TRANSFIGURED SPACE
The Education and Cultivation of Perfected Purple Yang

James Miller
Queen's University, Canada
Dao and Method
This essay forms part of a larger project that aims to understand the cultivation practices of the Daoist religious movement known as the Way of Highest Clarity 上清道. Highest Clarity 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 these metaphysical 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 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 心. 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 真, 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 性 and the constellated powers 命 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 problematic.

How then are we to try and understand the meaning of Highest Clarity Daoist cultivation? We can translate as many Highest Clarity 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 Daoist cultivation 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 tradition. Hagiographies, in fact, are a particularly important genre of Daoist literature, and Highest Clarity 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 their cultivation 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’s space 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.

This paper, then, offers an analysis of the *Esoteric Biography of the Purple Perfected Yang* 紫陽真人內傳, a hagiography prized and transmitted by the Xu 許 family, in whose midst originated the medieval Daoist religious movement known as Way of Highest Clarity 上清道. This religious movement centered on the revelation of texts in the mid-360s C.E. from a Daoist perfected person, Lady Wei Huacun 魏花村, through a visionary, Yang Xi 杨羲 (330–386 C.E.), who was a retainer in the household of a southern aristocratic family. The Xus collected these revealed texts and engaged in spiritual cultivation practices based on the methods and deities revealed in these texts. We have access to these revealed texts principally through the efforts of Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536) a Shangqing patriarch who, over a century later, collected and analyzed a wide range of manuscripts purporting to be Shangqing revealed texts.

Having discarded what he reckoned were the pseudepigrapha, he compiled the *Declarations of the Perfected* 真告 (DZ1016), our main source of knowledge about the original revelations. Among these revelations were biographies of *zhenren* 真人, ‘perfect humans’ who had succeeded in transforming their mortal bodies into a state that clearly transcended the ordinary limitations of time and space. Some of these ‘perfect humans’ were self-taught, others guided by a succession of figures; all seem to have taken the raw ingredients of life and the fated nature of existence, and through an act of spiritual transfiguration, become superhuman figures.

---

1 The notation ‘DZ’ indicates a text contained in the Daoist Canon of the Ming dynasty 道家典籍, published in 1445. The numbering system is based on the 1976 Taipei edition. A complete cross-referenced index can be found in Komjathy (2003).
An example of the biographies contained in the *Declarations of the Perfected* is that of one Huang Ziyang:

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

(Bumbacher 2000, 386)

Brief biographies such as this might be useful for peach marketing executives, but are not particularly helpful in trying to understand how to become an immortal. According to Bumbacher these short hagiographies serve chiefly to introduce the ranks of the Shangqing perfected to the adept (Bumbacher 2000, 386). They are, therefore, pedagogical tools, but ones of limited value.

The aim of this paper is to analyze a much richer and lengthier hagiography, that of the Perfected Purple Yang. According to Manfred Porkert (1979) the text was probably edited circa 340 by Xu Mi 許翩 (303-373), the senior of the two Xus who transmitted the revelations of Lady Wei to Yang Xi. There are three extant versions of this text: the above-mentioned *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang (DZ303)*, the *Esoteric Biography of Lord Zhou, the Perfected Purple Yang* 紫陽真人周君內傳, found in the *Yunji qiqian 106/8a-15b* and the biography of Zhou Yishan 周義山 in the *Comprehensive Examination of Successive Generations of Perfected and Immortals who Embody the Dao* 歷世真仙體道通鑑 (DZ296). In my examination below I follow Porkert’s reconstruction of the text based on these three recensions.

**Summary of the Text**

Perfected Purple Yang was born Zhou Yishan 周義山 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, a regional inspector in the service of the Han empire, caught him in the act and inquired as to the type of cult that he was practicing, Zhou replied:
I, Yishan, deep in my heart love the splendor of the sunlight and its constant radiance. This is the only reason why I worship it.

The hagiography records how Zhou as a young man was full of virtue but also reclusive, making donations to the poor anonymously, and refusing to have dealings with the regional officials in his father’s circle. On the contrary, Zhou recognized his first Daoist figure in the person of Huang Tai, a local artisan, who turned out to be Zhou’s first Daoist master. His real name was Su Lin, and his title was the Immortal of the Central Marchmount 中嶽仙人. Su Lin relates his autobiography, how he had learned the Dao from a middle-rank immortal 中仙人 and obtained the methods of an earthly immortal 地仙人. This had enabled him to to soar over the mountains and acquire longevity, but eventually he retreated to the mortal world and took up the life of a shoemaker. At the end of Su Lin’s speech, he transmitted to Zhou a recipe for destroying the three demonic worms 三虫 that infest the mortal body. The recipe involved compounding herbs, stewing them in a liquid, and drying the mixture in the sunlight until all the liquid has evaporated. According to Su Lin, the method would enable Zhou to extend his years and stave off death, but would not raise him to the rank of a flying immortal 飛仙.

Zhou did as he was told and after five years his body became so luminous and transparent that one could see his internal organs. He then returned to Su Lin to seek the method of becoming a flying immortal. Su Lin then described the various ranks within the celestial hierarchy but admitted that he only ever attained the rank of earthly immortal. Su Lin did recognize, however, that Zhou was destined for greater things:

Your name, [however], is on the golden book in the palace of Fangzhu. Your destiny is published in the Azure Register. Your ‘gold pavilion jade name’ is already fixed by the celestial officials. You will certainly be able to ride the clouds in dragon-pulled chariots and be established on high in [the heaven of] Purple Yang Great Clarity. You will wear a Golden Perfection and Jade Radiance sash, dragon robes and a tiger belt, and you will be venerated as a Per-
fected Person. My Daoist arts can only teach you [to become] a terrestrial immortal who will be delivered from his corpse, but they are not what a [future] Perfected Person such as yourself should study. I, however, am only a Middle Immortal, and not worthy to be your teacher.

Zhou continued his practice for a further five years until he obtained the limits of superhuman powers, able to see and stride across vast distances, and make himself visible or invisible at will. Then he set out on a tour of China’s famous mountains in search of Daoist masters who would be able to guide him to higher levels.

The next stage of Zhou’s spiritual progress involved a tour all of China’s famous mountains in search of the way to become a fully perfected being. His journey began at Mt. Song 嵩山, the mountain that corresponds to the center in Chinese correlative cosmology. There he met the Central Huanglao Lord 中央黄老君 who questioned him about the figures that he has encountered in his internal meditations. The Central Huanglao Lord then told him that he must learn to visualize the Lord of Infinite Luster 無英君 in addition to the White Prime Lord 白元君 in order to ascend to the rank of Perfected. Since Zhou has not yet achieved this, the Central Huanglao Lord sends him off on an extended pilgrimage across twenty-four of China’s famous mountains. Zhou travels from mountain to mountain. The text details each location, the master he encounters, and the text he receives. For example:

乃登桐柏山，遇王喬，受素奏丹符。
Next he ascended Tongbo Mountain, met Wang Qiao and received the Talisman of Cinnabar of Simplicity and Achievement.

乃登太華山，遇南嶽赤松子，受元真君書。
Next he ascended Supreme Florescence Mountain, met Chi Songzi of the Southern Marchmount and received the Book of the Highest Prime Perfected Lord.

乃登太冥山，遇九老仙都君，受黃水月華四真法。
Next he ascended Supreme Obscurity Mountain, met the Lord of Nine Elder Immortals City and received the Yellow Water Moon Blossom Four Methods of Perfection.

乃至合黎山，遇皇上，受八素真經，太上隱書.
Next he went to Heli Mountain, met Huangren and received the *Perfect Scripture of the Eight Simplicities* and the *Hidden Book of the Supreme High [Lord Lao]*.

乃登景山，遇黃臺，萬畢先生，受九真中經。

Next he ascended Jing Mountain, met Huang Tai and Mr. Bi, and received the *Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected*.

In this process he thus encounters a wide variety of Daoist masters and amasses a treasury of Daoist revealed scriptures, recipes and talismans, but fails to encounter the Lord of Infinite Luster. Finally Zhou ascends Empty Mountain 空山 and in a grotto there has a vision of the Huanglao Lord flanked by the Lord of Infinite Luster and the White Prime Lord. The Huanglao Lord tells Zhou:

「可還視子洞房中。」君乃瞑目內視良久。果見洞房之中有二大神，無英，白元君也。被服狀如在空山中者。黃老君笑而言曰：「微乎深哉，子用以意思之精也。此白日昇天之道。」

“You should look back in your own grotto chamber.” His Lordship then closed his eyes and visualized internally 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 Luster. They were clothed in garments resembling the ones who were on 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 Everlasting Mountain where you will be handed the Way of the Upper Perfected.”

Zhou returned to Everlasting Mountain where he meditated for ninety years before being presented with the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto* 大洞真經 (DZ6), the supreme text of the Way of Highest Clarity. He practiced the text for eleven years, served by twenty-one jade maidens and twenty-one jade lads, before finally ascending to the Palace of Supreme Tenuity 太微宮 to receive a decree granting him the title Perfected Purple Yang. (The term Purple Yang was the name of the palace where he took up residence, along with seven other Perfected).

The biography concludes with a sermon by the Perfected Purple Yang that begins with an explanation of the mysteries of Shangqing Daoist cultivation:

天無謂之空。山無謂之洞。人無謂之房也。山腹中空虚是謂洞庭。人頭中空虚是謂洞房。是以真人處天，處山，處人。人無間以黍米容蓬萊山。包括六合。天地不能載焉。
The nothings of the heavens are called emptiness. The nothings of the mountains are called grottos. The nothings of human beings are called chambers. The empty spaces in the mountains’ viscera are called grotto courts. The empty spaces in human heads are called grotto chambers. In this way the Perfected take up residence in the heavens, the mountains and human beings. When the Perfected enter the state of nothingness, a grain of rice could contain Mt. Penglai, and embrace the six harmonies, yet heaven and earth would not be able to contain it.

The text ends with a typical warning not to divulge the words of the Perfected to the uninitiated or to those who are merely flâneurs along the Way.

Gentle reader: I implore you to forget what you have just read.

Analysis

I would now like to analyze this hagiography in terms of what we can learn from it about a Daoist view of education. This analysis accords in part with views of Daoist philosophy and education based on proto-Daoist wisdom literature such as the Zhuangzi or the Liezi. Those earlier works sought to undermine classical views of the utility of conventional modes of learning by advocating notions such as ‘sitting in oblivion’ 坐忘 or by employing puns, paradoxes and humor to engender a deep sense of the unbridgeable gap between what we would today call rationality and reality. Yet Daoists have always aspired to ‘obtain the Dao’ 得道 even if they have remained steadfastly unconvinced of human abilities to ‘know the Dao’ 知道. The Dao may be unnameable and unknowable but the very premise of Daoism is that it is possible to obtain the Dao by employing the right methods. The Dao can even be spoken, says the first line of the Daode jing, but not by the usual sort of logic or speaking. In contrast to the preference for the intellect or the mind as the pre-eminent mode of knowledge and education in Greek logic, Indian jñana yoga and the classical Chinese logicians, both Confucians and Daoists have preferred the heart and the body as the vehicles for engaging the dao, the fabric of reality from which human vitality is woven.
**Progress and Return**

The first theme that I would like to highlight is that of the apparent dichotomy between progress and return. The hagiography of the Purple Perfected Yang indicates both a hierarchical view of spiritual enlightenment and the consequent necessity of making progress in one’s endeavors to obtain the Dao. The life of the Perfected is populated with characters who are themselves at various stages along the way to obtaining the Dao, and those figures are introduced with ranks and titles appropriate to the level of perfection that they have achieved. All this would seem to indicate that the Daoist sensibility resonates with the vast majority of Confucians and all other devotees of bureaucratic, institutional education who conceive of education as progress—making one’s way along a path towards some goal, each stage of the way marked out by ranks, titles and degrees. Indeed Daoism in its very name claims the concept of a path or a journey as its core identity.

The Way of Highest Clarity further underlines this notion of progress along the Way by adopting the term Perfected One or Perfect Human 真人 as the highest rank of its spiritual hierarchy, higher even than that of Immortal or Transcendent 仙人. Does this reflect the aristocratic milieu in which Highest Clarity Daoism evolved, or does it reflect a deeper philosophical sensibility about the hierarchical nature of the Dao? The answer is both. For Daoists it would seem that life itself is experienced not only as process or transformation but progress, that is, a vectored or teleological transformation that is distinguished by hierarchies, ranks and privileges. This deeply aristocratic sensibility is not simply a reflection of social class but is held by Daoist natural theology to be embedded in the fabric of natural-reality itself. Life is progress along the way and progress through the ranks. Like tenure, the Dao is not a given, but must be earned.

In the hagiography of the Perfected Purple Yang this progress towards the Dao is symbolized geographically through the progress through China’s various sacred mountains. In each location our hero meets with a master, receives a teaching, and then moves on.
This Daoist view of natural progress, however, is not so straightforward as it might seem. Zhou Ziyang’s quest for the Lord of Infinite Luster climaxes in an unconventional revelation. Instead of receiving yet more texts and teachings, Zhou is instructed to look back within himself. The use of the term 恆 (huan; return) is instructive. It suggests that the goal of Zhou’s quest is to be obtained not by making further progress along the way but by some form of retreat or reversion into his own ‘grotto chamber’. This concept requires some explanation in two regards. First the concept of return complicates and even undermines the simple notion of progress that Zhou Ziyang has been operating with until this point. It suggests that the Way is not simply a linear ‘straight-forward’ Way, but requires some kind of circuitous motion. This direction is further explained by the concept of grotto chambers. Central to the biotheology of the Way of Highest Clarity was the notion of the body as the residence of gods. Until this point, Zhou has been touring the mountains in search of gods in grottos. The new notion, however, is that Zhou must consult the gods in the grottos, the cavernous spaces of his own body. This suggests that the move to obtain the Way is not simply an outward journey but a journey inward that will reveal the depths of his own bodily identity. Zhou must retrace his steps not in an outward physical sense but in an internal retreat that will lead to his obtaining of the Dao.

The important question with which we are confronted is whether perfection involves attaining something new, something more than was there before, or whether it involves the recovery of what always was. The text seems to indicate that this is a false dichotomy. Throughout the text we are presented with the notion that Zhou’s status as a perfected has been ordained. His ‘gold pavilion jade name 金欄玉名’ has ‘already been fixed 已定’ by the celestial officials. He will ‘surely be able 必能’ to obtain the rank of Perfected and entitled to fly through the sky in a dragon-pulled chariot. Yet despite the fact that Zhou’s destiny is fixed, he still needs to make the journey.

This concept of progress can be illuminated by considering the semantic range of the term 真, the highest rank within the Highest Clarity cosmology. In Modern Standard Chinese this term is used for translating ‘true’ and ‘perfect’. Translators of this term, when used in a Daoist context, have opted variously for ‘real,’ ‘perfect,’
'true' and the decidedly Heideggerian 'authentic.' How are we to understand this term as it applies to our hero? The text clearly indicates that Zhou's journey towards perfection is the fulfillment of his destiny. In this sense he is actualizing the potential for what has already been ordained for his own life. His wanderings through China lead up to and are subordinated by the internal education of the self—a drawing out (Latin: educatio) of what is internally present. The fact that Zhou achieves his ambition through an internal visual encounter with the gods suggests also that this achievement is the result of transfiguring the space within his own body, that it is a self-actualization of sorts. At the end of this internal visualization process, however, his achievement is externally validated by his receiving of the rank and title of Perfected. The life of Zhou Ziyang suggests the achievement of a perfect symmetry between his internal bodily nature and the external givenness of his destiny or fate.

**Transfigured Space**

This dynamic relationship between nature and destiny I refer to as an economy of cosmic power in which the body and the Dao, that is, the cosmological context for the self, are brought into harmony. The harmonization of self and Dao, nature and destiny, actualizes the potential for creativity and transformation. In the hagiography of Zhou Ziyang this engagement is thematized most clearly in terms of space. Zhou's hagiography is not a life-history, a retrieval of memory, or a narrative of confession, but rather a cartography of cultivation. The most obvious point to be made is that Zhou's progress is peripatetic: it involves travel through China's sacred mountains. In each location he receives a new teaching and makes progress along the Way. Daoist wisdom thus seems to be a kind of spatially-located wisdom, as though the particular environments of each mountain give rise to a particular quality of teaching that is focussed in the person of the teacher who lives in that space. Mountains are also noted for housing libraries of Daoist texts such as the ones that Zhou received in his journey.²

² The following section is adapted from chapter eight, 'Nature,' in Miller 2003.
The Daoist literatus Ge Hong (287-347) explains that:

all noted mountains and the Five Marchmounts harbor books of this sort, but they are hidden in stone chambers and inaccessible places. When one who is fit to receive the Dao enters the mountain and meditates on them with utmost sincerity, the mountain spirits will respond by opening the mountain, allowing him to see them.

(Baopuzi neipian 19/336 quoted in Campany 2001: 134)

It is important to note that the mountains themselves are not the teachers. Daoists do not subscribe to a general Romantic view of nature as a teacher of the soul. Rather mountains are specifically important because they are the residences of spirits and libraries of scriptures. Consequently, many of these mountains are the location for Daoist temples or altars, or serve as homes for recluse and hermits. Zhang Daoling, the founder of Way of the Celestial Masters (天師道, the first formalized Daoist religious movement) received his first Daoist revelation on Mt Heming (鶴鳴山) in 142 C.E.

He heard that the people of Shu were very pure and generous and could easily be taught; moreover there were many famous mountains in Shu (present day Sichuan province). So he entered Shu with his disciples and dwelt on Mt. Heming where he composed twenty-four volumes of Daoist writings. He then concentrated his spirit and refined his will and suddenly there were heavenly beings descending with a thousand chariots, ten thousand riders and golden carriages with feathery canopies drawn by countless dragons on the outside and tigers on the inside. One called himself the Archivist; the other called himself the child of the Eastern sea. They then gave Ling the newly emerged Way of the Covenant of Orthodox Unity.

(Biography of Zhang Daoling in 神仙傳)

From this revelation on Mt. Heming began the organized religious movement that we know as Daoism today.

Mountains are particularly significant, however, because they are the home to grottos. Grottos or caverns form a means of communication or pathway between the Daoist adept and the mysterious workings of the Dao, whether symbolized as the starry heavens above or as the internal functioning of the body. According to Thomas Hahn,
Despite a singular solidity, their physical permeability in terms of air- and water-flow reflects the inner workings of the human body. Blood equals water; air equals breath. Spermatic liquids form pools; walls constitute shapes like inner organs or viscera. Their resident, left windowless and in an enclosed void, experiences the dignity of complete independence and autarky.

(Hahn 2000: 695)

This correlation of external geological space and internal physiological space is typical of the Daoist approach to nature in which natural images are replicated and re-formulated across a multitude of dimensions and categories of life. There is, in the end, nothing discrete about the Daoist mental universe, for it is capable of reaching across worlds and mapping layers of meaning over and against and on top of each other. All this is with the aim of comprehending the multivalent, transfigurative character of the natural world, a world of continuous transformation.

The multivalent character of natural imagery in the Daoist imagination can be seen in the biography of Zhou Ziyang in that the term grotto refers both to the mountain grottos of the physical environment and also the grotto chambers in the head, the inner-body space in which Zhou’s internal vision takes place. “The way to ascend to the heavens in broad daylight” is paradoxically attained through the practice of internal meditation in darkness and shadow. The grotto thus permits communication between the earthly and celestial realms. It is dark and mysterious, but paradoxically a repository of revelations and enlightenments. Grottos, both occipital and speleological, form the spaces for transfigurative communication symbolized in encounters with perfected beings and their sacred texts.3

This co-ordination of space or environment with Daoist learning and cultivation is thus singularly important within this Daoist hagiography. Zhou’s progress along the

---

3 The association between mountain grottoes and sacred libraries was formalized when the Daoist scriptures first came to be compiled by Lu Xiujing (406–77). Liu arranged them into three subdivisions that he termed grottoes: the Cavern of Mystery, the Cavern of Perfection and the Cavern of Spirit. These grottos were the repositories of the original texts, presided over by deities, who had transmitted them to earth at various times and places. These three grottoes moreover corresponded to the three major heavens, Jade Clarity, Highest Clarity and Great Clarity, each divided into twelve sub-heavens, making thirty-six in total. The grottoes, as libraries, thus represent the chief means of communication between the celestial and earthly realms in Daoism.
Way is marked by the spaces that Zhou inhabits and by the encounters and revelations that those spaces facilitate. Narrative, in the biography of Zhou Ziyang, is geography; time is space.

The centrality of space as a category of cultivation is further emphasized in the sermon that Zhou preaches when he receives his title:

The nothings of the heavens are called emptiness. The nothings of the mountains are called grottos. The nothings of human beings are called chambers. The empty spaces in the mountains’ viscera are called grotto courts. The empty spaces in human heads are called grotto chambers. In this way the Perfected take up residence in the heavens, the mountains and human beings. When the Perfected enter the state of nothingness, a grain of rice could contain Mt. Penglai, and embrace the six harmonies, yet heaven and earth would not be able to contain it.

From this sermon it is evident that the nature of space and the relationship between nothingness and emptiness constitutes the chief pre-occupation of the newly Perfected person. Whereas Buddhist metaphysics conceives of emptiness in terms of ontology and psychology, it is clear that this Daoist metaphysical teaching dwells on the existential, locative nature of space. The spaces of the heavens, the mountains and the body are all alike. They partake in the same character of nothingness 無 which is precisely what enables them to be places of residence 處 for the Perfected.

Zhou Ziyang’s progress along the Way, therefore, has been an encounter with nothingness, an encounter with empty spaces. The spaces in the mountains enabled him to encounter the teachers who revealed texts to him. The spaces in the body enabled him to visualize the gods of his body. The nature of this Daoist nothingness or empty space is that it transcends all place, or as the text puts it, “a grain of rice could contain Mt. Penglai, and embrace the six harmonies, yet heaven and earth would not be able to contain it.”
Fig. 1 Diagram of Yin and Yang Rising and Falling within the Structure of the Body
Knowledge 知道, Cultivation 修道 and Success 得道

I want in the final section of this essay to reflect on the relationship between three Chinese terms: 知道 to know the way; 修道 to cultivate or practice the way; and 得道 to obtain the way or to be successful. These three terms constitute the important moments in Zhou’s hagiography and perhaps suggest an affinity with pragmatic theories of education.

Knowing the way is the first stage of Zhou’s education. To know the way means that he has the ability to discern the true nature of Su Lin, his first Daoist teacher. Zhou knows that there is a way to be followed. He has the ability to discriminate, to see the importance of the hidden nature of reality. How to achieve this level of initial discrimination seems not to be worry Daoists. Rather they seem to accept that some people will get it and others won’t. The important task for Daoists is to take those who have already identified the necessity for embarking on the journey further along the path.

This thus leads to the most important theme in Daoist religion and literature, namely, cultivating or practicing the Way. Note that this term 修道 does not just mean self-cultivation in the sense of a purely disengaged, self-focussed onanistic form of spirituality. Rather, the cultivation of the self, Zhou’s progress towards perfection, takes place through engagement with the Daos, that is, fields of engagement, spatial contexts that provide the the possibility for Zhou’s progress. Zhou makes progress because he cultivates the spaces where transfigurative encounters can take place.

Finally, this hagiography is presented as the story of someone who was, in the end, successful. He obtained the Dao and was awarded the title of Perfected and granted the right to fly in dragon-pulled chariots. But what Zhou’s success means is that he was ultimately able to align his own nature with what was fated or destined for him. To obtain the Dao, to become a perfect human, means very profoundly, to attain a perfect state of grace or effortless action 無為 wherein the adept’s identity is so seamlessly co-ordinated with the Dao that there is no gap between who he is and
what he can be. This end of effort, this complete transparency of identity and existence Zhou achieves through the cultivation of empty spaces that facilitate transfigurative encounters. Discriminatory knowledge is the foundation. Cultivation of space is the method. Transparency, or the fusion of horizons of self and context, is the result.

List of Possible Plagiarisms


