

CHAPTER 13

Sacred Text

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“Text” as a cultural phenomenon is not limited to forming words and sentences into larger units. Many factors have a bearing on how a community both construes “text” as a concept and produces a text as a concrete physical object: the nature of a particular writing system, the perceived relationship between the spoken word and writing, the ways in which people use texts and are affected by them in their daily lives, and the technologies they employ to create, reproduce, and consume texts. In other words, attitudes toward text and understandings of textuality can vary greatly.

The same is true for “sacred text,” even though the qualifying adjective “sacred” creates the (false) impression that we are dealing with a single, well-defined category of texts. Yet, comparative research involving a wide range of Western and non-Western religious traditions has shown that “‘scriptures’ as sacred texts vary widely in terms of the cultural construction of textuality as well as their cultural understandings of sacrality” (Bell 2008). Hence, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to come up with a list of defining features of “sacred text.” As objects of comparison, sacred texts do not easily fall into a single category. In Daoism, for instance, “sacred texts” would include such diverse genres as written prayers, dispatches, certificates, commands, and talismans, while Chinese Christians in the nineteenth century were exposed to Christian primers, Biblical stories and narratives, Bible dictionaries, selections of scripture sentences, liturgical texts, and outlines of scripture and reading guides (Starr 2008).

Depending on the specific contexts in which they were used, all of these different texts could be referred to as “sacred texts.” Hence, generalizations about sacred texts are therefore often misleading and of little explanatory value.

This chapter starts by outlining some of the more important problems and questions that have been raised by scholars working on sacred texts, as well as how these can be made fruitful for the study of sacred texts in the Chinese context. It then draws upon examples from various religious traditions in China. We will not be limited to one particular Chinese tradition alone, be it Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, or popular religion, because a comparative perspective on “sacred text”—even if it is limited to the Chinese context—will perhaps provide deeper insights into this phenomenon than an insignificantly more comprehensive discussion of only one tradition. For the same reason, we will not attempt here to provide a descriptive summary of the major scriptures of each tradition because such summaries, usually focusing on the texts of one single tradition, can be found elsewhere (Yao 1994, Linke 2000, Reiter 2000, Price 2009). The task of this essay is rather to raise critical awareness of the complexity of the phenomenon “sacred text” and to stimulate further explorations into this fascinating field.

The Chinese Word for “Sacred Text”

The word that is most commonly used across different religious traditions in China to denote the idea of “sacred text” is *jing*. *Jing* is variously translated as “sacred text,” “classic,” or “scripture.” In its original meaning, *jing* denotes the fixed lead thread or “warp” of cloth, especially of silk, into which the weft threads are woven back and forth to create a fabric. As a verb, *jing* can thus mean “to weave” or “to thread.” In the period before the invention of paper, the verb was frequently used to describe the stringing together of the bamboo slips used for writing (Yan 2008). Because the warp thread serves as the fixed framework for the entire length of the weaving, *jing* became a metaphor for that which imparted definition, order, and utility to the “fabric” of society by providing the constant principles on which the socioeconomic order was based (Nylan 2001). As a noun, *jing* assumed the extended meaning of “standard” and “statecraft” or “governance.”

In the Confucian tradition, *jing* refers to the “five classics” (*wu jing*) or later the “thirteen classics” (*shisan jing*). In Buddhism, *jing* is used to translate the Sanskrit term *sūtra*, a transcription of the historical Buddha’s sermons or teachings. Similarly, the Daoist collection of canonical texts, the *Daozang*, contains a large number of texts that have the word *jing* in their titles, the foundational *Daode jing* being the best-known example. Last but not least, many popular religious texts that are commonly known under the generic name *baojuan* (“precious scrolls”) call themselves *jing*, obviously in an attempt to imitate and borrow the authority and credibility of the books of the mainstream traditions.

Jing has always been a term of remarkable elasticity. In the Zhou period (eleventh century to 256 BCE), the word could refer to almost any writing on bamboo or silk. Scholars in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) still had a tendency to use the term *jing* to designate all pre-Han literature. It was comparatively late, during the Latter

Han Dynasty (25–220 CE), that *jing* acquired a meaning equivalent to that of the words “classic” or “scripture” in English. Both terms presuppose an elevated status that writing simply did not have in China prior to the Latter Han. The ascendance of *jing* to “classic” or “scripture” in the full sense was the result of a revolution in the Chinese understanding and attitude toward writing, texts, and textualization. Since the *jing* are an integral part of China’s literary culture, they cannot be discussed without mentioning important developments affecting China’s literary culture as a whole. It is therefore necessary and worthwhile to briefly summarize the developments leading up to this revolution.

The Ascendance of the Written Word in China

In China, as elsewhere, the elevation of the written word to a culturally central position was a long and protracted process. It was not before the first century CE that written texts came to be regarded as the ideal repository of the past and the most genuine transmitter of the ethical truths established by the ancient sage kings, a status they kept throughout the entire Imperial period until the early twentieth century.

In the time of Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE) and his immediate disciples the word *wen*, which later predominantly meant “writing” and “writings,” “script” and “scripture,” referred almost exclusively to the exemplary behavior associated with the ancients. More specifically, *wen* denoted behavior that went beyond the basic moral obligations to kin and ruler to include wider benefits for society in general. In extension of its original meaning, “criss-cross pattern,” *wen* was also used to designate “brilliant ornament” as an outward manifestation of the inner value and quality of a substance or person. In the Warring States period (481–221 BCE), the semantic range of *wen* broadened to include “larger patterns in the cosmos believed to be of supreme significance for the human order” (Nylan 1999). After the establishment of the unified bureaucratic empire in 221 BCE, writing and literacy certainly gained importance as bureaucratic tools necessary for administering the empire. Mastery of the newly unified forms of script—the seal script (*zhuanshu*), the official or clerical script (*lishu*), the regular script (*kaishu*), the grass script (*caoshu*), and the running script (*xingshu*)—and genres of writing used in administration were skills expected of every official. However, as yet no particular emphasis was placed on the value of writing as such. Until the end of the Western Han period (206 BCE–8 CE), leading classical scholars (*Ru* in Chinese) at court generally regarded written texts, including those transmitted from the sages of old, as “too problematic, being liable to loss, misreading, forgery, and falsehoods” (Nylan 1999). Specialists in the five classics, who had first been appointed by Han Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE) in 136 BCE, were “probably more concerned with the performance of their political and administrative duties than with the contemplation of the grand unity of the classics as a whole” (Henderson 1991). In other words, the five classics were regarded primarily as

manuals of statecraft rather than as objects of study and exegesis, let alone as texts with a distinctive “god-like” or “divine” status. Only a few revelatory messages directly inscribed in unusual written forms on natural materials such as human or animal body parts or precious stones were regarded as inherently “divine” (Nylan 1999). For most classical scholars, single-minded emulation of the exemplary behavior and glorious deeds of past sages under the instruction of a qualified teacher remained superior to book learning in the cultivation of one’s moral judgment and desire to exemplify cosmic and social principles. The revolutionary shift toward a preference for textual transmission and text-based knowledge over long-standing oral traditions first becomes detectable in the first century CE. Many factors helped to bring about this shift, some of which are not yet fully understood.

The discovery of written versions of the five classics in archaic script and of inscriptions preserved on bronze, bamboo, and silk nourished the idea that “at least in some cases, writing had helped to preserve the genuine Way of the Ancients down through the ages” (Nylan 1999). Another, perhaps major, factor was that the study of state-sanctioned texts under the tutelage of acknowledged masters became increasingly intertwined with the social standing and competition for office among members of the elite. Examples of self-promotion via textual genealogies show that affiliation with a particular text or group of texts had an effect on a person’s self-understanding, social position, and career prospects in the imperial bureaucracy. Examples illustrating the greatly raised status of written texts are numerous. I can mention only two here: In 132 CE, Emperor Shun decreed that candidates for official posts were no longer to be nominated solely on the basis of their exemplary behavior. Instead, they had to demonstrate knowledge of the written texts of the classics or the ability to draft documents. Likewise, a comparison of the composite biographies of the classicists in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*) by Sima Qian (c. 145–c. 86 BCE) and in Ban Gu’s (32–92 CE) *Han History* (*Hanshu*) reveals a dramatic shift in the understanding of classical learning. The *Records of the Grand Historian* identifies appropriate behavior in the context of ritual and musical performance as embodying the exemplary Way of the Ancients. By contrast, roughly two centuries later the *Han History* equates the Way of the former sages with the *texts* of the six classics rather than with ideal conduct. In other words, ritual practice as the highest form of self-cultivation had been replaced by text-based knowledge. At the end of this transformative process the *Ru* (Confucian) scholars had been transformed from ritual masters to specialists in the exegesis of texts. At this historical turning point, some texts had gained the inviolable authority of scriptures.

The Oral and the Written

The protracted evolution of the supremacy of the written word highlights not only the problem of the relationship between textual knowledge and ritual practice but also of that between the oral and the written. When speaking of texts today and in

the occidental interpretation, it is immediately assumed that one is referring to a written text. This is even more so in the case of “scripture,” because the word itself refers to writing (“script”). In the Chinese religious context, however, the spoken word never lost its power, despite the elevation of the written word. Rather than writing replacing the power of the spoken word, both existed side by side. Except, perhaps, in the Confucian tradition, there is no general primacy of the written over the oral or over ritual practice in China. On the contrary, scriptures needed to be recited and heard in order to be efficacious. One can see the importance of the aural perception of sacred texts from the fact that Buddhist *sūtras* begin with the phrase “Thus have I heard.” A text associated with the Daoist tradition was known as the “Scripture of Mouth-to-Ear,” while another scripture in circulation in the sectarian milieu of the mid eighteenth century had the title *True Scripture Without Characters* (*Wuzi zhenjing*). The titles indicate that the texts’ efficaciousness was not predicated on them being written down and read by their users.

Awareness of the limitations of written texts and of the fact that in order to be able to act ritually one does not need a book remained constantly visible in Chinese culture, especially in Daoism. One famous anecdote in the book *Zhuangzi* states bluntly that scriptures “are the dregs of the men of old.” The centrality of ritual practice and recitation in Daoist ritual is the reason why, according to John Lagerwey, “Daoism has no scriptures worthy of the name” (Lagerwey 2005).

Canonization and Religious Identity

The question of whether sacred texts were transmitted orally or in writing was not a top priority among Chinese scholars prior to the developments described above. This changed dramatically once the five classics became essential legitimating texts in the construction of the Chinese empire as well as for the emerging class of scholar-officials who claimed exclusive authority as custodians and exegetes of China’s literary heritage by authoring a vast commentarial literature on a very small number of canonical texts. The early imperial state had an intrinsic interest in establishing a canon of authorized written texts that could promote the values and behavioral modes favored by the central state and set a normative standard against the many uncontrollable oral traditions that still lived on in all parts of the empire. The formation of the five classics and a culture of textual scholarship surrounding these scriptures on the one hand and the coming into existence of a “Confucian” identity based on service to the empire on the other are inextricably linked to each other. The same interdependence between the canonization of texts and the forming of an identity as a fully structured and organized religion can be seen in the case of Daoism and its interaction with Buddhism. The development of Daoism from various diffused religious traditions to a distinct religion in the fourth and fifth centuries CE is marked, first, by a proliferation of newly revealed scriptures that were collected, ordered, and codified into a set of canonical writings, and, second, by successfully

propagating these writings among the Chinese elite of that time. In 437 CE, the Daoist Master Lu Xiuqing (406–477) presented, at the request of the emperor, a list of “genuine” Daoist scriptures entitled *Catalogue of the Scriptures of the Three Caverns* (*Sandong jing mulu*), which laid the foundation for the later *Daoist Canon* (*Daozang*) and evidences the successful transformation of diffused traditions into an institutionalized, nationwide religion that was able to compete with its rival Buddhism (Bokenkamp 1997, Strickmann 1977). This new religion from India, when it was implanted in China, already had a well-structured canon of highly praised “genuine” scriptures that served as a model for the later Daoist compilations as well as indigenous *sūtras* written directly in Chinese, the so-called “apocrypha” (a word originally employed to describe works that in their title, form, and contents resemble books of the Old Testament and New Testament but are not accepted in the biblical canon).

The term “canon” implies closure for it springs from the desire to create a set of fixed and thus stabilized set of texts that are impervious to change or corruption. However, the history of the canonization of Daoist sacred texts and their encounter with Buddhist scriptures tells a different story. The sacred texts of one religion were not only impregnated with elements from the other but also some Buddhist *sūtras* had precise Daoist counterparts and vice versa. In other words, the two traditions tried to mirror each other through parallel production of sacred texts:

The quest, for both religions, was not only motivated so as to achieve scriptural hegemony. Buddhism and Daoism were also aspiring to strengthen their respective liturgical and evangelical monopolies. To integrate one another’s favored rituals was undoubtedly viewed as the best means to consolidate the status of their clerical organizations and to attract or keep faithful followers by providing them with the most fashionable religious trends, even if this meant borrowing conspicuously from the opposing camp’s heritage. (Mollier 2008)

Thus, the production of sacred texts was at all times intertwined with political and economic power and the construction of authority, organization, and social vision within a group.

“Sacred Text,” “Scripture,” or “Classic”?

In modern scholarly writings on Chinese religions the three terms “sacred text,” “scripture,” and “classic” are often used synonymously. Some comments on the specific meaning and explanatory value of each term are thus in order.

When referring to the canonical books of Confucianism, most authors prefer to use the term “classic.” For instance, Michael Nylan’s magisterial study on the early Confucian canon is entitled *The Five “Confucian” Classics*. The use of quotation marks around “Confucian” indicates that the identification of these texts with a “Confucian” school is anachronistic for the time of the early empires of the Qin (221–

206 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–9 CE) Dynasties. Rather, the five classics were used and studied by scholars representing various intellectual orientations that had not yet reified into clearly distinguishable philosophical “schools.” Although Nylan does not explicitly justify her choice of the term “classic,” one can nevertheless identify several elements that distinguish a “classic” from other contemporary forms of text. First, the term “classic” implies that the text in question is regarded as an ordered whole representative of a no-longer-extant ideal political and moral order. A “classic” invokes reverence for the models of antiquity and is read to preserve and even reinstate those models in the present. Second, the idea of a “classic” is closely connected to that of a canon, a standard collection of texts with claims to remarkable antiquity. “Classics” are texts that have stood the test of time and have an appeal for each new generation.

Some authors, finally, use the term “classic” to give expression to their view that Confucianism is a philosophy or way of life rather than a religion and, thus, to distinguish the Chinese “classics” from supposedly more religious texts such as the Bible or the Qu’ran. Yan Shoucheng, for example, argues that “*jing*, the Chinese equivalent of ‘scripture,’ actually means a classic,” because “*jing* as a word is never limited to religious ‘scriptures.’” The Chinese “have neither revealed religion nor the concept of interventionary God” (Yan 2008). Consequently, the *wu jing* should be primarily understood as a social-cultural phenomenon rather than a religious one.

It is not a coincidence that scholars asserting the religious dimensions of Confucianism tend to replace the term “classic” with “scripture,” thereby emphasizing the fundamentally religious nature of Confucianism. This claim has been made most explicitly by Rodney L. Taylor. Taylor argues that “scriptures must be related to our basic understanding of religion itself,” meaning that they must possess the “capacity for soteriology or ultimate transformation . . . The key to the interpretation of a work as scripture must be its ability to possess and hold authority within a tradition that can be defined in terms of a religious dimension or a soteriological capacity” (Taylor 1990). The religious dimension of Confucianism is defined by Taylor in terms of the Way of Heaven (*Tiandao*) and the Sage, who represents fulfillment of the goal of attaining the Way of Heaven in one’s own life. The Confucian canonical texts are part and parcel of this transformative process because they provide a living contact with as well as manifestation of the life and deeds of the sage kings of the past. Hence, “they bear an authority as well as a source that is religious in nature.”

The discussion of “classics” versus “scripture” illustrates that choosing a generic term to characterize the texts of a religious tradition is inextricably linked to certain assumptions about the nature of this religious tradition. In this respect, a more neutral term such as “sacred text” has certain advantages. “Sacred text” is less heavily freighted with Protestant notions than “scripture.” Compared to “scripture,” which usually refers narrowly to “the normative, bounded or semi-bounded written traditions that typically occur in the religions of chirographic cultures” (Levering 1989), “sacred text” is a broader and consequently more inclusive term. It designates the special status of many different kinds of texts, written and oral. According

to the current definitions, neither Buddhist mantras and *dhāraṇīs* nor Daoist talismans (*fu*) qualify as “scripture” but they certainly would fall within the broader category of “sacred text,” thereby becoming an element of comparative study.

The Protestant Bias

It is important to remind ourselves at this point of our own cultural baggage, which unconsciously shapes our understanding of the role of sacred texts in non-Western civilizations. The study of East Asian scriptural traditions is often marred by the assumption that the status and place of the written word in general and of sacred texts in particular are roughly similar to the status and place the Bible occupies in the religious life of Christianity. Western notions of sacred text have been shaped by an understanding of the Bible and its role in religious life that is most pronounced in some branches of Lutheran Christianity. Among the key characteristics associated with the Bible are the idea that a “sacred text” is a written text possessed in its own right of a (usually beneficial) special power that sets it apart from other “profane” objects; that it is a complete source of religious doctrine containing articles of faith that are central to the belief system of a community; that it has authoritative and normative status with regards to all aspects of religious life; that it is fixed and bounded in a canon; and, finally, that it gives evidence of and inspires the experience of an otherworldly reality that is clearly separated from the realm of the “profane.”

All these generalizations can be contested on the grounds that they are based on a particular Protestant experience that is not even representative of Christianity as a whole (Folkert 1989, Levering 1989). For example, first, African-American uses of the Bible, Vincent L. Wimbush notes, are “characterized by a non-literalist looseness, a multilayered, multisensory engagement and even a playfulness—sometimes within but often beyond what became the strictly church-defined interests and functions” (Wimbush 2003). For the Chinese context, John Lagerwey has also challenged the idea of Chinese scriptures being predominantly a source of doctrine, on the grounds that Chinese religious life can more adequately be characterized by a “centrality of doing”; the Western emphasis on belief and doctrine is misleading when applied to China (Lagerwey 2005). Second, with regards to the special powers supposedly inherent in sacred texts, Miriam Levering has noted that, whereas for many Mahāyāna Buddhists in China the power to work miracles was an important feature of sacred texts, there were also other groups, for instance within the Chan tradition, who considered such miracle-working powers unimportant or even dangerous (Levering 1989). Third, there is no single text in the Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian traditions, let alone in Chinese popular religion, that could nearly claim the same comprehensive authority and completeness for the whole tradition as does the Bible in Christianity or the Qur’an in Islam. There are many different forms and degrees of authority that can moreover have very different origins and justifications. The authority of a text might be based on the fact that it has divine origins and has been

revealed by a deity. Or a text might claim its authority from the fact that it has been edited by a great master of antiquity, such as Confucius.

Fourth, many Asian religious traditions would also have great difficulties with accepting the clear demarcation between a this-worldly, “profane” realm and a “holy” other-worldly or transcendent realm. Finally, the dominance of the written word over the spoken word and the attendant tendency to equate “sacred text” with written or even printed text is of rather recent Western origin. In most times and places “sacred text” referred to both the written *and* spoken word, as in Martin Luther’s characterization of Christian scripture as “the Holy Spirit’s own special book, writ, and word” (Graham 1987). In China, too, one can find many examples of books being transmitted orally rather than in writing, as has been shown above.

Approaches to the Study of “Sacred Text”

Despite the marked diversity of the phenomenon “sacred text” and the difficulties in achieving meaningful generalizations that hold true in different cultural contexts, scholars of religion still largely agree that sacred texts are read and used differently from other texts and that the words or texts in question are understood to play a special role in religious life. Therefore, it is important and worthwhile to clarify how scriptures were—and still are—used in different religious communities and how their special status is perceived and justified. Before that, however, I will briefly introduce three approaches that have shaped the discussion of scripture in the past: (1) the textual approach, (2) the functional approach, and (3) the epistemological approach.

(1) Proponents of the textual approach see the textual features of scripture as central to its nature, concluding that “scripture’s main role is the transmission of the *meanings* embodied in various textual forms” (Biderman 1995). Scriptural texts are different from other texts in that they have an infinite number of simultaneous meanings. As a result, analysis and interpretation of sacred texts are both necessary and impossible at the same time. The hermeneutic openness of “sacred text” to the interpreter’s manipulation is regarded as universal by proponents of this approach.

From the point of view of the textual approach, the eminent position of the commentator in many religious traditions, including Confucianism and Buddhism in China, becomes immediately plausible. Modern theorists and early Chinese commentators share common ground in the sense that for both the world is a system of signs. The key for deciphering this system lies hidden in the canonical texts. The commentator or exegete was thus not only charged with explaining a text but also often had the infinitely more difficult task of deciphering the signs and codes embedded in the text in an effort to disclose its ultimate meaning. In the Confucian tradition, the scriptures themselves were therefore often regarded as less important than the commentaries (Yan 2008). For, if it is true that “texts and literacy mark where power is in the world” (Wimbush 2008), it was the commentator who could

not only determine what a text could mean but who also directly influenced the nature and consequences of interpretive practices and strategies that were at the center of the power relations involved in but often masked in communication and interpretation.

The eminence of the role of the commentator in the Chinese tradition is at least partly a reflection of the ways in which Chinese texts construct meaning, which is considerably different from the predominantly “logocentric” concept of meaning in the West. Logocentric civilizations focus on the objective literal meaning of words and whether their linguistic meaning is actually true. By contrast, the hermeneutics of Chinese texts “concentrates not on what words as such mean, but rather on what people intended to convey by using these words” (Harbsmeier 1998). In other words, “the crucial semantic concept is not that of sentence meaning but of speaker’s meaning” (Andersen 2005). Texts are always embedded in a pragmatic context, a personal and social reality that needs to be situated in relation to the text by the commentator. This is what gives the commentator his power.

(2) Scholars working with the functionalist approach emphasize the importance of individual and communal uses to which scripture is put. Understanding “sacred text” as a concept requires the functionalist to “understand the conditions under which a group of texts has gained authority over the lives of peoples and has been incorporated into human activities of various important kinds” (Biderman 1995). In other words, sacred texts are not a literary but a sociohistorical phenomenon. The distinctive features of “sacred text” are not to be found simply in the linguistic structure or the ontology of the texts themselves but rather in the relationships formed around the use of the texts and in the nature of the authority bestowed upon them by the social institutions of religion.

Functionalists do not reject the importance of *meaning*. They would claim, however, that meaning is not tied exclusively to the literal and intellectual content of a text. Instead, non-discursive or *functional* meaning of a text is constituted by the ways in which it is experienced, in the specific quality of the relations between a text and a religious community.

In contrast to the textualists, for whom orality of scripture is merely a historical starting point but not an inherent characteristic of scripture (Biderman 1995), proponents of the functional approach stress that scripture plays different important oral roles in the actual life of religious communities, for instance in the lifecycle rituals of families and communities. In the Chinese case, this approach can be made fruitful by looking at the role of scripture in people’s daily lives as well as at the close links between text and ritual performance in China. A functionalist perspective further opens up a vast field of investigation pertaining to the modes of production, dissemination, and consumption of sacred texts and how these modes have influenced the understanding of scripture in different traditions.

(3) The third approach is the epistemological approach, which has been proposed most eloquently by Shlomo Biderman. From an epistemological point of view scriptures or sacred texts constitute a body of knowledge presented mostly in “descriptive

sentences that possess cognitive force” and contain strong truth-claims: “Without its claim to knowledge of the truth, scripture could not be what it is” (Biderman 1995). One of the most important constitutive elements of sacred text as a category is the fact that its knowledge claims are self-justified or self-referential. In other words, scriptures provide both the knowledge and the evidence by which this knowledge and in extension the authority of the text is justified.

Self-referentiality is characteristic in all Chinese scriptures irrespective of the tradition with which they are associated. For, all scriptures contain passages that seek to authenticate the text either by informing the reader that the text in question has been revealed by a god—that is represents the authentic words of a Buddha, bodhisattva, or ancient sage—or that it was made of a special material stuff that conferred certain powers on it.

Proponents of the epistemological approach deplore the relativism of the textual and functional approaches. The textual approach, in particular, is further criticized for having replaced certain and infallible “knowledge” with open-ended “hermeneutics.”

Each of the three approaches outlined above highlights different important aspects of sacred text in Chinese religion. The textual approach focuses on the important role of the commentator and exegete in the Chinese tradition and sharpens our appreciation of religious texts as linguistic and symbolic systems, two aspects that are inextricably linked to each other. For example, generations of scholars have studied the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*, fourth century BCE), a classic Confucius himself was supposed to have composed, with the aim of deciphering the arrangement and variation of particular words and phrases in the text, which Confucius allegedly used to pass moral judgment on persons and events and to set a pattern for the future.

The epistemological approach raises questions concerning the nature of the knowledge and truth claims made by sacred texts and how these claims are justified in different religious traditions. Does a text exclusively contain systematizing expositions of religious knowledge or does it also communicate “performative” or “organizational” knowledge? In other words, does a sacred text tell people how to conduct a ritual properly or how to behave as part of a religious community? Many Chinese sacred texts do both.

Sacred Text as Sacred Object

Apart from being perceived as a special class of true and powerful words that have religious meaning for a particular group, “sacred texts” are also often revered and worshiped as religious objects in their own right. In such instances the role of the text as a medium for the transmission of religious truth takes second place to its value as an object of veneration. To put it differently, the *meaning* of the text recedes behind the sheer *materiality* of the text. This veneration manifests itself, first, in the

preciousness of the materials used to produce the text—for example, silk as writing material and for the wrapping, the high quality of the workmanship, and the sophistication displayed in the design and makeup of the text. Second, the special status of a text as a religious object is visible in the special care with which it has to be treated by its users. Religious scriptures across the entire spectrum of Chinese religions contain instructions pertaining to the handling of a text. The following passage from the *Kongwang baojuan*, a sectarian scripture found in Shanxi province in 1946, is a typical example of the preparations necessary before reading from the text can begin:

First clean the altar area; cease talking; wash your hands; rinse your mouth and eat a vegetarian meal; arrange your clothes; light a lamp; burn high-quality incense; make offerings in front of the Buddha. Worship the Buddha by paying respects to him three times; sit upright; recite (ten times) “Amitufo” with folded hands to purify yourself of [all] thoughts, words, and deeds.

Failure to treat a sacred text reverentially invariably results in some sort of punishment, as one episode from the late fifth century involving a Daoist scripture illustrates:

[When] Prince Jingling of the Liang [Dynasty] came across the *Lingbao jing* [*Scripture of the Spiritual Treasure*] in one section, he examined [it], immediately took [it] and threw [it] on the ground. A few days later, [his] hand put forth abscesses and sores, the sharpness of its pains being extraordinary. He subsequently sent for Master Feng and confessed [his] fault. The Master made a statement of repentance on his behalf, [but] cautiously increased [his] suspicion [concerning the prince’s sincerity]. [The prince’s health] only changed slightly, and in the end he died as a result of this ailment. (Bumbacher 1995)

The Confucian tradition shows the same reverential attitude toward texts and the paper on which they are written. At least since the sixth century, educated Chinese were “exhorted to show special care to books and any piece of paper bearing the name of a Confucian sage, a quotation from the five classics, or a Confucian commentary” (McDermott 2006). In the seventeenth century, this custom was taken up by Cherishing Characters Associations (*xizi hui*), which had originally been formed by Buddhist monks. Influenced by the handling of charms and scriptures in some religious cults, members of these societies collected discarded scraps of written paper for cremation in special brick furnaces. The custom, which was believed to accumulate religious merit, continued into the twentieth century.

Textual Traditions and Imagery

While in the Confucian tradition the special status of the classics was based on their being the transmitters of the words of the ancient sages, the holy nature of Daoist

texts was predicated on the idea that sacred writings are endowed with “primordial energy” (*qi*). “Primordial energy” is what existed in the cosmos before creation took place. Heaven and Earth, the highest ranking gods, and the highest Daoist scriptures all emerged spontaneously out of the “primordial *qi*.” Hence, the highest Daoist scriptures are, in their original form, celestial books or “heavenly blue-prints” (Bumbacher 1995), coming into existence as spontaneous congealments of cosmic breath. Scriptures are equal to the highest gods and stand in a special relationship with them. They are believed to have been composed in a celestial script that is illegible for humans, and even lesser gods. These texts only become accessible through multiple transmissions down the celestial hierarchy, in the process of which they are transcribed onto less prestigious material until they are finally passed on to select humans in an accessible form. It was a common idea in Daoism and among popular religious groups that, in order to help a distressed mankind, gods or immortals created new sacred texts. These were then passed down to elected humans.

Besides direct transmission of scripture through gods and immortals, Daoist texts were sometimes found in mountain caves or buried in the ground. These texts were regarded as unmediated emanations of cosmic energy; the immediacy with which they appeared on earth made them illegible to common human beings and especially potent.

The idea of scripture as the earthly vessel for a heavenly presence is most clearly pronounced in the Daoist *Lingbao* tradition of the fifth century CE. The terms *ling* and *bao*, which are commonly translated as “numinous treasure,” also evoked mediumistic notions of a heavenly presence (*ling*) descending into an earthly receptacle (*bao*), a union of heaven and earth in which the former infused the latter. “In heaven it is *ling*, on earth it is *bao*; in the mysterious void of heaven it is *ling*, in the receptacles it is *bao*. That is why it is called *ling-bao*” (Bell 1988).

Presented as the self-generated talismans by which the universe was created, the *Lingbao* scriptures were ritual instruments of unsurpassed power for the creation and rectification of the universe. The following passage from a central *Lingbao* text, the *Scripture for the Salvation of Mankind* (*Duren jing*), summarizes the physical and phenomenological qualities of scripture:

The red writs of the turbulent void,
the highest Perfection of the nothingness of nothingness —
in the ancestral *kalpa* of the Primordial Beginning
they transformed and gave birth to all heavens.
They gave light to the Three Luminaries,
and these were the roots of the universe.
Above them there is no further ancestry,
only the Way constitutes their body.
The five writs opened up and spread out,
planting everywhere their spiritual power.
Without the writs there would be no light;
without the writs there would be no brilliance.

Without the writs nothing would be established,
without the writs nothing would be completed.
Without the writs there would be no salvation,
without the writs there would be no life. (trans. Andersen 2005)

The message the text communicates clearly is that it is a sacred treasure, an efficacious, miracle-working talisman, testifying to the spiritual status of its owner.

In contrast to Daoist textual imagery, the Buddhist tradition tends to emphasize a sacred text's function as a vehicle for universal salvation. Buddhist scriptures target a universal audience and encourage unlimited reproduction of scriptures through copying and printing as a means to generate merit. Whereas Daoist scriptures often signify a personal contract with Heaven or with an official in the heavenly bureaucracy—a contract that confers upon the owner of the text special powers or at least access to special powers—Buddhist textual imagery and practices signify the universal availability of scripture and hence of a path to salvation. The inclusion of “cause-and-effect” tales into many scriptures gives proof of the miraculous results of personal acts of devotion.

Finally, Confucian notions of textuality favor a textual imagery and practices that emphasize the importance of daily study and scholarly engagement with a sacred text. The Confucian sacred text is primarily an educational tool, a medium for the inculcation of Confucian values of self-cultivation through ceaseless study and scholarly engagement with China's literary past. The reader is encouraged to “study it daily, recompile or edit it, to compose commentaries or summaries and to explain it to the less educated” (Bell 1996). Inclusion of commentaries, word explanations, text critical notes, and other additional information dramatically inflated the volume of printed versions of the five classics and other Confucian texts centuries after the *jing* were first compiled.

The textual imagery and related practices of the different religious traditions are primarily ideal-types that more often than not appear in a hybrid rather than their pure form. Popular religious scriptures that cannot easily be attributed to one of the major religious traditions but instead incorporate various elements of all traditions within themselves in syncretistic fashion often combine different and sometimes contradictory textual imageries and practices. For example, in a morality treatise on divine rewards and punishments that appeared in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) and initiated the widespread practice of keeping “ledgers of merit and demerit,” the *Highest Lord's Tract on Action and Response* (*Taishang ganying pian*), Daoist notions of the text as a sacred treasure were juxtaposed with the Buddhist idea that the *Tract* should be mass produced and thus universally available.

The effect of such syncretistic accumulation of imagery was not to play one tradition off against the other but rather to increase the status and attractiveness of the text by suggesting that each individual copy is a treasure and a contract with heaven (Bell 1996).

Uses of Sacred Texts

Sacred texts involve their users in a wide variety of practices, some of which are closely linked to religious observances of an individual or a group while others are embedded in contexts that are not specifically religious in nature. For instance, the use of sacred charms, talismans, and scripture was part and parcel of the professional repertoire of traditional Chinese healers. Often a treatment was completed by the patient swallowing a piece of paper carrying a spell written in vermillion ink. Certain spells that were used by Buddhist and Daoist disciples alike were said to protect a person from snakebite for seven years, while the recitation of passages from scriptures was believed to avert all sorts of evil. One of the “Confucian” classics, the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), was used as a manual for divination throughout history, while other classics such as the *Odes* (*Shijing*) were used as tools for learning and in the training of officials.

Religion and society were always tightly intertwined in China (and still are in certain areas). As a result, the use of sacred texts is firmly embedded in most areas of life beyond what we would call the religious sphere today. In other words, a sacred text should not be approached in isolation or abstraction from the historical milieu in which it was written. The following excerpt from a confession of a man who was interrogated in 1753 for hiding a sectarian religious scripture in the flue of his brick bed gives some interesting insights into how scripture was used among popular religious groups of ordinary people. Popular uses of sacred text are usually overlooked by scholars interested in the use of scripture among educated elites, even though the number of partially literate or illiterate people far surpasses the number of elite users of sacred religious texts. The confession reads thus:

Normally I cut people’s hair, tell fortunes or sell [acupuncture] needles to make a living. I also know how to practice meditation; to recite *gāthās*; to recite the *True Scripture Without Characters* [*Wuzi zhenjing*] [by means of] *qi*-circulation; to prognosticate diseases by burning incense. [. . .] In Wanghuang village there is a certain Zhang Jindou. Those who have entered his teaching call him Patriarch Zhang. He does not recognize a single character, but he is able to preach [*jiangdao*]. His sermons are entirely in verse. Thus, together with Wang Fenglu, I went to visit Zhang Jindou, [. . .]. When I saw how wonderfully and subtly he spoke, Wang Fenglu and I immediately acknowledged him as our teacher. [. . .] As to this [method of] reciting the *True Scripture Without Characters* through *qi*-circulation, that was when I was thirty-five years old, on Five-Dragon Mountain in Lu’an prefecture. There was a certain monk Guangxiu who taught it to me. I gave him four or five-hundred [*wen*] incense-money, so he taught me this method to recite the *True Scripture Without Characters* [by means of] *qi*-circulation. He ordered me to sit in meditation with legs crossed, to close my eyes and clench my teeth, tongue up against the palate, and focus my thoughts on the Original Pass [*yuanguan*]. I inhaled *qi* through my nose [downwards] into my abdomen. When it was filled, I slowly let it go. This counts as the *True Scripture Without Characters*. [My teacher] said that after one

has practiced this technique to the point of skillfulness, while keeping one's eyes closed the entire room is filled with light and one is able to see marvelous flowers and unusual fruits, the Earth God, the God of the Stove as well as one's ancestors. After having studied [this technique] for a long time, one is even capable of preventing diseases and prolonging one's life. [...] After I had mastered these [*gāthās*] I was indeed able to see the intended effects.

This extraordinarily rich source highlights a number of important points. First, the confession illustrates that the use of religious texts was often part of the professional practice of healers, acupuncturists, midwives, fortune tellers, and other occupational groups who offered religious services to the local community in addition to other services. Reciting or transmitting texts that were perceived as powerful and efficacious constituted an additional income stream for both individuals and religious groups.

We learn, second, that the *True Scripture Without Characters* was transmitted orally from master to disciple because the master was himself illiterate. Third, the confession confirms a point made by many scholars of Daoism, namely that Daoist scriptures were created first and foremost as a way of transmitting methods of ritual practice. The method taught here is a meditational technique based on the circulation of "breath" (*qi*), which is designed to elicit a physiological response inside the adept's own body through recitation of the text.

Scriptures were not only used in the medical context though, but also at birthday parties, family celebrations, and similar events. The famous sixteenth century novel *Plum Blossom in Golden Vase* (*Jin ping mei*), for example, contains several descriptions of Buddhist nuns being invited to the house of the main protagonist to recite Buddhist and popular religious scriptures for the women of the household on one of their birthdays. The performances followed a prescribed ritual that could be interrupted in order to provide food and tea for the audience and the performers.

Several scholars have noted the embeddedness of Chinese sacred texts in a performance context defined by opera and ritual, stating that "performance always had priority over text":

Opera and ritual, the two most important institutions of non-elite community life in traditional China, were profoundly akin because for both, *performance* was fundamental. . . . It goes without saying that opera depends on performance; what is not so obvious is that in China, religion also depended on performance. Performance always had priority over text, except perhaps in the highest reaches of the organized religions, where they were coequal. Scriptures themselves, on the popular level, were intended to be performed—they were scripts as much as they were scriptures. Of the works in the Confucian Canon, those that were the most genuinely scriptural were the ritual texts, which were also scripts in their own way. The centrality of performance in Chinese culture certainly was due to the centrality of ritual. (Johnson 1989)

Chinese sources indeed contain a number of verbs that signify different activities involving sacred texts: “reading” (in a group or individually; *kan*), “listening” (*ting*), “reciting” (*song*), “singing” (*chang*), “explaining” (*jiang*), “speaking” (*shuo*), “reading aloud” (*nian*), “performing” (*yan*), “proclaiming” (*xuan*), and “visualizing” (*cun-xiang*). The verb “reading” thus provides only a very incomplete description of the many aspects associated with the uses of sacred text in China, for the additional simple reason that only a minority of users of sacred texts were fully or partially literate. This list of activities would become even longer if we would include other practices associated with sacred texts such as printing, copying, disseminating, citing, and writing commentaries.

The Ritual Context of the Longhua baojuan

In this concluding section, we will focus on one particular sacred text in order to demonstrate what close reading can reveal about the performative aspect of sacred texts. Let us examine a text from the Chinese sectarian tradition, *The Precious Scripture on the Dragon Flower, as Verified by the Old Buddha of Heavenly Purity* (*Gufo tianzhen kaozheng longhua baojing*). The text is illustrative for two reasons: First, because its status among the scriptures of the new religious groups of the Ming Dynasty has been compared to that of the *Lotus Sūtra* among Buddhist texts. The *Longhua baojuan* incorporates elements from all three mainstream religious traditions (Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism). Hence, it is a good example of a syncretistic scripture. The *Longhua baojuan* originated within a group that called itself the *Yuandun jiao* (*Teaching of Complete and Instantaneous Enlightenment*), but it circulated among a much wider audience. The second reason to examine this text is that the *Longhua baojuan* can be read as the story of how the teaching of the *Yuandun jiao* was first revealed to the Patriarch Gongchang, the founder of the *Yuandun* teaching, and how he then distributed this teaching among the people of the world. In other words, the *Longhua* is at the same time part of an actual ritual as well as the record of it.

The *Longhua baojuan* is extant in at least eight different editions. The oldest one, of which there is only the first volume still extant, was printed in 1654 in the traditional *sūtra* folded style.

Through the following analysis of the opening section and first chapter of the *Gufo tianzhen kaozheng longhua baojing* I want to demonstrate that a *baojuan* performance is best understood as a kind of multimedia event, a ritual that involves recitation, song, visual material, bodily movements, and interaction between the various participants in the performance. All these different practices are closely interrelated and form a complex liturgical structure. This structure of the *baojuan* performance is reflected in the text.

The Opening Section

The *Longhua baojuan* has an elaborate opening section, consisting of several different parts composed in prose and verse that precede the first chapter of the text. This section contains formulaic expressions that are easily recognizable and can be transplanted from one text to another. Therefore they were presumably familiar to anyone within the popular religious milieu. Since it is this opening section in which the setting of the performance is laid out, it should be of special interest to us.

The *baojuan* opens with a standard petition directed toward the Buddha-Heavens (*fotian*):

With a sincere heart, knocking my head [on the ground], I pray to the Buddha-Heavens,
That there is peace throughout heaven and earth and among the people;
That wind and rain come at the right time, causing the Buddha's teaching to flourish,
[And] that the August King (*huangwang*), possessor of the Way, may live ten thousand
times ten thousand years.

In later and modern editions, this petition or prayer is included within the text proper and thus appears as part of the spoken ritual. Originally, however, it was most likely represented as an inscription on drawings of steles, the so-called *longpai* ("dragon tablets"). These *longpai* might not even have been part of the original *baojuan*, but may have been part of a kind of screen facing the audience.

Next in the text comes the "Hymn for Raising the Incense" (*juxiang zan*). One has to assume that this hymn was sung at the moment when the incense was actually burned. The hymn may thus be understood as a wish that accompanies the fragrance as it fills the entire universe and reaches Numinous Mountain (*Lingshan*), in the *Longhua baojuan* the dwelling place of the highest deities (*Wusheng laomu*, *Gufo*) as well as the place where the heavenly Dragon Flower Assembly takes place. "Dragon Flower Assembly" is a term derived from Buddhism. It refers to three meetings held by Maitreya Buddha upon his appearance on earth. The burning of the incense is an invitation to the King at the Center of the Law (*Fazhong wang*) as well as to all the Buddhas of the Realm of the Law to descend to the place of worship. The *baojuan*, one can conclude, is thus not only performed in front of humans but also in the presence of the gods.

The closing formula of the introduction, "Praise to the Incense Clouds Bodhisattvas, the Venerable Bodhisattvas," is with great probability spoken by the whole assembly, as is shown by an instruction in another *baojuan* that reads "The multitude joins in three times." This line, spoken by the whole congregation in unison, shows that *baojuan* performances were "interactive" events in which everyone actively participated.

Incantations

Next in the sequence of the performance comes a series of eight “divine incantations” (*shenzhou*). These incantations are of Daoist origin, for we find exactly the same incantations in Daoist liturgy today. They are directed at the spirits residing in the body to purify the body parts (mind, mouth, body) under their control and to protect their respective terrain. Each of the incantations closes with the formula “Promptly, promptly, in accordance with the statutes and ordinances.” It is possible that this last formula was accompanied by one or more kowtows, as is prescribed by one modern Daoist ritual text. The incantations are followed by a “Respectful Invitation” addressed to thirteen Buddhas, venerable mothers, and bodhisattvas.

“Thus Have I Heard”

The following section is entitled *gaiwen*, “Thus Have I Heard.” The title refers to the opening phrase of Buddhist *sūtras*, “Thus have I heard” (*Ru shi wo wen*). It gives an exposition of the creation of the cosmos from undivided chaos in a process of division and subdivision of the original “one *qi* of the former heaven” (*xian tian yi qi*). This section introduces the *Longhua baojuan* as a text that has been kept in the storehouse of the Old Buddha Heavenly Truth (*Tianzhen gufo*; referred to in the title) since the time of primordial chaos (i.e., the time prior to the creation of the cosmos, which has appeared in the world in different transformations). The *Longhua* is described as the mother of all scriptures, made out of the stuff of the Former Heaven and therefore establishing a direct connection to this realm. The *gaiwen* closes with another well-known formula, “Praise to the Three Treasures, the Buddha, *Dharma*, *Sangha* of the past, present, and future of the absolutely empty and universal *Dharma-World*.”

The last section before the actual proclamation of the scripture is the “Gatha Opening the Scripture” (*kaijing ji*). Again this section is introduced by a standard formula that appears with absolutely no or only insignificant modification in every *baojuan* I have looked at:

The highest and supremely wondrous law
Has been difficult to encounter for innumerable *kalpas*
Today we have the opportunity to receive instruction,
We vow to understand the Tathagata’s true intentions

In a rather long prose section we learn that there are five Dragon Flower Assemblies in which those with a “karmic destiny” (*youyuan*) come together: in the sacred home (*shengjing jiaxiang*), among the Three Buddhas (*san shi zhufu*), in the skies (*tianshang*), inside the earth (*dixia*), and within the human body (*renshen zhong*). The fact that this enumeration of gatherings between humans and gods is part of the

“Verse on Opening the Scripture” suggests that the congregation in which the *Longhua* is performed is also regarded as a kind of Dragon Flower Assembly.

This whole introductory section as well as the last chapter of the text provide what Catherine Bell has called the “frame” of the ritual performance. “Such frames,” Bell explains,

not only distinguish performance as such, they also create a complete and condensed, if somewhat artificial world—like sacral symbols, a type of microcosmic portrayal of the macrocosm. Since the real world is rarely experienced as a coherently ordered totality, the microcosm constructed on stage purports to provide the experience of a mock-totality, an interpretive appropriation of some greater if elusive totality. (Bell 1997)

The special function of the first and last chapters is underscored by their length, both being twice as long as the other chapters of the book.

The Individual Chapters

Within the totality of the work, each of the individual twenty-four chapters (*pin*) of the *Longhua baojuan* constitutes a separate entity of its own, a ritual unit. Each chapter conforms to the same basic format (outlined below) that structures the performance. Passages that first appear in prose are then repeated in verse.

1. “Spoken” (*shuo*) prose outline of the chapter’s contents (also called “plain text,” *baiwen*).
2. Verse consisting of two or four lines with five or seven syllables each (sometimes with four or six syllables).
3. Hymn (*ji*) in seven or ten syllables.
4. Verse consisting of two or four lines with five or seven syllables each (sometimes with four or six syllables).
5. *Xiaoqu* (“small songs”); occurring only in *baojuan* from the Jiajing (1522–1566) through the Kangxi (1662–1723) reign periods.

Each chapter begins with a “spoken” (*shuo*) outline of its contents in a kind of rhythmically structured prose. This section is introduced by the phrase *jingyun* (“in the scripture it is said”), immediately followed by another formulaic expression, *qeshuo*, meaning “let’s rather talk about” or “let’s now talk about.” The first phrase, *jing yun*, usually introduces a commentary to a passage in a canonical text, for example a Buddhist *sūtra* or one of the Confucian classics. It indicates that the *Longhua baojuan* claims a similar status. The phrase *qeshuo*, conversely, frequently occurs in the novels *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji*) and *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*), where it is used as a connector between paragraphs, indicating that the narrator would like to direct his audience’s attention to a new aspect. It is tempting to take a

stock formula such as *queshuo* as an indication of the *Longhua baojuan*'s indebtedness to the techniques of oral storytelling and, therefore, as indication of a primarily oral performance setting. Yet, Vibeke Børdahl has cautioned us about such hasty conclusions with her observation that in living oral traditions of storytelling "the convention of stock phrases of introduction, connection, and conclusion is absent." She therefore wonders "if these expressions were ever part of the oral tradition, or if they were rather a literary convention of simulated storytelling from the very beginning" (Børdahl 1997). However that may be, it is clear that the *Longhua baojuan* combines rhetorical techniques from different literary genres.

In the *Longhua*, each chapter opens with an explanation of the chapter title. Take chapter one as an example:

In the Scripture it is said [*jing yun*]: Let's now talk about [*queshuo*] the initial partition of chaos. *Hun* ["undifferentiated"] means that clear and turbid are not [yet] differentiated; *dun* means that there is no above and below; *chu* means that in the beginning [all] was guarded in oneness; *fen* means that first darkness was divided, but there was no division into North and South or East and West; this is what is called "The initial partition of Chaos."

It is quite clear that the "commentary" given in this introductory passage is not meant to provide the reader with philologically sound explanations of the characters in the chapter title. Rather, this passage sets out the main themes/symbols of the chapter in abstract terms (undivided chaos, beginning, initial partition) and connects these abstract ideas with pairs of slightly more concrete images ("clear and turbid," "above and below," the four directions) on which the remaining part of the prose section continues to elaborate. The phrase *bu bian qingzhuo* ("clear and turbid are not [yet] differentiated"), for example, is repeated, appearing once in the prose part and once in the verse part. In this way, the text creates what could be termed "associative chains" or "chains of symbols," which enable the listener or reader to establish further links between the individual symbols on his/her own. Consider the following passage from the second chapter:

Wu [nothingness] is the same as the Former Heaven; *You* [existence/being] is the same as the Latter Heaven. Nothingness gives birth to Being. Nothingness is the Buddha, which is the Former Heaven created by the Old Buddha Limitless. This Former Heaven is true emptiness. The Latter Heaven is heavenly truth. Heaven is Emptiness; truth is *qi*; the true *qi* is not born. The Unborn is the mother, she produces *Yin* and *Yang*, originally without name and form. [Later] they are given the names Fuxi and Nüwa, they are the ancestors of humanity.

This passage quickly results in an informational and sensual overload. It is not difficult to imagine that a performance of the entire *Longhua baojuan*, together with music, singing, visual impressions, burning incense, and so on, is a multifaceted and enormously intense sensory experience.

The constant repetition of key symbols and key phrases first in a kind of rhythmically structured prose and then in sections of verse surely has a mnemotechnic function. The message of the *Longhua* is virtually drummed into its listeners' heads, first in prose, then in verse, and finally in a popular song, which always brings the chapter to a close. I am hesitant, however, to regard the participants in the performance simply as passive recipients of a religious message, and I am equally hesitant to interpret this constant repetition simply as a form of "proselytizing" or even indoctrination. Repetition also creates what could be termed "associative chains" or "chains of symbols," which enable the listener to elaborate on these symbols on his own via punning and word play or homophones. Let me give two examples. In the *gatha* section in the first chapter, we read the following two lines:

The single *qi* of the primordial chaos is like a chicken, originally pure and calm it is the Former Heaven;
The single *qi* of Former Heaven, [like] a chicken it gives birth to an egg, in the egg grows *ji*, the Ultimate/Apex, and this is the Origin.

Given the homophony between *ji* (chicken) and *ji* (Apex, Ultimate), one wonders whether the average participant in the performance—if he has no text to look into—always thinks of the right thing; that is, the apex instead of a second chicken. However, it seems safe to say that the use of symbols also serves the function of providing tools to visualize the contents of the text.

An example from the Western religious tradition might help to further illustrate how associative chains of symbols are employed to create a multisensory experience in the listeners or readers. In the *Golden Legend* (*Legenda aurea*), a collection of biographies of Christian saints compiled between 1265 and 1266 by Jacob of Voragine (c. 1228–1298), one finds the following pseudo-etymology of the name of Saint Peter Martyr:

The name Petrus, Peter, is interpreted as knowing or recognizing, or as taking off one's shoes; or Peter comes from *petros*, firm. Hence three privileges possessed by Saint Peter are indicated. He was an outstanding preacher and therefore is called knowing, because he had perfect knowledge of the Scriptures and, in preaching, recognized what met the needs of each hearer. He was a most pure virgin and so is called one who takes off his shoes, because he removed and put off all earthly love from the feet of his affections and inclinations: in that way he was virgin not only in his body but in his mind. Third, he was a glorious martyr of the Lord and so was firm, because he bore martyrdom with constancy in defense of the faith. (*The Golden Legend*, pp. 254–5)

Notice the shift from the level of the very concrete (shoes) to a level of abstract terms (e.g., virgin of the mind) as well as the connection of completely unrelated phenomena: shoes and virginity, feet and affections. These associative links, which create a sort of memory chain between otherwise completely unrelated words, allow the listener or reader to elaborate on the key symbols, to make connections until every

distinction, including that between gods and humans, collapses. Moreover, in the same way as the *Saints' Lives* of Jacob of Voragine were used as an aid to “preachers for composing their sermons” (Carruthers 1998), it is not too far-fetched to imagine that the same could also be true for the *Longhua*—that the text could be used as a tool for visualization during meditation.

Conclusion

The *Longhua baojuan* is not representative of one particular religious tradition. It incorporates elements drawn from across the entire spectrum of Chinese religiosity in an attempt to provide its users with the most fashionable religious trends available at their time. Written down yet performed orally, venerated as a canonical scripture yet open to constant interpretation and reinterpretation by its users, containing soteriological knowledge about the path to salvation *and* performative knowledge about the proper conduct of certain rituals, the *Longhua baojuan* as a whole epitomizes the essential features of Chinese sacred texts: inter-religious syncretism and reverberation, epistemological meaning, and performative action. These are the distinguishing characteristics of Chinese sacred texts as religious scripture.

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CHAPTER 14

Religious Ritual

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Ritual is a topic that has been the subject of considerable theoretical discussion, among both premodern Chinese intellectuals and modern scholars of religion. In this chapter, we will characterize some of the most salient features of Chinese religious ritual by examining both indigenous Chinese ritual theory and theoretical approaches developed by modern academic theorists. In adopting such an approach, we hope to demonstrate that in China, just as in the modern West, there has long existed a concept of “ritual” (Chinese *li*) that has, for millennia, been the subject of a great deal of both theoretical and practical speculation. The fact that a notion of ritual that developed largely within the narrow confines of Western intellectual history has been elevated to the status of a universal category of analysis is, largely, coincidental. Modern scholars of religion are becoming increasingly attentive to the various ways in which the history of concepts such as “religion,” “ritual,” and “magic” in Western thought has influenced the way that modern scholars perceive and study religion in general (Smith 1987, Bell 1992, Asad 1993). Careful examination and consideration of non-Western theoretical literature on analogous topics can perhaps serve as a corrective to these tendencies. Thus, in addition to familiarizing the reader with some important features and forms of Chinese ritual, I hope to also contribute to the larger scholarly dialogue concerning the nature of “ritual” as a descriptive or analytical category, by identifying some of the ways in which Chinese conceptions of ritual both converge with and diverge from traditional scholarly understandings of the concept.

Chinese Interpretations of Ritual

The importance of considering indigenous Chinese perspectives on concepts related to ritual has been identified by a number of scholars studying Chinese religious