Introduction

In the closing months of 648, after scouring the four corners of the Tang Empire for almost six months, a group of imperial envoys located and confiscated copies of the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* (*Sanhuang wen* 三皇文). The envoys returned to the capital, Chang'an 長安, and piled their collective plunder in front of the hall of the Imperial Secretariat of the Board of Rites, where it was unceremoniously set ablaze. The destruction of the text followed an edict that the board's vice director and de facto chancellor Cui Renshi 崔仁師 (ca. 580–ca. 660) had issued in the fifth lunar month earlier that year. The edict read, "The script and characters of the [*Writ*] *of the Three Sovereigns* cannot be transmitted; its words are reckless perversions, hence it is fitting that it be destroyed. It will be replaced by the *Scripture of the Way and Virtue* (*Daode jing* 道德經). All those among the populace or the Daoist abbeys who possess this text must imperatively forward it to the authorities for immediate destruction."[1]

The *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* Banned

If we rely on this account from the *Forest of Pearls in the Garden of the Dharma* (*Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林), these events were set in motion by the boastful Madam Wang 王氏, the wife of Liu Shaolüe 劉紹略, a jailer from Jizhou 吉州 (present-day Jiangxi). After Madam Wang acquired a copy of the *Writ,* she relentlessly extolled its powers and claimed, "Invariably,

when nobles have this scripture, they become monarchs of kingdoms; those among the great statesmen who possess this text will be as parents for the people; those among commoners who possess this text will amass many riches for themselves; and ladies who possess this text will inevitably become empresses."[2] In early 648, Ji Bian 吉辯, a legal adjutant, inspected the prison and found the *Writ* in Madam Wang's dresser.[3] Intrigued, he summoned Liu Shaolüe and his wife to inquire about the text, and they replied that they had obtained it from a Daoist cleric. Having heard about the text's reputation, and presumably about Madam Wang's claims, Ji Bian took the document to the regional offices to determine if it was a forgery or a divine revelation. Unable to reach a conclusion, he sent the text to the capital for further review. Two prominent Daoist priests who were sympathetic to the court were interviewed during the investigation, and the state commission in charge of the inquiry concluded that the *Writ* was an illicit forgery. Once the edict was issued, all known copies of the text were destroyed and it was removed from the Daoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏).

The swift response on the part of Tang authorities suggests that by the early seventh century, the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns,* or the *Scripture of the Three Sovereigns* (*Sanhuang jing* 三皇經) as its expanded version was known, had a recognized political resonance. From around the late sixth century, the *Writ* and the corpus that accrued around it were basic ordination documents for Daoist initiates. According to the *Forest of Pearls,* the Tang authorities awarded prized parcels of land to Daoists on the basis of the *Writ*. The edict that ordered the destruction of the text was substantiated with a report from the Office of Land Bestowal. According to the report:

> As in Buddhism, [by which] according to monastic regulations monks and nuns receive the precepts and obtain an arable lot of thirty *mu,*[4] nowadays all male and female Daoists, in accordance with the *Scripture of the Three Sovereigns,* receive the [registers of the Heavens] of the Highest and Lower Clarities. [This scripture] takes the place of the precepts of Buddhist monk and nuns, who equally [receive] an arable lot of thirty *mu*. Since this scripture is a forgery it [must] be abolished. [Because] male and female Daoists will be without a statute of precepts, they should not receive land.

> It is requested that [this practice of receiving land] be abolished together with the scripture.[5]
>
> 如佛教。依內律僧尼受戒。得蔭田人各三十畝。今道士女道士。皆依三皇經。受其上清下清。替僧尼戒處。亦合蔭田三十畝。此經既偽廢除。道士女道士既無戒法。即不合受田。請同經廢。

The Daoist clergy would have been understandably anxious about this development. They had benefited from tax exemptions and acquired considerable holdings over the years, primarily under the rule of a sympathetic emperor, Tang Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626–649), but they were now at risk of losing everything.[6]

The *Forest of Pearls* recounts that in a bid to avoid the confiscation of their land, "all Daoists of the capital" petitioned the Office of Land Bestowal to replace the *Writ* with the *Scripture of the Way and Virtue* as the basic ordination text for Daoist clerics.[7] The *Forest of Pearls* does not mention specific individuals, but it would not be surprising to find Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 and Zhang Huiyuan 張惠元, the only two Daoists who had been consulted during the authorities' investigation into the *Writ,* among the names of those who drafted the petition. Both were involved in independent efforts to raise the standing of the *Scripture of the Way and Virtue* within Daoism and project a more noble image of sophistication.[8] This project also played on the sympathies of Emperor Taizong, who, although he had grown fonder of Buddhism late in his reign, was still very partial toward the *Scripture of the Way and Virtue,* a text that had been purportedly uttered by his putative ancestor, Laozi 老子.[9]

About a decade earlier, in 637, after Taizong issued an edict that formally gave precedence to Daoists over Buddhists in all court ceremonies, a group of eleven Buddhist monks submitted a memorial to the throne in which they discredited Daoists by accusing them of growing unfamiliar with Laozi's teachings and deviating from the tenets of *Scripture of the Way and Virtue.* The memorial painted Daoists as dissolute rabble-rousers and spiritual heirs to the Yellow Turbans (Huang Jin 黃巾), a popular insurrectional movement that contributed to the fall of the Later Han (25–220).[10] Perhaps

in response, Taizong actively promoted the *Scripture of the Way and Virtue*. In 648, he even asked the renowned Buddhist prelate Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) to translate the scripture into Sanskrit so that it could be circulated in India.[11] One of the two Daoist scholars assigned to assist Xuanzang with the translation was Cheng Xuanying, who was renowned as the "hope of the Li [Laozi] school" (*Li zong zhi wang* 李宗之望).[12]

Cheng Xuanying, a representative of the Chongxuan 重玄 or "Double Mystery" school of philosophical argumentation, and Zhang Huiyuan, a skilled court debater, found this to be the perfect opportunity to elevate the status of the Daoist tradition. For them, replacing the *Writ* in the Daoist Canon with the lofty *Scripture of the Way and Virtue* was integral to refashioning the perception of Daoism from potentially seditious rustic charlatanry to an elegant discursive tradition. The proposed and eventually successful canonical swap affirmed Taizong's textual preferences, but it also coincided with the emperor's desire to standardize precepts and codes of discipline for all clergy, Buddhist and Daoist alike, in order to ensure their docility and avoid their unsolicited meddling in government affairs. Taizong notoriously championed the *Scripture of the Teaching Left Behind by the Buddha* (*Fo yijiao jing* 佛遺教經) because its rules of conduct forbade monks from participating in secular and state affairs. In addition to not participating in commercial or agricultural activities, monks and nuns were prohibited from owning property. The text also precludes them from crafting elixirs or "medicines of immortality" (*xianyao* 仙藥), casting spells, or participating in various forms of reckoning or divination.[13] The latter offense was also proscribed by Tang civil law codes and was punishable by two years in prison.[14]

Taizong famously promulgated a new legal code that contained a section regulating the clergy. The section, titled "Rules for Daoists and Buddhists" (Daoseng ge 道僧格), imposed restrictions on behavior that the imperial court regarded as detrimental to social harmony and the regime's endurance. In traditional Vinayic literature, divination and prophesying were considered minor offenses. In these new "Rules," however, they were among the most serious infractions and were punishable by defrocking and immediate prosecution in criminal courts. The Tang government's purging

of the *Writ* and its corpus from the Daoist Canon reveals that it deemed them antithetical to social order, civic mores, and political stability. Those who had the text in their possession, including Madam Wang, considered it potent enough to grant them direct access to the highest strata of power. For court Daoists such as Cheng Xuanying and Zhang Huiyuan, the *Writ* was representative of a popular tradition that was perhaps too invested in worldly affairs and unconcerned with introspective musings. That the text avoided metaphysical speculations and dealt instead with the "vulgar" pursuit of divination—summoning deities to obtain their favors and inquire about future events—did not help. The use of divination for political purposes was naturally of concern to authorities, but prognostication also worried the higher echelons of institutional Daoism, whose representatives were active at court and always conscientious of accentuating the profundity of their tradition to the emperor and his policy makers.

The misgivings that early Tang court Daoists voiced about the *Writ* were compounded by Buddhist accusations of forgery. This made it an easy target in polemical debates about the authenticity and credibility of Daoist scriptures. Accordingly, it is chiefly Buddhist sources that narrate the *Writ*'s ban. The account from the *Forest of Pearls* frames the matter of the proscription around its subversive potential, but it also makes clear that the *Writ*'s dubious origins were a significant problem. It accuses Bao Jing 鮑靚 (or 鮑靖; 230 or 260–330), "a gentleman of the Way of olden times" (*jiu daoshi* 舊道士), of having fabricated it. The *Writ* is mentioned again in a section on the endemic issue of Daoist forgeries, which, according to Buddhists, largely consist of plagiarized Buddhist scriptures that were later repackaged under a thin Daoist veil.[15]

Even before the *Forest of Pearls,* Buddhist polemicists had habitually condemned the *Writ* as illegitimate. In his *Treatise on the Two Teachings* (*Erjiao lun* 二教論), Dao'an 道安 (fl. sixth century) plainly states that Bao Jing fabricated the text he asserted to have received on Mount Song (Songshan 嵩山; in present-day Henan): "In the Yuan Kang reign of the [Western] Jin [between 291 and 299], Bao Jing forged the *Scripture of the Three Sovereigns* and consequently incurred capital punishment. The matter appears in the

History of the Jin [*Dynasty*]."[16] Despite Dao'an's contention, the episode was not documented in the official history nor in biographies of Bao Jing.[17] In his *Essays to Ridicule the Dao* (*Xiaodao lun* 笑道論), however, Zhen Luan 甄鸞 (fl. 535–581), another Buddhist polemicist, echoed his counterpart's version of the events; he reports that "Bao Jing forged the *Scripture of the Three Sovereigns;* the matter was exposed and he was put to death."[18] Regardless of the veracity of such claims, Buddhist indictments of the *Writ* succeeded in generating a controversy that would tarnish the text's reputation into the Tang.[19] With seemingly little or no substantiation, polemicists could raise the argument of forgery or plagiarism in an attempt to sway imperial opinion. The *Writ,* a work that had hitherto constituted one of the pillars of institutional Daoism, during a time that Daoists enjoyed favor at the court, was a choice target in Buddhist diatribes.[20]

In light of its contested origins and its mundane (and often prognosticatory) applications, it is understandable that the *Writ* elicited anxiety on the part of imperial authorities, ire on the part of the Daoist intelligentsia, and ridicule on the part of Buddhists. The text was regarded as spurious, potentially seditious, and associated with—at least in spirit—earlier grassroots movements that had challenged imperial authority, and the fact that it circulated so widely as a basic ordination document did not ease these apprehensions. Expunging the *Writ* from the Daoist Canon made perfect sense to a central government that was preoccupied with promoting the docility of its citizenry and patronizing dependent institutional religions. The *Scripture of the Way and Virtue* was a natural replacement for the *Writ.* Although still political in scope, it was not reputed to instantly propel its readers to positions of high responsibility or social prestige and was generally more compatible with the pursuits of elite culture (notably skirting the hot-button topics of divination or spirits). Moreover, the *Scripture of the Way and Virtue* seamlessly fit into Taizong's program of establishing rhetorical sovereignty through cultural products.[21]

The *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* Revealed

Buddhist polemics and official bans reinforced the notion that the *Writ* was an important and controversial text in the Tang dynasty. Two centuries prior, in early medieval China, it was central to the development of institutional Daoism, a formalized, politicized, and highly organized reformulation of local Daoist traditions that was purposely articulated to align with imperial designs of unification and to serve as a universal religion. Part of the gambit of institutional Daoism relied on the identification and hierarchical classification of its sources. The Daoist scholar and systematizer Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406–477) presented the earliest prototype of the Daoist Canon, the *Catalogue of Scriptures and Writings of the Three Caverns* (*Sandong jingshu mulu* 三洞經書目錄), to the Liu Song (420–479) court in 471. It ranked texts on the basis of a tripartite scheme, the Three Caverns (*sandong* 三洞). The Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity) revelations occupied the highest tier, known as the Cavern of Perfection (*dongzhen* 洞真). Lingbao 靈寶 (Numinous Treasure) sources followed in the Cavern of Mystery (*dongxuan* 洞玄). Finally, the Cavern of Divinity (*dongshen* 洞神), the last of the three divisions, housed the earliest stratum of materials, which predated both the Shangqing and Lingbao revelations of the middle fourth and early fifth centuries, respectively.[22] Texts from the Cavern of Divinity represented local "minor methods" (*xiaofa* 小法) from the Jiangnan 江南 area (present-day southern Jiangsu, southern Anhui, northern Jiangxi, and northern Zhejiang). These included the crafting of alchemical elixirs as well as elaborate visualization methods, but the most emblematic aspect of southern ritual lore was the summoning of deities for the purpose of divination or to enlist their protection. A preface to the *Catalogue of Scriptures* specifies that Cavern of Divinity materials are for "calling upon the gods of Heaven and Earth and making them obey one's orders. Their efficacy is fathomless; hence they were given the name *shen* 神 [divine]."[23]

The centerpiece of the Cavern of Divinity was an array of talismans (*fu* 符)—more accurately described as symbols—that were composed in celestial writing, the language of the gods. This set of talismans, known

collectively as the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns,* had been "the pride of Ge Hong's 葛洪 (283–343) library" during the preceding century.[24] According to Ge's description in *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity: The Inner Chapters* (*Baopuzi neipian* 抱朴子內篇), "Among the most important writings on the Way, none surpass the *Esoteric Writ of the Three Sovereigns*."[25] The *Writ* was divided into three scrolls (*juan* 卷),[26] one for each of the Sovereigns of Heaven (Tianhuang 天皇), Earth (Dihuang 地皇), and Humankind (Renhuang 人皇), with each subset of talismans seemingly intended for distinct uses:

> The scripture [itself] states that when a household has the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns,* it will dispel malignancies and evil demons, pestilent *qi,* wicked calamities and unexpected disasters. When someone is suffering from illness and on the cusp of death, if they believe in the Way with all their hearts, give them this writing to clutch and surely they will not die. [. . .] If you wish to build [anything] from a new dwelling to a tomb, make several tens of copies of the "Writ of the Sovereign of Earth" and strew them around the ground. Inspect the site the next day. Construction may immediately begin at the sites that bear a yellow mark, and the household will infallibly be wealthy and prosperous. Additionally, in the case that someone is being interred, copy the "Writ of Sovereign of Humankind" and inscribe your own full name on the inside of a page, and then stealthily put it inside the person's tomb without letting anyone know. This will cause you to be free from unexpected tribulations and thieves and bandits. If someone conspires against you, they will surely have their harm returned against them. Moreover, if you first perform purifications for one hundred days, then you can summon the celestial spirits and the Director of Destinies as well as the god of the Great Year, the Daily Traveler, the deities of the Five Peaks and the Four Waterways, and gods of local shrines. All will manifest their form as humans, and you can inquire about auspicious and inauspicious matters, safety and danger, as well as the evil influences that cause the misfortunes of the sick.[27]
>
> 其經曰，家有三皇文，辟邪惡鬼，溫疫氣，橫殃飛禍。若有困病垂死，其信道心至者，以此書與持之，必不死也。[. . .] 若欲立新宅及冢墓，即寫地皇文數十通，以布著地，明日視之，有黃色所著者，便於其上起工，家必富昌。又因他人葬時，寫人皇文，並書己姓名著紙裏，竊

內人冢中，勿令人知之，令人無飛禍盜賊也。有謀議己者，必反自中傷。又此文先潔齋百日，乃可以召天神司命，及太歲日游五嶽四瀆社廟之神，皆見形如人，可問以吉凶安危，及病者之禍祟所由也。

Thus, the *Writ* was a type of ritual panacea to counter the misfortunes of everyday life in early medieval China. In the broadest terms, the "Writ of the Sovereign of Heaven," its first scroll, summoned the highest-ranking deities and the gods of celestial bodies; the second scroll, the "Writ of the Sovereign of Earth," summoned the gods of mountains and waterways, telluric deities, as well as local gods; and lastly, the third scroll, the "Writ of the Sovereign of Humankind," summoned gods related to life, death, and fate.[28] Since the *Writ* effectively addressed mundane issues, its seventh-century detractors were not entirely unjustified in arguing that the scripture reflected the worldly concerns of the masses. Yet in actuality, and despite the distinctions they may have been intent on upholding, social elites in early and medieval China engaged in the same apotropaic and divinatory pursuits as commoners.[29]

For all its appeal, during Ge Hong's lifetime the *Writ* was esoteric and was difficult to obtain. It circulated exclusively through local Jiangnan lineage networks and was only revealed once per generation only to the most deserving of initiates, who were required to swear an oath by smearing their mouths with blood and surrendering an offering to establish a sacred covenant.[30] *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity* recounts how Bo Zhongli 帛仲理, more commonly known as Bo He 帛和, was the first human to receive the text. Since Bo He had a sincere heart and was spiritually fit to obtain the scripture, a local god revealed divine talismanic characters that were carved in rock inside a mountain cave (literally, a "stone chamber"; *shishi* 石室).[31] Bo He immediately established an altar and made an offering of silk, hurriedly drawing up a copy of the *Writ* before departing the cave.[32]

The *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* Unpacked

In spite of the *Writ*'s importance on a number of fronts—from local Jiangnan cultural identity to the formation of institutional Daoism, and

Tang debates on imperial politics and religion—modern scholarship has largely overlooked the topic of the *Writ.* This is no doubt because the original text was lost and only fragments or citations survive in canonical works and manuscripts. A small number of studies have wrestled with the source, its significance, and its associated practices. Gu Jiegang and Yang Xianggui's *Sanhuang kao* (The history of the Three Sovereigns in ancient China), published in 1936, was among the first to do so. The study is framed as a historical analysis of the foundational Chinese rulers and ancestral culture heroes, and although these figures were only nominally related to the early medieval *Writ,* the authors devoted a number of sections to the question of the "Three Sovereigns in Daoism."[33] More than a decade later, Chen Guofu's seminal *Daozang yuanliu kao* (Studies on the origins and development of the Daoist Canon) addressed the text and its tradition, establishing that there were two transmission lines for the *Writ,* one connected to Bo He and the other to Bao Jing. The study elaborated on the contribution of both textual lines in the formation of the Cavern of Divinity division of what would later become the Daoist Canon.[34] More recently, leading scholars such as Liu Zhongyu, Wang Ka, and Ren Jiyu have published findings on the *Writ* in the form of articles or book chapters.[35] A younger generation of researchers, including Hsieh Shu-wei, Wang Chengwen, and Lü Pengzhi, has also turned its attention to various aspects of the *Writ,* including its textual history or its contribution to the development of the early Daoist Canon.[36]

Japanese scholars have also produced studies on the text. From the outset, the foundational figures of Daoist studies in Japan realized the *Writ*'s historical significance. In their eyes the source's primary value lay in its role in canon formation and the establishment of the all-important Three Caverns. Yoshioka Yoshitoyo touched upon the text and Fukui Kōjun devoted a chapter of his *Dōkyō no kisoteki kenkyū* (Fundamental studies on Daoism) to the question of how the *Writ* contributed to the elaboration of a three-tiered Daoist Canon.[37] Others, such as Kobayashi Masayoshi and especially Ōfuchi Ninji, integrated their research on the *Writ* in benchmark Daoist studies publications with expansive scopes.[38] Yamada Takashi and Suzuki Yūmi are among the most recent Japanese scholars to contribute new perspectives on the source.[39]

In Western-language scholarship, the *Writ* has not yet been the focus of a book-length study. It is typically only discussed over a few pages in works on broader topics. The best examples can be found in Isabelle Robinet's examination of the sources of the Shangqing corpus and John Lagerwey's detailed overview of the *Unsurpassed Secret Essentials* (*Wushang biyao* 無上祕要).[40] In contrast to Japanese works, these treatments focus less on canon formation and textual history than they do on practices and rituals. One of the only Western-language articles on the *Writ,* Poul Andersen's analysis of what he terms "visionary divination"—the summoning of deities by means of talismans in order to inquire about future events—is a case in point.[41]

This book builds on previous key studies, but it both expands and deepens the scope of inquiry. In addition to retracing the *Writ*'s textual history, it reconstructs its nexus of practices and rituals. It also examines the constellation of sources that defined the contours of its textual tradition, and it addresses the circumstances that led to the *Writ*'s presence at the forefront of Daoism during the Six Dynasties (420–589) and beyond. It is also the first Western-language monograph to identify and analyze surviving fragments of the text and the first full-length study in any language to consider the *Writ* through ancillary practices such as alchemy and meditation.

From an epitome of southern Chinese local lore at the dawn of the fourth century, the *Writ* became a pillar of institutional Daoism less than two centuries later, providing a translocal ideological and theological ground upon which the notion of a unified Chinese empire could take root and spread. One of the reasons for the *Writ*'s impact may have been its egalitarian discourse, as epitomized by Madam Wang's declaration that anyone with access to the text could ascend to higher stations in life. This is not to say that the text's champions defended revolutionary or leveling ideals. The *Writ,* much like the overwhelming majority of scriptures throughout the history of Daoism, was firmly entrenched in a logic of buttressing imperial authority.[42] It fulfilled this goal of legitimation so well that it was eventually recognized as a source of sovereignty rather than a mere gage or proof thereof. Thus, while the *Writ* promoted a theocratic universal model of sovereignty that served the interests of ruling monarchs, it also purveyed the idea to dispossessed local

elites—or, theoretically, anyone else—that they too could become sovereigns. The text's key component in this regard was its talismans (*fu*). These material tokens of legitimacy and trust originally derived from early Chinese bureaucratic and juridical logics, the same that structured the supernatural world. Talismans afforded individuals the same control over the gods and spirits that the ruler had over his officials. The symbolic capital of talismans extended to mundane statecraft just as it did to otherworldly pursuits. Moreover, by virtue of being tangible objects, talismans immediately projected the authority they embodied in a way that was readily apparent to those who came across them, whether sovereign or subject, adept or noninitiate.

Chapter 1, "The *Writ* in Early Medieval Southern China," provides a sociohistorical assessment of the *Writ* in fourth-century southern China, based in large part on Ge Hong's ethnography, *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity.* Ge Hong's account extols the *Writ* as the quintessential text of early medieval Jiangnan esoterica. He describes its talismans as potent objects that integrate apotropaic and prognosticatory capacities by either dispelling noxious elements or summoning positive ones at their holder's behest. Ge Hong identifies two lines in the *Writ*'s transmission, one originating with Bo He and the other with Bao Jing. Both Bo He and Bao Jing brought prestige to the *Writ,* but Bo He was at first a more polarizing figure due to the historical circumstances of the period. The fall of the Jin 晉 (265–420) capital Luoyang 洛陽 in 311, the collapse of Chang'an in 316, and the arrival of throngs of northern aristocratic emigrés into Jiangnan displaced the local aristocracy. Bo He was considered to be emblematic of the old local cultic system and its "excessive cults" (*yinsi* 淫祀), which newer northern arrivals and their allies aimed to supplant. Bao Jing personified a translocal and metropolitan re-articulation of southern lore that was more compatible with new directions in which Daoism was developing. This chapter also shows how the *Writ*'s political metaphors, its imperial imagery, and its reliance on readily identifiable material objects as tokens of legitimacy rendered it a crucial asset in the broader influence via an institutional state cult that certain segments of the Jiangnan aristocracy defended.

Chapter 2, "The Religious Life of Objects: The Talismans of the *Writ* and Their Surviving Fragments," zeroes in more narrowly on the scripture itself. It opens with a cultural history of the *Writ*'s emblematic talismans, focusing on their role as gages of trust. The illegibility of the divine script in which they were written reinforces the emphasis on their tangible, material nature, the only aspect of the talisman to display a semantic logic that can be "read." Since mortals cannot decipher divine script, the objects' unintelligibility also signals their celestial origins. The markings on the *Writ*'s talismans are closer to images than to writing; they are the cosmic true forms (*zhenxing* 真形) of the supernatural beings they depict, a distillate of their identities that grants holders complete control over them. The chapter then turns to a textual history of the *Writ*. It discusses important fragments of both Bo He's and Bao Jing's versions of the text from two key sources: the sixth-century *Scripture of the Wondrous Essence of the Eight Emperors* (*Dongshen badi miaojing jing* 洞神八帝妙精經) and the "Essential Functions of the Three Sovereigns" (*Sanhuang yaoyong pin* 三皇要用品) chapter of the *Unsurpassed Secret Essentials.*

The third chapter, "Beyond Talismans: Alchemy, Charts, and Meditation in Relation to the *Writ*," continues the focus on material culture with which the previous chapter opened. It centers on objects that are less commonly tied to the *Writ* but were just as central to its nexus of practices. It begins with an investigation of alchemical elixirs, highlighting their functional equivalence with talismans and uncovering substantial links between the transmission line of Taiqing 太清 (Great Clarity) alchemical sources and that of the *Writ.* The chapter then turns to the *True Form Charts of the Five Peaks* (*Wuyue zhenxing tu* 五嶽真形圖), a set of documents that are often described as complementary to the *Writ* in transmission narratives. These documents provide a springboard into a broader discussion of charts (*tu* 圖) and their functional overlap with talismans and elixirs via the interface of true form (*zhenxing*), as well as their use in visualization practices. The chapter subsequently discusses the "Charts of the Nine Sovereigns" (Jiuhuang tu 九皇圖), a lesser-known esoteric partner document to the *Writ* that was integral to its meditation techniques. In addition to their function as

prophetic illustrated rosters of past and future monarchs, the "Charts of the Nine Sovereigns" were also used in contemplation methods that identify the sovereigns as manifestation of the Triple Unity (Sanyi 三一), hypostases of the Great Unity, Taiyi 太一. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the close kinship between the *Writ* and early visualization practices centered on the Great Unity.

Shifting away from material culture and practices toward institutional history, chapter 4 looks at the *Writ*'s transition from a standard bearer of local Jiangnan esoterica to a stanchion of emerging unified Daoism. "From Local Lore to Universal Dao: The Cavern of Divinity and the Early Daoist Canon" chronologically picks up where chapter 1 left off and traces the permutations that the scripture underwent as it passed through the hands of systematizers such as Lu Xiujing and Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536). The chapter charts the *Writ*'s growth from a three-scroll (*juan* 卷) document into an eleven-scroll collection, the Cavern of Divinity corpus (*dongshen jing* 洞神經). In the process, it sheds light on its relation to Shangqing and Lingbao texts and its role in the elaboration of the Three Caverns (*sandong* 三洞) model on the basis of which the nascent Daoist Canon was organized in late Six Dynasties China.

Chapter 5, "The *Writ* and Its Corpus: The Rise and Fall of the Cavern of Divinity in Institutional Daoism," continues to plot the *Writ*'s transition from a paragon of local lore to a mainstay of state Daoism, focusing on the themes of transmission as ordination and ordination as investiture. After its expansion to eleven scrolls around the sixth century, the Cavern of Divinity corpus quickly grew to its mature fourteen-scroll form. The first three scrolls were devoted to the Three Sovereigns, and the subsequent eight fell under the aegis of the Eight Emperors (*badi* 八帝), manifestations of the Eight Archivists (*bashi* 八史), gods of the Eight Trigrams (*bagua* 八卦). The last three scrolls of the fourteen-scroll corpus were liturgical documents that dealt with the purification and transmission rites for the Cavern of Divinity. The chapter surveys the content of these scrolls and identifies surviving fragments in the Daoist Canon. Around the turn of the seventh century, the Cavern of Divinity was transmitted for basic initiation into institutional Daoism. Consequently, its liturgical content, including multiple sets of precepts and

ritual interdictions, grew more prominent. As ordination gages for the lowest and most accessible grade of initiation among the Three Caverns, the texts of the Cavern of Divinity lost some of their esoteric cachet, but despite being more widely available than ever, the *Writ* and its related materials retained their politicized message of sovereignty with egalitarian inflections. The last part of the chapter examines the circumstances that led to the government's decision to proscribe and burn the *Writ* in 648.

The conclusion investigates how the *Writ* and the Cavern of Divinity recovered from the ban and even flourished in subsequent centuries. A handful of representative scriptures, most notably from the Song dynasty (960–1279) Daoist revival, are examined. The conclusion also considers a unique document that attests to the presence of the *Writ* or its lore outside of China. The *Illustrated Scroll of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors* (*Sankō Gotei emaki* 三皇五帝絵巻), found in Japan and tentatively dated to the Muromachi period (1336–1573), is composed of thirteen figures, most of which correspond to the mythical Chinese rulers who received the *Writ* in the early stages of its transmission. Antecedents to the *Writ* are also surveyed, namely the threads that connect it to Weft Texts (*weishu* 緯書), *fangshi* 方士 (masters of methods) heritage, and the state cults of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Indeed, the *Writ* had a vibrant prehistory before it was mentioned in Ge Hong's fourth-century *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity,* and it had a rich afterlife after the Tang proscription of 648.

This book follows a chronological arc, tracing the destiny of the *Writ* from the beginning of the fourth century to the middle of the seventh. It assesses the scripture's status as a paragon of local Jiangnan culture, and it establishes talismans, elixirs, and charts as defining elements of its tradition. It highlights how these elements were decisive in the *Writ*'s ascension and why they were crucial to the program of a unified Daoist creed. By considering the history of the scripture, the figures who were instrumental in its dissemination, and the meanings ascribed to it and especially its talismans, the present study collapses the conventional opposition between matter and meaning and shows that in this case, ritual objects or material things, not just notional ideas, were instrumental in shaping the intertwined destinies of the *Writ* and institutional Daoism.