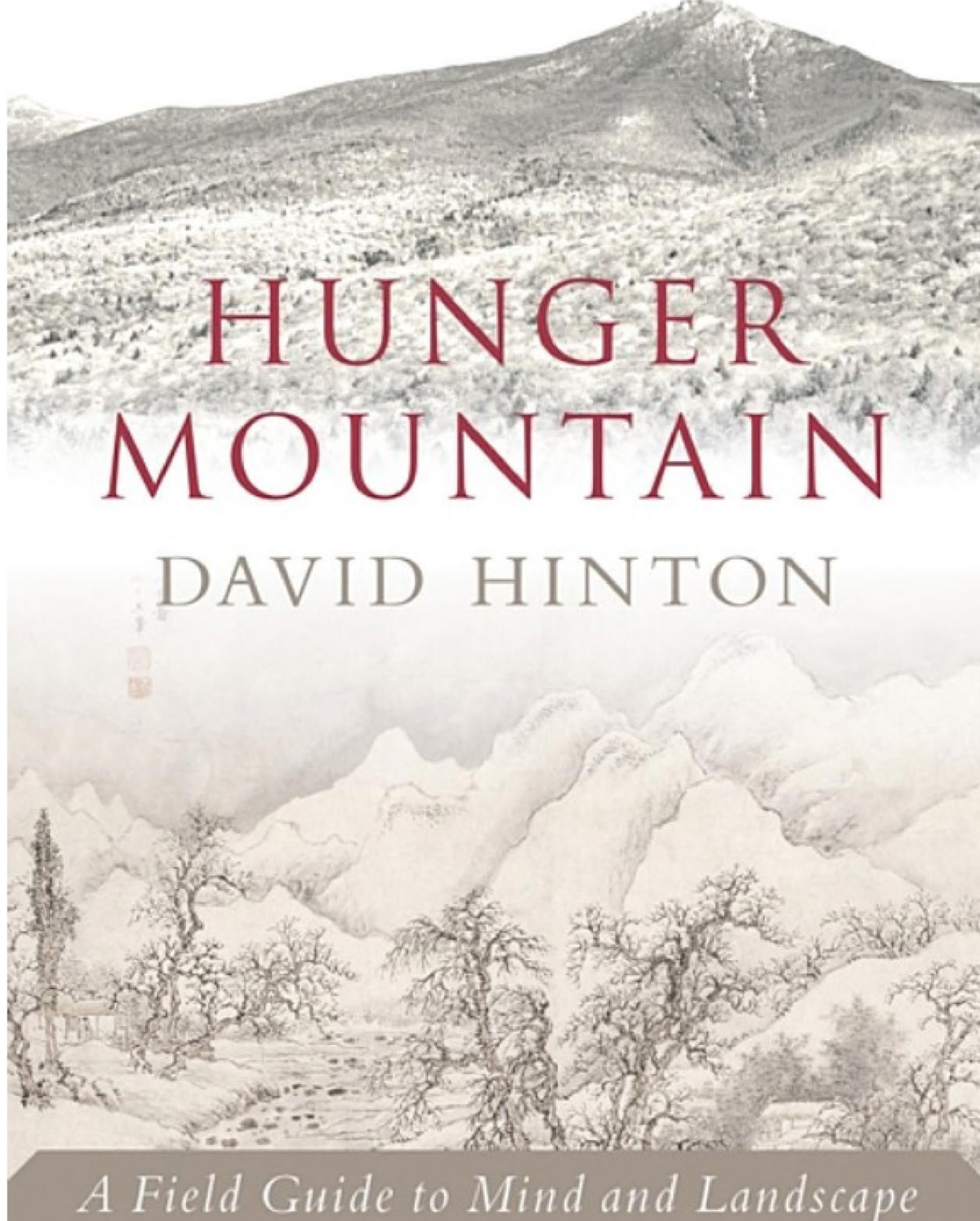
"A gorgeous book, a book of power, the very opposite of mystical. If you have a special mountain in your life, you'll read it with understanding; if you don't, it will make you want to get one!" —Bill McKibben

HUNGER MOUNTAIN

DAVID HINTON



A Field Guide to Mind and Landscape

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Shambhala Publications, Inc.
Horticultural Hall
300 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02115
www.shambhala.com

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The author acknowledges generous financial support from:

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hinton, David, 1954–
Hunger Mountain: a field guide to mind and landscape / David Hinton.—1st ed.
p. cm.
eISBN 978-0-8348-2811-7
ISBN 978-1-61180-016-6 (pbk.: alk. paper) 1. Philosophy of nature.
2. Philosophy of nature—China. 3. Taoist philosophy. 4. Zen Buddhism. I. Title.
II. Title: Field guide to mind and landscape.
BD581.H52 2012
181′.11—dc23
2012017256

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Preface

I've been translating classical Chinese poetry for many years, and slowly over those years I've come to realize that in translation I've stumbled upon a way to think outside the limitations not just of the mainstream Western intellectual tradition, but also of my own identity, a way to speak in the voice of ancient China's sage-masters, and for them to speak in mine. Ancient China had a long and diverse philosophical tradition centered on the nature of consciousness, the empirical world, and the relationship between them; but virtually all of that tradition's diversity begins with the same, relatively simple conceptual framework. This framework, apparently originating at the earliest levels of Chinese culture, in Neolithic and Paleolithic times, appears in the Taoist and Ch'an (Zen) Buddhist philosophical traditions and, even more fundamentally, in the structures of the classical Chinese language itself. It therefore provided a deep form that the minds of all ancient Chinese intellectuals shared, even across their remarkable diversity, as did all aspects of the cultural tradition they produced: classical poetry, for instance, or landscape painting.

Inhabiting the minds of those poets and philosophers as I translate, I have inhabited that conceptual framework. It is a kind of practice in which I have slowly cultivated the elemental dimensions of that framework over the years; and eventually I wanted to work through that framework with as much thoroughness and clarity as I could, in part because it represents such a remarkably contemporary worldview. It is secular, and yet deeply spiritual. It is thoroughly empirical and basically accords with modern scientific understanding. Although articulated in the written tradition entirely by male members of a virulently sexist society, it is profoundly gynocentric: a primal cosmology oriented around earth's mysterious generative force, a cosmology whose deep sources in the oral tradition may well be female. And it is what we now

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call “deep ecology,” meaning it weaves human consciousness into the “natural world” at the most fundamental level. In fact, the West’s separation of “human” from “nature” is entirely foreign to it.

For a variety of reasons that will be explained in the early chapters of this book, those ancient sage-masters saw the deep structure of things most clearly when in the presence of mountain landscapes (hence, for instance, the preeminence of mountain landscape in the painting tradition). It therefore seemed that tracing the physical and mental contours of mountain walks would be the best way to work through their insights—not as academic abstraction, but at the level of actual experience—though I am uneasy with any portrayal of myself as a master of sagely wisdom. And so, as autumn made its fitful way toward winter—days sometimes cold and sometimes warm, weather sometimes rain and sometimes snow, sky sometimes overcast and sometimes bottomless blue—I took a series of walks up a nearby peak here in Vermont called Hunger Mountain, following a trail I’ve taken often over my years translating the ancients.

Nothing much happens on these autumn walks, which makes them the perfect occasions to explore consciousness and landscape in and of themselves, as well as the dynamic interplay between them, which is to explore the fundamental texture of our everyday experience. To walk through a landscape is to walk through a culture, for it is culture that determines both what we are and what a landscape is for us. Each of these chapters reflects my attempt to understand one of those walks on Hunger Mountain as the ancients might have understood it through their shared Taoist/Ch’an framework, to think through it in their voice, but also to let them think through it in mine, with whatever new possibilities that might open.

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信
(Sincerity)

Things are themselves only as they belong to something more than themselves: I to we, we to earth, earth to planets and stars, countless stars more themselves mirrored in the eye for a moment and then vanishing there, forgotten completely and leaving room to spare for whatever occurs next. My wife and daughter talking in the next room, for instance, or later in the morning, a great blue heron. Watching it lumber huge-jointed into flight, the eye magically filling sight and mind with it utterly, I find no one to be this far from death, find only what I am not, then make it last, exact a ponderous banked glide slowing until there's a heron stalled on light wingbeats, settling gingerly into another shallows along the edge of this glacial lake: great, blue, perfectly apparent.

The Chinese graph for *sincerity* is 信, the pictorial elements of which depict a person (亻: modified form of 人, side-view of a person walking) standing by words (言: image of words rising out of a mouth). The implication here is that if we are sincere, our inner thoughts are the same as our outer thoughts, which take the form of spoken words. This is a particular instance of the more fundamental sense of *sincerity* as an identification of outside and inside. In this fundamental sense, sincerity is the elemental structure of our Cosmos, with its ten thousand things in constant transformation, appearing and disappearing perennially through one another as cycles of birth and death unfurl their generations: inside becoming outside, outside inside. This is the deepest form of belonging, and it extends to consciousness, that mirrored opening in which a heron's flight can become everything I am for a moment, then simply vanish into me as I turn away to set out for the first of my autumn walks up Hunger Mountain.

Nothing holds still in this ongoing process of sincerity. What

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happens never happens enough. It is, instead, possessed always of a restless hunger. Fact feeding hungry fact, occurrence opens into its own directions, all appearance vanishing into appearance pregnant through and through. Sincere, generative, hunger-driven—this is what the ancient Chinese understood to be the nature of our Cosmos. Referring to its two most fundamental elements, they called it "heaven and earth," and they recognized in mountain landscape its most dramatic manifestation, for they saw the generative powers of heaven and earth mingling there: heaven's male *yang* mingling with earth's female *yin*. Sky with its mist and cloud seethes down and vanishes among mountains, while mountains in turn vanish into that mist and cloud, only to reappear churning up into sky. This is a primary reason the ancients were perennially drawn to mountain landscapes—either as visitors wandering there and staying in mountain monasteries, or as recluses living among summits and ridgelines. Wisdom for them meant belonging deeply to that cosmology of restless hunger, and if this were ancient China, that cosmology might very well explain how Hunger Mountain acquired its name.

I often walk up Hunger because its hardwood forests give the trail an airy feel and periodic stream-crossings give it a comfortable rhythm, and also because of the final ascent up the summit's pale lichen-stained schist to wide-open views: north and south along the Green Mountain ridgeline, east to the White Mountains, and west across a neighboring ridgeline and Lake Champlain to the Adirondack Mountains. But this walk also attracts me because the mountain's name reminds me how it, like any other mountain, manifests that cosmology of generative hunger and sincerity. There is no limit to that cosmology, no limit to its expanse of empty generations; and each time I walk here on Hunger Mountain, I wander it a little more deeply.

Upslope from the lake where I watched the heron's ungainly glide, savory wild leeks are yellowing among the first fallen leaves. Each spring they form pearl-white bulbs I root out, sauté in butter and white wine, and fold with cheese into crepes. I don't know why—perhaps because they are spring's earliest joy on the tongue—but this interglacial watershed first took its name from them: *Winooski*. It's the ancient Abenaki word, and we still use it to name this place I have shared a little more each day

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with my daughter. I remember when she was learning her first words long ago, this Winooski Valley working further and further into another form of sincerity, another form of outside becoming inside and inside outside. In each new word I showed her, each new joy we shared in the eye, that sincerity was a parent's love: *lake* and *heron, leek* and *sky, mountain* and *star*.

As the elemental structure of this Hunger Mountain cosmology, sincerity is how things belong to something more than themselves: a fish vanishing into the heron's patient form; a glacier into the form of this mountain landscape it sculpted, where a sudden earthquake means bedrock still rebounding from the weight of mile-deep ice; my own body dying, and so continuing on through sincerity's physical cycles of birth and death, outside becoming inside and inside outside. But this parent's love is my most telling form of sincere belonging. Whenever I think of my own death, I like to imagine a sky-burial for myself—my body left out rain-swept in death, windswept on the wide-open rock of Hunger's glacier-scoured summit. Once ravens and vultures have eaten, all of the outside that language and sight have opened inside me will set out well-fed, soaring bottomless skies or tumbling downslope on evening winds, outside again. And that outside will in turn wander inside my daughter, inside her eye's mirrored depths, her grown-up tongue's restless joys. Inside becoming outside, outside inside, all appearance will set out (something lost, something gained), migrating true in a future of ice.

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廬

(Thatch-Hut)

Hunger Mountain is a seemingly unremarkable peak in a small subsidiary range that parallels the central spine of Vermont's Green Mountains, separated from it by a large valley. Even so, it is an imposing presence, especially this morning. Ablaze in early sunlight, its bare summit of pale schist looms above mist-filled valleys still deep in shadow. Rising everywhere in scraps and ribbons, the mist seems to magnify Hunger's scale even more, and it makes the neighboring peaks and ridgelines appear more vast and distant than they are.

In contrast to the strange effects of early-morning light and mist, my walk up Hunger could hardly be more familiar: the gently rising approach along a little-used woods-road to where the trail itself begins, its steeper ascent quickly crossing the largest of the mountain's streams and continuing up past a tiny brook trickling across the downhill edge of a large flat stone, then a long traverse along the mountain's shoulder and past a small waterfall, before beginning a final scramble up the bare dome of glacier-scoured rock. But however familiar this mountain is, however many times I climb it, I always have the sense that I don't know it at all. This is truer than ever today, walking among mysterious light and shadow and mist, all infused with early splashes of autumn's surreal color.

A mountain can be a great teacher—not only because it manifests that cosmology of sincerity and restless hunger with such immediacy and drama, but also because it stands apart, at once elusive and magisterial. Walking up Hunger Mountain today, its imposing and indifferent presence reminds me yet again that things in and of themselves remain beyond us, even after the most exhaustive and accurate scientific or philosophical account, the most compelling mythology, or the most concise and penetrating poem. Like the sense that those vast forces of the generative Cosmos were most dramatically

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manifest in mountain landscapes, this insight also drew ancient China's intellectuals to mountains.

In south China, there is a mountain so revered for its mastery of these insights that countless poets and artists and monks devoted themselves to its wisdom over the millennia. They lived in seclusion among its peaks, their work making it the most cultivated of China's mountains. In fact, its name reflects this sense of being a place where sages dwell: 廬 (Lu), meaning "Thatch-Hut," after the dwelling-place of K'uang Su (eleventh century B.C.E.), the first of its many fabled sage-recluses.

Now preserved as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, Thatch-Hut Mountain is a remarkably beautiful complex of ninety peaks graced with names like Incense-Burner and Yellow-Dragon, Crane-Song and Twin-Sword, Five-Elders and Spirit-Vulture. Those recluses wrote and painted among Thatch-Hut's peaks, and they meditated in its many monasteries. There were Ten-Thousand-Cedar and Flourish-Peak Monasteries; White-Crane and Cloud-Gaze (founded by the patriarch of Chinese calligraphy, Wang Hsi-chih, whose work was said to be "airy as drifting clouds and muscular as startled dragons"); West-Forest and, perhaps most illustrious of Thatch-Hut's monasteries: East-Forest.

East-Forest was founded by Prajna-Distance (Hui Yüan, 334–416 C.E.), a major figure in the early development of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism because he emphasized mountain landscape and sitting meditation. In its evolution as a homegrown blend of Taoist and Buddhist thought, Ch'an put the wisdom of mountains at the heart of its practice, for meditation empties mind of words, concepts, and stories, the preoccupations that distance us from the immediate presence of earth's ten thousand things.

The earliest surviving Ch'an text was written by the great poet Hsieh Ling-yün (385–433), who traveled to Thatch-Hut Mountain and apparently underwent a kind of enlightenment when he visited Prajna-Distance at East-Forest. At the same time, a recluse poet named T'ao Ch'ien (365–427) was eking out a living at his impoverished family farm on the northwest side of Thatch-Hut. Out of that unassuming life, T'ao reinvented Chinese poetry, creating the voice that was adopted by virtually all poets after him: a personal voice speaking of immediate

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experience. T'ao was the first of Thatch-Hut's great resident poets, and it is said that Prajna-Distance often invited him to East-Forest. But it's unclear how often T'ao visited, as he apparently had little patience for the religious trappings with which Prajna-Distance surrounded the core practice of meditation and mountain landscape.

T'ao preferred wine. He called it "the sage in a cup," for wine too can be a great teacher if just enough is drunk to let preoccupations fade away, leaving a serene clarity of attention to the ten thousand things, free of the preoccupations that separate us from them. This is why virtually all of China's intellectuals made a practice of drinking wine, though none more famously than T'ao Ch'ien. With the help of wine, T'ao cultivated the insight of Thatch-Hut itself. During a period when he had temporarily left his quiet farm to live in a nearby village full of human noise, he wrote this about the mountain, which rose up south of the village:

Drinking Wine

I live here in this busy village without
all that racket horses and carts stir up,

and you wonder how that could ever be.
Wherever the mind dwells apart is itself

a distant place. Picking chrysanthemums
at my east fence, I see South Mountain

far off: air lovely at dusk, birds in flight
going home. All this means something,

something absolute: whenever I start
to explain it, I forget words altogether.

Four centuries after T'ao wrote this poem, Po Chü-i called Thatch-Hut his "native home." Exiled to the region in 815, the great T'ang Dynasty poet built his own thatch hut near Incense-Burner Peak, between East- and West-Forest Monasteries, and spoke of the mountain as "the perfect place to get free of your

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name.” To understand Thatch-Hut Mountain is to take on the nature of the mountain, to live outside the human realm of words and concepts, like those in these chapters, outside even the self to which a name refers. This was a spiritual practice for the ancients, a practice that was ideally cultivated wherever one happened to be, including noisy towns and cities, as in T’ao Ch’ien’s poem.

But this practice was seen to be nowhere so immediate and complete as when living among mountains like Hunger and Thatch-Hut, in the kind of simplicity that is summarized in Thatch-Hut’s name: 廬. An early, more organic and pictographic form of this graph is recorded in the *Shuo Wen* dictionary (147 C.E.), the earliest surviving dictionary containing etymological knowledge about Chinese characters: . This graph begins with a simple roof, rendered in the image of half a roof: (a complete roof being , which shows a stylized side-view of the traditional Chinese roof with its prominent ridgeline). appears at the bottom of this graph, image of a dish with pedestal. Above that, depicts a kitchen vessel. And what dwells in this household shares the mountain’s nature, for it too eludes our words and concepts. It’s a tiger, which ancients revered for the spontaneous power of its movements, the clarity and immediacy of its mind. It’s a tiger that lives in the everyday world of our human dwellings and implements, whether vessels and dishes in a mountain hut, or cars and computers in a bustling city: in the *Shuo Wen* version, its image showing a head at the top right, tail at bottom right, and left of the body curving between them, four legs. This graph can be traced back through more organic forms, such as , where the whole image has the fluid feel of a tiger in motion, to earlier incarnations rendering the thing in and of itself, magisterial and elusive as the mountain it inhabits: .

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朋

(Friends)

In “Drinking Wine,” T’ao Ch’ien calls his immediate experience of Thatch-Hut Mountain “absolute.” The Chinese word is 真, the nebulous etymology for which seems to originate in early renderings of an eye with a line: . Hence, “the eye seeing straight,” from which came “straight, honest, direct” and eventually “real, actual, perfectly true.” To see the world with this depth and clarity, sight mirroring things wholly, is always a solitary act. This is no doubt why I generally prefer to take my Hunger Mountain walks alone. And however lonely such walks may seem, seeing with that depth and clarity can open new depths of friendship.

Last night I walked to the summit in time for sunset, then warmed up cashew chili on my ancient Svea camp-stove. As the stars slowly appeared, I ate it with crackers my daughter called “moon-crackers” when she was young, because they are round like the moon. Sleeping out on the bare rock felt like drifting deep into depths of stars, and this morning I wake early to watch a crescent moon rise into those still-dark depths. Immaculate, unscathed by the crowded millennia vanished between us, it’s the same crescent moon that Tu Fu watched over twelve hundred years ago. Tu Fu is often called the greatest of China’s poets; his mind was complex and profound, and when he stood watching this moon, he was a refugee struggling to survive the virulent war that had engulfed his country. But the poem he wrote about that moonrise seems to share little of his life or mind:

Moonrise

Thin slice of ascending light, arc tipped
Aside all its bellied dark—the new moon

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appears and, scarcely risen beyond ancient
frontier passes, edges behind clouds. Silver,

changeless—the Star River spreads across
empty mountains scoured with cold. White

dew dusts the courtyard, chrysanthemum
blossoms clotted there with swollen dark.

Friendship is a perennial preoccupation in classical Chinese poetry. Many aspects of what friendship meant to the ancients are familiar—shared histories or experiences, common interests or ideas or beliefs—but they knew another dimension of friendship that is less familiar. It's a dimension deeper than words, deeper even than the identities we think of as the subjects of friendship, and it explains how friendship could infuse this experience of being utterly alone here on Hunger Mountain watching the moon rise. It also explains why friendship was so compelling for China's ancient intellectuals. In fact, it gives Tu Fu's poem its form, though the poem doesn't mention friendship or even people who might be friends. Like any other aspect of ancient China's human culture, this dimension of friendship was shaped by the culture's deep conceptual framework—most notably its language and cosmology.

The graphs from which Tu Fu crafted his poem began as pictures, origins that may stretch back as far as the sixth or seventh millennium B.C.E., a period for which extensive proto-linguistic petroglyphs have been found. The primordial ancestors of these graphs no doubt emerged long before that in the earliest forms of symbolic representation: images and pictographs painted or etched on rock and other surfaces such as bark and animal skin. Pictographs were probably organized into a rudimentary writing system sometime between the seventh millennium B.C.E. and the Neolithic Longshan culture (3000–2000 B.C.E.). But the earliest surviving tradition of fully formed Chinese writing is oracle-bone script (, for example), which was etched into flat tortoise plastrons (ventral shells) and ox scapulae and used for divination texts in the second millennium B.C.E. Chinese graphs evolved through a second

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major tradition, inscriptions on bronze vessels (late second and first millennium B.C.E.), then through increasingly diverse forms typified by those preserved in the *Shuo Wen* dictionary and generally written with brush and ink on bamboo and silk. They were finally codified in standard forms that have remained stable through the centuries—the rectilinear graphs still familiar today and used as chapter titles in this book. As they evolved, graphs were gradually stylized and abstracted and combined with phonetic and nonpictographic elements, as well as borrowed for other words that shared the same pronunciation, but they nonetheless retained much of that primal pictographic immediacy. Those pictographic elements were a powerful influence on the erudite artists and intellectuals who created ancient China's intellectual culture, even if they misconstrued the original import of some pictographic elements because their knowledge of early etymology was limited. As they were all calligraphers, they were especially sensitive to the structures of graphs. Indeed, they thought graphs were sages, great teachers not unlike Thatch-Hut or Hunger Mountain.

Because classical Chinese retained much of its primal pictographic nature, it is the moon's actual form that rises in Tu Fu's poem: 月 in its stylized standard graph, which is derived from the more clearly pictorial oracle-bone image of . And like this morning's Hunger Mountain moon rising into empty sky, rises into wide-open space, for the grammar of classical Chinese is minimal in the extreme. It allows a remarkable openness and ambiguity that leaves a great deal unstated. Prepositions and conjunctions are rarely used, leaving relationships between lines, phrases, ideas, and images unclear. The distinction between singular and plural is only rarely and indirectly made. Verbs are not uncommonly absent, and when present they have no tenses, so temporal location and sequence are vague. And very often subjects and objects are absent, which creates the sense of individual identities blurred together into a shared space of consciousness. This openness is dramatically emphasized in the poetic language, which is far more spare even than prose. In reading a Chinese poem, you mentally fill in all that emptiness, and yet it always remains emptiness, the space into which Tu Fu's moon

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perennially rises.

The structure of a poem's empty grammar is shared by Taoist cosmology, the conceptual framework taken for granted by the ancients and allowing them that deeper dimension of friendship. This fundamental correspondence suggests that language and cosmology must have evolved together during the formative stages of human culture in China, and it is a joy to imagine that the earliest of the sages responsible for the core regions of this framework may well have been women from the culture's proto-Chinese Paleolithic roots. But the earliest surviving expression of that cosmology appears in the *I Ching* and Taoism's two seminal books: *Tao Te Ching* (ca. sixth century B.C.E.) by Lao Tzu, who was less a historical figure than a compilation of fragments deriving from the oral tradition as translated into classical Chinese; and the *Chuang Tzu* (ca. fourth century B.C.E.), written by a shadowy figure whose name gives the book its title: Chuang Tzu. As represented in these texts, Taoist thought is best described as a spiritual ecology, the central concept of which is Tao, or Way: 道. *Tao* originally meant "way," as in "pathway" or "roadway," a meaning it has kept. But Lao Tzu redefined it as a spiritual concept, using it to describe the process (hence, a "way") through which all things arise and pass away.

He described this process at a deep ontological level, where the Cosmos is divided into two fundamental elements: "Absence" or "Nonbeing" (無) and "Presence" or "Being" (有). Presence is simply the empirical universe, which the ancients described as the ten thousand living and nonliving things in constant transformation; and Absence is the generative void from which this ever-changing realm of Presence perpetually emerges, although it should not be conceived in a spatial sense, as if there were a pool of emptiness somewhere in the universe. Within this framework, Tao (Way) can be understood as the generative process through which the ten thousand things appear out of Absence and disappear back into it, and Lao Tzu often employs female terminology to describe the elemental contours of Tao, where Absence looms large as the enduring source of it all: "mother of all beneath heaven," "nurturing mother," "dark female-enigma." This is the cosmology of

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pregnant hunger that appears so dramatically here in this mountain landscape where I've spent the night, and Lao Tzu's account is simply an ontological description of natural process, manifest in the cycle of life and death that each of those ten thousand things passes through, for example, or in the annual cycle of seasons: the pregnant emptiness of Absence in winter, Presence's burgeoning forth in spring, the fullness of its flourishing in summer, and its dying back into Absence in autumn.

The classical Chinese language doesn't simply share, but actually participates in the deep structure of this Cosmos and its dynamic process, which no doubt helps explain why Chinese never evolved into an alphabetic language. Characters function in the same way as Presence's ten thousand things (a fact emphasized in the pictographic nature of characters), and the grammatical emptiness that surrounds characters functions as Absence. In this, the language reflects another central concept in Taoist cosmology: *tzu-jan* (自然). The literal meaning of *tzu-jan* is "self" + "thus," from which comes "self-so" or "the of-itself," and in the context of Taoist ontology, this becomes "Presence (Being) of itself." This leads to a more descriptive translation, "occurrence appearing of itself," for *tzu-jan* is meant to describe the ten thousand things emerging spontaneously from Absence, the generative source, each according to its own nature, independent and self-sufficient, then eventually dying and returning to Absence, only to reappear transformed into other self-generating forms. This vision of *tzu-jan* recognizes the Cosmos to be a boundless generative organism, and the Way of a sage in ancient China was to dwell as an integral part of this dynamic organism. T'ao Ch'ien, for instance, in explaining why he left a comfortable government job in the capital and moved back to his impoverished family farm on Thatch-Hut Mountain, spoke of returning to *tzu-jan*, or "occurrence appearing of itself."

It was in the age of T'ao Ch'ien that Ch'an Buddhism began to take shape. Ch'an clarified anew the spiritual ecology of early Taoist thought, and by Tu Fu's time it was fully developed and almost universally practiced by the intelligentsia, who generally thought it was basically another form of Taoism. Within the

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framework of Taoist thought, Ch'an focused on meditation as a way of deepening insight to a level beyond words. In meditation, it's possible to watch the process of *tzu-jan* in the form of thoughts burgeoning forth out of emptiness and disappearing back into it. Those thoughts appear and disappear in exactly the same way as Presence's ten thousand things, and the generative emptiness from which thoughts arise is nothing other than Absence, the primal source. So the deep structure of Taoist/Ch'an cosmology is shared not only by the poetic language, but by consciousness as well: Cosmos, consciousness, and language are woven together in a single unified fabric.

Meditative practice reveals that we are most fundamentally the opening of consciousness that watches thought coming and going, rather than the center of thought and intention with which we normally identify. And moving deeper into meditative practice, as the restless train of thought falls silent, self and its constructions of the world dissolve away into that emptiness of Absence. What remains then is consciousness emptied of all contents, known in Ch'an terminology as "nomind" or "empty mind." To dwell in that elemental emptiness, that generative realm of Absence, is to dwell at the heart of China's Taoist/Ch'an cosmology, inhabiting the primal Cosmos in the most complete and immediate way.

The dimensions of this meditative dwelling are suggested by the graph for *ch'an*, which literally means "meditation": 禪. The right-hand half of 禪 is an element meaning "individual" or "alone," a sense complemented by older meanings like "simple, great, entirely, exhaustively." The left-hand element is 示 in its full form, which derives from the *Shuo Wen* and the oracle-bone . This image shows heaven as the line(s) above, with three streams of light emanating earthward from the three types of heavenly bodies: sun, moon, and stars. Together, these two elements mean something like "alone simply and exhaustively with the Cosmos."

And this is indeed a profoundly lonely Cosmos. In it, the loneliness of this mountaintop moonrise takes on depths beyond the usual sense of being a self isolated from others, for I am most essentially an emptiness that is separate from all that I

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typically think of as my identity. It is loneliness in this sense that makes friendship so powerful for the ancients; but at the same time, that emptiness opens a new possibility for friendship. As Absence, empty mind attends to the ten thousand things with mirrorlike clarity, making the act of perception a spiritual act: empty mind mirroring the world, leaving its ten thousand things utterly simple, utterly themselves, and utterly sufficient. In that perceptual act, identity becomes whatever sight fills eye and mind, that mirrored opening of consciousness. This may sound like mysticism, but it seems much closer to observational science. In any case, it was common for friends to sip wine together and watch the moon rise, for example, or mountain peaks among clouds, or plum blossoms in evening light. In this, they were doing nothing less than sharing identity.

This perceptual experience was a spiritual practice outside language, and it was the fabric of Chinese poetry, manifest not only in the pictographic texture of its language but also in its focus on imagistic clarity. Tu Fu's "Moonrise" is a quintessential Chinese poem in this sense, for it is constructed entirely of images rather than discursive statement. In such poems, the simplest image resonates with the entire Taoist/Ch'an cosmology, rendering that unity of consciousness, Cosmos, and language. A Western reader might assume Tu Fu is deploying the poem's images as a metaphoric or symbolic complex to render an inner state of mind. But the poem's native cosmology makes the role of landscape quite different, essentially reversing how a poem means, how it is read. There is no question of the outside world seen from inside a "spirit-center" and shaped into the expression of an inner state of mind. That instrumental relationship to landscape is missing here. A Chinese poem is, by convention, about the poet's immediate experience, so we register Tu Fu's presence in the poem as images, as a particular constellation of the ten thousand things. Independent, existing in and of themselves rather than serving as metaphor or symbol or stage-setting for the human drama, those images fill the opening of consciousness, which is to say they quite simply are Tu's mind and identity at that moment. The poem obviously renders an emotional complex, but it's not an inner state represented by "natural" images. Instead, it's an *identity* that encompasses the entire Cosmos, from Star River

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(our Milky Way) to courtyard chrysanthemums.

In the poem, Tu becomes the weave of dark and light that are manifestations of *yin* and *yang* (other manifestations include cold and hot, winter and summer, female and male, earth and heaven, etc.), the two basic principles of energy whose interaction drives the dynamic Cosmos. He becomes the frontier passes contested in border wars that have turned him into a wandering refugee, and he becomes the cold and timeless indifference of a sparkling Star River. He becomes the chrysanthemums blooming in autumn, last splendor against earth's dying return into winter's pregnant emptiness, and the dew clotting their blossoms, shimmering prefiguration of their death to come when heavy frosts arrive. And finally, he becomes that swollen darkness of Absence. When Tu Fu speaks for himself in such a poem, the entire Cosmos speaks for itself.

Most would call it coincidence rather than an act of friendship, but if you are awake and watching this early-morning moonrise, you share my mind at a level deeper than the stories we tell about ourselves, stories that define who we are: our personal thoughts and histories, the cultural histories and mythologies and metaphysics that shape ethnic and religious and political identities, or even this story I am telling here. I share Tu Fu's mind the same way, however long ago and far away it was that he gazed at this moon. And I share it in his poem, too, when rises into empty space.

In bronze inscriptions (ca. 1000 B.C.E.), its earliest known form, the pictograph meaning "friends" portrays paired strings of cowry-shells: . By Lao Tzu's time, the image was evolving into wings: (friends as two things that can together take flight?). And by the time Tu Fu wrote his poem, the graph had become, quite simply, a pair of moons: 朋. At its deepest level, any poetic utterance may grow out of a desire to overcome loneliness, to share experience; but when Tu Fu speaks in a poem like "Moonrise," he shares identity at the most elemental level. Because empty mind is nothing other than Absence, its loneliness is the elemental loneliness of the Cosmos itself, which suggests a variation on the graphic meaning of 禪 (*ch'an*): "the Cosmos alone simply and exhaustively with itself."

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This friendship of you and me and Tu Fu sharing the moon—it's more than lonely people sharing experience, or even sharing identity. It is as a matter of empirical fact the Cosmos keeping itself company, sharing crescent moon with itself, and empty mountains, and the Star River stretched silver and changeless across them.

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有

(Presence)

That friendship between you and me and Tu Fu, that company the Cosmos kept with itself yesterday on Hunger Mountain, always falters. Today that crescent moon rises later, when the sky is beginning to brighten, so I take an early walk up Hunger, glimpsing that moon along the trail, as thoughts tangle through the empty opening of consciousness. With them comes the center of identity that renews our more familiar sense of loneliness because it creates the separation between you and Tu Fu and me, between the moon and me, this Hunger Mountain landscape and me, emptiness and me. But as I walk, the evanescent nature of that center becomes apparent as it weaves through the empirical, much as it does in a classical Chinese poem.

In poems such as Tu Fu's "Moonrise," the empirical renders the opening of consciousness completely, becoming identity itself: moon and stars, mountains and courtyard. But poems made up entirely of landscape images are relatively rare in Chinese poetry. Most contain the poet's personal voice as well, and in translation this aspect of the poetry may seem functionally similar to its counterpart in Western poetry, where it is normally the voice of a transcendental spirit-center. But unburdened by the metaphysical assumptions that spiritualize the center of identity in the West, a Chinese poem renders the center as it actually exists in immediate experience, as on this early-morning Hunger Mountain walk. It renders the center as something belonging to, rather than alien to, the ecosystem, something woven through the empirical as an expansive identity that includes the ten thousand things:

覺	不	初	秋	夜	漸	長
not	aware	beginning	autumn	night	gradually	long

A literal translation of the first unit in this opening line from a short poem by Meng Hao-jan, Tu Fu's eighth-century contemporary, is something like: *[I] didn't notice autumn beginning.* In English, this thought seems to operate in the usual way, with a spirit-center looking out on the world. But in Chinese, the "I" exists in the grammar only as an absent presence, almost indistinguishable from Absence itself, that pregnant emptiness paired with Presence to form the foundation of Lao Tzu's cosmology and appearing in poems as the empty space between words.

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Rather than inscribing a transcendental spirit-center, Meng Hao-jan's line inscribes the opening of consciousness woven through with the empirical. In this, it follows the same progression as today's walk on Hunger Mountain. As preoccupations with work and the coming day's responsibilities begin, that evanescent self comes into view, only to feather away as the empirical begins to weave through it: thin arc of moon in brightening sky; brilliant colors of autumn leaves resolving out of night's darkness, then suddenly sunlit splashes of it; a startled broad-wing hawk stitching flight through forest openings, crashing wingbeats against those colorful leaves.

Even the "subjective" moment in the line, "awareness," is made up of the empirical: 見, the picture of an eye (derived from the oracle-bone) atop a person walking (人). And from then on, Meng's personal voice is full of the ten thousand things. Robes with their shoulders and sleeves above loose skirts (full form 衣, from the *Shuo Wen*) ripple and sway beside a knife blade, and together they form 初, meaning "to begin," because cutting cloth is the beginning of making clothes. Fire flickers (火, derived from this oracle-bone rendering:) and grain grows in fields (禾, derived from the *Shuo Wen* and the oracle-bone , which depict a central stock with roots below and branches above, topped with a ripe seed-cluster nodding under its weight). Combined, they form 秋: "autumn," harvest time, when grain is "burned." Sky () shelters a half-moon (夕, from , stylized version of oracle-bone graphs such as) shining beside a person (, modified form of 人), to image forth *night*. Or in some earlier versions, the person is replaced with fire to paint a more elemental picture of night as fire and moon in the midst of the sky's dark expanse: . Water flows in rippling rivers and streams: , here portrayed as , an abbreviated form stylizing the left half of the full pictograph. Carts or chariots () move with scythes or axes (), together meaning either "to cut grain during harvest" or "to behead people in war," from which comes "to cut in two" (斬). This unlikely assortment of pictographic elements forms 漸 (*Shuo Wen* graph:), meaning "gradually," because water can cut a path through stone, but it's a very gradual process. And finally there is long hair, which came to mean simply "long," 長, deriving from an oracle-bone image () that later evolved into a stylized picture of hair so long that it must be tied with a band () and pinned with a hairpin (), as in this early form of the graph: .

Classical Chinese poets do occasionally use an "I" in their poems, which has the effect of weaving the center of identity into landscape and

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