THE MAO SHAN REVELATIONS
TAOISM AND THE ARISTOCRACY

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ABBREVIATIONS

CK Chen-kao 翰説, “Declarations of the Perfected” (TT 637-640).
CS Chin-shu 晉書, History of the Chin Dynasty. References are to Chin-shu chiao-chu 傳注, reprinted by I-wen, Taipei.
MTC (Chou-shih) Ming-t’ung chi 周氏冥通記, “A Record of Master Chou’s Communications with the Unseen World” (TT 152).
TCYC T’eng-chen yin-ch’ueh 登眞隠誥, “Secret Instructions for Ascent to Perfection” (TT 193).
TT Tao-tsong 道藏, the Taoist Canon. References are to fascicles of the 1925-27 Shanghai reprint.
YCCC Yin-chi ch’i-ch’ien 雲笈七籖, “Seven Slips from the Bookbag of the Clouds” (TT 677-702).

I. THE MAO SHAN REVELATIONS

The study of Chinese history has rather scamped the problem of Chinese religion. Apart from normative Buddhism, few early religious movements have been studied on the basis of first hand sources, and there is even a critical problem of definition. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of “Taoism”; the use of the word itself remains vague and arbitrary. It has been pressed into service to qualify a highly disparate assortment of phenomena, from the cult of the mot juste among the leisured few, to epidemic rebellion in the impoverished countryside. The various “Taoisms”
are generally supposed to share a common opposition to the central bureaucratic authority. Yet how then to explain the continuous official patronage of the Taoist religion, attested by hundreds of temples and commemorative inscriptions, as well as by the existence of the imperially-sponsored Taoist Canon 1)?

Perhaps the historians' difficulties stem from a persistent tendency to seek definitions in ideology, rather than in society. It seems safe to assume that there was a good deal more to the origins and development of the Taoist religion than the official chroniclers have told us. The determining factors must surely be sought in the structure of the society that produced and nurtured it. As yet, however, there seems little sign that historians are pondering this problem, or that a thorough grounding in Chinese religion is becoming part of the required equipment of the historian of China. The volumes of the Taoist Canon, representing a vast untapped repository of source material for Chinese social history, stand unread on the shelves of most Sinological libraries.

In one respect, though, there has been considerable progress in the last twenty-five years. A good deal of research on Taoist texts has been carried out in East Asia, and Taoist philology has developed appreciably since the pioneering efforts of Henri Maspero. Thus the Taoist Canon should no longer bear its traditional, fearsome character of a haphazard collection of anonymous texts, undated and undatable—and full of extravagant nonsense, to boot. Yet it remains to assimilate the results of these textual researches into the study of history. We must begin our studies anew, in the Six Dynasties texts preserved in the Canon, if we are to learn to use the terms "Taoism" and "Taoist" with any precision. I believe, too, that we will find in the Canon ample justification for restricting our use of the word Taoism, after the Han, to China's indigenous higher religion. Whatever its ideological prehistory, this religion came into social being with the Way of the Celestial Master (T'ien-shih tao 天師道) in the second half of the second century AD, and continues under the aegis of its successors and derivatives at the present day.

There are in the Canon certain documents which, in my view, furnish us with a new and promising point of departure for the critical study of early Taoism and its social background. The