Introduction

This book tells a story about Daoism’s encounter with modernity and its modern transformation by tracing the life and career of Chen Yingning 陈撄宁 (1880–1969) in early twentieth-century Shanghai. In his day, Chen was arguably the most influential theoretician and practitioner of the Daoist self-cultivation practice known as “inner alchemy” (neidan 内丹). He led a group of fellow lay practitioners in promoting Daoist practices as techniques for ensuring personal health and healing, as venues for pursuing individual spirituality, and as ways of forging cultural self-identity, building community, and even strengthening the nation. Amid the social and political crises of the first three decades of the Republican era, the pursuit of Daoist inner alchemy by urban lay practitioners became intricately linked with the rise of nationalist and scientific discourse, the revolution in social and gender relations, the increase in state control and reform of religions, and the proliferation of mass media in the modernizing urban metropolis of Shanghai and beyond. This encounter with the ideologies and processes of modernity helped transform, reshape, and continue the Daoist tradition of self-cultivation in the early twentieth century.

My interest in telling this story was inspired by my reading of two very different texts dealing with the state of China’s indigenous religion in modern times. A few years ago, I happened on a vignette of
a street scene in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation in the early 1940s, as depicted by the incomparable Eileen Chang:

A Daoist priest is begging for alms along the street. Dressed in a black Daoist robe that has faded to a yellowish hue, the Daoist wears his hair in a dusty topknot on his head, not unlike the upswept coiffure worn by a modern lady. His narrow slit eyes, like his hairdo, slant up and backward. He wears the expression of a wretched woman. It's hard to tell his age. Because of malnutrition, his lanky gaunt frame makes him look like a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old lad who has outgrown himself.

“Tuh, tuh.” He beats a piece of hollow bamboo resting along the length of his forearm. The sound is like a pendulum that marks a different kind of time, like the inching motion of the setting sunray on an ancient monastery located deep in the mountains. Like space, time also has some expensive segments, as well as large patches of barrenness. There are segments of time, of which you cannot buy even an inch with ten thousand pieces of gold. As for those who would sell their whole life spans just to earn a bite, their time is worthless (even if they were willing to sell their next life, the future of their posterity!).

Now the Daoist, carrying with him all that surplus yet worthless time comes to this high-speed metropolis with its shiny billboards, shops, and stores, with its cars blowing their horns. He is a man from some ancient romance in which he dreams the Yellow Millet dream. Yet he has merely slumbered without ever dreaming that dream and awakens only to feel ever more at a loss.

Eileen Chang then describes the profound indifference of urban shoppers to the Daoist beggar, as he perfunctorily kowtows to the shops in equally profound indifference to others and his surroundings.¹

Chang’s depiction of the Daoist beggar has since been read by many of her fans and scholars of modern China alike as a common street scene in modernizing Shanghai, as well as of all other modernizing Chinese cities. Yet it is precisely the seeming ordinariness of this scene and the serendipity of her use of the Daoist beggar as an icon that intrigue me. For into this simple street encounter, Chang embedded complex layers of emotions. On one level, the image of the uncouth Daoist beggar, like the other mundane things Chang observed on her shopping trip to her neighborhood market, evokes the quotidian rhythm of everyday life in the city, which quietly but
stubbornly continued despite the Japanese occupation and other tribulations history had hurtled at it. There is something persistent and unchanging about the scene. It was her sense of being connected to the daily pace of this tenacious reality that inspired Eileen Chang’s depiction and instilled in her a quiet sense of confidence about the future of her city and her nation.2

Yet on another level, Chang’s sympathy for the plight of the Daoist beggar is imbued with a subtle nostalgia for a timeless and transcendent past, encapsulated in the remote Daoist mountain temple fading in the setting sun, of which the Daoist cleric was a metonymic reminder. Buried in the nostalgia is an unmistakable feeling of both temporal and spatial dislocation and incoherence. The Daoist past set in the rustic and dreamlike mountain and embodied in the unkempt and undernourished Daoist beggar appears jarringly at odds with modern Shanghai’s glitzy neon lights, department stores, automobiles, and other trappings of modernity. The dramatic juxtaposition serves only to highlight the apparent incongruities between Daoism and modernity. Chang’s Daoist beggar—disheveled, malnourished, frail, and, most of all, indifferent to himself and everything around him—appears to symbolize the general decline of Daoism in modern China.

More important, the literary imaginary Chang created resonates with established conventional wisdom about the decay of Daoism, which has been shaped by a combination of influences, from Song neo-Confucian historiography to the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionaries’ views of Chinese religions to the modern Chinese states’ religious policies. Chang’s seemingly serendipitous use of the Daoist beggar as an icon of an irretrievable past reflects this persistent vision of Daoist decay in late imperial China. Although recent scholarship has begun to dispel this view by revealing a more complex picture of Daoism in the late imperium, the Daoist decline thesis, first perpetuated by the Song neo-Confucians, still lingers among many scholars of Daoism and modern China. This thesis perceives Daoism as a grand philosophical system developed by sages and philosophers during the pre-Qin golden age. Daoism steadily declined in both influence and power beginning with the Song dynasty, and the deterioration accelerated after the seventeenth century.3 Typical
of this Confucian critique are the comments of the Southern Song scholar Ma Duanlin 馬端臨 (1254–1323). In his widely read and influential Wenxian tongkao 文獻通考, a bibliographic review of pre-Yuan literary and philosophical writings and compilations, Ma characterized Daoism and its practices as being “a promiscuous hodgepodge” (za’er duoduan 雜而多端). Following earlier Song literati critics of Daoism such as Ouyang Xiu 欧陽修 (1007–72) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), Ma defined Daoism narrowly as a system of moral and philosophical teachings about the attainment of spiritual purity, tranquility, and non-action (qingjing wuwei 清靜無為). He dismissed the cult of divine immortals (shenxian 神仙) and rejected other practices often associated with Daoism, such as refining cultivation (lianyang 煉養), drug ingestion (fushi 服食), gymnastics (daoyin 導引), and talismans (fulu 符籙), as being “vulgar and shallow” (biqian 鄙淺) and “deviating far and wide from the true teachings of Laozi.”

Ma’s elitist view of Daoism as primarily a moral philosophy influenced many later generations of scholars. Privileging the early classics by Laozi and Zhuangzi, Ma’s interpretation saw the history of Daoism from the medieval era on as a process of decline and decay, a liturgical corruption of the classicism of the pre-Qin era. Widely cited by many post-Song scholars in their discussions of Daoism, his remarks have become a standard critique of Daoism. In this critique, post-Song Daoist institutions and practices, which flourished by incorporating Confucian and Buddhist teachings, were naturally seen as derivative, and not important or worthwhile. This elitist focus on the early philosophical writings as the core of Daoism has directed much scholarly attention to the classical period at the expense of the late imperial and modern periods of Daoist history.

In the early sixteenth century, the neo-Confucian critics of Daoism found an unlikely ally in the Jesuit missionaries in China. In their efforts to define themselves vis-à-vis the Confucian orthodoxy and other indigenous cults and practices, Matteo Ricci and others extolled the official state ideology of Confucianism, characterizing it as a system of moral wisdom, while describing Daoism and other popular indigenous rituals and practices as “deluded beliefs” (mixin 迷信), a term they introduced to the Chinese. As their perception of
Daoism gradually gained acceptance among the Europeans of the Age of Enlightenment and then through them among the modern Chinese intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Daoism came to be seen as a backward and unenlightened mishmash of irrational beliefs and practices.5

For many Chinese scholars of Daoism, the decline of Daoism was hastened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the forces of modernity. In a recent major survey of Daoist history, Ren Jiyu and several other leading Chinese scholars write of the Daoist decline in the late Qing period as part of the general and pervasive decay of the Qing empire. They attribute the decline to such factors as the state-led antisuperstition campaigns and other secularizing projects. This view is shared by the authors of another recent multivolume history of Daoism.6

The Daoist decline thesis may be more muted in the West, but it persists in western writings on Daoist history, where it is often couched in more nuanced arguments centering on state persecution and sectarianism, such as those advanced by early sinologists like J. J. M. de Groot. Writing at a time of intense and often violent cultural clashes between China and the West, de Groot held that many of his European compatriots entertained a romantic notion about Chinese religious tolerance, first popularized by Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire whose knowledge of China, ironically, came from the writings of Jesuit missionaries like Matteo Ricci. In light of popular antimissionary sentiments, which erupted as the Boxer uprising throughout north China in 1900, de Groot vowed to “endeavour to show that the favorable opinion entertained by the world at large about the tolerance and liberality of China on religion is purely chimerical.” Having culled the Chinese classics, penal codes, court decrees, and recorded customs, de Groot concluded that state persecution of and ideological hostility toward non-Confucian religions and cults had been extensive and rampant throughout Chinese history. Implicit in de Groot’s study is the thesis of Chinese religious decline and destruction by imperial state persecution and sectarianism.7

Although few scholars now share de Groot’s view of societal and state attitudes toward religion in China, subtler and more nuanced
variations of the decline thesis still persist. In a popular primer on Daoism, Kristofer Schipper, the esteemed scholar of Daoism and an ordained Daoist cleric, rectifies de Groot’s self-serving argument by stressing the role of western influence in the “progressive decline of Daoism over the last centuries.” For Schipper, the destruction of Daoism, which began in the sixteenth century, must also be understood as the result of a series of collusions, first between the proselytizing Jesuits and the Ming Confucian officials, then among European-influenced Chinese intellectuals and the modern state, and finally with Marxist-inspired socialist state policies and the mass movement of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Yet even his admirable rectification of the historical record accepts the thesis of Daoist decline in the face of advancing modernity in China.8

But was Daoism really in decline in modern China, as embodied by the sickly Daoist beggar? Had Daoist monasteries, lineages, ideas, techniques, and practices become as irrelevant to the modern world as the Daoist beggar appeared to be in the modern metropolis of Shanghai? How did contemporary Daoist practitioners experience the modern world as symbolized by Shanghai, with all its new physical, social, and cultural trappings? How did they envision and explain their encounter with modernity in their own daily life?

Very different responses to these questions emerged in the books, articles, and poems by Chen Yingning and his fellow practitioners of Daoist inner alchemy that appeared in the journals they published in Shanghai from the 1920s to the 1940s. In their writings, I encounter a different picture of what modern Daoism meant and how it fared during the same decades when Eileen Chang was growing up and writing her classic sketches of modern Shanghai. I can still recall my own sense of wonder and excitement more than a decade ago when I first read a poem composed by one of Chen Yingning’s fellow practitioners of inner alchemy:

One
Marry the Bridegroom Golden Lad in a timely way;
Betroth the Beautiful Maid at the age of sixteen.
Quietly wait to sequester the Sweetheart in the
Golden Chamber,
And in ten moons the Pearly Fetus matures into a Fragrant Infant.

Two
Nourish the Fetus of Peace and Beauty to come out of the Dark Pass.
Fear not the nine years of toil and hardship.
Ply to and fro to bathe in Lake Kunming,
Await quietly the Scarlet Summons to depart the Mud Ball.

The poet was Chang Zunxian 常遵先 (1873–?), a devoted practitioner of the ancient Daoist meditative technique of inner alchemy. In this verse, inspired by a Ming adept’s poem on the practice, Chang displayed his classical learning and his erudition in inner alchemy. Drawing on a rich repertoire of inner alchemic metaphors for the vital energies (the Beautiful Maid and the Golden Lad), Chang discussed his own sense of the delicate timing needed for uniting, refining, and perfecting these vitalities within the location in the lower abdomen known as the Golden Chamber for the goal of gestating and engendering a new self. He further affirmed that through persistent meditative care and nurture, figuratively described as “bathing,” the newborn “Fetus of Beauty and Peace” would answer the “Scarlet Summons” of the celestial realm and ascend from the “Pass of Darkness” in the lower abdomen through the Mud Ball within the head to achieve the ultimate freedom of an immortal.

When he was not writing about his inner alchemic practice or doing editorial work for The Biweekly to Promote the Good (Yangshan banyue kan 揚善半月刊), which was published every two weeks in the city, Chang ran a small private clinic and practiced Chinese medicine for a living in the bustling South Market, right off the Bund. Originally from Xiangtan in Hunan province, Chang came from a literati family steeped in Confucian learning. Well versed in the Classics and widely traveled, he joined the anti-Qing revolutionary movement in the early 1900s and served as a ranking official in the first Republican regime in Guangdong after 1911. But when the northern warlords seized the reins of power in the new Republican
government, Chang left his post and retired to his home in Xiangtan. While observing the mourning rites for his father in the late 1920s, Chang found himself the target of the communist-led local peasant movement in Hunan. Like many other Hunanese literati, Chang had to flee for his life. He finally settled in the booming city of Shanghai, where he turned to practicing Chinese medicine for a living. In his spare time, Chang engaged in Daoist inner alchemic meditation, wrote and published poems and articles on the practice, and served as one of the contributing editors for the biweekly.

And Chang was not alone. Among the tens of thousands who came to seek shelter and food, fame and fortune, in the expanding treaty port city of Shanghai, many followed a life centered on the Daoist inner alchemic meditation and other ascetic practices, even though most of them were not ordained or consecrated Daoist clerics (daoshi 道士). For almost a decade, from 1933 to the early 1940s, many of these lay practitioners were the readers, writers, contributors, and editors of the Yangshan biweekly and its successor, *The Immortals’ Way Monthly* (Xiandao yuebao 仙道月報). Using these journals as their forum, they wrote articles and poems, exchanged correspondence, and offered testimonials on the subject of Daoism and inner alchemy. Many of their fellow readers and practitioners enthusiastically read and responded to their publications.

Under the leadership of Chen Yingning, Chang and this group of Shanghai practitioners actively promoted traditional Daoist teachings and inner alchemy as “Immortals’ Learning” (xianxue 仙學). In the eight years from 1933 to the Japanese takeover of the foreign concessions in Shanghai in December 1941, Chen and his fellow advocates published these two journals, which became public forums where they and likeminded practitioners of Daoist inner alchemy pushed for a wider and more public understanding of Daoist history and geography and Daoism’s contribution to Chinese civilization. They vigorously promoted a national organization to link the various Daoist sects and lineages, as well as ordained clergy and lay practitioners. They established and operated a small but popular seminary in the French Concession to teach and disseminate the Daoist classics and inner alchemic meditation practice. As they sought to make the Daoist self-cultivation tradition more appealing and acces-
possible to their readers and followers in and beyond Shanghai, Chen and his colleagues reformulated traditional teachings and practices of Daoist inner alchemy by adopting and appropriating ideas from the modern discourses of nationalism and science then spreading in China. Over the eight-year period, they actively promoted this reinvented Daoist inner alchemy through the publication and distribution of these journals, personal communication and travels, and meetings of the journal editors, their readers, followers, and practitioners. Out of these connections and activities, a sense of community was engendered and strengthened. A network of inner alchemical practitioners connected through their common interest and ties to the journals gradually emerged, with a membership that extended from Shanghai to Chongqing, from Luoyang to Luzon in the Philippines.

After the greater Shanghai area fell to the Japanese in the autumn of 1937, Chen and other members of the lay-centered inner alchemic network withdrew to the International Settlement and the French Concession. From inside these zones in the city, which were known as the Solitary Isle (gudao 孤島), they endured, continuing their publication of the monthly and their operation of the journal-supported network of Daoist inner alchemy practice for another two and a half years. It was only in the winter of 1941 when Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor and took over the Solitary Isle in the heart of Shanghai that the lively Xiandao monthly ceased publication, and its network of practitioners disbanded.

But the legacy of the Shanghai Daoist group has continued to assert itself well into the post-1949 era in both mainland China and Taiwan. In the 1950s, Chen Yingning played a significant role in the emerging self-cultivation and healing movement known as qigong 氣功, a practice that stresses healing and health through a range of Daoist- and Buddhist-inspired breath regulation, meditation, and trance techniques. He was active in state-approved Daoist organizations in the PRC and led a host of Daoist reform projects until his death in 1969. In Taiwan, a journal run by a group of his disciples and devoted to the dissemination of Daoist inner alchemy and self-cultivation practice was published from the early 1950s into the 1990s. Since the 1980s, his writings have been reprinted and circulated widely. His teachings have continued to inspire and influence
communities of contemporary qigong practitioners and Daoists in China and beyond.\textsuperscript{10} Chen Yingning, Chang Zunxian, and many of their colleagues and followers embodied a Daoist tradition and their experience manifested a history of Daoism different from the one centered on monastic decline or clerical corruption. Their lives and careers represented a vastly different encounter with the forces of modernity in early twentieth-century China. Yet their story has so far remained largely unknown.

This book seeks to tell their story. It is a story about how modern lay Daoist practitioners such as Chen Yingning sought to renew the Daoist tradition by incorporating the new into the old and by reinventing the ancient Daoist practice of inner alchemy through a close engagement with nationalism, science, the religious reform movement, new urban print culture, and other forces of modernity. It is a story about the Daoist encounter with modernity, a story about resilience, reinvigoration, and revival through innovation of a Daoist tradition known as “literati Daoism” (wenren Daojiao 文人道教) in early twentieth-century China.

Defining “Literati Daoism” and Inner Alchemy

If Eileen Chang’s vignette of the Daoist beggar was meant to evoke a familiar picture of the clerical and monastic Daoism of the late imperial and early Republican eras, the life and careers of urban educated lay practitioners such as Chang Zunxian and Chen Yingning constitute a less familiar dimension of Daoism. Their obscurity stems in part from the fact that they do not fit our conventional categories of what or who constituted Daoism and Daoist identity. Neither ordained nor affiliated with any specific Daoist monasteries or sects, Chen and Chang were lay Daoists by devotion and practice. They were part of the lay Daoist tradition that Timothy Barrett and Russell Kirkland have recently termed “literati or gentry Daoists,” the members of the educated, often salaried or landed elite in traditional China who embraced the Daoist ethos, shared a Daoist outlook on life, and most of all pursued various Daoist techniques of self-cultivation in search of spirituality and self-identity. Although their
devotion to Daoist pursuits defined their religious identity, their social and cultural status as part of the elite often defied conventional definitions.

Indeed, as noted above, Daoism has long been defined by three mutually related sets of influences: the Song neo-Confucian interpretation, the early missionary definition, and the modern state’s regulatory efforts in China. Both the early neo-Confucian vision of Daoism as a moral and philosophical tradition centered on sages such as Laozi and Zhuangzi and the later Jesuit dismissal of it as a collection of primitive rituals and superstitious beliefs rooted among rural peasants have had lasting impacts on Daoist historiography. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the Qing and the Republican states sought to modernize themselves in the image of the western powers, they redrew the boundaries between the public and the private, the secular and the sacred, by granting legal protections only to those well-organized religious institutions and sects that could be integrated as organized “religions,” and by outlawing the more diffused community-based rituals and practices as “superstitions.” As a result, only two well-organized Daoist groups, the liturgical Orthodox One (Zhengyi 正一) sects and the monastic Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真) lineages, managed to have gained legal status through formation of a national organization and local registration in the early twentieth century.11

The effects of Confucian historiography and modern state policies toward religion can still be felt in debates about what constitutes Daoism, or who is a Daoist, albeit in subtler and more implicit terms of subject matter or subjects treated as “Daoist.” Although we have clearly moved away from the early sinologists’ almost exclusive focus on philosophical Daoism, most scholars today still concentrate on two main groups of people and institutions: the Zhengyi liturgical specialists, who trace their origins to the earlier Celestial Masters (Tianshi 天師) sects, and their ritual-centered practices based in rural communities; and the organized Daoist clergies such as the Quanzhen sects and their monastically based practices, communities, and lineages.12 Reflecting the sociological and historical turn in the field of Chinese religious studies, the shift in attention to rural ritual specialists and monastic practitioners seeks to situate and understand
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Daoism in the historical and social contexts of “popular religion.” But, since few of these recent studies examine the Daoist experience outside these two settings, they may have inadvertently reinforced the old boundaries for defining Daoism as being composed of organized lineages and monastic orders on one hand and the “diffused” rural ritual specialists and their communities on the other.

As such, they still do not adequately encompass and explain the richness and complexity of the Daoist experience in Chinese history and society. For example, they cannot account for the role and contributions of “gentry Taoism” during the Tang period, a time when many of the educated and bureaucratic elite, such as Sima Chengzheng 司馬承禎 (647–735), Wu Yun 吳筠 (?–778), Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (fl. 630–650s), and Li Bai 李白 (701–62) were actively engaged in promoting and disseminating Daoist ideas and techniques through their writings.13

The analytical limits of the earlier paradigms have prompted scholars of Daoism such as Timothy Barrett and Russell Kirkland to stress the importance of paying attention to the “diverse social backgrounds of the various historical leaders and shapers of the various streams that formed the tradition.” To Kirkland, the involvement in Daoism of the educated elite, or what he terms “literati Taoists,” can be traced to the early Louguan Daoists, who through their representative work, “Scripture of Western Ascension,” advocated a model of self-cultivation that would appeal to literati of all ages. He points out that literati Daoists such as Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) played a pivotal role in both refining and promulgating many characteristically Daoist ideas and techniques, including alchemical practices as a means of self-transformation in the early medieval period. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, literati Daoists such Wang Zhe 王喆 (1113–70) and his followers were instrumental in developing the early eremitical and individually based practices of inner alchemy into the monastically centered regimens and lineage orders that still endure today.14

Implicit in this and other studies is the view that literati Daoism, which stressed personal engagement with a variety of self-cultivation techniques, has been a continuous tradition from the medieval period to the late imperium. The tradition was embodied and carried
on through and by socially affiliated groups whose membership
to changed over time, from the aristocrats of the Eastern Jin dynasty in
southeast China through the elite members of the Tang court based
in Xi'an down to assorted civil service examination aspirants, land-
owners, merchants, and diviners of the early thirteenth-century
Jurchen empire in north China. As the studies by Barrett and Kirk-
land show, these educated elite practitioners were neither ordained
Daoist clerics nor temple managers nor villager ritual specialists. In-
deed, the literati or gentry Daoists became so by virtue of a variety of
factors or reasons, ranging from their faith in Daoist beliefs to intel-
lectual and personal ties with Daoist institutions and clergy to, more
fundamentally, their embrace of the Daoist vision and ideas, their
observance of Daoist precepts, and their pursuit of Daoist longevity
and self-cultivation techniques.

Daoist inner alchemy formed the core of traditional literati Daoist
endeavors. As a self-cultivation meditative technique, inner al-
chemy is generally considered to have matured around the late Tang
and early Song periods. It combines earlier speculative cosmologies
derived from the *Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi* 周易), *yin-yang* (陰陽)
and *Five Phases* (*wuxing* 五行) theories; nourishing life (*yangsheng*
養生) techniques and regimens such as regulated breathing (*huxi*
呼吸); gymnastics; and bedchamber arts (*fangzhong shu* 房中術). It
used the symbolic terminology inherited from the early “outer” or
“laboratory alchemy” (*waidan* 外丹). Ideologically, inner alchemy
has since its inception been characterized by its capacity to incorpo-
rate Confucianist teachings and Buddhist elements, a syncretic dis-
position that became even more pronounced during Ming and Qing
times.15

The ultimate goal of inner alchemy has remained the attainment
of immortality, a goal that for some meant unification with Nature
and for others eternal life. Since at least the twelfth century, inner al-
chemy has been a definitive and integral part of monastic life among
the major Daoist lineages and schools, and its meditative techniques
and cosmology have inextricably been associated with the literati pur-
suits of health, longevity, wisdom, and transcendence.16

But literati Daoism as an analytical category is not without
its critics and limits. One objection has to do with the analytical
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usefulness of the category. If the term “literati Daoist” refers simply to the personal spiritual self-cultivation beliefs and practices of individual members of the educated elite, then the “literati Daoist” is easily submerged in the larger social group we call scholar-officials or the gentry. But, even though the Daoist ordination rites are sometimes compared to the rigorous Confucian civil service examination system, they could never compete with the latter in granting both prestige and status to the successful candidates. Although ordained Daoist clerics gained a special status and authority as ritual specialists or monastic practitioners with privileged access to the spiritual world, their vocational skills and social status often excluded them from membership in the scholar elite as defined by orthodox Confucians, who tended to treat them with scorn and disdain. For that reason, the term “literati Daoist” does have the advantage of highlighting the learned culture of the Daoists as a social group distinct and separate from the gentry.

But what is more important and relevant, “literati Daoism” fittingly describes the unique contributions that many lay literati individuals and groups outside Daoist monastic or liturgical sects made to Daoist institutional, practical, and intellectual traditions in Chinese history. As an analytical concept, it takes more seriously the personal and private beliefs and practices of lay Daoist practitioners and seeks to understand them in their own historical and social contexts, rather than explaining away their lives as the products of general cultural trends or idiosyncratic habits.

Literati Daoism and Its Modern Fate

For that reason and many others, the story of urban lay Daoist practitioners like Chang Zunxian, Chen Yingning, and their colleagues in 1930s Shanghai is significant. First, the story offers a rare opportunity to examine the history and transformation of the literati Daoist tradition in early twentieth-century China, a topic still largely unexplored in Daoist studies. Since Liu Ts’un-yan’s pioneering studies of the Ming literati’s intellectual debt to and involvement in Daoism more than three decades ago,17 historians and scholars have paid closer attention to both the roles of literati Daoists in Chinese
society and politics and the social, political, and cultural interaction between the literati elite and Daoist institutions, ideas, and individuals during the late imperial period. Huang Zhaohan’s studies on the emergence of the Western Lineage in Daoist inner alchemy explores the active participation of the local literati elite in the creation and dissemination of Daoist inner alchemic writings and practice in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Sichuan. Zeng Shaonan, Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, Yang Ming, and others have examined the writings and practice of several influential literati Daoists from the Song to the late Qing period.18 Yet, few of these studies have dealt with the literati Daoists’ modern transformation in early twentieth-century China. The prominent exception is Vincent Goossaert. Although his recent pathbreaking study focuses on the social and institutional changes affecting Daoist clerics and their temples, Goossaert has also carefully traced the transformation of some urban-based Daoist lay practitioner groups in the context of the emerging self-cultivation market both in and around Beijing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.19 My own study seeks to further expand the investigation of the subject by tracing historical changes and continuities within the literati Daoist tradition in the first few decades of twentieth-century Shanghai.

Second, the focus on the early Republican era offers a unique opportunity to study and examine the nature and process of the Daoist encounter with modernity. As a major treaty port opened to foreign settlement, trade, and missionary activity in the 1860s, Shanghai experienced the rapid spread of western cultural and material influences in terms of industrial expansion, demographic growth, urban culture, and civic self-governance during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While living and practicing in this fast-changing and modernizing city, Chen and his associates engaged with many of the modern intellectual and cultural currents and movements that shaped modern China. Their nativistic advocacy of the Daoist inner alchemic meditation as the genuine “national learning,” their polemics against the Japanese-influenced Pure Land Buddhist sects in Shanghai, their incorporation of western scientific ideas and values into the traditional Daoist cosmology and inner
alchemy, their use of modern mass media and seminars as means of teaching and disseminating Daoist learning and practice, and their efforts at national organization of both lay and clerical practitioners combined to shape the trajectories of the Daoist engagement with modernity in early Republican China.

Third, the story of Chen Yingning and the Shanghai “Immortals’ Learning” group does not end with the 1941 Japanese takeover of the foreign concessions in Shanghai. Their legacy continued to unfold and helped shape developments in Daoism after 1949 through Chen’s continuing personal involvement in the emergence of qigong movements in the early 1950s and later through the publication of his writings in the contemporary, post-Mao era. The story of the Shanghai network of urban lay Daoist inner alchemy practitioners is crucially relevant to our understanding of Daoism and its practice as a living tradition in modern China today.

Sources and Outline of the Narrative

The primary source materials for this book are the Yangshan biweekly and the Xianda monthly. These journals published essays, correspondence, commentaries, serialized books, poems, and testimonials written by Chen Yingning and fellow practitioners of inner alchemy in Shanghai and other parts of China. Supplementing these journals are several published monographs by Chen and members of the Shanghai group, as well as an unpublished manuscript composed by Chen and circulated among his associates and followers. In these writings, Chen and his fellow practitioners not only expounded their view of Daoist cosmology and inner alchemic theories of the body but also outlined how the practice of inner alchemy might lead to the transformation of the self and even the salvation of the nation. Lastly, I have also relied on notes taken during my initial field research in China in the fall of 1994 and on my interviews of and private correspondence with surviving members of the Shanghai group between 1995 and 2004.

The book consists of six chapters and an epilogue. Chapter 1 outlines several major historical developments and cultural currents during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as back-
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ground for understanding both the innovative reformulation and re-invigoration of the Daoist tradition of inner alchemy and the emergence of a flourishing Daoist inner alchemy community between the 1920s and the 1940s.

Chapter 2 traces the life and career of Chen Yingning from 1880 to the 1940s as a key leader of the urban lay-centered Daoist revival in inner alchemy in Republican Shanghai. Chen’s lifelong pursuit of inner alchemy grew out of an early childhood experience of a nearly fatal illness. But in the late Qing cultural, political, and intellectual contexts, the culmination of Chen’s search for a cure of his illness in his pursuit of Daoist inner alchemy intersected with China’s national search for power and wealth and for modernity. As such, it took on much larger public and cultural meanings. I show how this intersection of a personal search and the national quest helped forge Chen’s vision of the Daoist tradition and foster a remarkable albeit brief revival of Daoism and inner alchemic self-cultivation practice during the 1930s and 1940s.

Chapter 3 examines how Chen and his associates constructed modern Daoist inner alchemic theories of cosmology and the body by selectively integrating traditional inner alchemy with scientific and nationalistic discourses. These reformulations of Daoist inner alchemy and cosmology were meant not only to inform the individual pursuit of spirituality and transcendence but also to define and shape the “authentic” Chinese body and character for the nation. Rejecting as foreign and culturally inferior both the Buddhist mind-centered body and the western biologically driven body, Chen and his fellow practitioners argued for an “authentic” Chinese body as the only way to achieve the national and moral liberation of China. In favor of what they called “vitalism” (weisheng zhuyi 唯生主義), Chen and his colleagues located this “authentic Chinese” body in the Daoist inner alchemic tradition, which sought to transcend the divide between the mind and the body by uniting the mental and psychological energies of the Spirit (shen 神) and the physical vital forces of qi 氣 through persistent meditative practice. In this way, the Daoist inner alchemic body became the site and conduit for the production of cultural nationalism, and the personal pursuit of self-
transformation came to be linked with the Republican state’s quest for a new citizenship and cultural norms in the 1930s and 1940s.

Chapter 4 investigates both the normative discourse and the practice of modern Daoist inner alchemy by Chen Yingning and his Shanghai group of practitioners during the 1930s and 1940s. By closely analyzing the practice manuals, poems, testimonials, and letters of members of the Shanghai group, I reconstruct the normative and experiential dimensions of the modern inner alchemic practice as imagined and carried out by Chen and many of his fellow practitioners. I show that although modern inner alchemic practice continued to be influenced by tradition in its assumptions, regimen, and techniques, it also employed and appropriated concepts and practices of modern science and medicine in its reinvention and in its adaptation to the changed political, social, cultural, and material conditions of modern China.

Chapter 5 examines the social and cultural milieus of modern Daoist inner alchemy practice. By following the stories of how individual practitioners and small groups came to be involved in Chen Yingning’s advocacy and pursuit of the Immortals’ Learning, I show that the modern practitioners of Daoist inner alchemy came from a variety of personal, social, and professional backgrounds. They embraced the practice for a range of reasons, such as concern for physical health and well-being, spirituality, and cultural or national identity. During the early decades of the twentieth century, they faced a host of daunting national crises, political and economic difficulties, and numerous personal obstacles as they took up the practice. In overcoming traditional difficulties and new challenges, these practitioners demonstrated remarkable resilience, courage, persistence, and ingenuity.

In telling the stories about individual practitioners and self-cultivation groups in Shanghai and beyond, I also trace their origins and the evolution of urban-based and lay-centered Daoist inner alchemic practice from small and private circles of friends and enthusiasts to the geographically far-flung network of a self-conscious public community, which extended beyond the city from the 1920s to the early 1940s. I argue that this transformation took place because
Chen and his follow practitioners conceived of the Daoist tradition as a resource and spiritual space to be shared by the public. Through their journals and published writings, they created an open forum and public space for Daoist inner alchemic practice throughout the 1930s. As it changed from an “esoteric” pursuit of the few into a public practice by many, Daoist inner alchemy offered its modern practitioners both practical means of caring for the body and the mind and a new venue to forge and maintain a new cultural or religious identity in the modernizing society of early Republican China.

Chapter 6 delineates the main institutional developments and innovations of the Daoist revival during the 1930s and early 1940s. By focusing on the role of journal publication and circulation by the Yihuatang publishing house, I show how Chen Yingning and his associates used the emerging mass print culture to create a vibrant and thriving public sphere of Daoist practice. Through their active promotion of the Immortals’ Learning, Chen and his colleagues redefined modern Daoism by appropriating sacred symbols from the early sage lore of China and by incorporating concepts of modern science to purge traditional Daoist inner alchemy of elements that could be identified with Buddhist idealism. Chen and his associates helped forge a sense of identity and fellowship among their followers through the nexus of writing, communicating, and publishing centered around the journals. Emerging from these writings and correspondence and the circulation of the journals was a vibrant community and fellowship of modern inner alchemy practitioners. This thriving Daoist revival was aborted only by the Japanese occupation of all of Shanghai in December 1941.

The Epilogue traces Chen Yingning’s career in the 1940s and early 1950s, especially his transformation from a Daoist scholar and practitioner to a leading Daoist reformer under the changed political and cultural circumstances of the PRC. I argue that despite the new restrictions on the practice of inner alchemy, Chen sought to preserve and continue the Daoist tradition of inner alchemic practice by reformulating it as part of “Daoist learning” (daojiao zhi xueshu 道教之學術) closely associated with the now-sanctioned discourse of science, and by promoting it as the new qigong practice and an
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efficacious self-healing and public health alternative to the limited resources of western medicine at the time. I conclude with some reflections on the significance of the achievements of the Daoist reforms throughout the 1930s and early 1940s and their ramifications for understanding the dynamics between Daoism and modernity and the process of religious secularization in modern China.