

Mountains

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Mountains (*shān* 山) occupy a revered place in the Daoist tradition, and Daoists have frequently resided in mountains, as both recluses and monastics, throughout Daoist history. This is so much the case that Daoism might be understood as a “mountain religion.”

The character for mountain 山 is a simplified version of the earlier **pictogram** 𡵓, or a mountain range consisting of three peaks. For Daoists, this invokes the various other ternary associations so central in Daoist lifeways, including the external Three Treasures and Three Refuges of the Dao, scriptures, and teachers. As we bow to these presences and influences, we re-member that we are in the mountains.

The **central importance of actual mountains** is confirmed by the well-known reference to a divine being living on Gūshè 姑射 (Maiden Archer) Mountain and Master Guǎngchéng 廣成 (Expansive Completion) on Mount Kōngtóng 空同 / 崆峒 (Empty Identity) in the *Zhuàngzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang). In organized Daoism, other examples include Hè míng 鶴鳴 (Crane-Cry) Mountain in early Tiānshī 天師 (Celestial Masters); Máo shān 茅山 (Mount Mao) in Shàngqīng 上清 (Highest Clarity); the Zhōngnán 終南 (Southern Terminus) and Kūnyú 崑崙 mountains in early Quánzhēn 全真 (Complete Perfection), later including Huàshān 華山 (Mount Hua) in the namesake lineage.

This further relates to **Daoist eremitic (hermit) culture**. For example, the well-known alchemist Gé Hóng 葛洪 (Bàopǔ 抱朴 [Embracing Simplicity]; 283-343) tells us, “Anyone seeking the Dao goes into the mountains.” And Xuē Tàilái 薛泰來 (1924-2001), an important modern Huàshān lineage monk, echoes such sentiments: “People who want to practice have to go deeper into the mountains.”

In the larger Daoist tradition, mountains may refer to geological mountains, eremitic withdrawal, meditation, and even ritual. Thus, “**entering the mountains**” (*rùshān* 入山) is often glossed as “entering stillness” (*rùjìng* 入靜) and “ascending the altar” (*dēngtán* 登壇). To go into the mountains is to practice meditation and ritual, and vice versa. The multilayered meaning of “mountain” in turn infuses the altar and its censer as symbolic and interpenetrating center. This dimension of the Daoist tradition has been explored by the Daoist scholar-practitioner and ordained priest Kristofer Schipper 施舟人 (1934-2021) in his book *The Taoist Body*.

Mountains within mountains. And more mountains still. Such mountains include “**mountain poets**” like Hánshān 寒山 (Cold Mountain; 9th c.), Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644-1694), and Gary Snyder (b. 1930). In the words of the latter, “Stay together/learn the flowers/go light.”

Then there is the **character xiān** 仙 (仙). While often translated as “immortal” or “transcendent,” it actually consists of *rén* 人 / 亻 (“person”) and *shān* 山 (“mountain”). A person of/from the mountains. The alternative character 僊 consists of *rén*-person and *qiān* 翾 (“fly”), perhaps invoking the great Pénɡ 鵬 bird and the associated state of being carefree (*xiāoyáo* 逍遙). As Daoists, we constantly dwell in the mountains. Wandering as/with clouds, we ascend elevated peaks. This is **Daoism as mountaineering**, and mountaineering as the “freedom of the hills.”