

Living Light: Shangqing Daoist Cultivation in Theory and Practice

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Introduction

This essay is part of a larger project that aims to uncover the theological foundations of the medieval Daoist movement known as Highest Clarity (Shangqing). A solid grasp of the underlying theory will enable contemporary scholars to make sense out of the texts of the Shangqing tradition that are available to us, in one form or another, in the Daozang. This is an important task within the larger overall understanding of Daoist cultivation, because the categories available to us in the Western discourse on religious studies are not always adequate to the task of making sense out of Daoist texts. Specifically, the pervasive notion of the absolute distinction between the sacred and the profane hardly seems to apply to a Daoist worldview predicated upon a continuous, correlative metaphysics in which the physiological processes of the body interact with the various constellations of cosmic power. Thus I developed my own theory called *The Economy of Cosmic Power*, in which Shangqing religious practices are understood as interactive transactions that take place between the

individual practitioner and the spiritual powers that structure the cosmic matrix or environment in which the practitioner is located (Miller 2000). In the Shangqing tradition, these transactions are mediated by the religious texts and talismans that were first revealed to the religious visionary Yang Xi in the 360s C.E., and which were transmitted from master to initiate as the tradition developed. The texts describe practices for coordinating the adept with the cosmos, and transfiguring the seemingly ineluctable realities of human existence. They contain powerful talismans that guarantee the adept privileged access to the highest reaches of stellar power. Thus the adept, the texts and the cosmos are to be understood as seamlessly woven together as a universal fabric—a fabric commonly called the Dao. In this view the Dao is not some absolute sacred power or numinous *mysterium* that transcends the universe as does the Jewish-Christian-Islamic God; neither is it the eternal substance that underlies the manifestations of the phenomenal world as in the Indian Brahman or the impersonal Absolute of Perennial Philosophy. The Dao is simply the dynamic structuring power that the cosmos has in and of itself. It is the infinitely many possibilities for transformation that are recursively embedded within the fabric of the universe, possibilities that are encoded in the corpus of the Shangqing revelations and unlocked by their ritual performance.

Methodological Rationale

Daoist cultivation, like any other sort of human activity, is founded upon a set of basic metaphysical presuppositions that makes sense out of those practices, and

which is reinforced by those practices when they are experienced as being effective. The hermeneutical problem faced by interpreters of Daoist texts and practices is that very often the presuppositions are presupposed, that is, not explicitly stated in the texts that describe those practices. Many religious traditions have cultivated complex theoretical languages that make possible a first-order critical reflection upon the practices of that tradition, and many religious traditions see such critical reflection as a valid mode of spiritual cultivation in its own right. An example of this would be the complex philosophy of the mind that developed alongside Mahayana Buddhist meditation practices. The philosophy helps us to reconstruct the significance of the ancient practices.

When we turn to understand medieval Daoist cultivation, the problem seems to be that there does not exist a prominent philosophical or theological discourse that helps us understand the underlying theory of Daoist cultivation. In fact, Daoism does not hold abstract intellectual discourse to be a significant mode of self-cultivation at all. This is extraordinary, given that Daoism is so clearly a richly textual tradition with a vast treasury of scriptures that is only just beginning to be appreciated by scholars of religion. How is it possible for modern Western intellectuals to understand these texts and practices if there is little critical reflection – of an overtly theoretical nature – within the tradition itself?

This question suggests that we may require a new approach to the problem of understanding Daoist texts, one that turns on the difference between

Daoist and Confucian hermeneutics. Confucians engage in a hermeneutical tradition of reflection upon classic texts and the authentic, moral self-actualization of the classics in the heart-mind (*xin*). This commentarial approach to texts is very familiar to Western academics. Daoists, on the other hand, engage in what might be termed a critical hermeneutics of the body. Through the body, Daoists interpret the self-revelation of the world in nature and scripture; through the cultivation of the body, Daoists achieve the highest state of perfected being (*zhen*), which is a dynamic, spontaneous identity between the body and its cosmic environment. Daoist cultivation is thus intrinsically somatic: the cognitive and the spiritual aspects of Daoist cultivation are distributed throughout the whole body – conceived as a dynamic complex of interrelated energy systems – and are not the function of specific fields within the body such as the mind or the soul. The entire Daoist tradition may legitimately be viewed as a continuously unfolding history of a critical hermeneutics of the body in which human beings have cultivated a “fusion of horizons” between the conditions of bodily existence (*xing*) and the constellated powers (*ming*) within which individual lives are circumscribed. Since the contemporary Western way of thinking presumes that thinking is an activity of the brain and not the body, it is difficult to grasp the notion that the body itself may be an organ of spiritual, intellectual and theological development.

One way to develop our understanding of medieval Daoist practices might be for scholars to converse with contemporary practitioners. At first glance

this might seem to be a helpful solution to a thorny problem. The danger, however, is that contemporary practitioners may have a quite different understanding of what is meant by certain practices than those who originally developed such practices. Furthermore, practitioners are no more immune than academics from the biases of their own culture and tradition and, like everyone else, will interpret ancient texts in their own way for their own reasons. What makes the problem worse is that Shangqing Daoism does not exist as a living tradition today, but rather has been absorbed into a wide variety of contemporary Daoist traditions. Consulting practitioners is useful, but also problematical.

How then are we to try and understand the meaning of Shangqing Daoist practices? We can translate as many Shangqing Daoist methods into English as possible, and we can try to interpret those methods in the light of what we know about the social, historical and cultural situation of that time. But this still does not help us to understand what those texts and practices really meant in a spiritual, religious or theological way for the people who actually used them. One way of getting round this apparent impasse might be to interpret Shangqing Daoist texts through the lens of hagiographies – the lives of earlier Daoist perfected that were valued, idealized and recorded by those at the center of the Shangqing tradition. Hagiographies, in fact, are a particularly important genre of Daoist literature. Shangqing Daoist hagiographies reveal a convergence between the cosmic functioning of the Dao and the processes of an individual's body.

Such texts point towards a high degree of transparency that can be achieved in individual lives between the body and the world, and they serve as inspiration for those who are themselves engaged upon a path of Daoist cultivation. One may even say that the lives of the perfected in and of themselves constitute texts that are reflections upon the human bodily experience and interpretation of the world. Daoist lives, distilled into hagiographic texts, are thus paths towards understanding of the relationship between human bodies and the cosmos that engenders them.

In short, if we are to understand the meaning of ancient Daoist cultivation texts and to have an imaginative appreciation of the practices, and we cannot rely fully on philosophical or theological materials or modern practices, then we must turn to hagiographic texts and see how those who actually engaged in these Daoist cultivation practices viewed the ideal Daoist life. In fact it would be a mistake to interpret Daoist texts except in terms of the lives of actual Daoists, because the purpose of these texts is neither to inspire belief nor to convert one to a particular worldview or value-system, but to transfigure the body in accordance with the hidden possibilities of the heavens and the earth.

This essay, then, does not propose to offer a historical analysis of these hagiographic materials that would aim to distinguish historical fact from theological myth. The goal is to offer a theological analysis of the texts that aims to understand how the lives of Daoist perfected functioned as embodied

reflections upon Daoist cultivation. By means of the lives, we can understand the practices.

The Shangqing Revelation

We are heavily dependent upon Tao Hongjing (456-536) for our understanding of the origins of Shangqing Daoism.¹ Writing in the *Zhen'gao* (Declarations of the Perfected; DZ1016, dated 499), he states: “The scriptures of Highest Clarity appeared in 364 in the East Jin dynasty. Lady Wei of Southern Marchmount, known as the Purple-Vacuity Primal Lord, descended from Heaven and bestowed these texts upon Yang Xi [330-386], a secretary in the household of Situ Wang. Yang Xi wrote down these scriptures in the Li script. He later gave them to Officer Xu Mi [303-373] and Xu’s son, Hui [341-ca. 370]” (Yu 2000, 306).

The term Shangqing itself refers to the heaven of Highest Clarity inhabited by a class of spiritual beings of the highest rank known as the perfected (*zhenren*). The texts are distinguished by a preoccupation with several important themes: the stellar deities of the big dipper who are the closest to the Supreme Ridgepole (*Taiji*) around which the heavens revolve; the central administration of the underworld (Fengdu) that governs the fated givenness (*ming*) of human existence; absorbing solar and lunar essences to render the body ever more translucent to its environment; and the internal visualization of gods in the body. It is this latter theme to which we will later turn.

The goal of all these practices is to become a perfected person (*zhenren*) and to enter into the heaven of Highest Clarity. But what does this “perfection”

actually mean? Perhaps we can gain some insight from the hagiographies of those perfected beings who revealed the corpus of Shangqing texts, and from the hagiographies of those who were revered by the transmitters of the Shangqing corpus. Many Shangqing revealed texts begin with a biographical account either of the transcendent figure who is revealing the text, or the deity who is the text's ultimate author. Below I examine two hagiographies: the biography of Perfected Purple Yang (*Ziyang zhenren*);² and the biography of the Central Huanglao Lord (*Zhongyang huanglao jun*), the ultimate author, or revelatory deity, of an important later Shangqing text known as the *Jiuzhen zhongjing* (Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected). The aim is to help our understanding of Shangqing cultivation practice by referring to the lives that Shangqing Daoists considered exemplary. Before examining the hagiographies, I would like to attempt an abstract, theoretical analysis of a visualization text.

Visualization in Theory

The main type of cultivation practice that this essay aims to understand is visualization. To understand what is meant by visualization, it is helpful to look at the broad meaning of some of the Chinese terms used in Daoist texts. A common term in the Shangqing revelations is the Chinese character *cun*, whose basic meaning is “exist”. In modern Chinese it is combined with *zai*, whose basic meaning “be present”, to form the binome *cunzai*, which together is usually translated as “exist.” More accurately, however, this binome might be translated as “to persist in a particular location” for it refers not to an abstract concept—

existence as such – but to the haecceity or “this-ness” of some discrete particular. The metaphysical presupposition indicated by this interpretation is that to exist means to assume a particular temporal and spatial condition. To exist temporally means to have the quality of persistence, that one stands through (Latin: *per-sto*) a temporal duration that has a beginning and an end. To exist spatially means to occupy a particular finite space.

It is particularly interesting to note that in many texts of the Shangqing revelation the character *cun* has the meaning of “actualize” and thence we translate it as “visualize”; it is also found in combination with the character *shi* (see). The text studied below in fact uses just the latter character “*shi*” for “visualize,” but the meaning is still the same: “to bring something into existence by observation.” Another character that is often used is *guan* (observe). The difference is that *guan* suggests a more intense observation or meditation of object, whereas *shi* indicates more the act of perception itself.

The *Jiuzhen zhongjing* (Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected), is an outstanding example of Shangqing spiritual technology which exploits the power of the religious imagination to visualize in precise, rich, technicolor the latent cosmic connectivity of the human body. Internal visualization is the means to achieve the full perfection of the cosmic depth that is present in all bodies, but unrealized by most. This visualization-actualization is an act of *transfiguration* in which the body become fully co-ordinated with the spatial and temporal configurations of the cosmic matrix. This co-ordination, combined with the

visualization of stellar deities that are co-ordinated with the physiological systems of the body leads to a profound transformation of the body.

The textual history of the *Jiuzhen zhongjing* has been studied by Robinet (1979: 1984) and by Kobayashi (1990). Two texts in the *Daozang* bear its name (DZ 1042 and 1043), but one cannot be said to be more or less authentic than the other (Robinet 1979: 24). Between the two of them, the text contains a biography of the Central Huanglao Lord, the Method of the Nine Perfected (*Jiuzhen fa*) accompanied by instructions for dragon-script (*longwen*) talismans, and alchemical recipes. Each text contains passages in common and also variations.³ Although the text is not included in the *Declarations of the Perfected*, the compilation of Shangqing revelations made by Tao Hongjing towards the end of the fifth century C.E., this does not at all mean that it is apocryphal. Robinet's conclusion is that much of the text forms an authentic part of the Shangqing revelation, though the authenticity of some parts (including the alchemical recipes attributed to Zhang Daoling [2nd century C.E.]) is doubtful (Robinet 1984: 2.82-83).

The method dictated in the text is the Method of the Nine Perfected (*Jiuzhen fa*). It prescribes a deliberate program for forging systematic correlations between the body and its cosmic matrix through a series of mental visualizations. In the text, the various organs or energy systems of the body are co-ordinated with stars of the Dipper. The Dipper is the most important constellation in the Shangqing revelations as it points the way towards the pole star, the central axis

around which the heavens rotate. The pole star, being the northernmost cosmological point, illuminates the location of the deepest place on earth, the underworld inhabited by the dead. Shangqing texts speak of astral journeys through the gateway of the Big Dipper to the underworld in order to remove the names of adepts and their ancestors from the registers of the dead and inscribe them in the registers of the heaven of Highest Clarity (see Robinet 1989). In this text, however, the connection between the adept and the stars of the Dipper is made by visualizing the deities of the Dipper enter into the organs of the body. To put this in a theoretical way, by learning to perceive the fundamental connections between the body and the matrix of the Dao in which it is embedded, these connections are perfected, actualized or vitalized. The cosmic energy with which life is imbued is thereby strengthened and refined. This energy is the energy of light itself, refracted in gorgeous radiated color through the prism of the human body.

The method consists of visualizing the Imperial Lord (*dijun*), the Great Unity (*taiyi*) and the five spirits (*wu shen*) merge into one great spirit on each of nine separate occasions over the period of a year. These nine spirits, each associated with a star of the big dipper,⁴ produce an energy of a particular colour in nine layers around a particular energy system of the body. The system is thus spiritually vitalized, and the energy then ascends to the *niwan* cinnabar field in the head. This process of visualization is thus an type of inner alchemy that is typical of the Shangqing revelations. The ordinary body is being transformed not

by means of the ingestion of natural substances endowed with magical properties,⁵ but by means of an prodigious act of the bodily imagination that concentrates and intensifies visual, physiological, and textual elements into a veritable alchemy of transfiguration.

The underlying theory of the *Jiuzhen fa* is based on the understanding of the human body in traditional Chinese medicine. The particular emphasis of this Shangqing practice, however, is that the perceptive correlation of energy systems and constellated spiritual forces can take place only when the adept is harmonized with the calendar. The correlation of the adept with the cosmic rhythms of time and space enables this transformation to take place. At the same time, however, the correct alignment of the cycles of cosmic energy is insufficient to actualize the transformation of the body. This can occur only through the direct bodily perception of the transformation taking place and by the presentation of the correct talismans. Talismans are important because they are embedded within the texts that are the revelations of the very spiritual forces that the adept is aiming to visualize.

The First Method of the Nine Perfected⁶

In the first month, on your birthday, the *jiazi* day, or the *jiaxu* day, at dawn, the five spirits, the Imperial Lord, and the Great Unity merge together into one great spirit which rests in your heart. The spirit is called the Lord of Celestial Essence, his style is Highest Hero of Soaring Birth, his appearance is like an infant immediately after birth. On that day at dawn, enter your oratory, place your hands on your knees, control your breathing, close your eyes. Look inside and visualize the Lord of Celestial Essence sitting in your heart. His name is called Great Spirit. Make him spew forth purple energy to coil thickly around your heart in nine layers. Let the energy rush up into the *niwan*. Inner and outer [dimensions] are as one. When this is done, clench your teeth nine times, swallow saliva nine times, then recite this prayer:

Great Lord of Celestial Essence,
Highest Hero of Soaring Birth,
Imperial Lord, transform inside me,
come into vision in my heart.

Your body is wrapped in vermilion garb,
your head is covered with a crimson cap.
On your left you wear the dragon script;
on your right you carry the tiger writing.

Harmonize my essence with the threefold path,
unite my spirit with the Upper Prime.
To the Five Numinous Powers I present a talisman,
with the Imperial [Lord] may I be wholly identical.

Your mouth spits out purple floescence,
to nourish my heart and concentrate my spirit.
As my crimson organ spontaneously becomes alive
may I become a soaring immortal.

When this is done, repeat the practice at midnight following the same method as above. These are the times of correspondence when the Five Spirits of the Imperial Lord spontaneously combine and form one great spirit. [They correspond to] the so-called periods of stimulation that match one's birth. Do not wait over and over for auspicious signs to practice successful meditation (1.3a-4a).

From this passage it is clear that three basic types of requirement for the successful transformation of the body: (1) proper alignment with the calendar; (2) knowledge and visualization of the divinities; (3) presentation of the necessary talismans. Each of these requirements will be examined in turn.

The Correlation of Time

The importance of synchronizing with the calendar indicates that the quest for transformation does not take place in a supernatural or atemporal dimension of being, but in a cosmic context. The concept of transformation that is evoked thereby is a transformation *into* the dynamic structuring of the dao, *into* the economy of cosmic power, and not away from it. Such a transformation

reconfigures, or transfigures, the conventional limits to human existence by harmonizing with the cosmic ordering of the matrix of the dao. The adept is told not to wait for “auspicious times” (a clear condemnation of superstition and sorcery), but to follow the carefully calculated rhythms of the cosmic order: there is nothing that can take place in any way outside or beyond it. Maintaining harmony with the cosmic context is an important theme in Daoist traditions, and performing complex “astrogeomantic” calculations is an important task for Celestial Masters. Since the cosmos evolves through the complex cyclical interaction of yin and yang forces, it is vitally important for adepts to be fully attuned to the basic contours of their temporal and spatial contexts.

Visualization

The purpose of the visualization techniques is to actualize the flow of energy, that has been made possible through the synchronization with the temporal order. Having made the appropriate physical preparations, the adept is ready for an encounter with a god, that is, a constellation of spiritual force (*shen*). The visualization of the god is the mechanism whereby this spiritual transfiguration takes place. By means of “figuring” i.e. visualizing the form of the god in relation to the corresponding energy system of the body and co-ordinated with the calendar, the concomitant regeneration of one’s physical body, the actual transformation takes place. The condition for the possibility of this “transfiguration” is that the imagination is cosmically profound – able to engage the breadth and depth of cosmos in the way that our ordinary sensibility is unable. It is also vital that the precise configuration of the visualized form is

correct. Through intense perception of the colours of vermilion, crimson, and purple, the imperial colours of the body's most regal organ, the energy of the heart itself is vitalized and refined by means of an energy of living light.

Talismans

In the Shangqing system, however, it is not possible for just anyone to sit down in their oratory and follow the instructions. It is necessary that adepts be correctly initiated into the texts and be presented with the correct talismans by their master. One half of the talisman is possessed by the adept, the other half by a particular spiritual power or deity. The combination of the two unlocks the conduit through which the religious transaction can take place.

Daoist talismans bear an affinity with imperial seals that authenticate the bearer's royal power, and which are said to have been handed down from the mythical sage-kings of old (Robinet 1993: 21). Furthermore the ordination of a Daoist priest is formally similar to the investiture of an emperor, "for it places him at the centre of the world, like the master of all humankind and puts him in touch with celestial powers" (Robinet 1993: 21; see also Stein 1966-8; Despeux 2000). Thus in the Shangqing theological system, the fate of individual lives – and deaths – was bound up in the possibility of establishing a way of communication between the adepts and the constellations of cosmic power that ruled their destinies.

The talisman thus establishes a pathway between humans and deities. As humans recite the texts which are traces of the originals in the heavens, deities echo in response; sacred talismans (*fu*) are also written in a double or mirror

script or in two colours (Robinet 1993: 27-8). In the passage from the *Jiuzhen zhongjing*, the divinity is depicted as carrying a “dragon script” and “tiger writing.” The adept presents the corresponding talisman thus achieving firstly the union of the adept with the divinity and secondly the release of cosmic energy which regenerates the adept.

The talisman is also significant for it points to the supremely textual quality of the Shangqing revelation. Writing, the complex configuration of colours on a page, was invested with a power and authority that is difficult for moderns to appreciate. Shangqing talismans were a further intensified, further complexified form of Chinese writing that even more fully embodies the richly pigmented fabric of the human life.

This theoretical analysis of one small portion of the *Jiuzhen fa* goes a long way to help elucidate its meaning. The question now is whether the same basic metaphors of spiritual transformation can be placed in the more concrete perspective of the hagiographies of perfected. Below I turn to examine two hagiographies.

Visualization in Practice: The Hagiography of the Central Huanglao Lord

The first hagiography that we ought to examine is the very brief story of the Central Huanglao Lord that is presented at the beginning of the *Jiuzhen zhongjing* itself. The Central Huanglao Lord is the central deity of five deities (representing the five directions) of the Supreme Ridgepole (*taiji*) from which the celestial canopy is suspended. He wears magnificent imperial vestments and is an

awesome figure: “On his left he wears the pendant of Dragon-mystery writing, and the talisman of spirit-tiger. On his belt he has a bell of flowing gold. In his hands he holds a scepter with purple feathers. On his head he wears a scarf of golden essence. Sometimes he also wears the morning blossom cap. [His chariot] is drawn by flying dragons and he rides in the clouds of threefold simplicity” (1b-2a).

The biography of the Central Huanglao Lord portrays a spiritual genius of a far more sublime order than that of conventional immortals and is written in a highly elegant and refined poetic style that is, to be frank, as difficult to translate as it is beautiful to read. The translation below can only be considered a crude approximation, but it serves to give a good general impression of a Shangqing hagiographic text.

The Central Huanglao Lord was the younger brother of the Highest Celestial Lord of Great Tenuity. In the second year of the High Emperor of Clarity and Vacuity there was swirling chaos and he first took birth. The sun was radiant and severely dazzling, relentlessly bright and shining. The Five Numinous Clouds formed a shady cover. Their mists of blessing were dark and stopped [its rays]. When he was seven years old he spontaneously knew of the essentials of longevity and the methods of celestial immortality. Thus he perceptively understood the subtle threads, respectfully took in mysterious perfection, and reverently extended his numinous imagination. His heart was settled in the spirit and he widely embodied the eight limits. He embraced emptiness and submitted the whole [of himself]. He was liberated from the trappings of civilization and luxury, and put on simplicity in the restfulness of his vacuous dwelling:

A vast island, dark and deep,
with mysterious waves and clouds.
[But] with complete control he traveled around,
became transparent to its patterns and its myriad pathways.

He spread cold winds on his marvelous awareness,

and hid in the [1b] empyrean to roam around.
He excited the mysterious prime beyond the heavens,
and traversed the nine energies in the flowing mists.

They overflowed like tasteful and elegant waves.
They froze crystal clear.
Strange sounds, dark echoes.
Clouds converged in eightfold mists.
Patterns played in the Great Initiation.

He merged his mind with elevated symbols.
Refined, he walked in the ten directions,
and sought out spirits in the dark prime,
He gathered whirlwinds and stirred up the infinitesimal.
He was disguised by simplicity and hidden by tenuity.

The valley of the sun was the gate to the Mystery Prime.
His hand reached out to myriad courtyards of apartments.
He looked up with joy at the spiritual architecture.
He look down with sadness at the five difficulties [of earthly life].

He flowed and penetrated into the pivot of radiance.
He was glittering and changing, his spirit refined to a point.
He restored his imagination and perfected his numinous powers.
Elegant he was, celestial his expression, marvelous and beautiful.

He dwelt and encountered the experience of mystery.

Thereupon the Highest Lord transmitted the scripture of the Supreme Lord's Nine Perfected and the stanzas of the eight paths secret formula. He put it into practice and the Dao was complete. He received other texts and became the Perfected of the Great Ultimate.

Benjamin Penny, writing on "Immortality and Transcendence" in the *Daoism Handbook* (2000) notes several characteristics of the immortal body, including the abilities to heal diseases, multilocate, transform one's own body and that of others and to predict the future. Clearly the brief poetical biography of the Huanglao Lord demonstrates a level of perfection that is of an order of magnitude more refined and subtle than the conventional powers of the immortal body. This certainly tallies with the Shangqing notion of the perfected

person's occupying a heavenly location superior to that of the ordinary celestial immortal (*xianren*).

For our purposes it is interesting to note the important visual elements of this biography. Firstly the biography is suffused with images of light and dark, sun and cloud. This certainly reinforces the idea that light and color are crucial elements of Shangqing spiritual transformation. The biography is also very dynamic, with images of flowing energy, waves and whirlwinds. Both these qualities of light and energy are emphasized in the repeated use of terms such as "glittering" and "radiant" to give a thoroughly brilliant and resplendent sensation. We may suppose, then, that these qualities captured in the hagiography are the same as those that the method of the nine perfected aimed to create.

Visualization in Practice: The Hagiography of Perfected Purple Yang

Since the hagiography of the Central Huanglao Lord is so brief and difficult to understand, it would be helpful to introduce other hagiographies connected with the Shangqing revelation. Many such biographies are contained in Tao Hongjing's *Declarations of the Perfected*, but they are of a similarly short and fragmentary nature. One example is the biography of Huang Ziyang translated in Bumbacher (2000, 386):

The Lord [Pei] said: Huang Ziyang was a native of Wei. [While] young, he knew of the subtleties of prolonging the life. He learned the *dao* on Mount Boluo for ninety odd years. He merely ate the peel of peaches and drank the yellow water from within the stones. Later he met with [the immortal] Sima Jizhu. Jizhu took the *Eight recipes of guiding immortals*

(*Daozian ba fang*) and gave them [to Huang]. [Huang] subsequently took [them] and transcended the world.

Brief biographies such as this are not particularly helpful in trying to understand Shangqing visualization, although they do serve the purpose of introducing the ranks of the Shangqing perfected to the adept (Bumbacher 2000, 386). There is, however, a full-length biography that sheds important light on Shangqing visualization techniques, that of the person known as Perfected Purple Yang. The biography was translated into French by Manfred Porkert (1979). According to Porkert the text was probably edited circa 340 C.E. by Xu Mi (303-373),⁷ the senior of the two Xus who transmitted the revelations of Lady Wei to Yang Xi (330-62). There are three extant texts: the above-mentioned *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang*, the *Esoteric Biography of Lord Zhou, the Perfected Purple Yang* (*Ziyang zhenren Zhoujun neizhuan*; *Yunji qiqian* 106/8a-15b) and the biography of Zhou Yishan in the *Comprehensive Examination of Successive Generations of Perfected Immortals and those who Embody the Dao* (*Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian*). In my examination below I follow Porkert's reconstruction of the text based on these three recensions.

Perfected Purple Yang was born Zhou Yishan in 80 B.C.E. As a young man he practiced the daily salutation of the sun and would soak up the dawn light. When his father caught him in the act and inquired as to the type of cult that he was practicing, Zhou replied, "I, Yishan, from the bottom of my heart love the sunlight and the splendor of its eternal radiance" (Porkert 1979, 26). Zhou's first Daoist master was Su Lin, the Immortal of the Central Marchmount

(*Zhongyue xianren*). He transmitted to him a recipe for destroying the three demonic worms (*san chong*) that infest the mortal body, and after five years Zhou's body became so luminous and transparent that one could see his internal organs.

From these three details of his early life it is clear that Zhou was marked by a devotion to light. This type of religious fascination with the qualities of light was precisely the hallmark of the Shangqing tradition that was to develop some three centuries after Zhou was born, and the metaphors of spiritual development for Zhou are essentially identical with the Shangqing metaphors of light, luminosity and transparency. It was for this reason that Zhou's biography was researched, written and transmitted by devotees of the heaven of Highest Clarity.

The next stage of Zhou's spiritual progress involves a tour all of China's famous mountains in search of the way to become a fully perfected being. His journey begins at Songshan where he meets the Central Huanglao Lord who tells him that he must learn to visualize the Lord of Infinite Lustre (*Wuying jun*) in addition to the White Prime Lord (*Baiyuan jun*).⁸ Zhou travels from mountain to mountain throughout China amassing a treasury of Daoist revealed scriptures, recipes and talismans, but fails to encounter the Lord of Infinite Lustre. Finally Zhou ascends the "Empty Mountain" (*Kongshan*) and in a grotto there has a vision of the Huanglao Lord flanked by the Lord of Infinite Lustre and the White Prime Lord. The Huanglao Lord tells Zhou:

“You should look back (*huan shi*) in your own grotto chamber.”

The Lord [Zhou] then closed his eyes and visualized internally (*neishi*) for a long while. Then he saw in the middle of his grotto chamber that there were two great spirits, the White Prime Lord and the Lord of Infinite Lustre. They were clothed in garments resembling the ones who were in the Empty Mountain. The Huanglao Lord laughed and said “So subtle, so profound is the mental concentration you employed. This is the way to ascend to the heavens in broad daylight. Go back to the Everlasting Mountain where you will be handed the Way of the Upper Perfected (*shangzhen zhi dao*).” (Trans. based on Porkert 1979, 106)

Eventually Zhou achieves the level of perfected being (*zhenren*) and is officially granted the title Perfected Purple Yang.

This text is important because it clearly marks the transition from an external, terrestrial spiritual journey to an internal, visual journey that takes place by means of the adept’s acute powers of visualization and concentration. Moreover, unlike the previous mountains in Zhou’s journey, Kongshan (Empty Mountain) and Changshan (Everlasting Mountain) are better understood not as physical features of Chinese geography, but as features of the landscape of the imagination. This suggests that the various mountains and grottoes function as locations of cosmic power generated within the body that permit the transfiguration of the body into a cosmically translucent being that is not bound by the conventional limits of human existence. Such is the privilege of a perfected being: to be transformed into the radiant beauty and luminous energy of the sun and the stars themselves. Paradoxically (and this is the key point in Shangqing Daoism) such a quest for luminous clarity can only be undertaken with the eyes closed and by means of internal visualization.

There is a further point of importance in this biography. Zhou's transformation is sealed by his being granted a title. The Shangqing preoccupation with religious titles reflects the aristocratic milieu of Shangqing adepts and the continuing importance of protocol and bureaucracy in Daoist liturgical traditions.

Conclusions

Those who received and transmitted the corpus of the Shangqing revelation prized hagiographies because they record in concrete detail the spiritual biographies of those who have successfully practiced internal visualization. Such a visualization takes the form of an audience with a spiritual being in the heavenly – that is, bodily – grotto of the imagination. The hagiographies shed light on the practices of internal visualization recorded in texts such as the *Jiuzhen zhongjing* and stress the importance of vestments, colors and titles in one's dealings with the perfected.

Shangqing Daoist cultivation is thus the cultivation of the experience of encounter with a rich variety of cosmic beings each with their correspondent colors, powers, ranks, vestments and titles. Although the Shangqing revelations represent a decisive moment in the internalization of Chinese Daoism that set the tone for the later flourishing of methods of internal alchemy and meditation, what is important in these texts is the rich external details of form, pattern and shape. While it may be tempting to speak of Shangqing Daoism in terms of mystical experience and unity with the cosmos, it is important to remember that

such experience and unity only took place through the precise detail of the ranks and titles of celestial personages. To put it another way, the apparent internalization of the bureaucratic structure of the Way Celestial Masters did not entail a corresponding simplification of the details and the formalities of dealing with the various ranks of perfected beings. In fact the intricate constellation of experiences that is expressed in Shangqing Daoist texts is perhaps far more complex than that of previous Daoist movements, and cannot easily be reduced to a vague mystical encounter with the Dao.

For this reason the study of Daoist hagiographies – those who transformed their status from ordinary mortal to celestial perfected – is a vital component in understanding the Shangqing revelation. Reading the methods in the light of the hagiographies mitigates against any potential tendency to interpret Shangqing methods in terms that are convenient for contemporary interpreters and practitioners. Rather the complexity and concrete detail in the hagiographies force us to pay close attention to the irreducible particularities of the methods.

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Glossary of Chinese Characters

Baiyuan jun	白元君
changshan	常山
cun	存
cunzai	存在
dijun	帝君
fu	符
huan shi	還視
<i>Jiuzhen fa</i>	九真法
<i>Jiuzhen zhongjing</i>	九真中經
Kongshan	空山
<i>Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian</i>	歷世真仙體道通鑒
longwen	龍文
ming	命
nei	內
neiguan	內觀
neishi	內視
niwan	泥丸
san chong	三蟲
Shangqing	上清
shi	視
Songshan	嵩山
taiji	太極
Taiyi	太一
Tao Hongjing	陶弘景
wai	外
wu shen	五神
Wuying jun	無英君
xin	心
xing	性
Xu Hui	許翮
Xu Mi	許謚
Yang Xi	楊羲
zai	在
Zhang Daoling	張道
zhen	真
<i>Zhen'gao</i>	真告
zhenren	真人
Zhongyang huanglao jun	中央黃老君
Zhongyue xianren	中嶽仙人

Zhou Yishan

Ziyang zhenren

Ziyang zhenren neizhuan

Ziyang zhenren Zhoujun neizhuan

周義山

紫陽真人

紫陽真人內傳

紫陽真人周君內

Endnotes

¹ For a general introduction to Shangqing Daoism see Robinet (1993).

² Note that the title *Ziyang zhenren* was also applied to the Quanzhen master Zhang Boduan (11th c.), author of the famous *Wuzhen pian*.

³ Robinet has reconstructed the probable order of the original sections, along with a table of their inclusion in other Daozang texts and anthologies (1979: 43; 1984: 73-4).

⁴ Although there are only seven visible stars of the big dipper, Shangqing adepts thought that there were an additional two invisible stars. It was important that there be nine stars, as nine symbolizes perfection.

⁵ See Campany (2001) for a study of Ge Hong's attempts to "Ingest the Marvelous."

⁶ This translation first appeared in Miller (2001).

⁷ Robinet (2000) states that the text was probably written by Hua Qiao

⁸ Porkert interprets these designations in terms of the phenomenology of mystical experience. White Prime represents the aura of a positive mystic perception, whereas Infinite Luster represents the experience of ultimate nonduality that can only be conveyed negatively (Porkert 1979, 72).