

Declarations of the Perfected. Part One: Setting Scripts and Images into Motion, by Thomas E. Smith. St. Petersburg, Florida: Three Pines Press, 2013. viii, 350 pp. US\$35.95 (paper), US\$15.00 (e-book).

This book attempts a major undertaking, no less than a fully annotated translation of the first four fascicles of the *Declarations of the Perfected* (*Zhen'gao* 真誥, DZ 1016; hereafter abbreviated as ZG). The ZG is Tao Hongjing's 陶弘景 (456–536) compilation in ca. 500 C.E. of a series of revelations bestowed primarily upon the Xu 許 family of Jiankang 建康, which took place roughly between 363–370 C.E. Encoded in esoteric terminology, literary allusion, and the linguistic shorthand of years-long conversation partners, the text covers a wide range of topics—the structure of the afterlife, oral instructions on scriptural practices, health exercises, the Xus' economic projects, their social relations, and their official prospects in this world and the next. The text bedevils the best translators, leading one Taiwanese scholar to comment that nine out of ten Daoist scholars do not understand the ZG. Thankfully, there are numerous research tools to make the text more accessible, from English-language translations of numerous portions to an excellent critical translation of the entire work into modern Japanese, *Shinkō kenkyū* 真誥研究 (hereafter abbreviated as SK), the result of a decade-long seminar at the Department of Humanities at Kyōto University.¹ The ZG has received so much attention and is of central importance to the study of early Daoism because of its historically high status and its ethnographic detail. On the one hand, it records the formation and foundation of the Shangqing 上清 sect, which came to be considered the highest form of Daoism in the Six Dynasties and Tang. On the other, it shows the day-to-day concerns of the Xu family, describing Daoism as lived rather than as prescribed. Tao Hongjing's dating of a number of passages, sometimes to the very day of the year, also provides an important reference point for the entry of new terminology into the Sinitic religious sphere.

Smith's translation is a valuable contribution to Daoist studies because it incorporates and translates the critical annotations of the SK in the footnotes, and takes the extra step of explaining the

¹ Yoshikawa Tadao 吉川忠夫 and Mugitani Kunio 麥谷邦夫, eds., *Shinkō kenkyū: yakuchū hen* 真誥研究：譯注篇 (Kyōto: Kyoto daigaku jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo, 2000).

connections between these references and the meaning in the *ZG* text. The introduction does not rehearse the lengthy history of Shangqing scholarship, although most major studies are referenced in the bibliography. Smith makes the structure of the *ZG* very clear by distinguishing the beginning and end of each manuscript that Tao Hongjing had, and by clarifying at the outset who the speakers are. He further adds a summary title describing the general topic of the revelations in each manuscript and the main speakers. This is particularly useful as working out the structure of the manuscripts is time-consuming and difficult; one can easily be distracted by the multiple directions in which the text goes and by the variety of speakers. Another major contribution is Smith's appending of his own commentaries to each manuscript translation. These do important organizing work not attempted since Tao Hongjing's time: Smith summarizes and explains the import of each revelation, the relations between the speakers, and the plot of the revelations as they relate to previous ones. Through this process, he is able to draw out a longer story arc than has been visible in the scholarship up to this point. The arc of that story, however, requires more careful assessment.

Smith argues that his contribution to the existing scholarship reveals the *ZG* as a sexological tract, and that five main features of the text can be found through his translations (9). First is a keen awareness of sexuality in all of its detail, from masturbation to newlywed passion to impotence. Second is that the *ZG* prescribes a "sex-replacement regimen" of visualization exercises that reverse gender roles. Third is a "shocking secret" underlying the fates of Xu Mi 許謐 and his son, Xu Hui 許翮, which Smith does not describe in the introduction, but leaves for the reader to discover through the unfolding translation. Fourth is the manipulative nature of the medium, Yang Xi 楊羲, which Smith argues has only been "hinted at" by scholars like Stephen Bokenkamp. Fifth is the relationship between the ideal of infancy in the early courtship scenes and the corpse-reviving and deliverance practices described at the end.

Smith is at his strongest when dealing with poetic imagery and clearly attributed literary allusions in the *ZG*. He writes with sensitivity to phrasing, grammar and nuance, giving his work linguistic finesse. The text is particularly strong in clarifying the sacred geography of the Shangqing *imaginaire*. Smith keeps track of

the directions, hierarchies and populations of different celestial and earthly locales, making his work an excellent reference just for this aspect. However, where he imposes sexual interpretations on ambiguous metaphors, more caution is required. There is a British schoolboy joke that any utterance can be turned into a sexual innuendo by ending it with the phrase “. . . said the bishop to the actress.” In his reading of many terms, images, and metaphors, Smith does much the same thing, over-sexualizing his interpretation of otherwise quite refined language to the point where sex becomes the primary focus of the whole work. Close reading of his claims reveals some deep misunderstandings, which, if followed thoroughly through the footnotes, appear to unravel some of Smith’s most cherished claims. One detailed example suffices to make this point.

The passage below translates a reference to the Male and Female Ones (*xiongyi* 雄一, *ciyi* 雌一), terms which play an important role in the teachings revealed to Yang Xi and the Xus, and also in Smith’s conceptualization of Shangqing sexual practice. He interprets the “Ones” to be veiled references to a type of sexual cultivation that forms an important foundation for Smith’s larger claims. This passage is the closest Smith comes to identifying the details of the practice (the index cites references to the Male, Female and Three Ones [*sanyi* 三一] in over twenty-five different locations). The passage appears as part of a revelation and romantic poem addressed to Xu Mi by his promised consort among the Perfected, the Right Blossom Lady Wang (Youying Wang furen 右英王夫人):

The vacant and harmonious can guard the Male [Ones]; souging solitude can guard the Female [Ones]. Now, “souging solitude” refers to single Lights that go forth alone.

虛和可守雄，蕭蕭可守雌。夫蕭蕭者，單景獨往也。

(Smith, 145; ZG, 2.20b5–6)

Following the leads given by the Japanese translation, Smith traces the terms to Tao Hongjing’s practice manual, *Secret Instructions for the Ascent to Perfection* (*Dengzhen yinjue* 登真隱訣, DZ 421; hereafter abbreviated as *DZYJ*).² The term is correctly unpacked as

² Smith, 145n218; *DZYJ*, 1.5a8–5b5; *SK*, 2.85an1. Smith’s annotation translates the passage cited in the *SK*, but gives the wrong *DZYJ* page numbers.

referring to specific cultivation practices—guarding (*shou* 守) the Male and Female Ones, body gods about which no more is said. The term “guarding” refers to visualization, and is cognate to “preserve” or “actualize” (*cun* 存). Smith, following the SK and Tao Hongjing, further cites *Daode jing* chapter 28 (“know the male, but guard the female” 知雄守雌), but implies this is a reference to sexual cultivation.

Smith asserts that the phrase “single lights” (*danjing* 單景) means “the male adept’s still-unpaired Lights as they proceed to those of his female partner” (145n219). He refers to his annotation to the same term in an earlier passage (Smith, 68n196; ZG, 1.16b6). But upon investigation, that passage turns out to describe something quite different. There they are single lights that “go forth alone . . . to protect the Female Ones.” This reading of this former passage does not recognize that *shou* refers to visualization, not protection. The two notes are internally inconsistent: do the lights proceed to the female partner in a visualized spiritual union, or do they go forth to “protect the Ones”? The commentary argues that the passage refers to veiled sexual cultivation practice, albeit visualized rather than bodily performed (147–149).

The argument here is also inconsistent, relying on vague innuendo and references to “broader contexts.” On the one hand, Smith asserts that Xu Mi cannot have spiritual union with Lady Wang and that he must prepare through guarding the Female Ones. On the other hand, he concludes that “soughing solitude” (*xiaoxiao* 蕭蕭), “vacuity” (*xu* 虛), and “harmoniousness” (*he* 和) are actually references to spiritual union. Which is it? He further argues that the romantic love poem following the instruction is in fact a humiliating taunt of Xu Mi’s impotence:

Xu Mi is far from ready for [spiritual union]. He must first show that he is ready by mastering the technique of guarding the Female Ones, a kind of preliminary exercise.

On the surface, [the passage translated above] is unremarkable. . . . However . . . if we consider the broader context, then the terms begin to take on an entirely new hue. In the act of spiritual union, what would surround the male but the vacuity and harmoniousness of the female? And what but “soughing solitude” would surround the male who sends his single Lights into the void?

Now all of this takes place on a very elevated, abstract, spiritual level; Right Blossom can only ask Xu if he is capable of accomplishing it entirely in his heart. . . . Is he devoted enough? . . . When she tells him, “I bear no blame at all for the incapable,” she could just as well be saying, “Don’t blame *me* if you can’t get it up, old man!” (147–148)

This contradiction might be warranted, given the twists and turns of Daoist poetics, if it were not for the fact that in the *DZYJ* passage that Smith cites, but apparently did not read, Tao Hongjing explains clearly and precisely what the Male and Female Ones are and how to perform the practice. The *DZYJ* reference is an annotation to a description of the Nine Palaces (*jiugong* 九宮) visualization, an important and very specific Shangqing cultivation method. This text describes the names and locations of the palaces within the head, as well as the names and genders of the gods who dwell in an arrangement within the head corresponding to the structure of heaven. To ensure there is no mistake, I translate the passage:

The aforementioned five palaces, their gods are all male. Thus they are called the Male Ones. The four palaces, they are all female—these are the Female Ones. All the Nine Palaces in the Grand Tenuity [region] of Upper Clarity have Perfected Lords living in them. Therefore, in people’s heads they are also established in the same position so that they mutually correspond. This is what is meant by the phrase: “In Emptiness and Harmony one can guard the Male; in sighing solitude one can guard the Female. Those who sigh in solitude, their single lights go forth alone.”

前五宮，其神皆男，故謂雄一。此四宮，皆女，是為雌一。凡上清太微中之九宮，則有真君居之，故人頭亦設此位，以相應耳。所謂「虛和可守雄，蕭蕭可守雌；蕭蕭者，單景獨往」之謂也。(DZYJ, 1.5a–5b)

Guarding the Male Ones refers to visualizing the male gods in their palaces in the head, and Guarding the Female Ones refers to visualizing the female gods in their separate palaces. The *DZYJ* goes on to state that for those who do not visualize these deities, their palaces remain empty and they die a natural death. Those who exert themselves in this practice will become transcendents and live supernaturally long lives. The superior practice is to meditate on the female officials, but both practices should be done together. This prioritization of the female while maintaining the

importance of the male echoes the epistemic priorities of *Daode jing* chapter 28, and so explains Tao Hongjing's reference to it. There is no evidence of sexual cultivation in the ZG, DZYJ, or *Daode jing* passages as discussed in this context.

Had Smith availed himself of the scholarship on the Nine Palaces or the very closely related practice, Guarding the Three Ones (*shou san yi* 守三一, or *shou san zhenyi* 守三真一), he might have paused to consider that not one single scholar, including Tao Hongjing, has ever interpreted them as referring to sexual cultivation practices.³ The state-of-the-art chapter by Chang Ch'ao-jan on this topic cogently demonstrates that these visualizations are described in a consistent and very specific order of practice in the Shangqing hagiographic genealogy. Chang reconstructs this series of practices through a complex cross-referencing of similar passages in the hagiographies of the Shangqing predecessors, Su Jun 蘇君 and his disciple Ziyang zhenren 紫陽真人, as well as in a number of other major scriptures. The chapter also makes the best arguments currently available for the dating of these scriptures. In Chang's analysis, Guarding the Ones is a step, or rather three steps (there are three different kinds of "Ones" that are visualized: the three Ones, the Male Ones and the Female Ones), on the path towards the ultimate Shangqing practice, which is intoning the *Great Cavern Scripture of the Perfected* (*Dadong zhenjing* 大洞真經).

Smith argues repeatedly throughout his translation, often with

³ Smith does not refer to these main works on the Three Ones: Poul Andersen, *The Method of Holding the Three Ones: A Taoist Manual of Meditation of the Fourth Century A.D.* (London: Curzon Press, 1980); Chang Chaojan 張超然, "Xipu, jiaofa ji qi zhenghe: Dongjin Nanchao Daojiao Shangqing jingpai de jichu yanjiu" 系譜、教法及其整合：東晉南朝道教上清經派的基礎研究 (PhD diss., Taipei: National Chengchi University, 2007), 47–87; Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. Frank A Kierman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 455–459. Other works cited in Smith's study but not consulted for their discussions of the Ones include Isabelle Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing dans l'histoire du taoïsme* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1984); Isabelle Robinet, *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-shan Tradition of Great Purity*, trans. Julian F. Pas and Norman J. Girardot (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Gil Raz, "Creation of Tradition: The Five Talismans of the Numinous Treasure and the Formation of Early Daoism" (PhD diss., Bloomington: Indiana University, 2004); Fabrizio Pregadio, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge, 2008).

reference to the Male and Female Ones, that the core and most vaunted spiritual practices in the *ZG* are modes of spiritual congress with one's promised consort. But, if Chang is to be believed, this simply cannot be the case. Smith reads sexual congress into every mention of gendered gods that appears in the *ZG*. This leads him to "discoveries" that are basically uncharacteristic of the elevated poetry of the *ZG* and its cosmic, astral aspirations. Smith's major revelation—not revealed in the introduction perhaps because its plausibility in that context would be diminished—is that the Perfected Lady of Purple Tenuity engaged in what I can only summarize as karmic revenge sex with Xu Mi's son, Xu Hui, because of Xu Mi's sexual transgressions in a past life (215–220). Not stopping there, Smith also reads images of a processional train of sacred beasts flowing from the vaults of heaven as a veiled depiction of the female ejaculate of the goddess (255–258). There are highly romantic exchanges between the goddesses and their earthly counterparts, which are well attested in earlier scholarship, but Smith over-reads the imagery and makes a habit of imputing sexual innuendo where he does not understand the textual references. This makes the translation unreliable. Caution is recommended wherever the analysis emphasizes illicit sexuality, which is unfortunately its primary focus.

Smith's work makes a very useful research companion to the *ZG* for its attention to the identities of people and mythico-geographic domains, for its clear analysis of the structure and the characters in the text, and for its careful cross-referencing of related passages. Similar attention is not given, however, to the rich architecture of cultivation and visualization practices that are also mapped out on bodily, bureaucratic, and astral planes, nor to the diverse trajectories through this terrain that are taken by the protagonists. The language of the *ZG* may be veiled, but it is precise. Smith's translation is best read as an interpretive argument inviting further detailed assessment, but not as a direct rendering for the unfamiliar reader.

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