability of food in the secluded mountainous regions, some Taoists embraced a more radical and ascetic variant of grain abstention. For instance, on Huashan, a hermit Taoist identified by the surname Wang is reported to have sustained himself exclusively on pine needles and spring water for upwards of twenty days. In a similar vein, another hermit Taoist, known by the surname Li, asserted that he engaged in the practice of grain abstention within a cave. This practice, according to his account, endured for over eighty days, during which his only intake was limited to spring water. (Zhang 2011, 248) Evidently, the dietary intake of these hermit Taoists deviated significantly from the conventional practice of grain abstention, demonstrating a more extreme degree of monotony. In certain cases, their sustenance was limited solely to water, with a complete abstention from any form of solid food. In light of modern medical knowledge, this form of ascetic practice seemingly transcends the physiological limits that the human body can endure. This inevitably gives rise to doubts among visitors regarding its authenticity. (Zhang 2011, 248-249)

It is noteworthy that not all Taoist hermits lead a life of permanent seclusion on the mountains, completely cut off from the rest of the world. Instead, some of them descend the mountains at irregular intervals to engage with secular society. Beyond the aforementioned purpose of procuring essential survival supplies, one of the most prevalent activities for these Taoist hermits during their descents from the mountains is to provide medical treatment to others, leveraging their knowledge of “Taoist Medicine.” (daoyi 道醫) In the context of Taoist beliefs, the attainment of immortality is deemed contingent upon the elimination of physical ailments. Consequently, Taoism draws upon certain elements of Traditional Chinese Medicine to formulate its unique system of “Taoist Medicine.” (Lalvani 2023, p. 51) The Taoist surnamed Hao (Zhang, 2011, p. 228), the Taoist surnamed Li (Zhang, 2011, p. 233), and the previously mentioned Taoist Hou (Editorial Department of Wendao, 2018a, p. 117) have all descended the mountains to practice Taoist medicine for the treatment of



patients. During the process of providing medical care, Taoist Hou also takes the opportunity to disseminate Taoist ideas, such as the teachings of the *Tao Te Ching* (Editorial Department of *Wendao*, 2018a, p. 119). A female Taoist priestess bearing the Taoist name Yuyaozi 玉瑤子 frequently provided free medical treatments using Taoist medical practices, whether for visitors or when she herself descended the mountain. (Shenyou liahuo 2022) In a similar vein, on the Zhongnan Mountains, there is a Taoist hermit by the surname of Lei, who regularly employs Taoist medical techniques to render medical treatment to visitors without charge. (Liahuo shenyou 2022a)

Many Taoist hermits who apply Taoist medical techniques to treat visitors or descend from the mountains to provide medical services assert that their impetus stems from the altruistic intent to offer free assistance. For instance, a Taoist hermit surnamed Yan on the Zhongnan Mountains articulated, “My aspiration is to extend aid to a greater number of individuals. Given that the majority of contemporary medical practices have been commercialized, I am determined to alleviate the suffering of more people through my endeavors and my own hands.” (Qinling zhongnan shanju 2024b) The aforesaid Yuyaozi likewise expounded on parallel perspectives. (Shenyou liahuo 2022) The conduct whereby they render Taoist medical services to others without charge might be an enactment of the ideology of “the salvation of others” (duren 度人) in Chinese Taoism. In the early stage, Taoism adapted its focus from self-redemption to the salvation of others in an effort to attract adherents and broaden its religious influence. During the Six Dynasties, the emergence of the Lingbao 靈寶 School, which promoted the principle of “the Taoist way values life and possesses boundless compassion to save all beings,” (xiandao gui sheng, wuliang duren 仙道貴生, 無量度人) significantly enhanced the prominence of the notion of assisting others in attaining immortality. As a result, a collection of Taoist texts centered on the theme of “the salvation of others” was produced and began to circulate widely. (Huang 2005, p. 55) Evidently, were they merely to seclude themselves deep in the mountains, focusing solely on self—cultivation, it would prove arduous to actualize the Taoist concept of “the salvation of others”.

In the interview records compiled by Jianfeng Zhang, several Taoist hermits reported experiencing some supernatural and enigmatic phenomena. For instance, the Taoist priest Wang asserted that a white fox, which he believed had achieved spiritual enlightenment, frequently accompanied him and was capable of verbal communication. This fox would appear and disappear unpredictably, often manifesting suddenly. (Zhang 2011, p. 163) Another Taoist priest Hao expressed the belief that the herbal plants found in the mountains possessed spiritual essence, and he claimed that the vegetation could exhibit movement. He recounted an incident in which he harvested several tuberous roots of *Polygonum multiflorum* and placed them in a basin, only to find them missing upon turning around. (Zhang 2011, p. 228) Additionally, Taoist priest Li recounted an experience during which he was practicing grain abstention in a cave; during this time, two large pythons approached and remained in close proximity for an extended period, seemingly unwilling to depart. Local residents were convinced that these pythons were acting as guardians for Taoist priest Li. (Zhang 2011, p. 233)

These exceptional experiences could potentially be attributed to random occurrences, memory discrepancies, illusion, or other comparable factors, leading to their misinterpretation as supernatural phenomena. Some Taoist hermits exhibit a skeptical stance regarding the genuineness of these mysterious phenomena. To exemplify, a Taoist surnamed Liu posited that these so-called mysterious phenomena are no more than illusions. Nonetheless, he conceded that such phenomena can only be experienced when an individual’s spiritual cultivation has ascended to a particular state. (Qinling zhongnan shanju 2024a) The aforementioned Taoist priest surnamed Hu, notwithstanding his acknowledgement of the authenticity of these arcane phenomena, posits that in numerous instances, they are merely illusions. Alternatively, they are not, in their essence, arcane phenomena at all; rather, hermits subconsciously and insistently categorize them as such. (Qinling Zhongnan shanju 2024c) The authenticity of these narratives remains a subject of debate. Nevertheless, as previously expounded, from the perspective of these Taoists, their hermitage sites are regarded as sacred spaces, which Mircea Eliade characterized as the dwellings of deities (Pals, 2015, p. 232). Consequently, they

instinctively believe that everything within these spaces, including both plants and animals, is imbued with divinity.

## 4. Conclusions

The above discourse delves into multiple dimensions of Taoist hermits residing in the Zhongnan Mountains and Huashan, including their motivations for seclusion, methods of making a living, religious devotions, and mystical encounters. Evidently, a segment of Taoist hermits opt to sequester themselves in these two mountainous regions because they perceive the Zhongnan Mountains and Huashan as sacred domains within the Taoist faith, convinced that these locales provide a more conducive environment for attaining spiritual achievements in their cultivation endeavors. On the other hand, some Taoists, propelled by a confluence of circumstances, are impelled to withdraw to these locales.. In essence, both groups of Taoists retreat to the mountains with the aim of securing a more propitious venue for cultivation. This stands in stark contrast to the ancient hermits, who either shunned the officialdom out of disdain or resorted to seclusion as a means to achieve fame, driven by utilitarian motives.

Evidently, these Taoist hermits employ diverse livelihood strategies. Some achieve self-sufficiency through farming; others descend the mountains to purchase, beg for supplies, hire locals to transport provisions for a fee, or rely on donations from lay followers attracted by their religious charisma. Their religious practices generally adhere to common Taoist methods. However, practices like grain abstention may be more extreme, driven by food scarcity in the mountains or an ascetic pursuit. These hermits maintain some contact with the outside world. Besides descending the mountains to obtain supplies, they also venture down to assist others in treating ailments, in line with the Taoist concept of “saving others”. Given the sacred status of the Zhongnan and Huashan Mountains to them, where all elements are deemed divine, they firmly believe in the existence of supernatural and mysterious phenomena.

Of course, given the presence of thousands of Taoist hermits both in the Zhongnan Mountains and on Huashan, with respect to inquiries like the reasons behind their seclusion, the nature of their religious way of life, and the character of their religious experiences, this study can merely glean some common responses applicable to these hermits from the extant materials. The content presented in this study is severely restricted. This situation calls for a greater number of scholars to carry out more in-depth field investigations of the Taoist hermits in the Zhongnan Mountains and Huashan in the future.

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