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## Preface

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Tucked away in Bologna, Italy, there is a quiet place on a street that begins in the shadow of historic towers and passes through an ancient gate. This is via Castiglione, where at number 11/b, a humble, unassuming door opens into a world of wonder: the Ibis bookstore.

It was here, on a rainy spring afternoon in 2001, that I first met Fazun 法尊 (1902-1980), the protagonist of this book. Ibis was founded in 1983 by a group of friends versed in various currents of Eastern and Western esotericism. From the start, it was more than a bookstore. It was imagined as a sanctuary, a place where readers and scholars could explore different paths to wisdom. In the words of its founders, Ibis encouraged plurality while honoring the uniqueness of each tradition. Over time, it became a space where insights from East and West could meet, challenge, and enrich one another.<sup>1</sup>

The bookshelves at Ibis whispered tales of magic, science, and religion. The collection stretched from Giordano Bruno to the Dalai Lama, and from the *Yijing* 易經 to the *Yoga Sūtras*. It drew on timeless wisdom from India and China, and from Tibet to Japan. But why the name 'Ibis'? Why invoke this feathered creature from Egyptian religion? In ancient Egypt, the ibis was a sacred bird associated with Thoth, the god of writing, wisdom, and magic. The founders chose the name for that reason. For through Thoth, they could also evoke Hermes, the Greek name for Mercury, the deity who embodied these same qualities in the Greco-Roman tradition. Naming the bookstore Ibis was their way of honoring that lineage in the heart of Bologna.

As a beginner in Asian Studies, I often visited Ibis. Hours slipped away as I sifted through its collections, enchanted by the fragrance of old books. In my naïveté, I gave little thought to the meaning of the ibis. I did not know

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<sup>1</sup> Picozza 2012, 34.

what kind of god Thoth was. Nor did I know that in early-modern Europe, between the Baroque and the Enlightenment, missionaries, travelers, and traders to Asia often mistook the Buddha for Hermes or Mercury, that is, Thoth by another name.<sup>2</sup> It seemed natural to me back then that modern translations of Buddhist classics like the *Diamond Sūtra* or the *Lotus Sūtra* would sit alongside volumes from the Hermetic canon.

One afternoon in April 2001, a particular book caught my eye. It sat on a shelf at the center of the room. Its sage-green cover seemed to beckon, as if it had been waiting for me all along. That book introduced me to Fazun. And through that book, I find myself here today. Nearly a quarter of a century later, on the hundredth anniversary of Fazun's pilgrimage to Tibet, I have been invited to tell this story.

That afternoon at Ibis, I bought *The Iron Statue Monastery (Tiexiangsi): A Buddhist Nunnery of Tibetan Tradition in Contemporary China*. The book, wrapped in a sage-green cover, had been published in Florence just a month earlier, in March 2001. Its author, Ester Bianchi, described how, between the First and Second World Wars, Chinese Buddhist monks began making pilgrimages to Tibet. Many never reached Lhasa. But some did. A few studied with renowned lamas in Tibet's great monasteries. And when they returned to China, they translated scriptures and commentaries from Tibetan. During the Japanese occupation of China in the 1930s, they founded new institutions to train Chinese monks in Tibetan Buddhist teachings. One name stood out: Fazun. He translated major works of Tibetan Buddhism into Chinese. He compiled biographies of Tibetan masters. He wrote detailed histories of Tibet's religious and political institutions.

Like many in the late 1990s and early 2000s, before reading *The Iron Statue Monastery* I assumed that relations between China and Tibet had always been defined by conflict. Bianchi's research shattered that view. Back home from Ibis, I began reading about Fazun. I was astonished by the depth of his learning. He had mastered both spoken and literary Tibetan. He could translate Buddhist texts. He also served as an oral interpreter for Tibetan high lamas, including the Dalai Lama. The more I learned, the more I was drawn into his story. And the more questions I had.

In August of that same year, after completing a summer language program in Beijing, I boarded a train bound for the city of Siling, on the northwestern edge of the Tibetan plateau. At Kumbum Monastery, built at the birthplace of Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), the great scholar and founder of the Geluk tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, I came across a set of Fazun's translations of Tsongkhapa's major works. There, as I began reading the *Lamrim Chenmo* (Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path) in Fazun's Chinese, I made a decision. I would move to Venice and enroll at Ca' Foscari University, where Bianchi was teaching Buddhism at the time.

Four years later, my engagement with Fazun's translations was put to the test as I worked on my M.A. thesis. Under the guidance of Bianchi, I produced an annotated translation of Fazun's exposition of Yogacāra, or "Practice of Yoga", denoting one of the two major Mahāyāna schools of Buddhism in India. The aim of my study was to show how Fazun employed Chinese Buddhist terminology to render the *Madhyamakāvātāra* (Entrance

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2 Droit 2003, 30.

into the Middle Way) of Candrakīrti (ca. 600-ca. 650) from Tibetan into Chinese.

For more than a thousand years, Yogācāra thought had been known and studied in East Asia. Still, Candrakīrti's critique of Yogācāra from a Mādhyamaka perspective was entirely new to China's Buddhist tradition. Tsongkhapa's refutation of the Yogācāra school's tenets based on the view of reality of the Prasaṅgika, or "Consequence" branch of the Mādhyamaka, was unheard of by Chinese Buddhists as it had been understood in Tibet. That was Fazun's major contribution: conveying the thought of both Indian and Tibetan masters into Chinese where it had remained unknown until the early twentieth century. Without access to the original Sanskrit manuscripts, he rendered those Indian and Tibetan classics directly from Tibetan into Chinese.

From Bologna to Venice as an undergraduate, and later to Ann Arbor during my doctoral training with Donald S. Lopez, Jr., Fazun has remained a steady presence in my life: a teacher, a mentor, and a companion in the study of Buddhist culture, history, and literature between Tibet and China. His writings have guided me, both in and outside the academy. And so now, back to Italy where it all began, I find myself once again in conversation with my forebears, the scholars whose work on Fazun has made mine possible.

The work on this volume began in the summer of 2023. A phone conversation with Ester Bianchi brought an old project back to life. That project, based on a rare first edition of Fazun's pilgrimage account, titled *Xiandai Xizang* 現代西藏 (Modern Tibet), has now become *A Chinese Pilgrimage to the Heart of Tibet*.

