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Author(s): John Lagerwey

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TAOIST RITUAL SPACE AND DYNASTIC LEGITIMACY*

John LAGERWEY

Trois domaines marquent la filiation du taoïsme par rapport au système impérial des Han : d'abord, l'espace rituel (tan) est hérité des plate-formes des sacrifices impériaux des Han, groupant une aire centrale siège du "grand un" (taiyi), une aire extérieure vouée aux "Cinq-Empereurs" et, en tout, 1514 sièges de divinités. Ensuite, sur ce tan, l'exécution du "Pas de Yu" (yubu) par les prêtres taoïstes est inspirée de la circulation du grand un qui alimenta la spéculation des Han sur le Mingtang et les Neuf-Palais. Enfin, comme Anna Seidel l'a montré, les registres (lu) donnés dans les initiations taoïstes dérivent des commentaires ésotériques des classiques (chanwei) des Han et reflètent des idées semblables sur la légitimité politique. Pris ensemble, ces trois démarches montrent clairement ce que la religion taoïste naissante devait à la religion impériale et à la spéculation théologique des Han. Nous comprenons donc mieux pourquoi les familles régnantes depuis les Topa Wei jusqu'aux Ming se sont régulièrement tournées vers le taoïsme pour en obtenir la confirmation spirituelle de leur légitimité dynastique.

The most common word for the Taoist sacred space is *tan* 壇, a word which refers to a "platform of tamped earth." In traditional China most if not all Taoist abbeys had a permanent sacred space where Taoist masters performed their rituals both for themselves and for the faithful who requested such services. Hereditary Taoists also had a permanent *tan* in their homes, and they there burned incense morning and evening and also received their clientèle for minor rituals. Such Taoists are literally identified by the name of their sacred space and hang above their doors a signboard on which this name is written. Traditionally, they underwent a ritual of ordination which gave them the right to use this *tanhao* 壇號 or name of the sacred space, and this ordination then enabled them to set up a temporary sacred space elsewhere, as in a client's home for a ritual to save the souls of the family dead, or in a temple for the community sacrifice (*jiao* 醮).

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Kristofer Schipper (1982: 125-135) has given a good description of such temporary sacred areas in modern Taoism, and of their metaphorical and liturgical implications. He explains that this space, which represents at once a mountain and a cave, is in reality created from the high priest's body by means of the exteriorization of his "breath" (*qi* 氣). I have shown myself (1992: 34-44) that the construction of the Taoist *tan* can vary greatly from one ritual to the next within a single tradition, for Taoist ritual is highly theatrical and requires, as a result, a careful *mise en scène*. This variety is characteristic not only of each living local Taoist tradition but also of the entire Taoist tradition in all its historical depth (Lagerwey 1987: 25-48). It is of this depth that I shall treat in what follows.

Let us begin by recalling the basic features of one of the three *tan* described in the late sixth century *Wushang biyao* 無上秘要, to wit that of the Fast of the Three Principles (*Sanyuan zhai* 三元齋), whose cosmological structure is especially clear: "The sacred space, whose contours have been drawn with red mud, has three levels. A table is placed in the middle of the top level and a table in each of the four directions of the second level, with an incense burner on each table. The eight trigrams of King Wen 文 are placed on the bottom level" (Lagerwey 1981: 159). As I have written elsewhere (1987: 30-35), the three levels of this sacred space represent the three levels of the universe, namely, heaven, earth and the waters under the earth. The eight trigrams on the aquatic level recall the myth of Yu 禹, who saved the world from the inexorably mounting waters by creating channels with the help of the trigrams.

These trigrams, in turn, are described in certain sources as the marks left by the Step of Yu, a Step which, already in the third century BCE, enabled exorcists to drive off the demons of illness and, from the third or fourth centuries CE on, enabled Taoist adepts to ascend to the Gate of Heaven or to circulate through space-time as the Great One (Taiyi 太一) does through the Hall of Light (*mingtang* 明堂; Andersen 1990: 15-37) by walking on the stars of the Big Dipper or on the trigrams. In the apocrypha (*weishu* 緯書) of the Han, explains Andersen (p. 24),

The *Mingtang* is explained to be a replica of heaven, where the five divisions of the building are associated with the seats in the constellation Taiwei 太微 of the emperors of the five directions (*Shiji suoyin* 史記索隱 1.23). It is stated in the same text that "the emperor, having received [the essence] of heaven, establishes the five offices (*wufu* 五府) in order to honour the repeated images (*chongxiang* 重相) of heaven," and the central office is said to be named *Shendou* 神斗, "Divine Dipper" (*Suishu* 隋書 68.1589). This designation clearly reflects the central position of the Dipper in Han cosmology, widely attested in the *weishu*. The Dipper is seen as the instrument of the emperor of heaven, Taiyi, who resides in the bright, reddish star Kochab near the pole of heaven. "It contains the primordial breath and

dispenses it by means of the Dipper,” says the *Wenyao gou* 文耀鉤 (*Zhouli yishu* 周禮義疏 18.119/3), and of the Dipper itself: “It is the throat and tongue of heaven” (*Shiji suoyin* 27.1292).

A bit further on (p. 30), Andersen states, “The two major forms of *bugang* 步罡 are modelled on the two patterns of the movement of Taiyi, and indeed the incantations accompanying the performance frequently express that the priest impersonates Taiyi”. To this we may add that the movement of the Great One through a ritual space defined by the trigrams and the Big Dipper derives from a system of “calendrical computation known as ‘the circulation of the Great One through the nine palaces’... [Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200)] describes the manner in which the Great One—the god of the northern marker, probably the Polestar—moves through the nine palaces where dwell the spirits of the eight trigrams” (Kalinowski 1985: 777). On the following page Kalinowski shows that this system of computation goes back at least to the beginning of the Han.

We may conclude from all this that the eight trigrams on the bottom level of the sacred area for the Fast of the Three Principles were to be walked on by the priest in order at once to drive off evil and enable him to ascend to the central part of the *tan* represented by the two upper levels. These levels clearly constitute a unity, for between them they have five tables, and five is the key number in China for the creation of a unified space. Moreover, the passage cited above from Andersen shows that this number cannot be dissociated from the Five Emperors, who have their thrones and their offices in the constellation Taiwei, itself associated with the northern center of the Chinese sky. And in order better to underline the unity of these two levels, let us recall that the word “heaven-earth” (*tian-di* 天地) is the equivalent in Chinese for our word “universe.”

But who are the Five Emperors, and do they have a concrete link to the Taoist sacred area? To the latter question we may respond immediately in the affirmative: in the oldest Taoist text to discuss the Jiao (the Taoist sacrifice), the *Lingbao wufu xu* 靈寶五符序 (fourth century), the Jiao, described in chapter 3, is done in honor of five “real writs” (*zhenwen* 真文) placed on five tables with offerings for the Five Emperors. These five real writs, in other words, represent the Five Emperors, and it is by the setting out of these writs that the *tan* is created. This is how, still today in the Lingbao 靈寶 liturgical tradition, the Taoist sacred area is made (for a succinct description of this ritual and its foundation in the texts of the fifth century, see Lagerwey 1987: 103-105). And at the end of the sacrifice, the sacred area is “deconstructed” by the removal and burning of the same five writs (*op. cit.*, 57).

As for the cult of the Five Emperors, Michael Loewe (1962: 128) retraces in the following manner its origin: already in the eighth century BCE, a cult of the

Four Poles (*siji* 四極) was celebrated at Yong 雍, near the Zhou capital. (This sacrifice goes back to the *di* 禘 sacrifice of the Shang, which was “offered to various natural divinities but above all to the four directions, which were consubstantial with the winds, themselves the messengers of the Almighty” [Vandermeersch 1980: 359]). The Han continued this cult but added a fifth direction, the north. In 164 BCE, after having set up five *tan* at Weiyang 渭陽, near the capital at Changan 長安, the Emperor Wen 文 proceeded there in person to perform the sacrifice, and the Emperor Wu 武 did the same in the year 134 BCE. It was then decided that the sacrifice should take place every third year. In 113 BCE the Emperor Wu had a *tan* constructed for Taiyi near the Ganquan 甘泉 Palace and went there in person to sacrifice. Three years later, Wudi performed the *fengshan* 封禪 sacrifice of imperial legitimacy on Taishan 泰山, and then again in the year 106 BCE, just after the building on Taishan of a Hall of Light. For this second *fengshan*, the emperor sacrificed to the Great One and the Five Emperors on the upper floor of the Hall of Light, and to the Empress of the Earth, Houtu 后土, on the lower (Loewe 1962: 130-135). We are no longer very far from the sacred area of the Fast of the Three Principles.

Regular sacrifices to the Great One were performed in the Ganquan Palace in 61-37 BCE. The minister Kuang Heng 匡衡 then completely reformed the system of imperial sacrifice, reducing the total number of cult sites from 683 to 208 and moving the worship of Heaven and Earth from the Ganquan Palace, far away from the capital, to the southern and northern suburbs respectively. After many further alterations, not the least of which were those undertaken during the reign of Wang Mang 王莽, the Later Han established altars for the worship of Heaven and Earth in the southern and northern suburbs of Loyang 洛陽 (Loewe 1962: 136-139). This is the description of the *tan* for the worship of Heaven in the southern suburb as given in the *The History of the Later Han* (*Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, *jisi zhi* 祭祀志 7.3159-3160):

In the first month of the year 25 it was decreed for the first time that the suburban sacrifice be performed seven li 里 south of Loyang, near Hao 鄆 (the place where the Emperor Guangwu 光武 ascended the throne). It was decided to perform it according to the rites of the Yuanshi 元治 era (1-6 CE). A round *tan* with eight steps was built, and in the middle a second floor on the southern side of which were placed the seats of Heaven and Earth. Access was from the west. The outer area was the seat of the Five Emperors, the Blue Emperor having his seat in the ENE corner, the Red Emperor in the SSE, the Yellow Emperor in the SSW, the White Emperor in the west and the Black Emperor in the NNW. On the outer edge of each floor were built low walls, so as to form a double military camp. They were purple, in imitation of the Purple Palace (the equivalent of the constellation Taiwei). Four pathways, which served as doors, were opened on both levels. The sun and

the moon were placed in the southern path of the inner camp, the sun on the east, the moon on the west. The Big Dipper was to the west of the northern path (the NW is the Gate of Heaven in Chinese cosmology). Each had its own seat and was not mixed with the rest of the gods.

Each of the eight steps had 58 cups (for the libations), with a total of 464 cups. The step of the Five Emperors was wider, and each emperor had 72 cups, for a total of 360 (signifying their mastery of the space-time cycle). Each of the four doors of the inner camp had 54 gods, for a total of 216; each of the four doors of the outer camp had 108 gods, for a total of 432... The four doors of both the inner and the outer camps were guarded by four gods, giving a total of 32. In all, there were 1514 divinities. The word “camp” refers to the low wall; the word “guard” indicates that the doors were sealed with earth. The five planets, together with the stellar mansions of the Officer of the Center and the gods of the five officers and the five holy mountains, had their seats in the rear part of the inner camp. The stars of the outer officers of the 28 stellar mansions, the Duke of Thunder, the First Farmer, the Count of the Wind, the Master of the Rain, the four seas, the famous mountains and the great rivers were all located in the rear part of the outer camp.

This is, at the very beginning of our era, the definitive form given to what Vandermeersch refers to as “the most important of all Chinese rituals until the twentieth century,” a ritual which he says goes back to the sacrifice performed by King Wu 武 of the Zhou almost one thousand years BCE in celebration of his victory over the Shang (1980: 362). It is, as we have seen, a sacrifice addressed to Heaven, with which are associated “the five hypostases of the celestial Sovereign on High (*op. cit.*, 368). Among the 1514 gods who had their place on this round altar of the sacrifice in the southern suburb, many still have a seat on the Taoist *tan*: the sun, the moon and the Big Dipper, the five planets and the other astral divinities; the Duke of Thunder, the Count of the Wind and the Master of the Rain. As for the *tan* used in the Later Han imperial sacrifice, although it is not identical with that of the Fast of the Three Principles, its eight steps and two levels clearly refer to the same universe. Nor can the two levels do other than to remind us of the two floors of the Hall of Light of the Emperor Wu of the Former Han.

The fact that the Taoist sacred area derives not only its name but also its basic structure from the altar where the regular ritual of renewal of the Heavenly Mandate (*tianming* 天命) of the dynasty was celebrated should hardly surprise us, for we know from Anna Seidel’s work that the same was true of the rites of investiture themselves: “The bestowal of the titles of parish offices and of registers on male and female [Taoist] officials is comparable to the investiture of a king... The Taoists found not only the name but already the whole idea of their *lu* 籙 registers in the Han concept of the sovereign’s power over spirits” (Seidel 1983:291, 323).

In addition, the steps performed by the Taoist priest, which we have already seen to be comparable to the movement of the Great One through the nine palaces or the Hall of Light, are to be explained in similar fashion:

The Great One resides in the central palace, which belongs to the stars surrounding the Polestar, or Purple Palace. According to the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, the Purple Palace is the constellation Taiwei... [The *Laozi ming* 老子銘, written in the year 166 for an imperial sacrifice to the god Laozi 老子, says]: “Laozi is now united with the Breath of primordial chaos, now separate”... Laozi is united with primordial chaos. In the *Huainanzi* the name of primordial chaos is the Great One. “Supreme Unity” is the state of the universe before the differentiation of Yin and Yang, Heaven and Earth. Laozi appears in this passage to be primordial, eternal and in constant movement. His movements are those of the sun and the seasons; they are adapted to the rhythm of time. In the same manner the Great One, in a hymn used in the sacrifice in the southern suburb, is described as the cosmic rhythm... Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 describes the circuit of Taiyi through the nine palaces which are at once the Hall of Light and the King Wen trigrams: “The Great One is the name of the god of the Polestar. When he dwells in his (celestial) palace, he is called Supreme Emperor (*Taidi* 太帝); when he moves through the eight trigrams and through the hours of the day, he is called Celestial Unity (*Tianyi* 天一), and according to others Supreme Unity (*Taiyi* 太一) (Seidel 1969: 54-57).

In short, like its model the altar used throughout Chinese history for imperial sacrifice to Heaven in the southern suburb, the Taoist sacred space is a representation of cosmic—and above all astral—order. The Taoist priest, when he moves through this space, is identified with his supreme god, Laozi, who in his turn is identical with the supreme god of the Han dynasty system of imperial worship, the Great One. And this Great One is none other than the supreme god called Sovereign on High (*Shangdi* 上帝) during the Shang and Heaven by the Zhou. From age to age the name of the Ultimate One changes, in accord with political circumstances and the advance of knowledge concerning the universe: the Sovereign on High, still very close to the royal ancestors, is an indication of the importance of ancestor worship in Shang government; the worship of Heaven under the Zhou, as Vandermeersch has shown so clearly, expresses the transition to a form of political legitimacy which is more abstract, more universal, and detached from the lineage; the cult of the Great One, finally, reflects the astro-calendrical research and speculation of the Han period.

If the Taoists, while borrowing from imperial institutions the name and the structure of their sacred space, as well as the name and enactment of the rite of imperial investiture, preferred to call their supreme god Laozi, it is because their

primary preoccupation was less dynastic durability than it was individual immortality. Whereas the Great One was exclusively linked to the rationality of the heavens, Laozi was, already in the Former Han, the very image of the immortal: “He was very adept,” says the *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳 (tr. Kaltenmark 1987: 220), “at nourishing his vital energy; during sexual union, he considered it crucial not to ejaculate.” By the end of the sixth century at the very latest, the theme of the transformations of Laozi, analyzed first by Seidel and then by Schipper (1982: 156-174), leads to the following portrait of the cosmic god Laozi (drawn from the *Xiaodao lun* 笑道論 of Zhen Luan 甄鸞, tr. Maspero 1971: 374):

Laozi transformed his body. His left eye became the sun, his right eye the moon. His head became Mount Kunlun 崑崙, his beard the planets and the constellations, and his bones dragons. His flesh became the animals, his intestines serpents, his belly the sea, his hands the Five Peaks, his body hair the trees and grass, and his heart the Flowery Canopy. His two kidneys united to form the truly real Father and Mother.

This text dates to the year 570 (Lagerwey 1981: 21). At least since the year 1116, when Yuan Miaozong 元妙宗 presented the *Taishang zhuguo jiumin zongzhen biyao* 太上助國救民總真祕要 to the throne (Lagerwey 1987: 71), a similar text may be found at the very beginning of the Taoist sacrifice (*jiao*):

Mine is not an ordinary body: my head resembles black clouds, my hair the scattered stars. My left eye is like the sun, my right eye like the moon, my nose like exorcistic talismans, my ears like golden bells. My upper lip is the Master of the Rain, my lower lip the Count of the Wind. My teeth are like a forest of swords, my ten fingers are officers of merit. I command my left ribs to become the Lord of Mount Min 閩 and my right ribs the Lord of Mount Lu 廬, my left feet to become the General of Thunder and my right feet the General of Lightning. I order my spinal column to become the Lord of Taishan. The 36 birds and 28 celestial mansions has each its equivalent in my body.

By the recitation of this text the body of the Taoist master is transformed, on the threshold of the sacrifice, into a cosmic body (the differences with respect to the sixth century text all have to do with liturgical functions): that of Laozi, whose body is identical with the Taoist sacred space, the *tan*. It may well be that this explicit identification of the body of Laozi with the *tan* is new in the twelfth century, that it is not to be interpreted as a late coming to the surface of an ancient tradition. Nor is this identification found in all Taoist liturgical traditions. But this does not change the fact that it is a logical and even predictable product of the conceptions and practices of the Han dynasty summarized above. There is, then, no reason to be surprised by the fact that the Taoist priest, as he moves through his sacred space, incarnates the Great One, for his body embodies the body of the Dao.

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