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Foreword

Buddha gazed at Jesus on the cross and said, “Your blood has all bled out. Would you like to come down? I’ll help you.”

Dao gazed at Jesus on the cross and said, “One always wants to go higher. Do you want to go higher? I’ll help you.”

Jesus gazed back at Buddha and Dao and replied, “I am at this location that is neither high nor low, and when people see me, they see the suffering people must endure.”

The Virgin Mary went up to the cross and said, “Haven’t you have already endured enough suffering on humanity’s behalf?”

Muhammad went up to the cross and said, “If you don’t do this, will humanity’s suffering decrease?”

Jesus on the cross gazed down at Mary and Muhammad and said, “If I am here, then when people see me, they will see the suffering humanity must endure.”

At this point, a group of people approached, and they chatted and drank next to the five deities—as though the deities were just like them. With a laugh, they said to the deities, “Hey, this is good wine, why don’t you come and have a drink with us? You shouldn’t stop until everyone is drunk!”

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Part I

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Preface



1. A womb like a flower, with the Bodhisattva Guanyin inside.

2. A womb like cattails and scallions, with Laozi inside.



3. When Guanyin is born, her delivery bed consists of a jade rabbit, the moon, and several villagers.

4. When Laozi is born, his delivery bed consists of an ox, crows, and a straw hat in the sunlight.





5. When Guanyin learns to crawl, a dead tree unexpectedly begins to bloom.



6. When Laozi learns to crawl, a dead tree unexpectedly begins to bud.



7. Guanyin's first dream is of a lotus blossom and a divine beast.

8. Laozi's first dream is of an enormous lotus-shaped leaf and a patch of wild weeds.



9. When Guanyin learns to stand, she feels that there is a black mass and a hand asking for help under her feet.

10. When Laozi learns to stand, he feels that the sky, earth, and forest are all flying under his feet.





11. Guanyin dreams again, dreaming of her future . . .



12. Laozi dreams again, also dreaming of his future . . .

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01 Yahui

The Buddha has as much faith in fate as the Bodhisattva has in the power of her own finger.

Yahui, however, suspected that mortal affairs were not necessarily determined by fate. Take, for example, tug-of-war, where it is assumed that there will always be winners and losers, the same way that there will always be black and white. However, when two of China's five major religions compete in a tug-of-war, they cannot simply be divided into winners and losers. In a competition between teams composed of Buddhists, Daoists, Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims from China's northwestern Ningxia and Gansu Provinces, the losers will always be the competitors, while the winners will always be those who organized the competition itself—the same way that there are casinos everywhere, where gamblers experience excitement and frustration around the clock, but at the end of the day all the money goes into the pockets of the casino owners.

One of these tug-of-war matches took place in late September. At the religious training center on the campus of Beijing's National Politics University, everyone felt as though they were being boiled alive, with the campus, the streets, and the entire city stewing in the heat. Today's match was between the Protestant and Catholic teams. The Protestants had selected five disciples for the competition, as had the Catholics. The Protestants were all wearing undershirts,

underwear, and sneakers with a good grip. The court had a red rubber surface, which resembled a Buddhist temple cook's fat face and was set up in the school's badminton court, with the Catholic team positioned on one side and the Protestant team on the other. To determine which team was winning, Director Gong, the competition's organizer, had painted a white line on the ground, and it was across this line that the competition unfolded. The members of the Protestant team were not ordinary apprentices or missionaries but rather pastors, just as the members of the Catholic team were not ordinary monks and nuns but priests. Only high-ranking religious figures like pastors and priests were qualified to attend this advanced religious research program and participate in these tug-of-war competitions. The spectators sitting around the court included Daoist masters, Buddhist abbots, Protestant pastors, and Muslim imams—all either religious masters or master candidates.

This was a competition between master and master, deity and deity, human and human, and deity and human. It was part of one of the religious training center's classes, and consequently all the disciples were required to attend. Even Yahui, who was at the center merely as an auditor, had no choice but to attend.

But today she was late.

She was late because she had spent too much time fashioning intricate papercut images in her dormitory room's temple, after which she had spent some additional time admiring herself in the mirror. On her way to the competition, she looked at the school's tallest building and thought how nice it would be if this were a Buddhist convent. She looked at the school's new library and thought how stylish and powerful it would be if this were the convent's sutra depository. As she was thinking this, she tripped over some pieces of sandstone in the middle of the road. She looked down and thought, *Yesterday these stones tripped a small child, and today they've tripped me. What might they do tomorrow?* She resolved to move two of the stones to the side of the road, but after several attempts she found

she was unable to budge them. A young Daoist came over to lend a hand, and he easily picked up the stones and moved them out of the way—but because he was afraid of crushing the grass by the side of the road, he instead placed the stones in a dusty area where there was no vegetation. When the Daoist returned, Yahui thanked him by clasping her hands together and chanting *Amitābha*. The Daoist didn't reciprocate with a heart palm salute, but rather, in a very secular fashion, he simply grinned and said, "Don't mention it. My name is Gu Mingzheng."

Then he walked away.

Yahui was surprised that a Daoist would respond to her in such a casual manner. She stood by the side of the road and watched him walk away as though looking at an unannotated page from a sutra. Meanwhile, at the tug-of-war court, they had already conducted the opening ceremony, and the Protestant and Catholic teams were already debating on which side of the white line the rope's red tassel would ultimately land. They argued until the flesh had almost fallen from their faces—as though debating who was God's most powerful presence on earth, Jesus or the Virgin Mary.

By that point, it was already three in the afternoon and the sun was burning brightly overhead, heating everything into a murky soup. Everyone felt like they were steadily boiling alive, and after they started the competition and began huffing and puffing, it sounded as if the earth were being rocked by thunder. Yahui finally entered through a small gate on the side of the court and stood quietly behind the Buddhist team. The first thing she saw were the bald heads of the senior monks, including one whose hair had already turned gray and whose close-cropped scalp resembled wheat stubble left in a farmer's field. Then she turned and saw the young priests and pastors divided into two groups, who glared at each other resentfully, like sports fans divided into two irreconcilable camps. Meanwhile, the Daoist and Muslim fans were casually laughing and chatting. The air was filled with shouts of "Go, go, go," though it was difficult to tell which shouts

were cheers directed toward the competitors, and which were simply spectators making a commotion.

As the temperature rose, the ground began to split open. Yahui watched for a while, until she began to feel similar cracks appearing in her own cheeks. Sweat poured out of these fissures, flowing like worms crawling down toward her chest. She was gazing up at the September sky when the shadow of a tree suddenly drifted overhead like in a myth. She turned and saw that the young Daoist master Gu Mingzheng had found a branch of an umbrella tree and was holding it over her head. With a smile, he said, "I'd like to treat you to an ice pop from that cold-drink shop."

02 Laozi

1. A young Laozi is herding cattle in the mountains.



2. Laozi is riding an ox to ford a river and ascend to the sky.



3. As confused as an ox in the cloudy sky.

4. Laozi discovers that behind the night sky there lies a vast expanse of stars.



5. Laozi discovers that the sky must also have shooting stars.

6. Laozi wonders: *Can I speak to this expanse of stars?*



7. Laozi also wonders: *Can I speak to the earth?*

8. Leading the ox and walking on the earth, Laozi tries to reach the highest peak, where the mountains touch the sky.



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9. On this peak, Laozi manages to touch the sky.



10. Laozi sees an eagle resembling the sun, and also sees an eagle-like sun and universe.



11. Laozi also sees Guanyin riding a divine beast through the sky and heading toward him.

03 Yahui

The fact that Yahui, an eighteen-year-old “jade nun,” would soon become the object of the Daoist Mingzheng’s love was something neither the school’s religious masters nor the deities themselves possibly could have anticipated. Yet Yahui didn’t even feel this was love. Instead, she simply regarded it as the kind of secular attachment her religious mentor, or *shifu*, had once mentioned—like the mud that sticks to your shoes on a rainy day. Once, as Yahui was going down the hall to dump her scraps from making papercuts, she happened to see Mingzheng at the bottom of the stairwell waving at her—like a boy wanting to give something he had just stolen to a girl. At the entrance to the building’s seventh floor, there was a wooden placard that read: “Male disciples must stop here!”

He came to a stop.

The placard’s interdiction stopped Mingzheng in his tracks. The female disciples were all housed on the seventh floor, the same way that all the female students at this university were assigned to the seventh floors of their respective dormitories—to prevent male students from visiting freely, and to block their amorous and lascivious impulses. In the religious training center, however, commandments were even more powerful than rules, and disciples crave commandments the way a starving person craves three meals a day.

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The religion building's first floor contained the religious training center's administrative offices, as well as the offices of its faculty and instructors. The second floor was the Buddhist dormitory, the third was the Daoist dormitory, the fourth, fifth, and sixth were the Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic dormitories, respectively, and the seventh was reserved for the school's female disciples. Each floor had a study room with newspapers and journals, but none had a chapel or a Mass room.

Every religious master and disciple who came here for training attended under the arrangement of the nation's School of Spirituality and Faith. This wasn't a foreign religious academy, nor was it a church or mosque, or a Buddhist or Daoist temple. Instead, it was an advanced religious research program that had been established with government support at Beijing's most prestigious university. A short-term appointment was for three months, a medium-term appointment was for six months, and a long-term appointment was for a full year.

The religious training center consisted of a single building, which the school called the religious belief building, or the religion building. The building's exterior was just like that of the school's other buildings, but inside everything was completely different. Not only were male and female disciples forbidden from mingling with one another, but even disciples of the same sex and belonging to the same religion rarely walked together or spoke to one another. Each disciple's religious practices—such as worshipping, attending Mass, burning incense, and chanting sutras—were conducted in the privacy of their own rooms. Every student had a room, every room had a temple, and every disciple had a church—though the Buddhist temples were rather small, as were the Daoist temples and the Islamic mosques. The young Daoist Mingzheng, meanwhile, yearned to see the Buddhist nun Yahui in person—the same way he might be able to recite the Daodejing by heart yet still yearn to see the real Laozi, or the way Yahui might burn incense and chant sutras every day yet still yearn to see the real Buddha.

Deities and humans must always maintain their distance from one another, because it is only with distance that there can be deities in the first place.

However, although most foreign deities reside in the distant heavens, many of China's deities are located closer to humans, down on earth. Foreign deities mostly attend to people's spirit and soul, while China's deities attend not only to their spirit and soul, but also to more mundane matters such as food and clothing, life and death, jealousy and hatred, money and wealth, aristocracy and bureaucracy, marriage and reproduction. Often, when people are walking along, they may suddenly look up and see a deity.

Now this young Daoist was at the center searching for deities. After repeatedly failing to speak to Yahui at the entrance to the seventh floor, Mingzheng figured he would probably run into her at the entrance to the building at mealtime. He decided he would join her when she emerged to take a stroll around campus, so he waited for her both on the path leading to the canteen and at the entrance to the campus store.

One day, Yahui had her period and went to the campus store to buy sanitary pads, which even nuns need to use. She bought the Comfort and Treasure brand, which had a blue sky, white clouds, and a female model smiling and dancing on the box, and on her way back to her room, she was as happy as a drifting cloud. With a relaxed heart and light steps, she strolled through the campus garden and began to wonder, *Does the Bodhisattva also have periods? And if she does, what kind of pad does she use?* At this thought, Yahui immediately stopped and silently chanted *Amitābha*. Then she smiled and saw a pair of feet with pointed-toe shoes and gray socks to protect the ankles. The stitching along the bottom of the robe resembled withered grass, but it was also as neat as cracks in a wall. This was a Daoist robe, and like a Buddhist robe it was wide at the bottom and narrow at the top. A row of cloth buttons extended diagonally across the left side of the robe, like a river flowing through it.

“I just knew you were going to pass by here,” Mingzheng said.

Yahui stopped in surprise and reflexively hugged her sanitary pads to her chest.

“Tomorrow, there will be another tug-of-war competition. However, if your *shifu* is opposed to these inter-sect athletic competitions, I can ask for the center to stop including them in its athletics classes!”

Yahui stared at the young Daoist in disbelief.

“Ours is a program for religious masters, and it is as selective as the Summer Palace’s Communist Party School. If you aren’t a Buddhist abbot or Daoist master, or a priest, pastor, or imam, then you are not qualified to enroll. I know you have come to look after your *shifu* and audit some classes on her behalf, but do you know why I, a twentysomething-year-old Daoist, was able to enroll?”

Lips pursed, Yahui continued staring at him.

Without answering his own question, the young Daoist approached her and took her hand. “Let’s go over there!” As though giving her an order, he led her toward the garden on the west side of the campus. The perimeter of the garden was lined with willows, while the interior was filled with dead cypresses. Students looking for a secluded site to either study or chat flirtatiously usually didn’t go there. This, however, was precisely where Mingzheng was leading her. Yahui wasn’t sure why she was following him, but when they arrived, he said solemnly, “I know that the reason you weren’t ordained when you turned eighteen is because your *shifu* wanted you to return to secular life.”

“...”

“But who could maintain their faith while enjoying a secular life? I also want to return to secular life, so why don’t we take the opportunity provided by this training program, return to secular life, and get married?”

Yahui stepped back in shock. With her gaze fixed on his face and her hands clasped in front of her chest, she repeatedly chanted

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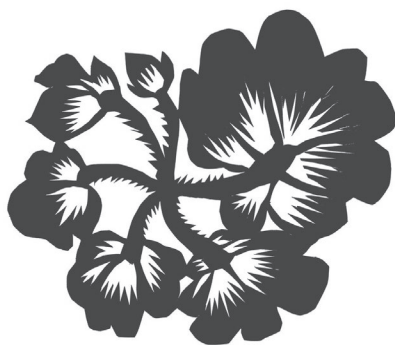
Amitābha, then turned and walked away. The young Daoist stepped forward and grabbed her, blocking her way like a wall.

“I really can arrange for the center to stop the tug-of-war competitions. Do you know about my family’s relationship to the center’s Director Gong?”

As Yahui listened, she took a step back, and then another. The entire time, her hands remained clasped in front of her chest as an interminable thread of sutra chants emerged from her mouth. After Yahui had taken several steps back, she turned and rushed out of the garden. As she ran off, she heard him calling after her, “I’m telling you that tomorrow, on behalf of your *shifu*, I’ll ask the center to remove tug-of-war competitions from its athletics courses!” She turned to him in surprise, then hurried away even more quickly than before. When she reached her room, she dealt with her period. She didn’t know why she kept feeling a surge of delight and wondered why Laozi and Guanyin hadn’t ever fallen in love. She reflected that if Laozi and Guanyin had in fact fallen in love and gotten married, it would have been a beautiful, divine marriage!

04 The Bodhisattva Guanyin

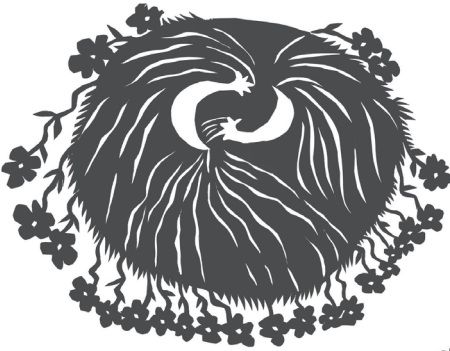
1. You know? The flower bud waiting for its season is the Bodhisattva Guanyin.



2. A picture of a lotus cloud.

3. *Ah-ya-ya, ah-ya-ya*, it turns out that the young Guanyin is the most beautiful person in the world.





4. When a boy grows up,
he will marry someone,
and when a woman grows
up, she will be married to
someone. Guanyin grows
up, the divine matchmaker
arrives, and a pair of moons
are born out of nothing.

5. However, there is only one
beautiful Guanyin, and ten
thousand suitors. What to
do? Fortunately, no matter
how many roads there
may be, Guanyin will
always be at the center.



6. Guanyin wonders:
Whom should I marry?

7. Guanyin thinks:
*Yes, yes, whoever
is everyone, that is
whom I'll marry.*



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8. Guanyin was born so that she could marry everyone—men and women, young and old.

9. But thousands of people curse her, crying, “Whore, whore!” Then her suitors depart, and the roads are left empty.



10. By the time her parents arrive, the beautiful Guanyin has already left, heading in the direction of the sage. Her parents, meanwhile, see the world's largest lotus blossom.



11. Guanyin, soaring up to your auspicious cloud, where is your distant region?



12. Guanyin sees the river to heaven.



13. Guanyin also sees Laozi in the sky calling out to her: *It turns out that the sage is here waiting for me!*



14. An image of Laozi's and Guanyin's first date.

05 Jueyu

The ridge on the roof of Yonghe Temple could be seen from the Yonghe Missionary Hospital, as though it were printed on the window, like a feather stuck inside a copy of *Records of the Grand Historian*. Today, there was an unprecedented absence of the usual morning bells and evening drums, but now the silence was obliterated by a loud ruckus. In Beijing, the city's noise was as great as the silence of the prairie or of Qinghai Lake—as distant and vast as eternity.

Yahui was about to arrive.

For more than twenty days, Jueyu *shifu* had been waiting in the hospital for Yahui to come visit. A sickroom, white walls, transfusions, and injections—Jueyu *shifu* was propped up to eat and listen as the volunteer nurses and nuns chanted several lines from the sutras. She gazed at Yahui's papercuts, which covered the bed and the walls. As she did so she would let herself think, or else she would just look at the papercuts and not think at all—letting her mind remain as empty as a white cloud, completely devoid of content. She had suffered a stroke and could no longer speak or walk, and although her mind remained as clear as a beautiful scene, she had no way of communicating this scene to others. She had been checked into the hospital less than ten days after arriving at the university's religious training center in Beijing, where she had never anticipated that she would have to witness the intersecting of war competitions.

When these competitions reached their peak, she collapsed and was brought to this sickroom.

The sun slowly sank from the second-highest window to the second-lowest one. Back in Jing'an Temple's Jingshui Convent, in Xining Province, where Jueyu *shifu* had lived for forty-seven years, the sunlight at this time of day resembled red paper immersed in clear water, but here the light appeared as though it were flowing out of muddy water. There was a major thoroughfare outside the hospital, and the sound of traffic resonated like rain flowing through a bridge's drainage hole. The sound was initially distracting, but now the cacophony of cars honking, people talking, and objects colliding made Jueyu *shifu* feel as though she had a companion in her solitude. A nurse entered her room and placed several pills by the head of her bed. Maybe the nurse also said something to her, or maybe she didn't—in any event, as the nurse left, she shut the door behind her. After a while, the door began to creak open again, followed by the sound of someone exclaiming "*Shifu!*" Before Jueyu *shifu* had a chance to shift her gaze from the window, she heard someone placing several objects in the cabinet at the head of the bed. Jueyu *shifu* turned and saw the sweat on the back of Yahui's robe, then watched as Yahui placed some apples and bananas in the cabinet. Lastly, Yahui placed a thermos in the cabinet, as ripples of joy spread on her face. Jueyu *shifu* looked directly at Yahui and saw that she did not appear as precise and orderly as usual. She realized Yahui had been struck by a surge of joy, resembling a girl delightedly standing in front of her mother.

"*Amitābha.*" Yahui held her finished papercuts of Guanyin's and Laozi's birth and their subsequent meeting. She happily told her *shifu*, "Someone spoke to Director Gong, and he agreed to discontinue the tug-of-war contests!"

Jueyu *shifu*'s eyes brightened.

"Director Gong wouldn't listen to us, but there is a Daoist with an impressive background, whose father might even be a minister or governor. Director Gong will definitely do whatever he asks." As she

was saying this, Yahui pulled over a chair and sat down next to the bed. She lifted her *shifu's* stick-thin hand, but suddenly remembered that she hadn't shut the door behind her. She got up to close the door, and as she was returning to her seat, she accidentally knocked over a broom behind the door. Then, as she was picking up the broom, she kicked over a trash bin, and as she was picking up the trash bin, her robe got snagged on a bamboo basket. Finally, smiling, she returned to the bed and once again grasped her *shifu's* hand. "You were hospitalized before you had a chance to meet this Daoist master. No one knows his family's background, or why he left his family to become a priest. In principle, he shouldn't have been able to join this program for religious masters, but when someone invited him to come, he did. When others said that the religion school's athletics class shouldn't have tug-of-war competitions, Director Gong ignored them, but when this Daoist master made the same point, Director Gong immediately agreed to discontinue the competitions." Yahui said this with a smile, as though she had accomplished a very difficult task. Yahui massaged her *shifu's* hand in her own, and as Jueyu *shifu* gazed back at her, her lips trembled and she seemed to whisper something. Then Jueyu *shifu* moved her body toward the head of the bed and sat up while supporting herself with her arms. She tried to lift her left arm but couldn't. Instead, while holding her right hand to her chest, she chanted *Amitābha*.

Yahui stared in surprise. Before, her *shifu* couldn't even move her hands, which hung limply from her arms like frost-covered grass, but now she could prop herself up and sit at the head of the bed. She could even use her left hand to make a Buddhist hand gesture, or *mudra*, in front of her chest. Yahui exclaimed, "*Shifu*, you're able to sit up?!"

Yahui once again clasped her hands in front of her chest and said loudly, "*Amitābha*, my *shifu* has sat up in bed on her own!"

Then she immediately rushed out of the sickroom into the hallway, shouting "Doctor! Doctor!"

In the hallway, which was not very long to begin with, there were no doctors or nurses. Instead, poking out of a doorway, there was the bald head of a young monk who was also there to visit someone. Yahui turned and ran back into the sickroom, then stood in front of the bed gazing at her *shifu*, who was rail-thin with snowy-white hair and wrinkles so deep that you could braid them. With tears in her eyes, Yahui exclaimed, “*Shifu*, I’ll make sure the school stops organizing those tug-of-war competitions . . . Gu Mingzheng said that he has arranged for the center to discontinue them tomorrow.”

With tears in her eyes, Jueyu *shifu* smiled and gazed at Yahui. She seemed to want to say something, but no words came out. Instead, she gestured with her right hand, and Yahui approached the head of the bed and once again grasped her hand. Jueyu *shifu* removed her hand from Yahui’s and slowly ran her fingers over Yahui’s body. She lightly stroked Yahui’s chest, shoulder, and face. She caressed Yahui’s chin, then brought her fingers up to Yahui’s lips and the tip of her nose, before finally stopping at the bridge of her nose. Trembling, she caressed Yahui’s nose, whereupon from the mouth of this woman, who almost a month earlier had been in a vegetative state, there emerged several halting words: “You . . . you have grown to resemble . . . to resemble a bodhisattva!”

Upon hearing this, Yahui burst into tears.

Jueyu *shifu* also burst into tears.

Jueyu *shifu* and Yahui hugged each other like a mother and daughter, or like someone embracing a loved one who has just returned from the dead. They wept until it sounded like the room was filled with a swarm of bees.

06 Director Gong, Professor Huang, and Pastor Wang

Before class on Monday, the religion building felt as though the followers of each religion had been battling one another and the deities' faces were covered in curses and slaps.

When the students returned from the dining hall after breakfast, they entered the auditorium and saw a professor shoving a book in Director Gong's face and shouting, "Damn it, I'm not going to take it anymore!" He said this angrily, as though no one recognized his talent.

Associate Professor Huang was forty-one or forty-two years old and was handsome and learned. He knew Christianity as intimately as a father knows his own son, and his articles were always published in leading religious studies journals. Three years in a row, however, each time he was considered for promotion to full professor, he was mysteriously passed over. This inevitably made him furious, and he would throw down his textbooks and the journals containing his articles. On that day, he even threw down a computer mouse and stomped on it. No one knew what exactly Associate Professor Huang and Director Gong said to each other in the auditorium that day, but it seemed as though the professor's outburst was not aimed solely at the director. However, the encounter did leave Director Gong feeling so embarrassed and helpless that all he could do was exclaim,

“Why bother? Why bother?” In the end, the men simply glared at one another, as though they intended to do battle with their eyes.

By this point, a crowd of disciples had gathered around. Because the disciples didn't know what the issue was, they just stood there and watched the commotion. The female disciples were so shocked that their words got caught in their throats, while the male ones waited for an opening in the fight. The Buddhists and Daoists put their hands together in prayer, though it wasn't immediately clear whether they were praying that Associate Professor Huang and Director Gong would start fighting or that they wouldn't. More and more people arrived, making Director Gong and Associate Professor Huang feel as though they couldn't leave without first starting a fight. Director Gong picked up the computer mouse Associate Professor Huang had stomped on and kicked it back to him, shouting, “What's the point of getting angry at me for something the school committee did? You should go complain to them!”

Associate Professor Huang put his hands on his hips and laughed coldly. “Do you think I wouldn't dare?!”

Director Gong shouted back, “Then do it!”

Associate Professor Huang glared at Director Gong one final time, kicked the computer mouse back against the wall, then strode through the crowd and out of the building. The disciples formed a path for him, allowing him to drift by like a specter. When the door opened, sunlight surged in and filled the building. Associate Professor Huang waded through the disciples' expectations and the divine light, and, panting, proceeded outside. The students watched him leave. Associate Professor Huang pushed the door with such force that it was as if he were opening the outer gate of the imperial court. By the time the light-yellow glass door closed behind him, Director Gong was already several meters away.

This appeared to mark the end of the dispute. The disciples turned back to Director Gong, who seemed to be about to say something, but then the auditorium door opened a crack and

Associate Professor Huang's face reappeared. The disciples heard him announce, "Director Gong, as of this moment, I, Huang Quidong, officially resign! After leaving this damned religious training center, I'll become my own master. You'll no longer have to worry about my career, my home, or where my child will go to preschool!" Then, his face bright red, he stepped outside and slammed the door. Through the door's glass window, the disciples could see him standing with his back to the sun, as the sunlight streamed down over his head and shoulders, before finally reaching his face.

Everyone waited for Director Gong's reaction. To their surprise, however, he turned to them and shouted, "What are you staring at?! You are all believers and God's children. Is there anything in this mortal world that you haven't already seen before?" As he said this, he cast his gaze over the crowd, making them feel as though they had become debased and secularized. Everyone left the auditorium quickly and rushed toward the stairwell and elevators. Even the old bishop and Monk Dade felt that they had let down Director Gong and the deities, and so when they passed in front of Director Gong, they bowed deeply to express their remorse.

The auditorium once again fell silent. As Director Gong was turning to leave, he saw the class monitor of the Protestant class, Pastor Wang Changping, standing next to him. Pastor Wang said quietly, "Associate Professor Huang is a talented individual, isn't he?"

"So what if he is?" Director Gong glared at Pastor Wang. "Rain will still fall from the sky and women will still get married. There may be nothing I can do to help Associate Professor Huang get promoted—that is, of course, unless you can arrange for God to issue me two more faculty lines for full professors."

Pastor Wang reflected for a moment, then said, "Even without the new faculty lines, he could still stay." Director Gong gazed at Pastor Wang, evaluating him as he would a believer who had suddenly come to perform penance. Pastor Wang was more than a decade older than Director Gong and was also taller and thinner. He was

the head resident pastor of Guangxi Province's famous Jialan Church, and therefore had been assigned to serve as the Protestant class's class monitor. Because of this position, Director Gong treated him more respectfully than he treated the other disciples.

Director Gong stared at Pastor Wang for several seconds, and then, in a voice that was simultaneously hard and soft, asked, "How can I get Associate Professor Huang to stay?"

Pastor Wang laughed, then looked around and replied, "You have to use money. In this era, money can resolve anything that the gods cannot."

Director Gong also smiled and asked, "And where exactly would I find this money?"

"In this religion building you oversee."

Director Gong looked up at the ceiling and then glanced in the direction of his own office, as though he were about to go work. For the sake of politeness, however, he invited Pastor Wang to sit with him for a while.

Director Gong's office was located at the northern end of the hallway. It was room 106, and had a steel plaque with the words *Director's Office* printed in yellow. The office was sixteen square meters—somewhat larger than the offices of the other instructors. Upon entering, visitors would see a huge chart labeled "Tug-of-War Regular Season and Playoffs" posted over the window, beside which there was a bookcase, a table, a sofa, and a small fountain. There was also a copy of the journal *Chinese Athletics* as well as several religious magazines and newspapers—all prominently displayed.

Director Gong invited Pastor Wang to sit on the couch and poured him a glass of hot water, then proceeded to steep a cup of the *maojian* tea that one of his students had given him. Director Gong explained apologetically that the religious training center was considered marginal by the university, like an extra thumb on a hand with six fingers. However, even if it was completely useless, it still