

# FROM LISTENER AND STUDENT TO COACH AND SCHOLAR: FEEDBACK ON COLLECTING TAOIST MUSIC

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In the 1980s, the Chinese government launched a cultural project referring to the “Intergration of China’s 10 national folk arts” (中国十部民族民间文艺集成). This project, among others, included folk songs (民歌), Chinese drama (戏曲), narrative songs (说唱), instrumental music (器乐). What is interesting is that the religious music, both vocal and instrumental, was considered being the inheritance of national instruments.

The Wuhan Conservatory of Music undertook editing works of Chinese traditional instrumental music inherited from Hubei, and at that time, I was involved as a student. In this editorial work, focus had been given to the religious music, specifically consisting of recordings, collection, organizing and related study of music of Wudang Taoism. I was involved in this work.

During the 1980s, ordinary people had less knowledge about religion, and on the mountains of Wudang, there were few Taoists able to remember Taoist rituals which have been interrupted for nearly three decades. And religious music has just recovered. Many young Taoists who had just entered the Taoist temple did not have the chance to learn Taoist traditions.

Elder Taoists were unable to sing or play instrumental music due to the long interruption. Some, who were capable of singing and playing an instrument, did not memorize the original Taoist rituals. In this situation, it was difficult to do any recordings at that time. Then we found that fragments of memories of all these elder Taoists could be put together out of which complete rituals could be reproduced. For instance, some vocal music was originally played with instrumental accompaniment. Considering the old Taoists cannot longer play musical instruments, we took through the way of singing instrumental parts out of their mouth, then we can conveniently write it these melodies down on a sheet of paper.

I observed another case is in the countryside where some Folk Taoists practice who don’t live in Taoist temples. While they are working as farmers, they were doing some Taoist rituals. They can still remember some complete Taoist rituals. The music that some senior Taoists have been handed down to them at the ashram of the Folk Taoist was fully integrated in these rituals. These rituals were recorded.

Because the government had given a clear mandate at that time, the recording of this ritual must be a complete set including the acoustics, musical scores, still pictures, moving images (videos), and words. Applying this insight of completeness it was also possible to record the Taoist music of Wudang mountain as far as possible even when the conditions were not so good.

As a student participating in this work, to be honest, was difficult from every aspect. Being a “student” had two meanings to me: firstly, at that time, I was a graduate student and it was expected that I understood quickly and creatively. The second aspect, facing these seemingly unfamiliar situation, I had to learn like a beginner since religious behaviors were a long time missing in our daily life. I had no idea about it. From every scripture the Taoists were singing, the rituals they did, we all had to get to know each other’s world again through asking them for advice and learning from them like a small schoolboy.

At the time when we were working on this recording project, sorting, editing, our simplest idea was to complete the tasks assigned by the country. There was not yet any thought of how this may impact the future of musical knowledge on Taoism. It did not take very long, about five years from then, this recorded and published set of music had been returned to the Wudang Mountain Taoist temple as

teaching material for the young Taoists at that time. They took these music sheets to learn about music in Taoism.

This is a situation we didn't think of when we collected information. It was an unexpected outcome that we did not anticipate. We did not expect that a collection of work done for its own ordered purpose in this special period of history could have this unexpected function and effect on inheriting Taoist music.

So, at that time, as a student I participated in this work and learned Taoist music from the Taoists' hands and mouths, which became then my research materials for Taoist music research. In addition to our expertise, the use of music technology and specific recording skills, we used our special effects and expertise in writing the scores out from audio sources, and then we went back to Taoist temples, to help and assist the young Taoists learn the Taoist music, read and understand the musical melodies. So our self-understanding transformed from the student that had collected and organized music materials in the Taoist temple to the coach and music tutor for the young Taoists.

After three years, the other Taoist music collection and final work in the Longhu mountain Celestial Masters mansion (龙虎山天师府) of Jiangxi province was basically similar to that in Wudang mountain. The difference was that the project in the Wudang Mountain was carried out as an integrative part of work required by the national government. While this time, the Taoist music collection was initiated by the Celestial Masters mansion in the Longhu mountain because of the local importance. Longhu mountain Celestial Masters mansion is the ancestral Chamber of Orthodox Unity (正一派). It is a famous Taoist temple that is very influential in Taoism. At that time, the Wuhan Conservatory of Music was convinced that it should take the initiative to collect the music of this influential Taoist temple.

The situation was similar to that in the Wudang mountain: Just a few of old Taoists could be motivated to remember some of the "rhymes" (jingyun 经韵) that they sang and the "tunes" (qupai 曲牌) they played when they performed Taoist rituals. Because the Taoists were very old, they could not play the instruments by themselves. It was also the same way that the instrumental music was sung by their mouth to give us an impression of how the instruments played in the Taoist rituals.

The chanting practiced by the Taoists was similar. There were not many Taoists that could describe the whole ritual. Most of them have made a choice out of the notated songs we brought along because that was the music that they remembered. We recorded their chanting and then kept it.

Some Taoists had been living in the countryside for a long time. After political reforms and the re-opening of temples, they didn't return to their Taoist temples and still continued living in the countryside. Therefore, we went to collect their music practices to the rural areas to record the actual state of chanting at that moment.

Due to this combination of searching for the old Taoists in temples and the retired Taoists scattered in the countryside we finally completed the recording project, the collection of music practices and interviews of Taoists speaking about music in 1991. Two years later, in 1993, the collection was published by Longhus Mountain Celestial Masters Music (中国龙虎山天师道音乐).

The situation after publication is basically the same as that with the recording project in the Wudang Mountain. At that time, the Longhu Mountain Celestial Masters mansion also recruited a group of young people as followers. These people have not experienced Taoist rituals. They also depended on the notation that we have produced from the recordings to read the musical notes and sing the rhymes. Thanks to this, they could get a basic understanding of the rhyme passed down by the old Taoists.

As for instrumental performance, they sent several young Taoists to learn playing musical instruments at the Wuhan Conservatory of Music. The instruments included: erhu (二胡), bamboo flute (笛子), yangqin (扬琴), and pipa (琵琶). Resulting from these specific circumstances, my actual experiences and my previous musical knowledge, I also became the teacher of music to teach these young Taoists

basic theory and music technology. They were about the same age as me. It seems to be a surprising fact that the former student turned out to become the music coach. This happened at the Wuhan Conservatory where I was studying and working at that time.

The third story to be told starts in 1990. I went to Beijing when I was a postgraduate student at the Wuhan Conservatory of Music. The reason was that Master Min Zhiting (闵智亭), vice-chairman of the Chinese Taoist Association, sent a request to the Institute of Taoist Music of the Wuhan Conservatory of Music (武汉音乐学院道教音乐研究室). He was able to recite all the rhymes of *Proper Melodies of Complete Perfection* (全真正韵) that was published in the Qing dynasty. He hoped that we could send someone to record it.

When we got this news, I and another teacher were sent to Beijing by Institute of Taoist Music of the Wuhan Conservatory of Music. After our experiences with the Wudang Mountain and the Longhu Mountain Taoist music collection and skilled in organizing work, it was a bit easier and more handy than the first two collections. Two conditions were much better than before: the first is that we had some practical experiences with Taoist music. The second is that it is easier to simply pick up a single representative such as this old Taoist than focusing on many different players. After almost a week of work, we recorded all the rhymes of *Proper Melodies of Complete Perfection* by Master Min Zhiting, and then brought them back to Wuhan making a recording document and notations of these rhymes. Later, I took the full set of recordings and writings to Beijing, sang according to the music score to master Min over and over, and let him comment on whether or not the music is the same as the melody he was singing. Hearing me reciting this set of rhymes, the old Taoist was glad to say that the notation was accurate. I felt especially glad to have achieved such a Taoist's compliment.

I never would've thought about that I was asked by master Min, as a teacher at the Chinese College of Taoism (中国道教学院) at that time. The main teaching content included: teaching the students from all over the country to read music scores, learn basic music knowledge, and chanting the rhymes of *Proper Melodies of Complete Perfection* as taught by master Min. At that time, there really was a very strange and magical feeling. I didn't think of myself as a student who had no knowledge of Taoism or Taoist music. However, I came to the Chinese College of Taoism, taught young Taoist students chanting rhymes in class, and this was something I hadn't ever thought of before.

So it is because of this experience, there was a transformation from the role as the student to the music teacher in class. At that time, I was determined to take master Min as my teacher. I wanted to learn *Proper Melodies of Complete Perfection* from a practical example and in a direct way. In 1991, in Xi'an, I worshipped Master Min Zhiting as my Taoist teacher.

There was a true teacher-student relationship since Master Min taught me the rhymes personally. Also, I personally experienced the chanting while I taught young Taoists in different places, such as at the Eight Immortals Temple in Xi'an (西安八仙宫) and at the Chinese College of Taoism. To this day, when I go to the Eight Immortals Temple, I can still hear the intimate rhymes, especially when listening to the rhymes of those with whom I learned to sing *Proper Melodies of Complete Perfection* as taught by master Min Zhiting. This is a special feeling of accomplishment.

Looking back at the experience of collecting Taoist music, I have felt the following: Three different stories actually also reflect different circumstances of time how music was collected from the Taoists. The first time going to Wudang Mountain is a short term action of the national government. I was completely unprepared, and I was passively involved in the work as a student. In my personal case, I was rather interested in Taoist culture and Taoist music than in the work of collecting or preserving knowledge.

After that collection experience in Wudang Mountain, on the second trip to the Longhu Mountain Celestial Masters mansion, the nature of the recording project work that focused on Taoist music my conditions have changed. The work shifted from the government task to the task given by an Institute of Taoist Music of Wuhan Conservatory of Music to actively seek out for important historical

recordings. Personally, I have carried further my initial curiosity with Taoist music in the Wudang Mountain, so my feelings are transformed from a completely uneducated to that of a beginner's expert.

After the time of visiting the Longhu Mountain Celestial Masters mansion, collecting and processing knowledge became easier and more comfortable. Still there were some small differences though the work as a whole was consistent and the collected items have shown great similarities.

The contact with master Min Zhiting and the process of following him to learn the *Proper Melodies of Complete Perfection* had a huge impact on me personally. This huge impact consisted mainly two aspects: First, I could directly learn from an old Taoist with profound knowledge of Taoism. I developed a sincere feeling for Taoist culture that cannot be expressed in words. Second, the Taoist style of old Taoism is very different from ordinary Taoism practiced by normal people and influenced my worldview and how to know religion, in particular, there has been a great change in my perception of Taoism. I changed from a stranger to this phenomenon to someone interested in Taoist culture who feels a strong affinity to Taoism, especially after Mr. Min Zhiting has been my master. I as a layman, master Min as a Taoist, there was a specific communication between us that went beyond a teacher-student relationship as I have seen it before. As he gradually influenced me, I gradually began to have a new understanding of Taoist people, Taoism and Taoist music as well as its culture. Also because of such a chance and fate, then when I chose my master's thesis, I have chosen to write about the Wudang Taoist music without hesitation. And in my thesis defense, the school also invited two people who were not music professionals, both of them are academic experts and senior Taoist scholars: one was Li Yangzheng (李养正), a prestigious Taoist expert, the other was master Min Zhiting himself. At that time, these two members of a special defense committee in the school gave me the impression that my own research on Taoist music has been given a special care and attention.

Because of these many accidental and purposeful events in my life during my early career I advanced from a student completing Taoist music collections and eagerly publishing findings to an instructor of music. Later academic research on the topic of Taoist music was a special academic growth path and a direction of academic research, especially, because of these three activities that laid the foundation. Setting the direction of Taoist music research shortly thereafter, this research became a major subject in my field of academic research, and until today, I still enjoy it.

The changes I experienced reflect in a way my perception of life after becoming familiar with Taoist practices. I am well aware of the importance of processes in working relationships. One of my own experiences is that all these changes were completed beyond my own assumptions and expectations. When we were collecting Taoist music, we first thought we were just doing a collection of Taoist music. It never occurred to me that such a piece of music would later become the textbook for any Taoist temples.

Everything seemed to be unexpected, but it all seemed to have its own order and some sort of arrangement into a specific direction. I think this view is probably what is meant in Taoism "predestination".

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