

The Performance and Significance of the Merging the Pneumas (*Heqi*) Rite in Early Daoism

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Abstract

One of the great mysteries surrounding the early Celestial Master Daoists is a sexual ritual called Merging the Pneumas (*heqi* 合炁). This rite was practiced from the beginning of the movement in the 2nd century and became a distinguishing characteristic of the nascent religion; its performance continued at least into the Song dynasty. Despite a series of articles by top scholars of Daoism, we are still very much in the dark about this ritual, uncertain about its real character, the times it was performed, the individuals who participated, and the ultimate goal of the participants. In this paper, the author examines both surviving Daoist scriptural material related to the rite as well as normative material concerning its improper performance and external critiques of the rite. Because it was an esoteric rite, no authentic liturgical materials survive from a Celestial Master context; the current *Huangshu* and *Shangqing Huangshu guodu yi* derive from a Shangqing context and hence are unreliable witnesses to the Celestial Master rite. Similarly, Buddhist polemics must have portrayed a recognizable but not necessarily entirely accurate image of the ritual. Secondary evidence in the Daoist canon suggests that the rite was performed by normal Daoist citizens, not just libationers, on a regular basis. Celestial Master libationers played a special role as teachers of the rite and initiators into its initial practice. The goal of the ritual is stated to be the avoidance of disaster. One way this is effected in the *Shangqing Huangshu guodu yi* is through the inscription of

the performer's name on the roster of the living. The avoidance of jealousy seems to have been an important proximate goal.

Keywords: Merging the Pneumas, sex ritual, Daoism, libationer