



Empowered writing

Cosmic scripts and heavenly scriptures in Chinese religious culture

The Daoist Canon

- The term *daozaang* 道藏, commonly rendered as “Daoist Canon,” originally referred to collections of texts kept in Daoist establishments.
- Later also a series of major compendia of Daoist texts, usually compiled by imperial decree and distributed to temples throughout China.
- Daoist Canon of the Ming dynasty—published in 1445 and known as the Zhengtong Daozaang 正统道藏, or Daoist Canon of the Zhengtong Reign Period—is the last of these collections and the only one to be extant today.
- A supplement entitled Xu Daozaang jing 续道藏经, or Sequel to the Scriptures of the Daoist Canon, was added in 1607, and since then has been an integral part of the collection. Together, the two parts of the Canon contain almost 1,500 works.



The Power of Scriptures

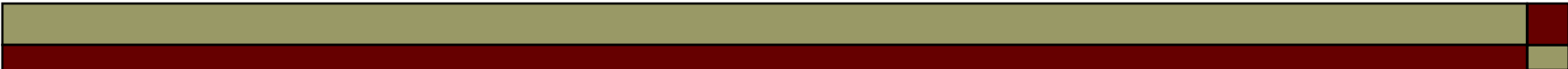
Gu Huan of the [Liu] Song [dynasty (420-479)] was skilled in Daoist arts [...]. Once someone had a nasty disease, and a relative asked Huan about it. Huan said: “Which books are there in the family?” The reply was: “We have only the *Xiaojing*.” Huan said: “Select the section on ‘Confucius Living [in Retirement],’ place it next to the pillow of the sick person, honor and treat it with all due courtesy, and he will be cured.” They did so and the sick was indeed cured.

(Source: *Sandong qunxian lu* 三洞群仙錄 20.2ab; Chen 1963, 469.7, 10-11; Bumbacher 2000a, 231-232)

The Power of Scriptures: Ge Hong notes in his *Baopuzi neipian*

“The classic states that if the *San huang [nei] wen* is in a household, it will banish evil and hateful ghosts, soften the effects of epidemics, block calamities, and rout misfortunes. If anyone is suffering from illness or on the point of death, let someone believing in the process with all his heart give this text to the patient to hold, and he will be sure not to die. If a wife is having trouble in childbirth to the point of possible death, let her hold this text, and her son will be born immediately. If Daoists pursuing long life hold this text when entering the mountains, it routs tigers and wolves so that none of the mountain powers, poisons, or evils will dare approach. When crossing rivers and seas, Daoists can dispel crocodiles and dragons, or halt wind and waves with this book.” (19.336; Ware 1966, 314-315)

- Daoist lists contain the names of 1,200 divine bureaucrats to be asked for help in healing diseases.
- “The [*Qianerbai guan*] Yi says: When the swelling of the stomach is strong and below the navel you have intense pain, invoke the Lord of Feili and his twelve men.”



Nature of scriptures

- ❑ Why have scriptures extraordinary powers?
- ❑ Where do these powers come from?
- ❑ Are these powers linked to the content of a text, its materiality for both?

Text and primordial energy

“As for the so-called [Daoist] sacred writings, they too are endowed with primordial energy. They come into being spontaneously and are not made. Just like the Heavenly Venerable of Primordial Beginning, they exist forever and are indestructible. If, on the other hand, Heaven and Earth were never destroyed, they would just pile up and not be transmitted. As the *kalpa* unfolds [through rise and decline], its texts are revealed appropriately [...]. The texts are called celestial writings, with characters one *zhang* (ten feet) square. They give forth beams in every direction, shining and brilliant, so that the mind is rendered respectful and the eyes are dazzled.” (4.1091; Ware 1933, 244)

The Great Inception

- Dao as all-encompassing universal law manifested itself
- Emergence of space-time in the nebulous void or chaos
- Once space-time had come into being, it produced primordial *qi*; differentiated into a light and pure *qi* versus a heavy and turbid *qi*, which in due course formed Heaven and Earth (*Huainanzi* 3; see Major 1993)
- Pure *qi* is the stuff from which the highest gods are made; the highest scriptures (celestial writings) too emerged from it spontaneously
- → these scriptures are inaccessible for humans and even lesser gods



Suishu (History of the Sui) 4.1091-1092.

“Though the celestial immortals are unable to gaze upon [the celestial writings], when the Heavenly Worthy initiates the *kalpa* (world-age), he orders the supreme persons and the heavenly perfected (lower-ranking celestials) to change the *qi* in Heaven and divide it up [to produce new copies]. From the heavenly perfected on down to the immortals, the various classes [of supernatural beings] hand them on to one another according to rank. After finally reaching the immortals, they are passed on to people of this world. Since, however, the Heavenly Worthy takes years to completely open a *kalpa*, those who receive the doctrine keep it secret for a period, and then hand it on. [If it is a scripture] of the first class, [it is handed on] after a long time; [if it is a scripture] of a lower order, [it is handed on] in a short time.”

Transmission of a Daoist scripture

“In the third year of [the reign period] Resurgent Peace, when the year-star was in [the celestial mansion of] *yizhou*, on the night of the twenty-fifth of the sixth month (July 26, 365 CE), Lady Wang of [the Heaven of] Purple Tenuity descended to me. A divine woman accompanied her, dressed in a shirtwaist of cloud damask, cinnabar-red above and blue below. [...]

After a while, the True Consort declared: “I would like to make a composition of a single page to present to you, and moreover to avail myself of you, taking your brush to convey my humble meaning. Will that be all right?” I replied: “I obey your orders.” Then I immediately spread paper and dipped my brush in ink. She stood up and orally made her transmission.” (*Zhen'gao* 1.13b; Hyland 1984, 108-9 and 112)

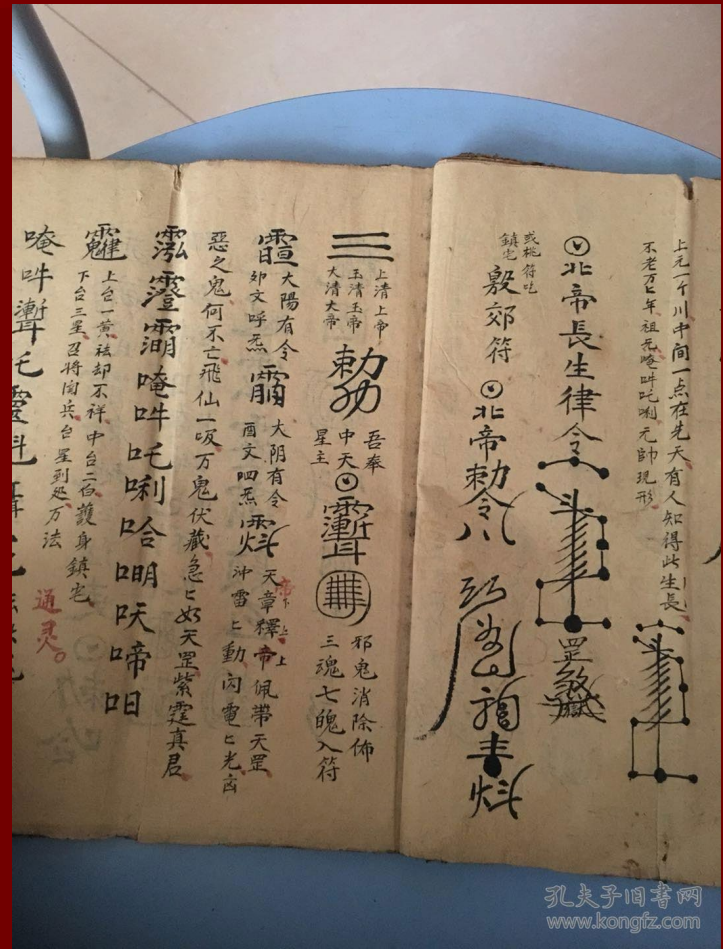
Transmission of scriptures

- Transmission of scriptures has rules
- Even lesser texts that do not consists of pure *qi* are handed down to candidates of immortality only and at certain occasions (“It will be transmitted either twice in a hundred years or three times in seven hundred years to students of Dao so they can become immortals.”)
- Exemplary moral behavior and diligent cultivation practice may lead to the discovery of sacred scriptures hidden in mountain caves or buried in the ground
- only worthy people were given full access to the scriptures
- Originals were not taken away but remained where they were found

Scriptures are guarded

“Attendant on this text (*Lieji*) are ten jade lads, attendant on the *Jin que zi wen* 金闕紫文 (Purple Writ of the Golden Gate) are ten jade maidens. Each time you re-cite this scripture or put its contents to use, bow respectfully to them. Wash your hands and burn incense to the left and right of the writing. Whoever treats this numinous record rudely will be changed into a ghost of the lowest rank and his descendants will undergo infernal interrogation up to the third generation. This is because the jade lads and jade maidens report the transgressions to the authorities above and will make known who is sincere of heart. Each bad or good deed, no matter how insignificant, will be recorded.” (6b; Bokenkamp 1997, 351)

Spells



Benefits of possessing and reciting a scripture

- ❑ Path to longevity
- ❑ Protection against evil spirits and malicious humans
- ❑ Protection against natural disasters and other calamities
- ❑ Example: Laozi's advice to chant his *Daode jing*:
“[If during this crisis] you wish to know my whereabouts, chant the Five Thousand Book ten thousand times.”

Textual practices: Recitation

“When the female perfected Qian Miaozen (fl. 520-527) was still a child, she studied the Dao. Later she dwelled in the grottos and mountains of Juqu. At age eighty-three, **she recited the *Huangting jing***. Completing [the requisite number], she bade farewell to relatives and friends, ate yellow and white colored drugs, entered Swallow Grotto, and stayed there the whole night. The next morning, when Daoist monks and nuns went to ask for her, they suddenly heard a sound of thunder in the grotto and saw a carriage drawn by a dragon and a phoenix. It rose from the northwest and bore her ascending to Heaven.”
(*Xianyuan bianzhu* 1.15b9-16a3; Bumbacher 2000a, 303-304)

2018

Scripture Reading Chart



you shall have *peace* in ME

Personal Temple Goal: _____

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Direct transmission in Buddhism

Mu said: “When I was lying prostrate on the ground [in veneration], I dreamt that I went to the Country of Peace and Care (Western Pure Land) and saw [Amitābha] Buddha. He expounded the *Lesser Perfection of Wisdom* for me, and I obtained four scrolls. Then I was trampled on [by someone] and immediately awoke. I was very much annoyed and vexed about it. (*Mingxiang ji* in *Fayuan zhulin* [法苑珠林, Pearl Garden of the Dharma Forest, T 2122] 15.400a27)

Summary: Daoist textual imagery

- Writing "as a replicant of divinatory patterns, the revealed text was an earthly counterpart or 'trace' of its celestial original, the descendent of great ancestral texts composed of light and breath that pre-existed the universe and continued to maintain its order" (Bell, 'A Precious Raft to Save the World', 166)
- Since 4th cent.: "scriptural text as a contract with Heaven that conferred certain rewards, specifically immortality as an official in a heavenly bureaucracy" (167)
- "revealed scriptures as earthly transcriptions of their heavenly counterparts, crytallization of life-giving primordial breath (qi), jade designs suspended in the surging creative flux of the divine empyrean." (168); **scripture as divine talismans.**
- **"Daoist dimensions ... communicate a very clear message - that this text, even when it is a mass-produced re-edited compilation of other versions, could still be regarded as a sacred treasure, an efficacious, miracle-working talisman, testifying to the spiritual status of its owner." (168-69)**

■ Thank you for listening.