

Article

Vernacular “Fiction” and Celestial Script: A Daoist Manual for the Use of *Water Margin*

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Abstract: This article maps out a sphere of ritual practice that recognizably serves as a framework for the famous Ming dynasty (1368–1644) vernacular narrative *Water Margin* (水滸傳 *Shuihu zhuan*). By establishing a set of primary referents that are ritual in nature, I question the habit of applying the modern category of “literary fiction” in a universalizing, secular way, marginalizing or metaphorizing Daoist elements. I argue that literary analysis can only be fruitful if it is done within the parameters of ritual. Although I tie the story’s ritual framework to specific Daoist procedures for imprisoning demonic spirits throughout the article, my initial focus is on a genre of revelatory writing known as “celestial script” (天書 *tianshu*). This type of script is given much attention at important moments in the story and it is simultaneously known from Daoist ritual texts. I show a firm link between *Water Margin* and the uses of “celestial script” by presenting a nineteenth century Daoist ordination manual that contains “celestial script” for each of *Water Margin*’s 108 heroic protagonists.

Keywords: *Shuihu zhuan*; ritual; revelation; celestial script; literary interpretation

Though deeply intertwined with Daoist ritual and popular cults of worship, several of the great books of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) may forever be colonized within the modern, secular project of “literary fiction.”¹ Our understanding of a story-cycle like *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳, variously translated in its most popular Ming version as *Water Margin* or *Outlaws of the Marsh*,² has long been successfully forced into the Eurocentric straitjacket that wants to interpret it as a “novel,” that subjects it to “literary analysis,” and that tends to read as “metaphor” any content that is too overtly shaped in the likeness of demons, immortals or other phenomena appearing fanciful to the secular mind. Thus, it is divorced from the cultural milieu that has produced it and that is inscribed prominently on the surface of the narrative.³

Water Margin does, indeed, not exactly beat around the bush when it comes to its ritual teleology, especially referring to the vernacular rituals of Daoism.⁴ The narrative revolves around 108 demonic spirits who escape from their imprisonment in a Daoist temple and subsequently transform into the story’s heroic main characters. At the beginning of the story the spirits are pressed down beneath a stone slab that seals off a deep wellspring—used as subterranean prison—on the temple precinct.

¹ For a summary history of the secular ideology behind the modern discipline of Chinese literature, see (Meulenbeld 2015, chp. 1).

² (Fang 1937; Shapiro 1980). Alternatively, the book has been assigned the title of *All Men Are Brothers* in the 1933 translation by Pearl S. Buck.

³ *Water Margin* exists in many versions. The work by Irwin (1953), still offers a useful summary. A recent work by Scott W. Gregory proposes detailed suggestions for the earliest Ming editions by Guo Xun (Gregory 2017, pp. 1–29). All of the earlier versions seem to have been longer (with more chapters) than the abridged 1644 edition in 70 chapters by Jin Shengtan 金聖嘆. This version has become a standard and unless otherwise indicated, it is the version I have used for this study. Although there is some controversy over which of the extant versions is the earliest, I follow Andrew Plaks. He concludes that the earliest extant version of *Water Margin* is the Rongyutang 容與堂 edition from 1610. See (Plaks 1987, pp. 287–89).

⁴ This class of rituals has been described first in an article by (Schipper 1985, pp. 21–57).

The illicit removal of the slab from the wellspring sets them free, marking the commencement of the 108 heroes' adventures, when they are launched onto a trajectory towards gathering merit by performing righteous deeds. Subsequently, despite their demonic origins, during a grand Daoist rite at the end of the book, another stone slab⁵ is unearthed that contains the secret names of each of the spirits—legible only to Daoist initiates. Through these esoteric graphs that thus enshrine their presences, it is revealed to the world that the 108 demonic spirits constitute a cosmologically coherent group of 108 astral forces, each single one of them embodying a distinct star god. After this rite of canonization by revelation, all these astral forces are ready to be summoned in the service of higher orders—for quelling uprisings no less than for battling demonic adversaries. It is due to the memorable acts of righting wrong, performed by the members of this group of Daoist star gods, that *Water Margin* has come to be associated with the project of “Spreading the Dao on Heaven’s behalf” (替天行道 *ti Tian xing Dao*), one of its best known slogans.⁶ Indeed, this is only one indication of its ritual roots, as this phrase also precisely defines the social function of a Daoist priest⁷ and is a widespread trope in Daoist liturgical texts.

Wedged in between a Daoist ritual opening and a Daoist ritual conclusion, the martial episodes forming the narrative of *Water Margin* belong to the “literature of canonization” I have described elsewhere.⁸ A fundamental characteristic of this sort of narrative—like its militaristic peer narratives *Canonization of the Gods* (封神演義 *Fengshen yanyi*), *Three Kingdoms* (三國志演義 *San Guo zhi yanyi*) and others⁹—is its deep affinity with martial ritual. It is upon this type of practices that these story-cycles are constructed. For *Water Margin*, however, no such ties have ever been described—at least not to any substantial degree,¹⁰ even in the oral lore studied by Vibeke Børdahl.¹¹

This article, then, presents a recently discovered manuscript from Hunan province (PRC), roughly dating back to the middle of the 19th century, which contains a full set of esoteric writs (and basic colophons) for each of the 108 heroes of *Water Margin*. The manuscript, a formulary of secret talismans, was transmitted as part of the materials that acolytes received in the process of becoming ordained as a Daoist priest. Its stock of 108 talismans fits squarely into a genre of writing—“celestial writing” (天書 *tianshu*; also 天文 *tianwen*, and yet other binomes) that has a long history in environments where communications with celestial presences formed a daily reality, such as Daoist ritual. I will present some aspects of this phenomenon, as far as it is relevant within a narrowly delimited type of texts, namely Daoist manuals that contain similar forms of celestial script—and its ritual application as “talismans” (符 *fu*) for invoking the presence of gods.

1. Between “Fiction” and Talismans: Some Questions

By establishing a sphere of ritual practice—and really of ritual *logic* more broadly—that recognizably serves as framework for *Water Margin*, I question the habit of applying the modern category of “literary fiction” in a universalizing, secular way. Since there is nothing fictive about the widespread performance of certain ritual practices that inform *Water Margin* and existed prior to

⁵ Perhaps it is the same stone slab, as nothing is said about the fate of the first one after it has been removed from the wellspring in the temple. In some versions of the story the first stone slab, like the second, is said to hold inscriptions of all the 108 spirits' names.

⁶ In one of the earlier scholarly studies of *Water Margin* in Western academia, Irwin (1953) sees this as a form of elevation by evolution: “In *Xuanhe Yishi* they appear as ordinary brigands distinguished, perhaps, for cleverness, mutual loyalty and their success in withstanding punitive campaigns; but they are nothing more than fugitives from justice. Now [in *Water Margin*] they emerge with no less a mission than ‘carrying out the will of heaven,’ [. . .]” (p. 38).

⁷ (Schipper 1993, pp. 60, 66).

⁸ (Meulenbeld 2015, pp. 15–17).

⁹ For *Canonization*, see (Meulenbeld 2015); for *Journey to the West*, see (Dudbridge 1970; Shao 2006). For other examples, see (Cedzich 1995, pp. 137–218; Shahar 1998).

¹⁰ A recent article by Peng Liu does make a case for the relevance of reading *Water Margin* within a context of Ming dynasty Daoist ritual, even relating some of its content to Daoist activities conducted at the Ming court. See (Liu 2016, pp. 48–71).

¹¹ (Børdahl 2013).

it, it seems to me that at the very least it should be necessary to justify the habit of reading stories from 16th and 17th century China as if they constituted “fiction” in our distinctly post-Enlightenment sense of the word. I will argue that before any literary analysis can be applied, the boundaries of interpretation must first be delineated in terms of Daoist ritual.

In his exploration of secular modernity, the anthropologist Talal Asad shows that modern disciplines like “literature” were founded upon a commonality between “skeptical inquiry in pursuit of authenticity” as represented by science and the “imaginative,” yet no less authentic, pursuit of “genuine” experience in literature.¹² Interpretation of books like *Water Margin* has explicitly taken this modernist sentiment to heart. If, in China, secular hermeneutics were established firmly with Lu Xun’s quest for “historical veracity” and realism in Chinese literature,¹³ it was embraced by later scholars such as C.T. Hsia: “*The Water Margin*, with its several sagas of picaresque heroes depicted in **settings of everyday truth**, certainly achieves far **greater realism** than *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and it also claims greater **psychological interest** [. . .].”¹⁴ If the modern mind proposed that science represented reason, the concept of literature was “no longer opposed to reason, as in the secular Enlightenment, ‘imagination’ now acquired some of reason’s functions and stood in contrast to ‘fancy.’”¹⁵ As long as imaginative tales had a basis in psychological realism, modernity taught, they were reasonable enough to count as literature.

Asad argues that this contrast between genuineness (of scientific and historical truth, of realist fiction) and fancy (of superstition, of magic) had emerged out of the Christian concern for finding truth in the Holy Scripture.¹⁶ According to Asad, moreover, it was made conceptually possible due to the modern “essentialization of the ‘sacred’ as an external, transcendent power”¹⁷—a phenomenon far removed from our profane world with its individual constructions of truth.

It may be for these reasons above all, that *Water Margin*’s modern interpreters show little interest in the production of efficacy through Daoist ritual that the story presents so prominently. Daoist ritual and its efficacy (some would prefer to speak of “magic,” or “sorcery”) does not naturally correspond to a transcendent notion of the sacred, nor does it self-evidently relate to the requirement of authenticity, realism or other notions of what constitutes the “genuine.” By that logic, a story like *Water Margin* can only be appreciated by diminishing such topics as secondary to the framework of the story, as symbolic of something else (a “deeper meaning”) that is covert and by imposing on it some form of “interpretation” that is made primary. In that sense, literary interpretation obscures the most basic framework of the text, which presents itself in straightforward reference to the efficacy of Daoist ritual.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht points to a very similar hermeneutic shift—from experiencing the immediacy of sacred “presence” (of gods, of demonic power, of ritual efficacy) to the belief that things (bodies, objects) need to be interpreted in search for an underlying meaning—as one of the defining characteristics of modernity. Whereas the premodern person would understand herself “as part of and as surrounded by a world” that essentially was of divine nature, the modern person sees himself as eccentric to the world and as “being an observer of the world.”¹⁸ If in modern cultures it is a precondition for any form of knowledge to be produced by humans (and their science of how objects express the invisible laws of nature), in premodern cultures any fundamental knowledge “was thought to be only available through divine revelation.”¹⁹ It is with such a sense of immediacy and presence of divine power that the narrative of *Water Margin* should best be approached, because this is the primary way in which it presents itself to us: revelation is thematized at major crossroads in the story.

¹² (Asad 2003, pp. 40–44).

¹³ See the discussion in (Meulenbeld 2015, chp. 1, pp. 44–45 ff).

¹⁴ (Hsia 1968, p. 76). Boldface mine.

¹⁵ (Asad 2003, p. 44).

¹⁶ (Asad 2003, p. 42).

¹⁷ (Asad 2003, p. 35).

¹⁸ (Gumbrecht 2004, p. 24).

¹⁹ (Gumbrecht 2004, p. 26).

It is precisely the kind of revelatory knowledge embodied by the story's demonstration of talismanic presence that does not require "interpretation as its transformation into meaning."²⁰

In related vein, the idea of a transcendent "sacred" can hardly be discovered in any of the episodes that make up the story of *Water Margin*. Although there are frequent encounters with temples, gods, divine revelations and other evidence of a cultic environment, none of the book's content could live up to that modern standard of the sacred. At best, it might be labeled as "superstition," even as "heterodoxy," or any other indulgence of the fanciful mind. It is exactly this sort of essentializing—of Religion, of psychology, of empirical reality—that has successfully instilled a pervasive blindness to the ritual dimension of vernacular narratives (Børdahl 2013).²¹ In its profoundly secular outlook, the interpretive basis of literary studies is suited for conceiving just the universally transcendent meaning it presupposes; it is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So, if our understanding of "literature" is formed in contrast to certain ideas of magic, superstition or even Religion, can it be unaffected when the latter are not universally or even diachronically applicable?²² It is my hope that, as soon as one acknowledges the habitual adumbration of Daoist ritual discourse within the discourse of Chinese literary studies and, instead, takes it seriously as a fundamental element in the narrative framework of many so-called novels, it becomes necessary to see that this Daoist "wedging" of the story creates the narrative conditions for the story to be told. In a profound sense, Daoist ritual opens up the discursive space within which the content is made to play out. It is "scripted" in ritual terms.

2. Daoist Script: 36 Celestial Rectifiers and 72 Terrestrial Killers

Let me further narrow down the core focus of this article. My principal goal is to show that relevant approaches to *Water Margin's* subject matter need very much to be situated within the Daoist ritual context of talismanic script. Known as "celestial script" (*tianshu* or *tianwen*), as "celestial writs" (天章 *tianzhang*) or sometimes as "dark writs" (玄章 *xuanzhang*), such graphs are thought to constitute writing directly revealed by heaven.

Celestial script like this has a long history within Daoism. In his work on the *Scripture of Salvation*, Stephen Bokenkamp provides insight into the provenance of this very esoteric type of revealed writing. In the context of that particular scripture, he says, the script "is formed of . . . primordial pneumas, . . . the stuff of which the highest heavens are made as well as a language that perfectly represents the powers of these heavens."²³ Bokenkamp goes on to translate a description of this hidden language from the *Scripture of Salvation*, showing that it "speaks the inner names of the thearchs and the sounds of the secret rhymes of all the heavens, as well as the taboo names of the demon kings and the secret names of the myriad spirits. These are not common words of the world." Indeed, just like the esoteric graphs for each of the 108 heroes, these are celestial secrets made available to extraordinary human beings, sages, perfected beings—and Daoist priests.

Oftentimes such writing would be revealed individually by a divinity, such as the Dark Maiden of Ninefold Heavens (九天玄女 *Jiutian Xuannü*) who reveals her "celestial script" to *Water Margin's* main hero, Song Jiang 宋江. Or, sometimes revelations might occur indirectly, such as through the unearthing of a stone slab with the divine names of the 108 heroes written in "Dragon Writs and Phoenix Seals,

²⁰ (Gumbrecht 2004, p. 81).

²¹ Vibeke Børdahl's analysis, unfortunately, is another example of the essentialization of modern categories. When she states that the oral lore related to the tiger-killer Wu Song is not in any sense "religious," she argues exactly what Lu Xun and C.T. Hsia have said before her: "What is related about the tiger and the tiger-killer is by and large coloured by a **rationalism** and **psychological insight** that seems divorced from what we might think of as folk religion in China and elsewhere [boldface mine]." What this sort of thinking shows, in combination with her simplistic notion of "folk beliefs" as "transcendental or magic rituals and convictions," is a deep-rooted blindness to Chinese religious patterns, hampering the ability to recognize *Water Margin's* ritual dimension (cited from p. xxvii).

²² My question here, again, is asked in the likeness of Talal Asad's challenge. See (Asad 2003, p. 95).

²³ (Bokenkamp 1997, p. 386).

Talismanic Registers in Celestial Script” (龍章鳳篆, 天書符籙 *longzhang fengzhuān, tianshu fulu*) that only a Daoist initiate could read. As revealed writings, however, they always represent celestial injunctions, and in this case are seen as powerful embodiments of “celestial law” (天律 *tianlü*). In the context of the Dark Maiden, as Lee Feng-mao reminds us, celestial writing is closely related to various kinds of talismanic writing (符 *fu*), a highly stylized form of efficacious graphs by which Daoist priests write out the deepest secrets of the cosmos, oftentimes using them as tokens of power obtained from heaven²⁴.

Indeed, in the opening chapter of the story, a stone slab is used to press down the 108 spirits inside a wellspring underneath the Daoist temple complex of the Daoist patriarchate on Mt. Longhu in Jiangxi province. A passage towards the end of the first chapter refers to this writing as “celestial talismans” (天符 *tianfu*) that anchor the spirits down in their subterranean confinement.²⁵ In addition to thus classifying the writing on the stone slab with a specific label of celestial authority, the story offers another type of classification: numerological units.

In this hall were locked up the Stars of the 36 Celestial Rectifiers and of the 72 Terrestrial Killers—a total of 108 Demon Lords were inside. On top of it was erected a stone stele inscribed with Celestial Talismans in dragon writs and phoenix seals, in order to keep them suppressed here. To have them released back into the world will inevitably cause the distress of beings in the lower world.

此殿內鎮鎖著三十六員天罡星，七十二座地煞星，共是一百單八個魔君在裏面。上立石碑，鑿著龍章鳳篆天符，鎮住在此。若還放他出世，必惱下方生靈。

Thus are introduced the 108 Demon Lords (魔君 *Mo Jun* or Demon Kings, 魔王 *Mo Wang*) who are nowadays better known as the 108 heroes of the Liangshan Marsh (梁山泊 *Liangshan Bo*). These ambiguous figures, both hero and demon, are the vectors that guide the story; their narrative course is determined by a script from beginning to end.

Constituting this group are the 36 “Celestial Rectifiers” (天罡 *Tiangang*) and 72 “Terrestrial Killers” (地煞 *Disha*). These two numerological subsets are a trope in Ming dynasty ritual discourse, referred to frequently in the exploits shared between vernacular narrative and vernacular ritual. They stand for two sets of heavenly powers representing time and directly connected to earthly space. It is important to point out right away that celestial bodies always had an immediate link to geographic regions in China. From early times there existed something like an “astral geography” projected on earth, known as “star fields” (星野 *xingye* or “field division,” 分野 *fenye*; see Figure 1). This concept was one that correlated 28 regions of China with the 28 *xiu* 宿 or “lunar lodges,” a sequence of asterisms that correlated earthly affairs with celestial affairs.²⁶ Similar links are found for most (if not all) celestial bodies, most notably the Year Star (歲星 *Suixing*), which is still widely known in 60 different divine manifestations that govern people’s fate on earth. All this should remind us of the fact that in the traditional Chinese understanding of the cosmos, there was no categorical divide between celestial bodies and terrestrial spaces (or the bodies inhabiting them). A continuum between heaven and earth underpinned people’s understanding of their world. Different dimensions of this continuum were often represented with different numerological configurations.

²⁴ (Li 2010, pp. 17–54).

²⁵ Here the text reads: “Atop [of the wellspring] was erected a stone slab with Celestial Talismans [consisting] of Dragon Writs and Phoenix Seals, anchoring them here” 上立石碑，鑿著龍章鳳篆天符，鎮住在此。 This is from the 120-chapter Yuan Wuyai 袁無涯 version of 1614. In Jin Shengtan’s 70-chapter version, the stone slab looks more like the one we find during the concluding ritual of canonization, with all the names recorded: “Atop [of the wellspring] was erected a stone slab with all the names in Dragon Writs and Phoenix Seals, anchoring them here” 上立石碣，鑿著龍章鳳篆姓名，鎮住在此。

²⁶ (Sun and Kistemaker 1997, p. 106).

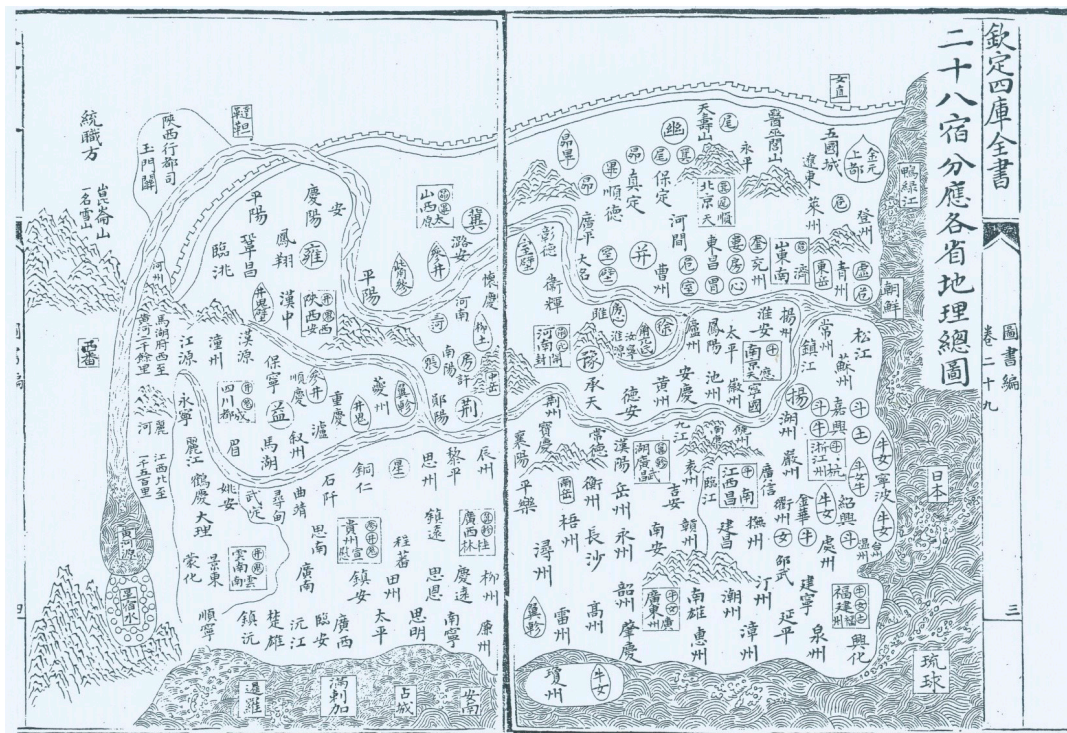


Figure 1. The “star fields” projected on a Ming dynasty map of China. (Zhang, Huang 章潢. *Tushu bian* 圖書編. In *Wenyuange siku quan shu* 972, juan 29, 3b-4a. Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshu, 1983).

Before returning to the 36 “Celestial Rectifiers” and 72 “Terrestrial Killers,” one other important asterism deserves mentioning. The Northern Dipper (北斗 *Beidou*) is another example of the close connection between the heavenly and earthly. On the one hand it can indicate with precision the time of night but it also can indicate the four seasons on earth—temporal concepts already expressive of a time-space continuum. In Daoist ritual contexts specifically, there was not only a Northern Dipper but there existed a Dipper for every one of the four cardinal points, thus supplementing a Southern, Eastern and Western Dipper. Another parallel between heaven and earth was that the Dipper was seen as the chariot of the celestial emperor, revolving around the center of the universe—the field of “Purple Tenuity” (紫微 *Ziwei*)—in his stellar tours of inspection, thus controlling the sky.²⁷ As a bright manifestation of the highest cosmic order, the Dipper embodies the execution of celestial law.

In its exorcist manifestation, the Northern Dipper is known as *gang* 罡, which I translate here as “rectifier” due to the ritual function it has in righting wrong.²⁸ Daoist priests overwhelmingly look up to the Northern Dipper as the locus of exorcist power. The 36 Celestial Rectifiers are directly related to this important heavenly body. As Poul Andersen describes in his introduction to the exorcist tradition known as “Celestial Heart” (天心 *Tianxin*), the Northern Dipper contained also the throne of the Northern Emperor (北帝 *Bei Di*). Priests of the Celestial Heart tradition would send petitions to this god, simultaneously known as Great Emperor of Purple Tenuity (紫微大帝 *Ziwei Dadi*), where he presided over the Court of Exorcism of the Northern Ultimate (北極驅邪院 *Beiji quxie yuan*). From this Court, “the army of generals and soldiers assisting [Daoist priests] were called forth.”²⁹ The Northern

²⁷ (Sun and Kistemaker 1997, pp. 22, 133).

²⁸ Even though in a seminal article Poul Andersen translates *gang* as “outline,” his emphasis there is on the shape of the Northern Dipper as a connected outline, imagined or projected on the ground, to be paced by Daoist priests. See his “The Practice of BUGANG.” *Cahiers d’Extrême Asie* 5 (1989–1990). In Andersen’s other work, on the “rectifying rites” (正法 *zhengfa*) of the Celestial Heart (天心 *Tianxin*) tradition, it becomes clear that one predominant understanding of *gang* was as a demonifuge entity. See below. Another reason for my translation of *gang* as “rectifier” is because the character itself contains this concept of *zheng* 正, a semantic aspect that would not escape contemporaneous readers.

²⁹ (Andersen 2008a, p. 991).

Emperor has a group of “great generals” reporting to him as his direct underlings, “notably the group of thirty-six generals headed by Tianpeng 天蓬, the deity corresponding to the ninth star of the Northern Dipper.”³⁰ During the Ming dynasty these 36 generals were coupled with 72 other generals and all of them became associated with the ritual powers of thunder—thirty-six “Great Generals of Thunder” (三十六雷大將) and 72 “Great Generals of Yin Thunder” (陰雷大將).³¹ This numerological configuration is the backbone of exorcist rites that invoke the power of astral bodies.

Similar to the 36 Rectifiers, the 72 Terrestrial Killers are frightening gods. In keeping with the link between celestial bodies and earthly spaces and with their function as timekeepers, the Killers originate from disruptive—and usually unexpected—collisions between the courses of time and space. In ritual contexts the 72 Killers are a common occurrence, prominently understood as a possible cause for disease or death. Preying on the 72 “passes” (關 *guan*) that connect the human body to all aspects of the cosmos, they can cause all sorts of maladies—especially for small children. Daoists commonly apply apotropaic rituals to prevent the working of these “killers of the passes” (關煞 *guansha*).³²

Although now largely unknown, even (or especially?) to educated Chinese, the 72 agents of disease were deeply ingrained into the daily life and ritual procedures of late imperial China, perhaps because it is impossible to gain a final victory over these fundamental forces of the cosmos: their ever recurring manifestations will perennially require renewed ritual treatment. The following observation by a Western missionary in late Qing dynasty Sichuan province illustrates the familiarity of the Killers and their noxious effect on people’s health. It also shows that the priests who performed these rituals, disparaged as charlatans who made up these cosmic pathogens, were not much appreciated in the modern mind.

Sorcerers and others, have concocted **seventy-two** “Baneful Influences” which may assail a child and **thirty-seven** “Passes” through which they are liable to pass. If a child becomes sick, the mother at once supposes that the child has met one of the “Baneful Influences” called *Sha* or “trespassed” on one of the “Passes.”³³

Similar but more detailed descriptions are provided by Anne Goodrich in her book on paper gods, collected in 1931. She says that “there are 72 entrances to the body through which these spirits may enter and cause all sorts of illnesses. [. . .] There are charms to be used against their evil influence.”³⁴ The word “charms” refers to talismanic writing. Most interestingly, she includes a print that shows the 72 Killers as a group of gods (see Figure 2).

Clearly, then, one cannot proceed to perform an operation of literary analysis on *Water Margin* before placing the 108 protagonists in their proper context of exorcistic ritual. To drive home the need for prioritizing ritual as a referent, it will be helpful to recap how in *Water Margin* the celestial writs inscribed on the stone slab are referred to with various enlightening descriptors. Apart from being classified as “celestial writing,” some of their formal features are indicated. With a more or less standard term they are referred to as “the tadpole writing of Dragon Writs and Phoenix Seals” (龍章鳳篆蝌蚪之書 *longzhang fengzhuan kedou zhi shu*). The story states that this sort of script is unintelligible to most people save for a few trained experts. During the Daoist ritual that concludes the adventures of *Water Margin*’s protagonists as outlaws, a Daoist priest steps forward who is able to decipher what is written in stone. He reveals that there are 36 lines written for the stars of the Celestial Rectifiers, each with a name and 72 lines for the stars of the Terrestrial Killers, also each with a name. These are

³⁰ (Andersen 2008a, pp. 991–92).

³¹ See the Tianpeng generals listed in DZ 585 *Guandou zhongxiao wulei Wuhou mifa* 貫斗忠孝五雷武侯祕法. By this time during the late Ming, as we will see below, the numerology of 36 and 72 generals was already applied beyond Tianpeng and can be found in many late Ming novels.

³² This is true for both areas where I have done fieldwork, the city of Kee-lung on Taiwan, as well as the Xinhua and Lengshuijiang region in central Hunan province.

³³ (Vale 1906, p. 40). Boldface mine.

³⁴ (Goodrich 1991, p. 250). Thanks to Patrice Fava for bringing this to my attention.

inscribed beneath a Daoist chart of the “Southern and Northern Dippers” (南北二斗 *Nan Bei erdou*). Subsequently, he reads the list as is printed in the novel and intelligible to all readers—and thereupon the world knows that the Rectifiers and Killers are subordinated to the asterism of the Dipper(s).³⁵

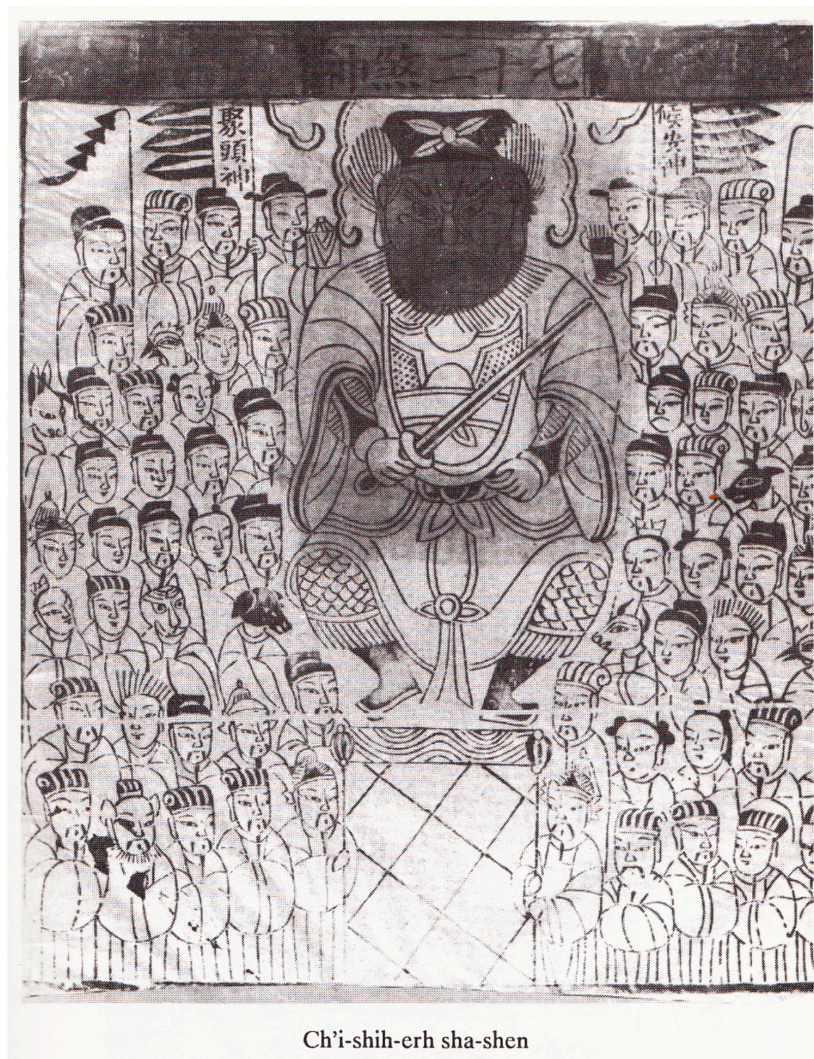


Figure 2. The 72 Killers depicted on a paper print. From: Goodrich, *Peking Paper Gods*.

Before venturing further into ritual terrain, let me contextualize *Water Margin*'s list of 36 Rectifiers and 72 Killers with similar lists in peer narratives. For example, in *Canonization of the Gods* (封神演義 *Fengshen yanyi*), the great list for the final divinization of the story's protagonists also includes the same configuration of stellar gods, with 36 Celestial Rectifiers and 72 Terrestrial Killers. In this story, too, they are entirely assigned to positions subordinate to the “Dipper Division” (斗部 *doubu*). Their personal names are not the same as in *Water Margin* but the names of the stars are identical and the framework moreover is identical numerologically and cosmologically. It is also used for the same purpose: both vernacular narratives have established these stellar gods as formidable—dangerous—warriors who may enforce celestial law.

In the story-cycle of *Water Margin*, the 36 protagonists who are revealed to be Celestial Rectifiers have been conjoined with celestial script from its inception as a popular narrative. Even in its earliest

³⁵ The Southern Dipper, as used here, is not an actual asterism. It is the ritual counter-presence of the Northern Dipper and commonly depicted on Daoist ritual scrolls.

iterations, the band of outlaws led by Song Jiang has been conceptualized unambiguously as a group of Daoist gods. This is, in fact, one of the core elements that *Water Margin* inherited from its immediate predecessor, “Old Affairs of the Xuanhe Period” (宣和遺事 *Xuanhe yishi*, hereafter “Old Affairs”), dated to the twelfth or thirteenth century. Before the “Old Affairs” provides its description of Song Jiang’s exploits as leader of his gang of outlaws, moreover, be it noted that it narrates exhaustive descriptions of the Daoist politics during the southern Song dynasty—emperors styling themselves as Daoist gods, widespread construction of palatial Daoist temples and Daoist priests galore.³⁶ This is the historical context within which the early version of the story is situated.

In its approach to Song Jiang’s heroic group, the “Old Affairs” already names all 36 members and it also lists all of them with their signature epithets in “a volume of celestial writing” (天書一卷 *tianshu yijuan*) revealed by the Dark Maiden.³⁷ In that volume, so the story records, they are presented as “the 36 Fierce Generals and Envoys from the Court of Celestial Rectifiers” 天罡院三十六員猛將使, thus defining them as celestial warriors in Daoist terms and locating their official sphere in a Daoist celestial body with the task of maintaining universal order. In the “Old Affairs” they are ranked as generals who serve the Court of Celestial Rectifiers (天罡院 *Tiangang yuan*) and they are thus indeed close kin of the 36 generals who serve the Court of Exorcism (驅邪院 *Quxie yuan*) of the Celestial Reed (天蓬 *Tianpeng*). The Celestial Reed’s court represents exactly one of the few ritual affiliations made explicitly in later versions of *Water Margin*, too.³⁸

Narratives describing the powers of celestial scripts with the 36 Celestial Rectifiers are common in the Ming.³⁹ More often than not, they are coupled with the 72 Terrestrial Killers. Aside from *Water Margin* and *Canonization*, in another late Ming book they play a crucial role. Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) version of *Quelling of the Demon* (平妖傳 *Pingyao zhuan*), starts out in the first chapter with the theft of a precious volume entitled “As You Wish Booklet” (如意冊 *Ruyi ce*) by a celestial ape in search of “Daoist rituals” (道法 *Daofa*). The booklet contains celestial script from the inner sanctum of none other than the Dark Maiden of the Ninefold Heavens, recording the “108 Daoist rituals of transformation.”⁴⁰ The script is subdivided into 36 rituals for the “Celestial Rectifiers” and 72 rituals for “Terrestrial Killers,” and, like in *Water Margin*, it is also assigned the Daoist task of “Spreading the Dao on Heaven’s behalf.”

Feng Menglong’s story provides further details about content and usage: the 36 writs of the Celestial Rectifiers represent “big rituals of transformation” (大變法 *da bianfa*) and the 72 writs of the Terrestrial Killers are “small rituals of transformation” (小變法 *xiao bianfa*). In that sense, they are indeed identical to the “Daoist rituals” (also termed *daofa*) in *Journey to the West* (西遊記 *Xiyou ji*), when Sun Wukong is asked whether he wants to learn the 36 transformations of the Celestial Rectifiers or the 72 transformations of the Terrestrial Killers. He opts for the latter and his master then secretly transmits to him a set of oral formulas. Although the oral nature of Sun Wukong’s formulas is different from the writs we are discussing here, they also are of an esoteric nature, marking Sun Wukong’s first initiation into structured control over some of the deepest forces of the cosmos. It is what distinguishes him from the other disciples in his cohort and what evokes images of acolytes receiving “secret formulas” (秘訣 *mijue*) as part of their Daoist ordination.⁴¹

³⁶ (Yu 1929, pp. 25–42).

³⁷ (Yu 1929, pp. 55–59).

³⁸ The Court of Exorcism is headed by the god Tianpeng 天蓬, which also is an asterism. In Daoist ritual contexts it belongs to the Tianxin tradition of rectifying rituals. Indeed, in chapter 54 of *Water Margin*, the only “real” Daoist priest among the outlaws, Gongsun Sheng 公孫勝, receives a ritual tradition in just this lineage, the “Celestial Reed’s Rectifying Rituals of Five Thunders” (五雷天心正法 *Wulei Tianxin zhengfa*).

³⁹ In addition to those mentioned below, the *Journey to the North* (北遊記 *Beiyou ji*) also revolves around a configuration of 36 generals, all reporting to the Thunder Division (雷部 *Leibu*).

⁴⁰ 道家一百零八樣變化之法。

⁴¹ (Schipper 1993, pp. 58–59).

At any rate, Feng Menglong's narrative in *Quelling of the Demon* goes on to specify that these transformations are Daoist methods that can be used to impressive ends. Mentioned are grand cosmic acts, like "move Heaven and swap the Dipper" (移天換斗 *yitian huandou*, chp. 1) or "steal Heaven and swap the Sun" (偷天換日 *toutian huanri*, chp. 3),⁴² and more concretely ritual acts like "deploying demons and chasing gods" (役鬼驅神 *yigui qushen*, chp. 1) "pursuing *hun*-souls and catching *po*-souls" (追魂攝魄 *zhuihun shepo*, chp. 3). Also mentioned are martial rituals, such as conjuring up "bean-men and paper-horses" (豆人紙馬 *douren zhima*), as well as "demon-knives and divine swords" (鬼刀神劍 *guidao shenjian*, both chp. 3). This sort of *Daofa* is indeed very much at the core of the vernacular rites described extensively in the vast compendium of vernacular rituals included in the Ming dynasty Daoist Canon, the "Unified Origins of the Dao and its Rituals" (道法會元 *Daofa huiyuan*), many of them used for curing demonic diseases.⁴³

In sum, the type of illegible script commonly associated with Celestial Rectifiers and Terrestrial Killers represents specific embodiments of astral forces on earth and can be applied within the context of Daoist "therapeutic" ritual. While the nitty-gritty details of their everyday ritual practice consist principally of endless battles with demons large and small, they work in concert to uphold the order in the universe; this often entails a form of rectifying some wrongs caused by demons.

As a category of revealed writing, moreover, celestial script is permeated with an aura of frightening power. The fact that these graphs were directly revealed by gods to humans and that they did not require mediation by official authorities, thus made them not only the common stock in trade of Daoist priests (whose standard repertoire consists of many revealed texts, talismans, sacred charts and diagrams to begin with),⁴⁴ but also for seekers of extraordinary powers, including warlords, rebels and other aspiring leaders. It should come as no surprise to learn that several of the rebellions during the late Ming dynasty were led by figures who claimed to own celestial script.⁴⁵

Let me conclude this section with an observation about the ritual and cultic environment by a contemporary figure who witnessed the embodied presence of *Water Margin's* protagonists. A comment from the Jiajing reign (1522–66), made by the book collector Lang Ying 郎瑛 (1487–1566) in a discussion of the way in which canonical history was misrepresented by vernacular narratives, reveals that the heroes of *Water Margin* resonate with particular aspects of late imperial culture.

The Histories state that Song Jiang's 36 men ravaged through the region of Qi and Wei [present-day Shanxi and Shandong] with the official army unable to withstand them. ... Once Luo Guanzhong plotted them into his novel [小說 *xiaoshuo*], it contained the phrase "Spread the Dao on Heaven's Behalf." In the lands of the Yangzi river and Jinan [Shandong], people nowadays all erect temples for them. ... Only when Luo Guanzhong was about to complete his writing, he made the 36 into "Celestial Rectifiers" and expanded these with the names of 72 "Terrestrial Killers."⁴⁶

史稱宋江三十六人，橫行齊魏，官軍莫抗。[...]羅貫中演為小說，有「替天行道」之言。今揚子、濟寧之地，皆為立廟。[...]但貫中欲成其書，以三十六為天罡，添地煞七十二人之名。

⁴² This language about altering the very basis of the cosmic structure is similar to what is said in other grand descriptions of ritual power (cf. *Xiyouji*, chp. 44).

⁴³ (Schipper and Verellen 2004, pp. 1105–13).

⁴⁴ For an extensive survey of this phenomenon, see (Huang 2012).

⁴⁵ See for example several records in the *Ming shilu* 明實錄. In Wanli 46 a putative "White Lotus" leader called Li Wen 李文, self-styled Li the Old Lord 李老君 claimed to be in the possession of "Celestial writing and flying swords" (天書飛劍 *tianshu feijian*, j. 577). The next year, Wanli 47, another supposed White Lotus leader called Wu Wukong 武悟空 (an interesting reference back to monkeys in possession of celestial secrets) claimed to possess "celestial texts" (天文 *tianwen*). In the same year, Wanli 47, Li Wen claimed possession of a "celestial book" (天書 *tianshu*) entitled "Flying Swords of the Six Jia" (《六甲飛劍》 *Liu jia feijian*, j. 589). See Li Guoxiang 李國祥, et al. *Ming shilu leizuan* 明實錄類纂. Vol. *Wenjiao keji* (Wuhan: Wuhan chuban, 1992): 1041. The theme of revealed celestial writing as the underpinning of rebellions is also borne out in *Sanguo zhi yanyi*, where the Yellow Turbans similarly find three volumes with celestial writs.

⁴⁶ (Lang 1983, pp. 385–86).

Several things become clear with this verdict of *Water Margin's* altered history. The first of those may be somewhat unexpected, namely Lang Ying's observation that temples dedicated to the 36 heroes of *Water Margin* were widespread from Shandong to the Yangzi delta. While we know nothing about these temples or about their actual numbers, it is significant that this one observer from the early sixteenth century mentions the protagonists of the *Water Margin* as widespread objects of worship in temples. This reinforces the need for taking seriously *Water Margin's* close proximity to an environment of temple worship and ritual. Note, indeed, that the ritual pledge of Daoism to "Spread the Dao on Heaven's Behalf" was prominent enough to be mentioned by Lang Ying.

In the extant 120-chapter version of *Water Margin* itself, this cultic environment is similarly mentioned.⁴⁷ At the very end of the story, we find the outlaws enshrined in a temple called "Temple of Peace and Loyalty" (靖忠之廟 *Jingzhong zhi miao*). This temple, built on imperial order at Jizhou 濟州 in Shandong, was equipped with images of the 36 Celestial Rectifiers in the main hall and two side-halls with images of the 72 Terrestrial Killers divided between them! Significant for the argument that Daoist ritual is intertwined with *Water Margin*, these Rectifiers are here referred to as "Proper Generals" (正將 *zhengjiang*) and the Killers, too, are listed as "Generals" (將軍 *jiangjun*), thus indicating their status as office holders in the divine hierarchy of Daoism.

The story continues to say that when Song Jiang repeatedly manifested his divine efficacy (累累顯靈 *leilei xianling*), the people of Chuzhou 楚州 in present day Jiangsu Province also built a temple with statues of all the 36 Rectifiers and 72 Killers. The story notes that at the time of publication, the temple "still existed" (尚存 *shangcun*). Indeed, it is entirely relevant to consider this in relation to the fact that many (if not most) temples of Chinese "popular religion" are extensively decorated with scenes from Ming vernacular "novels"—including *Water Margin*.⁴⁸ Many depict Daoist divinities.

Considering the existence of very real and practical presences of the 36 Celestial Rectifiers and 72 Terrestrial Killers, we should start wondering how we can close the perceived gap between the abstract forms of celestial script, on one hand and the concrete embodiments of *Water Margin's* protagonists in cultic environments, on the other. The answer, of course, lies in ritual.

3. The Script of *Water Margin* in a Daoist Manual

An extraordinary Daoist manuscript from Li County 禮縣 in north-western Hunan contains codifications of celestial script for each of the 108 protagonists from *Water Margin*.⁴⁹ Here, the significance of the descriptions in the Ming story become all the more clear—each of the writs in the Daoist manuscript is illegible, written in the same abstract yet elegant "tadpole writing" of "Dragon Writs and Phoenix Seals" that *Water Margin* mentions. Each writ is also accompanied by the title of the star it embodies, the personal name of the protagonist it represents in *Water Margin* and the protagonist's *nom de guerre*. These are, indeed, the secret graphs that can be written in order to bring the 108 heroes to life.

Although the manuscript is incomplete in that the first and last page (or pages) are missing, almost all of the pages with *Water Margin's* celestial script are fully preserved. Only half a page at the beginning is lost, so that six of the 108 writs remain wholly or partially unknown. Apart from this unfortunate lacuna, the manuscript is extraordinary, especially given its relatively old age: comparison with other manuscripts from Hunan suggests that it dates back to the middle or second half of the nineteenth century.

Determining the purpose of this manuscript is straightforward, despite the lack of a title page and the paucity of explanations it contains. Most of the volume's 76 pages are records of talismanic writing, covering most of what a Daoist priest would normally use within the basic range of his daily

⁴⁷ This is the 120-chapter Yuan Wuyai 袁無涯 version of 1614, mentioned in note 25.

⁴⁸ This is true for temples along the Chinese southeast coast, including Fujian and Taiwan, such as the Guangying Gong 廣應宮, a Mazu 媽祖 temple founded in 1621, in the township of Xindian 新店鎮, Xiamen. Another notable example is the Lo Pan Temple 魯班先師廟 in Kennedy Town, Hong Kong Island, originally built in 1884.

⁴⁹ Unfortunately, numbers 4 through 9 are partially or entirely missing, as is the title page of the manual.

ritual activities. And indeed, from brief explanations following the first few sets of talismans, we learn that these writs are “secret formulas” bestowed upon novices as a part of their ordination and to be “applied for the summoning of generals.”⁵⁰ In other words, the manuscript is the esoteric part of ordination materials, generally referred to as a “secret book” (秘本 *miben*).

The first twelve pages⁵¹ of the “secret book” are filled with talismans of the *Water Margin* characters (see Figure 3). In cursory colophons accompanying every talisman, the manuscript stipulates (a) the name of a respective celestial body, (b) a character’s nickname, (c) his or her personal name and (d) it depicts the celestial script to be used as talisman. For example, the first one has these elements (see Figure 4): (a) “Celestial Rectifier Star” (天罡星 *Tiangangxing*), (b) *Hubao yi* 呼保義, (c) Song Jiang and (d) a talismanic shape (see Figure 4). The second one runs as follows: (a) “Celestial Leisure Star” (天閑星 *Tianxianxing*), (b) “Cloud-entering Dragon” (入雲龍 *Ruyun long*), (c) Gongsun Sheng 公孫勝 and (d) a talisman.

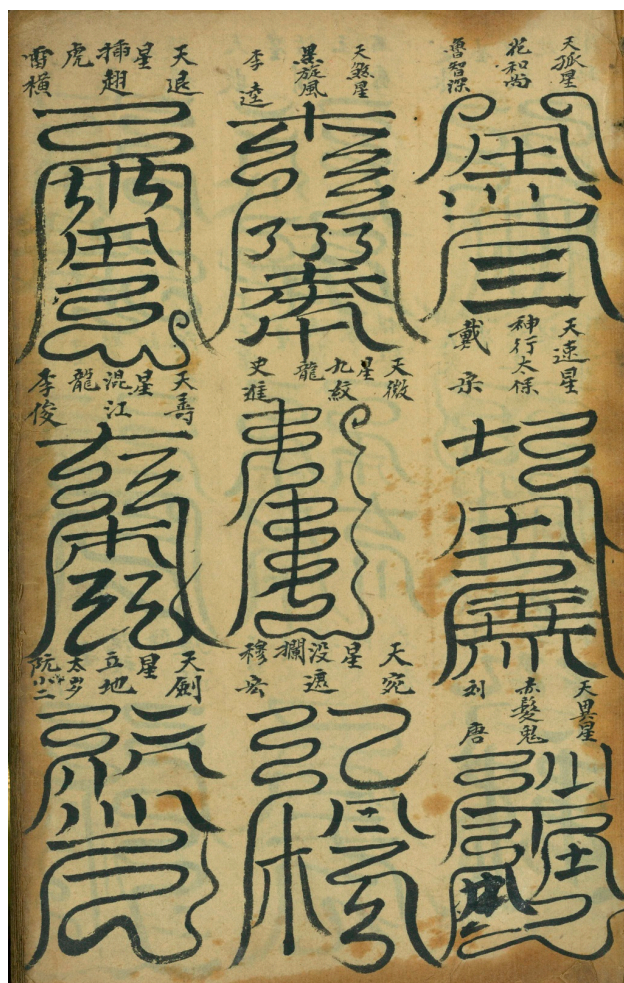


Figure 3. One page of the Li County manual, including several of the most famous heroes from *Watermargin*, such as Lu Zhishen, Li Kui, Shi Jin and so on.

⁵⁰ 新授嗣徒弟子召將運用秘訣 (10a).

⁵¹ The pages are 6 *recto*, 6 *verso*.

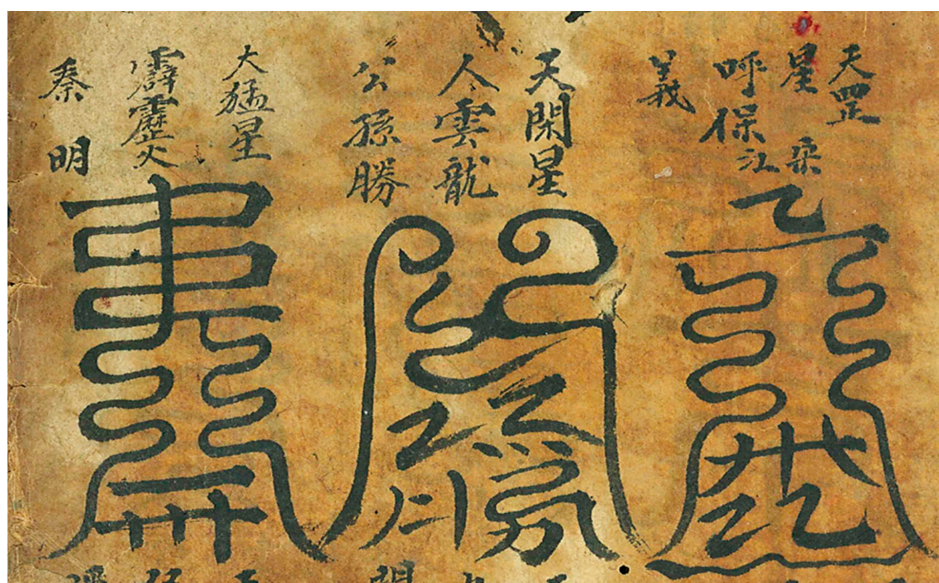


Figure 4. The first three writs of the Li County manual. From right to left: Song Jiang, Gongsun Sheng and Qin Ming.

The next 48 pages (24 *r*, 24 *v*) are also replete with talismans, many of them called “flying talismans” (飛符 *feifu*). These writs, immediately following after the 108 writs, are used to invoke the lower ranks of the divine bureaucracy who always serve as local dignitaries charged with the task of reporting the Daoist priest’s intentions to other spirits and divine entities. The main bureaucrats invoked are the God of the Earth (土地 *Tudi*), and, very importantly, the “Proper Gods in all Boroughs of the God of the Earth in this District” 當坊土地里域正神—that is, all those (local or national) gods who are recognized as loyal to the divine bureaucracy.

Next, the “Merit Officers” (功曹 *Gongcao*) are invoked to announce the ritual procedures to the realms of Heaven, Earth and Water. Other servants of the Daoist bureaucracy include the God of Walls and Moats (城隍 *Chenghuang*) and a small group of military gods. This last group consists of martial writs that embody the great thunder gods, such as Xin 辛, Zhang 張, Wang 王, Wen 溫, Ma 馬, Yin 殷 and several others. There are other sets of thunder gods, with different and more elaborately shaped talismans. These include the commander in chief of thunder, Marshal Deng 鄧元帥, Marshal Guan Yu 關羽, as well as Marshal Zhao 趙, and it records alternative writing forms for the thunder gods mentioned earlier.

In keeping with ordination materials known from other regions in Hunan, the manuscript contains talismans for curing a broad range of human ailments. These include diarrhea, headaches, childbirth, demonic malfeasance or dog bite. Others are specifically meant for settling the vulnerable spirits of children. Together they form a comprehensive set of talismans for the ritual therapies that Daoist priests would use in their daily practice.

Talismans referring to basic elements of the Daoist ritual program are listed as well. There is, for example, a talisman for “lighting the incense burner” (發爐 *falü*), the main opening rite for any Daoist ritual.⁵² One such rite, for which the manuscript includes a talisman, itself again forms a preparatory rite, namely the “nocturnal invocation” (宿啓 *suqi*). This rite is always performed on the evening of the first or second day of a Daoist *jiao* 醮 ritual in order to establish communication between the priest and the celestial world.⁵³ Another crucial talisman included is for “purification of the altar”

⁵² (Lagerwey 1987, pp. 121–23; Andersen 2008b, pp. 400–1).

⁵³ (Lagerwey 1987, pp. 90–105).

(淨壇 *jingtān*, also known as “sealing the altar,” 禁壇 *jintān*).⁵⁴ This, too, is a basic element of any Daoist ritual, meant to purify and consecrate the ritual space with heavy use of talismans. The last 16 pages contain other materials, including a list of texts and talismanic writing used for a funerary *jiao* ritual. In sum, this manuscript represents the core of the ritual business of Daoist priests in Li County.

Since this manuscript hitherto is the only known specimen with celestial script embodying the main protagonists of *Water Margin*, it is hard to contextualize it or even fully appreciate its significance. And since it is a manuscript recording talismans that are transmitted during ordination, unfortunately it does not provide much insight into the ritual application of the script.

By way of reasoned speculation, I would like to suggest that there is more than exorcism to the script. Given the seminal link between astral geography and actual, earthly geography, it is possible that this repertoire of 108 talismans represents a comprehensive set of celestial powers that could be manifested periodically by persons (groups) in the earthly realm. The talismans could represent Daoist priests and their clienteles but they could also be used for consecrating the kind of social groups described in *Water Margin*, primarily martial defenders of villages and towns such as local militias or other types of cult groups, like secret societies, who formed brotherhoods and pledged to uphold “loyalty and righteousness” (忠義 *zhongyi*, a core theme in *Water Margin*). In his fieldwork on the ritual/theatrical performance of temple associations in Taiwan, Piet van der Loon has described exactly this kind of local militias: embodying the 36 Celestial Rectifiers and wielding a black banner with a Thunder talisman, such groups would be ready to carry out the celestial order.⁵⁵ In triad lore, similarly, brotherhoods would be constructed around distinct myths of self-identification, with each group (“sub-lineage”) of sworn brotherhoods knowing its own talismanic character.⁵⁶ Triads, too, saw themselves as the loyal and righteous defenders of celestial law. It is not hard to imagine that the Daoist talismans of *Water Margin*’s 36 Rectifiers and 72 Killers need to be situated in this environment where ritual embodiments of celestial forces find a concrete social application.

One thing should be clear, either way. Due to the fact that they represent some of the most spectacular narratives of the late imperial period, it has been easy enough to approach *Water Margin* and its peers in their manifestation as things of the library. The practice of reading these books as “literary fiction” has rarely been questioned. But the celestial script recorded as Daoist talismans in the manuscript from Hunan urges us to break through the interpretive distance that the field of literary studies maintains to the ritual practices that *Water Margin* refers to. The primary context is ritual; any interpretation should come to terms with it first.

4. Celestial Script in Rituals of the Daoist Canon

In order to gain more clarity about the significance of celestial script in the Daoist context that *Water Margin* presents, it will be helpful to look at other ritual manuals containing similar forms of celestial script. Several examples are contained in texts ranging from the Ming dynasty Daoist Canon to other “local” manuscripts from the Qing (1644–1911).

One of those texts is the “Great Yang-Thunderclap Method of Celestial Writs from the Great Monad.”⁵⁷ It contains several series of celestial script, here referred to as “celestial writs” (天章 *tianzhang*)—three sets of 18 (that is, half of 36) and two sets of 17. They can be used to activate the judicial and punitive forces of the Thunder Division (雷部 *leibu*), with its demonic soldiers enforcing celestial law.

The first set of 18 scripts is used precisely in the context of celestial phenomena. It is revealed to counteract the phenomenon of “rogue stars” (流星 *liuxing* or meteors) transgressing upon the “astral geography” of the earthly “field division” I mentioned earlier. In other words, it embodies the same

⁵⁴ (Andersen 2008c, pp. 583–85; Lagerwey 1987, pp. 112–13).

⁵⁵ (Van der Loon 1977, pp. 153–54).

⁵⁶ (ter Haar 2000, p. 77).

⁵⁷ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 道法會元 140: *Tai Yi tianzhang yanglei pili dafa* 太一天章陽雷霹靂大法.

rationale of a correlation between celestial bodies and earthly regions that is relevant for the 36 Rectifiers and 72 Killers. As the colophon explains, the danger of rogue stars is that they may bring “disaster for the dynastic ruler, anomalies of water and fire or the rise of military uprootings everywhere.”⁵⁸ These catastrophes can be suppressed by using the forces embodied in the celestial writs. In a sense similar to *Water Margin*, social disorder that arises from irregularities in the relationship between celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies must be fixed by a reissuing (or, rather a re-activating) of celestial law. That law is reactivated through a writing of celestial script by the Daoist priest on duty—by mere efficacious writing of talismans, or, of course, by empowering local groups in heaven’s name.

While other celestial writing in this manual is also related to the “star fields,” one series is designated for subduing “great demons” (大魔 *damo*; see Figure 5).⁵⁹ The characters specifying the use of each of these graphs explain that they specifically target “great demons who transgress against Heaven and are wayward.”⁶⁰ Perhaps needless to say but this is one expression of the script’s specific relevance within the teleology of “Spreading the Dao on Heaven’s behalf.”

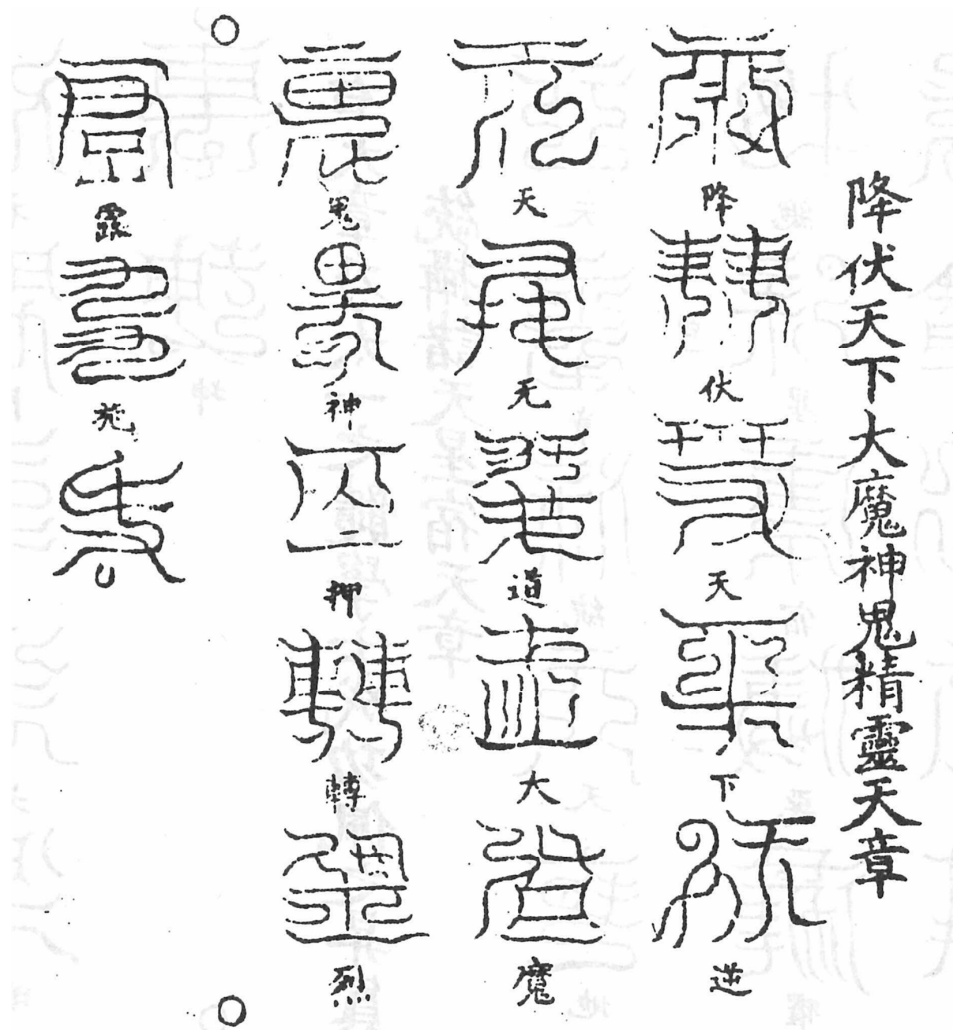


Figure 5. Celestial Script for subduing “great demons.” From DZ 1220: 140. 3ab.

⁵⁸ DZ 1220: 140.2a: 國主有災，水火不常，兵革四興.

⁵⁹ DZ 1220: 140.3ab.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*: 逆天無道大魔.

More generally speaking this manual is part of a cluster of eleven manuals (*juan* 135–145) in the aforementioned ritual compendium known as *Daofa huiyuan*. The first few manuals in this group treat graphs for various purposes, referred to with the term “directive” (令 *ling*). In total there are 36 of such “directives”—note the numerological parallel. Application ranges from commanding of celestial generals to production of rain. It also includes two directives that are specifically designed to control the influence of the “killers” (煞 *sha*).⁶¹

Within this set of eleven manuals, extraordinarily, one text provides a brief account of the provenance of some of the writs it expounds, articulating a deep similarity to the account in *Water Margin*. In this ritual manual also, a stone slab (石碣 *shibe*) is unearthed. And just like in *Water Margin*, the illegible writing can only be deciphered by a Daoist. It contains instructions for a ritual that can command a great mass of martial gods, ranging from star gods to, again, thunder gods.

“This ritual comes from the intersection at Zhaojiawan, along the Great River. There was a stone stele and on the back-side of the stele was a directive (令 *ling*). It was not intelligible. Later there was Master Magu who could decipher it, saying, “this one character signifies that in the river will be the Rogue Star’s Thunder Directives of the Great One’s Thunderclap.” When the True Person heard of this, he ordered a fisherman to dive into the water and search it. He got it.”⁶²

此法出於川江趙家灣十字口。有石碣。碑陰有一令。不分曉。後有麻姑先生能辨之。云：此一。江中必有太一霹靂流星雷令。真人聞之。令漁人入水尋覓。得之。

This anecdote of revealed talismanic script on a stone stele, included in the Daoist Canon of 1445, predates any known version of it in *Water Margin* by at least a century.⁶³ Note that there is the perennial linking of this punitive discourse to the powers of Thunder. As most people during the Ming would have known, Thunder was a major executioner of celestial law.

Kinship with the ritual sphere of *Water Margin* is evident in many other ways. Throughout virtually each manual of the cluster, the term “Carrying out transformations on Heaven’s behalf” (代天行化 *daitian xinghua*) is given as a key motivation.

If the episodes in *Water Margin* are all woven into a grand narrative that ultimately upholds the order of the universe, the same can be said about these manuals. One manual opens with a “Great Directive of the Flying Rectifier, for Supplicating the Support of the Dynasty” 佐國祈求飛罡大令.⁶⁴ Despite the subversive reputation of the outlaws under Song Jiang’s leadership, this talisman’s specific backing of the imperial powers is also paralleled in *Water Margin*. The earliest extant version of *Water Margin*, the Rongyutang edition from 1610, comprised 100 chapters. In that version, the list of canonizations is presented roughly halfway through the story, while the ensuing half is devoted to the martial exploits of the same 108 characters. In the latter part, however, they dedicate their actions to serving the imperial government.

For a thorough understanding of how celestial writs are conceived of and how they relate to *Water Margin*, it will be useful to summarize some of their finer ritual details. As can be gathered from the longer sequence of manuals to which this one belongs (spanning *j.* 135–145 in *Daofa huiyuan*), these writs are applied in the broader context of cosmic irregularities manifesting themselves as drought, disease or other deviant phenomena. In them, we find the discourse and numerology of *Water Margin*.

The general emphasis is on procuring rain and curing disease. Representative examples would be the first few rain rituals. The opening rite requires the priest to set up a thunder altar (雷壇 *leitan*) and

⁶¹ Specifically, these are “Eighteen Killers” (十八煞 *Shiba Sha*; DZ 1220: 134.6a-8a) and the “Seven Killers” (七煞 *Qisha*; *ibid.*, 18b-20b).

⁶² DZ 1220: 137.21b-22a.

⁶³ I count Guo Xun’s no longer extant editions as the earliest, based on the excellent study by Gregory (2017).

⁶⁴ DZ 1220: 136.1a.

deploy a set of 72 generals to make rain-dragons cooperate and spread abundant rain.⁶⁵ This set of 72 generals is rarely seen in other contexts but occurs numerous times here in this and various other rites within the same cluster of manuals.⁶⁶ Significant for our understanding of the relevance for *Water Margin*, they are sometimes coupled with other sets of 36 divinities.⁶⁷ Various sets of 36 divinities occur at other points in this cluster,⁶⁸ including—in a unique parallel to *Water Margin*—the 36 Celestial Rectifiers.⁶⁹ And finally, here, too, the Northern Dipper is the hinge pin of the ritual.⁷⁰ Thus, while these instances of celestial script themselves do not embody any groups of 36 and 72 generals, they are prominently present in the texts accompanying the graphs.

If *Water Margin*'s celestial script is associated with the Dark Maiden of the Ninefold Heavens, these Daoist rituals refer to similar celestial authorities. For example, the second, third and fourth rituals in this sequence achieve rainfall by following the “Dark Writs of the Ninefold Heavens” (九天玄章 *Jiutian xuanzhang*),⁷¹ and the sixth follows the “True Directives of the Ninefold Heavens” (九天真令 *Jiutian zhenling*).⁷²

A next ritual again focuses on the noxious influence of “killer” airs (煞 *sha*), intending to cure a disease caused by what is called “bad killer [air]” (兇煞 *xiongsha*) and the “Three Killer Gods” (三煞神 *sanshashen*; 17b). It draws upon the assistance of the “Twelve Killer Generals” (十二煞將 *shier shajiang*; 18ab). Elsewhere in the same sequence of manuals, a talisman counteracts the “Three Killer Stars” (三煞星 *Sanshaxing*).⁷³

Another ritual, the tenth in this text, for counteracting “shamans” (巫覡 *wuxi*) who “exclusively practice demonic teachings” (專行魔教 *zhuanxing mojiao*), specifically mentions “Celestial Law” (天律 *Tianlü*) as the norm to abide.⁷⁴ It aims to bring all the shaman's “ferocious soldiers” (猖兵 *changbing*) and other “demonic gods” (鬼神 *guishen*) into a “celestial prison” (天獄 *tianyu*). The last ritual in this manual again draws upon 72 celestial marshals (天帥 *tianshuai*) to bring bounty to the world.⁷⁵

Beyond the ubiquitous combination of stars with the numerology of 36 and 72, what connects the celestial script in this canonical set of Ming dynasty manuals with the script in the *Water Margin* manual from Hunan, is a consistent preoccupation with upholding terrestrial order through abiding a body of celestial law.

5. Celestial Script in Other Daoist Manuals from Hunan

Similar writs are found in rural regions, far from the political center where the Daoist Canon was compiled. Below I will present one more manual from Hunan, dated to the early nineteenth century.⁷⁶ This manual, the “Secret Mirror of Celestial Lord Wang, Who Holds Thunder, Takes the Corpse and Obliterates the Traces [of Celestial Punishment]” (王天君住雷收屍削影秘鑿) is dated 1817 and contains several sets of writs. The first of these is included in one of the manual's subsections, entitled “Secret Treasures of Commands, Celestial Writs of the Thunder Division” (雷部天章秘寶號令 *Leibu tianzhang mibao hao ling*). It is classified as “Thunderclap's Thirty-six Criminal Regulations for transgressions of Celestial Law” (雷霆三十六犯定天律罪條 *Leiting sanshiliu fanding tianlü zuitiao*; see Figure 6).

⁶⁵ DZ 1220: 135.1a-2b.

⁶⁶ DZ 1220: 135.9b, 14a, 24a; 137.5a; 141.2b, 24b; 142.5a, 16b, 17b, 18b, 19a, 25a; 143.3b, 4a, 18b; 144.9b, 17a, 19b; 145.10a, 17b, 18a, 20a.

⁶⁷ DZ 1220: 137.12a; 143.4b-6a; 144.1b, 4b.

⁶⁸ DZ 1220: 136.19a, 23b; 142.5b.

⁶⁹ DZ 1220: 136.24a.

⁷⁰ DZ 1220: 135.2a.

⁷¹ DZ 1220: 135.3a, 6a and 7a respectively but also 143.6a, 13b; 145.14b, 15b.

⁷² DZ 1220: 135.10b.

⁷³ DZ 1220: 139.4ab.

⁷⁴ DZ 1220: 135.19a.

⁷⁵ DZ 1220: 135.24a.

⁷⁶ I acquired this manual from an antiquarian in Xinhua in 2004.

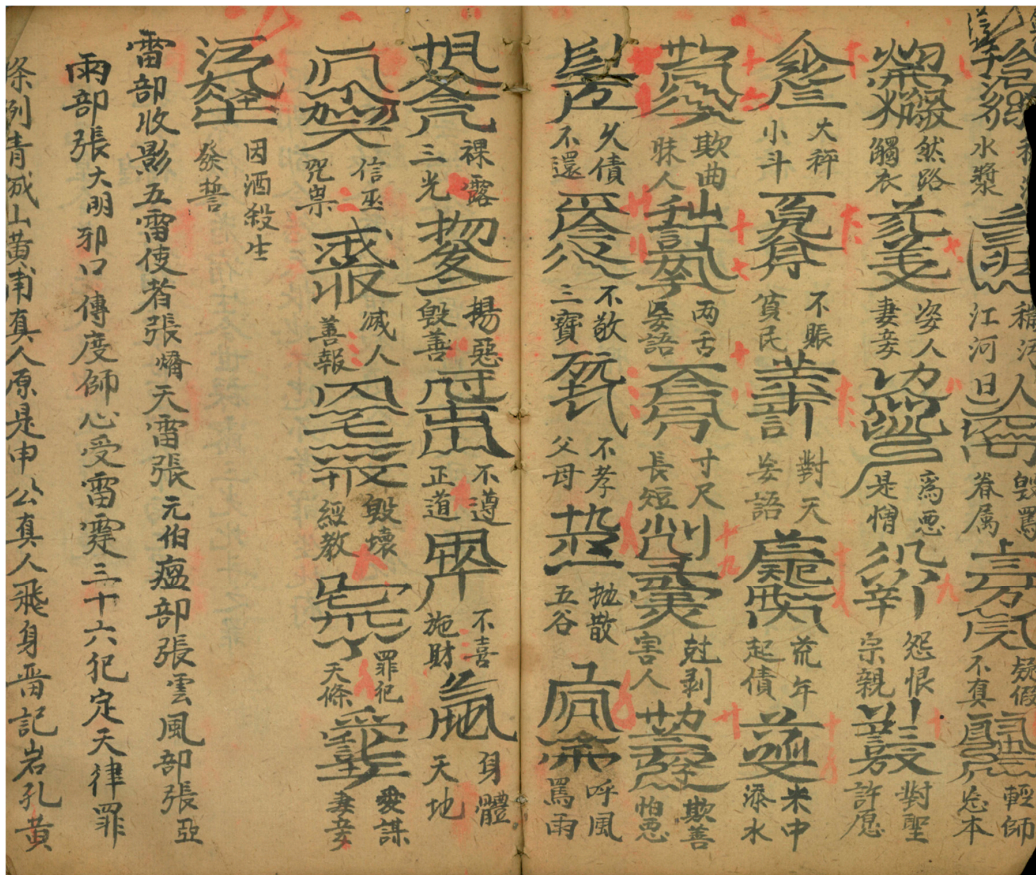


Figure 6. Most High Thunderclap’s Arrayed Seals for Thirty-six Crimes.

Like the script of the *Water Margin* manual from Li County, these 36 writs form a crucial part of the Daoist priest’s commitment to maintaining the celestial order in his daily practice, as they are “secret treasures” (秘寶 *mibao*) transmitted orally (口傳 *kouchuan*) from the “ordination master” (度師 *dushi*) and “received in one’s heart” (心受 *xinshou*). In subsequent Daoist ritual practice, they are to be inscribed on talismans and dispensed under the (invisible) aid of Thunder Gods. In this case their aim is to hold Daoist priests to celestial laws and to punish them for very specific transgressions, many of them related to debauchery, disrespect, slander, greed, anger but also “not adhering to the authentic Dao” (#29: 不遵正道 *buzun zhengdao*), “disrupting the scriptural teachings” (#33: 毀壞經教 *huihuai jingjiao*) and even such things as “pollution of rivers and streams” (#2: 穢污江河 *huiwu jianghe*). In sum, these are all transgressions against the order of the Dao, here constituting a moral code for priests.

6. Demons Imprisoned in a Temple’s Wellspring: Narrative Descriptions

Conceptualization of celestial script is one thing, very prescriptively enshrined in Daoist manuals—but the ritual practice within which this form of script was applied, unfortunately, is barely explained in any of these texts. Here it will be enlightening to revisit the opening chapter of *Water Margin*, in order to reveal a pattern of ritual logic that is found in Daoist texts from the same period.

In Jin Shengtan’s 金聖嘆 popular 1644 edition of *Water Margin*, “the standard text for three centuries of Chinese readers,”⁷⁷ Daoist ritual is invoked at important moments throughout. As I have already pointed out, the story is literally wedged in between two Daoist rituals—in all Ming versions of *Water Margin*: the story opens with a grand Daoist *jiao* ritual and it ends with one, too. The opening

⁷⁷ (Plaks 1987, p. 292).

chapter in Jin Shengtan's edition is framed as so-called "wedge-chapter" (楔子 *xiezi*) but the title (and major content) is the same as all other versions, namely "Celestial Master Zhang Holds Prayers Against the Plague; Defender-in-chief Hong Heedlessly Releases the Wicked Monsters" 張天師祈禳瘟疫：洪太尉誤走妖魔. It describes the historical advent of the Song dynasty after a longer period of chaos in the empire. Even in the more or less historically based beginning, the narrative has several emperors identified as celestial beings. Most conspicuous among them is Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 (927–76), the founder of the Song, whose celestial identity is ominously said to be the Great Immortal of Thunderbolt 霹靂大仙. This is the same title carried by the main divinity in charge of the Daoist Thunder gods since the Song.⁷⁸

The "plague" in the title of the opening chapter refers to a devastating epidemic in 1058—and of course it demarcates a particular field of relevance for the story: curing of disease. This segment narrates how court officials advise the emperor in the first place to grant a general pardon to imprisoned criminals and cut taxes, and in the second place to ask the thirtieth patriarch of Daoism, Zhang Xujing 張虛靖, to avert the catastrophe by holding a "Great *Jiao* Ritual Covering All Heaven" (羅天大醮 *Luo Tian Da Jiao*).⁷⁹ Subsequently, while the universal release of prisoners is mentioned in passing, after the emperor's pardon does not result in a termination of the plague the narrative focuses mostly on the Daoist *jiao* offering. By contrast, the Daoist ritual clearly has the desired result: the sick are cured and the plague is overcome. Thus, the story invests Daoist ritual with a degree of authority that literally surpasses the scope and power of imperial policies—the powers of the Son of Heaven (天子 *Tian Zi*) are contrasted unfavorably with those of the almighty Celestial Master (天師 *Tian Shi*), the Daoist patriarch.

Upon successful completion of the Daoist ritual, the story quickly introduces the demonic subjects that will become the famous outlaws of the story. The imperial envoy that has been sent to the Temple of Upper Purity (上清宮 *Shangqing Gong*) of the Celestial Masters on Mt. Longhu, led by Defender-in-chief Hong Xin 洪信, is given a tour around the various temples on the sacred mountain. Among the many halls that he visits, one in particular catches his eye: the "Hall for Subduing Demons" (伏魔之殿 *Fumo zhi Dian*).⁸⁰ When the envoy inquires as to the meaning of this hall, the abbot answers that it is the hall in which one Celestial Master from the Tang dynasty has "contained and locked up the Demon Kings" (封鎖魔王 *Fengsuo Mowang*).⁸¹ They are locked inside by a "celestial talisman" (天符 *tianfu*). Hong Xin eagerly demands that he be allowed to take a look at them but the abbot says his ancestral patriarch pronounced a taboo on opening the doors and he would not dare trying. Hong Xin stubbornly insists, accusing the clerics of deceit; he threatens to report back to the throne that Mt. Longhu is populated by a clique of imposters unworthy of the title of Celestial Master, falsely claiming to possess "rituals for subduing demons" (伏魔之法 *fumo zhi fa*, in some editions "rituals for locking up demons" 鎖魔之法 *suomo zhi fa*)—with all the possible negative consequences. The abbot yields and accompanies the Defender-in-chief into the Hall for Quelling Demons.

Upon tearing off the talismans sealing the doors, they enter a room in which they find "a den of ten-thousand *zhang* deep underneath the earth" 一個萬丈深淺地穴 covered by a stone. Chiseled into this stone are the illegible characters that form the topic of this article, "talismanic registers in Celestial Writing" (天書符籙 *tianshu fulu*). Still, there are four separate characters that can be read: "Open when

⁷⁸ Chief Marshal of the Thunder Division Deng Bowen (雷部主帥鄧伯溫 *Leibu zhushuai* Deng Bowen). Cf. DZ 1220: 57 *Shangqing yushu wulei zhenwen* 上清玉樞五雷真文, 15a.

⁷⁹ The 30th Celestial Master Zhang Xujing was a historical figure, also written as 張虛靜. His actual name was Zhang Jixian 張繼先 (1092–1127).

⁸⁰ In one ritual manual that pertains to *Water Margin* (because of the occurrence of the four generals Cui 崔, Lu 盧, Deng 鄧 and Dou 賈, who are four Daoist deities guarding the canonization ritual in *Water Margin*) a similar temple is mentioned by the name of "Hall for Subduing Demons" (伏魔院 *Fumo Yuan*). It belongs to the Northern Emperor. See DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 169: *Huntian feizhuo Sisheng fumo dafa* 混天飛捉四聖伏魔大法, 2b. Another text also links the *Fumo Yuan* to the Northern Emperor: DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 217: *Ziting zhui fa buduan dafa* 紫庭追伐補斷大法, 2b, 7a, 8a.

⁸¹ This term, too, is close to the exorcist language of ritual. In DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 176: *Yuanhe xianjiaofu yuce* 元和遷教府玉冊, 2b, the term used is "fix and lock up the Demon Kings" (鎖鎖魔王 *zhensuo Mowang*). Below are more examples.

encountering a flood [hong]" 遇洪而開. The riddle that reveals "flood" to mean Hong Xin (indeed, Hong Xin understands it as referring to him) is a double-edged pun that simultaneously refers to the 36 Celestial Rectifiers: the character *hong* 洪 also is a rebus for "Thirty-six" (三十六 *sanshiliu*).⁸²

Hong Xin ignores the abbot who beseeches him to leave everything untouched. Instead, he brazenly removes the stone. Immediately a black miasma bursts out of the hole and disperses into all directions before anything can be done (see Figure 7). A disaster has happened.



Figure 7. Black miasma escapes the demon prison. From *Shuihu zhuan*, Rongyu Tang edition.

⁸² See the transmission of Chinese triad lore for contexts in which the character *hong* was read differently (ter Haar 2000, pp. 60–61).

7. Demons Imprisoned in a Temple's Wellspring: Ritual Genealogy

The framework here set up for *Water Margin* closely resembles actual Daoist rituals of imprisoning demons. In many of these, demons are locked up in a ritually constructed den beneath the earth.

So close is the resemblance, in fact, that it is easy to see structural overlaps with one particular Daoist manual from the Ming dynasty that contains an extensive genealogy for such a ritual, recounting the founding legend of a certain Daoist who similarly locked up demons in a wellspring below a Daoist temple.⁸³ It is this text, “Great Rite of Five Thunders, from the Fire Mansion of the Grand Monad,” that offers an astonishing glimpse into the ritual framework that informs the basic narrative structure of *Water Margin*.

In this text, two versions of the founding legend are recorded. Here I first translate the shorter one and then will provide some details of the longer version. The summary version is placed in the middle of a transmission narrative that lists the main figures who (supposedly) formed a ritual lineage. This lineage starts with the eminent late Tang dynasty Daoist Chen Tuan 陳搏 (*zi Xiyi* 希夷, d. 989), who is said to have “obtained this ritual in a grotto [lit. stone chamber]”—another trope for revelation.⁸⁴ Its short title is simply “Thunder of the Grand Monad” (太乙雷 *Tai Yi Lei*) and it consists of “thunder seals” (雷篆 *leizhuan*).⁸⁵ Though we are not told much about this revelation, the story builds a transmission narrative in which Chen Tuan’s revelatory text, referred to as “dark writing” (玄文 *xuanwen*), is transmitted to Liu Haoran 劉浩然 (initiation name Tongxuan 通玄)—though at first it remains unclear how this happens.⁸⁶

Then it came to ancestral master Liu Tongxuan, the True Man. When he spent time at the Zhangren Monastery [on Mt. Qingcheng in Sichuan], he caught the Demon Maiden of the Ninefold Heavens and locked her up in an octagon-shaped well. Ever since, his great teachings increasingly manifested.⁸⁷

至祖師通玄劉真人。昔曾在丈人觀。收九天魔女。鎖之於八角井。繇是大教愈彰。

Thus we find a short anecdote of a ritual method that allows Daoist priests to “lock up” (鎖 *suo*) demonic beings inside a wellspring, here located on the sacred precincts of the Zhangren Monastery. Containment of demonic beings in a subterranean prison on the precinct of a Daoist temple is the first significant overlap with *Water Margin*.

The longer version of the legend refers to the Demon Maiden differently and more correctly, as representing not nine Heavens but six.⁸⁸ It says that in the Zhangren monastery, “the Demon Maiden of the Sixfold Heavens transformed into a woman. She went into the monastery to burn incense, yet did harmful things” 有六天魔女化一婦人，入觀中燒香作孽。⁸⁹ In this second narrative we are also told how Liu Tongxuan obtained the method, namely as a revelation from the deified Lao Zi.⁹⁰ Due to the successful locking up of the Demon Maiden in the wellspring, Liu Tongxuan receives an invitation from emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 1127–1129) to do an exorcism in his palace.⁹¹

After this brief legend the narrative again focuses on transmission. In its description of Liu Tongxuan’s main disciple, Xu Zhigao 許志高, the lineage narrative offers a second legend. Here, another example of the method’s application is given. Again, the story claims success of this lineage in the imperial palace, thus maintaining order at the core of the dynasty.

⁸³ See DZ 1220: 188: *Tai Yi Huofu Wulei dafa* 太乙火府五雷大法, 2a, 5ab.

⁸⁴ DZ 1220: 188.2a: 得其法於石室中。

⁸⁵ DZ 1220: 188.1a and 3a respectively.

⁸⁶ DZ 1220: 188.2a.

⁸⁷ DZ 1220: 188.2a.

⁸⁸ As is well known from Daoist texts, the Celestial Masters defined as their demonic opponents the “stale miasmas of the Six Heavens” (六天古氣 *Liutian guqi*).

⁸⁹ DZ 1220: 188.5b.

⁹⁰ DZ 1220: 188.2b.

⁹¹ DZ 1220: 188.6a.

When [Xu Zhigao] travelled south to the capital [Hangzhou], there was a monstrosity in the [emperor's] inner quarters that caused harm. None of the ritual masters could cure it. The True Man [Xu Zhigao] took one talisman and executed a monstrous ghost of more than one *zhang* long.

自南遊至京師，內院有妖作孽。諸法師不能治之。真人以一符，馘妖精長丈餘。

There is a lot more to reveal through the narrative of this ritual lineage but one issue deserves highlighting because of the analogy with *Water Margin*, namely that the method here transmitted is one of talismanic writing. Most likely these were the aforementioned “thunder seals.”

Revelation again stands at the beginning of this method, and, with Chen Tuan obtaining the method from a grotto, it is not unlike the revelation in *Quelling the Demon*. Yet, though Chen Tuan is credited as the first Daoist master of the lineage, he was not the first to have received it. The lineage narrative states that the original revelation was made in the year 742 to Feng You 馮祐, magistrate of Jinzhou 綿州. It was this official, so the story goes, who had a dream vision of a female goddess who revealed to him a method to eradicate the world's evils. Subsequently, he woke up to find a “secret writing” (祕文 *miwen*). The story of magistrate Feng concludes by saying that he left office and family, instead “obtaining merit by dispensing talismans and consecrated water” 行符咒水有功. For this man too, the revelation served as initiation into a ritual method.

Significant also is the divinity who originally revealed the method, the “Holy Mother of Northern Yin” (北陰聖母 *Beiyin Shengmu*), a female manifestation of the Northern Dipper.⁹² This connection with the Northern Dipper is intensified in the authority who presides over this talismanic method, namely the “Primal Ruler, Ancestral Mother of the Grand Monad” (太乙祖母元君 *Tai Yi Zumu Yuanjun*).⁹³ This goddess, a manifestation of the terrible “Star Ruler, Yue Bei” 月孛星君, is the ruler over all the “bad killer [air]” (兇煞 *xiongsha*) below the Ninefold Heavens that cover the earth. The text also presents her as a “manifestation of the Northern Dipper's true breath” (北斗真炁之化身 *Beidou zhenqi zhi huashen*). In sum, the efficacious powers of this ritual are subordinated to the Northern Dipper—just as in *Water Margin*.

At this point we have seen frequent overlaps between *Water Margin's* 36 Rectifiers and 72 Killers, on the one hand, and actual therapeutic rituals for bringing order to ailments caused by “killer airs” or the dangerous powers of the rectifiers, as well as for containing these two groups inside a wellspring. Having established *Water Margin's* narrative focus around this ritual specialization, we can zoom in further.

8. Demons Imprisoned in a Wellspring: Writing on the Ground

Imprisonment of demons in wellsprings is not always done on the precincts of an actual Daoist temple, as we have seen in the example of parallels between *Water Margin* and the “Great Rite of Five Thunders, from the Fire Mansion of the Grand Monad.” A much more common space for locking up demons is the ritual precinct that needs to be consecrated for every Daoist ritual and consists of a written representation of a wellspring. It can be encountered throughout the amalgam of exorcist traditions known as thunder ritual (雷法 *Leifa*).

The pivot of these rituals often is the drawing on the ground of a wellspring (井 *jing*) that functions as prison for locking up plague spirits who cause sickness in people. A more explicit analogy to the theme of *Water Margin's* opening chapter is barely conceivable. Note that the language of such rituals here moves from big institutions, great plagues and legendary demons to the smaller scale of individual households and their everyday illnesses. Accordingly, descriptions are much more detailed.

⁹² DZ 1220: 188.1a.

⁹³ DZ 1220: 188.5a.

Thunderclap Method for Arrest and Incarceration

In order to arrest and incarcerate all the deviant demons inside the body of a sick person, as well as [those who cause] nightmares of little children and [who cause] poisonous swellings, first they must be captured. The ritual master will stand firm in the *ding*-position,⁹⁴ facing the sick person. With his hand he will form a Sword-gesture and [with it] write the character ‘wellspring’ 井 above the ground, direction northeast and actualize it as a dry **wellspring of ten-thousand zhang deep**.

... recitation of spells ...

Capture the calamitous *qi* within the body as well as to its left and right, the deviant *qi*, the herbal *qi*, the poisonous *qi* and the **improper demons and spirits such as the Seventy-two Hours and the Twenty-four breaths** [氣 *qi*]. Make them all **convene below the Chief Rectifier, following the Killer Writ** [on the palm of my hand] and have them immobilized.

... recitation of spells ...

Absorb the *qi* of the sick person in one mouthful, **force them down the wellspring** with your gestures and close it off. Thank the generals and withdraw.⁹⁵

雷霆收禁法

收禁病人身中一切邪鬼，及小兒夜驚、腫毒，並皆收攝。法師丁字立定，面向病人。右手劍訣，於東北地上虛書一井字。存為枯井萬丈。

...

收攝病人身中、身左、身右禍氣、邪氣、藥氣、毒氣、七十二候、二十四氣不正鬼神，並皆攝赴吾煞文魁罡之下，無動無作。

...

攝取病人氣一口，剔訣下井中，封蓋。謝將而退。

Although described here as the achievement of a single ritual master with the help of his divine thunder generals, this ritual constitutes an exact parallel with the starting point of *Water Margin*: demons of disease locked up in a deep wellspring of Daoist signature. Note that, despite the absence of the 36 Celestial Rectifiers as a group, this procedure nonetheless calls for the deviant spirits to convene “below the Chief Rectifier of my Killer Writ” 煞文魁罡之下. These noxious spirits include the “Seventy-two Hours” (七十二候 *qishier hou*), who are alter egos of the 72 Killers. In other words, the 72 terrestrial agents of disease are here controlled by their celestial counterpart, that of the rectifiers (罡 *Gang*).

9. Demons Imprisoned in a Wellspring: Earthenware Jars

The drawing of a wellspring is among the simplest acts for capturing 72 (and other) plague-spirits but there are rituals that involve more complicated procedures and more concrete objects. While the earthly prison often is realized by drawing the character for “wellspring” on the ground, it may also be inscribed on a physical object, too. Containment vessels such as earthenware jars are frequently used for incarceration of demonic spirits. This has the advantage of making the prison tangible while keeping it mobile: the jar that is to contain the spirits does not have to remain fixed at the place where the sick person is rid of his demons, it may be taken away from him and safely stored at the altar of the practicing Daoist.

The usage of jars for imprisoning demons who cause disease can be encountered in various sources. In my introductory section on the 36 Rectifiers and the 72 Terrestrial Killers, above, I quoted a

⁹⁴ The *ding*-position refers to a posture whereby the right foot is placed perpendicular to the left foot, heel of the right foot against the middle of the left. It is a military posture.

⁹⁵ DZ 1220: 101 *Wulei qidao xingchi mifa* 五雷祈禱行持秘法, 9a-10a.

missionary report on the practices of “sorcerers” in Sichuan province. The same observer reveals that their ritual therapy entails a segment in which the 72 agents of disease are first located and captured, then placed into small jars, whereupon they are taken home by the ritual master and placed in front of the god on his household altar.⁹⁶ Identical rituals for imprisoning spirits in an (earthenware) jar or other container can also be found in Daoist ritual manuals as well as in anecdotal literature from the Ming and Qing.⁹⁷ Further descriptions by westerners confirm that it ranked high among exorcist practices in the late imperial history of Daoism.⁹⁸

One of the most astonishing observations comes from a Presbyterian priest, the Rev. Hampden C. DuBose, who visited China in the late nineteenth century. His observations parallel the opening chapter of *Water Margin*, in that we once more find demons locked up in a ritual prison on the precinct of a Daoist temple. And, more closely aligned with *Water Margin*, in DuBose’s descriptions it is the very mansion of the Daoist patriarchs on Mt. Longhu.

Most prominent in his descriptions are the methods by which the Daoist “pope,” or also the “chief of the wizards”—more properly the Celestial Master—“controls the invisible hosts of demons,” and the fact that he is “often summoned by emperors and men of countless wealth to rid their houses of these troublesome intruders.” (DuBose 1886). The Reverend DuBose states that these powers of the Daoist pontifex are shared by common Daoist priests who live with their own household, dealing mostly with “evil spirits and quack medicines, which makes them deserve the appellation, ‘a dirty set of fellows.’”⁹⁹

For all of DuBose’s condescension, he specifically mentions two types of objects in relation to this power, namely ritual weaponry (a sword) and receptacles (jars).

All demons fear this sword [of the Celestial Master]. He who wields it, the great Taoist magician, can catch demons and shut them up in jars. It is said that near his home there are rows of such jars, all of them supposed to hold demons in captivity.¹⁰⁰

Thus, as with so many other martial methods, the “captivity” of demons in jars is the common property of ritual masters generally as well as Daoists specifically—but as is apparent from DuBose’s description, it apparently exemplified the authority of the Celestial Masters. By extension it was associated with the Daoist tradition that this patriarchate represents.¹⁰¹

Below I provide another example from the early Ming that shows how an earthenware jar is consecrated as a prison. In this case the character for “wellspring” is drawn on top of the earthenware jar, then a divine thunder general is deployed to carry out the arrest and incarceration. Like in *Water Margin*, a talisman is used to seal off the incarcerated spirit.

Whenever you want to set up a prison, use an earthenware jar and pour half a cup each of wine and vinegar into it. Then recite [a spell for invoking the Thunder Gods]. Draw the character for ‘Wellspring’ 井 [and make it] into the Northern Prison of the Celestial Monad; use a string of ten copper coins and burn a talisman for summoning Marshal Zhu. As he arrives and arrests the spirits of the evil shaman, order him to push [the spirits of the shaman] into the prison and close it off. . . . Seal off the opening of the jar with a talisman for this Marshal [i.e., Zhu] and use yellow mud to harden the seal. Then, bury it in a burning stove so that it may become sublimated by radiant fire.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ (Vale 1906, p. 36).

⁹⁷ Wang Tonggui 王同軌 (fl. 1620), *Ertan leizeng* 耳談類增, 47.8b. In *Xuxiu Siku Quanshu*, vol. 1268 (Shanghai: Guji, 1995). Also see two stories in Yuan Mei 袁枚, *Zi bu yu* 子不語, j. 1, p. 13: 鬼衣受網; j. 18, p. 334: 山娘娘. In *Yuan Mei quanji*, vol. 4 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji, 1993).

⁹⁸ (Gray 1878, pp. 101–2; De Groot 1892–1910, pp. 1259–61).

⁹⁹ (DuBose 1886, pp. 375–76).

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 374–75.

¹⁰¹ In his forthcoming book *Heavenly Masters*, Vincent Goossaert provides further examples of the same jars, (Goossaert 2019).

¹⁰² DZ 1220: 228 *Leifu Zhu shuai kaoxie dafa* 雷府朱帥考邪大法, 8ab.

凡立獄。用瓦罐瓶一隻。入酒醋各半盞。念...。畫井為天一北獄。用一銅錢十文。燒符召朱帥。至。收捉邪巫魂。命押入獄內囚禁。... 將本帥符一道封瓶口。以黃泥封固。頓於火爐中。以烈火燒鍊。

The talismanic writing by which the jar is sealed off continues to embody the protective powers of Marshal Zhu even after the ritual is long over. Like a stone slab, it functions as a force for guarding the imprisoned spirits. Considering this application of talismanic writing to seal off subterranean prisons in the context of Daoist ritual, the parallels with *Water Margin* are obvious.

But, then again, who reads Daoist manuals? Perhaps a more effective venue for the argument that *Water Margin* referred to a commonly known repertoire of ritual practices would be to present anecdotal evidence. Let us return to the second half of the Ming dynasty to examine a literati description of rituals for imprisonment of demons in earthenware jars. It presents the procedure in correlation to a clearly defined demonic object, namely the spirit of a monkey who possesses a woman.

Around the time of the Jiajing or Longqing reign, there was the wife of a minister in some department. She would occasionally leave through the South Gate and go burn incense at the Mei Temple when she got possessed by a certain thing. Every time she arrived there she would fall under an enchantment for which no recipe was effective. Later some clerk in her husband's ministry turned out to be well versed in the Daoist registers (道籙 *Daolu*) and with talismanic water (符水 *fushui*), so that the minister ordered him to cure her by means of indictment.

The clerk set up an altar to carry out his ritual and furthermore used an earthenware jar for containing the anomaly. After a long while there came sounds of approval from the jar and the clerk then covered it with rice that he had incanted with ritual spells: Every time when he took a grain of rice and threw it into the jar, the anomaly would cry out in fear, as if he could not take it anymore. When asked where he came from, the anomaly answered: "I originally am an old monkey. From Huguang I have gone north by the River. When I got to Jinling [Nanking] I happened to rest at the tip of a twig of a tree at the Monastery of the High Throne and when this woman passed by beneath it, I was overcome by lewd desire. Thereupon I possessed her so that I could toy with her." The clerk used a talisman to seal off the jar. He incinerated the jar and the anomaly subsequently ceased.¹⁰³

嘉、隆間。一部郎之妻。偶出南門梅廟燒香。為物所祟。每至輒迷眩。百計遣之不去。後部中一辦事吏諳道籙符水。郎命劾治之。吏設壇行法。別以小攝怪。久之內嘖嘖有聲。吏復以法咒米。每用一粒投中。其怪即畏苦號叫。似不可堪忍者。問其何所來。怪答曰：「本老猿也。自湖廣將之江以北。道過金陵。偶憩於高座寺樹杪。而此夫人經行其下。適有淫心。遂憑而弄之耳。」吏以符封口。火焚之。怪遂絕。

Just like in the ritual manual we have seen; the spirit is here imprisoned (and tortured towards a confession) in an earthenware jar and it is sealed off with a talisman. And, true to the prescriptions of the ritual manual, the jar is incinerated; a form of transformation (化 *hua*) by fire. The anecdote moreover adds an insight that no manual can describe: the woman is cured of her demonic illness.

Significantly, among the most commonly performed Daoist rituals in Hunan nowadays, the ritual imprisonment of noxious spirits inside earthenware jars is paramount. The ritual exists in different versions, each with a proper function and title: "Sealing off the Evil Demon's Confinement" (封邪魔禁 *feng xiemo jin*) and "Collecting Souls" (收魂 *shouhun*). More important is the general term used for this type of ritual, namely "Dispatching Talismans" (打符 *dafu*).

For this extremely common ritual, a priest (often on his own) will visit the house of a sick person and execute a ritual imprisonment in order to "collect souls." He does this by filling an earthenware

¹⁰³ Gu Qiyuan, *Kezuo zhuiyu*, j. 3, p. 95.

jar with ashes from a censer, write the character for “wellspring” with his ritual sword on the ashen surface and then put the demonic spirit(s) into this object. Many of the laypeople ask the ritualist to do something that directly coheres with DuBose’s observation of the Celestial Master’s altar on Mt. Longhu: to take the jars away from their home, to his Daoist altar, where they are deemed to be safe (see Figure 8). The Daoist priests confirm that extensive groupings of Killers (煞 *sha*) form the main target of these rituals.



Figure 8. Rows of earthenware jars containing spirits. Altar of Chen Demei (Hunan). Photo by author.

Although there hardly is a verbatim correspondence between all these ritual procedures and the narrative of *Water Margin*, the way the story is set up in reference to Daoist ritual should speak for itself, and, furthermore, the points of overlap are too many and too persistent to ignore. Even if one is not a Daoist priest who possesses a manuscript that contains 108 talismanic graphs for each of *Water Margin*’s heroes, this much is clear: for premodern readers, it should be hard to avoid the association with the everyday ritual therapies that the story repeatedly and strongly evokes. After all, if there is one aspect of life that we can attribute with universal and eternal importance, it is the anxious concern for good health.

10. Conclusions

In my attempt to situate *Water Margin* within a primary field of ritual references, I do not mean to say that everything about this story is ritual or that nothing of its content could be made available for literary analysis. Quite to the contrary: much of the protagonists’ actions and dialogues surely are open to interpretation. They express morality, moods and other “meanings” that may require a hermeneutic field like that of literary analysis. Yet there is no doubt that before the protagonists can be properly interpreted, they first need to be situated within a cultural sphere that comes with its own, very specific points of reference—references that are ritual in nature and Daoist in denomination.

To neglect the ritual bedrock of a Ming dynasty book like *Water Margin* comes at a great cost: any such interpretation that unquestioningly believes in the post-Enlightenment idea of “literary

fiction” is entirely our own, academic fiction. It would yield interpretations that may be learned and sophisticated, even relevant to the debates and needs of our present-day society but the meanings it proposes can only reflect us, moderns. It amounts to saying that the field of traditional Chinese literature is one where scholars are content to project modern relevance into the materials they have selected as equivalent of the academic notion of Literature. For anyone interested in the peculiar logic and cultural specificity of the topics they study, this is a great loss.

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