

MEDIEVAL DAOIST ORDINATION: ORIGINS, STRUCTURE, AND PRACTICE

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Medieval Daoist ordination developed under Buddhist influence in the fifth century, but retained models of ancient Chinese blood covenants. While following the Buddhist model, which was essentially a membership ceremony, in its formalities and overall organisation, in its essence Daoist ordination was an empowerment and transference of allegiance, not from the family to an overlord, but from the world to the celestial realm. Daoists through ordination do not just leave the family but become active members of an otherworldly administration, with all the powers and obligations of this role.

Key words: ordination, blood covenants, Buddhist ceremonies, pledges, precepts, codes, transmission myth, rites of passage.

Ordination into the ranks of the priesthood played an important role in medieval Daoism. It was a formal ceremony that involved the transmission of a set of sacred scriptures (*jing* 經) together with precepts (*jie* 戒) and ritual methods (*fa* 法). These three, and the sacred teachings they represented, were further protected and empowered by talismans (*fu* 符) that served as passports to the otherworld, registers (*lu* 籙) that contained the names of relevant deities, ordinances (*ling* 令) that held orders to be obeyed by the spirits, and contracts (*qi* 契) that documented the practitioner's standing in the divine cosmos.¹

The ceremony in which these empowering documents and teachings are transmitted is an initiation into the secrets of the Dao, an ordination into the higher ranks of the religion. Like all rites of passage, it can be understood as establishing a bridge between this world and the divine, or as formalising the transition from one social, seasonal, personal, or spiritual state to another. As Victor Turner, developing the work of Arnold van Gennep (1960), points out in *The Ritual Process* (1969), these rites of passage mark an in-between phase, the so-called liminal state – characterised by the

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¹ On medieval Daoist ordination, see Chen (1975); Qing (1988); Ren (1990); Schipper (1985); Benn (1991; 2000).

basic ambiguity that the person undergoing the rite is no longer in one state or on one social level and yet has not yet fully reached another. The liminal state is marked by a sense of insecurity and vulnerability, a sense of being thrown back into a primal state before one was shaped into a specific person, without status, property, rights, and duties.

As a result, people at the center of such a rite often behave in a humble, shy way, allowing themselves to be taken care of and moved about rather than controlling and managing the situation. In order to enter the liminal state, they first have to step away from their previous status; this, known as “separation”, often occurs in a preparatory stage of the ritual and is accompanied by measures of purification and detachment. After the rite proper is concluded, ordinands again leave the liminal phase and fully enter into their new position and status. This is called “reaggregation” and often ritually expressed by the donning of new garb, the sharing of merits, and various thanksgiving ceremonies. Examples of such ritualised passages in civil society include weddings, funerals, and coming-of-age ceremonies; in a religious context, they are most clearly visible in the rites of ordination that formally transfer the person from one status to another: lay to novice, novice to monk, junior to senior.

Daoist ordination developed in the Six Dynasties under the influence of both traditional pledges used for political covenants and membership ceremonies of the Buddhist sangha. Like the former, it was essentially a rite of cosmic empowerment and change in social status; like the latter, it required a set number of masters and witnesses, involved the chanting of various ritual formulas, and was formalised in the transference of a new title and a set of religious robes.

Blood covenants and revelations

In ancient China, in the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the dominant mode of social position and interaction was based on kinship ties. Involving the extended family, the clan, and the relation to one's feudal overlord, the basic social unit found expression in the cult of joint ancestors and formed the basis of all decisions and social and political actions. In the late Western Zhou period, this family-based pattern was shattered as interstate wars and inter-lineage conflicts increased; they replaced the old system of clan honour with a struggle for dominance through armed force (Lewis 1990, p. 43). No longer related to one's partners-in-arms by ties of kinship, Zhou warriors had to develop new modes of connection and documentations of commitment. A key solution to the problem was the blood covenant (*meng* 盟), sealed “through the collective drinking of blood of a sacrificial victim” and activated in a set of formal rites (Lewis 1990, p. 44).

Typically, the tying a blood covenant was prepared through fasting and purifications and the erection of a formal outdoor altar with a pit dug in front. The central part of the rite involved the sacrifice of an animal, usually a sheep, whose left ear was cut off to symbolise the vanquishing of enemies while its blood was collected in a sacred vessel.

The blood was then sprinkled on the altar to summon the spirits, and the text of the covenant was read. This text included a list of the participants, the terms of the oath, and sometimes a curse upon those who violated the covenant. Each of the participants then smeared some blood on his lips while another held the left ear of the animal (Lewis 1990, p. 44).

The text of the covenant, moreover, was copied several times – one copy was buried in the pit, another kept by the participants, a third stored in a separate archive. The covenant ceremony concluded with the “malediction”, which served to call down the revenge of the spirits on all those who might ever violate its rules (Lewis 1990, p. 47).

The purpose of these blood covenants in ancient China was to replace kinship ties with those of the new organisation, taking people out of their traditional social environment and pledging them firmly into a new coalition of warring forces. They both replaced and transcended lineage lines, and created a voluntary, intentional bond in the place of traditional birthrights – thus enabling the fittest fighting men to form military leagues that could vanquish enemies with great effectiveness. Any participant in such a blood covenant formally left his family relations behind and pledged himself first and foremost to the new unit. He underwent a significant transition in social status, becoming part of a larger and more powerful entity than his birth family could ever be.

The practice of swearing blood covenants appeared in a Daoist context especially in the alchemical tradition. As described at length in Ge Hong’s 葛洪 (263–343) *Baopuzi* 抱朴子 (The Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity, DZ 1185; see Ware 1966), alchemists required their adepts to keep their powerful methods secret and never transmit them to anyone who “lacked the necessary qualities, even if he offered jade piled as high as a mountain” (4.6b). If found qualified to receive the Dao and become a member of the cosmic fraternity, on the other hand, one had to first make a pledge by “throwing a golden human statuette and a golden fish into an eastward-flowing stream”, then “close a formal covenant with the teacher by smearing one’s lips with blood” (4.6b; see Ware 1966, p. 75; Benn 2000, p. 330). Only after the allegiance of the disciple was thereby firmly tied to the master, could the preparation of the elixir be undertaken – in itself a highly ritualised process that began with extensive purifications both of the adept and the site, led to a formalised sequence of concoction procedures that often extended over years or even decades, and concluded with a thanksgiving sacrifice and the distribution of the newly created gold to the gods and, anonymously, to the crowds. People who wrongly transmitted the secrets were cursed and greedy adepts condemned to extensive suffering.

Medieval Daoist ordinations basically followed this pattern of ancient blood covenants and alchemical pledges, as is first made clear in the ritual transmission of the scriptures of Highest Purity (Shangqing 上清), both in revelation from the gods to the seeker and in initiation from master to disciple.² A classic case of such scrip-

² It is also quite likely that initiations among the early Celestial Masters followed a similar pattern, involving purifications, a pledge of allegiance to the new group, a sacrifice or offering, and

tural transmission is found in the story of the Han emperor Wu who received sacred texts and talismans from Xiwang mu 西王母, the Queen Mother of the West, as told in the *Han Wudi neizhuan* 漢武帝內傳 (Inner Biography of the Han Emperor Wu, DZ 292). As in this mythological setting, so also in initiation rites among human beings, the process begins with a purification period that signifies the adept's separation from ordinary society and his former kinship ties. Next, an assembly is convoked, the spirits approach, a banquet is held, and the adept formally requests to be taught. He offers a sacrifice and makes a vow of allegiance and secrecy in return for the teachings to be transmitted, humbling himself in this liminal phase of the proceedings. The scriptures, together with sacred charts, maps, talismans, as well as recipes for elixirs and medicines, are bestowed upon him, making him a member of the divine host and removing him firmly from his former limited self and environment. The rite concludes with thanksgiving and a set of warnings against abuse, thus reaggregating the seeker into his new status (Smith 1992, pp. 230–256).

The earliest records of Daoist lineage formation and initiations, therefore, closely follow both the cross-cultural pattern found in rites of passage and the ceremonies of blood covenants in ancient China. The key point of the process is the severance of family ties – the most powerful social connector in ordinary society – in favour of a higher, more potent unit to whom full allegiance is pledged through the smearing of blood, the offering of sacrifices, and the swearing of vows. The participant in the rite changes his status from an ordinary, family-bound person to a ritually and divinely empowered member of a superior group – be they warriors, alchemists, or gods. Thus empowered, he can take part in the activities of his new peers and becomes, to all intents and purposes, an executive among the most powerful group of his world.

Buddhist membership ceremonies

This empowerment aspect, which is central to all Daoist initiations and ordinations, is utterly lacking in the comparative Buddhist model. In ancient India, the transition from ordinary person to Buddhist follower is not a change in power and cosmic influence. Rather, it is a formal dedication of one's life to the dharma, an application for membership in the sangha, and the acceptance into a separate social setting. As the *Mahāvagga* describes it, in the earliest stages of the Buddhist community the Buddha himself admitted followers into the order upon brief examination by pronouncing a formal invitation and encouraging them to “embrace the dharma for the final extirpation of suffering and misery” (Misra 1969, p. 113). In a second stage of development, membership could be conferred by a senior monk and was formalised to include the

a malediction of traitors and renegades. However, information is sketchy, and we only know that adepts had to undergo sexual rites as part of the initiation process (Stein 1963; Despeux 2000, p. 404) and that in the fifth century households had to make pledge offerings and destiny pledges to the organisation (Nickerson 2000, p. 275).

shaving of the head and beard and the donning of yellow robes which left one shoulder bare. The new candidate would face a group of monks and repeat his desire to pursue the dharma three times to gain admission (Misra 1969, p. 113).

Only well after the lifetime of the Buddha was Buddhist ordination formalised into a more extensive set of ceremonies – borrowing from Hindu communities at the time (Misra 1969, p. 110). Now, in addition to shaving his head and obtaining a set of robes and a begging bowl, the entrant had to be at least fifteen years old and have the formal consent of his parents. Before applying for admission, he had to be made aware of the four major precepts against killing, stealing, lying, and sexual misconduct, and the difficulties in observing them. Then he had to be formally presented by a mentor or ordination master (*ācārya*) to a quorum of ten monks, to whom he pronounced his request for admission. If the leading monk concurred and no objection was voiced, admission was granted and the applicant became a new member (Misra 1969, pp. 114–115). Conditions, moreover, were specified that precluded admission – some involved physical obstacles, such as sickness or dirty habits; others were more social in nature, exempting, for example, soldiers, royal retainers, criminals, jail-breakers, debtors, and slaves (Misra 1969, p. 116).

These sets of conditions and rules for admission, together with extensive codes of conduct and proper monks' behaviour, were further collected in the *Vinaya* of the various schools and in due course transmitted to China.³ Here especially the *Sifen lǜ* 四分律 (Four Part Vinaya) provided a standard model. According to this, the ceremony involves the presence of three masters – the ordination master (*jie heshang* 戒和尚), the confessor or catechist (*jiemo* 羯摩), and the examiner (*jiaoshou* 教授) – plus seven witnesses, usually monks of good standing.⁴ It begins with the ordinand announcing his name and bowing to all ten senior monks, then answering ten questions about his name, his master's name, his age (over 20), the acquisition of his robes and bowl, his parents' approval, his freedom from debt, his status as free man, his status as civilian, his sex as male, and his freedom from diseases and criminal record (Matsunaga 1976, 1, p. 56). Following this, the candidate formally requests ordination and receives the approval of the three masters and seven witnesses. This leads to a sermon of instruction and warning against abuses and the breaking of the precepts. Then the precepts are given, either fully recited by the ordinand or simply agreed to. The ordinand has his head shaved and dons his robes, receives a new name in the dharma and an ordination certificate, and is pronounced a member of the sangha.⁵

³ For a detailed discussion of all the different sets of rules and ordination materials in the Taishō canon, see Tsuchihashi (1980, pp. 262–360). He lists a total of 112 texts: 32 Indian, 24 Chinese, and 56 Japanese.

⁴ These masters are named and described in Prip-Møller (1967, p. 307); Buswell (2000, p. 79).

⁵ See Matsunaga (1976, 1, p. 57), discussing the practice in Nara-period Japan. The same process is still actively undertaken in Buddhist ordination today and practiced also in the U.S. See Looi (1998). Details of mass-ordination, following the same basic system, in twentieth-century China are found in Prip-Møller (1967, pp. 298–331). For a personal record of a Buddhist undergoing various training periods and ordination ceremonies, also from the early twentieth century, see Chen-Hua (1992).

Never entirely leaving this fundamental pattern, the format of Buddhist ordination has yet developed and transformed over history, so that the ceremonies practiced in different Buddhist countries today are not entirely the same. In Korea, for example, a strong distinction is made between novice ordination, which is given by a single master, involves the transmission of the ten precepts and a simple vow, and can be revoked if necessary, and full *bhikṣu* ordination, which is considered a commitment for life and undertaken only after a novitiate of three years and attainment of the age of twenty. Ceremonies lasting several days are performed in the presence of three masters and seven witnesses; they involve various lectures, the formal asking of a series of questions, the chanting of mantras, the donning of robes, and the official presentation of the complete set of *Vinaya* rules together with a proper ordination certificate (Buswell 2000, pp. 76–82).

In Japanese Zen ordination follows more of a Mahāyāna pattern. It places highest emphasis on the inner, mental development of the disciple, who after a formal confession of sins vows to develop compassion and follow the ten bodhisattva precepts. Preceding this central part of the ceremony, formalities begin with the joint chanting of the three refuges (Buddha, dharma, sangha), followed by an invocation and lecture by the master. The disciples then bow to worldly rulers and parents for one last time, prostrate themselves to their master, and – accompanied by more bowings and chantings – have their heads shaved, don their new garb, learn their new name, and receive several ritual robes. Confession, vow, and precepts follow, all highly formalised and joined by more chantings and homages. The ceremony ends with a concluding verse on how the universe rejoices at this marvelous occasion, a last homage to the Buddha, the bodhisattvas, and the “Scripture of Great Wisdom,” and a concluding speech by the presiding master (Kennett 1976, pp. 322–333).

Daoist ordination as described from the sixth century onward on the surface appears highly similar to this latter set of ceremonies, involving confession, vows, and precepts. Quite obviously the ritual setting, the assembly of recluses, the need for three masters and a number of witnesses, the ritual formulas, and even the idea of precepts are taken over from Buddhism. Still, the core of the Daoist ceremony is very different and consists not so much of the declaration of the individual ordinand’s intention and membership but of the severance of his or her ties with ordinary life and the establishment of a position among otherworldly forces, an empowerment of the individual in the methods and activities of the Dao.

Early Daoist ordination

The earliest evidence of a formal ceremony attached to the transmission of Daoist scriptures, other than the establishment of a covenant between alchemists and practitioners of Highest Purity, is found in the the context of the Daoist theocracy under Kou Qianzhi 寇謙之 (365–448) in the early fifth century. Kou had been born into a Celestial Masters family and grew up to be a Daoist hermit and visionary on Mount Song. In 415 and 423, he received revelations from Lord Lao that appointed him the

new Celestial Master and provided him with both longevity methods and community rules. The latter consisted of twenty scrolls and were known as the “New Code”. Taking his new vision and community organisation to court, Kou found the support of prime minister Cui Hao 崔浩 and became head of a state-sponsored Daoism, geared to bring peace and harmony to the northern (Toba) empire. After establishing Daoist institutions throughout the country, the emperor himself accepted Daoist ordination in 440 and changed his reign title to “Perfect Lord of Great Peace” (Taiping zhenjun 太平真君). Successful for some time, the theocracy declined with Kou’s death in 448 and ended with the execution of Cui Hao in 451 (see Mather 1979; Yang 1956).

A set of thirty-six precepts from the “New Code,” including instructions on how to perform ordinations, still survives in the *Laojun yinsong jiejing* 老君音誦戒經 (Lord Lao’s Scripture of Recited Precepts, DZ 785). According to this, all

Dao officials (*daoguan* 道官) and register disciples (*lusheng* 籙生), when they first receive the precepts and statutes, should perform eight bows to the scripture of the precepts, then stand up straight before the text. Whether master or friend, hold the scripture and make eight obeisances, then recite it to the proper melody. The recipients then prostrate themselves and recite the scripture [mentally] in their intention, scroll by scroll. Thereafter they formally request it and give eight more bows. If there is someone who cannot recite it to the melody, he or she should just plainly recite it, and that is all. (sect. 2, 1a)

The rite indicated here seems to involve the presence of a group of masters and recipients, the formal bowing and performance of obeisances, and the ritual chanting of the precepts as presented in the scripture. The precepts are at the center of the ceremony, and the text explains that they “must always be venerated and treated with great diligence” and should not be transmitted except with the prescribed methods (sect. 2, 1a).

Some additional details are provided in the subsequent section:

Daoist officials and register disciples, when copying the scriptures, precepts, and statutes, must never omit, misspell, add, or alter anything, not even one single character. If in drafting and writing copies of the precepts, they fail to state the proper scroll heading on the second or third page, then the rules and statutes are not complete, and great disasters will befall their bodies. These rules and precepts of mine naturally have officials that supervise and manage them; they follow the scripture and its precepts closely and keep inspecting how it is being treated. Therefore, be very clear and careful about them, honor and practice them in accordance with the statutes and ordinances. (sect. 3, 1b)

This section shows that the text of the precepts, once received in a formal ceremony, had to be copied by the adepts and was protected by a series of deities assigned as guardians. The written word was essential and the exact text had to be preserved, upon punishment by the resident gods and cosmic powers. The beliefs ex-

pressed here reflect the emphasis placed in Daoism on the written word (see Robinet 1993) and anticipates the common medieval practice of ordinands copying the scriptures for their personal use and the understanding that all ritual objects, later including also vestments, had to be treated very carefully since they were guarded by special deities.

Another early glimpse of Daoist ordination is found in the preface to the *Laojun yibai bashi jie* 老君一百八十戒 (The One Hundred and Eighty Precepts of Lord Lao). The text, which survives in various collections, is a fifth-century code of rules for the Celestial Masters community.⁶ The preface, transmitted separately, was recovered from Dunhuang.⁷ It begins by describing the – rather spurious – connection of the precepts to the *Taiping jing* 太平經 (Scripture of Great Peace), a text associated with the Great Peace movement of the Later Han dynasty which was lost early on and reconstituted in the sixth century (see Hendrischke 2000). Following this, the preface presents a speech by Lord Lao, in which he deplores the decline of the age and admonishes senior practitioners who have received the rules to grow in the divine law (*fa* 法, dharma) for the sake of later generations. Without the precepts, he says, how are people different from trees or stones, even if they manage to attain extended longevity? With them, on the other hand, they can find deliverance from the corpse and ascend to the immortals.

To receive the precepts, moreover, adepts should first purify themselves by bathing, abstaining from the five pungent vegetables (*wuxin* 五辛),⁸ and changing into fresh clothing. Bowing to their master, they receive the rules by reciting them three times and vow to observe them. When the transmission is over, adepts obtain the text of the precepts and make one copy so they can venerate them in their proper text. The precepts are essential not only for the functioning of a harmonious society but also for the attainment of eternal life and the powers of the Dao. Practiced for millennia, they still are at the core of all successful immortals and sages.⁹ The basic elements of the ceremony described here correspond to those mentioned in the *Lao-*

⁶ The text has survived variously: in the sixth-century *Taishang laojun jinglü* 太上老君經律 (Scriptural Rules of the Highest Lord Lao, DZ 786, 4a–12b); the ritual compendium *Yaoxiu keyi* 要修科儀 (Essential Rules and Observances, DZ 463, 5.14a–19a) of the eighth century, and the eleventh-century encyclopedia *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (Seven Tablets in a Cloudy Satchel, DZ 1032, 39.1a–14b). It is translated in full in Hendrischke – Penny (1996); discussions of content and origins is found in Schmidt (1985); Penny (1996); and Schipper (1985; 2001).

⁷ The preface appears in P. 4731, P. 4562 (Öfuchi 1979, pp. 685–686) as well as in a citation in *Yaoxiu keyi* 5.14a–19a. A scholarly presentation and discussion is found in Maeda (1985).

⁸ These are onions, leeks, scallions, garlic, and ginger. Originally part of the diet of Daoist hermits and immortals (see Yamada 1989), they were not encouraged by Daoist communal practitioners because of their socially disruptive tendencies. They were also proscribed in Chinese Buddhism because of the yang quality which makes it harder to meditate and eliminate desires. See *Fanwang jing* 梵網經 (Brahmajāla sūtra, T. 1484, 24.997c; DeGroot (1969, p. 42); *Shoulengyan jing* 首楞嚴經 (Śūraṅgama sūtra, T. 945, 19.141c; Ch'en 1973, p. 98).

⁹ P. 4731, P. 4562 (Öfuchi 1979, pp. 685–686). The second part of this preface, summarised here, is also found in *Yaoxiu keyi* 5.14a–19a. For a punctuated and annotated edition and discussion, see Maeda (1985).

jun yinsong jiejing, with the addition of the actual speech of instruction and encouragement given by the ordination master at the time of transmission. The precepts again are lauded as having supernatural power and being at the center of Daoist practice, leading to social harmony and personal immortality.

Ordination myths

In the sixth century, as the various Daoist schools began to integrate into one coherent ordination system, a set of myths arose that described the progress of the adept toward the higher ranks. The medium used was the story of the divine Laozi transmitting the *Daode jing* to Yin Xi 尹喜, the Guardian of the Pass, which at this time was expanded to include more details of Laozi's expanding hagiography. The main source was the *Wenshi neizhuan* 文始內傳 (Essential Biography of Master Wenshi, in *Sandong zhunang* 三洞珠囊 [DZ 1139], ch. 9), a devout record of the exploits of Yin Xi, the senior patriarch of the Louguan or Northern Celestial Masters branch of Daoism that came to flourish after the demise of the theocracy in the mid-fifth century (see Kohn 2000). According to this text, rather than only arranging to meet Laozi on the western pass and inviting him into his home at Louguan to transmit the *Daode jing*, Yin Xi is subjected to a full investigation and ordination procedure that lasts several years. The process can be divided into four stages:

1. Laozi meets Yin Xi on the pass and administers several tests before he agrees to teach him. This represents the ordinand's first encounter with the Dao and its organisation and shows the need to prove his inherent ability, determination, and loyalty.

2. Laozi's retainer, a man by the name of Xu Jia 徐甲, greedily demands his pay and is put in his place with the help of Yin Xi. This story confronts the uneducated servant Xu Jia with the literate official Yin Xi. In terms of ordination, it symbolises the rejection of popular, shamanistic practitioners, who serve the populace not for salvation but for material gain.

3. Laozi transmits the *Daode jing* to Yin Xi and gives him oral explanations and formal precepts. This represents the central act of Daoist ordination, when the Daoist receives the scriptures, methods, and precepts of his new rank. The transmission of the *Daode jing* with its basic precepts at the same time represents an initial stage of ordination. It stands at the beginning of the Daoist hierarchy and symbolises the ordinand's first formal foothold in the Dao.

4. Laozi gives Yin Xi three years to perfect his Dao and agrees to meet him again in a black sheep shop in Chengdu. After the reunion Laozi examines his student and finds him successful. Together they set out for an ecstatic excursion to the heavens, followed by their journey to the west and subsequent conversion of the barbarians. This episode shows the continued training of the aspiring Daoist over several years and his attainment of the higher ordination stages. The far-off journey in the story corresponds to the ecstatic travels to the stars undertaken especially by ordinands of Highest Purity, the highest of later Daoist ranks. Having realised the

Dao, the practitioner on this level travels freely to and from the otherworld and serves as a divine officer in the heavenly hierarchy.¹⁰

Showing the essential features of Daoist ordination in a narrative, mythological framework, this also matches typical patterns found cross-culturally in what is known as the quest of the hero. According to this, the hero is typically born under unusual circumstances or virginally; he is exposed and abandoned but saved by local people or animals; he passes through a period of transition; eventually he returns to his rightful kingdom where he overcomes all resistance and rules as king. The key motif in the hero myth is discrepancy: his dislocation from home and rightful rank, the gap between his early life and later fulfillment, and the resistance that has to be overcome between the two stages of his life. The exposure of the child is not the main point, rather it is the attempted prevention of the hero's quest. This can be achieved either by separating him from his family or by closeting him within it. In either case, the hero is separated from his true home in the world. He may be first separated then violently reunited with it, or first united then violently torn away. In either case, the transition from one to the other, crossing the "threshold of adventure" between safe childhood and vigorous adulthood (Campbell 1949, p. 245), prepares him for full autonomy as king in the next stage of his career (Dundes 1990, p. 195).¹¹ This always entails overcoming an obstacle, "a shadow presence that guards the passage"; it is often also characterised by a period of withdrawal, a "vision quest" of growing awareness of the impending task.¹²

The time of transition is usually characterised by temptations and the summons of fate, as well as by an initial refusal to do the required work and an attempt to remain in the realm of childhood. It is a stage between roles and positions and thus a form of liminality, signalled by the simultaneous presence of joy and suffering, unity and diversity, present and future, way and goal, shrine and home. In concrete terms, the same threshold phenomenon is often also evoked in pilgrimages, and the hero sets out to travel during this phase (Biallas 1986, p. 153). In symbolic terms, it appears as inversion, a turning upside-down of established order that creates "a *Spielraum*, a space in which to take chances with new roles and ideas" (Babcock 1978, p. 25). Overall, it is a period of transition, in which both danger to the old and high hopes for the new come together in a potentially explosive mixture.

In terms of Daoism, the entire process of ordination as described in the myth is very much a rite of passage, guiding the adept from humanity to immortality, from being a socially centered individual to a cosmic partner of the Dao. Many of the typical motifs associated with this transition or threshold situation thus appear equally in the myth of Lord Lao's interaction with Yin Xi and in the hero's quest for his kingdom. The heroes, Lord Lao and Yin Xi and all the adepts undergoing the ordination

¹⁰ The stories surrounding Laozi and Yin Xi were first studied in Kusuyama (1979). For a discussion of their relevance to Daoist ordination, see Kohn (1998a, pp. 255–270; 1998b).

¹¹ The same structure also applies to the Buddha's life story, in which he is kept strictly within the confines of his home and only leaves as an adult, and very much against his father's will, to seek out his true kingdom, the attainment of enlightenment. See Pye (1979); Pyysiäinen (1987).

¹² See Campbell (1949, p. 245); Leeming (1973, p. 185); Biallas (1986, p. 141).

process, all travel far from home, and encounter new and potentially threatening situations. They grow only by pursuing their quest with single-minded determination and working their way through the appropriate rituals in the process.

Tang practice

A fuller picture of the ordination ceremony, that integrates these early Daoist procedures with the Buddhist model outlined earlier, is found in the *Fengdao kejie* 奉道科戒 (Rules and Precepts for Worshipping the Dao, DZ 1125) of the early Tang dynasty, a major document on monastic and institutional organisation that also discusses the ranking system of the Daoist priesthood.¹³ Section 18 of the text provides a complete description of a formal ordination to the rank of “Disciple of Pure Faith” (*qingxin dizi* 清信弟子) through transmission of the ten precepts as contained in the *Shijie jing* 十戒經 (Scripture of the Ten Precepts, DZ 459).¹⁴ According to this text, candidates were carefully chosen and underwent extended periods of ritual and scriptural training under the guidance of an ordination master and with the active support of their native families and sponsors from the community.

Eventually, the time of ordination – determined on the basis of cosmic calculation and with permission from the imperial court – arrived, and the candidates went to the large teaching monastery which alone was allowed to hold the ceremony. There they were secluded to purify themselves for a set period, while the masters made sure the guarantors and officiants were ready and all materials were prepared correctly. Usually, a ceremony involved three masters – the Ordination Master (*dushi* 度師), the Registration Master (*jishi* 籍師) and the Scripture Master (*jingshi* 經師; see Benn 1991, p. 40)¹⁵ – five to ten witnesses, and a group of officiating priests, divided according to their role as cantors (*dujiang* 都講), purgation overseers (*jianzhai* 監齋), incense attendants (*shixiang* 侍香), lamp attendants (*shideng* 侍燈), and scripture attendants (*shijing* 侍經).¹⁶

¹³ Some fragments of this text also survive among Dunhuang manuscripts (Ōfuchi 1979, pp. 219–242; Tonkō kōza 1983). Early discussions of its history and content are found in Akizuki (1965); Yoshioka (1955; 1976). More recently, the text is translated and evaluated in Reiter (1998); Barrett (1997); Kohn (1997; 2004).

¹⁴ An abbreviated description of these ordination procedures is also found in *Daoxue keyi* 道學科儀 (Rules and Observances for Students of the Dao, DZ 1126), 1.20b–21a. For more on the “Disciple of Pure Faith”, see Kusuyama (1984). The ritual, which was quite common in the Tang, as documented in various covenant texts recovered from Dunhuang, is also discussed in Schipper (1985, pp. 135–137).

¹⁵ These masters were also called the Master of Orthodoxy (*zhengshi* 正師), the Master Supervising the Ordination (*jiandu shi* 監度師), and the Master Testifying to the Covenant (*zhengmeng shi* 證盟師). See *Chuanshou jingjie yi* 傳授經戒儀 (DZ 1238), 7a.

¹⁶ Lesser ceremonies might require only one of each, but more elaborate ordinations would have groups of them – five cantors, six overseer, seven incense, eight lamp, and nine scripture attendants, plus the three essential masters making a total of thirty-eight officiating priests. *Chuanshou jingjie yi* 5b, 7a; Benn (1991, pp. 40–41).

Not only the responsible officiants but also all material objects had to be in good order, including the set-up of a proper ordination platform and the preparation of the scriptures and precepts to be handed over. Last-minute arrangements or temporary stop gaps were frowned upon. For example,

if the chosen date arrives and the time comes close but the scriptures and methods are not all ready, some masters have their ordinands receive blank sheets of paper or a roll of plain silk. This is an insult to the sacred scriptures and a fraud. (*Fengdao kejie* in S. 809, Ōfuchi 1979, p. 222; Tonkō kōza 1983, p. 176.)

Once all is properly set, the festivities go on for several days. On the evening prior to the central rite, a memorial is presented to the gods to announce the great ritual step to be taken (Schipper 1985, p. 132). The main event, then, begins with the ordinands lining up in the courtyard before the altar platform.

First, they face west to bid farewell to their parents and give thanks to their ancestors, bowing twelve times. Then they turn to face north and bow to the emperor four times. The reason for this is that, once they have donned the ritual vestments of the Heavenly Worthies, they will never again bow to parents or worldly rulers. Therefore, when anyone joins the Daoist community, he or she must first bid farewell and give thanks. (*Fengdao kejie* 6.9b)

Here the ordinands formally leave their old life behind and get ready to take the irreversible step into the otherworldly community of the Dao, formally undergoing separation from the ordinary world. They then enter the liminal phase of the rite and surrender themselves to the Dao:

The ordinands then stand erect with their hands folded over their chests. Still facing north, they surrender themselves three times to the Three Treasures, bowing three times to each. They say:

With all my heart I surrender my body
to the Great Dao of the Highest Nonultimate.
With all my heart I surrender my spirit
to the Venerable Scriptures in Thirty-Six Sections.
With all my heart I surrender my life
to the Great Preceptors of the Mysterious Center.
(*Fengdao kejie* 6.9b)

After this basic form of surrender, ordinands were equipped with the insignia of their new status: religious names as well as the titles, vestments, and headdresses appropriate for their new rank.¹⁷ To show their new affiliation, they would tie their

¹⁷ The *Chuanshou jingjie yi* specifies five essential items each Daoist has to receive: kerchief, long robe, cape, shoes, and staff. It also mentions further necessities that are provided later: hut, rope-bed, awnings, coverlet, dishes, book case, writing knife, ink, and so on (11b–12a).

hair into a topknot, unlike Buddhists who shaved theirs. Also unlike in Buddhism, where nuns had to observe many more rules than monks and were given a lower status, women in Daoism were treated equally and underwent the same ceremonies.¹⁸

In exchange for their new status, ordinands made a solemn declaration to follow the Dao and do everything to uphold it. This declaration involved the pledge of lavish gifts of gold, silk, and precious objects to the master and the institution, as well as the formal oath to follow the rules and work toward the goals of the organization.¹⁹ Following this, ordinands bowed to the masters and chanted a set of stanzas on the development of true wisdom. The first stanza has:

Wisdom arises from original nonbeing,
Brightly it goes beyond the ten directions.
Combined in the void, formed in the mysterious empyrean –
It pours from the various heavens as flowing fragrance.
Its wonders are beyond belief,
Its empty impulse truly beyond the real.
It is right there, yet ultimately it is not –
It is not there, yet nothing appears without it.

This is followed by the ordinands taking refuge in the gods of the ten directions. Next they are formally given the ten precepts and their related scriptures and ritual tokens, bow once again to the masters and patriarchs, and conclude the rite by chanting the “Hymn to the Precepts,” which ends:

Honoring the precepts without a moment’s relapse,
For generations we create nothing but good karma.
With concentration we are mindful of the Great Vehicle,
And soon embody the perfection of the Dao.
(*Fengdao kejie* 6.10a–11a).

The scriptures commonly associated with the transmission of the ten precepts are the *Daode jing* with its various commentaries and biographies of Laozi and Yin Xi (*Chuanshou jingjie yi* 4b–5a). However, the rank attained by receiving these texts goes beyond Disciple of Pure Faith and is either Disciple of the Golden Button (*jinniu dizi* 金鈕弟子) or Preceptor of Eminent Mystery (*gaoxuan fashi* 高玄法師; Schipper 1985, pp. 139–140). Originally different initiations, these three were commonly combined in the Tang and subsumed under the overall rank of Eminent Mystery.

Ritual tokens associated with this and other ranks usually consisted of various contracts, talismans, registers, ordinances, and methods. As the *Zhengyi weiyi jing*

¹⁸ For a discussion of the role of women in Daoist ordination, see Despeux (1986) and Despeux – Kohn (2003).

¹⁹ *Fengdao kejie* 6.9b–10a. A list of preferred pledge objects is also found in *Chuanshou jingjie yi* 10b. According to the *Yaoliu keyi*, the pledge was divided into three parts: two tenths were given to the ordination master, two tenths went to poor hermits, and the remainder was given to the institution (1.7b–8a; Benn 1991, p. 37). For more details on medieval ordination procedures, see Benn (2000, pp. 327–331).

正一威儀經 (Scripture of Dignified Observances of Orthodox Unity, DZ 791) describes it, these tokens of empowerment are essential in establishing the Daoist's status in the otherworld. Contracts, for example, are needed so that the officials of heaven and earth know the ordinand's new rank. Talismans and registers are essential to make the divinities descend, gain divine protection, and ensure that the memorials will reach their proper destination. Ordinances ascertain that one can move freely through the mountains and rivers of the nine provinces, and the ritual methods (spells, incantations, sacred gestures) serve to prevent demons and spirits from blocking roads or bringing sickness and harm (1ab). The tokens work very much like the precepts, which too protect against disasters and dangers and ensure the Daoist's cosmic power, but they are more focused and more concrete in their application (11a).

The transmission of scriptures, precepts, and tokens concluded the main part of the rite and its central, liminal portion. For three days after this, ordinands would be busy making copies of their scriptures, especially of precepts and ritual manuals, so that one set could remain in the institution for safekeeping and the other be used in daily ritual.²⁰ No mistake was permissible, and every character and heading had to be copied perfectly. Once this was done, the final part of the ordination, signifying the reaggregation or full entering of Daoists into their new status, took place. Daoists donned their new vestments and performed a thanksgiving ceremony, "presenting offerings to the great sages, masters, and worthies of the various heavens", while the masters prepared a detailed record (*Fengdao kejie* in S. 809).

Higher ranks

The ceremony just described provided the fundamental blueprint for all Daoist ordinations in the middle ages; however, it changed in scope and intensity as practitioners ascended through the ranks. The earliest ranks known, which came to form the foundation of the hierarchy, are those of the Celestial Masters, usually associated with different types and numbers of protective generals listed in registers and presented to the disciples. Ranks here include register disciple (*lusheng* 籙生), demon soldier (*guizu* 鬼卒), Dao official (*daoguan* 道官), and libationer (*jijiu* 祭酒). Anyone holding registers of as many as 150 generals, as described in the *Daomen kelüe* 道門科略 (Abbreviated Rules for Daoist Followers, DZ 1127) of the fifth-century ritual master Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406–477), had to be good, loyal, simple, careful, prudent, diligent, and utterly dedicated to the Dao. They were making up the avant-garde of the religion (Nickerson 1996, p. 356; see also Schipper 1985, pp. 131–135).

Beyond this, adepts ascended the Daoist ladder in a total of eight major ranks:

Orthodox Unity
Divine Incantation
Eminent Mystery

²⁰ The personal copy would never leave the Daoist and be buried with him or her eventually. See *Fengdao kejie* 5.3ab.

Spirit Cavern
Mystery Ascension
Mystery Cavern
Perfection Cavern
Three Caverns²¹

As ordinands passed on to the higher levels, the requirements became more intense, monastic status was essential, and ceremonies grew to greater levels of intricacy. An example of a Mystery Cavern (Lingbao 靈寶) ceremony is described in great detail: the ordination of the two Tang princesses Gold-Immortal (Jinxian 金仙) and Jade-Perfected (Yuzhen 玉真) held in February, 711, presented in Zhang Wanfu's 張萬福 *Chuanshou jingjie lüeshuo* 傳授經戒略說 (Brief Outline of the Transmission of Scriptures and Precepts, DZ 1241).²² Establishing Daoist status for the two daughters of Lady Dou, third consort of Emperor Ruizong (r. 710–712), and thereby keeping them safe from the dangerous court intrigues of the time, the event took place in the Guizhen guan 歸真觀 (Monastery of Refuge in Perfection) in the Inner Palace.

A three-tiered altar, 3.5 meters high, was set up specially, supported by golden pillars, entered through ornate gates marked by purple and gold tablets, and surrounded by blue-green silk cordons (Benn 1991, p. 22). Its floors, although consisting of plain tamped earth, were covered with brocade cushions and intricate mats; its ramparts were lighted by seventeen types of lamps and four different sorts of candles, often giving forth special effects, such as “purple-flaming orchids” or “thousandfold moonbeams” (Benn 1991, pp. 27–28). Each level had at least three tables, one for incense burners, made from jade or gold and burning aromatic woods, like aloeswood, frankincense, sandalwood, cloves, and camphor (Benn 1991, p. 29); another to be used as a lectern for the officiant's recitation of the memorial and the precepts; and a third for placing the pledge offerings to be made. Each table, moreover, had a scarlet kerchief and a blue-green cover, seen as substitutes for smearing the lips with blood and cutting off a lock of hair in the sealing of the oaths – quite obviously recovering the essence of the blood covenants of antiquity (Benn 1991, p. 31).

More ornamentation was also present in the wrappers, cases, and bags used for the scriptures – all made from precious substances and bedecked with designs of celestial kings, immortals, mountains and rivers, clouds, dragons, phoenixes, and other sacred figures (Benn 1991, p. 31). The pledges – understood to appease the gods of the five directions and ward off malign influences during the delicate transition – were extensive and rich, including 72 lengths of variegated silk net, 240 lengths of purple silk net, 480 lengths of coarse silk, 240 strings of cash, 200 ounces of gold, 25 lengths of five-coloured brocade, 120 catties of incense, 500 ounces of blue-green silk

²¹ This outline follows *Fengdao kejie* 5.4a–8a. Similar lists of ranks are also found in *Fafu kejie wen* 法服科戒文 4b–5b. See Benn (1991, pp. 72–98; 2000, pp. 313–322).

²² The description is found in 2.18a–21a. For a detailed presentation and analysis, see Benn (1991).

thread, 24,000 sheets of memorial paper, 12 scraping knives, 38 knives and kerchiefs, 6 gold dragon plaques, and 54 golden buttons (Benn 1991, pp. 32–35).

Such enormous wealth given to the institution is, of course, exceptional and occurs especially in ordinations held for members of the imperial family and other high-ranking aristocrats. But the overall impression remains that entry into the higher levels of the Dao required a full commitment, not only personally and socially but also materially and through observation of the proper forms. These forms, moreover, required that the ceremony, accompanied by many festivities, should last up to nine days, and that the full contingent of thirty-eight officiants be present for its execution. The ordination, then, while maintaining the basic pattern described above, consisted of entire sequences of preparations and the transmission of different levels of precepts and groups of scriptures, each preceded by a proper memorial sent off to the gods, executed with attention to detail and full propriety, and concluded with the bestowal of power and rank to the new initiates (see Benn 1991, pp. 39–71).

Similarly splendid and impressive ceremonies were also performed for imperial relatives in later dynasties. An example is the ordination of Empress Zhang (1470–1541), the sole consort of the Ming emperor Hongzhi 弘治 (r. 1488–1505) as Daoist priestess through the Celestial Master Zhang Xuanqing 張玄慶 (d. 1509) in 1493. Obtaining the a high rank in the order of Orthodox Unity, she underwent a series of rituals and received an extensive group of scriptures, talismans, and registers and was thereby empowered as a member of the spiritual hierarchy of the gods (Little – Eichman 2000, p. 208).

Here ordination is documented in an extensive, ornate scroll, 54 centimeters wide and over twenty meters long, that is now in the San Diego Museum of Art. It shows the empress “floating on a cloud in the heavens, accompanied by an entourage and a large group of deities and adepts”, including the Ruler of Fates, the Dark Warrior, the God of Literature, the first Celestial Master, celestial generals, zodiac deities, jade maidens, and many more (Little – Eichman 2000, p. 208). The inscription makes it clear that through the ceremony the empress is expected to receive a title and rank in the celestial administration, gaining the power to control spirits and demons, activate the scriptures, and perform efficacious rituals (Little – Eichman 2000, p. 213). Unlike medieval sources, this document does not mention a specific set of precepts to be bestowed and followed, but focuses more on talismans and registers and the powers they entail.

Conclusion

Medieval Daoist ordination is a complex process that developed under various influences when Daoism integrated into an organised system in the sixth century. On the surface, much of the ordination ritual goes back to Buddhism – taking precepts, swearing allegiance, bowing to the gods, taking refuge, presenting before masters and witnesses, and so on. However, at the core of the Daoist ceremony is an older model, the creation of military covenants and alchemical empowerment through blood sacri-

fices and the bestowal of talismans that removed the participant from his or her traditional social context and created a new setting for him or her. Daoists in particular are not only transformed from ordinary members of society into devout and dedicated followers of the religion, but also elevated from simply human status to the rank of a divine officer. Daoists like Buddhists leave the world of humanity and society behind, but unlike them they go further and become players in a higher reality, moving about in a more powerful domain of existence.

Daoist ordination ceremonies reflect this change in status and the ancient military origins of the practice. Codified in myths of the sixth century, they can be compared cross-culturally to other ordination and initiation ceremonies as well as to the traditional quest of the hero. The Daoist ordinand, both in the myth and in real life, is like the hero of the folktale, since he is violently separated from his original home – the Dao or the celestial realm – and then has to overcome many temptations and obstacles to be reunited with it. Ordination in this context is the paradigmatic liminal experience; it is also the formalised, ceremonial enactment of the many temptations and difficulties of the quest. They are, therefore, often accompanied by a series of tests or examinations that prove to himself and the world that the ordinand is ready to occupy the elevated position of the Dao. “Acts of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms” (Babcock 1978, p. 14), such tests are administered not only to Yin Xi and the hero but to all Daoists, be they classical immortals, medieval ordinands, or aspiring trainees of Complete Perfection.

Typically the tests appear as difficult situations engineered by a master for a prospective disciple. They may include the eating of excrement, resistance to a woman’s seduction, denying or burying one’s kin, and giving selfless help to ungrateful wretches. They cover three major areas: detachment from mundane goods and relationships, the overcoming of desires and fears, and the development of compassion for all beings. They make sure that the Daoist ordinand and future immortal is completely free from the demands and lures of the ordinary world, can withstand the hardships of the training, and will not abuse whatever powers he or she may gain (Kohn 1998b, pp. 272–273). Having passed these tests, the Daoist is found worthy of ordination which guides him to a new rank and allows him to function fully in a higher, otherworldly capacity.

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