The Way of Highest Clarity
The Way of Highest Clarity

Nature, Vision and Revelation in Medieval China

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To Anne M. Oppenheim
& Michael J. Oppenheim
There is in God (some say)
A deep, but dazzling darkness; as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear;
O for that night! where I in him
Might live invisible and dim.

From *The Night* by Henry Vaughan (1621–1695)
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Introduction

This book investigates the concepts of nature, vision and revelation within the worldview of the medieval Daoist movement known as the Way of Highest Clarity (Shangqing dao 上清道). It does so by focusing on three Daoist texts associated with that movement, which are presented in a parallel Chinese-English edition. The overall goal is to help bring this tradition to the attention of students of religion and theology and to make the case not only that this is a sophisticated and complex religious tradition in its own right, but also that it is a key element of China’s religious heritage, without which it is impossible to claim any basic understanding of Chinese religions. This is a bold claim and deserves some explanation. What is so important about Highest Clarity Daoism and why is it not so well known?

Firstly, Highest Clarity Daoism, originating in the 4th century C.E., represents one of the earliest and most successful attempts to synthesize the foundational religious elements that had already appeared on China’s religious scene. These included shamanism, mystical experiences, astrology, the quest for immortality, meditation practices, court ritual and Buddhist concepts of death and rebirth. The synthesis brought these various elements into a single complex system, the highest goal of which was the transfiguration of the body and its pre-mortem ascension into heaven. Should this goal not be attainable other, lesser, forms of salvation were also available to practitioners so that even if they were to die, they could safely pass through the underworld and be reborn, intact, in the heavens.

This religious system deserves careful study because of its focus on the body and the relations of bodies to the heavens and the afterlife. This is, of course, a major focus of many religious traditions. The preservation of the body into the afterlife has been the goal of pharaohs, emperors and all those who have built elaborate tombs in which carefully embalmed corpses have been preserved for millennia. Though this form of religion is not particularly in vogue in the modern world, where religions place their emphasis on “spirituality” rather than “materiality,” the widespread mod-
ern practices of embalming and viewing the bodies of the deceased and a hesitation about donating organs for transplant both indicate the continuing cultural and psychological importance of the material preservation of corpses. By studying this tradition we can obtain important material for the comparative investigation of widespread human impulses that cut across a variety of cultures and traditions.

Yet Highest Clarity Daoists were not principally interested in the preservation of corpses but rather the transformation of bodies into a form suitable for a life in paradise. In this regard their ideas bear something of a resemblance to the orthodox Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. But unlike the Christian saints who did all they could on earth to fit their bodies for a resurrected, post-mortem life that would take place after the final judgment, Highest Clarity Daoists saw the afterlife as a worst-case scenario. Better still was to avoid death itself by ascending directly to a higher paradise, conceived not as a realm for the grateful dead but for the deserving living. Heaven, the celestial web of cosmic powers shifting in an eternal cycle of light and dark, day and night, yang and yin, was the place for the living, not the dead. This book thus investigates Highest Clarity Daoist theology as a unique and original set of religious ideas about life and death that will be of profound interest to any student of comparative religion and theology.

Highest Clarity Daoism also deserves study by those interested in Chinese culture and history, for it synthesized a unique combination of Chinese cultural and religious factors. In fact its religious practices cannot properly be understood except in the context of earlier Chinese ideas about the functioning of the body and its relation to wider processes in nature. In studying this form of Daoism the scholarly gaze thus engages an exquisite brocade of uniquely Chinese religious practice whose meanings can only be unraveled by careful attention to the particularities of Chinese civilization. Moreover, although Highest Clarity Daoism might appeal to the common religious motivations and existential concerns of human beings, it does so in texts couched in a rare and difficult language, even for those who are at ease with classical Chinese. Its documents are thus of high value from the point of view of linguistics and literature.

Indeed the complexity of its language is an essential characteristic of the tradition because it was, first and foremost, an esoteric tradition into which one had to be initiated through years of study and practice. It was not designed, like the five pillars of Islam, for easy and widespread prac-
Nor did it seem to develop a wide lay following, as did Mahayana Buddhism, where the interaction between the community and the laity produced a rich cross-fertilization that helped Buddhism emerge as one of the most powerful religious forces in the world. Perhaps for this reason it came about the Highest Clarity Daoism no longer exists in the form that it did in the fourth century. Of course this is true for all religions. But the difference is that no-one today has quite the same claim upon this tradition as other historical forms of Daoism, as the Highest Clarity patriarchate was absorbed into the Orthodox Unity branch of Daoism in the fourteenth century and its practices were absorbed and transformed into the language of inner alchemy that continues to this day in Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真) Daoism.

This, then, gives us a clue as to why Highest Clarity Daoism is not so well known. In terms of organizational structure, it is a dead esoteric tradition. However, this does not mean that it is important only for its historical value. Although it would be perfectly possible for a historian of religion to explain Highest Clarity Daoism in terms of its role in developing and transmitting a wide array of Chinese religious concepts and practices, this book seeks rather to explain and argue for its significance in the conceptual realm of religious ideas and theologies. In doing so it treats Highest Clarity Daoism not so much as a dead tradition, but something that was, at one time, a live option within the religious imagination of human beings. This book thus pays attention to the ideas and practices of the tradition in their own terms and in terms of the comparative study of religion. It does so by focusing not on personalities and events, but on the theological concepts of the tradition and in particular the concepts of nature, vision and revelation, concepts that are familiar to a wide variety of religious traditions, but which receive a distinctive treatment in Highest Clarity Daoism.

Its concept of nature, for instance, is an expansive one that encompasses the realm of humans, earth and the heavens in a single, but complex, cosmic process of generation and decay, expansion and contraction. Its concept of revelation is founded on the central significance of religious texts transmitted by the hypostases of elemental cosmic powers. Their chief function is to unite the heavenly and earthly worlds so as to provide a means for humans to achieve salvation. The meditative practice revealed by these texts is that of inner vision, and this is the means by which humans can enter into a communicative reciprocity with the heavenly world.
and thereby achieve salvation. These concepts of nature, vision and revelation point to an overarching “economy of cosmic power” in which religion provides adepts with a repertoire of practices, or “transactions,” by means of which to mediate cosmic power and negotiate their ultimate fate or destiny. Highest Clarity Daoism is a single, comprehensive religious system, but one that requires careful attention to detail to explain, not least because the details are likely unfamiliar to the contemporary Western, or even Chinese, reader.

Underlying the book’s exposition of these topics is the translation of three texts associated with Highest Clarity Daoism. The first of these texts is the hagiography of a Daoist saint, born Zhou Yishan 周義山 (80 B.C.E.–?), who eventually attained the rank of a perfected transcendent being and was granted the title “Perfected Purple Yang.”

Complementing this text is the first part of the Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected, which details, among other things, two visual meditation practices that are typical of Highest Clarity Daoism. These practices, the Method of the Nine Perfected and the Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao both explain a course of visualization that lasts the period of a year in which at various times and dates gods are to be visually actualized and prayed to. In the first form of meditation, practitioners see the gods enter the body and dwell in specific organs corresponding to the systems of circulating qi, or vital force. In the second, they visualize themselves ascend into heaven and obtain audiences with the highest gods of the Daoist pantheon. Thus the individual joins his body intimately and socially with the ranks of the transcendent celestial powers and, with this connection firmly sealed and recorded in the offices of the heavenly courts, finds salvation.

The third of the texts is the preface to a much longer, key Highest Clarity text, written by the late patriarch, Zhu Ziying 朱自英 (976–1029). It constitutes a mature theological reflection on the relationship between sacred texts and the metaphysics of the Daoist cosmos.

All three texts, detailing biography, practice and theory reveal a key element of the Highest Clarity experience. Together they can be used to help explain the overall religious system: the story of an ideal Daoist life provides a vivid context for understanding the specific details of the various practices; and the insights of Zhu Ziying reveal how the subsequent tradition came to understand these practices in metaphysical terms.
Introduction

While it might seem odd to use texts from different historical periods to discuss a single religious phenomenon, this book offers an interpretation of the tradition based upon the argument that they display a theological, rather than historical, unity. This single constellation of theological ideas is thus the proper focus of the book.

From this description, the reader will be aware that my hermeneutical approach is first and foremost that of sympathy, rather than criticism. My goal is not to unmask how the religious ideas of Highest Clarity supported the patriarchal structures of Chinese society, nor to explain the transmission of religious texts in terms of the economic function of religion. It goes without saying that it is important to examine religion in terms of its impact on society and economics. I, however, am not a social scientist or an economist, but rather a scholar of religion interested in religious ideas for their own intrinsic value. My goal is thus largely imaginative, rather than social or historical: to recreate for the contemporary reader some of the principal aspects of the worldview that functioned in Highest Clarity Daoism.1

In so doing I am motivated by an urgent moral concern for a dialogue of civilizations between China and the West in the arena of religious ideas. Religious ideas, even those originating thousands of years ago, convey core motifs and values that are relevant for understanding contemporary social forces. In the shadow of economic globalization, religions and cultures are being brought into mutual engagement in ways never previously contemplated. This requires students of culture and history to play a role in advancing a dialogue of civilizations. For such a dialogue to be real, the “other” has to be treated with understanding, which is to say occupy-

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1 For an excellent socio-historical study of the Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang see Tsai (2008). Tsai’s approach to the study of medieval Chinese religion, which is by far the dominant approach among academic scholars, explores what the texts reveal about the practical functioning of Highest Clarity religion: how it adopted the traditions of earlier forms of Chinese religion and wove them into a new synthesis. Such an approach gives information principally about religion as a socio-historical phenomenon. This book, however, is concerned with the theology and spirituality of Highest Clarity religion. It is interested in developing an interpretation of the texts in which the religious ideas expressed in those texts take center stage. It is also interested in how those ideas compare with other theologies and how those ideas can be valuable in and of themselves as artifacts of human religiosity.
ing an intellectual ground that could potentially be common to both parties.

This book aims to recreate Highest Clarity Daoism as a conversation partner in the study of religious ideas. It does not aim to pronounce judgment upon it. This is quite different from the traditional understanding of the scholar as someone in an ivory tower explaining what other people mean. Understood in this more vulnerable light of dialogue, engaging with the “other,” even a dead, esoteric “other,” is a form of moral activity as well as intellectual activity. It also has the destabilizing effect of calling into question the validity of our own presuppositions. As J. J. Clarke writes:

> It is rather an agonistic encounter, an engagement in which we try to enter into and thrive on differences rather than seek to obliterete them, a potentially subversive engagement, in which we are compelled to confront the assumptions, limitations and fractures in our own cultural traditions. It is thus a way of experiencing ourselves from the outside, as other; a point of departure which can lead to an enhancement of self-understanding. (Clarke 2000: 11–12)

This book does not complete the hermeneutical circle by systematically exploring the ways that Highest Clarity Daoism subverts the assumptions of modern or postmodern cultures. That is a project for another day. Rather this book aims to explore Highest Clarity Daoism imaginatively, from the inside, as a religious tradition whose practices and concepts are of intrinsic value as artifacts of human civilization and elements of the human religious spirit.

The major Western scholar who has dealt with this tradition is the late Isabelle Robinet who worked at the University of Aix-en-Provence. She, perhaps more than any other Western scholar of the Daoism, attempted to penetrate Highest Clarity Daoism from the perspective of its philosophical and religious meaning. Her major work on this subject was translated into English and published by the State University of New York Press as *Taoist Meditation* in 1993. Her more detailed two-volume investigation of specific Highest Clarity texts was published in 1984 by the École Française d’Extrême-Orient and is available in specialized research libraries. More recently, American scholars such as Nickerson (2008) and Bokenkamp (2007) have made enormous inroads into studying the history of religions in this period. With the benefit of their work, it now
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seems as though the public attention can be focused on this religious movement once again.

Despite these recent developments, the Way of Highest Clarity remains a relatively unstudied movement within a relatively unstudied religion. Part of the reason for this perhaps lies in the difficulty of engaging and interpreting the chief sources for this movement, religious scriptures that were transcribed and republished in the various editions of the Daoist Canon (Daozang 道藏). These texts are difficult like all Daoist texts because until very recently they have only existed in unpunctuated reprints of the 1445 Ming Dynasty Daoist Canon (Ming Zhengtong Daozang 明正統道藏). Since then, a more recent punctuated version has been published in Beijing, but early anecdotal reports indicate that not all scholars are happy with the result of editing and punctuating the texts. Nevertheless, having a punctuated text is an enormous advantage over a non-punctuated text and takes away much of the labor that is required in generating a reading of the text. Even with some of this labor already undertaken, the task of translating a text into English still requires considerable effort. This is true for Highest Clarity Daoist texts perhaps more than any other branch of Daoist texts because they were held in such high esoteric regard and display high literary value. The texts are valuable not simply for the instructions they convey about how to reach the heaven of Highest Clarity, but because they were considered to be written manifestations of the Dao itself and thus they were powerful and valuable simply in their own right. The result is that the texts are particularly obscure, containing a vast complexity of religious meaning within a few characters.2

2 As an example of the polysemous character of Highest Clarity texts it is worthwhile recalling Edward Schafer’s discussion of the Three Primes, or intermediary deities who take up residence in the body. He writes: “Three Primes (san yüan) is a multivalent term, but because of the belief in correspondences—the doctrine that phenomena conceal identities or harmonized alter-egos—the various ‘meanings’ given to the expression do not exclude each other. Primarily they are three astral deities, who may project themselves into the three great ‘palaces’ of the human body” (1978: 394). Here Schafer indicates that a text that refers to the Three Primes may simultaneously be indicating the three deities, the three fields of the body in which they reside, or other natural phenomena with which they might be in correspondent relation.
In order to make these texts more accessible to scholars and the general public I have chosen to present a punctuated edition of these texts along with a parallel English translation. First, a word about punctuation. The first task for the translator is to choose how to punctuate the text, deciding where sentences begin and end. As an example of the choices required in punctuating the text, it is instructive to compare my translation of the preface to the *Perfected Scripture of the Great Grotto* with a small fragment that appears in Isabelle Robinet’s *Taoist Meditation* (1993: 16). Robinet’s translation runs as follows: “The Ta-tung … causes a propitious Wind to blow and guides the dance within the void. Suddenly (*hu*) the respiration disperses the form of the ten thousand things… .” My translation reads: “… whirling an auspicious wind, drumming and dancing. In midst of nothing, suddenly there is breathing in and out, which scatters the myriad spirits on their way.” The basic difference between the two translations comes from how to punctuate the text. Robinet chose to end the first sentence after the words “within the void” (*wu zhong* 無中). I, on the other hand, chose to end the sentence immediately before those two characters. I did so because I considered that those two characters ought to be paired with the next four characters “suddenly there is breathing in and out” (*xu you huxi* 歘有呼吸) to form a single phrase “In the midst of nothing, suddenly there is breathing in and out” (*wu zhong xu you huxi* 無中歘有呼吸). However, it is highly likely that a good case could be made for either of these ways of punctuating the text and, consequently, the specific translations that ensue therefrom.

The reader will inevitably discover that I have sacrificed much poetry on the altar of meaning, and the result is probably a mediocre version that is neither as poetic as the original, yet at times both infuriatingly literal and maddeningly imprecise. I have opted for this unsatisfying middle ground because the reader who has some knowledge of classical Chinese will be able to see how I have made the choices that I have made. My goal here is that these translations will not serve as the last word on Highest Clarity Daoism but will allow the student of classical Chinese to embark on the journey towards reading Highest Clarity Daoist texts. By showing how I have translated and interpreted these texts, I hope that other scholars will be tempted to produce more and better versions of these and other texts. In this way, the field will gain a valuable advanced pedagogical tool and, in the long run, scientific knowledge about Highest Clarity Daoism will be advanced.
A word about the translation of some key terms: the term Highest Clarity (Shangqing 上清) may be familiar to some readers as Highest Purity or Supreme Purity. I find the term “purity” unsatisfying because it connotes a whole wealth of meanings in the English language that derive from Biblical concepts of purity and holiness. The concept of purity is furthermore a well-developed category in anthropology and relates to concepts of contagion and disease. None of these meanings are clearly present in Highest Clarity Daoism. Although there are occasional references to the adept’s purifying himself from the turbidity of the world, the sense here is that this turbidity does not constitute a moral contamination that is preventing his ascension to heaven, but rather that the turbidity of the world clouds the adept’s vision. In fact, the adept relies on the penetrating clarity of his faculty of inner vision in order to ascend to heaven. Thus it seems more accurate to translate the Chinese term qing 清 as “clarity” rather than “purity.” The second advantage here is that the English word “pure” is now freed up to translate the Chinese character su 素 without fear of confusion. A common translation for this latter term is usually “simple,” but this does not always have a positive meaning in English and the alternative translation of “unadorned” is perhaps too unwieldy for frequent use.

From this the reader will also learn that I have taken the approach of translating as much as possible in a straightforward English style even though the texts themselves do not readily lend themselves to this type of translation. In fact a very strong argument could be made for translating obscure Chinese characters with obscure English words in order to convey something of the feeling that the text might have even to someone who reads Classical Chinese. Indeed this is a major approach to translation that has been taken in Daoist Studies. Its chief exponent was the late Edward Schafer, who employed a rich and florid vocabulary of polysyllabic words to convey, quite brilliantly, the flavor of the Chinese original. I, however, have chosen a different tactic. In the translations them-

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1 See, for example, his translation of the glorious description of Lady Wei that appears in her hagiography: “Empyreal phosphor, glistening high; / Round eyelines doubly lit; / Phoenix frame and dragon bone; / Brain colored as jewel-planetoids; / Five viscera of purple webbings; / Heart holding feathered scripts.” (A Bag of Pearls from the Three Grottos Sandong zhu’nant 三洞珠囊 8. 22b; trans. Schafer 1977: 230). The use of obscure words such as “empyreal,” “viscera,” or “planetoids” gives a wonderfully archaic and poetic feel to the text.
selves, I have attempted to forge a slightly more concrete and down-to-earth vocabulary because my overall view of Highest Clarity Daoism is that it is a tradition rooted in concrete bodily experience rather than vague mysticism or abstract theology. It would, indeed, be a mistake to take the high literary value of its texts as indicating some sort of intellectualism. Rather, in Highest Clarity Daoism, the phrases are obscure and complex because they are attempting to convey something of the highly complex somatic experience. It should never be forgotten that this is a tradition that revolved concretely around the bodies of its followers.

I have, however, supplemented the translations with footnotes and commentary expanding and, perhaps, complicating the translations, perhaps even to the extent of making something that appears straightforward on the surface more obscure in the commentary. Indeed the complex and often paradoxical relationship between obscurity and clarity is one of the chief philosophical concerns that underlie the revelations, a theme discussed more extensively in chapter four.

The titles of Chinese texts are generally given in English. The first time a text is mentioned, the Hanyu pinyin and Chinese characters are also given. The titles of texts from the Daoist Canon generally follow the standard translations established in Schipper and Verellen (2004). A complete list of texts from the Daoist Canon, with Chinese characters and Hanyu pinyin transliteration, can be found in the bibliography.

Readers who are not interested in the details of translating classical Chinese, will, I trust, benefit from these translations too, because they will be able to see the raw materials, at least in English version, upon which I have based my analysis and drawn my conclusions. None of these texts has been translated into English before. Only the first has been translated into a Western language, but it is published in a book not easily available. Without such translations, knowledge of Daoism will remain the province of a small handful of elite scholars who have been fortunate enough to spend many years of their life learning classical Chinese. Daoism is a vast, prodigious, yet obscure religion, and it requires an army of scholars

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4 For this reason I have chosen to translate Dadong zhenjing 大洞真經 as the Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto, rather than the Scripture of Great Profundity. Both are equally valid, with “grotto” emphasizing the concrete, locative character of the text, and “profundity” expressing the abstract, mystical character of the text. See also footnote 6 on page 37.
to decode it. Such scholars will not be produced unless there is a more widespread public appetite for learning about it and until there are more students wishing to enroll in college courses about Chinese religions. This will only come about when more texts are translated into English.

The one ethical dilemma here is that all of the texts translated in this book are esoteric texts that were never supposed to have been published beyond the circuit of initiates. The texts contain explicit warnings that they should not be widely circulated nor, presumably, translated into English. The fact that these are historical texts—collected and published in China for five hundred years yet not the sacred preserve of a living sect—gives the contemporary translator some license in this regard: I do not believe that I am causing offense to any extant religious group by divulging these texts here. On the other hand, my regard for the texts behooves me to disclaim responsibility for any misfortune that may befall those who take up this book. The translations here have been provided for intellectual rather than practical, purposes, and I do not advise anyone to take up Daoist practices of any kind except under the supervision of an experienced Daoist master. Gentle reader, you have been warned.
4. Revelation

Along with nature and vision, revelation is a key concept of Highest Clarity Daoism. Drawing on existing understandings of revelation within Daoism and, more broadly, what has been termed the “southern” tradition in Chinese religions (see Strickmann 1981), it forged them into a synthesis with unique characteristics and emphases.

Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343), one of the leading intellectuals in medieval Daoism, emphasized the concept of divine revelation. In his biography of Zhang Daoling 張道陵, the first Celestial Master, Ge Hong glosses over the details of Zhang’s meditative activities, and focuses simply on the result: a visit from a panoply of divine beings and the bestowal of the Covenant of Orthodox Unity, by the divinized Laozi. From his account it is not clear what form exactly this covenant took, though later in the text Ge Hong is clear about the results, which were that Zhang Daoling was able to heal the sick and attract a large following. The basic pattern that this text reveals remains unchanged into the Highest Clarity movement: through effort on the part of the individual it is possible to be granted an audience with a divine being, the result of which is the bestowal of spiritual authority and cosmic power upon the adept. The spiritual authority is accompanied by the bestowal of ranks, titles, texts and other insignia. The cosmic power is evident in the biospiritual transfiguration that these insignia symbolize. This, then, is the general concept of revelation which forms the parameters within which Highest Clarity Daoism works.

Before examining the specific features of that revelation, it is worthwhile pausing to consider some of the fundamental assumptions that the general concept of revelation entails. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to examining how these general concepts are specified within the Highest Clarity revelations. It is important to consider some of the general assumptions, or “absolute presuppositions” about the theology of the Highest Clarity Daoist revelation because these reveal important features about the overall worldview. These general features within the topogra-
phy, so to speak, of Highest Clarity Daoism are in many respects common to many traditions within the general human religious experience.

First, the concept of revelation implies from the beginning a complementary concept of mystery. If there is something to be revealed, then by definition before its revelation it must have been secret or hidden or, in a word, mysterious. Highest Clarity Daoism, in fact, takes this element of mystery to be the foundation from which revelation takes place. That is to say, “mystery” (xuan 玄) is not simply the complement of revelation, but is, in fact, its foundation or origin. The concept of mystery was examined in terms of nature and metaphysics in chapter two. Mystery was likened to the empty spaces that form the inside, so to speak, of the spiritually significant locations within the natural realm and the human body. Just as nature is seen to be a metaphysical expression of the creative function of the mystical power of the cosmos, so also the texts and revelations of the Highest Clarity tradition can be examined as literary expressions of that same mystical, creative power.

The second general concept of revelation, then, is that of religious revelations as sacred communications, different in some fundamental way, from ordinary human communications. The argument here is that the religious significance of revelation does not exclusively lie in the content of the message that is transmitted but also in the way in which the transmission takes place. In order to understand the significance of religious revelations from a theological perspective it is important to consider the formal nature of the message as much as its pragmatic content. The religious significance of the Koran, for instance, cannot be summed up solely in the meaning of the words, but relies also on the fact that Muslims believe the Archangel Gabriel dictated it in a beautiful language to an illiterate man. The form of transmission and its pragmatic meaning are inextricably linked in Muslim theology. Thus in terms of the present study, while the previous chapter examined the more practical aspects of Highest Clarity scriptures, such as when and how to perform various visualization methods, this chapter will consider the overall form and communicative structure of those same texts. The theory advanced here is that religious scriptures (jing 经) have a formal structure and process of transmission that is in itself religiously significant. This sacred process, more so than the actual content, marks out Highest Clarity religious texts as sacred.
Closely linked to this movement from mystery to revelation is the idea of an inherently hierarchical disclosure of knowledge. A revelation implies that one person discloses to another person a mystery, some piece of information of which that person was previously unaware. Before the revelation, the revealer occupies a higher epistemological position than the person to whom the revelation is given. Paradoxically, however, while the process of revelation implies a hierarchy of knowledge over ignorance, the effect of the revelation is to collapse that hierarchy uniting both parties in an equal knowledge. A revelation is thus a gift, or an act of gracious enlightenment on the part of the one who possesses the knowledge to the one who does not and brings about an equality of relationship between the two. In order to understand Highest Clarity revelations it will be necessary to examine how they implicitly constructed and deconstructed these hierarchies of knowledge.

The fourth and final general concept of revelation that this chapter will examine is the idea of a revelation as the personalization of sacred knowledge. As the previous chapters have documented, the Highest Clarity tradition focuses on dissolving the boundaries between the heavenly and the earthly realms. Scriptures reveal methods for humans to transform themselves into some more divinized state of being. But the corollary of this is equally important. Revelation implies that gods must descend to the level of the humans in order to communicate with them. While it is only natural for humans to focus on the latter part of this process, nevertheless, revelation does imply the “descent” of the gods just as much as the “ascent” of humans.

One important feature of this descent is the personalization of the gods. Whereas the creative mystery of the cosmos is by definition unfathomable and unattainable, the very concept of specific revelations implies the transformation of this raw creative power into some personalized form. Since communication is inherently the transmission of meaning from one mind to another, for gods to communicate they must become personalized, that is they must condescend to speak in words, transforming their lofty sentiments into forms that mere mortals can grasp. Thus in many religions there is a distinction to be made between an absolute cosmic god and an intermediary deity whose chief function is to communicate “down below.” This can be seen in West African religions where the high creator god is rarely the object of people’s religious life; instead ordinary people deal with an intermediate level of deities who have
authority over specific areas in people’s lives. Similar comparisons can be made in many religions where intermediary deities or quasi-divine spiritual beings such as angels translate the abstruse thoughts of the divine mind into words that the human brain can grasp.

Intriguingly, Highest Clarity Daoists take this element of “personalization” and “descent” quite literally, envisioning the gods as resident in the bodies of the practitioners. Revelation is not simply a spiritual or cognitive process, but a material, somatic process too.

REVELATION AND MYSTERY

The most paradoxical aspect of revelation lies in its relationship to mystery, a relationship that is well developed in the Highest Clarity tradition and forms the theological heart of Zhu Ziyng’s preface to the Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto, translated in chapter seven. The main function of this preface is to explain, albeit in rather mystical language, how the scripture came into existence. To do so, he has to start with cosmology. He writes:

In midst of nothing, suddenly there is breathing in and out, dispersing the myriad spirits on their way, moving them to the utmost, then returning them to stillness. It is shadowy and indistinct, [yet] it encloses the marvelous phenomena of the Imperial [Lord] and [Supreme] Unity. This is called the “blending of the whirlwind.”1 It forms the common root of the stem of Heaven and Earth and the source of the creative power of emperors and sages. (p. 213)

Here Zhu Ziyng is offering his definition of the key Highest Clarity concept, found in the Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto, known as the “blending of the whirlwind” (huifeng hunhe 循風混合). In his understanding this “whirlwind” represents the fullness of the creative process by which the spirits are flung outwards, filling the void with their presence and then returning to a state of inaction. But as Zhu continues with his description, it becomes less clear that he is making metaphysical pro-

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1 The previous paragraph explained the “great grotto” as the swirling emptiness of the cosmos that connects all forms together. Similarly this paragraph has described the parallel process within the body whereby through the centrifugal force of the “whirlwind” the adept invokes the various spirits of the cosmos gathering them within his body.
nouncements and more evident that he is also referring to a spiritual process that can be grasped by human beings.

The next sentence focuses on the body of the Highest Clarity practitioner: “in the nothingness, suddenly there is breathing in and out” (wu zhong xu you huxi 無中欲有呼吸). Thus the “whirlwind” also refers to the ecstatic state in which the spirits can “enclose the wondrous phenomena of Imperial Unity.” The “myriad spirits” in Highest Clarity Daoism normally refer to the spirits that reside in the body rather than the abstract spiritual forces of the cosmos. At this point, Zhu seems to be indicating that just as the creation of the cosmos involves a swirling expansion and contraction at the macrocosm level, so also at the microcosm level there is a spiritual process by which human creatures can grasp the “source of this creative power” (zaohua zhi yuan 造化之原).

The way Zhu Ziyung describes this process makes use of the famous phrase in ch. 21 of The Way and Its Power in which the Way is described as “shadowy and indistinct” (huanghu 恍惚). In the context of this passage, however, this phrase can also be seen as referring to the body of the practitioner who is “in a trance” (huanghu 恍惚), a phrase that denotes an alternate state of consciousness and recalls the shamanic overtones in the previous sentence in which the multitude of cosmic spirits are “whirling an auspicious wind, drumming and dancing” (yun xiang feng er gu wu 運祥風而鼓舞).²

It is important to remember that Zhu is writing in an allusive way that leaves the subject of these statements deliberately unclear. Zhu’s imagery thus manages to embrace several possible interpretations all at the same time. He is combining the shamanic imagery of drumming and dancing to induce an entranced state with the cosmic imagery of expanding and contracting in a swirling revolution around a metaphysical abyss, and with the Highest Clarity notion of body spirits who “enclose the marvelous phenomena” of the high gods. All of this he describes as the “blending of the whirlwind” which can be understood as a process of creation, revelation and salvation: it is creation in that it is the foundational process of the cosmos; it is revelation in that it describes the ecstatic state in which visions of gods can take place; it is salvation in that it is the source of “transformative power” for emperors and sages. But of these three as-

² See also note 10 on page 214 for more detail on this phrase.
pects of the “whirlwind” Zhu was most interested in the aspect of revelation. The context for these pronouncements is, after all, the preface to the Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto. His goal is to explain how this scripture came into being, and he is locating the scripture firmly in the cosmic processes of creation and transformation. Ultimately, revelation is for him the same process as creation and salvation. The creation of the scriptures is not to be considered in any way supplementary to the creation of the universe: they were part and parcel of the same “whirlwind” process.

Thus Zhu begins the next section of his preface with the following statement:

Thus the thirty-nine Imperial Sovereigns of the heaven of Highest Clarity circulate as perfected ones and shine down to enter the thirty-nine portals of the body. Thereupon, each [perfected one], penetrating through the portal, composes one [of the thirty-nine] sections of the scripture. Its language is profound and abstruse and by using it one can draw in a hundred spirits and summon perfected cosmic forces. This is called “congratulatory clouds opening the gate of life” and “auspicious vapors blocking the portals of death.”

The term “thus” (故) here indicates a logical connection between this section and the preceding section. The metaphysical description of the whirlwind, the breathing in and out and the drumming and the dancing is the means by which the thirty-nine Imperial Sovereigns enter the body and compose (著) the sections of the scriptures. By this point it is evident that the subject of the text as a whole has transitioned from discussing the origins of the cosmos to the origins of scriptures.

Zhu Ziying is claiming that the ultimate authority of scriptures lies with the Dao itself, the cosmic process of creation and transformation, and that this Dao is accessible to human beings through a process of revelation. Revelation thus means the transformation of the ultimate cosmic forces into the Chinese characters of the text. At this point it is important to be clear about how this transformation takes place. Zhu describes the composition of this particular scripture as being a process that takes place “through the door which it [each spirit] had penetrated” (由此其所貫之戶) a phrase that refers to the way in which the

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3 It would be equally plausible to describe this as an act of transfiguration, parallel to the way in which the adept’s body was transformed into a light being.
perfected spirits of the Imperial Sovereigns establish communication with the human who physically recorded the scripture in Chinese characters.

The root meaning of the term guan 贯, translated above as “penetrated,” is a string of coins. The phrase evokes the concept of linking things together by means of their empty spaces. This metaphor indicates that revelation depends on emptiness for the process of transmission, whereby the threads of scriptures string gods and humans together through their empty spaces. The consequence of this is evident in the next sentence: “Its language is profound and abstruse and by using it one can draw in a hundred spirits (ling kuo baishen 領括百神) and summon perfected cosmic forces (zhao zhen pifei 招真辟非).” Since the scriptures are the threads that link the human spiritual world with cosmic powers they are also the means by which humans have access to those forces and can issue commands to them. Thus the relationship between cosmic mystery and spiritual revelation is a reciprocal one. Although mystery must cosmologically precede the revelations of the spirits, the act of revelation has the effect of negating this antecedence, thus permitting the Daoist to enter into a state of equality or unitive fusion with those prior cosmological powers.

In this sense, therefore, it is true to say that the Highest Clarity revelations and the revelations of mass religions such as Christianity and Islam share a common goal which is to overcome the difference between divine knowledge and human knowledge. However, Highest Clarity Daoists construe this relationship in a unique way. In Theravada Buddhism, say, the quest for perfection can be construed as a process of “enlightenment” in which the status of the individual “believer” is gradually transformed from someone who lives in darkest ignorance to someone whose path is shining clear. If this general characterization of many forms of religion holds true, then in this one regard Highest Clarity Daoism is fundamentally different. Revelation does not entail enlightenment: rather it entailed entering more profoundly into the abstruse mystery of things.

A first clue to thinking about this can be seen in the fact that many religious revelations distill the most religiously significant element of their message into a basic quantum of knowledge that they freely make avail-

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4 Chinese coins traditionally had a hole in the middle and so could be strung together in bundles of ten, hundred or a thousand.
able to the masses: “God loves you,” or “Life is suffering,” or “There is only one God and Muhammad is his prophet.” Each of these “nuggets of information” encapsulates the basic “revelation” on which Christianity, Buddhism or Islam is based. By contrast, in Highest Clarity Daoism there is no “basic message” that can transform the individual’s life should he or she understand it. Rather, as the first line of The Way and Its Power says, “The way that can be told is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name.” The key message here is a paradox: that there is no single, ultimate key message. Rather, ultimate knowledge is irreducibly obscure, revelations are irreducibly mysterious and the further one travels along the path of knowledge, the more one dwells in the land of mystery. Paradoxically, therefore, although the Highest Clarity revelations convey practical information that enables the adept to make progress up the hierarchy, the more one progresses, the more one dwells in obscurity.

Before proceeding to examine the function of revelation with respect to this cosmic hierarchy, however, there is one further aspect of the relationship between revelation and mystery that needs to be elucidated. This aspect has already been alluded to above and relates to the way in which Highest Clarity scriptures are both precisely detailed and also maddeningly obscure. Zhu Ziying was not wrong when he referred to the language of the Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto as profound and abstruse (you’ao 幽奧) and indeed this is true of all Highest Clarity revealed scriptures. All of them use highly metaphorical imagery, rare Chinese characters and approach their subject matter in an elliptical fashion. Inasmuch as they described with precise detail the appearance of the gods, at the same time they seemed to make it as difficult as possible to know what those precise visual clues refer to.

An example of the difficult language in these scriptures can be found in an extract from the Biography of the Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center in the Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected:


He focused his mind on lofty emblems, subtly traversed the ten directions and sought out spirits in [the realm of] Abstruse Prime.
He gathered the whirlwind and stirred the infinitesimal, submerging himself in purity and hiding in subtlety. (p. 164)

The text here is using rarified language that is explained in more detail in the translation in chapter six. The question here is why were Highest Clarity scriptures so obscure if they were emblems of the gracious revelation of celestial powers? Ought they not to have been simple and accessible, offering a straightforward path towards spiritual progress? The answer to this question lies in understanding the implicitly hierarchical concept of the spiral or the swirling abyss that was explained in chapter two as the basis of the natural metaphysics of the Highest Clarity Daoist world. Simply put, cosmic power functions in direct proportion to obscurity. The closer to the heart of the Dao a god or a text is, the greater its transfigurative power and also its obscurity and rarity. Moreover, the dazzling radiance of the gods described in Highest Clarity Daoist texts depends for its effectiveness on the contrast with the obscurity of their surroundings. Gods are described like stars, as points of light interrupting an otherwise dismal darkness. Thus the brilliant detail with which the gods are described when they are visualized in the Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected and other Highest Clarity texts is also accompanied by many references to the darkness and void of their surroundings.

In terms of the biography of the Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center, this contrast between the revelation and mystery appears in how obscure language functions rhetorically to build up an ever more mysterious impression of the Lord’s activities. Having built up this crescendo of obscurity, the text then announces in plain and simple language that the Lord received the scriptures, put them into practice and became a perfected being. The climax, that of receiving the scriptures and becoming transfigured, depends both in terms of literature and cosmology on the increasing obscurity of the previous stanzas. It is this “deep but dazzling darkness” on which the mystery of revelation depends as its antecedent, background and complement.

SACRED SCRIPTURES

This second section moves to examine the formal structure of Highest Clarity revelations and argues that their status as sacred scriptures (jing 經) is evident in their formal structure just as much as their pragmatic content. The most important factor is that the scriptures contain within themselves the formal authentication of their pragmatic content, explain-
Revelation

ing how they came into existence and how they came to be transmitted in their present form. They then proceed to reveal techniques that enable the adept to ascend to some transfigured state. The scriptures thus comprise a circular movement, from the heavens to the adept and back from the adept to the heavens. In this aspect of their formal structure they thus imitate the creative process of the cosmos whereby the Dao swirls outwards generating the myriad creatures in a process of extension and at the same time drives downwards in an ever deeper abyss of “intension” or intensification. The form of the texts reflects the creative tension between the outer and the inner; it marks them specifically as sacred texts, threading from the highest reaches of the heavens to the deepest spaces of the body and back again.

The previous section offered a glimpse of this formal movement in the way Zhu Ziying connects the creative power of the cosmos to the revelation of scriptures through gods entering the body. He then goes on to make this more explicit by explaining how the scripture came to be transmitted. Ultimately the text is said to have originated in the primal forces of the cosmos, but then it has to establish a chain of transmission through celestial beings, the gods of the Highest Clarity pantheon who were the bureaucratic instantiations of these cosmic forces.

According to the text, the origins can be traced back to the Queen Mother of the West who received the way from the Heavenly King of Primordial Beginning. The text was engraved in heaven, with a “numinous reflection” (灵镜 lingjing) formed of characters ten feet tall in a mountain grotto. This “reflection,” threaded through the emptiness of the cavern, is connected to the human realm. This implies that through visual meditation in the empty spaces of the body an adept can come to visualize the characters of the text and record them. What most marks the scripture as sacred, however, is the form in

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5 The concept of a “numinous reflection” is usually associated with Numinous Treasure (Lingbao 靈寳) Daoism. It seems here that Zhu Ziying, writing centuries after the original Highest Clarity revelations has appropriated this term to help explain the theology of the Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto.

6 This in fact fits with the way in which the visionary Yang Xi is said to have transmitted the key corpus of Highest Clarity scriptures. In her discussion of the religious function of Yang Xi, Robinet (1984) argues forcefully that it would be wrong to think of Yang Xi simply as a medium who transcribed the teachings of the gods. Rather Yang Xi is to be regarded as someone who, by dint of meditative visu-
which it was transmitted. Zhu Ziying does not emphasize here the fact that the text reveals methods for the adept to ascend to the highest reaches of heaven, but rather its provenance and mode of transmission. The text is religiously significant because it is a cosmic thread that weaves the textures of the human body into the fabric of the cosmos. The fact that the scripture was transmitted in this way thus constitutes the guarantee that the adept who practices the methods revealed in the text will ultimately be successful.

For this reason all three texts that are under investigation in this book contain a preface that explains their origin. The *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang* claims to have been written by Hua Qiao, who, it will be recalled, met the Perfected Purple Yang in a dream. The *Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected* begins with the hagiography of the Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center which, as was discussed above, culminates in his receiving the scripture in question. These accounts of transmission are not simply attempts to emphasize the importance or rarity of the methods contained in the text but are integral aspects of the formal structure of the texts without which they could not be considered as revealed scriptures (*jing* 經). ⑦

If this argument is correct, then it follows that the efficacy of the texts does not solely rely on the correct practice of the methods. Rather the mere existence of the texts in fact reflects the cosmic power from which they originate. Thus while the significance of an ordinary text lies solely

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⑦ This does not mean that there are no literary devices within the texts to emphasize their importance. In fact, Zhu Ziying’s preface to the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto* goes on to record a second method of transmission for this scripture. In this alternate transmission, the Heavenly King of Primordial Beginning gave the scripture to the Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center, the most significant intermediary deity in the Highest Clarity pantheon. Curiously, however, Zhu Ziying notes that although the Heavenly King of Primordial Beginning’s motive in so doing was “to enable the teaching to be conferred upon the lower regions” (*shi jiaoshou xiafang* 使教授下方), the Yellow Venerable Lord did not in fact do this, and thus the scripture came to be kept hidden from the earthly realms. Zhu is here alluding to the extremely precious nature of the scripture: it is a rare treasure because although the Heavenly King gave express instructions for it to be transmitted, in fact this did not happen. Including this “dead-end” account serves chiefly to highlight the text’s rarity and hence its value.
in its intellectual meaning, the significance of a Highest Clarity revealed
text is evident in other ways.

A first indication of this lies in the description of Perfected Purple Yang’s
encounter with the Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center in his *Esoteric
Biography*. The *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto* first makes an appear-
ance in the text when Zhou ascends Mt. Song 嵩, the central of the five
sacred mountains of China and residence of the Yellow Venerable Lord
(hence the inclusion of the term “Central” in his title). Below is Zhou’s
vision of the Yellow Venerable Lord’s residence:

Spirit tigers flanked the entrance to the grotto. Numinous preda-
tors guarded the Taishi peak. The servants on the left were Young
Lads of Clear Perfection; the servants on the right were Jade
Maidens of Supreme Harmony; there were over a hundred of
each. They were offering cups of spirit wine, chanting the thirty-
nine chapters of the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto*, reciting
the twenty-four chapters of the *Marvelous Scripture from [the Pal-
ace of] Vast Possessions* and performing the twenty-one tunes of the
Supreme Purity Numinous Power. In the central court were Az-
ure Waisted Jade Maidens holding Mystery Jade Southern Light-
ning lamps, scattering blossoms and lighting incense; they were
attending to the Yellow Venerable Lord. (p. 135)

In this extract the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto* is significant in
terms of its function in the courtly ritual that is on display. The jade
maidens and young lads are reciting the scripture as part of their service
towards the Yellow Venerable Lord. Again, this points to the sig-
ificance of the text for something other than its pragmatic meaning. Its
spiritual power is being evoked by chanting and in so doing serves to glo-
lify the Yellow Venerable Lord.

A further indication of the non-pragmatic value of Highest Clarity texts
comes at the end of Zhu Ziying’s preface to the *Perfect Scripture of the
Great Grotto*. He wrote:

If, however, you possess this scripture but do not get to study it,
the Heavenly Imperial Lord of Supreme Subtlety will expunge
your death certificate and, beginning from when you received the
scripture, will establish [your] register of perfection. When you
first begin a purification retreat, he will transfer your records to
the Supreme Ultimate, inscribe your name in Eastern Blossom
and send a report about you to the Supreme [Imperial Lord]. You
will be registered and enfeoffed in Turtle Terrace, and ten thou-
sand spirits and a thousand numinous powers will call you the
Great Man of Nine Mysteries. Your position will be that of Immortal Earl of Great Clarity.

Here Zhu Ziyiing is indicating two different relationships between the adept and the text: the first is that of “possession” (有), the second that of “studying” or “reading” (讀). Zhu is claiming that simply possessing the scripture will have the function of enabling the adept to be transferred, post mortem, to the celestial realms and receive a heavenly title. This again is a further indication that the sacredness of the text lies outside its content. Of course studying the text and putting it into practice would enable the adept to achieve an ante mortem ascension into heaven and a correspondingly higher status, but the cosmic power of the text does not lie solely in its being put into practice by the adept. Rather some residue of transfigurative possibility seems to exist in the text itself, presumably by virtue of its transmission. Again this is a further indication that the sacred character of the text does not lie solely in its pragmatic content.

This function of the text develops and extends an earlier Daoist conception of sacred texts as talismans (符). As Isabel Robinet explains (1993: 21), Daoist talismans bear an affinity with imperial seals (印) that authenticate the bearer’s royal power, said to have been handed down from the mythical sage-kings of old. A talisman thus functions as a seal between humans and deities and recalls the reciprocal or covenantal relationship established through the revelation of sacred texts from the celestial realm to the human realm. The possession of talismans, therefore, protects the bearer by advertising that the bearer is in a covenantal relationship with a powerful cosmic being.

Highest Clarity scriptures extend this notion of the protective power of a talisman by claiming that the possession of the sacred text has not merely the power of protection from harm but also the power to transform the body of the adept after death. This implies that the transmission of texts plays an active cosmic role in enabling the transformative processes of the universe to take place. Zhu Ziyiing makes this role explicit when he describes the scripture as follows:

This text is the Emblem of The High Imperial Way, the Marvelous Purple Dawn Volume, [and thereby] regulates the destiny of the [various] ranks within the nine heavens and invokes the numinous powers of the five Imperial [Lords]. (p. 220)
In this sentence the text itself is given a specific sacred function, that of regulating destinies and invoking numinous powers. The text is thus imagined like a god, a specific configuration of raw cosmic power. Moreover, the practical effect of the transmission of this text is to establish a reciprocal connection between the highest reaches of the cosmos and the interiority of the human body:

It moves primal energy to the individual’s personal vital force, connects the transforming existence [of the cosmos] to the mystery gate [in the body] and links the creative powers [of the Dao] to the production of marvels [in the phenomenal world]. It is the pure and dazzling web, which shines through the clouds. (p. 230)

The transmission of the scripture is thus about “moving” or “transporting” (yun 運) the primal forces of the cosmos to the individual body and forging connections (tong 通) between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Its sacred role does not merely lie in practicing the methods that it prescribes, but is a consequence of the very revelation of the text in the first place. The process of revelation in and of itself establishes a reciprocal relationship, like a covenant or a talisman, which binds the recipient of the revelation to the heaven of Highest Clarity.

This reciprocity is evident, argues Robinet, in the notion that as humans recite the texts, which are traces of the originals in the heavens, deities echo in response; moreover texts are said to be written in a double or mirror script or in two colors (1993: 27–8). Zhu Ziyi bears this out when he claims that the received text of the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto* is a “numinous reflection” of the original that is “engraved in the Northern Prime Heaven” (ke Beiyuantian zhong 刻北元天中; p. 219). As the text goes on to indicate, the consequence of this process of establishing a “numinous reflection” accessible by humans was to forge the link between “primal energy” (pifei 辟非) and the “life forces” (mingliang 明梁) of individual humans. Thus the act of revelation and the form of transmission are themselves essential constituents of the function of the scripture, which is to enable the adept to ascend to heaven.

This does not discount the pragmatic content of the texts. Returning to the *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang*, although Zhou has his first
“encounter” with the text in his first glimpse of the Yellow Venerable Lord, his ascension to perfection only comes about when he is formally transmitted the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto*:

Lord Zhou then returned to ascend Everlasting Mountain. Inside the stone chamber he undertook a ritual purification and meditated on the Dao. When he had again done this for a further ninety years, Lord Baiyuan and Lord Wuying and the Yellow Venerable Lord forthwith transmitted to him the thirty-nine chapters of the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto*. There were twenty-one jade lads and twenty-one jade maidens who were all in attendance, continuously burning incense. He studied the book at night and accumulated eleven years [doing so].

After this he rode through the clouds on a dragon-pulled chariot and ascended to heaven in broad daylight. He visited the Palace of Great Subtlety and received the document that appointed him as the Perfected Purple Yang.

As this extract and Zhu Ziyiying’s preface make clear, merely receiving the book, while in itself more than a great honor, is not sufficient to attain the formal title and status of “perfected.” This requires actively studying and practicing its methods. From the text above it will be seen that it takes Zhou eleven years before he finally ascends to heaven and is granted the title of “perfected.”

**HIERARCHIES OF KNOWLEDGE**

The notion of “studying” a text in order to make progress on the path to perfection raises the question of theory of knowledge that is implicit in Highest Clarity texts. Based on the three texts under discussion here, it is clear that Highest Clarity theology envisages knowledge in hierarchical terms, and it is further apparent that Highest Clarity knowledge has two intriguing characteristics: it is locative, in the sense of being tied to particular locations, rather than universal; and it is esoteric, in that it is only comprehensible by and transmissible to certain rare individuals.

To say that knowledge is hierarchical means first of all that knowledge can be distinguished by its quality. Not all knowledge is the same. Some knowledge has a deeper value or a higher purpose than other knowledge. In the hierarchy of Highest Clarity Daoism, the more valuable the knowledge, the fewer the people who know it. Highest Clarity Daoism, as a religious system, therefore, trades in highly valuable information. From a religious perspective this makes the tradition completely different
from a mass, popular religion such as evangelical Christianity, in which
divine revelation is considered to be equally accessible by all people, and
great efforts are made to make the message of the religion widely accessi-
ble.

By contrast, Highest Clarity revelations construe the most fundamental,
vital and significant pieces of knowledge to be the most hidden, rare and
inaccessible. In terms of the sociology of knowledge, therefore, Highest
Clarity Daoism is less like a mass religion and more like theoretical phys-
ics: anyone can understand Newtonian mechanics because it resonates
with our basic mental intuitions about how the world functions; but the
Newtonian model breaks down at the quantum level, and the more one
delves into the fundamental structures of the universe, the stranger it be-
comes until finally it can be grasped only in the highly abstract and rari-
fied language of pure mathematics and linguistic paradoxes. The deeper
one delves, the stranger things become, getting more complex and more
mysterious rather than more simple and more basic. Further knowledge
does not in fact yield enlightenment, that is to say, clarification, but
rather deeper mystery. As much as one might like to believe that the uni-
verse operates according to basic principles that can be grasped by any-
one, the Highest Clarity revelations imply otherwise.⁹

The reason for this “hierarchy of knowledge” in which progress is meas-
ured not by enlightenment but by mystery lies in the hierarchical view of
nature that was explored in chapter two. If the Dao itself is imaged as a
swirling abyss of mystery (xuan 玄) then it follows that the closer one
gets towards the very center, the deeper, more abstract, the more “vacu-
ous” the understanding one has.

Another way of thinking about this comes from emphasizing the locative
quality of knowledge in the Highest Clarity tradition. In this view
knowledge is not universally true or false, but instead connected to loca-
tion. This idea can be seen in the Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple
Yang when Zhou travels from mountain to mountain, in each place en-
countering a deity and receiving a scripture. Specific revelations occur in
specific places and the specific meditative practices revealed in those texts
are ideally to be undertaken in association with specific geographic con-

⁹ Of course this analogy breaks down when one considers that theoretical physics
is in principle comprehensible by anyone who can devote their attention to the sub-
ject, whereas the revelations of Highest Clarity were kept deliberately secret.
texts. To this day, Daoist monasteries located on various sacred mountains maintain traditions of practice and ordination that vary from place to place. This emphasis on locative knowledge is no accident. Even in its very name, the Daoist tradition is associated with knowing “the way” rather than the “truth” (see Graham 1989: 3). Far from being an abstract philosophical question, Highest Clarity Daoists take this to be a concrete, locative question: the “Way to Highest Clarity” depends on where and when you are physically located.

The emphasis on location is also an extension of the concepts of “disposition” and “alignment.” Progress along the Daoist path is made not by applying a universal principle or formula to any given situation, but rather by harmonizing the specific patterns in specific places to enable a specific moment of transfiguration to take place. Daoist scriptures such as the *Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao* thus revealed the comings and goings of the gods, saying what happened where and when so that the adept can put himself in the right location to take advantage of the particular constellation of cosmic forces that happens to be occurring at that particular time.

In the *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang*, Zhou’s travels through mountains reveal a hierarchy of space and a hierarchy of knowledge. As Zhou makes progress, he enters increasingly rare spaces and acquired increasingly profound texts, gaining at the very end the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto* and a vision of the Three Lords in the “empty grotto” of his own brain. In Highest Clarity terminology, then, the highest knowledge is the most profound and mysterious and is revealed only in the rarest of empty spaces. Highest Clarity Daoism is thus not a “catholic” religion claiming a universal and eternal validity, nor is it formulated

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10 The association between mountain grottos 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 grottos: the Grotto of Mystery, the Grotto of Perfection and the Grotto 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 grottos 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 grottos, as libraries, thus represent the chief means of communication and locations of transformative revelation from the celestial to the earthly realms.
around abstract principles or laws that are to be applied in all circumstances. Rather it seems to say that the gods are in the details, that salvation depends on bringing the adept into conformity with the specific contours of his cosmological context and taking advantage of the specific disposition of things.

Given this emphasis on the locative nature of knowledge, it also follows that Highest Clarity Daoism is an esoteric tradition, guarding knowledge within the circle of initiates and generally preventing outsiders from gaining access to this knowledge. Indeed the Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang seems to hold the view that knowledge of the gods and methods revealed in scriptures should be revealed only to those individuals who are qualified to receive it. Qualification, moreover, was expressed as something that was foreordained:

Your name, [however], is in 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.

(p. 126)

Here Huang Tai is explaining to Zhou Ziyang why he is not worthy to be his teacher. Although he is at that moment more advanced in his cultivation of the Dao, he recognizes better than Zhou that Zhou is destined for greater things. Moreover, when Zhou Ziyang eventually receives his title and gives his first sermon, he refers to “all those who are suited to obtain the way of the immortals” (zhu ying de xiandao 諸應得仙道). The phrase conversely implies that some people are not suited to obtaining the way of the immortals. The texts do not offer any theoretical explanation as to why some people are “destined” or “suited” to achieve high status in the afterlife and others are not. Rather, they take it as an absolute presupposition that some people inevitably are destined for the Daoist path and other people are not.

The most important consequence of this esoteric aspect of the Highest Clarity revelations is that it severs any fundamental connection between public morality and salvation. The concept of salvation or ascension that operates in these texts completely transcends the moral questions of the human life. Therefore questions of morality do not play any fundamental role in the status of the adept in the afterlife. On the other hand, this does not imply that Highest Clarity Daoists officially supported immorality of any sort. Rather the reverse was the case. Precisely because the path to transfiguration takes place outside of any fundamental moral
framework, its adepts were warned to guard against any appearance of immorality. The *Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao* is most explicit about this:

Putting this path into practice should not cause people to give any offense in terms of footwear and also headdress and clothing. They should frequently wear fresh footwear and wash their clothes. In following this path, they must not break any laws or taboos. (p. 208)

Of course the appearance of such a prohibition only makes it more likely that Highest Clarity Daoists did in fact appear to flout the conventions of ordinary society. Just as they regarded themselves as the privileged possessors of esoteric knowledge handed down in sacred revelations, so also must this have tempted some to consider themselves in some way above the law, or beyond conventional morality. At the very least, as the *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang* notes, Daoists do not fit in well with conventional society. Such a statement is thus further evidence that Highest Clarity Daoists do not see social ethics as having any intrinsic connection to ascension.

Secondly, this emphasis on esoteric knowledge raises the question of why some people are destined to ascend to the stars and others are not. If salvation does not depend on morality, is it simply the result of some fortuitous connection? The only clue to answering this question lies in considering the prohibitions against further revelation of the text to others. Zhu Ziyang writes:

The treasured secrets of the Heavenly Perfected of Highest Clarity should certainly be handed on only to those who will become perfected persons: only those who have a gold pavilion jade name in the heaven of Great Mystery; [those who have] a precious inscription in purple lettering; those who possess a secret register from the Three Primes of being joined to the dawn-star; or those who have a writ in yellow characters in the Cinnabar Tower. (p. 230)

Coupled with the evidence from the *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang* it can be concluded that the responsibility for the transmission of scripture lies with those who possess it, and that possessing the knowledge of the scriptures also enables them to know the status of others. The text implies that the way to learn about the status of others is to make an inquiry in the appropriate department of the celestial bureaucracy. Checking the records would reveal whose names were listed in the appropriate registers of birth and death. Revelation of the scriptures thus
entails not only the possession of esoteric knowledge for one’s own salvation, but also the means to make inquiries about others. It seems, therefore, that an inherent element in the esoteric knowledge contained in the Highest Clarity revelations is also knowledge about how to continue the transmission of the scriptures. By putting the scriptures into practice, the adept thus gains insight into how and to whom to pass on the knowledge.

DIVINE MEDIATORS

This then raises the final question of this chapter: how did the scriptures come to be revealed in the first place? It is already clear that it occurred through intermediary deities—not so rarified that they were the purely abstract forms of the Dao but gods who could assume quasi-human form and thus enter into intercourse with mortals. In this way the original celestial scriptures, which existed as the pure fabric of the Dao, were themselves transfigured into human meanings and transcribed into Chinese characters. The previous chapter examined how humans could attain a vision of the celestial deities and ascend to heaven. But how were the deities able to descend to the human level?

In all three texts, the Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center plays the key role in mediating between the celestial and earthly realms. His biography opens the Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected and he appears there as the younger brother of the Heavenly Imperial Lord in the Palace of Supreme Great Subtlety. He has a mystical experience, receives the Scripture of the Nine Perfected, then becomes one of the four perfected of the Great Ultimate:

The Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center stands on the left and possesses 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 the clouds of the Three Pure Ladies. (p. 168)

In this description he wears insignia similar to the nine perfected who are to be visualized in the Method of the Nine Perfected. From this we can see that the Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center himself receives the text and became a perfected, using the same methods that the text reveals. Having become a perfected person he then goes on to reveal his own scripture, the Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao. In this text he explains how
Another type of perfected deities such as himself, can function as intermediaries, bringing the adept up to the heavens to have an audience with a powerful lord. Similarly, in the *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang*, the Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center is one of the three lords who are ultimately responsible for guiding Zhou in his journey, being visualized by him and transmitting to him the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto*. These three lords were the Prime Lords (San yuanjun 三元君), sons of the Three Pure Ones (Sansu 三素) or Three Ladies of Simplicity (Sansu yuanjun 三素元君), female deities, associated with three colors (purple, yellow and white) and three cinnabar fields of the body (upper, middle and lower, respectively; see Robinet 1993: 124–127). In the *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang*, their sons inhabit the three grotto chambers in the brain. In the *Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao*, the Three Primes—it is not always clear here whether this term refers to the Three Prime Lords or the Three Pure Ones—function as intermediary deities enabling the adept to fly up to heaven for an audience with a powerful deity.

The Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center thus belongs to a tradition in which three intermediary deities connect the empty spaces of the body to the heavens through feathery chariots that sail through the clouds. The important point here is that in the Highest Clarity tradition, this also makes the Venerable Lord a revealer of scripture. In this regard, the act of revelation is the same as the act of salvation, and transmitting esoteric revelations is the key to bringing the body into connection with the heavens. Whereas other Daoist traditions emphasize the importance of biospiritual cultivation exercises similar in some regards to Highest Clarity practices, this was the first Daoist tradition to align the cultivation of the Dao so completely with the revelation of sacred scriptures. The perfected deities who enable the Highest Clarity practitioner to ascend to heaven are also the deities who transmitted the scriptures in the first place.

This then gives us a further clue as to the nature of “perfection” that is sought by Highest Clarity Daoists. It turns out that “perfection” is quite the wrong sort of word to use to describe these spiritual beings because it implies something final or complete. But as we have seen already, the story of the Central Yellow Lord does not end with his becoming a perfected. He goes on to reveal the *Method of the Nine Perfected* and to create his own scripture, the *Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao*. So also, the Perfected Purple Yang does not disappear into the ether when he becomes a
perfected, but appears in a vision to Hua Qiao to relate his life’s story. To be a perfected, then, is in no way to be finished. It is to become a perfect medium and translucent conduit between the celestial and the human worlds. Perfection, it would seem, points back towards the fundamental concept of the grotto (dong 洞) which connects (tong 通) the inner spaces of the body with the outer spaces of the heavens. The perfected thus do not achieve a final resting place in the heavens, but rather achieve the perfect embodiment of the relentless creative capacities of the Dao. As such they became key figures in the ongoing processes of revelation and transfiguration. To be a perfected, then, is to be one who travels fluidly through the empty spaces of nature and the nonbeing of the Dao.
7. Preface to the Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto

The *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto* (*Dadong zhenjing* 大洞真經; DZ 6) is generally regarded as one of the most important Highest Clarity texts transmitted by perfected Lady Wei to Yang Xi in the original Highest Clarity revelations in the early 360s. The text comprises thirty-nine stanzas revealed by thirty-nine gods, who correspond to thirty-nine points in the body. Each stanza follows a standard pattern. First it names the relevant deity and describes how it can block one of the “thirty-nine gates of death qi” (*siqi sanshijiu men* 死炁三十九門). The adept is instructed to visualize the “perfect qi” (*zhengqi* 真炁) of the deity blocking up the death gate and then recite a prayer. The second part of the stanza begins with a picture of that deity, usually accompanied by others, being visualized by the adept. Multicolored qi from the visualized deities then enters the adept’s body through the Mud Pill and the adept meditates on their names. There then follow one or two prayers to be recited by the adept while his body transforms. Each stanza ends with a talisman, a symbolic token of the fusion between the adept’s body and the spirit.

The *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto* is also significant for its preface, written by Zhu Ziying (976–1029) and translated in full below. The preface, written some six hundred years after the initial revelation of the Highest Clarity scriptures attempts to connect the visualization practices detailed in the text with the revelation and transmission of the scriptures and with the creation of the cosmos. It does so with the image of the “whirlwind,” a mysterious cosmic process that fuses together the human

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1 The term used in this text is *zhensi* 真思 which could be translated as “perfect and think” or “realize through meditation.” It is basically a gloss on the term *cun* 存 which is used in other Highest Clarity texts.
world and the celestial world through the vast “absence” of the Great Grotto.

From a strictly historical perspective it would be difficult to bring this preface into conversation with the two previous texts studied in this book, despite the fact that it is a preface to a text that is contemporaneous with the other two. But the chief reason for including this preface in this study is that the overall goal of this study is theological, rather than historical. The preface is useful for this because it demonstrates how the specific practices of the early traditions of Highest Clarity came to be conceived in metaphysical terms that relate back as far as *The Way and Its Power*. It is thus an important clue to grasping the underlying cosmology and theology of the Way of Highest Clarity and a mature reflection on the significance of the Highest Clarity tradition as a whole. It thus helps illuminate the various concepts that have been alluded to in other forms in the *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang* and the *Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected*. The interpretation of the text offered in the footnotes aims to bring out these connections to the other texts and also attempts to explain the concepts as much as is possible in a concrete, rather than abstract way, in terms of the spatial geography of Highest Clarity theology and in the tradition of revelation that derives from shamanism.

**SYNOPSIS**

The preface itself contains five main sections. The opening connects the scripture to the abstract cosmology of the Dao. Next it explains more concretely how the text came to be created in the heavens and then transmitted by the Queen mother of the West. The fourth section of the text explains the functioning of the text in terms of the cosmology advertised in the opening section. The final section of the text explains how the contemporary Highest Clarity adept is to make use of the text.

**Preface to the Highest Clarity Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto**

Related by the Gentleman who Observes Marvels, Zhu Ziyining, twenty-third patriarch in the Highest Clarity lineage of Mt. Mao.
THE ORIGIN OF THE WAY

Now, the Way is born from nonbeing, secretly harboring a multitude of numinous powers, which no-one can fathom. Spirits condense in the void, marvelously transforming in myriad ways without bounds. In the darkest depths, there is an essence, serene and stable, which shines out light. This great mystery is infinite, reaching across the void, preserving stillness. This is called the “Great Grotto.”

2 This first sentence images the Dao as an infinitely deep pool that conceals a multiplicity of cosmic power within it. The Chinese characters translated as “secretly harboring” (qian 潛) and “fathom” (ce 議) are both written with the water radical on the left. This gives the impression that the abyss is like an infinite abyss of water, deep and murky. The translation uses nautical terms in order to convey something of the flavor of the Chinese.

3 In contrast to the numinous powers (ling 神) which are described in the previous sentence as being born from nonbeing, this sentence focuses on the spirits (shen 神) which condense in the emptiness. It is important to understand the relationship between these two terms. The numinous powers are shadowy cosmic forces that are formed from the nonbeing of the Dao. In contrast, the spirits condense, that is, attain a definite form within the “void.” The “void” in question is not the ontological nonbeing of the numinous powers, but the rather specific empty spaces of the grottos in mountains and in the body. As a result, although the numinous powers are remote and unfathomable, the spirits by contrast have specific forms and locations (and also names). However, the function of spirits is to animate transformation within the cosmos, thus they are always “marvelous,” that is, provoking the extraordinary changes within the cosmos. Moreover, because the Dao is spontaneous, or “self-so” (ziran 自然) the transformations that the spirits generate are “boundless” (wufang 無方) and do not follow any external pattern.

4 The great mystery, identified in the next sentence with the great grotto, is what connects these two aspects of the process of the cosmos, namely the ontological and the locative. The swirling mystery (xuan 玄) reaches to the furthest limit of the empty spaces of the cosmos yet preserves the silence or solitude at the center, so that being is always predicated on nonbeing, and presence on absence. The great grotto, or great pervasion, is thus the connection between things that derives from their all being predicated on the same emptiness.
It accumulates vital essence\(^5\) and gathers in the spir- 
its, driving the ancestral qi round and about,\(^6\) refining 
the spirits,\(^7\) joining with the Way, whirling an 
auspicious wind and drumming and dancing.\(^8\) In 
midst of nothing, suddenly there is breathing in and 
out, dispersing the myriad spirits on their way, mov-
ing them to the utmost, then returning them to 
stillness.\(^9\) It is shadowy and indistinct, [yet] it en-
closes the marvelous phenomena of the Imperial 
[Lord] and [Supreme] Unity.\(^10\) This is called the 
“blending of the whirlwind.”\(^11\) It forms the common 
root of the stem of Heaven and Earth and the 
source of the creative power of emperors and sages.\(^12\)

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\(^5\) The subject of this sentence is the creative process of the Dao. Yet one should 
not make the mistake of interpreting this paragraph in purely cosmological terms. 
These sentences can equally be understood as describing the experience of the High-
est Clarity practitioner. Zhu Ziying considers the relationship between the great 
grotto and the vital essence (jing 精) that is the root of inner-alchemical transfor-
mation. He seems to be claiming that the function of the great grotto is to allow vital 
essence to be accumulated (lian 敛) and then refined (lian 炼). 
The focus of the text 
is thus moving from the great grotto of the cosmos to its counterpart, the interior of 
the body.

\(^6\) As the Method of the Nine Perfected makes clear, when the spirits are visualized 
coming into the “empty spaces” of the various organs of the body, the result is that 
they emit qi which rotates around the body of the adept.

\(^7\) When the qi is emitted and rotates around the body, this has the effect of refin-
ing the spirits of the body, thus transforming the body into a more perfect state.

\(^8\) Here Zhu Ziying uses images derived from shamanistic trance experiences to 
describe the experience of being filled with this revolving qi.

\(^9\) This sentence recalls the earlier sentence in which the swirling of the cosmos is 
described as “reaching out to the void and preserving stillness” (see footnote 4 on 
page 213). In this case, however, the sentence seems to describe the process by 
which the adept goes into a trance, expelling the spirits then recalling them back into 
the body.

\(^10\) This sentence recalls The Way and its Power ch. 21: “As a thing the way is / 
Shadowy (huang 恍) and indistinct (bu 嘴). / Indistinct and shadowy, / Yet within it 
is an image; / Shadowy and indistinct, / Yet within it is a substance.” (trans. Lau 
1963). Here, the words huang and bu (translated here as “shadowy” and “indistinct”) 
are one of a number of metaphors used within The Way and its Power to describe the 
formlessness of the Dao (Moeller 2007: 52). Yet in this particular context, it is ap-
propriate to consider these terms as describing the experience of the practitioner as 
much as the process of the Way. As a binome huàng bu can also have the meaning of
When humans are born, they are endowed with *qi* from the Supreme Ultimate and their activity and stillness is modeled on heaven and earth. They derive their numinous powers from Unity Prime and their contractions and expansions embody *yin* and *yang*.

“entranced” and could be used to describe the experience of one who is in an altered state of consciousness and whose body “encloses the marvelous phenomena” of the gods. Seen in this light, the entire passage can validly be interpreted in two ways: firstly the passage describes the continuous process of creation; secondly the passage describes how the Highest Clarity adept embodies this cosmological process within himself.

The previous paragraph explained the “great grotto” as the swirling emptiness of the cosmos that connects all forms together. Similarly this paragraph has described the parallel process within the body whereby through the centrifugal force of the “whirlwind” the adept invokes the various spirits of the cosmos gathering them within his body.

Just as the Dao is the watery abyss from which the creative power of the cosmos emerges, so also this “whirlwind” embodying of the spirits, is the source of creative transformation for human beings. In fact, says the text, they are the same thing, the “common root of the stem of heaven and earth” (*tiandi puzhi zhi ben* 天地普植之本).

This paragraph is explaining how the whirlwind and the great grotto can be the common root of creative transformation in the cosmos and in human beings. The reason is that humans are fundamentally no different than the other dimensions of the universe because they are “endowed with *qi* from the Supreme Ultimate,” the *axis mundi* of the cosmos which connects the center of earth to the center of heaven. The result of this is that humans embody exactly the same cosmic pattern of *yin* and *yang*, contraction and expansion, as the universe itself.
THE HEAVENLY ORIGIN OF THE SCRIPTURE

Thus the thirty-nine Imperial Sovereigns of the heaven of Highest Clarity circulate as perfected beings and shine down to enter the thirty-nine portals of the body. Thus [the thirty-nine perfected] each composed one [of the thirty-nine] sections of the scripture through the portal that they had penetrated. Their language is profound and abstruse, but by using it one can draw in a hundred spirits and summon perfected cosmic forces. This is called “congratulatory clouds opening the gate of life” and “auspicious vapors blocking the portals of death.”

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14 The text proper has thirty-nine chapters, revealed by thirty-nine deities who enter thirty-nine portals of the body. They can do so when they assume the form of a perfected being, since the perfected are the intermediaries between the heavenly and earthly realms. The perfected are imaged as light beings, or stars, which shine down on the body from the distant reaches of the night sky.

15 Just as the text was created by light pouring down into the bodies of its transcribers, so also the function of the text is to enable the adept to summon spiritual forces into his own body. The method of revelation is in fact the method of salvation.

16 These two phrases refer to how the thirty-nine revelations can have a salvific effect upon the adept. Using language relating to the medical tradition, the revelation of the gods brings life by opening up the vital portals of the body, and inhibits death by blocking up the portals through which noxious forces could invade the body. Thus as each of the chapters is recited, the adept is to visualize the gods descending into the body to perform these dual functions of generating life and blocking death. In a process of spiritual recursion, the recitation of the scripture invokes the content of scriptures, which is in fact the very revelation of the scriptures in the first place.
Thus the Yellow Venerable Lord of Prime Simplicity of the Center gathered the abstruse sentiments of the ranks of sages and compiled them into the Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto, which is why it is called the scripture in thirty-nine chapters. In addition there is one [chapter] from the Whirlwind Imperial [Lord], one [chapter] from the Lofty Prime Male and one chapter from the Five Elders and the Female One. These three chapters are the only additions [to have been included in] the venerable scripture in thirty-nine chapters.

So the Way has three marvels. The first marvel is the thirty-nine chapters of the Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto. The second marvel is the Precious Scripture of the Female One and the Five Elders. The third marvel is the Marvelous Scripture of the Pure Numinous in the Palace of Vast Possessions.

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17 Just as the Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected was created when the Yellow Venerable Lord received both the Method of the Nine Perfected and the Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao, so also this preface reveals the Yellow Venerable Lord to be a key compiler of Highest Clarity texts and thus a key intermediary between heaven and earth.

18 In fact in Highest Clarity theology there are only thirty-six celestial realms, and therefore only thirty-six Imperial Sovereigns (Dihuang) each of whom is responsible for one section of the text. The fact that the text has thirty-nine chapters thus requires an additional explanation.

19 The extant version of this text, The Lofty Jade Emperor's Precious Scripture of the Female One and the Five Elders (Dongzhen gaoshang yudi dadong ciyi yujian wulao baojing 洞真高上玉帝大洞雌一玉检五老宝经; DZ 1313), contains a variety of methods which are of varying periods and degrees of authenticity. They center on visualization involving female deities in the brain (Schipper and Verellen 2004: 558).

20 The Grotto Perfection Supreme Marvelous Scripture from the Room of Pure Spirit in the Palace of Vast Possessions (Dongzhen taishang suling dongyuan dayou miaojing 洞真太上素灵洞元大有妙经; DZ 1314; see footnote 117 on page 135).
Therefore the thirty-nine sections are in fact marvelous sayings from the nine heavens, and the first scripture in the “golden books” of the Lord of Great Purity in the Realm of Highest Mystery.

One name [for this book] is the Dragon Book of the Three Heavens; another name is the Scripture of the Way of Great Perfection of the Nine Heavens. This scripture was created by the Heavenly King of the Primordial Beginning of the Ten Directions of Mysterious Subtlety, who circulated his qi to compile them.

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21 Each divided into four sub-realms, making thirty-six heavens in total.
22 The Heavenly King of the Primordial Beginning (Yuanshi tianwang 元始天王) is to be distinguished from the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning (Yuanshi tianwang 元始天王), a deity who does not make an appearance in Daoism until the Way of Numinous Treasure (Lingbao dao 靈寶道; Robinet 1984: 1.127).
西王姆受道於元始天王，乃共刻北元天中錄那邪國，靈鏡人鳥之山，闍萊之岫，乃於虛室之中，聚九玄正一之炁，結而成書，字徑一丈，于今存焉。元始天王又以傳上清八真中央黃老君，使教授下方，當為真人上昇三辰者焉。中央黃老君隱禁此經，世無知者。故人間地上五嶽天中，永無此經。　

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE SCRIPTURE

The Queen Mother of the West received the Way from Heavenly King of Primordial Beginning and then had [the texts] collectively engraved in the Northern Prime Heaven and registered in Naxie Country, with a numinous reflection on the Mountain of Humans and Birds in the Tower Field Cavern.23 In [this] empty chamber, the vital force of the Orthodox Unity of Nine Mysteries came together, forming calligraphy with characters ten feet tall, which still exists to this day.

The Heavenly King of Primordial Beginning moreover transmitted this to the Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center attached to the Eight Perfected Ones of Highest Clarity, enabling the teaching to be conferred upon the lower regions, so that [the people there] should become perfected persons and ascend to the three starry realms.

The Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center kept this scripture secret and in the profane realm there is no knowledge of it, so that in the human world on earth, on the five sacred mountains and in heaven, this scripture continues to be nonexistent.

23 This indicates the dual, talismanic character of the scripture, with one copy preserved in heaven and a “numinous reflection” in an earthly grotto.
上清天真尤所寶 秘，唯太玄有金 閣玉名，瓊札紫 簡，三元有併晨 秘籙，丹臺有黃 文之字，當必為 真人者乃得受之爾。

The treasured secrets of the Heavenly Perfected of Highest Clarity must only be handed on to those who will become perfected persons: only those who have a gold pavilion jade name in the heaven of Great Mystery; [those who have] a precious inscription in purple lettering; those who possess a secret register from the Three Primes of being joined to the dawn-star; or those who have a writ in yellow characters in the Cinnabar Terrace.

THE COSMIC FUNCTION OF THE SCRIPTURE

This text is [also known as] the Emblem of The Highest sovereign Way and the Volume of the Marvelous Purple Dawn. It regulates the destiny of the [various] ranks within the nine heavens,24 and invokes the numinous powers of the five Imperial [Lords].

It spins out the blending of the whirlwind; and condenses the mystery essence of the nine revolutions [of the heavens]. It unites male and female, and convokes the myriad spirits. Lushly wooded and rich with sound is [the Heaven of] Great Perfection.

It brings cosmic energy down to the individual level,25 connects the transforming existence [of the cosmos] to the mystery gate [in the body],26 and links the creative powers [of the Dao] to the production of marvels [in the earthly world].27 It is a pure and dazzling web, which shines through the clouds. [From] vast emptiness it produces the qi of the numinous gate and [from] uncreated nonbeing it produces years of catastrophe.28

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24 That is to say the use of the text determines the rank that one is able to attain as a perfected being within the nine heavens.
25 Literally, “it moves pifei 辟非 to the bright beam 明梁.” Pifei is vital force that transcends the nine heavens. The bright beam is the equivalent of pifei in the body.
26 This is another way of saying the same as above.
巍巍神館，萬真之淵，金房煥赫，鬱乎上清。  
It is the loftiest residence of the spirits and the deep abyss of the myriad perfected. With golden rooms, lustrous and radiant, rich indeed is [the Heaven of] Highest Clarity.  

其旨幽微，難可究詳。兆能長齋，絕志人間，誦玉篇於曲廈，叩瓊音以震靈，則真人定籙於東華。  
Its implications are secret and subtle and it is hard to fathom in detail. If you can go on a lengthy purification and abstain from human contact, recite the precious chapters on a winding terrace and stir up the numinous powers with sweet sounds of invocation, then your registration as a perfected person will be fixed in the east.

七玄更潤於紫房，制魔王以威神，攝五帝以衛身，萬遍周而肉身飛，七轉召而司命至。  
The seven mysteries will then flood the purple chamber [in your head], overpowering the demon king and thereby dominating the spirits; the five Imperial [Lords] will be knitted together so as to protect your body; always and everywhere your fleshly body will fly [up into heaven] and seven times will [the seven mysteries] call on the Controller of Destinies to appear.

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27 This is another way of saying the same as above.
28 This would seem to indicate that the text has vast creative powers that could be framed either positively or negatively.
29 Whereas the previous paragraph seems to be describing fairly clearly the function of the text, this paragraph seems to be giving a description of the heaven of Highest Clarity. This would indicate that in the mind of the author both the thirty-six heavens and the scriptures that descend from it are really one and the same phenomenon.
30 See footnote 29 on page 168 for a discussion of the “lengthy purification.”
31 If one is able to use the text to invoke the celestial powers, then the spirits of the body will be brought under the authority of heaven and there will be no chance of being led astray by demons. Moreover, as the Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected indicates, the five spirits will be fused together to protect and transfigure the body.
32 The controller of destinies will be summoned so that the adept can remove his name from the registers of death and be inscribed in the registers of perfection.
此大洞之奇章，
總億道而反生，
自無奇毛異質，
金骨玉名，皆不
得有妄披於靈
文，其禁悉依九
真明科。

兆當苦齋三年乃
得讀之。

誦詠此章，萬遍
既畢，中央黃老
道君上奏，太上
命丹鈍綠蓋之
車，九靈使者太
乙司命來迎於
子。

於是五老翼軒，
八風扇羽，神雷
前驅，玉華扶
轂，乘雲駕龍，
即日升天，諸太
素三元君宮中受
書。

是謂上登上清，
受書太極，拜為
高仙左卿者也。

These marvelous chapters of the great grotto sum up
countless ways to revert life, [producing] from noth-
ing marvelous hair, unusual substances, golden
bones and jade names. There should be no false pub-
lication of any of these numinous texts and their
knowledge should be restricted, according to the
Sworn Code of the Nine Perfected.33

If you can endure the hardship of a purification re-
treat for three years, then you will be able to study it.

If you recite these chapters ten thousand times
without ceasing, the Yellow Venerable Dao Lord of
the Center will submit a report, the Supreme [Im-
perial Lord] will order a supreme cinnabar whirl-
wind chariot with a green canopy and the nine nu-
minous powers will dispatch the Supreme Control-
ler of Destinies to come and meet you.

Thereupon the winged chariot of the five ancient
ones, its feathers fanned by the eight winds, spurred
on by spirits and numinous powers, will carry you
into the clouds like a flying dragon and you will as-
cend into heaven that very same day to be granted a
text in the palace of the Three Prime Lords in the
[Heaven of] Great Simplicity.

This is what is meant by ascending to Highest Clar-
ity to receive a text at the Supreme Ultimate and to
be venerated as Left Officer of the High Immortals.

33 The Sworn Code of the Nine Perfected 九真明科 is a Highest Clarity text that
governs the rules of transmission for texts. It is contained in the Grotto Perfection
Supreme Marvelous Scripture from the Room of Pure Spirit in the Palace of Vast Posses-
sions (DZ 1314) and a later edition is available in the Sworn Code of the Four Poles
(Siji mingke 四機明科; DZ 184; see Robinet 2000).
If, however, you possess this scripture but do not get to study it, the Heavenly Imperial Lord of [the Palace of] Supreme Subtlety will expunge your death certificate and, beginning from when you received the scripture, will establish [your] register of perfection. When you first begin a purification retreat, he will transfer your records to the Supreme Ultimate, inscribe your name in [the Palace of] Eastern Blossom and send a report about you to the Supreme [Imperial Lord]. You will be registered and enfeoffed in Turtle Terrace, and ten thousand spirits and a thousand numinous powers will call you the Great Man of Nine Mysteries. Your rank will be that of Immortal Earl of Great Clarity.

The rules for receiving this scripture follow completely the Sworn Code of the Nine Perfected. You should properly comply with them.

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34 The turtle is a symbol of immortality.
35 Another name for Mt. Kunlun, the western paradise of the Queen Mother of the West.
36 Like the other texts studied in this volume, this text ends with a description of what the adept can expect if he is not entirely successful in its practice. As always, the result is not so great as attaining the rank of perfected person, but it is better than what the ordinary mortal can expect. In this case the adept will gain the rank of Immortal Earl, rather than perfected person, and will be installed in the heaven of Great Clarity, rather than Highest Clarity.
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The following table lists the various Daoist texts from the Ming Daoist Canon that are mentioned in this book. The numbers below the letters DZ refer to the index to the 60-volume reprint of the Daoist Canon published in Taipei (Schipper 1975b). A complete cross-referenced index of the various compilations of Daoist texts can be found in Komjathy (2003). English translations of the titles are based on Schipper and Verellen (2004).

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¹ Reading *meng* 盟 for *ming* 明 (Schipper and Verellen 2004: 192-3).
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