

## Cthulhu Cultivation: Corporate Horror, Proletarian Manifesto, and the Salvation of Insanity in Chinese Fantasy Novels

**Abstract:** The Cthulhu Mythos is fictional universe positing the existence of Cthulhu and other monstrous deities beyond the human rational and moral order and warn against attempts to venture into a cosmos indifferent, if not hostile, to human interests. The Cthulhu Mythos has become diffused in American popular culture and traveled across the world. In contemporary China, this Mythos has hybridized with “Immortality Cultivation” (xiuzhen 修真) novels, a uniquely Chinese fantasy genre telling stories in which the protagonists practice internal alchemy (neidan 內丹) to achieve immortality. Cultivation novels first emerged in the early 2000s, the time of China’s economic boom, and, in celebrating human divinization, seem incompatible with the pessimistic Cthulhu lore. However, the 2020s began to unfold with the global pandemic, nation-wide lockdowns, and economic stagnation. Novels such as *The Patriarch of Dao is Cthulhu* (Daozu shi kesulu 道祖是克蘇魯, 2021-23) and *Strange Immortals of Daogui* (Daogui yixian 道詭異仙, 2021-23), in which cultivators are portrayed as Cthulhu worshippers, speak to the heart of a burnout generation seeking shelter in ignorance or even insanity. In the Cthulhu Mythos, ancient deities from the outer space are worshiped by secret sects. Learning from the Mythos, cultivation novels have rediscovered sectarian religions in Chinese history and added the theme of rebellion into their fictional worlds. Earlier cultivation novels fuse the trope of self-cultivation from the orthodox teachings of institutionalized religions with the project of self-enterprising in neoliberal capitalism. By contrast, Cthulhu-cultivation novels shift attention to esoteric sects and present alchemical cultivation as invoking some other-worldly power to challenge established authorities. The Cthulhu conquest of China is also the Chinese conquest of Cthulhu. The anti-humanism of supernatural horror has been transformed into a humanist critique against the capitalist system that utilizes information sciences and digital technologies to exploit human capacities. While alchemical cultivators struggling to integrate themselves into the Dao stand for digital laborers valorizing capital, cultivators calling for a Cthulhu apocalypse are cyber-proletariats who dare to reappropriate the grotesque, the weird, and the unruly and to turn stigmatization into resistance.