

# The Empty Vessel/Mystical Abode

## China Trip 2017



On May 16<sup>th</sup> 17 intrepid travelers left from San Francisco to journey to the Middle Kingdom (one more left from Montreal and met us in China), there to begin an adventure filled with great food, beautiful vistas, friendly people, a master of qigong and taichi and one cave-dwelling hermit.

Arriving in Shanghai after a 13 1/2 hour flight we stumbled across the vast airport to meet our guide and translator for the trip, the amazing Dana Xu. Piling onto our own bus we traveled down the highway to Hangzhou (my favorite city in China). After a very long day and a half of travel we were all happy to get some rest before beginning our Big Adventure in China!

Our first day found us walking through a beautiful park surrounding West Lake. Fantastic topiary (see photo), meandering paths and the chance to dance with some of the locals were the perfect way to begin our journey. Hangzhou has long been a haven for artists of every kind. As a matter of fact, there is an ancient Chinese saying

about both Hangzhou and its sister city Suzhou: “Heaven above, Hangzhou and Suzhou below.” After a hearty lunch we visited a local Buddhist temple (Lin Yin). The walk up to the temple is so amazing, with many stone statues carved into the side of the cliff that faces the road. It is like taking a journey into another era when devoted artists spent much time on crafting the best and most beautiful statues they could.

One of my favorite parts of the journey was our visit to a local Taoist temple, the one favored by the famous ancient alchemist Ge Hong. After a walk up many stone steps (which became a daily occurrence once we went to the Wudang Mountains) we arrived at a small yet cozy temple. After a meeting with a young Taoist, who gave us a short lecture on Taoist thought and practice, we had lunch there. I was not expecting anything fancy but it turned out to be one of the best meals I had there! Everything was very fresh and tasty. Afterwards we drank tea and “talked story” out on a shaded veranda. Some of us had brought flutes along, including a



*Our happy group*



*Our teacher, Master Zhou*

very magical double Native American flute that Jessica played and a Chinese xiao flute that our host and guide Dana played, filling the air with magical sounds.

After a couple of days seeing the sights in Hangzhou and acclimating to China time, we began our journey to the sacred Taoist mountains in Wudang. I have been to many sacred mountains in China but Wudang is closest to my heart. There is just something very magical and special in the air there. Not only is a very beautiful environment but also just doing our practices in the place where Taoists have done theirs for thousands of years makes it all so much more powerful!

Anyone who has traveled to Wudang will remember the exhilarating and at times scary bus ride up the mountain from the town of Wudang. The road curves back and forth, with a cliff face on one side and a drop on the other. For the most part private cars are not allowed on the mountain so everyone takes the public buses, which travel up and down the mountain all day.

One thing that amazed me is that the bus would periodically stop and let people out in the middle of “nowhere.” I could not see any

dwellings or even paths where people got out. Perhaps they were Taoist “fairies” and just flew off down the mountain!

When we arrived at our hotel, named Jiu Long (Seven Dragons), we were greeted by a huge banner across the outside, welcoming our group! Lacking an elevator it was a bit of a challenge to get our heavy luggage up the stairs but once we got that accomplished we found ourselves in a lovely courtyard style hotel. (My room was on the third floor and was exactly 106 stairs up. Living as I do in Eugene Oregon, where most of the houses are one story, it took a bit of getting used to every time I went up or down.)

But it was so exciting to be back in Wudang that it was all so worth it to spend time in that wonderland of qi-filled mountains! Our teacher, Master Zhou Jingo, whose school was a little bit down the mountain, met us our first evening in Wudang and began teaching us a simple qi-gathering exercise as well as a lovely 18-movement tai chi form native to Wudang. Dana did her usual excellent and at times very amusing translation, as we got to know our teacher and ourselves in our new environment.



*Practice in the courtyard of the Purple Heavenly Palace*



*My old friend, Jiaye the cave man, holding my hand*



*Group of young men doing their sword practice for the filming at the Purple Heavenly Palace*

The next day we went to the largest temple on Wudang, the Purple Heavenly Palace, which is run by woman Taoists (*kundao*). We had a morning class with Master Zhou in the large courtyard of the temple. Once again, we got to immerse ourselves in the good vibrations of all the masters and students who have practiced in this space. The temple itself was built in 1413, during the Ming Dynasty.

One of the days I was there on my own I came upon a group of 35 young men and boys all beautifully dressed in robes and topknots, who were practicing a tai chi sword routine. They were all goofing around and dropping their swords while the teachers yelled at them and tried to get them into straight lines. I thought it was a class, as many people come to this special spot to study, but suddenly people started moving us all away from them and off to the side. It turns out they were shooting a movie there! The amazing thing was that as soon as the director shouted “action” they all fell into perfect synchrony and did a short tai chi sword routine just perfectly. I wish I knew the name of the film but alas, no one there spoke English and my Chinese is very limited!

One of the highlights to any visit to Wudang for me is the Nanyan temple, built in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). Part of it is built into the side of a cliff and it takes many, many steps, up and down and on and on, to get there. (I love going to places that you cannot drive a car, to but have to rely on your own two feet to get there.)

One of the most famous parts of Nanyan temple is the stone dragon head that extends out into the very deep chasm that has a incense burnt on the end. The story is that in the old days monks would have to walk out onto this very narrow dragon head and light incense at the end and then walk backwards to get off of it. Nowadays they have it blocked off and don’t allow folks to go out on it but it is quite a sight hanging over the deep drop off the edge of the cliff! (You can see it in a Jackie Chan movie called Karate Kid, from a few years ago, where a Taoist nun is dancing out on it with a cobra, which are not actually native to this area, out on it.)

I always love to sit and try different teas in the little teahouse in the temple. I buy a tea there I have never seen in any other teahouse in China or the U.S. It’s little hard green pellets, like some kind of green gravel. They call it Taoist Tea and it’s made of green tea and wild ginseng. (Later on in the trip I had to buy a small carry on suitcase to hold all the tea I bought in various parts of China, especially the wonderful Tea Market in Beijing.)

Master Zhou not only came to our hotel and met up with us in various temples but hosted us at his school a little ways down the mountain. In the small courtyard of his school we sat under a grand old tree and drank tea overlooking the beautiful mountains. I told everyone a story one day, a Chinese Taoist version of the Wizard of Oz, making it up as I went along. When I was done Dana said, “Wow, I didn’t know there were so many Chinese people in that story!”

In my version Dorothy was traveling to find the mighty immortal who lived on the Emerald Mountain, accompanied by the Guardian of the Crops and an armored warrior who had been doing Tree Pose for so long he had become frozen!



*So many stairs!*

Many of our travelers had a lot of experience with tai chi and so were able to pick up Master Zhou's short, fairly simple form in the limited time we had with him. Although he did not speak any English our teacher was very patient, kind and humble. His school happened to be right next to a temple where Zhen Wu, the "god" of this mountain met an old woman who was rubbing an iron rod on a stone there.

Zhen Wu had been cultivating in these mountains for some time and was getting very impatient, as he had not seemed to be reaching any kind of attainment, and so was on his way down the mountain. When he questioned the old woman on what she was doing rubbing the iron rod patiently on the rock she told him she was making a sewing needle. "But Grandmother," said Zhen Wu, "that will take forever, or at least a very long time." "Oh," she answered, "I have plenty of time."

And so, feeling chastened by the old woman (though some Taoists say she was actually an Immortal sent to teach him a lesson), Zhen Wu returned to the mountain to continue his cultivation practices and is said to have attained immortality himself.

One of the highlights of any trip to Wudang is the chance to visit my old friend Jiaye (Od Grandfather) who has been living in a cave up above the Purple Heavenly Palace for over 25 years. There is a small shrine at the opening of the cave for Zhen Wu and Jiaye's "job" is to maintain the shrine. His cave dwelling, while very primitive,



*Solala, Master Zhou and Jessica strike a pose.*

is good enough for his simple needs. People bring him food and incense for the altar and he loves to meet people from everywhere. (For a video interview I did a few years ago go to our website at [www.abodetao.com](http://www.abodetao.com)).

There used to be a hive of wild bees under a cabinet outside of the cave. He never took their honey and they often swarmed all around him but they never stung him. He called him his "Taoist friends." But this year I looked for them and was told that one day they all flew off. Perhaps to join Zhen Wu high in the mountains!

Jiaye comes out of his cave with a big toothless grin when I bring people to visit him. He sits and beams at everyone and they all fall immediately in love with him. We sat in mostly silence this year, while he held my hand for the longest time (something he had never done before).

Being in the very special Wudang Mountains with a group of very special people is one of the high points of my year. My co-leader Jessica Kolbe was always very positive and fun and I could not ask for a better companion on this China adventure.

The "Te" in the title of the ancient book the *Tao Te Ching* is usu-



*One of the wild macaques on Wudang.*

ally translated as "virtue" but it means much more than a kind of morality (though, of course, that is part of it as well). It also means "spiritual potency or spiritual power." It is when we do our self-cultivation practices of meditation, studying Taoist texts, qigong and tai chi that we are able to strengthen our own spiritual power.

Not only that but it is believed that nature, especially mountain areas are full of natural te or spiritual potency. This is why hermits and sages throughout China's history have always gone to the mountains to do their cultivation practices. This is also why, when we go to the mountains ourselves, we are able to not only strengthen our own te but are able to pick up on the te of all the masters who have cultivated there as well. This is why it is so powerful to go to the Wudang mountains, which have been an area of Taoist practice for thousands of years.

Group practice is also a wonderful way to strengthen our te or qi body. It is when we are all moving together, breathing together and inhabiting the one eternal moment in time and space that is contained in our tai chi or qigong practice that we really get a sense of connection and grounding into our common core of being. And to get to do that in the sacred mountains of Wudang is such a gift and a blessing. Jessica and I so look forward to being there again next fall!

We took an overnight train to Beijing at the end of our time in the mountains. I had grave reservations about it as the last time I took an overnight train it was filled with smokers and the bathrooms were horrendous but to my pleasant surprise the trip was lots of fun...no smokers, very clean bathroom etc. We were all in four-person rooms and visited each other all afternoon and into the evening. It was kind of like being at summer camp...bunk beds and all!

The last few days of our trip were spent in Beijing with a side trip to the Great Wall. Our last night we went to have Peking duck and had to go through an amazing gauntlet of food stalls with lots of mouth-watering smells and some not so pleasant smells and even one stall selling scorpions on a stick!

All in all, it was a great and memorable trip. The group camaraderie helped a lot when we had challenges at funky train stations or ridiculously early flights (something that will not happen again). An example was when we were leaving China and one of our group had her luggage over the weight limit and immediately four members of our group offered to take some of her stuff to lighten her load..

Our time in the mountains was magical and challenging (so many stairs) and our teacher was warm and friendly and very patient. Our guide Dana was as usual, amazing and fun. Our local Wudang guide Amy was also quite fun. It is so important to have people you trust and who trust you on these trips. I have worked with Dana for years now and always enjoy her presence on our trip. I look forward to working with her on our next journey to the Middle Kingdom!



*Zhen Wu meeting the old woman with the iron rod.*



*Practicing at the White Cloud Temple in Beijing.*

## China Impressions: a very personal experience.

Jessica Kolbe

China is Tai Chi. It is a land of opposing forces blending together to form the whole.

On one hand, it is hard to ignore the enormous growth. High-rises, roads, subways and new train tracks are being built everywhere. It seems everyone has money, a smart phone and a new model car. The mood is one of prosperity and growth. On the other hand, there is the ancient culture that pervades everything. Under the present leader, Chairman Xi Jinping, there is a new interest in all things old. The Chinese are embracing the old traditions of Qigong, Tai chi, and Chinese history. The Cultural Revolution seems to be fading into the past.

I go to China to embrace the old ways. I go to study Qigong, to deepen my understanding of energy and how to use it to heal, find peace and to manifest my dreams. Our Master Zhou says to expand the energy from within. In my mind, this translates to expanding my heart with compassion and love, expanding this through my cells, tissues and bones and blood, expanding this energy beyond my body. My godson goes to China to embrace the new ways. We met in Beijing where he was studying Chinese business practices and meeting executives from Alibaba.

I go to China to learn more about Taoism, how to live with nature and find the flow in life. We visited the quiet Taoist Guans (temples), filled with statues of enlightened humans and the calming smell of incense. Climbing endless steps, it is like we are ascending to heaven and enlightenment. In the evenings before we retired to our rooms Solala read Taoist fables to our group. How lovely to have a bedtime story.

I go to China to open my mind to different ways of doing things and ways of thinking. People in China are very open and friendly. There is a childlike innocence and lack of fear. Americans seem much more guarded and standoffish. Chinese people are not shy and they came up to us all the time, wanting to take their photo with us, touch us, connect with us and welcome us to their country. They are proud people and proud of their country. They will break into a song to share with you and then invite you to sing a song from your country. Next time I will be more prepared!

Much of life in China happens out in public. The Chinese go out into the parks and public squares in the mornings and evenings. At Tai Chi Square in Wudangshan the quiet mornings are a time to do exercises, tai chi and Qigong. It is inspiring to watch flexible and graceful men and women of all ages move together as one. Our group was always encouraged to watch or join in. Others practice calligraphy with a mop and pail of water. They paint the ground with beautiful characters, only to have them evaporate moments later.

The evenings are loud and noisy as the large squares become a happy chaos of energy.



*Nanyan Temple seen from afar.*



*Fantastical topiary in Hangzhou*



*Our welcoming banner at hotel in Wudang*

There are small children, dogs and people everywhere. There are groups doing Karaoke, others practicing Zumba, ballroom dancing and line dancing. Other groups dance with fans and swords. People set up crafts areas for children and adults. There are people playing chess and Mahjong. Even in our hotels we saw maids dancing and moving in their free time. People are out connecting with their own bodies, their inner natures and one another. What a difference when I think that in the US we tend to go home to watch tv, surf the internet and read.

I go to China for the Tai Chi, the beautiful quiet movements that bring balance and harmony into my body, my mind and my life. It is grounding to practice Tai Chi and Qigong in places where it has been practiced for thousands of years. Learning a new Tai Chi form is a fun challenge. To bring it home, embody it and witness the emerging insights is a thrill.

I go to China to get out of my world and live like the Chinese. Get up early and gently exercise my body with movement and breath, eat healthy and delicious food, savor tea, contemplate life and my own nature. I go to China to learn about myself and to gain insight about what is really important. I come home renewed with a different outlook on my life and how to live it.

Traveling to China with a like-minded group is a wonderful way to visit. It is safe, organized and planned. All we have to do is show up every day.

In 2018 we will first visit Hangzhou where we will acclimate and learn about history, culture, food and tea. We will then travel to the birthplace of Tai Chi, the Wudang Mountains, and immerse ourselves in Qigong and Tai Chi, Taoism, and the peaceful quiet of nature. Our final destination will be Chengdu, where we will visit the Giant Pandas, eat Szechuan food, go to the Chinese Opera and spend time with locals in the parks and Taoist Guans practicing all that we have learned! I can't wait to go back!



*Nanyan Temple, built into the side of a cliff.*



*Master Zhou and Dana*



**Jessica and Solala will be leading a trip in the fall of 2018. Please write to [solala@abodetao.com](mailto:solala@abodetao.com) or go to our website at [chinatrip.mystical-abode.com](http://chinatrip.mystical-abode.com) for more information and to register.**



*Teatime in Hangzhou*