

Article

The Zhenwu Sculpture in the Nanshan, Dazu District and Its Metaphor for Alchemy Cultivation

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Abstract

Zhenwu (Perfected Warrior), one of the most influential Daoist martial deities, was historically shaped by the northern celestial emblem Xuanwu and later personified and integrated into the Daoist pantheon. While scholarship on Zhenwu has largely relied on textual sources, cliff sculptures provide a material setting in which doctrine, ritual space, and iconography can be examined together. Taking the Zhenwu niche (No. 1) at Nanshan, Dazu (Chongqing) as a case study, this article first situates the niche within the spatial program of the Nanshan Daoist carvings and describes its architectural design, composition, and inscriptional evidence of worship. It then revisits key motifs associated with Zhenwu—such as the sword, bare feet, and the turtle–snake pair—through Daoist and inner-chemical (neidan) textual traditions. Rather than positing a direct or exclusive link between the Nanshan sculpture and inner-chemical practice, the article argues that the niche mobilizes an established iconographic repertoire that could have resonated with late imperial discourses of self-cultivation, and that its northern placement within the Nanshan ensemble reinforces these cosmological associations. By combining site-based analysis with a cautious reading of Daozang and neidan texts, the study contributes to scholarship on Daoist visual culture and offers a framework for comparing Zhenwu images across regions and media.

Keywords: Zhenwu; Xuanwu; Dazu rock carvings; Nanshan; Daoist iconography; internal alchemy (neidan)

1. Introduction

Daoist niches and cliff sculptures translate doctrinal systems and ritual imaginaries into durable visual form. As material supports for liturgy and devotion, they not only inherit earlier sculptural conventions but also register historically specific hierarchies of deities, local patronage, and ritual practice. Recent Daoist studies have increasingly combined textual analysis with material culture, ritual performance, and local religious life (Bai 2015; Jiang 2017; Lü 2025). Within this methodological turn, Daoist cliff sculptures—especially those accompanied by inscriptions—can be read as sites where texts, images, and embodied practice intersect.

The Nanshan carvings in Dazu, Chongqing, located on the summit of Bayue Mountain (anciently Guanghua Shan), constitute one of the most comprehensive Daoist sculptural ensembles in China. The main carving phase began in the Southern Song (1131–1162), with later additions in the Ming and Qing (X. Li 2003, p. 39; Hu 2008, pp. 151–55). Along an approximately 80 m cliff face, major niches include the Sanqing Cave, the Houtu Holy



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Mother niche, the Dragon Cave, and the Zhenwu niche. Existing scholarship on Dazu Daoist sculptures has tended to focus on the Sanqing Cave and the overall pantheon (Deng 1990, 1995; Hu and Zeng 1992; H. Huang 1994; S. Li 2010; Zhou 2022, 2025), leaving the Zhenwu niche comparatively understudied.

Zhenwu has been approached primarily through textual history and cult formation—ranging from classic studies of hagiography and worship (Grootaers 1952; Kao 1988; Nikaido 1998; Andersen 2004) to interpretations of iconography and visual transformation (Little and Eichman 2000; Wang 2000; S. Huang 2015; Xiao 2019; Karetzky 2015). For early discussions of Xuanwu (玄武, Dark Warrior) in relation to astral and directional systems, see Major (1985). Building on this scholarship, the present study uses the Nanshan Zhenwu niche (No. 1) as a case study to ask two related questions: how was Zhenwu situated within the Nanshan spatial program and its ritual affordances, and how might the niche's iconographic choices have resonated with inner-chemical (neidan 内丹) discourses found in Daozang and neidan texts? The analysis proceeds cautiously: motifs such as the sword and the turtle-snake pair are widespread in Zhenwu imagery and cannot by themselves demonstrate the presence of inner-chemical practice at a given site. Section 2 reconstructs the niche's spatial position within the Nanshan ensemble, describes its architectural design, composition, and inscriptional evidence, and discusses how the northern placement of the niche relates to Daoist cosmology. Section 3 revisits major motifs of Zhenwu iconography through textual traditions of self-cultivation and proposes a cautious synthesis for interpreting the Nanshan case. The conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and outlines directions for further comparative work.

2. The Nanshan Zhenwu Niche at Dazu: Ritual Space, Layout, and Iconography

Nanshan, in Dazu District (Chongqing), was anciently known as Guanghua Mountain. A Daoist temple—Yuhuang Guan 玉皇觀—once stood on its summit, and the surviving cliff-carving is primarily Daoist in theme. Although the main carving phase began in the Southern Song, later additions and repairs continued into the Ming and Qing. The Zhenwu niche discussed here is numbered as No. 1 in the modern catalog and is dated by a wall inscription to the sixteenth year of the Zhengde reign (1521 CE). The niche is approximately 235 cm high, 275 cm wide, and 165 cm deep. The central sculpture shows Zhenwu seated, flanked by two attendants holding ritual and martial attributes.

Rather than treating this niche as an isolated image, the following analysis approaches it as a small ritual micro-space embedded within the wider Nanshan ensemble. The discussion proceeds from (1) spatial layout and placement, to (2) niche design and inscriptional evidence, and finally to (3) a detailed description of sculptural composition and iconography.

2.1. Spatial Layout and the Northern Placement of the Zhenwu Niche

According to the schematic plan of the Nanshan carvings (Figure 1), the Zhenwu niche (No. 1) occupies the northern end of this cliff, while the Sanqing Cave (No. 5), devoted to the Three Pure Ones (Sanqing 三清), takes a prominent and more central position. This north-south distribution is in accordance with Daoist cosmology and hierarchies of deities.

In texts from the Spring and Autumn period, the seven constellations of the north were collectively called Xuanwu. The “Qu Li 曲禮” of the *Book of Rites* (Li Ji 禮記) explains the position of Xuanwu: “On the march the (banner with the) Red Bird should be in front; that with the Dark Warrior behind.” (X. Sun 1989, p. 84). The orientation described in the text is based on facing south, meaning that front is south and back is north. Xuanwu resides in the north; the north belongs to water, water gives birth to all things, thus it is the chief deity of the northern water phase; it is also the collective name for the seven northern

constellations among the twenty-eight constellations. Regarding the shape of Xuanwu, it is said in *The Rites of Zhou* (Zhou Li 周禮): “The turtle and snake (flag) with four streamers, to symbolize the Yingshi 營室 constellation.” (Y. Sun 2013, p. 3236). Here, the Wei 危 and Xu 虛 constellations of the Seven Northern Constellations were connected to form a pentagon and were seen as a tortoise shell. When the northern Tengshe constellation was added, it was the shape of a turtle and snake (Feng 2001, p. 319; Chen 2018, p. 8) (Figure 2). By the Eastern Han period, Xuanwu acquired the function of stabilizing the four directions and expelling evil, with turtle–snake patterns appearing on everyday portrait stones and tomb stones (Figure 3). Professor Yang Lizhi pointed out that before the rise in institutional Daoism, Xuanwu was merely a northern stellar deity, but with the emergence of institutional Daoism, Xuanwu became a dharma-protecting deity, namely an attendant of Laozi and a protective god for Daoist practitioners entering the mountains (Yang 1993, pp. 8–14).

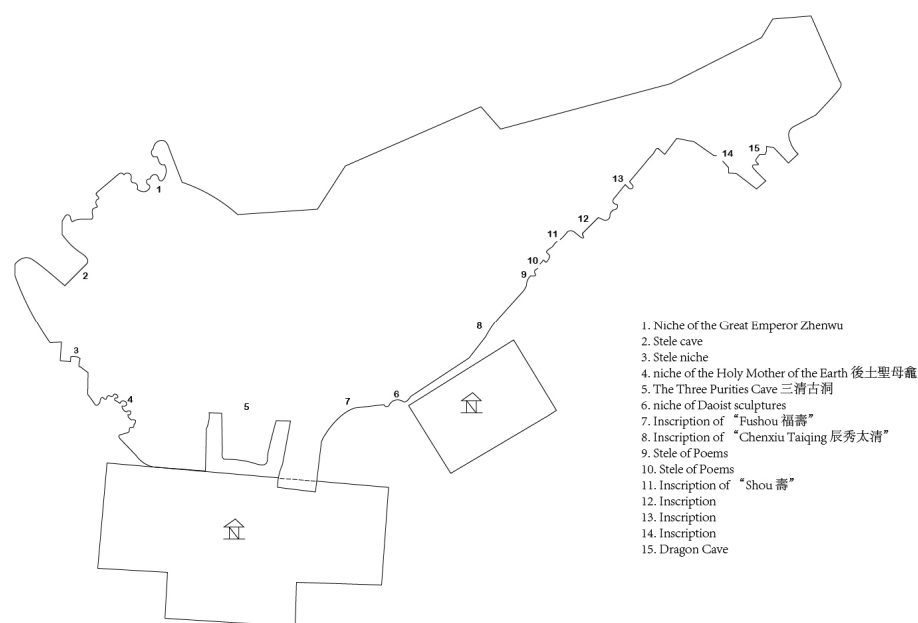


Figure 1. Drawing of the schematic plan of the Nanshan cliff statues in Dazu (F. Li 2017, p. 287).

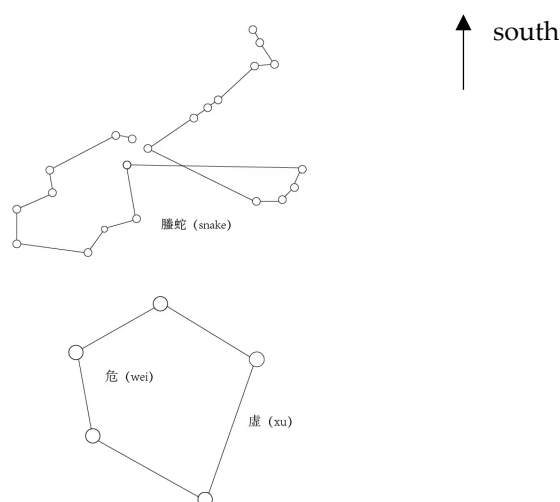


Figure 2. The shape of snake and turtle of the Xuanwu, formed by the constellations Xu and Wei and the Tengshe constellation (Feng 2001).

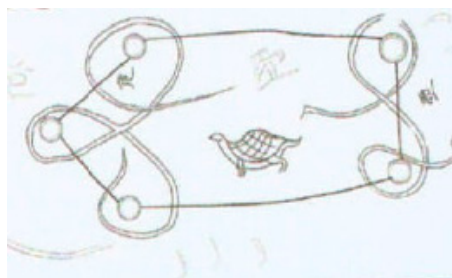


Figure 3. Drawing of the image of turtle and snake of the North Xuanwu Constellations in the astrological maps in the mural tomb at Qushuhao, Yangqiaopan, Jingbian County, Shaanxi Province (Duan et al. 2017).

According to Daoist divine hierarchy rules, the Sanqing are revered as the highest deities; hence, their position is south and central. Zhenwu is on a relatively lower rank; hence, he occupies a side position and is placed off-center. We could see the rank and arrangement in many Daoist classics. For example, the true form of the Taishang Laojun 太上老君 is described in the *Inner Chapters of the Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi Neipian* 抱朴子內篇) that “On the left are twelve Qinglong, on the right are twenty-six Baihu, in front are twenty-four Zhuque, and behind are seventy-two Xuanwu.”¹ The Xuanwu, like the Qinglong, Baihu, and Zhuque, was originally a protective deity serving as attendant and guard to the Taishang Laojun. By the Ming Dynasty, the Great Emperor Zhenwu had become the water deity governing the North Pole, but remained below the Sanqing (Zhang 1974).

Therefore, the northern placement of the Zhenwu niche is compatible with a basic Daoist cosmological grammar: Zhenwu, as the martial protector associated with the northern direction and the water phase, is placed at the northern end, visually complementing the highest deities represented in the Sanqing Cave. At the same time, the niche’s position at one end of the ensemble invites consideration of how it relates to neighboring niches and to the movement of visitors along the cliff face, for instance, as a protective or boundary-marking presence within the overall sacred landscape.

2.2. Niche Design, Inscriptions, and Ritual Affordances

From the perspective of niche form, the Zhenwu niche is an embedded, independent square cave cut into the cliff, with a relatively deep space and clear frontal orientation. Such a design physically shelters the sculptures from weathering and crowding, while also delimiting a focused devotional field in which a worshiper’s gaze, posture, and offerings are directed toward a single triadic composition.

As *Research on Chinese Daoist Sculptural Images* (Zhongguo Daojiao Zaoxiang Yanjiu 中國道教造像研究) notes, “Daoist sculptures exist for Daoist rituals, and the places where Daoist sculptures exist are the places where Daoist rituals are conducted” (Wang et al. 2010, p. 10). The Zhenwu niche provides epigraphic traces of such ritual activity. An inscription on the right wall records a donor and the burning of incense: “舍財信士王伯富謹立。正德十六年夏五月十五日焚香建立，修爐石匠黃相、黃彎、成國用。” (roughly, “Respectfully erected by the donor Wang Bofu. On the fifteenth day of the fifth month in summer of the sixteenth year of Zhengde (1521), [this was] established with incense offerings; the stone masons Huang Xiang, Huang Wan, and Cheng Guoyong repaired the incense burner.”). Read literally, the inscription documents patronage and ongoing ritual use (especially incense offerings), and it provides a terminus ante quem for the presence of the niche and its devotional setting.

Through offerings and prescribed actions—such as burning incense, bowing, and reciting invocations—worshippers could communicate with the deity before the sculp-

tures at specific times and in a specific space, articulating requests and hopes for protection. In this sense, the independent niche does not merely house an image; it stages a controlled interface between devotees and the divine, making the material environment part of the ritual process.

Excavating a niche allows the spiritual sustenance of believers to become tangible entities for worship within a specific space. As images continue to evolve, many corresponding symbols appear in their depictions. These symbols adhere to fundamental normative requirements. The chapter “Carving Statues (Zaoxiang Pin 造像品)” of the *Scripture on Daoist Liturgies and Precepts of the Three Grottoes of the Pervasive Mystery of Numinous Treasure* (Dongxuan Lingbao Sandong Fengdao Kejie Yingshi 洞玄靈寶三洞奉道科戒營始) states: “All statues must be carved in accordance with the manners and appearance prescribed in the scriptures.”² There are some basic descriptions of the Zhenwu image in Daoist texts. For example, the *Yuanshi Tianzun Shuo Beifang Zhenwu Miaojing* states: “The divine general Zhenwu respectfully served the Heavenly Venerable’s teaching. He had his hair loose and was barefoot, stepping on the Teng Snake, the Eight Trigrams and the Divine Turtle.”³ Another example is *Wondrous Scriptures on Divine Incantation Transmission of Perfect Warrior Sacred Goddess of the Dark Heaven by the Most High* (Taishang Shuo Xuantian Dadi Zhenwu Benzhu Shen Zhou Miaojing 太上說玄天大帝真武本傳神咒妙經), which states: “Sometimes wearing armor with robes, sometimes wearing boots or going barefoot. Always with dark hair loose, constantly wielding the divine sword.”⁴ *Casual Notes from Cloud Ridge* (Yunlu Manchao 云麓漫鈔) states: “With long loose hair and black clothing, wielding a sword and treading upon turtle and snake, with followers carrying black banners.”⁵ (Zhao 1996). From these recordings, we can see the basic symbolic characteristics of the Zhenwu image: (1) loose hair, (2) wearing boots or going barefoot, (3) accompanied by a turtle and a snake, (4) wielding a sword.

2.3. Sculptural Composition and Iconographic Features

The No. 1 niche presents a triadic composition. Zhenwu sits at the center, with two attendants carved on the left and right walls. The female attendant holds a seal in front of her chest, while the male attendant holds an elongated object in both hands (possibly a sword or related attribute). Zhenwu’s left foot treads upon a turtle, while his right foot rests on a rock, and his hair is depicted loose behind the head—features widely associated with Zhenwu’s standard iconography (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Front View of the Zhenwu Statue Niche at Nanshan, Dazu.

The central figure has a square, full face and a steady forward gaze. Although the hands are damaged, the seated posture and frontal arrangement emphasize Zhenwu's authoritative presence. The deity wears armor beneath a long robe and is shown barefoot, a combination that visually fuses martial power with an ascetic or cultivated body.

Behind Zhenwu's head is a halo/nimbus, painted in contrasting colors (orange at the center and black around the outer ring). In Daoist visual culture, such head halos often mark divine radiance and separate the deity's body from the surrounding rock surface, visually intensifying the focus on the face and head.

There is also a halo on the ceiling above the head of the Zhenwu sculpture. Examining the detail, the base color of the background of the halo is light red with black (Figure 5). The character “xuan 玄” is explained in the *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters* (*Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字) as “That which is black but has red color is called xuan.” (Xu 2016, p. 124). This is precisely black with red color. There are strips rising on both sides of the ears behind the Zhenwu Emperor (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Enlarged view of the circle above the head of the Zhenwu statue.

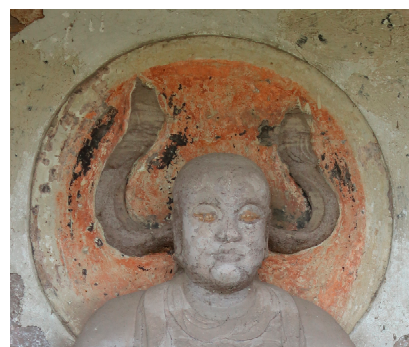


Figure 6. There are two strips floating upwards behind the ears of the Zhenwu statue.

On the whole, the Zhenwu niche combines a relatively formal martial iconography with local stylistic features. Compared with more courtly or liturgically standardized representations, the attendants' facial expressions and the handling of costume and accessories convey a more vernacular, popularized aesthetic. Here, “popularization” refers to the accommodation of elite Daoist imagery to wider local audiences and patrons, rather

than a loss of religious meaning. The Nanshan niche thus participates in broader late imperial processes of visual dissemination while remaining embedded in a devotional and ritual setting.

3. Zhenwu Iconography and Inner Alchemy

As we mentioned above, in early Chinese astronomy and correlative cosmology, Xuanwu designated the northern celestial emblem, composed of seven constellations and conventionally visualized as a turtle entwined with a snake. Archeological and art-historical materials attest to the long-standing association between the north, the water phase, and protective power in this emblematic figure (Little and Eichman 2000; S. Huang 2015).

3.1. From Xuanwu to Zhenwu: Textual Sources and a Standard Iconographic Repertoire

From the Tang–Song period onward, this astral emblem was increasingly personified. By the Northern Song, narratives of a martial deity who subdues demons and guards the northern direction circulated widely. To avoid the Emperor’s name, Zhao Xuanlang, Xuanwu was changed to Zhenwu 真武. And Daoist institutions incorporated the deity into the pantheon and liturgy (Grootaers 1952; Kao 1988; Nikaido 1998; Zhu 2016). In visual culture, personification gradually stabilized into the familiar Zhenwu type: a warrior deity, often seated or standing on the turtle–snake pair, with loose hair and bare feet and, frequently, a sword—an iconographic repertoire that later became widespread across media (Little and Eichman 2000; Xiao 2019).

Daoist Canonical texts record and shape this development. For example, the hagiographic *Record of the Enlightenment of the Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heaven* (*Xuantian Shangdi Qishenglu* 玄天上帝啟聖錄, DZ 1988, vol. 19) narrates Zhenwu’s cultivation, divine tests, and martial mandate, while scriptures such as the *Wondrous Scripture Spoken by the Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning on Northern Zhenwu* (*Yuanshi Tianzun shuo beifang zhenwu miaojing* 元始天尊說北方真武妙經, DZ 1988, vol. 1) articulate Zhenwu’s salvific and protective powers. There is abundant content related to the internal alchemy in the spiritual cultivation story of Zhenwu. For example,

The Dark Emperor came up to the Mountain, first dwelling in seclusion at Prince Rock. During his cultivation, a sacred crow heralded dawn, while a black tiger guarded the rock. At every meal, he would feed them. Both creatures possess spiritual power now, having attained divine status. They appear and vanish at will. The crow’s beak is red; those who see it shall prosper. The tiger is black; those who defy it shall meet disaster.⁶

The Dark Emperor here refers to the Xuanwu (Emperor Zhenwu). Ancient people believed that the Five Emperors guarded the five directions, with Xuanwu residing in the north; hence, he was also called the “Dark Emperor” or “Dark Emperor Xuanwu”. The mountain refers to Wudang Mountain. Noteworthy in this passage are the imagery of the “Black Tiger” and the “Sacred Crow”, which carry symbolic significance in the Daoist alchemical tradition. Immediately following the main text of the *Xuantian Shangdi Qishenglu* is an explanatory passage: “According to the *Comprehensive Collection of Truth* (*Zongzhen Ji* 總真集), the Great Black Tiger Deity of Wudang is the manifestation of the Northern Heavenly One, a spirit protecting the teachings and guarding the mountain. Its majestic presence manifests in diverse forms: sometimes taking human likeness, clad in golden armor and black robes like a general; other times revealing its true form, with black mane like a lion... The *Canon of Alchemy* (*Dan Jing* 丹經) states that the tiger is born from water. Secret methods are transmitted and practiced in the world. Today, the Black Tiger Rock and Sacred Crow beneath the Jiaqing Pavilion of the Tianyi Zhenqing Palace is the black essence of the North and the divine spirit of Wudang.”⁷ This commentary cites the Dan

Jing, indicating that within Daoism, there were indeed practitioners who used the Xuanwu as a guiding principle in their alchemical cultivation. While the commentary does not elaborate on the specifics of such alchemical practices, it does subtly reveal their approach. The key lies in the symbolic function of the “Black Tiger.” The “Black Tiger” is in fact the “black lead” within the alchemical tradition. In Daoist alchemy, lead and mercury serve as the primary elixirs. Understanding the principle of their union has always been regarded as a crucial factor in the success or failure of the alchemical cultivation.

Later imperial patronage—especially in the Ming—further promoted Zhenwu’s cult and visual dissemination (Grootaers 1952; Kao 1988; Zhu 2016). A Ming illustrated album of Zhenwu, *Album of Pictures of Zhenwu’s Numinous Responses* (*Zhenwu Lingying Tuce* 真武靈應圖冊), further shows how the deity’s iconography was codified and circulated in late imperial visual media, helping to stabilize expectations about what a “Zhenwu image” should look like. This album consists of meticulously painted color illustrations depicting stories of the Great Emperor Zhenwu’s birth, cultivation of the Dao, attainment of immortality, the exorcism of demons and monsters, and spiritual manifestations, accompanied by corresponding texts. The texts below the pictures are concise but profound, containing deep Daoist philosophical thought. For example, beneath the first image, it states: “When the Supreme Ultimate (Taiji 太極) first divided, heaven and earth began to become clear. The east was divided into nine parts of azure, the south received three parts of cinnabar, the west formed seven parts of white, the north returned five parts of black, and the center generated one part of yellow. These are called the Five Elders (Wulao 五老), which are the root of the mysterious and yellow cosmic manifestation. When each of the Five Elders took their positions, the primordial *qi* 炁 transformed and formed, the Four Spirits were established, the four corners encircled, the six directions and two principles (yin-yang 陰陽) operated within, promoting the creation of all things.”⁸ And “the Mysterious Emperor is indeed the transformation of the primordial *qi* of the Five Spiritual Mysterious Elders of the Supreme Yin and Celestial One that existed before heaven.”⁹ (Figures 7 and 8). This passage describes the Daoist creation cosmology, explaining how the universe emerged from the initial division of the Taiji into the complementary forces and directional energies, ultimately giving rise to the Great Emperor Xuanwu through this cosmic process.



Figure 7. The first page of the *Zhenwu Lingying Tuce* 真武靈應圖冊 named “Transcendent Country Jingle, Incarnation in the Golden Palace 淨樂仙國 金闕化身.” (Xiao 2019, p. 190).

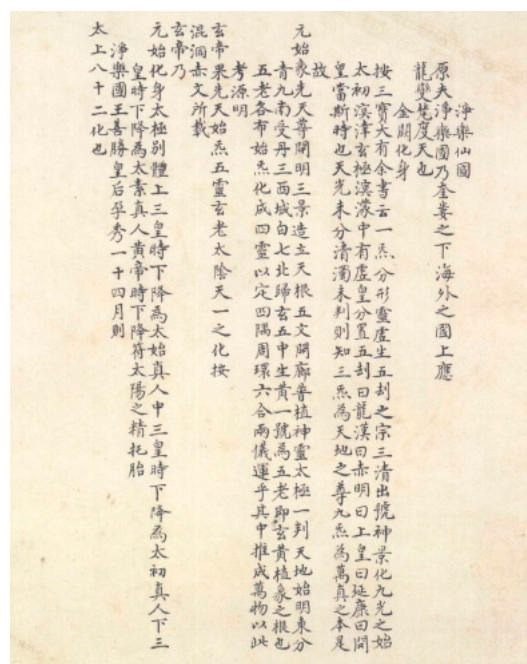


Figure 8. The second page of the *Zhenwu Lingying Tu*, which explains the first page.

And it is said under the fourth painting “Yuanjun Shoudao 元君授道” that:

The Great Emperor Xuanwu devoted himself solely to the Dao; thus, the Purple Lady of Saint Ancestor of the Jade Purity (Yuqing Shengzu Zi Yuanjun 玉清聖祖紫元君) was moved. Yuanjun transmitted to Xuanwu the limitless supreme Dao. Yuanjun told Xuanwu, “You should cross the sea and go eastward. Under the constellations of Yi and Zhen, there is a mountain that rises from the Qian 乾 and Dui 兌 directions, spiraling for fifty thousand li, with water flowing from the Zhen 震 palace. Since the Taiji existed, this mountain was born. The mountain corresponds to the Heaven above and is in great peace. There are two heavens in Huangya, with seventy-two peaks and thirty-six cliffs. You may enter this mountain and choose the highest peak that reaching the purple heaven (Zixiao 紫霄) among all peaks to dwell on. When you were integrated with the Great Harmony and transcendent five hundred years later, you shall ascend to heaven. In two kalpas of the Dragon Han, with long loose hair and bare feet, treading upon the true essence of Kan 坎 and Li 離, you will return to the root and restore your original position. Above (the Heaven) you will serve as minister to the Three Realms, down (the Earth) you will be the great sage of the ten directions. Only then will your name be manifest for billions of years, standing equal with heaven, earth, sun and moon—this is the fulfillment of your merit.” Having finished speaking, Yuanjun ascended on clouds and departed.”¹⁰ (Figure 9).

There are three points worth noting here. Firstly, the Jade Purity (Yuqing 玉清) is one of the Three Pure Purities (Sanqing 三清), the highest deities in the Daoist pantheon, which shows that Xuanwu comes from a distinguished Daoist lineage. Secondly, “there are two heavens in Huangya, with seventy-two peaks and thirty-six cliffs” contains the Daoist concept of “grotto-heavens and blessed lands (dongtian fudi 洞天福地),” while Zixiao directly refers to the Lingxiao Palace on Mount Wudang. Thirdly, “treading upon the true essence of Kan and Li, you will return to the root and restore your original position” refers to the Daoist method of inner alchemical cultivation. It highlights how the text incorporates key Daoist elements: the supreme divine hierarchy, sacred geographical concepts associated with Daoist practice, and internal cultivation techniques that are central to becoming the transcendents.



Figure 9. The fourth painting, “Yuanjun Imparts the Dao 元君授道”, of the *Zhenwu Lingying Tuce* 真武灵应图册 (Xiao 2019, p. 196).

Art-historical scholarship has emphasized that this transformation from Xuanwu to Zhenwu involved both narrative elaboration and visual standardization. Armor, martial posture, the turtle–snake base, and associated implements formed a recognizable iconographic package that could be reproduced across regions and media, even as local workshops introduced stylistic variation (Little and Eichman 2000; S. Huang 2015; Xiao 2019). Because these motifs are broadly shared, they cannot, on their own, establish a specific doctrinal program at a given site. In what follows, they are treated as an interpretive interface: widespread images offer a point of entry for examining how Daoist and inner-chemical texts could have framed the meanings that later viewers associated with Zhenwu iconography.

The Nanshan case is particularly suitable for such a cautious approach: the niche is embedded in a clearly Daoist sculptural ensemble and includes inscriptional traces of worship, but no local liturgical manuals survive that would allow a direct reconstruction of practice.

3.2. The Sword: Ritual Weapon and Inner-Alchemical Metaphor

In Daoist visual culture, Zhenwu is frequently associated with a sword, often described as a “seven-star sword” (qixing jian 七星劍). The sword has an obvious apotropaic valence—subduing demons and protecting ritual space—but it can also be interpreted, in inner-chemical discourse, as a metaphor for disciplined refinement. In the Nanshan niche, the central figure’s hands are damaged and no sword is preserved in the main figure’s grasp; nevertheless, the male attendant holds an elongated object that may relate to this attribute. For this reason, the sword motif is discussed here as part of a broader Zhenwu repertoire rather than as a unique feature of the Nanshan sculpture.

Comparative material from the Dazu region underscores how common this attribute was. For example, a Zhenwu sculpture in the Sanhuang Grotto at Shimen Mountain (Dazu, Chongqing) is shown holding a sword (Figure 10), demonstrating that sword-bearing Zhenwu imagery circulated locally and could have informed the expectations of patrons and worshippers at Nanshan.



Figure 10. Zhenwu sculpture in Sanhuang Grotto at Shimen Mountain, Dazu, Chongqing.

In Daoist culture and inner alchemy cultivation, the “sword” is not merely a weapon but a cultivation instrument with profound symbolic meaning. It ingeniously integrates the core concept of dual cultivation—cultivating both ‘inner nature’ (mind and spirit) and “life force” (body and energy).

The early Daoist scripture, *“The Scripture of the Supreme Ultimate Perfected Person’s Stone Essence and Golden Light, Concealing View and Recording the Form and Spirit (Taiji Zhenren Shijing Jin’guang Cangjing Lu Xingshen Jing 太極真人石精金光藏景錄形神經)”*, describes the method of corpse dissolution using a sword: “The Perfected Person employs a treasure sword for corpse dissolution, the supreme method of metamorphosis like a cicada shedding its skin.”¹¹ It further states: “All who dissolve their corpses with swords use the sword as a substitute for the body. After five hundred years, these swords will naturally return to their original places.”¹² This implies that accomplished Daoist practitioners may have their swords buried in place of their physical bodies when ascending to immortality. Having shed their mortal form like a cicada, they become immortals, while the swords—as substitutes for their physical and spiritual essence—ultimately dissolve. The text further cites legends such as the Yellow Emperor’s burial on Mount Qiao and the sword flying skyward from Wang Ziqiao’s tomb to substantiate the efficacy of “sword liberation.”

Subsequently, the theory of internal alchemy developed “sword forging” into a systematic method for cultivating life, often used as a metaphor for the training and regulation of primordial essence and vital energy. A poem from the *Treatise on Awakening to Reality (Wuzhen Pian 悟真篇)* states, “With the sword-forging formula passed down by Ou Ye, Mo Ye blended metal and water to harmonize softness and strength. Once refined, the sword discerns human intent, slaying demons across ten thousand miles in a flash of lightning.”¹³ This uses sword-forging as a metaphor for the Daoist alchemical process of harmonizing *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 and refining essence and *qi*. The forged “sword” (sufficiently culti-

vated essence and qi) can sever the “demons and specters” (diseases and deluded thoughts) within the body. The *Master Spiritual Sword* (*Lingjianzi* 靈劍子) and *The Guide to the Meridian Hours by Master Spiritual Sword* (*Lingjianzi Yindao Ziwu Ji* 靈劍子引導子午記), attributed to Xu Xun 許遜 (Xu Jingyang 許族陽) and published during the Southern Song dynasty, further integrated the “sword” with internal cultivation. Though titled “Spiritual Sword,” the work primarily details internal alchemical practices such as fetal breathing, qi cultivation, and guiding exercises.

As Daoist scholars know, the theory of internal alchemy includes the concept of “dual cultivation of inner nature and life force (xingming shuangxiu 性命雙修).” “Cultivating inner nature” aims to sever inner demons and dispel external delusions, while “cultivating life force” involves refining and regulating vital energy. Whether cultivating nature or life, the “sword” serves as a symbolic metaphor for both directional guidance and technical practice. On one hand, the sword represents the primordial spirit and righteous mind, embodying the wisdom to expel inner demons and external delusions—thus termed the “sword of wisdom.” On the other hand, “forging the sword” signifies the cultivation of reproductive energy and bodily functions through specific methods of preserving essence and nurturing qi, ultimately achieving robust health and longevity.

The first volume of the *Xuantian Shangdi Qishenglu* recounts the story of “The sword bestowed by the Heavenly Emperor”: “The Dark Emperor (Xuanwu) heeded his master’s words and journeyed east across the sea. He then encountered the Great Celestial Emperor Feng Qian, who bestowed upon him a treasure sword. The Celestial Emperor declared ‘This sword is named the Northern Black-Hued, Horn-Severing Demon-Subduing Sword. Seven feet and two inches long, it corresponds to the seventy-two solar terms. Its three-fold curvature aligns with the Three Assistants. It weighs twenty-four jin, corresponding to the twenty-four qi. Its width is four cun 寸 and eight fen 分, corresponding to the four seasons and eight solar terms. You may wear this sword, dwell in the mountains to cultivate, subdue heretical paths, and slay demons and monsters.’ Having spoken thus, the Heavenly Emperor ascended into the clouds and departed. The Dark Emperor, having received the sword, journeyed beneath the constellations Yi and Zhen. He indeed found the mountain, hidden by water and submerged, all matching his master’s words. He then entered the mountain, crossed the ravine, chose a place, and withdrew to cultivate in seclusion.”¹⁴ From the detailed description, it is evident that the Zhenwu received the sacred sword from the “Great Heavenly Emperor Feng Qian.” The dimensions and specifications of this sword ultimately correspond to the Dao of Heaven. His practice in the mountains essentially embodies the “dual cultivation of nature and life” as described in the Inner Alchemy tradition, whose core spirit lies in conforming to the Way of Heaven. Viewed from this perspective, all questions regarding the sword depicted in the Zhenwu statue are readily resolved.

3.3. The Turtle–Snake Pair: Northern Cosmology and Water–Fire

The turtle–snake pair (guishe 龜蛇) is the most persistent visual marker inherited from Xuanwu and, by extension, from Zhenwu imagery. In the Nanshan niche, Zhenwu’s left foot treads upon a turtle while the right foot rests on a rock, visually anchoring the deity on the northern emblem described above. In correlative cosmology, the north corresponds to the water phase and is often linked with the color black (xuan 玄), associations that structure many later interpretations of Zhenwu.

If the sword held by the Zhenwu symbolizes the methodology of “cultivating both inner nature and life force” in the theory of internal alchemy, the “integration of turtle and snake” beneath his feet embodies the technical significance of alchemical mastery in

achieving “water and fire in harmony.” The *Stone Inscription of Perfected Man Xu* (Xu Zhenjun *Shihan Ji* 許真君石函記) states in the first volume that

Ren 壬 and Gui 癸, with the property of water, corresponding to the Xuanwu, occupies the seven constellations of the Dou 斗, Niu 牛, Nü 女, Xu 虛, Wei 危, Shi 室, Bi 壁. It looks like the shape combining turtle and snake in the northern sky, hence it’s named Xuanwu. The Eight Trigrams form the image of Heaven, while the Four and Seven govern the divine workings. Considering the sun’s movement north and south, the moon’s movement west and east, the movements (of the seven constellations) follow the rotation of the Big Dipper, and transformation lies within.¹⁵

To comprehend the symbolic significance of the “turtle and snake” in the Zhenwu sculpture regarding the mastery of fire control in internal alchemy cultivation, one must analyze the interplay among three elements: the number associated with the north in the *Yellow River Diagram* (*Hetu* 河圖) (Figure 11) (the essence of water of yin and yang), the seven constellations of the Xuanwu among the Twenty-Eight Lunar Mansions (the carriers of spatiotemporal rhythms), and the dynamic-static attributes of the turtle and snake (the operational logic of fire control in internal alchemy cultivation).

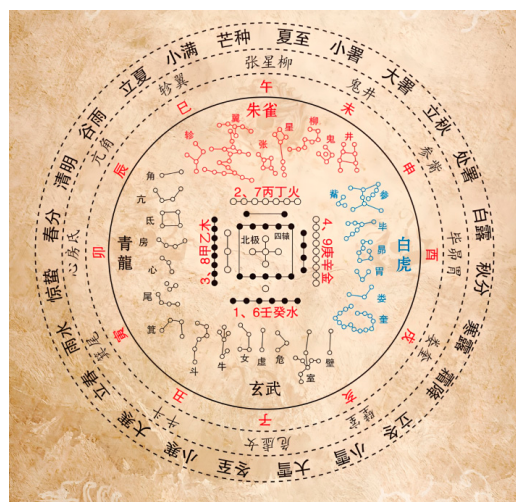


Figure 11. Yellow River Diagram (*Hetu* 河圖).

Firstly, the number associated with the north in the *Hetu* represents the concretization of water of yin and yang through the turtle and snake. The *Hetu* corresponds “Heaven generates water with One, Earth completes it with Six” to the northern water of Ren 壬 and Gui 癸 (the position of Xuanwu), where “Heaven One” represents water of yang (active, initiating) and “Earth Six” represents water of yin (passive, nurturing). The turtle and snake, as the “body” of Xuanwu, are precisely symbols of this pair of water of yin and yang.

Turtle: With its thick carapace and slow movements, it symbolizes “water of yin, Earth, Six,” representing “concealment” and “nourishment,” corresponding to the sustained nurturing of “gentle fire (wenhuo 文火)” in the process of refining (such as the “gentle nurturing” stage in internal alchemy).

Snake: With its flexible body and ability to shed its skin, it symbolizes “Heaven generates water with One,” representing “movement” and “change”, corresponding to the driving and stimulating force of “intense fire (wuhuo 武火)” in alchemical processes (such as the “fire manipulation” stage in internal alchemy). The combination of the turtle and snake essentially represents the union of water of yin and yang—the manipulation of fire requires water of yin as the foundation (the hidden aspect of the turtle) and water of yang

as the active force (the movement of the snake), avoiding excessive rigidity (overly intense fire) or excessive softness (insufficient gentle fire).

Secondly, the seven constellations of Xuanwu in the twenty-eight constellations: the turtle and snake serve as the carriers of spatiotemporal rhythms. The seven northern constellations of the Xuanwu (Dou 斗, Niu 牛, Nü 女, Xu 虛, Wei 危, Shi 室, Bi 壁) correspond to winter (the months of Hai 亥, Zi 子, and Chou 丑), the season when the Yang energy of Heaven and Earth is “hidden,” which perfectly aligns with the alchemical logic of “storing Essence (Jing 精) and nourishing Energy (Qi 氣).” The turtle and snake, as the “symbols” of these seven constellations, carry the constraints of spatiotemporal rhythms; the movement of the seven constellations (“the movement follows the rotation of the Big Dipper”) corresponds to the periodic movement of the Big Dipper, symbolizing that the alchemical process must follow natural rhythms (such as the changes of “lunar phases” and “daily cycles”). The “stillness of the turtle and the movement of the snake” essentially represents seeking change within stillness—although winter is primarily a season of concealment, the Yang energy is not completely extinguished (the movement of the snake). The alchemical process requires maintaining the vitality of “movement” (the snake) within “concealment” (the turtle), avoiding “dead concealment.”

Finally, the core of controlling fire in the internal alchemy cultivation: the turtle–snake is the metaphor of the harmony of yin and yang. The key to fire control in the internal alchemy cultivation is “balance of yin and yang,” and the combination of turtle and snake is a concrete representation of this balance. The intertwined turtle and snake (“the body of turtle and snake”) symbolize the intertwining and fusion of yin and yang energies—the union of “Heart fire” (Li 離 fire) and “Kidney water” (Kan 坎 water) in internal alchemy cultivation. This requires using the stillness of the turtle (the storage of Kidney water) to guide the movement of the snake (the descent of Heart fire), achieving “water and fire in perfect balance”; the turtle’s “longevity” and the snake’s “shedding skin” correspond to the “persistence” and “transformation” of the fire control in the internal alchemy cultivation—it requires both long-term nurturing like the turtle (gentle fire) and timely transformation like the snake (fierce fire), ultimately achieving the qualitative change of “the completion of the internal alchemy.” Therefore, the first volume, “Returning to the Kan Palace” of the *Xuantian Shangdi Qisheng Lu*, states

The Celestial Emperor told the Dark Emperor: “You should keep your hair loose and feet bare, treading upon the combination of turtle and snake, raising the dark flag, and wearing mirrored armor. You shall be positioned in the Kan 坎 Palace, known as the Grand Marshal in Heaven and the God of Fortune in the mortal world. You should descend every month, defending the nation and bringing blessings to all living beings, tirelessly for countless eons, your glory would be ever-renewing.” The Dark Emperor (Xuanwu), having received the decree, admired and said: “When I was an ordinary person, I cultivated the Dao in Mount Taihe, and my master, Ziyuanjun, sincerely told me: ‘Five hundred years after your ascension, you should wear your hair unbound and go barefoot, treading upon Kan 坎 and Li 離, your true essence returning to its origin and rightful place. You will be a minister in Heaven and a great sage on Earth, thus gaining renown for countless eons, equal to Heaven, Earth, Sun, and Moon.’ Today, my master’s words have come true, and I have returned to my rightful place in the Kan Palace! How joyful this is!”¹⁶

In this paragraph, “positioned in the Kan 坎 Palace” represents a turning point in the life of Emperor Zhenwu (Xuanwu) from individual cultivation to serving and saving humanity; during individual cultivation, “treading upon Kan 坎 and Li 離” (the turtle and snake corresponding to Kan 坎 water and Li 離 fire) symbolizes the harmonization of wa-

ter and fire, and the return of true essence to its origin. This is the process of yin-yang unification in internal alchemy, with the goal of self-ascension. After the restoration of the Kan Palace, which is the northern water palace of heaven and earth and governs the nourishment of all things, the turtle-snake expands from the metaphor of yin-yang harmony within personal cultivation to the symbol of the water virtue of Heaven and Earth. The turtle's steadiness represents the stability of the nation, and the snake's agility symbolizes the flow of life. Their combination signifies that Dark Emperor (Xuanwu) governs and defends the nation and blesses all living beings with the power of yin-yang balance obtained through cultivation, and thus achieves the transition from individual cultivation to serving and saving humanity.

3.4. Halo, Color, and the Visual Framing of Divine Presence

In the Nanshan niche, Zhenwu is framed by a round head halo painted in contrasting colors—orange at the center with a black outer ring. In Daoist visual culture, halos are conventional markers of divine radiance that separate the deity from the surrounding rock surface and intensify the viewer's focus on the head and face. The specific black-red pairing is compatible with broader late imperial color symbolism (black/xuan for the north and water; orange/red for fire), and it can therefore be read as reinforcing the cosmological register already activated by the turtle-snake base and the niche's northern placement.

The sculptures' color also contains guidance for spiritual practice. Although the existing painted decoration is severely eroded, analysis of residual pigment reveals that the original color scheme adhered to the alchemy principle of "Wuqi Chaoyuan 五氣朝元 (Five Qi Converging to the Origin)": the light ochre face represents the center of the "Yellow Court (Huangting 黃庭)", the blue-black armor corresponds to "Kidney Water" and "Liver Wood", and the red robe symbolizes "Heart Fire". This color system visually represents a complete five-element cycle, and practitioners can promote the flow of qi through long-term meditation. The blue-black and reddish-brown tortoise and snake on the base further reinforce the imagery of "water and fire in harmony (*shuihuo jiji* 水火既濟)" and provide viewers with a direct reference to the balance of yin and yang.

Taken together, the turtle-snake base, the barefoot body, the niche's northern placement, the halo's visual framing and the sculpture's color create a dense cluster of associations around "north/water" and divine protection. These associations were readily legible within late imperial correlative cosmology. Whether patrons and worshippers at Nanshan also activated more technical inner-alchemy readings cannot be demonstrated from the sculpture alone, but the imagery remains compatible with interpretive traditions in which cosmological symbols are mapped onto inner cultivation.

3.5. From Iconography to Practice: A Cautious Synthesis for Nanshan

Interpreting the Nanshan Zhenwu niche as an explicit neidan "instructional image" would exceed the available evidence; the sculpture does not preserve textual labels or technical diagrams that would anchor a specific inner-alchemical curriculum. Yet the niche does offer a set of material and visual affordances that could have supported concentrated engagement. Its deep, enclosed space limits peripheral distraction; the triadic composition frames the central deity; and the halo and frontal arrangement stabilize attention within a narrow devotional field. These features are consistent with a broader Daoist practice ecology in which protective worship, recitation, and personal cultivation overlapped.

The donor inscription, centered on incense offerings and the repair of an incense burner, indicates that the niche was a locus of ongoing worship in 1521. Such epigraphic traces suggest that images like this operated within a lived devotional economy—petitions, vows, and offerings—through which cosmological and self-cultivational meanings could

be activated differently by different participants. If one reads the iconographic cluster (north/water, turtle–snake, black–red halo) through a neidan lens, it can be aligned with the ideal of balancing “water” and “fire,” often expressed as *shuihuo jiji* 水火既濟. This alignment should be treated as a historically plausible interpretive possibility rather than as a demonstrated practice at Nanshan.

Future work could test these hypotheses through systematic comparison with other dated Zhenwu images in Sichuan–Chongqing, technical analysis of pigments and repainting layers, and close reading of local ritual manuals or temple archives where available. Such evidence would help clarify how and when neidan interpretations were historically mobilized at specific sites.

4. Conclusions

This study examined the Zhenwu niche (No. 1) at Nanshan, Dazu, by combining site-based analysis with a cautious reading of Daoist and inner-alchemical textual traditions. The niche’s spatial position at the northern end of the Nanshan ensemble, its independent cave form, and its inscriptional traces of incense offerings situate the image within a lived devotional setting. At the same time, the niche mobilizes a standard Zhenwu repertoire—martial posture, a turtle–snake emblem, bare feet, and halo—whose meanings could be framed through correlative cosmology and, for some late imperial readers, through neidan discourse.

By foregrounding the relationship between spatial program, iconography, and textual horizons, the article contributes a contextualized case study for scholarship on Daoist visual culture. Importantly, it does not claim that the Nanshan niche directly documents inner-alchemical practice; rather, it shows how widely shared motifs could have supported multiple layers of interpretation, from protection and exorcism to self-cultivation, depending on the viewer’s ritual and textual literacy.

Further comparative research on dated Zhenwu images across Sichuan–Chongqing, together with technical studies of pigments and closer attention to local ritual documentation where available, would help clarify how these interpretive registers were historically activated in specific sites and communities.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The original Chinese text is: 左有十二青龍，右有二十六白虎，前有二十四朱雀，後有七十二玄武. (DZ 1988, vol. 28, p. 229).
- ² The original Chinese text is: 凡造像，皆依經具儀相. (DZ 1988, vol. 24, p. 748).
- ³ The original Chinese text is: 真武神將，敬奉天尊教劫。乃披發跣足，踏騰蛇八卦神龟. (DZ 1988, vol. 1, p. 813).
- ⁴ The original Chinese text is: 或掛甲而衣袍，或穿靴而跣足。常披紺發，每仗神鋒. (DZ 1988, vol. 18, p. 38).
- ⁵ The original Chinese text is: 被（披）發黑衣，仗劍蹈龜蛇，從者執黑旗. (Zhao 1996, p. 148).
- ⁶ The original Chinese text is: 玄帝登山，首於太子岩栖隱。帝修真時，有靈鴉報曉，黑虎衛岩。每食必餌之。至今二物通靈，皆證大神，時隱時見。烏鴉喙赤，見之者昌；黑虎奸，逆之者殃. (DZ 1988, vol. 19, p. 573).
- ⁷ The original Chinese text is: 按《總真集》云：武當黑虎大神，乃北方天一之所化，護教守山之靈。正真威顯，變化不一或托相為人，金甲皂袍，若將軍之狀；或現真相，玄髮黑色，如獅子之形……《丹經》云：虎向水中生是也。有秘法傳之，於世行焉。今天一真慶宮嘉慶閣下有黑虎岩靈烏者，秉北方之黑色，為武當之靈神. (DZ 1988, vol. 19, p. 573).
- ⁸ The original Chinese text is: 太極一判，天地始明。東分青九，南受丹三，西城白七，北歸玄五，中生黃一，號為五老，即玄黃植象之根也。五老各布，始炁化成，四靈以定，四隅周環，六合兩儀，運乎其中，推成萬物. (Xiao 2019, p. 190).
- ⁹ The original Chinese text is: 玄帝果先天始炁五靈玄老太陰天一之化. (Xiao 2019, p. 191).
- ¹⁰ The original Chinese text is: 玄帝念道專一，遂感玉清聖祖紫元君，傳授無極上道。元君告玄帝曰：子可越海，東遊歷，於翼軫之下，有山自乾兌起跡，盤旋五萬里，水出震宮。自有太極，便生是山。上應顯定，極風太安。皇崖二天，有七十二峰，三十六岩也，子可入是山，擇眾峰之中，冲高紫霄者居之。當契太和升舉之後五百歲，當上天。龍漢二劫中，披髮跣足，躡坎離之真精，歸根復位。上為三境輔臣，下作十方大聖，方得顯名億劫，與天地日月齊並，是其果滿也，告畢，元君升雲而去. (Xiao 2019, p. 196).
- ¹¹ The original Chinese text is: 真人用寶劍以屍解，蟬蛻化之上品也. vol. (DZ 1988, vol. 22, p. 594).
- ¹² The original Chinese text is: 諸以劍屍解者，以劍代身，五百年之後，此劍皆自然還其處. (DZ 1988, vol. 22, p. 593).
- ¹³ The original Chinese text is: 歐冶親傳鑄劍方，莫邪金水配柔剛。煉成便會知人意，萬里誅妖一電光. (DZ 1988, vol. 2, p. 1006).
- ¹⁴ The original Chinese text is: 玄帝乃如師言，越海東遊。又感豐乾大天帝，授以寶劍。天帝告曰：此劍，名曰北方黑馳裘角斷魔雄劍，長七尺二寸，應七十二候。撫三輔，應三台。重二十四斤，應二十四炁。闊四寸八分，應四時八節。子可佩此，居山修煉，降伏邪道，收斬妖魔。告畢，天帝升雲而去。玄帝受訖，曆翼軫之下，果見是山，山藏水沒，皆符師言。於是入山渡澗，擇地，隱居內修. (DZ 1988, vol. 19, p. 572).
- ¹⁵ The original Chinese text is: 壬癸水者，玄武也，位鬥牛女虛危室壁七宿，有龜蛇之體，在北方，故曰玄武也。八卦乾成象，四七運神功，考日躔南北，月度西東，運移隨鬥轉，變化在其中. (DZ 1988, vol. 19, p. 418).
- ¹⁶ The original Chinese text is: 上帝命玄帝曰：卿可當披髮跣足，躡踏龜蛇，建早森玄旗，躬披鏡甲，位鎮坎宮，天稱元帥，世號福神。每月下降，操扶社稷，普福生靈，億劫不怠，輝光日新。而帝欽奉詔已，而歎曰：昔吾為人時，入太和山煉道，蒙本師紫元君所誡云：升舉之後五百歲，當披髮跣足，躡坎離，真精歸根復位。上為輔臣，下作大聖，方得顯名億劫，與天地日月齊並。今日果符師語，復位坎宮，豈不快哉. (DZ 1988, vol. 19, p. 576).

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