COMMUNITY AND DAILY LIFE IN THE EARLY DAOIST CHURCH

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The indigenous organized religion of China, commonly referred to as Daoism in English (daojiao 道教 in Chinese), has its origins in 2nd-century Sichuan among the followers of a religious teacher named Zhang Ling and his descendents. They formed a new religious movement call the faith of the Way of the Celestial Masters 天師道法, with a clearly delineated membership marked by ritualized ordination and defined by legitimate possession of an ordination register, a clear hierarchy of offices, a body of sacred texts, and a demanding set of religious precepts that governed interactions both within the community and between members of the community and the divine powers they believed oversee this mortal world. Followers of this nascent religion organized themselves into religious communities that shared a distinctive social structure, religious calendar, and world view. These communities evolved over time, but persisted many centuries, and constitute an unwritten page of Chinese social history. In this chapter I will examine a variety of literary, scriptural, and iconographic sources in an attempt to see inside these communities, analyze the way they functioned, and trace their evolution over time.

The earliest evidence for Celestial Masters is a stele from Sichuan dated 173 AD, only some 30 years after the legendary founding of the group. It already shows a religious organization with clearly defined priestly offices and rituals. The text of the stele reads:

Second year of the Xiping era, third month, first day. Hu Jiu-X, spirit soldier (guibing) of the Heavenly Elder,1 [announces]: You have followed

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1 I read tianlao where others read tian biao 天表. The character on the stele, after Hong Gua’s transcription, is a graphic variant and does not exactly resemble any known character. The lower portion does resemble that of biao, but I can find no example I know of biao written with only one horizontal crossbar in the upper portion of the character. Moreover, the lao 老 on the Cao Quan stele 曹全碑 is close in both appearance and time, and the Wang Xizhi cursive form is also similar, and is from a known Celestial Master Daoist. Both can confirm this identification. See Zhongguo shufa
a path to transcendence and your Dao is complete; the mystic dispensation has extended your lifespan. The orthodox and unitary pneumas of the Dao have been distributed to the earl of pneumas, and it has been decided to summon the libationers Zhang Pu, Meng Sheng, Zhao Guang, Wang Sheng, Huang Chang, and Yang Feng to come to receive twelve dazidian (Taibei, 1970), pp. 978–9 and 1101–2. Zhang Xunliang and Bai Bin describe the normal form of lao found in Northern Wei Daoist stele as “a xian character with a ren in the hook on the lower right,” which also closely approximates our graph. See Zhongguo daojiao kaogu, 6 vols (Beijing, 2006), 3.691. I do not think this Tianlao is necessarily to be identified with the figure of that name in the later Lingbao texts. It may well just be another sobriquet or reflex of Laozi, “the celestial Lao[jun].”

The mystic dispensation is also mentioned in this line from the statement of gratitude presented by the novice after receiving promotion to the 150–general register: “I have received a great grace 大恩. Joy and trepidation arise in turn. The mystic dispensation is vast and deep. Truly I must exhort myself to progress!” (Zhengyi fawen taishang wailu yi, DZ 1243, 6a.) Lü Pengzhi has suggested quite plausibly (personal communication) that the term 玄施 refers to the “joining the pneumas” rite, which by some interpretations was completed at the time of reception of the 150–general register.

I read this character as the Daoist variant of qi, assuming that a fire radical at the bottom of the character has become illegible. Other possible readings are yuan 元 or tian 天, but neither seems to make good sense in context. Jao Tsung-i reads the graph as an abbreviated form of qi 其, but this leads to an irregular meter. I read the inscription in four character phrases as much as possible. See Jao Tsung-i, Laozi xiang’er zhu jiaozheng (Shanghai, 1991 rep. of Hong Kong, 1956), p. 159. In chapter 10 of the Xiang’er commentary, Gu Baotian and Zhang Zhongli read yuan 元 as qi 其, providing a close parallel reading from the same time and milieu. See Gu and Zhang, Xinyi Laozi Xiang’er zhu (Taibei, 1997), p. 37.

Jao, Xiang’er zhu, p. 160, reads these two characters as baiqi 百氣, “the hundred pneumas,” and suggests that bai could be a loan for po 魄, the earthly component of the composite Chinese soul (hunpo 魂魄). Either way, it seems likely to be an official title, like the lingue 領決 or “determiner of pneumas” in Sandong zhunang 三洞珠囊 (DZ 1139, 7.18–19, cf. Terry Kleeman, Great perfection: religion and ethnicity in a Chinese millennial kingdom [Honolulu, 1998], pp. 78–79), who pronounced upon the validity of oracular pronouncements from spirit mediums 鬼氣男女. An alternate reading might be to take bo as bu 霸, “hegemon, violent,” yielding a reading something like, “The Dao has distributed his ethers amidst the hegemonic pneumas [of this violent age].” The reading chosen here is supported by the parallel to two lines in the Commands and precepts: “Later the pneumas of the Dao [i.e., the most high Lord Lao] were to be distributed throughout the four seas” 後道氣當布四海 (Zhengyi fawen tianshi jiaojie kejing, DZ 789, 13b1) and “[The Dao] divided and distributed the mystic, originating, and inaugural pneumas in order to govern the people” 分布玄元始氣治民 (Jiaojie kejing 14b1–2). Here it is the pneumas of the correct and unitary covenant that are being distributed to the faithful.

Although some have read this shou 受 as the homophonous graph with the hand radical (shou 授), the pairing of this character yi 誼, which Wang Li glosses as “to arrive” (usually at the place of a superior, elder, or revered figure), makes clear that the libationers are lower in status than the other party and therefore must be receiving, rather than bestowing the texts. Note also that in later ordination texts like the