CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

The oldest surviving temple paintings depicting a Daoist Heavenly Court date to the thirteenth century. Representations of a Heavenly Court also exist in stone sculptures, the earliest dating to the mid-eighth century. Textual references, however, push the earliest date of a Daoist Heavenly Court back to the fifth century. In this very early phase, the Heavenly Court is not an entirely new invention, but elaborates on a particular theme, the *chao* -audience theme, of which representations exist dating back to, at least, the second century.

The first section of this chapter presents a chronological survey of representations of the Daoist Heavenly Court in their social-historical context as these survive today in material form, such as sculptured statues, scroll paintings, wall paintings, or in references thereof in textual sources. Although depicted in different media they are representations of the same theme and praxis of the Heavenly Court.

The second part of this chapter will give an art historical account of the early development and origins of the representation of the Daoist Heavenly Court. I will argue that a Daoist Heavenly Court painting is a later development of a fixed theme in Chinese art history, a theme I call the audience-theme and which exists in various pictorial formats prior to the emergence of the Daoist Heavenly Court in about the fifth century (or perhaps earlier). The connective principle between a representation of a Daoist Heavenly Court and the other representations of the audience theme is not only pictorial, but also practical, or what I call iconopraxis: Daoist Heavenly Court paintings, as well as the other images depicting an audience theme, are representation of a ritual practice, namely a court audience ritual.

1.1 Four Phases

The history and development of representations of the Daoist Heavenly Court can be divided into four general phases: Early (400–700), Transitional (700–1000), Middle (1000–1400) and Late (1400–present). The transitions between these periods are chosen for convenience
and by approximation and do not correlate exactly to dynastic or ‘stylistic’ change, in the sense of a period-style. The four phases and their changes are characteristic for the development of the representation of the Heavenly Court, not for entire Chinese art and history. If this were so, it still would remain to be attested in the future.

The four phases are defined by the change in overall appearance, contents and layout of the Heavenly Court representation, and in particular of its deities, and as such I would like to characterise the Early Phase as ‘Daoist,’ the Middle Phase as ‘imperial,’ the Late Phase as ‘popular,’ and the Transitional Phase as a time when ‘Daoist’ and ‘imperial’ representations co-existed. These phases are not mutually exclusive, but accumulative. Each next phase also contains the representation or elements thereof of the previous phase, e.g., Late Phase Heavenly Court representations feature deities in Daoist, imperial and popular representations.

**Early Phase, 400–700**

No concrete material survives of representations of the Heavenly Court in the Early Phase. The beginning of the Early Phase in the fifth century is also arbitrary and based on the first references to Daoist images or imagery mentioned in conjunction with a ritual area.

The history of Daoism is much older and officially starts with Laozi 老子, the author of the *Daode jing* 道德經. Laozi is traditionally identified with Lao Dan 老聃 (also called Li Er 李耳) who was a librarian and astrologist at the Western Zhou court and who, according to legend, once received Confucius 孔子 (551–479) seeking instruction on ritual. Laozi remained a central figure of Daoism in the following centuries and was deified as the embodiment of the Dao in the Later Han period (25–220), also receiving official worship by the Han emperors. This was also the period when Daoist practitioners organised themselves in an order with a defined set of communal rules, liturgies and a clergy of ordained priests who provided services to a community of Daoist believers. One order was called the Taiping Dao 太平道 (Way of the Great Peace) in Shandong 山東 in east China but soon disappeared at the end of the second century. Another order was the Tianshi Dao 天師道 (Way of the Heavenly Masters) established in Sichuan 四川 in south-west China and this order, taking Laozi as their

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1 On this early Daoist movement, see Hendrischke, *The Scripture on Great Peace*. 