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Introduction

This book investigates the concepts of nature, vision and revelation within the worldview of the medieval Daoist movement known as the Way of Highest Clarity (Shangqing dao 上清道). It does so by focusing on three Daoist texts associated with that movement, which are presented in a parallel Chinese-English edition. The overall goal is to help bring this tradition to the attention of students of religion and theology and to make the case not only that this is a sophisticated and complex religious tradition in its own right, but also that it is a key element of China's religious heritage, without which it is impossible to claim any basic understanding of Chinese religions. This is a bold claim and de-serves some explanation. What is so important about Highest Clarity Daoism and why is it not so well known?

Firstly, Highest Clarity Daoism, originating in the 4th century CE represents one of the earliest and most successful attempts to synthesize the foundational religious elements that had already appeared on China's religious scene. These included shamanism, mystical experiences, astrology, the quest for immortality, meditation practices, court ritual and Buddhist concepts of death and rebirth. The synthesis brought these various elements into a single complex system, the highest goal of which was the transfiguration of the body and its pre-mortem ascension into heaven. Should this goal not be attainable other, lesser, forms of salvation were also available to practitioners so that even if they were to die, they could safely pass through the underworld and be reborn, intact, in the heavens.

This religious system deserves careful study because of its focus on the body and the relations of bodies to the heavens and the afterlife. This is, of course, a major focus of many religious traditions. The preservation of the body into the afterlife has been the goal of pharaohs, emperors and all those who have built elaborate tombs in which carefully embalmed corpses have been preserved for millennia. Though this form of religion is not particularly in vogue in the modern world, where religions place their emphasis on "spirituality" rather than "materiality," the widespread modern practices of embalming and viewing the bodies of the deceased and a hesitation about donating organs for transplant both indicate the continuing cultural and psychological importance of the material preservation of corpses. By studying this tradition we can obtain important material for the comparative investigation of widespread human impulses that cut across a variety of cultures and traditions.

Yet Highest Clarity Daoists were not principally interested in the preservation of corpses but rather the transformation of bodies into a form suitable for a life in paradise. In this regard their ideas bear something of a resemblance to the orthodox Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. But unlike the Christian saints who did all they could on earth to fit their bodies for a resurrected, post-mortem life that would take place after the final judgment, Highest Clarity Daoists saw the afterlife as a worst-case scenario. Better still was to avoid death itself by ascending directly to a higher paradise, conceived not as a realm for the grateful dead but for the deserving living. Heaven, the celestial web of cosmic powers shifting in an eternal cycle of light and dark, day and night, *yang* and *yin*, was the place for the living, not the dead. This book thus investigates Highest Clarity Daoist theology as a unique and original set of religious ideas about life and death that will be of profound interest to any student of comparative religion and theology.

Highest Clarity Daoism also deserves study by those interested in Chinese culture and history, for it synthesized a unique combination of Chinese cultural and religious factors. In fact its religious practices cannot properly be understood except in the context of earlier Chinese ideas about the functioning of the body and its relation to wider processes in nature. In studying this form of Daoism the scholarly gaze thus engages an exquisite brocade of uniquely Chinese religious practice whose meanings can only be unraveled by careful attention to the particularities of Chinese civilization. Moreover, although Highest Clarity Daoism might appeal to the common religious motivations and existential concerns of human beings, it does so in texts couched in a rare and difficult language, even for those who are at ease with classical Chinese. Its documents are thus of high value from the point of view of linguistics and literature.

Indeed, the complexity of its language is an essential characteristic of the tradition because it was, first and foremost, an esoteric tradition into which one had to be initiated through years of study and practice. It was not designed, like the five pillars of Islam, for easy and widespread practice. Nor did it seem to develop a wide lay following, as did Mahayana Buddhism, where the interaction between the community and the laity produced a rich cross-fertilization that helped Buddhism emerge as one of the most powerful religious forces in the world. Perhaps for this reason it came about the Highest Clarity Daoism no longer exists in the form that it did in the fourth century. Of course this is true for all religions. But the difference is that no-one today has quite the same claim upon this tradition as other historical forms of Daoism, as the Highest Clarity patriarchate was absorbed into the Orthodox Unity branch of Daoism in the fourteenth century and its practices were absorbed and transformed into the language of inner alchemy that continues to this day in Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真) Daoism.

This, then, gives us a clue as to why Highest Clarity Daoism is not so well known. In terms of organizational structure, it is a dead esoteric tradition. However, this does not mean that it is important only for its historical value. Although it would be perfectly possible for a historian of religion to explain Highest Clarity Daoism in terms of its role in developing and transmitting a wide array of Chinese religious concepts and practices, this book seeks rather to explain and argue for its significance in the conceptual realm of religious ideas and theologies. In doing so it treats Highest Clarity Daoism not so much as a dead tradition, but something that was, at one time, a live option within the religious imagination of human beings. This book thus pays attention to the ideas and practices of the tradition in their own terms and in terms of the comparative study of religion. It does so by focusing not on personalities and events, but on the theological concepts of the tradition and in particular the concepts of nature, vision and revelation, concepts that are familiar to a wide variety of religious traditions, but which receive a distinctive treatment in Highest Clarity Daoism.

Its concept of nature, for instance, is an expansive one that encompasses the realm of humans, earth and the heavens in a single, but complex, cosmic process of generation and decay, expansion and contraction. Its concept of revelation is founded on the central significance of religious texts transmitted by the hypostases of elemental cosmic powers. Their chief function is to unite the heavenly and earthly worlds so as to provide a means for humans to achieve salvation. The meditative practice revealed by these texts is that of inner vision, and this is the means by which humans can enter into a communicative reciprocity with the heavenly world and thereby achieve salvation. These concepts of nature, vision and revelation point to an overarching “economy of cosmic power” in which religion provides adepts with a repertoire of practices, or “transactions,” by means of which to mediate cosmic power and negotiate their ultimate fate or destiny. Highest Clarity Daoism is a single, comprehensive religious system, but one that requires careful attention to detail to explain, not least because the details are likely unfamiliar to the contemporary Western, or even Chinese, reader.

Underlying the book’s exposition of these topics is the translation of three texts associated with Highest Clarity Daoism. The first of these texts is the hagiography of a Daoist saint, born Zhou Yishan 周義山 (80 B.C.E.–?), who eventually attained the rank of a perfected transcendent being and was granted the title “Perfected Purple Yang.”

Complementing this text is the first part of the *Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected*, which details, among other things, two visual meditation practices that are typical of Highest Clarity Daoism. These practices, the

Method of the Nine Perfected and the *Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao* both explain a course of visualization that lasts the period of a year in which at various times and dates gods are to be visually actualized and prayed to. In the first form of meditation, practitioners see the gods enter the body and dwell in specific organs corresponding to the systems of circulating *qi*, or vital force. In the second, they visualize themselves ascend into heaven and obtain audiences with the highest gods of the Daoist pantheon. Thus the individual joins his body intimately and socially with the ranks of the transcendent celestial powers and, with this connection firmly sealed and recorded in the offices of the heavenly courts, finds salvation. The third of the texts is the preface to a much longer, key Highest Clarity text, written by the late patriarch, Zhu Ziyong 朱自英 (976–1029). It constitutes a mature theological reflection on the relationship between sacred texts and the metaphysics of the Daoist cosmos.

All three texts, detailing biography, practice and theory reveal a key element of the Highest Clarity experience. Together they can be used to help explain the overall religious system: the story of an ideal Daoist life provides a vivid context for understanding the specific details of the various practices; and the insights of Zhu Ziyong reveal how the subsequent tradition came to understand these practices in metaphysical terms.

While it might seem odd to use texts from different historical periods to discuss a single religious phenomenon, this book offers an interpretation of the tradition based upon the argument that they display a theological, rather than historical, unity. This single constellation of theological ideas is thus the proper focus of the book.

From this description, the reader will be aware that my hermeneutical approach is first and foremost that of sympathy, rather than criticism. My goal is not to unmask how the religious ideas of Highest Clarity supported the patriarchal structures of Chinese society, nor to explain the transmission of religious texts in terms of the economic function of religion. It goes without saying that it is important to examine religion in terms of its impact on society and economics. I, however, am not a social scientist or an economist, but rather a scholar of religion interested in religious ideas for their own intrinsic value. My goal is thus largely imaginative, rather than social or historical: to recreate for the contemporary reader some of the principal aspects of the worldview that functioned in Highest Clarity Daoism.¹

¹For an excellent socio-historical study of the *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang* see Tsai (2008). Tsai's approach to the study of medieval Chinese religion, which is by far the dominant approach among academic scholars, explores what the texts reveal about the practical functioning of Highest Clarity religion: how it adopted the traditions

In so doing I am motivated by an urgent moral concern for a dialogue of civilizations between China and the West in the arena of religious ideas. Religious ideas, even those originating thousands of years ago, convey core motifs and values that are relevant for understanding contemporary social forces. In the shadow of economic globalization, religions and cultures are being brought into mutual engagement in ways never previously contemplated. This requires students of culture and history to play a role in advancing a dialogue of civilizations. For such a dialogue to be real, the “other” has to be treated with understanding, which is to say occupy-

This book aims to recreate Highest Clarity Daoism as a conversation partner in the study of religious ideas. It does not aim to pronounce judgment upon it. This is quite different from the traditional understanding of the scholar as someone in an ivory tower explaining what other people mean. Understood in this more vulnerable light of dialogue, en-gaging with the “other,” even a dead, esoteric “other,” is a form of moral activity as well as intellectual activity. It also has the destabilizing effect of calling into question the validity of our own presuppositions. As J. J. Clarke writes:

It is rather an agonistic encounter, an engagement in which we try to enter into and thrive on differences rather than seek to obliterate them, a potentially subversive engagement, in which we are compelled to confront the assumptions, limitations and fractures in our own cultural traditions. It is thus a way of experiencing ourselves from the outside, as other; a point of departure which can lead to an enhancement of self-understanding. (Clarke 2000: 11–12)

This book does not complete the hermeneutical circle by systematically exploring the ways that Highest Clarity Daoism subverts the assumptions of modern or postmodern cultures. That is a project for another day. Rather this book aims to explore Highest Clarity Daoism imaginatively, from the inside, as a religious tradition whose practices and concepts are of intrinsic value as artifacts of human civilization and elements of the human religious spirit. The major Western scholar who has dealt with this tradition is the late Isabelle Robinet who worked at the University of Aix-en-Provence. She, perhaps more than any other Western scholar of the Daoism, attempted to

of earlier forms of Chinese religion and wove them into a new synthesis. Such an approach gives information principally about religion as a socio-historical phenomenon. This book, however, is concerned with the theology and spirituality of Highest Clarity religion. It is interested in developing an interpretation of the texts in which the religious ideas expressed in those texts take center stage. It is also interested in how those ideas compare with other theologies and how those ideas can be valuable in and of themselves as artifacts of human religiosity.

penetrate Highest Clarity Daoism from the perspective of its philosophical and religious meaning. Her major work on this subject was translated into English and published by the State University of New York Press as *Taoist Meditation* in 1993. Her more detailed two-volume investigation of specific Highest Clarity texts was published in 1984 by the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient and is available in specialized research libraries. More recently, American scholars such as Nickerson (2008) and Bokenkamp (2007) have made enormous inroads into studying the history of religions in this period. With the benefit of their work, it now seems as though the public attention can be focused on this religious movement once again.

Despite these recent developments, the Way of Highest Clarity remains a relatively unstudied movement within a relatively unstudied religion. Part of the reason for this perhaps lies in the difficulty of engaging and interpreting the chief sources for this movement, religious scriptures that were transcribed and republished in the various editions of the Daoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏). These texts are difficult like all Daoist texts because until very recently they have only existed in unpunctuated reprints of the 1445 Ming Dynasty Daoist Canon (*Ming Zhengtong Daozang* 明正統道藏). Since then, a more recent punctuated version has been published in Beijing, but early anecdotal reports indicate that not all scholars are happy with the result of editing and punctuating the texts. Nevertheless, having a punctuated text is an enormous advantage over a non-punctuated text and takes away much of the labor that is required in generating a reading of the text. Even with some of this labor already under-taken, the task of translating a text into English still requires considerable effort. This is true for Highest Clarity Daoist texts perhaps more than any other branch of Daoist texts because they were held in such high esoteric regard and display high literary value. The texts are valuable not simply for the instructions they convey about how to reach the heaven of Highest Clarity, but because they were considered to be written manifestations of the Dao itself and thus they were powerful and valuable simply in their own right. The result is that the texts are particularly obscure, containing a vast complexity of religious meaning within a few characters.²

² As an example of the polysemous character of Highest Clarity texts it is worth-while recalling Edward Schafer's discussion of the Three Primes, or intermediary deities who take up residence in the body. He writes: "Three Primes (*sanyuan*) is a multivalent term, but because of the belief in correspondences—the doctrine that phenomena conceal identities or harmonized alter-egos—the various 'meanings' given to the expression do not exclude each other. Primarily they are three astral deities, who may project themselves into the three great 'palaces' of the human body" (1978: 394). Here Schafer indicates that a text that refers to the Three Primes may simultaneously be indicating the three deities, the three fields of the body in which they reside, or other natural phenomena with which they might be in correspondent relation.

In order to make these texts more accessible to scholars and the general public I have chosen to present a punctuated edition of these texts along with a parallel English translation. First, a word about punctuation. The first task for the translator is to choose how to punctuate the text, deciding where sentences begin and end. As an example of the choices required in punctuating the text, it is instructive to compare my translation of the preface to the *Perfected Scripture of the Great Grotto* with a small fragment that appears in Isabelle Robinet's *Taoist Meditation* (1993: 16).

Robinet's translation runs as follows: "The *Ta-tung* ... causes a propitious Wind to blow and guides the dance within the void. Suddenly (*hu*) the respiration disperses the form of the ten thousand things." My translation reads: "... whirling an auspicious wind, drumming and dancing. In midst of nothing, suddenly there is breathing in and out, which scatters the myriad spirits on their way." The basic difference between the two translations comes from how to punctuate the text. Robinet chose to end the first sentence after the words "within the void" (*wu zhong* 無中). I, on the other hand, chose to end the sentence immediately before those two characters. I did so because I considered that those two characters ought to be paired with the next four characters "suddenly there is breathing in and out" (*xu you huxi* 歘有呼吸) to form a single phrase "In the midst of nothing, suddenly there is breathing in and out" (*wu zhong xu you huxi* 無中歘有呼吸). However, it is highly likely that a good case could be made for either of these ways of punctuating the text and, consequently, the specific translations that ensue therefrom.

The reader will inevitably discover that I have sacrificed much poetry on the altar of meaning, and the result is probably a mediocre version that is neither as poetic as the original, yet at times both infuriatingly literal and maddeningly imprecise. I have opted for this unsatisfying middle ground because the reader who has some knowledge of classical Chinese will be able to see how I have made the choices that I have made. My goal here is that these translations will not serve as the last word on Highest Clarity Daoism but will allow the student of classical Chinese to embark on the journey towards reading Highest Clarity Daoist texts. By showing how I have translated and interpreted these texts, I hope that other scholars will be tempted to produce more and better versions of these and other texts. In this way, the field will gain a valuable advanced pedagogical tool and, in the long run, scientific knowledge about Highest Clarity Daoism will be advanced.

A word about the translation of some key terms: the term Highest Clarity (Shangqing 上清) may be familiar to some readers as Highest Purity or Supreme Purity. I find the term “purity” unsatisfying because it connotes a whole wealth of meanings in the English language that derive from Biblical concepts of purity and holiness. The concept of purity is furthermore a well-developed category in anthropology and relates to concepts of contagion and disease. None of these meanings are clearly present in Highest Clarity Daoism.

Although there are occasional references to the adept’s purifying himself from the turbidity of the world, the sense here is that this turbidity does not constitute a moral contamination that is preventing his ascension to heaven, but rather that the turbidity of the world clouds the adept’s vision. In fact, the adept relies on the penetrating clarity of his faculty of inner vision in order to ascend to heaven. Thus it seems more accurate to translate the Chinese term *qing* 清 as “clarity” rather than “purity.” The second advantage here is that the English word “pure” is now freed up to translate the Chinese character *su* 素 without fear of confusion. A common translation for this latter term is usually “simple,” but this does not always have a positive meaning in English and the alternative translation of “unadorned” is perhaps too unwieldy for frequent use.

From this the reader will also learn that I have taken the approach of translating as much as possible in a straightforward English style even though the texts themselves do not readily lend themselves to this type of translation. In fact a very strong argument could be made for translating obscure Chinese characters with obscure English words in order to convey something of the feeling that the text might have even to someone who reads Classical Chinese. Indeed this is a major approach to translation that has been taken in Daoist Studies. Its chief exponent was the late Edward Schafer, who employed a rich and florid vocabulary of polysyllabic words to convey, quite brilliantly, the flavor of the Chinese original.³

I, however, have chosen a different tactic. In the translations themselves, I have attempted to forge a slightly more concrete and down-to-earth

³ See, for example, his translation of the glorious description of Lady Wei that appears in her hagiography: “Empyrean phosphor, glistening high; / Round eye-lenses doubly lit; / Phoenix frame and dragon bone; / Brain colored as jewel-planetoids; / Five viscera of purple webbings; / Heart holding feathered scripts.” (*A Bag of Pearls from the Three Grottos* Sandong zhu’nang 三洞珠囊 8. 22b; trans. Schafer 1977: 230). The use of obscure words such as “empyrean,” “viscera,” or “planetoids” gives a wonderfully archaic and poetic feel to the text.

vocabulary because my overall view of Highest Clarity Daoism is that it is a tradition rooted in concrete bodily experience rather than vague mysticism or abstract theology.⁴ It would, indeed, be a mistake to take the high literary value of its texts as indicating some sort of intellectualism. Rather, in Highest Clarity Daoism, the phrases are obscure and complex because they are attempting to convey something of the highly complex somatic experience. It should never be forgotten that this is a tradition that revolved concretely around the bodies of its followers.

I have, however, supplemented the translations with footnotes and commentary expanding and, perhaps, complicating the translations, perhaps even to the extent of making something that appears straightforward on the surface more obscure in the commentary. Indeed the complex and often paradoxical relationship between obscurity and clarity is one of the chief philosophical concerns that underlie the revelations, a theme discussed more extensively in chapter four.

The titles of Chinese texts are generally given in English. The first time a text is mentioned, the Hanyu pinyin and Chinese characters are also given. The titles of texts from the Daoist Canon generally follow the standard translations established in Schipper and Verellen (2004). A complete list of texts from the Daoist Canon, with Chinese characters and *Hanyu pinyin* transliteration, can be found in the bibliography.

~~Readers who are not interested in~~ the details of translating classical Chinese, will, I trust, benefit from these translations too, because they will be able to see the raw materials, at least in English version, upon which I have based my analysis and drawn my conclusions. None of these texts has been translated into English before. Only the first has been translated into a Western language, but it is published in a book not easily available. Without such translations, knowledge of Daoism will remain the province of a small handful of elite scholars who have been fortunate enough to spend many years of their life learning classical Chinese. Daoism is a vast, prodigious, yet obscure religion, and it requires an army of scholars.⁴

The one ethical dilemma here is that all of the texts translated in this book are esoteric texts that were never supposed to have been published beyond the circuit of initiates. The texts contain explicit warnings that they should not be widely circulated nor, presumably, translated into English. The fact that these are historical texts—collected and published in China for five hundred years yet not the sacred preserve of a living sect—gives the

contemporary translator some license in this regard: I do not believe that I am causing offense to any extant religious group by divulging these texts here. On the other hand, my regard for the texts be-hooves me to disclaim responsibility for any misfortune that may befall those who take up this book. The translations here have been provided for intellectual rather than practical purposes, and I do not advise anyone to take up Daoist practices of any kind except under the supervision of an experienced Daoist master. Gentle reader, you have been warned.

