

Introduction

This book is a translation and study of the transcripts of a fourth-century CE Chinese Daoist medium. The medium, Yang Xi 楊羲 (330–ca. 386), or rather those deities he channeled, wrote poems and instructions of such compelling literary excellence that they drew the attention of one of the foremost scholars of the early medieval period, Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536). Tao collected the autograph manuscripts based on calligraphy, then added a history of the participants and a scholarly apparatus explaining the texts. The resulting work was the *Zhen'gao* 真誥 (*Declarations of the Perfected*).

If we could imaginatively transport ourselves back to Yang Xi's oratory on Mount Mao, where he crafted his beautiful poetic visions of celestial scenes and human perfectibility, we would likely be disappointed. Yang describes his mountain meditation chamber as a thatched wooden hut roughly five by four meters in area and only two and a half meters high under the ridgepole. The hut had only a single door and a small window in the opposite wall. Within was a short bench long enough for Yang to lie down for meditations that required this posture. For decorations, there would have been an incense burner, a paper knife, an ink stone, brushes, and paper. What occurred within occurred inside the imagination of Yang Xi: Female deities appeared, their garments flashing with ethereal light, sometimes accompanied by scripture-bearing attendants. Divine refreshment was offered. Sometimes Yang's deities brought news from the darkest corners of the underworld, where infernal judges

held stern sway; more often they told of flight as they moved effortlessly between one end of the cosmos and the other, swooping lightly back to their floating palaces in the seas off the eastern coast of the empire. All that and more we find not on Mount Mao, then or now, but in the pages Tao Hongjing so patiently patched together for us.

The *Declarations* arguably rivals in quality other world classics of imaginative literature. It is in many ways comparable to Dante Alighieri's (1265–1321) *Divine Comedy*. Both works deliver compelling visions of bright celestial realms and dark underworld regions; both present a political perspective on the important figures of their respective societies; both feature love portrayed as holy and ethereal; and both helped remake the literature to come through pushing the boundaries of poetry.¹ The major differences between the two works are three: Yang Xi's visions of other worlds were conveyed through the media of his deities and, as this infers, he did not claim to have written the work himself. Further, he did not in this work attempt a single, clear narrative. Rather, the work tells a number of tales at once, perhaps making it even more deserving of vertical reading than is the *Divine Comedy*.²

We might also compare the *Declarations* with the classics of religious literature. Unlike such influential works as the *Apocalypse of John*, the *Book of Mormon*, or the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, however, the *Declarations* enjoyed the attentions of a textual scholar soon after its production.³ We thus have not only a description of Yang Xi's procedures in contacting the divinities, but also an account of the realia surrounding the event. We learn the size and furnishings of his meditation chamber, the paper and calligraphy of the revelations, and so forth. We learn as well the justifications for these procedures, such as the elaborate explanations that the deities give when asked why they refuse to write anything in their own hands. For these reasons, we are informed

1. I will be unable to prove these claims. The scholarship on Dante is vast, exhaustive, and spans centuries, while that on the work of Yang Xi is sparse and begins to expand only in the 1930s. Dante scholars have begun to debate whether the literary nature of his work can be separated from its religious impetus. (See, for instance, Barolini, *Undivine Comedy*, and the reviews by Sowell (1998), Botterill (1994), and a host of others). We have scarcely begun to understand the religiosity of Yang Xi.

2. I refer, of course, to the remarkable series of essays collected in the Cambridge University open library project, *Vertical Readings in Dante's 'Comedy.'* (See Corbett and Webb, introduction, 1–12.)

3. For recent work on the realia surrounding the revelations accorded Joseph Smith, see Taves, "History and the Claims"; for an introduction to the *Tractus de Purgatorio*, see Barbezat, "He Doubted."

on the social and material background of Yang Xi's revelations in detail that far transcends what we can know of similar revelations from other cultures.

In the section on prior translations later in this introduction, I will discuss how I intend to exploit these aspects of the text, which will hopefully be of use to scholars dealing with the revelatory literature of other times and places. For now it is enough to note that the *Declarations*, both in their narrative accounts concerning the living and the dead and in the extensive annotation provided by Tao Hongjing over a century later, offer new and unexpected perspectives on the history of the period. The standard official history of the Jin 晉 dynasty is based on tale literature and is notoriously inaccurate.⁴ Tao Hongjing's extensive citations of earlier lost histories supply much new information.

In comparison with other classics of early Daoism, the *Declarations* have long been regarded by scholars as a guide to the analysis of the scriptures and biographies that Yang Xi wrote, as well as to those his work influenced. Firmly dated, Tao Hongjing's collection was the primary temporal milestone that pioneering scholars used to navigate the undated morass of texts in the Daoist canon.⁵

The excellent work done on this text does not exhaust what it has to tell us. For instance, given the sharp disciplinary divisions and sectarian distinctions that formed our understanding of that period's religion, scholars tended to miss the ways that Yang Xi's Daoism also borrowed much from the foreign religion of Buddhism that was just coming into its own at that time (see the section on Buddhism). Today we know that Daoism was a shape-shifting religion intimately involved in the cultural history of China that did not organize itself around unalterable doctrine or creed in the ways we at first imagined. At the time of the *Declarations*, Daoists had just begun a full-scale adoption of various strategies brought in with the foreign religion—lengthy scriptures, description of postmortem destinations, new forms of religious vocation, and the like.

The *Declarations* further mark the moment in history when new forms of religiosity became popular with the literate aristocracy and became poised to influence Chinese cultural life in the centuries to come. The *Shangqing* 上清 (Upper Clarity) scriptures of Yang Xi, which are

4. I refer to Fang Xuanling's (579–648) *Jinshu*.

5. Particularly worthy of mention are Chen Guofu, Yoshikawa Tadao, Michel Strickmann, Mugitani Kuniō, and Isabelle Robinet, but many scholars contributed to this enterprise.

introduced in the *Declarations*, feature new, higher heavens and a new type of celestial being, all unknown to previous Daoists.⁶ Yang Xi's triad of heavens—Grand Clarity, Upper Clarity, and Jade Clarity—restricted the previously-known *xianren* 仙人 (Transcendents) primarily to the lower heaven, while a new class of qi-formed beings, the Perfected 真人, reside in the middle heaven but might roam throughout.⁷

Beyond new celestial realms, Yang's informants provided him with the most detailed descriptions we possess of the lands of the dead as they were imagined before the arrival of Buddhism. Buddhism brought with it the concept of a hellish underworld filled with infernal torture camps, where the dead were made to suffer for impossible periods of time for transgressions they had committed during their lives, such as the consumption of meat. In these camps, a new class of fear-inspiring hell beings punished the dead before sending them off to be reborn as human or beast, with no regard for their original families. Judgment was visited not on families or social groupings, but on individuals, who were made to account for their personal sins. Fengdu 酆都, the underworld found in Yang's revelations, by contrast, is entirely family centered and bureaucratically organized. One might be demoted for a personal indiscretion, but the rest of one's family would be punished as well. Members of the terrestrial aristocracy typically could expect to hold positions in Fengdu similar to those they held in the sunlit world. They could remain there in the underworld for long periods of time, but with luck would eventually move through underground study centers to become Transcendents or, just possibly, Perfected. Promotions and demotions were thus, in this time when family welfare was still seen as intimately tied to the fate of the ancestors, a matter of intense concern to the consumers of Yang's revelations.⁸

The primary recipients of the communications assembled in the *Declarations* were members of a single gentry family. The Perfected directed Yang to pass their words on to Yang's patron, Xu Mi 許謚 (also named

6. Shangqing is also sometimes translated "Highest Purity," though it was not the highest of the heavens imagined in Shangqing writings. In addition, the scriptures are also sometimes referred to by the name of the mountain where Yang Xi received his revelations, Mao Shan 茅山. For an introduction to the Shangqing scriptures, see the Works Cited for works by Yoshikawa, Strickmann, and Robinet.

7. The Perfected are described as pure emanations of the Dao. For the best brief description of these beings, the gods that also inhabit their bodies, their relationship with the stars, their diet of mysterious minerals, and their place in Daoist cosmology, see Strickmann, "On the Alchemy," 177–92.

8. These ideas are explored in Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety*.

Mu 穆, 303–73?) and to Xu Mi's sons, Xu Lian 許聯 (328–404) and Xu Hui 許翽 (341–ca. 370). But the Perfected also report on the religious progress (or lack thereof) made by a number of their acquaintances. Since the pursuit of Daoist Perfection was also, to a certain extent, a family affair, we learn much about these people, both from the Perfected and from Tao Hongjing. As a careful scholar, Tao continually checks the pronouncements of the Perfected against his own sources. Detailed political, social, and spiritual accounts of these men and, to a lesser extent, women, are provided in the accounts of Fengdu. Details on members of the extended Xu family are given in Tao's postface, translated in this volume.

Members of the Xu family were clearly enchanted by the exalted language that the Perfected used to write to them through Yang. They respond in the same idiom when they address communications to the deities through Yang. Further, as Tao Hongjing details, Yang's posthumous news of family members and self-cultivation methods circulated fairly widely. The *Declarations* thus influenced Chinese literature to a greater extent than we yet appreciate. Yang did not claim to be a poet, but the gods and goddesses he channeled were, and their untrammelled verse had a wide-ranging impact on later poetry.⁹ It contributed in equally surprising ways to Chinese narrative. Yang Xi placed prominent statesmen and public figures in his bureaucratic underworld. He recounted their promotions and demotions in chilling detail, since the fates of these recently deceased ancestors directly affected the health of their living descendants, the immediate audience for Yang's writings. Some of these are lengthy enough that they feature in subsequent works of the *zhiguai* 志怪 ("strange tales") genre. In fact, Xu Mi for a while toyed with the idea of composing a supplement to the *Traditions of the Divine Transcendents* 神仙傳, employing "where are they now?"—type accounts from the Perfected.¹⁰ In this way, Yang's accounts focus on some of the most prominent families of Eastern Jin society.

Many of these same people feature in the other major narrative work of the period, the *New Account of Tales of the World* 世說新語, translated by Richard Mather in 1976.¹¹ The complex interplay between social imaginings expressed in these two works remains largely

9. For excellent studies on some of these issues, see the works cited by Edward H. Schafer, Paul Kroll, and Zhao Yi 趙益.

10. On *zhiguai*, see Campamy, *Strange Writing*; for the *Shenxian zhuan*, Campamy's translation in *To Live as Long*.

11. Mather, *New Account*.

unexplored. But we can, perhaps, distinguish them roughly as being one public and one private in nature.

The *Tales of the World* is a collection of anecdotes. These are divided into chapters with titles that reflect the supposed personality types of the main characters appearing therein, such as “Virtuous Conduct” or “Cultivated Tolerance.”¹² The events recorded are sometimes quite intimate, but they typically involve interactions with those outside the family, in the public realm. We thus might characterize these tales and anecdotes as “outside,” public assessments. The sorts of character assessments often provided by the Perfected regarding members of the Xu family and their acquaintances are, by contrast, intensely private. Sometimes the Perfected even specify that their information on someone outside the circle of the family *not* be revealed to that person. It is therefore not an exaggeration to claim that the *Declarations* provide our sole intimate glimpse of family life from this period of Chinese history. Yang Xi’s revelations were addressed to the quotidian concerns of the Xu family and buttressed with notes and written communications between the principals. The attentive listener can thus hear the voices of family members, including the female members of the family. This sort of intimate familial record is extremely rare, even in later periods of Chinese history.

CONTENTS AND BACKGROUND OF THE WORK

The *Declarations* contain several different types of material. Most important for Tao Hongjing, the editor whose work we will follow, were the references to the Shangqing scriptures. As we will see from his postface, Tao was intensely interested in the transmission and contents of the Shangqing scriptures and began collecting fragments of Yang Xi’s calligraphy for that reason.¹³

Tao Hongjing was not the first to collect the autograph manuscripts of Yang and the Xus. An earlier collection, entitled *Traces of the Perfected* 真迹, was written by Gu Huan 顧歡 (fl. 420–479).¹⁴ That work no longer survives. The extent to which Tao’s work relied on this previous collection is unknown. Our only hints come from Tao’s correction

12. On the chapter headings of the *Shishuo xinyu*, see Mather, *New Account*, xvi, and “Chinese Letters.”

13. SKKY, iii–v.

14. Gu Huan is best known for his anti-Buddhist treatise, the *Yixia lun* 夷夏論, arguing that, as a foreign faith, Buddhism was appropriate only for foreigners. See Barrett, “Gu Huan.”

of the errors he noticed in Gu's account. For one thing, the very title of Gu's work, Tao announces, is inaccurate. The Perfected beings left no traces. Indeed, they had Yang Xi write out what they dictated to him. As this critique shows, Tao Hongjing brought the habit of precise scholarship to his work. Most interesting are those passages in which Tao struggles with information passed on by the Perfected that contradicts what he finds in other sources.

Tao Hongjing divided the materials that he gathered in a very particular way. Michel Strickmann, in his dissertation, provided a useful characterization of the first six sections, the seventh being Tao's post-face. (The way Tao Hongjing himself describes these six sections appears in chapter 1.)

1. Minutes of the visionary sessions particularly relevant to Yang and the Xus. (chapters 1–4)
2. More general counsels and admonitions, often highly philosophical in tone, and documents related to the cause and treatment of disease. (chapters 5–8)
3. Technical instructions concerning a variety of technical operations, including propitiation of the stars and absorption of astral essence, respiration, and massage. (chapters 9–10)
4. Revelations concerning the secret subterranean structure and the administrative hierarchy of Mao Shan. (chapters 11–14)
5. Particulars concerning the isle of the dead, Fengdu, in the far north, and its spectral denizens. (chapters 15–16)
6. Personal jottings of Yang and the Xus—and thus, properly speaking, not “declarations” at all. Here are included specimens of their correspondence, extracts they made from secular as well as sacred writings, memoranda with regard to the performance of certain sacred duties, and records of their dreams. (chapters 17–18)¹⁵

This organization poses challenges for the modern translator. Often, Tao Hongjing's placement of materials is more a matter of genre than of narrative continuity. In fact, Tao frequently complains that he has no sure way of reconstructing the order of the textual fragments he has

15. The text is from Strickmann's English-language typescript draft of the dissertation, p. 9. I have converted Strickmann's original Wade-Giles romanization to pinyin. For the published copy, see Strickmann, *Le Taoïsme*, 11–12.

recovered. Writings related to a single incident may thus appear in several sections of the work.

For example, one of the primary issues related to Yang Xi's early work on the Xu family centered around the death of Xu Mi's wife Tao Kedou 陶科斗. Following her death, several members of the family fell ill. Yang Xi's Perfected revealed to him that she was being held in her tomb by aggrieved shades who had been murdered by Xu Mi's uncle. Horrifyingly, but not unreasonably, she offered to bring living Xus into the underworld courts to answer the accusations. Her argument was apparently that, since in origin she was a Tao and not a Xu, there were others who might more properly answer the charge. Yang's job was to communicate with the otherworldly generals who might help to stop the underworld lawsuit, free Tao Kedou from her tomb, and save the living members of the Xu family from death.

Documents related to this affair appear primarily in section 2, since the lawsuit from beyond the grave in which Tao Kedou finds herself involved is the cause of illness in the family. But details concerning the dead involved in the lawsuit have been placed in section 5, and very informative communications in letter form between Yang Xi and Xu Mi, some containing advice from the Perfected, appear in section 6. Tao Hongjing sometimes provides cross-references between materials relating to a single incident. It seems clear to me that a modern reader will be better served by rearranging the work, with the goal of translating materials related to single incidents together.

This is where my translation differs from previous approaches to the work. Tao's cross-references provide a key to reorganizing the *Declarations* in a way that will be more familiar to Western readers and will aid future research. In one of the volumes of scholarship on the *Declarations* produced by a Kyōto University study group, Aramaki Noritoshi 荒牧典俊 identified clusters of documentation found in various parts of the text that related to incidents in the lives of Yang and the Xus prior to the main incidents related in the text.¹⁶ This suggested to me the idea that I might follow Tao Hongjing's annotations and other clues to rearrange the material in the *Declarations* by incident or theme. I first tested the methodology in reconstructing the fascinating story of Tao Kedou in my book *Ancestors and Anxiety*.¹⁷ Working this way, I learned, brought

16. See Aramaki, "Shinkō yizen."

17. Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety*, 130–57.

aspects of the events into clearer focus, especially the concerns of family members whose objections the Perfected had to answer.

With Aramaki's identification of early incidents as a starting point, I have organized the rest of the *Declarations* according to the major events and themes to which Yang Xi's revelations responded. In some cases I have identified clusters of texts relating not to a single incident, but to a theme or topic. For example, one of Yang's goals was to convince the head of the Xu family, Xu Mi (Tao Kedou's husband), to leave his official post and pursue the Dao full time. As incentive, Yang offered Xu Mi the prospect of a young celestial bride who would join with him spiritually and aid his practice in enticing ways. But Xu Mi seems never to have responded to the call. His writings and the practices he did undertake were rather directed to stopping the march of time through improving his eyesight, turning his white hair black again, and curing the troublesome ailments of old age. The full story of Xu Mi becomes clear only when one follows Tao Hongjing's work closely through the various parts of the *Declarations*.

I am not as sanguine as Aramaki that I can recover a chronology of incidents when Tao Hongjing—a much better scholar than I—despaired of doing so. Even more discouraging is the fact that, as I discovered (see the section “Buddhism in the *Declarations*”), we do not even have the book as it left Tao's hands. Nonetheless, I think that the rearrangement that I have hit upon with the help of Tao's footnotes will help future scholars make fuller use of the text. In the introductions to each textual cluster, I will give my reasons for presenting the materials as one.

WOMEN AND GODDESSES

Tao Hongjing was fascinated by the fact that these fragments of text included accounts of Yang's own dealings with Perfected beings 真人. Some of these beings, while interacting with Yang in human ways, had never been human. Among those who had been human was the primary instructor of Yang Xi, Wei Huacun 魏華存. After ascension, she boasted the title Lady of the Southern Marchmount, Director of Destinies among the Higher Perfected 上真司命南岳夫人. Before death, she was a Libationer for the Way of the Celestial Masters.¹⁸ Her example, related

18. This is mentioned in Tao Hongjing's commentary to the *Dengzhen yinjue* (DZ 421, 3.5b–6a). On the evidence that she actually existed, see Zhou Ye, “Nanyue Weifuren.”

in the *Declarations*, held out the hope that humans might also aspire to Perfected status.

Wei Huacun's interactions with Yang show precisely how such a pursuit might be successful. Among the methods of physical cultivation she proffered, the one that takes up the most space in the *Declarations* was known obliquely as *oujing* 偶景, which might be translated "mating of the phosphors." The "phosphors" were the glowing, perfected gods inhabiting the bodies of the two partners, one celestial and one human. Tao Hongjing, in his postface, refers to this joining of spiritual forces as "linked lapels and joined phosphors" 併衿接景, metaphorically portraying the practice as a marriage.¹⁹ Given that the goddess and human vowed to remain together and, in describing it, Yang's Perfected employed many of the metaphors signifying human marriage in early medieval China, this is likely justified.²⁰ Another term we might employ is *hierogamy*, though in this case the union is between a divine woman and a human being.²¹ The human partner in this case was not necessarily a prince or king in the mortal world, but was promised high rank in the next.

The description we find in the *Declarations* of this hierogamy is not, to my knowledge, common to other Daoist texts. Nonetheless, the context in which it is presented makes it clear that the hierogamy was meant to replace the widely practiced *heqi* 合氣 "merging of pneumas" ritual of early Celestial Master Daoism. This ritual, performed by living human participants through *coitus reservatus* accompanied by a complex program of massages and movements, was meant to balance the yin and yang qi of practitioners and to prepare them to pass unscathed through the cataclysms to come.²² Yang Xi's Perfected do not deny the efficacy of this ritual, but they do emphasize repeatedly that *heqi* was easily performed incorrectly. The result of incorrect performance—a likely result since both participants were human seekers—was more dangerous than dancing on an axe blade. They thus explicitly replaced *heqi*, sometimes styled the "yellow and the red," with the deity-directed practice of mating of the phosphors.

19. See chapter 1, p. XX.

20. See Bokenkamp, "Declarations."

21. For the terminology I am using, see Pongratz-Leisten, "Sacred Marriage," 44. On how scholars have begun to reconsider the concept of sacred marriage, freeing it from the narrow definition by James George Frazer, who saw the *hieros gamos* as evidence of ancient fertility rituals, see Nissinen and Uro, *Divine Marriages*, 1–6.

22. See Kleeman, *Celestial Masters*, 159–62; on the details of the ritual, see Raz, "Way of the Yellow."