

Editorial

Preface: The Sacred and the Secular in Taoism: Theories, Practices, and Communities

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As an indigenous religion of China, Taoism has always been regarded as “Za Er Duoduan” 雜而多端 (Miscellaneous and Multifaceted), just as a famous scholar Ma Duanlin 馬端臨 (1254–1340) said in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Although academic studies on Taoism have been conducted for more than a hundred years, its understanding remains unclear and disjointed because few scholars are engaged in it, and many issues remain unexplored. On the other hand, because of the “Za Er Duoduan” (Miscellaneous and Multifaceted) characteristics of Taoism itself, research from different scholars often takes into account one aspect only, failing to examine Taoism comprehensively and systematically. In view of this, we have established a Special Issue on Taoist studies in the journal *Religions*, hoping to build an academic platform for scholars to publish their achievements and promote the fostering of talents and teams in this field. At the same time, we limit the scope of discussion of this Special Issue to theories, practices, and communities, to illustrate the “Za Er Duoduan” (Miscellaneous and Multifaceted) characteristics of Taoism itself, reminding readers that we need a comprehensive examination to understand Taoism well on the whole.

Unlike the Daojia 道家 (Philosophical Taoism), which pursued spiritual realms and personal transcendence in the pre-Qin period (770 B.C.–221 B.C.), as a religious community that still exists in Chinese society, not only does Taoism have its special religious beliefs, theological theories, mysterious practices, and organizational systems, but it is also inextricably linked with Chinese secular society. In terms of daily life, moral ethics, economic behaviors, social activities, and so on, it has been consistent with the secular society and has constantly transformed to adapt to the secular situation of Chinese society. This practice of constant change to adapt to the real situation is the essence of Taoist philosophy “Shun Qi Ziran” 順其自然 (Let Nature Take Its Course) or “Yinxun” 因循 (Follow the Course), but at the same time, it also leads to the different appearance of Taoism in different periods and increases the difficulty in grasping Taoism in general. In view of this, this Special Issue emphasizes both “sacredness” and “secularity”, the purpose of which is to remind readers that Taoism is characterized by two aspects simultaneously, and it is not advisable to hold onto only one side.

There are 13 articles published in this Special Issue, and in order to better reflect its aims, we rearrange the order of the articles and make the following brief explanations:

The first article is “What Do the Lingbao Celestial Scripts Tell Us about Some Fundamental Characteristics of Daoism?” by Professor Pengzhi Lü of Southwest Jiaotong University. By discussing three kinds of “Tianshu” 天書 (Celestial Scripts or Celestial Writings) in the Gu Lingbao Jing 古靈寶經 (Ancient Numinous Treasure Scriptures) of the Eastern Jin (317–420) and the Liu Song (420–479) dynasties, and their understanding in the *Lingbao Jingmu* 《靈寶經目》 (Catalogue of Numinous Treasure Scriptures) compiled by Lu Xiuqing 陸修靜, a prominent Taoist of the Liu Song dynasty, this article holds three basic characteristics of Taoism that differ from other religious traditions: the veneration of written symbols, the pursuit of longevity and immortality, and the synthesis of philosophy and belief. It should be noted that the title of this article when it was originally submitted was “What is



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Taoism?: A Perspective from the Celestial Scripts of the Numinous Treasure (*Lingbao* 靈寶 Daoist Scriptures)". However, both the anonymous reviewers and the editorial board felt that it was not appropriate for him to attempt to illustrate the basic characteristics of the whole of Taoism with only three Lingbao celestial scripts in the Six Dynasties (222–589) as examples, because Taoism had undergone many changes in its later stages. Therefore, we suggested that the author use the current title instead. From this case, it can also be seen that Taoism is "Za Er Duoduan" (Miscellaneous and Multifaceted) indeed, and that we have difficulties in grasping Taoism in general.

The next five articles are about the ideas or theories of Taoism. Among them, "Searching for the Location of Lord Lao: The Evolution of Daoist Cosmic Concept between the Han and Tang Dynasties", written by Zhaojie Bai of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and Pei Li of Northwest University, discusses the change of the Taoist concept of the universe in the Han (202 B.C.–A.D. 220) and the Tang (618–907) dynasties by organizing the different views of different Taoist scriptures regarding the heavenly realm where "Laojun" 老君 (Lord Lao) lived, such as Kunlun 崑崙, Taiqing 太清, Ziwei 紫微, and Taiji 太極. Because "Laojun" (Lord Lao) is one of the Taoist supreme deities in its belief, the examination of his celestial position in various Taoist scriptures not only helps in understanding Taoist concepts of the Gods and the universe deeply, but also makes us understand that Taoism has indeed been developing and changing in the long river of history.

"Laojun" (Lord Lao) is one of the highest deities in Taoism, but Laozi 老子, as its prototype, is a real historical figure. The article "On the Origin of 'Laozi Converting the Barbarians': A Historical Background Analysis", written by Jiamin Si and Jishao Han from Shandong University and Yuan Zhang from Hefei Normal University, examines the Taoist statement of "Laozi Hua Hu" 老子化胡 (Laozi Converting the Barbarians) from a realistic and historical perspective, before arguing that the basic elements of this statement are rooted in Chinese secular ideological resources and describing the process in which Laozi, as a historical figure, was gradually deified into "Laojun" (Lord Lao). At present, there are two approaches to Taoist studies in the academic circle, understanding from the conceptual level and investigating from the realistic point of view, both of which are helpful for furthering the study of Taoism and understanding it comprehensively. Our purpose of combining the above two articles is to give readers a sense of the differing and even contradictory aspects of Taoism.

The other three articles in this group also understand Taoism from a conceptual perspective. Among them, "Gender Trouble in the Early Lingbao Scriptures" by Jiefeng Lu of Nanjing University reveals three different attitudes about gender in the early Lingbao 靈寶 (Numinous Treasure) scriptures, such as the statement "differences between men and women" from Confucianism, the term "transforming a female into a male" from Buddhism, and the proposition that "men and women are equal in the transmission of the Tao" from Taoism. Finally, the principle of softness and femininity espoused by the Taoist tradition became the mainstream of Taoism in its later stages. Another article written by Daizhao Zhou and Hongwei Chen from the University of Science and Technology Beijing, "On the Classical Principles and Contemporary Practices of Taoist Female Worship", further discusses the phenomenon of female worship in Taoism and suggests that this phenomenon actually reflects the Taoist traditional principles, such as "Qiwu" 齊物 (The Oneness of All Things), "Zhuyin" 主陰 (Honoring Softness and Appreciating Femininity), and "Xujing" 虛靜 (State of Complete Humility and Tranquility Without Being Affected). The article "Visualizing the Invisible Body: Redefining *Shanshui* and the Human Body in the Daoist Context" was written by Ziyun Liu of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Although it is based on the traditional Chinese "Shanshui Hua" 山水畫 (Landscape Paintings) as the research object, it involves Taoist views on the relationship between "I" and the universe, and it believes that landscape paintings can transcend the mundane body and provide access to the sacred truth and reality of the Tao in the context of Taoism.

There are three articles on Taoist practices in this Special Issue, namely "A New Study on Fushi of Early Quanzhen Daoism" by Hongyi Chen and Yongfeng Huang of Xiamen

University, “A New Form of Taoist Theurgy in the Qing Dynasty: Xizhu Doufa in the Taoist–Tantric Fusion Style” by Yuhao Wu of Nanjing University, and “An Overview of the Wei Yi (威儀 Dignified Liturgies) of Taoism” by Zehong Zhang and Yang Lou of Sichuan University. Hongyi Chen and Yongfeng Huang’s article found that Quanzhen 全真 Taoism, representing the emerging Neidan 內丹 (Inner Alchemy) sect of cultivation, made extensive use of traditional Taoist feeding techniques named Fushi 服食 in its early stage. It indicates that some views of the former academic circles are not true, because most scholars who previously studied Quanzhen Taoism either believed that there was no practice of Fushi within Quanzhen or thought that their practice of Fushi was influenced by the Southern Lineage of Taoism after the convergence of the northern and southern sects of Taoism in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). From this case, we can learn that the emergence of a new practice in Taoism is not necessarily able to completely replace the old method, but may exist simultaneously and harmoniously, just as the Waidan 外丹 (Outer Alchemy), an ancient method for becoming immortal, is still practiced by some Taoists. The other two articles on Taoist practices discuss the use of theurgies and rituals as a means of serving the religious order or the general public. Among them, Yuhao Wu’s article discusses the Xizhu Doufa 西竺斗法 (Dipper Method of Ancient India) of the Longmen Xizhu Xinzong 龍門西竺心宗, a branch of Quanzhen Taoism that emerged in the Yunnan 雲南 region during the Qing dynasty (1636–1912), and it analyzes the relationship between Taoist theurgy and Buddhist Tantra. The article written by the famous scholar Zehong Zhang and his student Yang Lou discusses the solemnity and sanctity of Taoist rituals from the perspective of “dignity” or “stateliness”, such as the dignified image of Taoist priests, dignified duties of ritual masters, and some tools used in Taoist rituals to enhance the sacredness, including commanding banners, swords, rulers, mirrors, tokens, water bowls and bells, drums, cymbals, and chimes, which are essential to their religious practices.

As well as theological theories and religious practices, communities of believers and their organizational systems are also indispensable elements in our understanding of Taoism. As a kind of “institutional religion”, Taoism not only needs to have a flock of believers who believe in its teachings and practice its propositions, but also need some institutions to convene these believers for inheriting its incense. There are three articles in this Special Issue, which adequately demonstrate the content of Taoism in this aspect: “Zhao Yizhen and the Thunder Method Inherited from His Master Zhang Tianquan” by Wei Xu of Fudan University, “The Celestial Masters and the Origins of Daoist Monasticism” by Qi Sun of Shandong University, and “The Flow of Institutional Charisma: Quanzhen Taoism and Local Performing Arts in Republic Shandong and Henan” by Guoshuai Qin of Qilu University of Technology and Wanrong Zhang of Fudan University. Wei Xu’s article found the clue of the Hunyuan Leifa 混元雷法 (Thunder Method of Hunyuan) that Zhao Yizhen 趙宜真 (?–1382), a famous Taoist priest in the late Yuan (1271–1368) and early Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, inherited from his master Zhang Tianquan 張天全 (1275–?), but former scholars always believed that Zhao Yizhen was the inheritor of the Quanzhen Sect 全真派, Jingming Sect 淨明派, and the Thunder Method of Qingwei 清微雷法. This discovery not only enriches our understanding of Zhao Yizhen, but also strengthens our understanding that Taoist sects are not strictly walled and incompatible. Qi Sun’s article discusses the popularization of Taoist monasteries (*Daoguan*, 道觀/道館) as a form of organization in the Southern and Northern dynasties (420–589). He believes that Taoist monasteries were not only the early Taoist tradition of seclusion, asceticism, and hermetic practice in the mountains, but also the influence of the southern Tianshi 天師 Taoism, which had its roots in popular society and is based on the tradition of “Linghu Huamin” 領戶化民 (Mastering the Households and Ruling the People). Further, he argues that this reflected major changes in the structure of medieval Taoism and gradually transformed the Taoist monasteries into religious service facilities in the metropolises. If Qi Sun’s article mainly discusses the institutional form of Taoism from the perspective of orthodox Taoism and professional Taoists, then Guoshuai Qin and Wanrong Zhang’s article paints a different picture for us from the perspective of ordinary believers, which takes some local performing groups still active in

Shandong 山東 and Henan 河南 as examples, showing their consistency with the orthodox Quanzhen Taoism in the disciple initiation rites, lineage poems, guild names, sacrificial ceremonies, etc. Although this article discusses Quanzhen Taoism from the perspective of its influence on local arts, it believes that this phenomenon is the local arts borrowing and imitating the Quanzhen Taoist institution in order to raise their own status. However, the actual situation may not be so simple, because we know that when Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1112–1170) founded Quanzhen Taoism in the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), he had set up many folk groups that were not professional Taoists or monasteries, such as the famous “Sanzhou Wuhui” 三州五會 (Five Guilds in Three States), and there were some popular religions characterized by talking-singing the “Baojuan” 寶卷 (Precious Scrolls) in Chinese society after the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1636–1912) dynasties, which are also deeply influenced by orthodox Taoism. In other words, there were indeed groups of people in China who believed in Taoism that differed from the professional Taoist priests and the Taoist monasteries, but the scholars paid less attention to them in the past. Consciously aware of the existence of such groups, the in-depth exploration of their relationship with monastic Taoism and professional Taoists and its significance in the development of Taoism should perhaps be a direction to work on in the future.

The last article in this Special Issue is the “Suggestions on the Revision of *the Great Dictionary of Taoism*” written by Zuguo Liu of Shandong University, Qi Liu of Fudan University, and Mi Wang of Shanghai Jiao Tong University. This article points out some errors in the *Daojiao Da Cidian* 《道教大辭典》 (*The Great Dictionary of Taoism*) compiled by the Chinese Taoist Association and the Suzhou Taoist Association in 1994, and it discusses the explanations of some entries in this dictionary, which cover many aspects of Taoist theories, practices, communities, etc. Although the focus of this article is on the revision of the dictionary, its content is helpful to our understanding of Taoism, so we are pleased to include it in this Special Issue.

In conclusion, the above 13 articles cover many aspects of Taoism, which not only contribute to academic research, but also help people understand Taoism. We hope to establish more Special Issues about Taoist studies in the future, in order to train research teams and promote related research.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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