The Body of Laozi and the Course of a Taoist Journey through the Heavens

Patrice Fava
Translated by Vivienne Lo

Abstract
At the border of Hunan and Jiangxi, where Taoist rituals and the Nuo tradition of masked theatre have undergone a large scale revival in recent decades, a Taoist master of the Orthodox Zhengyi 正一 sect, Master Yi Songyao 易松堯, has preserved a number of rare ancient paintings and manuscripts that have been transmitted to him as the liturgical texts of his lineage; these include a map of the body of Laozi and a chart of the course of a Taoist journey through the Heavens. The following brief introduction to these two documents serves mainly as an example of how an intimate knowledge of Taoist ritual can provide a key to the performative nature of the charts and indicates the rich scope for future research.

Keywords
Daoism/Taoism, Taoist rituals, Taoist Body, inner alchemy, exorcism, medicine, thunder rites

Laojun gulou 老君骷髏 (Chart of the Skeleton of Lord Lao) is a religious topography of the body of Laozi 老子, the foundational deity of Taoism and putative author of its sacred text, Daode jing 道德經 (Scripture of the Way and its Power). ¹ It is derived from a Taoist manuscript entitled Lingbao taiji lianmi 靈寶太極鍊秘 (Alchemical Secrets of the Supreme Ultimate Tradition of the Sacred Jewel) in the collection of Hunan Taoist Master Yi Songyao 易松堯 of

¹ Early accounts describe the scribe Laozi, or Lao Dan 老聃, as the sixth-century BC author of the Daode jing, a quietist philosophical text propounding detachment, simplicity and removal from worldly affairs. During the early unification of China he became worshipped by the imperial house, and also appeared in a vision as Taishang laojun 太上老君 (Lord Lao of Grand Supreme) to the founder of the Celestial Master (Tianshi 天師) Daoist sect. Records in the early Tang describe Laojun, under the title Celestial Worthy of the Way and its Power (Daode tianzun 道德天尊), one of the three Celestial Worthies (Tianzun 天尊), a trinity of anthropomorphic manifestations of the Dao who are coterminous with the Three Purities, celestial realms associated with the teachings of different Taoist sects. Daode tianzun is associated with the Great Clarity (Taiqing 太清) heaven. The reason why Laozi was associated with this specific Pure One is, of course, that the book attributed to his authorship contains the same term, Daode, the Way and its Power.
Fig. 1. *Laojun gulou* 老君骷髏 (Chart of the Skeleton of Lord Lao)
Fig. 2. *Xian zhang feixing sanjie zhi tu* 奉章飛行三界圖 (Chart of a Flying Journey through the Three Worlds to Present a Petition)
the Orthodox Zhengyi 正一 sect. According to an attribution on the cover, it had been in the possession of a certain Master He Huaide 何懷德 whose ordination name (luming 絳名) was Yuanzhen 元真. He copied the manuscript in the middle of the 18th century from Zhang Fazheng 張法正 who received it himself in the thirty-sixth year of the Kangxi reign period (1697). The entire manuscript, which includes some 70 double sheets, and contains many texts, illustrations and diagrams related to Taoist ritual, is stitched together using the traditional xianzhuang 線裝 string binding.

This article discusses the Chart of the Skeleton of Lord Lao in its relation to another chart in Master Yi's collection entitled Xian zhang feixing sanjie zhi tu 献章飛行三界圖 (Chart of a Flying Journey through the Three Worlds to Present a Petition). While the latter chart is not a map of the body, but a representation of Heaven, both charts relate to Taoist ritual, and particularly to the liturgy of Thunder magic (lei fa 雷法). Both are also unique inasmuch as they have no close match in either Taoist or medical archives. As it is outside of the scope of this article to provide a full historical contextualisation of every detail of the complex pantheons and places listed on the two charts, my argument here is that while they focus on different aspects of the Taoist ritual, the two charts are actually inter-dependent. The journey to present the petition was enacted via the ancient ritual of chuguan 出官 (the exteriorisation of the gods that inhabit the adept's body) and required a working knowledge of the celestial domain and the names and locations of a host of different deities within the body.

I visited Master Yi together with Professor Liu Jingfeng 經勁峰 while researching the relationship between Nuo theatre and Taoism. In 30 years of participant observation of Taoist ritual this was the first time I had come across documentary and illustrative evidence of the secret knowledge and practice that is at the heart of the Taoist Liturgy. Master Yi is actively involved in the Thunder magic, an exorcistic class of ritual which gained prevalence during the Song Dynasty, had as its core methods designed to appropriate the powers of thunder for vitalizing the body and punishing enemies using judicial, bureaucratic and meditative rituals. The foremost collection of these rites is in the the Daofa huiyuan 道法會元 (Taoist Method, United in Principle). This is the largest compendium of the Taoist Canon, in 268 volumes (juan 卷), and represents the rites (fa 法) of 39 different sects from the Song and Yuan dynasties. Van der Loon 1979, pp. 401–5. For the historical background to these rituals and a résumé of the whole collection, see Schipper and Verellen 2004, pp. 1056–7, 1081–3, 1105–15. Boltz 1987 pp. 47–9 mentions 60 different sects in her discussion of this corpus of Taoist ritual. Skar 1996–7, pp. 159–202. Davis 2001 bases his description of Song society on the Daofa huiyuan.

I have only seen one other witness to this kind of text in a collection belonging to John Lagerwey. However, the well-known chart of the body called neijing tu 内经图 and specially the xiuzhen tu 修真图, share common features with the Laojun tu. Despeux 1994, pp. 12–29, 46–65.
local Taoist community where he is the gaogong 高功, the highest officiant in
the Taoist ritual known as the jiao 酋, or sacrifice. Despite excellent studies of
Taoist body illustration, no published research has previously linked these two
charts by considering the relationship between the internal body structures
and a spiritual journey through the celestial realm together, as two aspects of
the same practice. The title, Laojun gulou 老君骷髅 (Chart of the Skeleton of
Lord Lao), employs the term ‘skeleton’ in the metaphorical sense evoked by
Schipper when he wrote:

One must have ‘the bones’, the skeleton of an Immortal, to qualify for the dignity
of being the representative of heaven and the master of the gods. This genetic
quality is not exactly a question of physiology or of physiognomy (although a tao-
shih must me of sound mind and body); the “skeleton” is a hidden quality, an
inner quality that expresses itself, perhaps unexpectedly but nonetheless signifi-
cantly, in the special privilege of being the keeper of the sacred writings.

To expand upon Schipper’s insight, one might add that the cosmic body of
Laozi, as it is represented here with its deities and celestial bodies, does not
intend to represent a common physiology, but the Taoist body as it is culti-
vated over several years under the formal instruction sanctioned through the
ordination ceremonies variously known as zouzhi 奏職 (bestowal of office),
shoulu 受籙 (receiving the register), shoujie 受戒 (receiving precepts), chuanjie
傳戒 (transmitting precepts) or shoudao 受道 (receiving the Tao). During this
time, the Taoist initiate (daoshi 道士) receives the liturgical instruments of his
priesthood and the register of those gods who he can command to intervene
in his rituals.

Since this image of the body of Laozi is a replica of the macrocosm, it
reminds us of the so-called ‘registers’ (lu 籍) which, in the form of cosmic
diagrams or lists of deities, constitute a vital part of the alliance between initi-
ate and the transcendent powers that is established during ordination. In
Hunan province, during ordination, ritual masters (fashi 法師) receive a long
‘register’ including hundreds of national and local gods (difang shen 地方神)
gods of the Thunder Department (leibu 雷部), soldiers and Celestial Marshals,
some wielding fierce exorcistic powers that will, subsequent to the ritual,

---

4 The jiao is a community sacrificial ritual, usually performed to affirm the contractual asso-
ciation between a community and its tutelary deity. While some elements are open for public
interaction, and can involve offering sacrificial food, jugglers and other displays during this rite
which can last up to a week, the central rites take place in a closed temple to which only the
primary priests of the rite and certain members of the community have access. Jiao rituals can be
performed on a regular basis, once every three or more years, or they can be offered to prevent
calamities of a specific kind.
5 The only European language study of these images of the body to date is Despeux 1994.
constitute the specific group that are under the command of the Taoist initiate. These gods must be familiar to him. Although there are many register charts in the Daozang, until the recent discovery in Hunan of ordination registers for fashi ritual masters we have had no evidence of contemporary Taoist registers. That is why Schipper has opined that the ordination register (lu) is a ‘fictive document’.

The registers must be ‘inspected’ (yue 閱) on certain dates during meditation sessions to ensure that all the deities are present and correct. The process involves recitation of specific sutra and breathing techniques that enhance the purification process. Writing about the register, Dongxuan lingbao ke zhong fa 洞玄靈寶課中法 (Method for determining [the Dominant Qi] in each class [of register] DZ 1246), Early Tang (618–907), Schipper opines:

The human body at birth is like the hundun 混沌 [hundun (lit. chaos) is a central concept in Taoism that describes the moment before creation when nothing is

---

7 There are many references to these spirits in Reiter 2005.
8 For a reproduction of a Register from the Daozang, see, for example, Pregadio (ed.) 2008, pp. 39–42.
differentiated], but thanks to the revelation of the Zhengyi mengwei lu 正一盟威 篙 (Register of the Orthodox Covenant with the Powers), the Qi differentiates and manifests in form: the correct spirits of the Three Pneumas (Qi) of the three Cinnabar Fields can change themselves into myriad forms. To do this, one must know how to visualise on the inside as well as on the outside (內外存). 9

The Cinnabar Fields are the three alchemical furnaces in which the adept refines the movement and quality of qi 氣, originally undifferentiated, into the elixir of immortality. Although locations vary within limits, these most usually reside in the lower abdomen, the chest and the forehead, and correlate with the successive transmutation of jing 精, seminal essence) into qi, and qi into shen 神 (spirit(s)), the most common transformative process in inner alchemy. The Zhengyi (Orthodox Covenant) sect, to which Master Yi Songyao belongs, is steeped in the culture of inner alchemy and its traditions of visualisation of the Cinnabar Fields.

Fig. 1. 老君圖 Map of the body of Laozi

The guan 冠 [crown] is the headdress par excellence worn by the Taoist master at the major ritual ceremonies. Once rolled into a chignon on top of the head, the master’s long hair is fastened with a flame-like cap (or a three headed flower hua 華). This marks the place where the gods ascend and leave the body, moving in harmony with the rhythm of the breaths of the master. From the crown we can identify that this is an illustration of the body of a Taoist master as it is linked to its liturgical functions. Beginning at the top of the body, marked at the summit of the skull, are the Three Purities, Jade Purity 玉清 (Yuqing), Highest Purity 上清 (Shangqing), and Great Purity 泰清 (Taiqing). The Three Purities are the highest deities of Taoism, they represent the Tao, but they are also representations of the gods and the palaces where they live. This is the ultimate destination of the Taoist master ascending to heaven with his petition (chengci 呈詞).

9 Schipper 1973. The Zhengyi mengwei lu (DZ 1208) is a Song Dynasty (960–1279) text on the 24 registers that the initiate can receive during his life. The first is intended for children from seven to eight years, and comprises one general, while the latter is reserved for couples and includes 150 generals. These 24 registers are interpreted as an image of 24 dioceses of the Celestial Masters and the deities who inhabit them. Incorporating them into his own body through the alchemical process of refinement liandu, the initiate can then appeal to the deities and encourage them/coerce them to intervene. Schipper and Verellen 2004, pp. 971–2. For the Dongxuan lingbao ke zhong, and particularly the Zhengyi registers, see Schipper and Verellen 2004, p. 472.
Fig. 4. Heaven of Jade Purity 玉清天 (Yuqing tian) residence of the Celestial Worthy of the primordial beginning 元始天尊 (Yuanshi tianzun)

Fig. 5. Heaven of the Supreme Purity 太清天 (Taiqing tian) residence of the Celestial Worthy of the Sacred Jewel 灵寳天尊 (Lingbao tianzun)
Figures four to six are modern representations of these palaces from the *Daqiantu shuo* (大千圖說 Explanations of One Thousand Illustrations) published in 1916.

The two eyes or Lord Lao are identified with the sun and the moon (Taiyang 太陽 and Taiyin 太陰), and the Celestial Eye (Tianmu 天目) in between. The nose is the location of the Grand Unity’s Prefecture of Thunder, (Taiyi leifu 大乙雷府). Flanking this on both sides are the Celestial Emperor, Great Unity (Taiyi tiandi 大乙天帝) and the Celestial Net (Tiangang 天罡) which includes both the star and Ursa Major. The right side of the face is designated as Yin and the left as Yang. The mouth is called the Gate of Man (Renmen 人門). The titles Fengbo 風伯 (Lord of the wind) and Yushi 雨師 (Rain Master) stand as metaphors for breath and saliva. On the left and right cheek are two major centres of Taoist administration: *Leiting xuansheng* 雷霆玄省 (the Mysterious Province of Light) and *Taixuan dusheng* 泰玄都省 (Capital of Great Mystery).

The ears are depicted as musical receptors: at the left is written ‘large Golden Bell, small Fire Bell’ and ‘Sky Drum’ (*jinzhong* 金鐘, *huoling* 火零, *tiangu* 天鼓), and at the right ear a Jade Chime (*yuqing* 玉磬), the small Bronze Bell
(tongling 銅鈴) and the Sky Drum. In Taoist cultivation, these terms refer to 'knocking the teeth', an ancient practice which occurs in a variety of contexts, including yangsheng practices for health, exorcistic ritual, and entering or departing a ritual space. In hygiene practices it is associated with the production of elixir in the form of saliva from the jade pool under the tongue, which was thought to have rejuvenative qualities. These liturgical instruments are used in ritual and produce a celestial music that invites the gods to descend and participate in the dramatic performance of Daoist ritual. Drum, cymbals, gong and bell are all percussion instruments, but there are also wind and string instruments: flutes or trumpets (suona 嘿呐) and Chinese violins (nanhu 南胡 and erhu 二胡).

The throat is the channel of communication between the two alchemical furnaces, the Upper Cinnabar Field (shang dantian 上丹田) and the Middle Cinnabar Fields (zhong dantian 中丹田). Under the character hou 喉 (throat) is written shier chonglou 十二重樓 (twelve-storey building), sometimes represented in the form of a pagoda and referring to the layers formed by the cartilage of the throat that one can palpate and see outlined at the front of the neck. On both sides we find the sanyuan kaojiao fu 三元考較府 (Administrative Offices of the Three Origins) and sanguan dadi fu 三官大帝府 (Prefectural Offices for the Three Officers), the qingxu fenyang gong 清虛紛陽宮 (Palace of Pure Emptiness) and the beiji sisheng yuan 北極四聖院 (Court of the Four Saints of the Far North). Two other administrations are referred to at the left and right shoulders: the tianfu dadian 天符大殿 (Great Hall of the Celestial Talisman) and the Censorate of the Commander of Pestilences (wensi xianfu 瘟司憲府). The name of the seventh office of celestial administration, huoxin jianggong 火心絳宮 (Crimson Palace of the Fiery Heart) is inscribed on the central axis and is associated with the zhuque 朱雀 (Vermillion Bird) and xialei 夏雷 (Summer Thunder). The zhuque is one of the animals that represent the constellations of the South. Reference to Summer Thunder, and other terms that I will come to later, associates this chart with the liturgy of the wulei 五雷 (Five Thunders), with which the Daoist initiate will light his internal fires. The fires then ascend into the Fire Palace of the Heart, here located in the lower chest. Visualising the fire ball ascending through the heart and entering the Niwan (mud ball), at the modern-day brain, the adept's ultimate aim is to nurture the infant of immortality.

Common to the two charts at the top is mention of the Three Pures 三清, their residencies on the one hand and on the other the names of the deities imprinted on Laozi's forehead. There are also Tianpeng 天蓬, Tianyou 天猶, Yisheng 翌聖 (aka Heisha 黑殺, the Black Killer) and Zhenwu 真武, martial deities and commanders of their own spirit generals, who became associated as
the Four Saints (Sisheng 四聖) in the Song dynasty and were called upon to assist in exorcistic rites. They are the subject of, for example, the Song text, the *Taishang jiutian yanxiang di'e sisheng miaojing* 太上九天延祥滌厄四聖妙經 (DZ 26). Mention of the Four Saints links the Laozi’s body chart specifically to the exorcistic traditions within the liturgy of the Five Thunders (*Wulei fa* 五雷法) that dates to Song times. Further detail of our seventeenth-century charts will testify to a direct association with the Song liturgy which introduce radical changes in Taoist organisation and ritual. Scattered around the chest, stomach and arms, there are multiple references to the Five Thunder Rites: the seasons, the calendrical spirits, the 24 divisions of the year, the five viscera, the heraldic animals, i.e. the Green Dragon, White Tiger, the Vermillion Bird and then, at the elbows.

Expressions such as *huibing* 会兵 (assembled troops) and *jibing* 寄兵 (despatched troops), together with the Four Saints, and in particular Heisha, associate the exorcisms in our chart with the exorcistic rituals of the Thunder liturgy (*lei fa* 雷法) as they are described in the fourteenth-century text *Daofa huiyuan* 道法会元 (Taoist Method, United in Principle) where they are also found. These are all troops in the celestial militia in the service of the master during the ritual. They are the souls of the deceased recruited from the 84,000 *gui* 鬼 (ghosts) that reside under the sole of the left foot and the 3,700 under the right foot. The body thus depicted is both an alchemical crucible and a world in miniature in the image of the cosmos, populated by a host of spirits and deities.

As a representation of the sites for refinement and circulation of *Qi*, the body is a dynamic system interacting with the cosmos. The interactive quality of the Taoist body is a manifestation of the resonance between state, cosmos and body so eloquently described for medicine of the classical period by Nathan Sivin. *Qi*, or *shenqi* 神氣 ‘numinous *Qi*’, permeates the universe and body alike. Chinese medicine, he remarks, remained largely holistic: ‘the resonance of the body with natural process is an ideal toward which man must strive; ignoring it brings on disease’. Lord Lao’s body contains elements that link canonical medicine, structural anatomy, alchemy and meditation techniques. But above all it is distinguished by its lists of deities and ritual spaces which uniquely chart the body according to Taoist liturgy—that is to say it is the body of the Taoist master as he works through the prescribed ritual activities and transforms himself and those around him.

---

10 See, for example, all the references to these Celestial Marshals (*yuanshuai*) in Davis 2001.

If we focus on the performative function of the text, there are two terms written on the two middle fingers, *yuwen* 玉文 (the jade wrinkles) at the middle phalanges and *wu* 午 at the tip of the finger, that have a specific function. They simultaneously correspond to constellations, calendrical data and/or internal Qi. By pointing with his thumb to the *yuwen* or *wu*, the master links his own body to the external world, remotely exerting control over external phenomena, and mobilising the gods and deities. Listed at the index finger, the ‘chariot of fire’ (*huoche*) is the divine vehicle pulled by dragons in which the gods travel between worlds. Another reference to the liturgy of Thunder is the inscription at the left forearm of the name of the King of Changsha who Destroys Temples (*damiao changsha wang* 打廟長沙王) and at the left forearm that of General Liu (*Liu Jiangjun* 柳將軍), both major exorcists in the Ministry of Thunder.

As in almost all maps of the Taoist body, the Court refers to the Yellow Court (*huangting* 黃庭), a term that first emerges in the second century and reminds us of the antiquity of notions of inner landscape, the gods of the body and transmutation. *Huangting jing* 黃庭經內/外 (Inner and Outer Canons of the Yellow Court), two meditational manuals used in the Shangqing 上清 (Supreme Purity) tradition of Taoism, contain the earliest writings to link the microcosm of the body with a list of its resident gods. It was later absorbed into *xiu zhen* 修真 (cultivating perfection) practice. Since then, the image of the body-microcosm has evolved differently in different contexts, but the fundamental concept of the human body as a replica of the macrocosm is shared with medical and religious cultures. With this map of the skeleton of Taishang laojun, Taoists show clearly how they have abolished the boundaries between cosmos and the physical body.

Progressing downwards, we leave the territory of the myriad gods of the Earth (*dijie wanshen zhi suo* 地界萬神之所) to enter the underworld which is located in the lower body. Here we find Mount Fengdu 豐都 and its 36 courts of Justice 豐都三十六, Iron Encircled Mountain (*tiewei shan* 鐵圍山), The Mount Taishan, one of the Five Sacred Peaks (*wuyue taishan* 五嶽泰山), the Small and Large Iron Courts (*xiao tieyuan* 小鐵院 *da tieyuan* 大鐵院)—all symbols of a formidable penal system—together with the City Thearchs (*chenghuang* 城隍) who represent the underworld above ground, and the gods of the Five Prefectures and Nine Provinces (*wufu jiuzhou zhi shen* 五府九州之神). Here is also Winter Thunder (*donglei* 冬雷), coupled with the True Warrior

---

12 The Jade Wrinkles are the horizontal wrinkles of the middle phalangeal joints of the hand.


(真武 Zhenwu), regarded as a powerful deity and exorcist who reigns over the
darkness of the netherworld, and is symbolised by the tortoise and snake, and
the dragon kings (longwang 龍王), which are water gods and also reside in the
lower body.

The inscriptions around the periphery of Laozi’s body provide us with more
information. Proceeding from head to toe, at the top and corresponding to
Heaven and the Upper Cinnabar Field, are the Palaces of the Five Emperors,
the couple Xi Wangmu 西王母 (Mother, Queen of the West) and 東王公 Dong
Wanggong (Duke of the East) as well as the names of several constellations. In
the ritual transformation of body and space (bian shen bian tan 變身變壇), which
is enacted during the creation of the sacred internal space, the Taoist master
visualises a whole army of celestial soldiers leaving his body through his four
limbs. Most deities, generals and officers mentioned in the body chart of Lord
Lao are the deities that the adept has received during his ordination. As the
ritual evolves he lets them intervene at strategic moments and as the ordina-
tion draws to a conclusion, they return to his body. In acknowledgement of
the work done, both master and deities receive a promotion. As Schipper has
often pointed out, rituals referred to as ke 科 describe a kind of ‘upgrading’.
The practice of internal alchemy (neidan 内丹) shared techniques and goals with
Taoist ordination ritual, before autonomous individual practices were absorbed
into the more widespread yangsheng 養生 (nourishing life) practice of lay peo-
ples, neiguan 内觀 (inner observation), and shouyi 守一 (preserving unity).

Min Zhiting 閩智亭, once the most well known representative of modern
Taoist organisations at international ecumenical meetings and author of A
Commentary on Morning and Evening Rituals (xuan men risong zaowanke jing-
zhu 玄門日誦早晚功課經注) described one of the eight secret formulas for
purification of the mouth (jing kou shenzhou 淨口神咒), a technique which is
accompanied by alchemical techniques (xiulian 修練). Invoking the gods of
the teeth, throat, Qi, heart and thought, the adept recites the formula and the
gods of the mouth (all mentioned in the Book of the Yellow Court) return to
their respective places in the body. Maintaining the gods in their designated
locations, the adept can unite the Tao (yu dao he zhen 與道和真).15

The sending of petitions and memorials to Heaven has been part of the
Taoist liturgy since the foundation of the Celestial Masters Sect 天師道 (Tian-
shi dao) in the second century, especially during the healing rituals of the three
major Taoist assemblies of the year that are held in honour of the agents of
Heaven, Earth and Water. Several scroll paintings illustrate the ascent to
Heaven taken by Taoist masters with their documents in different ways. Our

15 Min 2000, p. 20.
second chart from Master Yi’s collection is one of these illustrations and a study of the performance of the ceremony reveals how aspects of the ritual body are connected to the Chart of the Skeleton of Lord Lao. The rituals to submit the petitions take different forms, according to particular Taoist schools and local traditions. Taoists from the White Cloud Temple 白雲觀 (Baiyun guan) in Shanghai use paper cranes as their intermediaries. In Beijing, the gaogong 高功 (Grand Master of the Ritual) mimes the master’s ascent to Heaven by pacing the patterns of the constellations (bugang 步罡) on a brocade carpet, which is embroidered with the image of the taiji 太極 symbol, surrounded by the Eight Trigrams. He presents the official envelope containing the petition 方函 (fanghan). On his dragon robe, a ritual dress which appropriates the power of the emperor, are hung talismans to protect him and to open the doors of paradise.

Figure seven is an example of the sort of scroll that I have seen frequently hung by Hunan Taoists outside the entrance to their altar. This scroll probably dates to the Republican period and, at least as a decorative object imbued with ritual power, has a performative function in the ceremonies, where its presence augments the numinous power of the ritual ground. Whether it was originally intended as a pedagogical tool in the illustration of the ritual process through which this kind of petition should be submitted is a subject for more lengthy analysis, but it certainly serves as evidence in the historical reconstruction of the meaning of Master Yi Songdao’s second chart.

In the Hunan painting, the master respectfully prostrates himself in front of the altar. A crane flies from the mouth of the incense burner, representing the avian mount of the immortals. He visualises the journey through the clouds. On each side of the altar, two assistants have prepared offerings. After rising through several stages, the main officiant 功曹 (gongcao), holding the envelope in which the petition is contained, arrives at the gates of the Palace of the Three Officials 三官 (san guan), where stand two guardians with their banners. Beyond the gates, the master will submit the petition to the Emperor of Heaven 天皇 and the Jade Emperor 玉皇, and then on to the Three Pure Ones 三清, that we have also seen inscribed on Lord Lao’s forehead.

The petitioner’s journey through the Heavens is charted in the second manuscript under consideration entitled Xian zhang feixing sanjie zhi tu 獻章飛行三界之圖 (Chart of a Flying Journey through the Three Worlds to Present a Petition), also transmitted to Master Yi Songyao by Master He Huaide. It depicts the same journey, but in a much more detailed manner. The chart is in nine pages and dates to the twenty-third year of the Daoguang period (1843). The date is written on the inside of the back cover. Master He Huaide indicates that he was ordained under the 60th Celestial Master Zhang
Fig. 7. Hunan painting describing the submitting of a petition to Heaven. 350 × 33 cm. (Fava: Private collection)
Fig. 7.1. Hunan painting
Fig. 7.2. Hunan painting
Fig. 7.4. Hunan painting
Fig. 8. Map of the Journey to Heaven of a Taoist master presenting a petition to the Palace of the Three Pures, dating to 1843

Fig. 8.1. The master kneels in front of the altar. A vermillion bird leads him the way through the clouds
Fig. 8.2. At the entrance of Heaven, the Crystal Gate
Fig. 8.3. Beginning of the ascent through the 32 heavens. The master arrives before Donghua gate, the second gate of heaven.
Fig. 8.4. Across the 28 mansions and the four Brahma heavens
Fig. 8.5. Arrival at the third Gate of Heaven
Fig. 8.6. Beyond the 28 mansions are the constellations of the five agents and the stars of Ursa Mayor
Fig. 8.7. The seven stars of Ursa Mayor have the Pole star on their top (ziwei). Beyond is the Palace of the Three Masters, the Four Offices of the Stellar Lords and the Palace of the Four Saints.
Fig. 8.8. Crossing the last palaces among which are those of the three agents of water, earth and heaven.
Fig. 8.9. Arrival at the court of the Jade Emperor and the Palaces of the Three Purities
Peiyuan 張培源 (1829–59) and his ordination lasted three days. He mentions where it took place, the name of his master of initiation, Wang Chunhua 王春華, and the title he received.

To our knowledge, there is no other document that records so much information about the celestial journey and the major agents as the Chart of the Heavens manuscript transmitted to Master Yi. It belongs to that genre of books and manuscripts that circulated only within closed lineages. Representing the organisation of the celestial administration and therefore the internal process of the Master sending a memorial to heaven, it reveals the invisible and intimate part of the ritual. This illustration is inserted into a folio of 52 pages. The introductory statement explains the journey and all the deities and institutions that the Daoist initiate will encounter on his journey and the appropriate rituals to perform at each stage. In describing the elements in the illustration I have relied on these explanations. In this chart, the petitioner is represented as transcending his body through his flame-like cap which, in contrast, in the scroll illustration, takes the form of a flower on his crown. A little further on we find that his court tablet (often carved from ivory or peach-wood and held high so as not to pollute the face of one’s superiors with mortal breath) has shifted on to his shoulder for ease of travel. The master will carry it in front of him when granted a hearing before the emperor. The bird here is not a crane, but clearly identified and illustrated as the zhuque 朱雀 (the Vermillion Bird), one of four heraldic animals.

Flanking the route chart are the names of a host of emissaries, gods, celestial bureaucrats and different departments and ministries. Continuing the ascent, we traverse three celestial portals: the Crystal Courtyard, the Grotto of the Belles and Upright Yang, residences of Tang 唐, Ge 葛, and Zhou 周 and the generals of the Three Origins. Onwards and upwards we arrive at the Palace of the Five Agents, residences of the officers of Fire, Earth, Metal, Water and Wood. The ascent to Heaven continues through the constellations and the 28 lodges, each marked with different colour Qi, at the summit of which presides the Pole Star. To the 28 celestial lodges is added the four Brahma Heavens (四梵), familiar from the Lingbao 靈寶 Daoist traditions, and therefore the 32 heavens of the journey through the Empyrea. Proceeding from one position to the next, the master passes 32 named heavens.

Beyond these 32 heavens, the master enters the domain of the Five Officers (官) who represent fire, earth, metal, water and wood. Going up, he passes through the seven stars of the Big Dipper and the crowning pole star, Purple Tenuity (ziwei 紫微). Arriving at the constellation of the three masters (Sanshi 三師), he passes close by the four Directors among the Perfected lords (Sisi 四司真君, Tianpeng, Tianyou, Yisheng, Yousheng). Ahead in the
centre he reaches the Palace of the Four Saints listed in the Lord Lao’s Body chart and pays homage to each of the dignitaries. In the margin, a note indicates that he has entered the three Heavens (三天門內) where he prostrates himself in front of the lineage masters of the three previous generations, listed in descending seniority (jing 經, ji 籍, du 度), and introduces himself and the purpose of his mission to the officiant.

Thereafter he salutes the Lord of the Origins (Yuansheng dijun 元生帝君), the Celestial Worthy of the Dao and its Efficacy (Daode tianzun 道德天尊), the nine masters (Jiushi 九師), and the three officers (sanguan 三官) before entering the Hall of the Three Mysteries (sansheng dian 三省殿) and the Court of the Celestial Pivot (tianshu yuan 天樞院). From that point, he visits the Emperor of the North Pole who is in charge of the Office of Exorcisms (beiji quxie 北極驅邪) and the Emperor of the South Pole who has the residence at the front. Now he approaches his ultimate destination and the zenith of the Heavens. After the gate of the five phoenixes (wufeng lou 五風樓), he can see the residence of the Jade Emperor flanked by the Palace of the Pole star of the extreme north and the Marvellous and Majestic Palace of the Extreme East (妙嚴宮, miaoyan gong). The manuscript mentions that when the master arrives at the gate of the five phoenixes he kneels and gazes at the Jade Emperor with his Celestial Eye (tianmu 天目). He also visualises the Celestial Master who transmits his petition to a young maiden and follows her to the Palace of Supreme Purity (taiqing gong 泰清宮) which is the residence of the Celestial Worthy of the Tao and its Efficacy (Daode tianzun), the third of the three Pure Ones, identified with Laozi himself.

Schipper, in the fifth chapter of The Taoist Body, described this trip as follows:

Curled up in the fetal position, the Great Master then makes a spiritual journey within his own body. First he visualizes a newborn child in the area of his abdomen, there at the site of the Cinnabar Field (dantian) below his navel. Then he concentrates on his heart, where he rediscovers the newborn child, who is now called the True Person. He is dressed in red and two guards in military uniform stand beside him. They are ‘generals’. He visualizes all three, standing on a terrace bathed in the light of dawn. Then, with an escort of other generals, they ascend a twelve-storey tower (which corresponds to the trachea) and present themselves before the Pass of the Tiger and the Leopard (throat) they enter the mouth, then the nose and continue their path all the way to the Gates of the Sun and Moon (the eyes), which open into the point between the brows. Finally, they arrive at the top of the head and from there enter the cavity inside the crown. There stands the Golden Gate. On his knees, facing the flaming the pearl—a white light emanating from the original energy—the True Person presents the memorial on which he has placed several fu or passes. Once the memorial has been accepted by the officers of the Heavenly Chancellery, the True Person turns back. But the journey to the heavenly regions has transformed him. Now he appears as a venerable old
man, the Great Lord of Long Life, the stellar deity of Immortality, who slowly descends to reintegrate himself with the point of origin, The Cinnabar Field.  

There are many descriptions of the submission of Taoist petitions and the process through which the Taoist master externalises the officers of his body. In Chisongzi zhangli 赤松子章曆 (Master Red Pine’s Almanac), the officiant, prostrated in front of the altar, visualises a red Qi emanating from his heart, passing along the course of the huangdao 黃道 (solar ecliptic) and arriving at the Gate of Heaven where he is hosted by Zhang Daoling 張道陵, the founder of the Celestial Master sect. Once there, an immortal approaches to receive his petition. The Taoist master is then brought before the Palace of the Three Pure Ones who read the document. He withdraws respectfully, and then returns to the altar while they examine the petition, and finally he performs the rites of thanks. Chisongzi zhangli is a collection of zhang 章 (petitions) dating to late Tang times, which probably contain documents used by Taoist masters in late Han.

Another very complete account of the submission of a petition is that of the great Taoist master and prominent liturgist Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406–77). Lu wrote a manual for the ordination rites in which hundreds, if not thousands, of gods are dispatched to Heaven during the chuguan ritual who are then at the end of the ritual re-integrated (fuguan 複官) into the body pending the next mission assigned to them. It was during such ordination ceremonies which sanction a lengthy training in Taoist ritual that the initiate will become the alter ego of the gods who enter into his service and to whom he will give orders, as a general to his troops. But lest the military metaphor be over-read we must remember that the Taoist initiate is also an alchemist. During the long retreat that precedes ordination, the applicant prepares a bowl of sacred water in which he mixes the ashes of fu 符 (talismans) that record the secret names (hui 諱) of his divinities. This water is then mixed with cinnabar that he will drink on the day of his inauguration so that the gods can pass inside his body.

As was succinctly observed by Kenneth Dean:

The medieval liturgical manuals reveal that the talismanic-orders were not only burned and send to the Gods or to the souls. Some were burned and the ashes were then consumed by the priest. Descending into his body, they could affect the

---

16 Schipper 1993, pp. 98–9.
18 A very detailed summary of this work by Lu Xiujing, entitled Taishang dongxuan lingbao shoudu yi 太上洞玄靈寶授度儀 (DZ 522), is in Benn 1991, pp. 121–36. For an account based primarily on the ritual of Master Chen Yung-sheng in Tainan, see also Lagerwey 1987, pp. 126ff.
summoning of the gods within his body, whom the priest would then send forth to merge with their counterparts in the macrocosm.19

Master Yi Songdao’s Chart of the Skeleton of Lord Lao and Chart of a Flying Journey through the Three Worlds to Present a Petition have focused us on connections between the inner and outer geography of the Taoist ritual. Together the charts preserve knowledge of an ancient tradition belonging to, as Piet van der Loon has described, the shamanic sub-strata in Taoism. Simultaneously alchemists, exorcists, official dignitaries of the Tao and masters of gods, Taoists are also the inheritors of ancient shamanism, of which this journey into the celestial realm is the best illustration.

References

Dao fa hui yuan 道法会元 (Taoist Method, United in Principle) Daozang no 1220.
Fava, P. 2005, The Revenge of Han Xin, A Taoist Mystery, DVD 90 mn, EFEO—CNRS Images (A film about Taoist ritual in Hunan province), distributed by CNRS Images, France.
—— (forthcoming), Aux portes du ciel, la statuaire taoïste du Hunan, Art et anthropologie de la Chine, E.E.E.O.
—— 1982, Le corps taoïste, Fayard.

19 Dean 1993, pp. 48–9.


