

Daoist Modes of Perception: “Registering” the Living Manifestations of Sire Thunder, and Why Zhuang Zi is Relevant

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Abstract

The present article investigates different representations of Sire Thunder (雷公 Lei Gong), classifying them according to the particular modes of viewing—“registering”—they exemplify. My analysis involves Tang dynasty (“literary”) stories, hagiographic materials, Daoist ritual manuals from the Ming, and some visual representations of modern provenance. Taken together, they will allow me to bring to light a theory about a repertoire of differentiation that I would like to characterize as Daoist “modes of perception.” I argue that different perspectives for viewing Sire Thunder (as an outlandish demon, as a registered god, and as a cosmic entity that inheres throughout the bodily micro-cosmos) express a hierarchical understanding of his ritual transformation from an individual and lowly spirit to a force that can be ritually called forth from the cosmic “realities” latent with the human body. Much of my analysis is developed in dialogue

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with the Phenomenology of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus—but this dialogue is unthinkable without the theories articulated in the classical writings of Zhuang Zi.

Keywords: Sire Thunder, Zhuang Zi, Perception, representation, subject-object distinction, mindful body

I. The Lives of Sire Thunder: Different Perceptions, Different Stories¹

Stories tell us how the abject creature that repeatedly dropped down from the sky onto the muddy surface of the earth during the Tang dynasty (618–907), was recognized by local observers as Sire Thunder (雷公 *Lei Gong*).² For no apparent reason this archaic deity that had led a relatively autonomous and awe-inspiring life until the Tang, suddenly found himself robbed of his clothes, with his naked limbs prone to attacks by mortal weapons and helplessly available for graphic representation in the form of paintings, statues, and talismanic diagrams. What had happened to this paragon of heavenly might, the bailiff of the Celestial Court?³ Once aloof, now tattered, taunted and terrified. Why had this mythical power come to look like an “ordinary god”⁴—one that could be

¹ This paper owes a great debt to various readers. First, I would like to thank the participants of the Conference “Vies taoïstes—Daoist Lives,” organized in honor of Kristofer Schipper’s 80th birthday, in Aussois, France (September 10–12, 2015). The comments Stephen Bokenkamp, Paul Katz, and John Lagerwey offered after the presentation gave my paper a different direction. Secondly, I must thank Vincent Goossaert and Franciscus Verellen, who not only organized the conference, but moreover spent considerable time and effort in their critique of the first written draft. The same is true for my friend David Mozina, whose feedback is always indispensable. Further help came from Tobias Zürn and the two anonymous reviewers—all offered substantial suggestions.

² I translate *gong* 公 with “Sire” instead of the more commonly used “Duke” for several reasons. Firstly, there was nothing aristocratic about Sire Thunder at all—neither before nor during or after the Tang. Secondly, as is still evident from colloquial Chinese, the word *gong* often denotes a more familiar status, such as “grandpa” 阿公 or in the case of the local Earthgod 土地公, “Father,” or “Sire.” In short, the word *gong* should not be exclusively understood as a noble rank. Elsewhere, I will apply the same principle to “Uncle Wind” 風伯.

³ Several early stories about the phenomenon of Thunder depict him as a musclemán who acts as proxy for Heaven in order to punish unruly dragons. See, for example, the extensive treatment of Thunder lore provided by Wang Chong in his *Lunheng* 論衡. He observes that “Commoners think that when [thunder] shatters a tree, or destroys a house, it is Heaven arresting a dragon; and if thunder kills a man, then it is because he had a hidden crime” 世俗以為擊折樹木，壞敗室屋者，天取龍。其犯殺人也，謂之有陰過。Wang Chong 王充 (27–97?), *Lunheng* 論衡 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1996), 294.

⁴ I use the term “ordinary god” as a pun on *sushen* 俗神, a term that is usually translated as “profane god” and which refers to the un-canonical and demonic
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jostled and scolded? Was this the same Thunder God who later became invested with lofty epithets, promoted as one of the highest gods in martial Daoist pantheons, by the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) even ubiquitously seen as a cosmic reality inherent in the human body?

The present article investigates different representations of Sire Thunder, classifying them according to the particular modes of viewing they exemplify. I argue that different perspectives for viewing Sire Thunder (as an outlandish demon, as a registered god, and as a cosmic entity that inheres throughout the bodily micro-cosmos and the worldly macro-cosmos) express a hierarchical understanding of his ritual transformation from an individual and lowly spirit to a force that can be ritually called forth from the cosmic “realities” latent with the human body. This transformation is probably applicable to many other gods who became incorporated into the Daoist liturgical structure between the medieval and late imperial period, but it is not my intention here to investigate this historical process per se. Instead, I am interested in mapping out and analyzing the worldview that enabled these transformations, revealing how the theoretical underpinnings used by Daoists are informed by the classical writings of Zhuang Zi 莊子.

II. Daoist Modes of Perception and Their Underlying Theory

My analysis of Sire Thunder’s differing representations involves Tang dynasty stories, hagiographic materials, Daoist ritual manuals from the Ming, and some visual representations of modern provenance. Taken together, they bring to light a theory about a repertoire of differentiation that I would like to characterize as Daoist “modes of perception.” Much of my analysis is developed in

(Note 4—*Continued*)

gods of the common people. See Rolf Stein, “Religious Taoism and Popular Religion from the Second to Seventh Centuries,” 53–81. Anna Seidel and Holmes Welch (eds.), *Facets of Taoism* (Yale: New Haven, 1979).

dialogue with the Phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, and some of his later spokesmen, especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hubert Dreyfus—but this dialogue is unthinkable without the theories articulated in the classical writings of Zhuang Zi.

Three modes of perceiving Sire Thunder characterize the different relationships one may have towards this god (or, perhaps, any god in traditional China). The first of these views is the most distant, and the most similar to our idea of “objective” perception—that is, to view a thing as if it were a completely external and autonomous object *in itself*. This mode of perception belongs to the realm of initial encounters with extraordinary phenomena such as Sire Thunder, and the ensuing descriptive observations of his outer appearances. It is akin to the “fields of initial differentiation” where the “formation of objects” takes place, as described by Michel Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*.⁵ It is this initial differentiation that allows Sire Thunder to be “registered” in graphic form: in the second mode of perception either depicted in recognizable shapes on a painting or as a statue, or later, more abstractly, in the schematic form of talismanic graphs. It is this perception that is profusely narrated in stories of the strange, with its uncanny manifestations, startling revelations, and bouts of spirit-possession.⁶

The second mode of perception emerges within the ensuing field of registered, divine shapes. It is a mode of perceiving that, though forming an obvious continuum with the first mode, has departed from the initial moment of encounter and has become acquainted with registered shapes as individual powers that can be

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1991 [1969]). On p. 41, he describes the circumstances of this initial stage: “First we must map the first *surfaces* of their *emergence*: show where these individual differences, which, according to the degrees of rationalization, conceptual codes, and types of theory, will be accorded the status of disease, alienation, anomaly [etc.], may emerge, and then be designated and analysed.”

⁶ Robert Campany’s notion of “cosmography” fits well here. *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: SUNY, 1996), 12: “The goal of collecting is the domestication of that which is dangerously wild, the fixing of anomaly in a stable format, a determinative taxonomic place.”

subjected to a relationship, sometimes controlled within that relationship, and even applied outside of the context of encounter. Though only possible in light of the initially encountered “objectivity” and its registered appearance, the emphasis is no longer on the act of registration but on the practice of reconstituting the presences already available in graphic form: images of individual gods that are at the receiving end of sacrificial gifts and ritual commands alike, of hagiographical writing and official canonization. This continuum runs from the village god to the celestial warrior, differentiated largely by the degree to which their power is delimited within ritual hierarchies. At the Daoist end of this continuum, gods can be commanded to follow their graphic “re”-presentation and thereby present themselves, simultaneously restrained by ritual structures as well as enabled due to the greater scope of higher pantheons and increased regional spread of the ritualists who command them. The pinnacle of this second mode can be perceived from the outside as a ritual spectacle: the priest’s act of recreating a divine force as an individual presence within a social setting. As studied in great detail by David Mozina, this is often achieved by summoning down the god.⁷

Insofar as Chinese gods belong to the same world as human beings, both the first and the second mode are tied to the realm of worldly perception. Their difference is hierarchical, not categorical. That is to say, the first mode may be found among laymen who encounter powerful spirits in dreams or in a temple and *subject themselves* to the frightful powers associated with these usually alien entities. The second mode may apply to the same gods, but it allows for these gods to be viewed as *powers to be subjected to ritual discourses*—as spiritual presences that can be pacified through

⁷ In David Mozina’s work, the reconstitution of a divine force (in his case, Thunder Marshal Yin), is articulated as a summoning down of a god. See his “Quelling the Divine: The Performance of a Talisman in Contemporary Daoist Thunder Ritual,” PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2009. Also see his “Summoning the Exorcist: The Role of Heart Seals (*xinyin* 心印) in Calling Down a Demon-Quelling Deity in Contemporary Daoist Thunder Ritual.” In Florian C. Reiter (ed.), *Exorcism in Daoism*, 231–56 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011).

sacrificial ritual, or even as gods that can be placed in the hierarchy of sacred powers below ritualists who are trained to perceive them as objects of ritual manipulation.

The third and final mode of perception is categorically different: it breaks through both the autonomous objectivity of the first mode, and the subjected individuality of divine shapes in the second mode. Thus tearing down the subject/object distinction, it articulates the fact of an umbilical connection between perceiver and perceived, construing the reconstitution of divine forces as a regeneration of presences always already latent within oneself. This mode of perception “realizes” the Daoist notion of the equivalence of worldly creatures, of existence as a form of being that shares a cosmic connection between all things. It sets up the Daoist adept as a micro-version of the cosmos, within which the relationship of worldly things with bodily things is not broken. In this mode, “physical” things respond to “non-physical” phenomena, such as time, space, spirit, and so on, because they are inherently connected by virtue of their shared origin in the same cosmos.

These modes of perception seem to parallel three Daoist modes of “registering” (錄 *lu*) in a more general process of bringing local oddities in tune with the Great Dao. The first points to the moment of establishing a spiritual presence as one that is an autonomous power. It is open to subjugation within a ritual framework, as seen in the second mode, and subsequently available for empirically observable ritual exploits within a community. The third is not separated from the previous two, but it represents an additional perspective that transcends the first two even though they can occur side by side: if a layperson may only witness the identity of a divine force *as an autonomous presence*, and if a wide variety of ritual practitioners (Daoist or other) may view that same *god as an object of ritual manipulation*, only the Daoist ritual practitioner is able to understand its ritual appearance *as the externalization of a universal, inner presence*. This sort of inner presence, indeed, is pervasively codified within Daoist lineages as the “register” (錄 *lu*) of spiritual forces conferred upon acolytes during their ordination.

My focus lies on this third mode of perception, because it diverges most sharply from the everyday mode of perception that

keeps us comfortably nested in a web of conventional reality. Its divergence, therefore, is exactly what makes it the most “Daoist” of all three these modes.

The third mode of perception tallies in various ways with the theory of perception that has been developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the basis of Martin Heidegger’s Phenomenology. This phenomenology, in a nutshell, opposes the intellectualist reduction of perception to a mere mental process. Rather than understanding the process of perceiving the world in terms of cognition or rational analysis, the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty situates perception against the background of the human body. From the vantage point of that body, we recognize the world on bodily terms. Concepts like “being,” “space,” “movement,” and so on, can only be understood because we are bodily “beings,” because we occupy bodily “space,” because our bodies “move,” and due to the time-cycles of our body (menstruation, fetal development, metabolism, aging).⁸ These fundamental concepts, intrinsically meaningful for human beings, are thus not to be understood as if they were produced by the thinking mind, but rather in their sense of existing as a shared domain between the human body and its world—it is the body that “knows” these concepts. Literally, in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, meaning thus resides not only in our mind, but also in the physical world occupied by the body.⁹

To liberate meaning from the exclusive property of the mind, and to bring it back into the domain it shares with the bodily (physical) world, is important because it allows us to undo the Cartesian divorce of mind from matter, upon which the claim of objectivity can be based.¹⁰ One of Heidegger’s main interpreters,

⁸ See the chapter on “The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motility” in Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1962 [1945]).

⁹ The issue of meanings residing in the things of the world is also taken up by Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 33–34.

¹⁰ See for example Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008 [1962]), 41–63. For recent attempts to bring back “mind” as an inherent possibility in matter, see: Gregory Bateson, *Steps* (Continue on next page)

Hubert Dreyfus, has summarized this succinctly: “The detached, . . . knowing subject . . . must be replaced by an embodied, . . . doing subject.”¹¹ Knowledge is not merely isolated in the brain, knowing is also an active process of the living body as a being in the world.

This point, centrally treated by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, is developed further by Merleau-Ponty. In his discussion of body movement, Merleau-Ponty says that “it is the body which ‘catches’ and ‘comprehends’ movement. The acquisition of a habit is indeed the grasping of a significance, but it is the motor grasping of a motor significance.”¹² His thinking here is directly based upon Martin Heidegger’s discussion of the optimal way to grasp the being of things (and thus: their meaning). Heidegger famously uses the example of the hammer: if we visually inspect the hammer and then logically analyze it, we may indeed know that it is a hammer and what it is meant to do. Yet it is only when we start to hammer nails into wood that we truly grasp the full potential of the hammer.¹³ Specifically, it is our body that “knows” the properties of the hammer, can adjust to its weight and length while using it, and generally “understands” how to use it. Most importantly, the reason why the carpenter’s optimal knowledge of the hammer exceeds by far the philosopher’s ideas about it, is because the carpenter has cultivated bodily habits that allow him to access the hammer directly instead of cognitive processes of mental differentiation that can only analyze the hammer from an “objective” distance. To some extent, if the carpenter would have to continually use his brain to think about how to use the hammer, his mental operations would complicate smooth hammering.

(Note 10—Continued)

Toward and Ecology of Mind. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1972, and also his *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Bantam, 1979); Stuart Kauffman, “Beyond Reductionism: Reinventing the Sacred,” *Zygon* 42.4 (2007), 903–14; Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-Time: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (Boston: MIT Press, 1991), 47.

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 165.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 98.

Thus we supersede the first mode of perception, the stage of differentiating autonomous objects, and also the second mode, of objects that are controlled by human manipulation. We enter into the third mode: the holistic view that sees continuity and relatedness between phenomena rather than rupture and distance. Here we can start to extend this strand of thinking to archaic Daoist theories that deal pointedly with breaking down the boundaries between subject/object. Similar (though emphatically not identical) to Heideggerian Phenomenology, it constructs a view of the world that goes beyond the everyday conventions of individuality and objectivity, one that places less emphasis on the intellect and more on the lived experience of being.

The theories I am referring to are first formulated in ancient China by Zhuang Zi, and they loom large in the much later ritual manuals from the Ming dynasty that I analyze to show a fully articulated Daoist mode of perceiving Sire Thunder. In a general sense, as has been argued by Robert Eno, Zhuang Zi's stories show constant awareness of the problem of intellect as opposed to the experience of the lived act.¹⁴ In Eno's words, Zhuang Zi treats "the dichotomy of practice and speech, and claims that whereas practice can yield authentic knowledge, speech cannot."¹⁵ The specific importance of Zhuang Zi's ideas for understanding Daoist ritual has already been explained in relation to the practice of body-transformation (變身 / 變神 *bianshen*; 化身 / 化神 *huashen*).¹⁶

One of Zhuang Zi's theories, also used in Ming dynasty texts as theoretical underpinning for the ritual drawing of a talismanic representation of a Thunder God (which, in a sense, similarly is a method of body-transformation), to be discussed in the last section of this paper, is not at all formulated as a theory. It is merely a story—a story about a butterfly. Indeed, the very fact of this

¹⁴ Robert Eno, "Cook Ding's Dao and the Limits of Philosophy." In Kjellberg and Ivanhoe (eds.), *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi* (Albany: SUNY, 1996), 127–51.

¹⁵ Eno, "Cook Ding's Dao," 132.

¹⁶ See Meulenbeld, "From 'Withered Wood' to 'Dead Ashes': Burning Bodies, Metamorphosis, and the Ritual Production of Power," *Cahiers d'Extrême Asie* 19 (2012), 217–66.

theory's formulation in anecdotal manner as opposed to theoretical manner is entirely consistent with the attempt to relate to entities (and their realities) by means of a less mathematically logical and rather more intuitive way.

Once I, Zhuang Zi, dreamt that I was a butterfly, a butterfly fluttering about happily, so utterly fulfilling its purpose! It was innocent of knowledge about Zhuang Zi. Yet, suddenly I awoke and started to realize that I still was Zhuang Zi. Now I don't know whether it has been me dreaming that I was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that it was me. Yet there must be a difference—we will call this the "Transformation of Things."¹⁷

昔者莊周夢為胡蝶，栩栩然胡蝶也，自喻適志與！不知周也。俄然覺，則蘧蘧然周也。不知周之夢為胡蝶與，胡蝶之夢為周與？周與胡蝶，則必有分矣。此之謂「物化」。

Several layers of meaning are relevant here.¹⁸ We are made witness to the human capacity to viscerally relate to other realities that we cannot directly access—neither physically nor through reasoning. Assuming that the starting point of the reader is the conventional human reality of differentiation and distinction, the story first plays along by contrasting these two realities: Zhuang Zi's deeply ingrained human tendency to question and analyze only leaving him to have his question unanswered, juxtaposed to the butterfly's happy self-contentment. Implied is the reason for the butterfly's joy: its sense of being in tune with its own nature. Being a butterfly, its nature is pervaded by an emptiness of language; it does not ask questions, it is entirely absorbed in its doing (fluttering) and its being.

Another implication is that of identity, and by extension, individuality. Not only is the butterfly innocent of knowledge about Zhuang Zi (whose dream has produced it as a distinct entity), it is

¹⁷ *Zhuang Zi, Qiwulun* 齊物論 (ch. 2). Wang Shumin 王叔岷, ed., *Zhuang Zi jiaquan* 莊子校詮 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan), 1988.

¹⁸ I am ignoring more mainstream interpretations, for example those that emphasize the butterfly-dream to reflect back on the illusory quality of life.

so taken up by the act of flying around that it does not inquire after its own identity. Indeed, this is what Zhuang Zi experiences in his dream: the butterfly's liberation from Zhuang Zi's own identity, and the subsequent irrelevance of his human concerns, purpose, and existential uncertainty. When the dream ends and human reality has returned, Zhuang Zi's individual self is what resurfaces immediately upon awakening: he self-consciously wonders who he is, and how he is different from the butterfly—both vexing, existential questions. His awakening makes him “aware” again, in the negative sense of “analytical” and “preoccupied” as used by Lao Zi, who also contrasts the “clarity” (昭昭 *zhaozhao*) and “alertness” (察察 *chacha*) of conventional selves with their worldly preoccupations against the “dim-witted” (愚 *yu*) transcendental ego of the accomplished Daoist.¹⁹

It is in the above senses that the butterfly embodies a challenge of human subjectivity, and thereby reveals a split between the “logos-driven” human individuality and the “being-driven” fullness of experience that can exist only for as long as differential tools like language have not shattered it. Other stories in Zhuang Zi elaborate on this theme as well, such as that of the minnows under the bridge where Zhuang Zi strolls with his friend Hui Shi 惠施.²⁰ Whereas Zhuang Zi intuits the “joy of the fishes” as they are silently strolling on the bridge (an emblem of crossing gaps) over the River Hao 濠, he inadvertently destroys their intuitive connection by verbalizing it, drawing a dialectic response from Hui Shi, whose logical analysis prevents him from perceiving the same joy. At the end Zhuang Zi literally “goes back to the beginning” (循其本 *xun qi ben*, lit. “return to the root [of this conundrum],” before words had been uttered) in an attempt to reveal his natural affinity with the fishes. Wordless, both the butterfly and the fish serve as evidence that humans contain within themselves true knowledge of being an entirely different entity—insect or aquatic animal, or any

¹⁹ Lao Zi (ch. 20). Wang Ka 王卡 (ed.), *Lao Zi Daode jing Heshang Gong zhangju* 老子道德經河上公章句 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988).

²⁰ Zhuang Zi, *Qiushui* 秋水 (ch. 17).

other thing.²¹ Perhaps, in a way, this is to be called “visceral knowledge.”²² Similar to Merleau-Ponty’s ideas about a bodily perception of the world, Zhuang Zi can only explain his “knowing” by referring to the shared physical space by which he is related to the minnows: he knows the joy of the fishes by “standing above the River Hao” 我知之濠上也。

Zhuang Zi’s intuitive understanding of the butterfly and the minnows points to another aspect of being that is relevant here. It is not just a matter of humans having the inherently visceral capacity to know what an inaccessible reality such as that of the butterfly may be like, it is the suggestion that humans and butterflies share common ground: a “real” cosmic connection. Emphatically, in Zhuang Zi’s story this reality is not limited to mental imagining alone; as he says, “we will call this the Transformation of Things.” Zhuang Zi talks about *things*, not *minds*, and presents “transformation” (化 *hua*) as the relational concept. The transformation he sets up as the connection between man and butterfly is one where the human vantage point relates to that of the butterfly by joining the physical spontaneity (natural fluttering) with spiritual fullness of being absorbed in a natural activity. The happiness of the butterfly is thus also rooted in its bodily activity. Zhuang Zi’s way of referring to this connection, “transformation,” suggests that mind and matter are inherently united.

Zhuang Zi articulates this mode of spiritually connecting to differentiated objects by means of an intrinsic commonality in another story. Indeed it is the very point of the story about the divinely gifted artisan who explains his procedure for making a bellstand. After a period that entails different stages of fasting, the

²¹ Similarly, the cook who butchers an ox has transcended the conventional vision of dissecting (analysis) and instead follows the natural spaces that allow him to go with the cosmic flow. In doing so, he does not “hack” at individual obstacles but “follows” the universal structure that applies to all things of this cosmos—he has found the unwritten script that governs natural processes.

²² I mean the term visceral here not in the colloquial sense of “emotional,” but more as it points to the inner workings of the human body, including—but not limited to—the organs (viscera).

artisan explains, he sets out to find suitable wood.

Next I go into a mountain forest. I look for [the wood's] natural character. If I see one that is perfectly shaped, then I complete a vision of a bellstand, and only then do I lay my hands upon it. If not then it's over. Thus I connect with [my] nature to [the tree's] nature. The reason that some think this [bellstand] is the work of gods, could it be in that?²³

然後入山林。觀天性。形軀至矣，然後成見錄。然後加手焉；不然則已。則以天合天。器之所以疑神者，其是與？

Thus, the artisan recognizes the nature of the tree because of his own nature. Here, the human being does not experience the authentic being of the tree, but he connects with the tree on the level of their shared natural “being.” This is not a spiritual connection in the modern sense of the term, as with people hugging trees, but a primordial connection that exists between things on a concretely physical level—even though, as “objective” realities in the modern sense, they are separated. Note that in all these cases, the connection is also not a solid or static one, but one of an ephemeral *process* (a dream-vision of an active butterfly, a strolling observation of swimming fishes, a visualization during a foray into the woods, and so on). It's in the process, in the doing, and not in the logic or the theory, that this knowledge becomes manifest.

If the semantics of process seem to presage the relevance of ritual, this story does indeed relate deeply to Daoist ritual practice. Before the carpenter goes into the forest to find timber for his craft, he engages in preparatory acts that are identical to Daoist priests before ritual: first he does a multi-day ritual purification (齋 *zhai*) that starts with calming of the mind (靜心 *jìngxin*) and ends in a forgetting of the social-biological husk: “I forget having a four-limbed body” 忘吾有四肢形體.²⁴ And after the carpenter has thus

²³ Zhuang Zi, *Dasheng* 達生 (ch. 19): 梓慶削木為鐻. Wang Shumin 王叔岷, ed. *Zhuang Zi jiaquan* 莊子校詮 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan 中央研究院, 1988).

²⁴ See Kristofer Schipper's discussion of Daoist ritual procedures that aim to transcend the limitations of the human body (chapter 5 on Daoist ritual).
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transcended his conventional persona of human being, he is finally able to “complete a vision of a bellstand” (成見鑿 *chengjian ju*). This vision, driven home by his connection to the trees on a primordial level of cosmic nature, is a purely “transcendental vision.” Only by letting go of regular vision and transcending awareness of his human form can the artisan subsequently attain recognition of (or rather: synthesis with) the “true” being of things.²⁵ All this refers to a ritual phenomenon: the preparatory acts are explicitly ritual, and the visions—practiced as visualization—are a key component of Daoist ritual.

It is necessary to dwell on the issue of visualization, because it meaningfully conflicts with the Cartesian understanding of the mental realm (which would include visualization) as one that supposedly only contains ideas in the Platonic sense—intangible abstractions of “real” things, and nothing material. The presupposition that Cartesian convention dictates is quite simple: mind is separated from matter. Aside from some obvious problems with this notion that have been raised in great detail by phenomenologists in the tradition of Martin Heidegger, the mental process of the Daoist priest’s visualization contradicts the Cartesian view in that Daoist visualization produces actual entities that consist of *qi*, “energy matter,” or “cosmic breath.”²⁶ In the traditional Chinese worldview, even ideas are of a certain materiality.²⁷

(Note 24—*Continued*)

Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

²⁵ Of course there are many other stories that point to similar ideas, such as the story of Hui Zi’s gourds (where human being and gourd are encouraged to connect in a way that first makes them equals and second subjects both to the natural flow of rivers and lakes; *Zhuang Zi*, 2, *Qiwulun*) or the story of the masters who join in harmonious laughter once they are connecting on a level that transcends their individual selves (instead recognizing their cosmic equivalence; *Zhuang Zi*, 6, *Dazongshi*).

²⁶ The translation of *qi* remains an intractable problem. *Qi* is most certainly more than energy alone, but it does not quite correspond to the scientific notion of atoms. *Qi* animates the universe like *atman* or *brahman*, but it is not something like an all-pervading universal soul.

²⁷ Note that the Classical Chinese idiom for “idea” does not include any terminology that is exclusively “mental” in the Platonic sense.

Finally, Zhuang Zi also provides a rationale for the relatedness of things. Not surprisingly, his theory is based upon the Dao as ultimate reality. In his words, “that by which things are things is not itself a thing” 物物者非物.²⁸ Indeed, the Dao is not a thing, it is the dynamic process that structures all being. And just as the carpenter wonders whether the primordial connection shared between human being and tree leads to the divine craft of a perfect bellstand, the dynamic that informs this process—the Dao—is sacred.

Ultimate centrality of the sacred Dao is also what makes it necessary to point out a detrimental difference between Heideggerian Phenomenology and Daoism. For Heidegger the ultimate question is about naked, human Being, a form of being he defines as “that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which entities are already understood, [. . .]. The Being of entities “is’ not itself an entity.”²⁹ That is, being is ultimately a phenomenon structured by its own way of being, not by any sacred structure. Heidegger’s unacknowledged debt to Daoism, though known for a long time,³⁰ is nowhere more clear than in this close paraphrasing of Zhuang Zi’s dictum about the Dao as the non-thing that structures things. For Heidegger, however, the basis on which entities become entities is the human being itself—a much more secular viewpoint than Zhuang Zi’s sacred Dao (a concept repeatedly described reverently as “miraculous” [妙 *miao*] or “ultimate” [至 *zhi*]). It’s hard to avoid the conclusion that Heidegger not only tried to obscure his debt to Daoism by leaving this inspiration unmentioned, but that he moreover distorted Zhuang Zi’s viewpoints by desacralizing them. In that sense, Heidegger’s challenge of the Cartesian legacy of subjectivism and objectivism is a failure; for Heidegger no principle is more decisive than the human being, neither Zhuang Zi’s natural world (of butterflies, minnows, and trees), nor the ungraspable greatness of the cosmos—so deeply revered by Zhuang Zi—in which humans

²⁸ Zhuang Zi 22 (*Zhibeiyou*); similarly phrased in ZZ 11 (*Zaiyou*) as 物物者之非物.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 25–26.

³⁰ Reinhard May, *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on his Work*, trans. Graham Parkes (London and New York: Routledge, 1996 [1989]).

are on an equal footing with butterflies. Though not focused on intellect as the ultimate faculty of knowledge, Heidegger remains wedded to the secular ideology of the same Enlightenment thinkers he attempted to debunk. Ultimately, in this thinking, nothing is sacred.

Merleau-Ponty differs slightly from both, in that his discussion about “natural intuition” and the possibility for “‘things’ to be constituted” within “the phenomenal field”³¹ is a vaguely indicated “crypto-mechanism.”³² In a sense, at least, he appears to allow for some mystical element that we cannot quite rationalize.

The modes of perception laid out above can be used as indices for determining the relationship that observers have with the phenomena they describe. These modes may indicate something about the observer’s position within a ritual (“religious”) spectrum of hierarchical relationships: the first mode is available for everyone, layperson or religious professional; the second mode is accessible to religious professionals with a certain ritual training, including but not limited to Daoists; the third mode is overwhelmingly Daoist.

Similarly, these modes also indicate something about the observed phenomenon. In its objective state, a spiritual entity could be anything, ranging from a frightening demon to a more familiar god, occurring autonomously and without overt ties to any hierarchy. The second mode, where the presence of a god depends on a ritualist’s skill to render him present, can only be applied to gods already associated with temples, or otherwise ranked within the divine bureaucracy. Note that Daoists can apply this view as well, for example in the painted pantheons whose scrolls are hung throughout the ritual space they consecrate. The third mode, where subject-object distinctions are obliterated, is not empirically observable in the gods that a Daoist reconstitutes by primordial connection; it is entirely the Daoist’s view of a god.

³¹ The term is meant to denote the condition of possibility for experiencing phenomena—such as Thunder. See his *Phenomenology of Perception*, 60–74.

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 67.

Again, the third mode marks the closest proximity to the Dao. In this paper I will show how Sire Thunder's fall and ascension are indicative of the Daoist ritual methodology in its drive to incorporate stagnant spiritual powers into the flow of the Dao, sometimes catapulting them into the highest reaches of the sacred hierarchy. The many stories about Sire Thunder's fall, from the mighty heights of the celestial dome into the eager and intrusive fascination of the lowly world's captivating discourse, represents the beginning of his transformation into the purview of Daoism. The differences in appearance are striking. While the earliest references around the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) tend to imagine Thunder either as a dragon or as a muscleman called "Sire Thunder," later sources visualize him in a variety of manifestations, most famously as an ugly bird-man hybrid, a pig with a pointy snout, or a monkey with an eminently protruding mandible. All these "objective" entities can be registered with recognizable shapes, in paintings or in talismans. From that field of perception later emerges a different Sire Thunder, one who is endowed with high titles such as "Marshal" (*yuanshuai*) or even "Celestial Lord" (*tianjun*). At that point, when he has become the celestial commander in chief who holds sway over the forces of Thunder, we also find that he can be reconstituted through a primordial, cosmic connection.

In the first mode, manifestations of thunder can be perceived very differently across the cultures of different localities. Indeed, although narratives from the Tang that record encounters with Sire Thunder may all be based upon a common natural phenomenon (thunder), his mongrel appearances attest to the wildly differing repertoires of perception that underlie these descriptions. The one force of Thunderclap is embodied with manifold bodies that are all alien, strange, frightening, or ugly.

What the narrative records from the Tang dynasty capture is the moment of rising into a more unified ritual consciousness of precisely that great range of local variations on the theme of Thunder. Whereas each locality knows its own procedures for subjugating (its own) Thunder, each with its unique shapes, all determined by acquaintance with a distinct "phenomenal field" within which the perception of thunder takes place, the Tang

records concretely mark Sire Thunder's transformation from local oddity into supra-regional agent of a Daoist ritual vision. Crucially, this transformation is closely linked to his subjugation within ritual procedures for summoning Thunder by means of formal registration. Quite literally so, as many Tang tales recount encounters with Sire Thunder that lead to the process of having him depicted, iconized, or otherwise "formalized" in talismanic shapes. The history of this subjugation can be traced back to the interplay between local epiphanies of Thunder, on the one hand, and ritual systems that developed in conjunction with Daoist practitioners, on the other. Graphic registration—especially talismanic—attests precisely to this process.

Finally, as a side effect of my concern with representation, this paper takes seriously the phenomenon of scripted depiction as a viable way of generating great power. Rather than understanding the depiction of Sire Thunder as an act of symbolically representing power, I view it as its direct production (or perhaps we should refer to it as its mode of gaining access, or its reconstitution, or recreation). Again I would like to distinguish this mode of producing power from the "objective" view. Even in a groundbreaking work on notions of representation such as that by David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, this view persists. Despite the message conveyed by the book's title, namely that images may hold power, the basic idea remains that such power is actually produced by the mind of the beholder.³³ That is, Freedberg subscribes to the exact view that the Phenomenologists wanted to debunk, namely the idea that the mind only *responds* to external stimuli by means of a cognitive process. Daoist modes of perception go far beyond such a stimulus-response model.

III. Registration of Sire Thunder's Powerful Body

The Tang dynasty exploration of the forms and features of Sire Thunder finds a divine body that is alien. Formulated as a process of probing, stories record an attempt to understand the meaning of

³³ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Thunder as a phenomenon that manifests itself autonomously. As this can only be a tentative process, the unity that emerges from the stories is still pervaded by smaller or greater differences. Most of all, it is the haphazard appearance of Thunder that bespeaks its undomesticated nature. But, control over Thunder is inexorably gestured at towards the conclusion of these narratives: his presence is registered.

Franciscus Verellen has termed such stories “encounter narratives,” a term that defines accurately what they describe, namely human encounters with extraordinary spiritual beings.³⁴ Many such stories have recorded the strange shapes of Thunder. Verellen emphasizes the fact that such stories were part of a drive to find extraordinary beings, such as women or men who had successfully reached transcendence.³⁵ While narratives about Thunder do not necessarily reveal the encounter as a result of a quest, we may nonetheless assume that the act of recording and collecting these stories was motivated by a drive to become acquainted with the extraordinary.

The following narrative in *Extensive Records from the Great Calm* (太平廣記 *Taiping Guangji*), entitled “Xu Chan” 徐訥, presents the details of what will become recognizable as the basic features of Sire Thunder. It contains a great number of important bodily characteristics that recur in other texts: his “demonical” appearance, his pointed beak-like snout, flesh wings, and metallic claws. Though included in *Extensive Records*, the story originally belongs to the *Records of Registered Marvels* (錄異記 *Luyiji*).³⁶ Significant in the context of Thunder’s cooptation within Daoist ritual, this collection of marvels is the work of the famous court-Daoist Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933).³⁷ Therefore we should take

³⁴ Verellen, “Encounter as revelation: a Taoist hagiographic theme in medieval China,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient* 85 (1998), 363–84.

³⁵ Verellen, “Encounter as revelation,” 367 ff.

³⁶ DZ 591 *Luyiji* 錄異記. The extant collection, however, does not contain the story of Xu Chan.

³⁷ Franciscus Verellen, *Du Guangting (850–933): Taoïste de cour a la fin de la Chine médiévale* (Paris: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1989), 171. More recently the same author has delved deeper into the same topic: Franciscus
(Continue on next page)

seriously the generic label of these narratives as *ji* 記—a form of “record” that was connoted with ritual significance.³⁸ As such, the narrative description becomes less about the art of merely narrating the spectacle of strangeness, but rather about the importance of recording it accurately for ritual purposes; it becomes a first step towards a Daoist “registration.”

In Yanling County in Runzhou, bordering on Maoshan, during the Yuanhe period of the Tang [806–820], there was once a great occurrence of wind and rain. A demon dropped down, more than two *zhang* long, black and with a hog-like face, horns of five to six *chi* long, and flesh wings of over one *zhang*. It had a leopard tail. Moreover, it wore a red apron that covered only half of its body, and a leopard skin wound around its waist. Its hands and feet had two claws that were of a metallic [golden] color, and it held a red snake on which it trampled with its feet. Fixating its eyes it was about to eat the snake and its voice sounded like thunder. There was a farmer named Xu Chan who happened to see this, and he ran away in fright, reporting it to the official of the district. Subsequently the local magistrate went there in person to have a look. Thereupon he ordered to make a drawing. Soon afterwards there was again thunder and rain. It clapped its wings and disappeared.³⁹

唐潤州延陵縣茅山界。元和春。大風雨。墮一鬼。身二丈餘。黑色。面如豬首。角五六尺。肉翅丈餘。豹尾。又有半服絳禪。豹皮纏腰。手足兩爪皆金色。執赤。足踏之。瞪目欲食。其聲如雷。田人徐。忽見驚走。聞縣。尋邑令親往覩焉。因令圖寫。尋復雷雨。翼之而去。

(Note 37—Continued)

Verellen, “Shu as a hallowed land: Du Guangting’s Record of Marvels,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 10 (1998), 213–54.

³⁸ See my discussion on these generic labels, quoting Martin Kern and Robert Campamy, in *Demonic Warfare*, 62.

³⁹ Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 393.3144. This story was classified in the first of three sections on thunder in *Extensive Records*, although it does not explicitly identify this creature as Sire Thunder. Its relation to thunder and rain are nonetheless more than just coincidental, as is the demon’s special interest in vipers. Indeed, one later source identifies this creature with hindsight as a “thunder god” 雷神 (Qian Xiyan 錢希言, *Kuaiyuan* 獮園. 1613 preface; 1774 edition. In *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* (v. 1267). Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1995). Two more stories in *Taiping guangji* relate thunder’s exploits in the region of Maoshan (395.3159–60: “Li Cheng” 李誠 and 395.3160 “Maoshanniu” 茅山牛).

This record of a double encounter with Thunder, first by a lowly farmer, then by the authorities (and then, of course, by the reader), heavily emphasizes the availability of this creature for graphic representation: Thunder is described first alongside the presence of the farmer, upon whom is thrown the unexpected observation (見 *jian*) of the demonic manifestation, but then actively seeks to convey its existence to the authorities.⁴⁰ Next, the magistrate personally goes there to have a look (覩 *du*) at Thunder, upon which the creature's features are officially recorded (圖寫 *tuxie*, literally made into a “graphic drawing”) and henceforth can be recognized by those who have never seen him manifest his forms. What drives this story are various moments of seeing a phenomenon and registering it.



Late Qing painting of a Thunder God largely similar to the Tang narratives. Photo by author and Patrice Fava.

⁴⁰ It is interesting, and somewhat odd, that the story includes the name of the farmer. It is not unthinkable that the local cult to this local manifestation of Thunder was somehow associated to a figure called Xu Chan.

Upon close consideration, the record presents its own predetermined lens through which to view the manifestation—one that is not so much determined by its exclusively Tang dynasty official stamp as it is defined by markers of a broader and more structural kind, namely Thunder's attire. The red apron that covered only half of its body and the leopard skin around his waist both associate this demon with territorial religion, especially the spirit-mediums who would dress up in this way during their trance-possession. It is no wonder that this manifestation would be encountered first by a (likely illiterate) farmer, because this situates the practices for manifesting Thunder in a realm associated with oral and performative embodiment by village spirit-mediums. Note that, consistent with the first mode of perception as one that sets up the encountered object as autonomous, spirit-mediums are *subjected to* the gods who possess them.

From that perspective, the second encounter with Thunder (by the authorities), allowed the supra-regional institution of local administrators to draw Thunder into their discourse. Although this appearance was so fraught with foreignness, authorities still recognized him as Thunder. Their response went beyond mere recognition: they observed and fixated him by having him put into iconic form. To some degree the construction of the story itself brought to realization what the local authorities would surely want (a textual mastery over the seemingly uncontrollable), and it seems in accord with what Robert Campany has defined as the goal behind collecting anomalies as “the domestication of that which is dangerously wild, the fixing of anomaly in a stable format” on the one hand, while on the other aiming to “display its foreignness.”⁴¹

Yet, there may have been a much more significant reason for these textual and iconographic records. It is likely that we witness here the transfer of Thunder's powers into the ritual apparatuses of

⁴¹ Robert Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*, 12. According to Campany, furthermore, the act of recording these strange phenomena (during the time that previous generations of scholars have hailed as the “birth of fiction”) constitutes a “flight from the center, [. . .] beyond the bounds of service to the imperial center.”

religious experts. While his demonic appearance is certainly not an everyday phenomenon, the fallen Sire Thunder was not necessarily represented by drawings for the mere purpose of collecting anomalies and fixating them in a predictable (and thus less frightening) format. Du Guangting's story of such a graphic representation roughly coincides in time with the earliest historical references to the practice of "drawing a Sire Thunder Talisman" 畫雷公符, dating back to the early ninth century.⁴² In other words, both in the story as well as in historical references, Thunder is subjected to the human power of *re-presenting* his body—a loss of autonomy that paves the way for ritual manipulation.

Indeed, I surmise that the act of graphically representing Sire Thunder foreshadows (or even directly points to) his transformation into a ritual subject and the development of distinct ritual traditions for the Daoist command over Thunder. The context in which "drawing a Sire Thunder Talisman" is mentioned deserves special attention: it is a military expedition. Several official histories belabor various details of this application for Sire Thunder, one of which is reiterated in different sources. The full version of this record narrates a military campaign by the Tang loyalist general Li Guangyan 李光顏 (761–826). The record describes how his army defeats a rebel force, led by the warlord Wu Yuanji 吳元濟 (783–817), of no less than 30,000 men. Upon inspection it turns out that these soldiers (as well as their horses, weapons, and shields) all have a Sire Thunder Talisman drawn on them, along with some written characters. An official historical record elsewhere narrates roughly the same story, but it adds the interesting detail that in addition to a talismanic representation of Sire Thunder, the soldiers also have a depiction of the "Dipper Stars" (斗星 *Douxing*).⁴³ A third source adds yet another element that defines the above two as parts of a (Daoist) ritual complex. The *Imperial Survey of the Great Calm Era* (太平御覽 *Taiping Yulan*) states that on the bodies of the

⁴² Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, 945 reprint edition (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975), 161.4220.

⁴³ Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (et al.), *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書, 1060 reprint edition (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975), 5185.

soldiers is written a spell (or it is recited onto their bodies) that says: “Quickly annihilate the Army of the Northern Wall; Swiftly, swiftly in accordance to the Statutes and Ordinances” 速破城北軍。急急如律令。⁴⁴ This phraseology, as is well known, belongs to the stock and trade of martial rituals like Thunder Ritual. Other stories from the same era corroborate the military application of Thunder.⁴⁵ Surely, for these soldiers the purpose was not to symbolically represent Sire Thunder as a visible yet otherwise merely symbolical token of their strength; rather it was to reconstitute the mighty body of Sire Thunder as their own, or even to be inhabited by him.⁴⁶ To understand this as a symbolical act, aside from all religious considerations, would be to miss its significance.

Though the reference to the “Sire Thunder Talisman” does not allow for sweeping conclusions, the ritual command over Sire Thunder apparently had been established firmly in Daoist liturgies at least as early as the year 1003. By that time the important school

⁴⁴ Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽 (Taipei: Shangwu, 1975), 1629–31.

⁴⁵ A record from the *Miscellany of the Youyang Mountains* 酉陽雜俎 by Duan Chengshi 段成式 (ca. 803–863) tells of a Daoist jiao ritual during which “the sound of thunder can be ordered to appear” 令致雷聲. When emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–745) hears this, called Bao Chao 包超, he orders the practitioner to accompany the famous general Geshuhan 哥舒翰 (?–757) on his Western expeditions. See *Taiping guangji* 393.3140: “Bao Chao” 包超. Similarly, it is possible that even military men such as the great Tang general Gao Pian 高駘 (d. 887) may have been initiated into this kind of lore when he received the dagger of the Northern Emperor from the Daoist “quack” Lü Yongzhi 呂用之. The particular story that relates the bestowal upon Gao Pian of the Northern Emperor’s dagger is included in *Taiping guangji* 290.2309. Franciscus Verellen has shown that Gao Pian was quite commonly associated with Daoist lore. See Verellen, *Du Guangting (850–933): Taoïste de cour a la fin de la Chine médiévale* (Paris: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1989), 53–55. For a highly relevant treatment of Gao Pian and his exploits, see Franciscus Verellen 傅飛嵐, “Gao wang” zhen Annan ji Tang mo fanzhen geju zhi xingqi 「高王」鎮安南及唐末藩鎮割據之興起 / *Prince Gao’s occupation of Annan and the rise of regional autonomy under the late Tang*, Jao Tsung-I Lecture in Chinese Culture No. 4 (Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, 2015). Interestingly, Verellen shows that Gao Pian’s strategies involved marshaling the forces of thunder!

⁴⁶ It is conceivable that the warriors would do battle while being possessed by Thunder.

of the “Daoist masters of the Supreme Mystery belonging to the Northern Emperor” 北帝太玄道士 had included a text entitled “the Northern Emperor’s Method of Sire Thunder” 北帝雷公法 in the books to be received upon ordination.⁴⁷ In other words, Thunder-related rituals had surpassed their local origins, such as those of Xu Chan’s story near Maoshan, or Chen Luanfeng’s story from Guangdong, to be discussed below. By the early eleventh century they were included in the transmission of documents that defined at least one Daoist school with broad geographical reach.

While the historical coincidence of these separate occurrences of the depicted Sire Thunder is suggestive enough, other stories reveal concrete links to the ritual dimension behind these graphic visualizations. One such story, entitled “Chen Luanfeng” 陳鸞鳳 describes an unexpected encounter with Sire Thunder, and it constitutes a direct link to Thunder Rituals of later times.⁴⁸ Just like Du Guangting’s story it claims to recount events from the Yuanhe reign, early ninth century. The person from whom the story derives its title, Chen Luanfeng, is said to have burned down a temple dedicated to Sire Thunder on the peninsula of Haikang 海康 (present day Guangdong).⁴⁹ The reason for doing this, the story recounts, is the deity’s lack of response to rain-prayers during a drought.

Tellingly, Sire Thunder *in his territorial manifestations* was thought to be enough of a local phenomenon that fellow locals could have the idea of burning down his temple—not a likely act in relation to higher gods.⁵⁰ The significance of insulting Thunder is reinforced by Chen Luanfeng’s subsequent acts: he is said to have gone out into an open field where he intentionally transgressed

⁴⁷ DZ 1237 *Sandong xiudaoyi* 三洞修道儀 8b–9a. For a treatment of this scripture within the context of the exorcist tradition of the Emperor of the North, see Christine Mollier, “La méthode de l’empereur du nord du Mont Fengdu: une tradition exorciste du Taoïsme médiéval,” *T’oung Pao* 83 (1997), 329–86.

⁴⁸ Also see Franciscus Verellen, “*Gao wang*,” 72.

⁴⁹ This was the “Land of Thunder” 雷州, close to the Song dynasty center of the thunder rituals promoted by Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾, see below.

⁵⁰ This is not to say that gods could not be coerced by commoners. See the great article by Alvin Cohen, “Coercing the Rain Deities in Ancient China.” *History of Religions* 17 (1978), 224–65.

certain taboos associated with the cult to Sire Thunder (not eating fish in combination with pork) in order to provoke the deity to manifest himself, and fight him.⁵¹ After a while, the story goes:

. . . indeed, strange clouds rose, an evil wind grew, swift thunder and sudden rain struck him. Chen Luanfeng thereupon took his blade and brandished it up into the air. He actually did hit the left buttock of [Sire] Thunder and chopped it off. When [Sire] Thunder fell down on the earth, he was shaped like a hog, had hairy horns and wings of flesh, all colored blue. In his hands he held a short handled *vajra* and a stone axe. Blood gushed forth and wind and rain were completely extinguished.⁵²

果怪雲生。惡風起。迅雷急雨震之。鸞鳳乃以刃上揮。果中雷左股而斷。雷墮地。狀類熊豬。毛角。肉翼青色。手執短柄剛石斧。流血注然。雲雨盡滅。

As before, Thunder's vulnerability is exposed as soon as he is visible/recognizable to commoners—if anything, he can be seen as a clumsy local ruffian, rather than a high divinity. And again, Thunder is revealed with features similar to the stereotype with horns, flesh wings, a dark skin, etc.

The story continues by relating that Chen Luanfeng wanted to devour Sire Thunder, and goes on to describe how the people of the region feared they would be punished for Chen Luanfeng's bravery. Only after a second feat of strength, repeatedly proving Chen Luanfeng's invulnerability to attacks from thunder, did the locals acknowledge his great powers and gave him the interesting ceremonial sobriquet of "Rain Master" 雨師. By the Yuanhe period this title also designated an official function in the state ritual observances that had only recently been elevated from the minor to the medium rank.⁵³ Thus we again find a glimpse of the fact

⁵¹ The fact that respect for taboos regarding the thunder cult was no small matter is illustrated by the massacre described in *Tai ping guang ji* 393.3137: "Shilei" 石勒.

⁵² *Tai ping guang ji* 393.3145–46.

⁵³ Victor Xiong, "Ritual Innovations and Taoism under Tang Xuanzong," *T'oung Pao* 82 (1996), 261.

that encounters with spiritual oddities were relevant against a background of ritual practitioners and ritual reforms.

Most intriguingly from a ritual perspective, this story provides a strong indication of a nascent tradition of Thunder Ritual that has agents like Chen Luanfeng included in highly specialized procedures for summoning Thunder. One post-Tang source reveals that a divinized Chen Luanfeng was present in later Daoist thunder ritual with the bureaucratic title of “Chen Luanfeng, General Supervising Emissary of the Five Thunders” 五雷總管使者陳鸞鳳.⁵⁴ The ritual visualization prescribed for this divinity (again depicted in good spirit-medium “fashion” with a red apron) includes two uncanny elements that Chen Luanfeng may have appropriated from the Sire Thunder whose leg he chopped off, namely the hooves of a hog, and an axe. Corresponding with the title of “Rain Master” that the Tang record mentions, Chen Luanfeng is in command of a platoon of rain-making Thunder Gods. This remarkable reference, moreover, belongs to a document that is associated with a thunder lineage from the same broad region in Southern China (Southern Hunan). While the local roots thus are still commemorated in this ritual manual, at the same time the ascension of Sire Thunder into the Daoist hierarchy is clearly an ongoing process.

Generally, although in the stories considered thus far Sire Thunder is presented as a strange and otherworldly creature, an animal-like demon with foreign powers, already he was not invulnerable to human attacks; a demon falling down from the sky hardly suggests a sophisticated or almighty god, and getting one’s buttocks hacked at is equally bawdy—even comical. Below we will read another story about Thunder, this time getting stuck in a tree.

More generally, in the picture drawn by the story of Chen Luanfeng, Sire Thunder appeared as a possible object for mortal resistance: his actions are questioned, his sovereignty is challenged, and the integrity of his body violated. Even if Sire Thunder was immensely powerful, he could be made to stray from his safe

⁵⁴ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 道法會元 122.5a, 19a.

otherworldly position into the net of mortal discourse. Such stories of encounters with Sire Thunder doubtless constitute the early stage of an ongoing ritual subjugation. Through them he was prepared for his new role as a ritually manipulable subject of Thunder Ritual. Key in this process is the act of graphic representation.

The ritual importance of depicting Thunder is driven home in the following record that links Sire Thunder to ordination practices, similar to what we have already seen to be the case with “the Northern Emperor’s Method of Sire Thunder.” From the tenth century collection *Trivia from the Northern Dreamer* (北夢瑣言 *Beimeng Suoyan*) by Sun Guangxian 孫光憲 (ca. 900–968) comes the record of an anonymous villager from Xinfan 新繁 in Sichuan who claims: “I have received the Registers of Sire Thunder and I hold the same office as Thunder” 我受雷公籙，與雷同職。⁵⁵ Though the term “Registers of Sire Thunder” (雷公籙 *Lei Gong lu*) is unique even if compared to later Thunder Rituals, the trend of making Thunder available for ritual manipulation (and bestowal during ordination) clearly is not.

As is well known, the transmission of registers was—and remains—a key component in Daoist ordination practice, and to have received them indicates allegiance with an elaborate body of ritual. Significant for my argument of a connection with Daoist ritual, the above record furthermore mentions that a Daoist master (道士 *Daoshi*) from Dongcun 東村 in Jiangling 江陵 (present-day Hubei) also possessed these same registers. They were said to belong to the “one hundred and twenty methods *not* included in the ritual registers of the Three Grottoes [i.e. the official Daoist Canon]” 三洞法籙外，有一百二法。Note that, on the one hand, this record dissociates its Thunder registers from the Daoist Canon, while on the other hand implicitly defining it in direct juxtaposition to canonical Daoism. It will be useful to point out that this sums up the situation of Thunder Ritual until the fifteenth century: even though it was widely popular, both among village shamans and Daoist priests, it did not meet unequivocal approval until the early

⁵⁵ *Taiping guangji* 395.3157: “Tiangong tan” 天公壇。

Ming.⁵⁶ Canonical or not, either way this record equally shows that the forces of Thunder could be included in ritual registers by the middle of the tenth century.

Depiction of Thunder is what defines these particular registers. The narrative record from *Trivia from the Northern Dreamer* furthermore mentions that the register contains depictions of several postures taken by male figures, each labeled with its own title and reminiscent of the names of postures current in martial arts traditions (digging a well, carrying wood, holding a mountain). In this instance the registers apparently existed in the form of pictures on scrolls, representing humanly shaped figures executing powerful actions. This is not necessarily different from the ritual paraphernalia of today's ritual specialists, such as scrolls used during exorcisms (see picture below).



Five Thunders on a *fashi* scroll. Possession of Li Tenglong, Kee-lung, Taiwan. Photo by author.

There are narrative records that relate Sire Thunder to very specific ritual repertoires. Foreboding the Song dynasty dissection of Sire Thunder's body into dozens of different Thunder Gods, it appears that Sire Thunder had come to exist in multiple ritual personalities. Du Guangting, in his *Biographies of Encounters with Spirits and Immortals*, recorded another encounter with Thunder

⁵⁶ That is despite the patronage of emperors in the Southern Song dynasty, whose support was real yet could not immediately establish Thunder as a universally accepted Daoist form of ritual.

that is interesting not only because it again describes Sire Thunder as a flying god, albeit a clumsy one, but because he is one of five brothers. This suggests the existence of the Daoist tradition of the Five Thunders, which is usually attributed to the Song dynasty. In Du Guangting's record, remarkably, Thunder is again connected to the creation of talismans.

Ye Qianshao of the Tang dynasty was a man from Xinzhou (present day Shangrao 上饒 in Jiangxi). Once, as a youth, when he was gathering wood and herding sheep, he sought shelter from the rain beneath a tree. The tree was struck by thunder, and during one short moment it split and closed again. Sire Thunder was stuck in the tree, frantic flapping could not get him to move out. Ye Qianshao took a stone wedge to open the trunk, and then Sire Thunder got out. Still feeling embarrassed, he thanked Ye Qianshao and made an appointment: "Come back here tomorrow, if you can."

Ye Qianshao went back there as agreed. Sire Thunder also came and gave him a book with writings in ink, saying: "If you practice this here, then you will be able to make thunder and rain, relieve the suffering of illness, and establish your merit by saving people. We are five brothers. If you want to hear the sound of thunder, call only Thunder the Old, and Thunder Two; then you will have an immediate response. But Thunder Five is tough and hot-tempered; if there is no urgent business, you must not call him." From that time onwards Ye Qianshao practiced talismans to make rain, and each time he had various successes.⁵⁷

唐葉遷韶，信州人也。幼歲樵牧，避雨於大樹下。樹為雷霹，俄而却合。雷公為樹所夾，奮飛不得遷。韶取石楔開枝，然後得去。仍媿謝之，約曰：「來日復至此可也。」如其言至彼。雷公亦來。以墨篆一卷與之，曰：「依此行之，可以致雷雨，祛疾苦，立功救人。我兄弟五人。要聞雷聲，但喚雷大雷二，即相應。然雷五性剛躁；無危急之事，不可喚之。」自是行符致雨，咸有殊効。

In line with the procedures described in the other records above, the power to summon thunder is here again related to knowledge

⁵⁷ DZ 592, 1.3b–4b: "Ye Qianshao" 葉遷韶; version used here is from *Tai ping Guangji* 394.3151.

of talismans. At the same time, as Verellen points out in relation to the same story, the “power of the talisman seems to be independent of the merit of its user.”⁵⁸ This is coherent with the way in which talismans are perceived to be true embodiments of a divine force, not a mere symbolic *re*-presentation. Thus corroborating the importance of talismanic recreation of Thunder’s power, the story furthermore suggests a link with the most famous of all thunder rituals, namely the Five Thunder Methods (五雷法 *Wuleifa*).

Indeed, in addition to simply stating his command over a pentad of Thunder Gods, elsewhere in the story Ye Qianshao applies this command for a purpose when he is asked by the governor of Xinzhou to perform a rainmaking ritual. He summons “Thunder Five” (雷五 *Lei Wu*) with an overwhelming response. While the tradition of “Five Thunder” had become dominant by the Southern Song, some of these later scriptures still contain references to the older way of referring to this pentad. References to figures like “Thunder Two” (雷二 *Lei Er*) and “Thunder Five,” who occur in the story of Ye Qianshao, can for instance be found in several Thunder manuals contained in two different compendia included in the Daoist Canon.⁵⁹ Or, whereas most of those later texts refer to “Thunder One” (雷一 *Lei Yi*) instead of the story’s “Thunder the Old” (雷大 *Lei Da*), two ritual texts retain the latter.⁶⁰ Other details of the story cohere with Daoist ritual, too. Of the paraphernalia used by Ye Qianshao after his encounter with Sire Thunder, the talismanic writing of the “iron tablet” 鐵札 is a very common feature in later ritual.⁶¹ Of the above mentioned texts, one also mentions the use of an “iron plaquette” 鐵牌.⁶² All these correspondences suggest rather convincingly that the Five Thunder tradition existed in ritualized form during the latter half of the Tang.

⁵⁸ Verellen, “Encounter as revelation,” 377.

⁵⁹ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 61, 67, 83, 92, 116; DZ 1166 *Fabaiyizhu* 法海遺珠 9.

⁶⁰ DZ 1166 *Fabai yizhu* 7, 34.

⁶¹ See for example DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 46, 93, 98. One text includes this in its title: DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 100: *Leiting tiezha zhaolong zhiyu fufa* 雷霆鐵笱召龍致雨符法.

⁶² DZ 1166 *Fabai yizhu* 9.6b.

From yet other narratives it becomes clear that the depiction of Sire Thunder became a common feature in encounters with him. One story mentions how, during the Zhenyuan reign (785–805), a creature with a hog’s head dropped onto the ground while holding a red snake and chewing on it.⁶³ In this case as well, “people all painted pictures and transmitted them” 皆圖而傳之. In another record, “folk” 民 from Haikang in Southern China found out that Thunder’s capacity to fly was not limited to his avian kin either. They saw that there was a thing in the air with a swine’s head and a scaly body, which they attacked so that it fell on the ground. Although no wings are mentioned, and even though the creature had been bleeding badly, “that night it soared off into the air and left” 其夕凌空而去. It was said that, subsequently, “the people of Leizhou painted Thunder so that they could worship him, all with a swine’s head and a scaly body” 雷民圖雷以祀者，皆豕首鱗身.⁶⁴ This sort of representation, doubtlessly involving painters and sculptors, remains close to those still copied by artisans nowadays from *yangben* 樣本—literally, “shape books” (see below; also *fanben* 範本 or *fenben* 粉本): drawings of a deity to be reproduced for worship or ritual purposes.



Two Sires Thunder from a painter’s manual.
Xinhua, Hunan (PRC). Photo by author.

⁶³ *Taiping guangji* 393.3142: “Xuanzhou” 宣州.

⁶⁴ *Taiping guangji* 394.3150: “Chen Yi” 陳義.

Descriptions of the act of depicting Thunder, however, did not remain limited to Tang dynasty narratives of encounter. An even larger body of such descriptions is included in ritual texts. The last record I will treat in this section is just such a narrative from a ritual manual. It has preserved many of the details of the Tang records (iconography), but especially interesting is the fact that it ties ritual power over Thunder to the act of depiction.

In it, we are met with the hagiography of a high Thunder God, namely Deng Bowen 鄧伯溫. It stands as the most complete and probably oldest extant hagiography of this god, and it can be found in the second of two texts entitled *True Writs of Five Thunder, [belonging to] the Jade Pivot of the Highest Purity* (上清玉樞五雷真文 *Shangqing Yushu Wulei zhenwen*), written probably around the eleventh century. This text, entitled “God of Scorching Fire” (歟火神 *Huhuoshen*), seems to describe just the very manifestation of Sire Thunder as discussed above.⁶⁵ Features of Deng Bowen identical to the Sire Thunder of the Tang are many, yet the hagiography reveals several interesting additions.

The God of Scorching Fire.

According to the *Five Thunder Scripture*, the Great Immortal of Thunderclap is just this deity. He also bears the name of Great God of the Statutes and Ordinances. His surname is Deng, and his given name Bowen. During the time of the Yellow Emperor he was in supreme command of the armies, and was dispatched to capture Chi You. He followed Feng Hou as leading minister and was victorious in battle. The Emperor promoted Deng Bowen to the rank of “General of Henan.”

When the Emperor ascended into the heavens, Deng Bowen withdrew from the world and entered Mt. Wudang, where he practiced cultivation for a hundred years. But because in the past he had eaten human flesh, he could not ascend into heaven. The Lord on High reminisced about him and granted him a fief on Mt. Wudang. Thereupon, [Deng Bowen] observed how mortals did not practice loyalty and filial piety. Murderous aggressions grew more serious and offensive deceit increased; the strong oppressed the weak, and the

⁶⁵ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 57.15a–16a.

superior abused the humble. Subsequently [Deng Bowen] pronounced an oath, day and night, that he desired to become a divine thunder, in order to punish these people with their evil ways—on Heaven’s behalf. He relentlessly recited [his oath] and the breath of his anger burst forth into Heaven.

Suddenly, one day, his body changed into the stuff of a demon, his form into the likeness of a bat: he had a phoenix beak and silver teeth, with red hair on a blue body. In his left hand he held a thunder awl, and in his right hand a thunder hammer. His body was a hundred *zhang* long! From beneath his armpits came two large wings that caused darkness for several hundred *li* when he unfolded them for departure; from his eyes, two rays of light cracked forth and shone brightly for a thousand *li*. They smelted stone and liquefied metal; they dried out the vast oceans. On his hands and feet he had dragon-claws, and he could travel the Great Void in his flights. He devoured deviant spirits, and decapitated malfeasant dragons. The Lord on High promoted him to the rank of God of Statutes and Ordinances serving under the aegis of divine thunder. On the *wu* hour of the fifth day of the fifth month he ascended into the residence of the Fire Command of the Southern Palace.⁶⁶

His mighty powers are extreme. At times of banditry and destruction, with his two wings he stirs up the waters of the Four Seas, turning the peaks of Mt. Kunlun upside down and dipping them into the water, toppling and turning mountains and rivers and the great earth. Each master who practices Thunder Ritual should sacrifice to him on the fifth day of the fifth month. Then he will be able to exorcize severe possessions, and to shake the peaks of mountains; to respond to plague-causing demons and phantoms, and venomous mountain specters. As soon as they hear the name of this god, they are terrified. This deity delights in drinking goose blood. **One has to draw his appearance and pray to him while making offerings.** His evidential miracles will follow upon one’s wish; it is unfathomable. If one has no goose blood, then replace it with goat blood. **Moreover, there exists a “Talisman of the God of Scorching Fire.” It can terminate demonic possessions, cure the hundred diseases, and remove the plague.** Hang it at the entrance of the main hall: it shall pacify one’s home and

⁶⁶ This refers to the purgatory in the Southern Dipper 南斗. For an extensive treatment of this subject see DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 121: *Nangonghuofu Wuyang Leishi bifa* 南宮火府烏陽雷師祕法. See Stephen Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 411n.

dissolve calamities; it shall protect against the hundred evils.⁶⁷

燄火大神者。按《五雷經》云：霹靂大仙者，是此神也。又名律令大神。姓鄧，名伯溫。黃帝時為統軍領兵，使收蚩尤。從風后為帥臣，戰勝。帝封伯溫為河南將軍。帝昇天，伯溫棄世，入武當山，修行百載。為嘗食人肉，不得昇天。上帝念之。封於武當。因見世人不行忠孝。殺害愈甚，侵欺愈增；以強凌弱，以貴虐賤。遂日夜發願，欲為神雷，代天誅伐此等惡道之人。念念不絕，怒氣衝天。一日，忽變形如鬼質，狀若蝙蝠，鳳觜銀牙，朱髮藍身。左手持雷鑽，右手持雷錘；身長百丈，兩腋出兩大翅，展去則數百里皆暗；兩目迸光二道，照耀千里，鑠石流金，乾枯滄海。手足皆龍爪，飛遊太空。吞噬精怪，斬伐妖龍。上帝封為律令神，隸屬神雷。五月五日午時昇入南宮火令之宅，威力最大。劫壞之時，以兩翼鼓動四溟之水，翻浸崑崙之丘，崩倒山河大地。凡行雷法之士，宜於五月五日祭之，能驅大祟，搖動山嶽。應瘟疫鬼魅、蠱毒山魃，聞此神名皆恐懼。此神喜飲鵝血。當圖其形，供養禱之。隨意靈驗，莫可測度；無鵝血，以羊血代之。又有火神符，能斷鬼祟，治救百病，祛剪瘟疫。懸於廳堂門戶，鎮宅消災，辟除百惡。

This hagiography of the eminent Thunder God called Deng Bowen thus shows him to be a direct heir to the appearance of the Sire Thunder we know from the Tang Records.

Even though we cannot historically pinpoint the transformation of Sire Thunder into this one Thunder God, the continuities are as clear as the innovations. In fact, thanks to the Tang records, we can see this story as the outline of a transformation: (1) the god's origins as a bloodthirsty demon from Henan (yet again a different local origin); (2) his investiture on Mt. Wudang by the Jade Emperor (tying Deng Bowen to a new, specifically Daoist sacred site); (3) and the details of his sacrificial cult (worship of an icon; efficacy of a talisman).

⁶⁷ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 57.15a–16a.

Indeed, as a final reminder of the different relationships expressed by different forms of depiction, the hagiography mentions two forms of embodying him: one is the depiction of his appearance (圖其形 *tu qi xing*) in a form that can be worshiped and sacrificed to (in the manifestation as described throughout the various encounter-narratives, probably very similar to the “shape books” above), and in the form of a talisman (歙火神符 *Huhuo shenfu*) that *itself* serves as apotropaic force within the space where it is used. To make that distinction sharper, the painted depiction is recognizable in the familiar discourse of iconography and apparently requires an active, sacrificial relationship for it to manifest efficacy; the talismanic version may or may not be graphically conventional, but its efficacy is not predicated upon the conventions of sacrificial reciprocity.

If this hagiographic record, then, distinguishes the graphic format of Thunder’s presence (a painting that narrates Thunder’s shapes within conventional discourses of understanding) from a more schematic form (an efficacious talisman), the question needs to be asked whether this difference may have anything to do with differences in perception. If the image corresponds to the second mode of perception, does the talisman correspond to the third mode?

IV. Animating Sire Thunder’s Powerful Depictions

Now that depiction has come to the fore as an important means of relating to Sire Thunder, let us turn to the emic understanding of what depiction means. Here I want to start using ritual manuals from later time periods, especially the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). These texts allow us to investigate the production of talismans in order to contrast them with graphically recognizable formats such as narratives, paintings and statues.

Crucial for the conventional understanding of depiction in its meaning of representation, it seems, is the assumption that is precisely indicated by the reduplicative aspect of the word “representation,” namely its secondary nature (not unlike Walter

Benjamin's "work of art").⁶⁸ Implicit in the word re-presentation is the understanding of depiction as somehow referring to an original that is real (and present) with the depiction only constituting a weakened, inauthentic (and not really present) reflection of it—a trace of some original, as it were. Of course, to depict a thing suggests that the thing exists first; it is primary in time and primary in authenticity. As a secondary phenomenon the representation does not need to be studied in relation to the original (and by extension, its original environment). The depiction of the object can thus be removed from the depicted object, just as the depicted object can be separated from its environment. Depiction as representation, thus, can be studied along the lines of academic disciplines such as literature, material culture, etc., all of which subscribe to "objective" analysis by an outside observer.

While Chinese forms of re-presentation do assume a true original—referred to as "true form" (真形 *zhenxing* or "original form" 元形 *yuanying*)—this original is not inaccessible through its reproduced form. To the contrary, the Daoist talisman is precisely the production of the original form—one that can be reproduced infinitely. In a way, talismans may "realize" true form by reproducing it in a localized version. Even more: not only is the original not inaccessible through its reproduced manifestation, it is not really separated from it either. That is to say, there exists a direct connection between object and representation; as I have explained with the example of Zhuang Zi's theories, this connection is both concretely material and also more abstractly spiritual.

The Daoist premise for a "subject" to interact with "other" objects as equal bodies, formulated abundantly by early theorists such as Zhuang Zi, is not their capacity of rational logic—it is not "mind." The potential for connecting things lies in their nature of belonging to this cosmos: anything that has come into being without human manipulation is naturally endowed with the

⁶⁸ In Benjamin's words, "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999 [1936]).

creative forces of the universe. These forces are acutely tangible and visible in human beings, but they can be present (and developed or cultivated) even in lifeless (brainless) objects such as stones.⁶⁹

To reconstitute the body of a Thunder God by means of a brush is therefore by no means an example of a “subject” representing a secondary “object”—it needs to be seen as the manifestation of a fundamental continuity between two nominally different entities. At the outset, this is what needs to be clear when we look at various ritual procedures for embodying Thunder Gods that have been recorded after the Tang, in ritual manuals from the Southern Song (1127–1279), Yuan (1271–1368), and Ming. Below we will investigate two such rituals, particularly those of (Chief Thunder Marshal) Deng Bowen and that of his very similar peer, (Thunder Emissary) Zhang Yuanbo 張元伯.

The longest extant ritual manual devoted to Deng Bowen is the *Great Method of Celestial Lord Deng, the Statutory Commander of Scorching Fire*.⁷⁰ It was written in the first half of the thirteenth century by a Daoist from Yanping 延平 in Fujian, named Yang Gengchang 楊耕常 (*zi* Piyun 披雲; fl. 1208–1227).⁷¹ In the present context Yang Gengchang’s text is valuable because it describes the process by which the priest was able to realize (that is, also, “made real”) the divine presence of Deng Bowen—referred to in the text as “Chief Marshal” (主帥 *Zhushuai*) as well as “Celestial Lord” (天君 *Tianjun*).

First, the practitioner had to start the circulation of “ancestral energies” (祖炁 *zuqi*) throughout his body,⁷² so as to form an orb of

⁶⁹ The word for this force is *ling* 靈.

⁷⁰ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 80: *Huhuo Lüling Deng Tianjun dafa* 歛火律令鄧天君大法.

⁷¹ A fragmentary biography of this liturgist is included in DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 188.2b–4a. The unfamiliarity of his name should not conceal the fact that he was a figure of considerable stature, as is evinced by the occurrence of his name in other texts: DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 188, 189, 190, 193. More impressively, he is associated with a sacred site in Zhong Du 中都 (Anhui), and is said to have lived in the Long Life Monastery 萬壽宮. *Zhongduzhi* 中都志 (Chenghua reign). In *Tian Yi Ge cang Mingdai fangzhi xuankan*, vol. 33 (1990), 345.

⁷² Ancestral energies refers to primordial cosmic forces and is not related to social concept of ancestors.

golden rays. The priest should then slice the orb with his fingers using the Dipper gesture (斗訣 *doujue*), so that Marshal Deng could manifest himself. Thereupon an incantation was to be recited. Next, a fire had to be kindled in order to smelt a divine presence out of cosmic ore.⁷³

After the incantation is finished, close your eyes and actualize a fire of ten-thousand *zhang* in the direction of *xun*. Guide the fire of the heart and the fire of *xun* towards their union, so that they fill Heaven and Earth. Circulate the fire of the heart and congeal it into a sign, with the Golden Rays radiating. Hit forth the sign with your hands in a thunder-gesture, so that it will burst forth towards the direction of *xun*. Watch the Great God emerge from the fiery glow; while you recite the Summoning Spell, he will ride on the sign down onto the altar, and “my” body is inside the fiery glow together with the Marshal. With your left hand form a Thunder-gesture and lead him into the Palace of the Heart. Once the general has come into being, blow out the sound of the character 𩇛 onto the smoke of the incense and he becomes clear as if he were facing you.⁷⁴

咒畢，瞑目存巽方火光萬丈，引心火與巽火混合，充塞天地。運心火結成號頭，金光爍爍。以雷局打發號頭，衝至巽方。見大神從火光中出；誦召咒乘號降壇，我身與帥俱在火光中。左手雷局，引入心宮，結成元帥，以 𩇛 字音呵出香煙上，分明如對。

These procedures represent the first stage in the process of realizing (or: actualizing) the existence of the force named Deng Bowen. The manual indicates what the priest needs to visualize—that is, the phenomenon the priest can conjure up through his primordial connection. At this point the process is past mere mental imagination. The Thunder God exists as a power—the god is present. Note that part of his coming into clear existence is based first upon the production of a “sign” (號 *hao*) and then upon the blowing out of a sacred writ.

At the point where the god is seen to “emerge from the fiery

⁷³ For a broad discussion of the process of burning bodies as a means of appropriating ritual power, see my “From ‘Withered Wood’ to ‘Dead Ashes.’”

⁷⁴ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 80.2b–3a.

glow,” we understand that the practitioner must already be acquainted with his appearance. Indeed, the practitioner’s actualization of the Marshal’s power involved a visualization of the demonic forms known from Tang tales. At the start of the ritual manual is narrated an iconographic vision of the Thunder God’s appearance that is rooted in the records we have encountered in the Tang. Though not visible to onlookers, this is what the priest sees.

Red hair and a golden crown, three eyes and a black face, phoenix-beak and flesh wings; in his left hand he carries an awl, in his right hand he holds a hammer. His body is naked, with pearls wound around his arms and legs on each of which he has five claws and on each of which he wears golden rings. [. . .] He wears a red, retreating apron with straps, from under his wings there are two heads: the left head controls the wind, and the right head controls the rain. His entire body is covered by a blazing fire, and he rides a vermilion [naked] dragon.⁷⁵

赤髮金冠，三目青面，鳳嘴肉翅；左手執鑽，右手執槌；赤體朱纏絡，手足皆五爪，上帶金環。[略]紅吊褌裙，兩翼下二頭：左主風，右主雨。徧體烈火，乘赤龍。

These descriptions clearly cohere with the sightings of Thunder recorded in the Tang narratives: bird-like beak, flesh wings, naked body, and again the red apron of spirit-mediums. In a sense, what the ritual procedure reconstitutes is the encounter with a presence that was first encountered during the Tang. Now the priest encounters the god as his doppelganger, inside an orb of fire produced from his body.

Although the presence of Deng Bowen has been realized by the priest and is seen by him, the god’s form has not yet been manifested. Though the visualization of the priest has become endowed with a divine materiality, the shapes of the god are visible to him only—not to outsiders. It is this epiphany that the following instructions are meant to render visible, making the “true form” of Deng Bowen perceptible to the world at large. The priest himself

⁷⁵ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 80.1a–b.

first transforms into a major divinity before rendering Deng Bowen visible. He thereupon claims divine authority for himself on the basis of the “talismanic command” (符命 *fuming*) that he holds—entirely consistent with the power-relationship mapped out by David Mozina.⁷⁶

Carrying a talismanic command, I hold great authority.⁷⁷

秉持符命，掌握威權。

Then, after reciting several spells, the priest recites an “incantation for manifesting the shape” 現形咒 whereupon he enters his meditation chamber in order to draw a talisman. This talisman is called “Talisman of Scorching Fire’s True Form” 欵火真形符.⁷⁸ We may wonder whether it is the same talisman as the older version mentioned in Deng Bowen’s hagiography as “Talisman of the God of Scorching Fire.” Crucially, it is brought to life by “circulating *qi* to infuse the talisman with it” 運氣入符. Through this whole process then, finally, Deng Bowen’s body is present and visible. Note that here, the bodily presence of the Thunder God is first drawn, and only then infused with *qi*. This infusion constitutes one method for activating the powers of thunder.

Even in this written talisman, Deng Bowen’s “true form” is recognizable as the demonic apparition we have encountered above so many times, yet it is not nearly as detailed or concrete as any of the common graphic depictions. It is more abstract and schematic. In fact, one could say that his presence looks more like an “idea” than a “real” god—a mental presence rendered concretely present.

The schematic quintessence of this depiction is easily recognized once one sees the different building blocks that constitute it (termed “scattered shapes,” *sansheng* 散形), and even more so if one adds to these graphic elements the fact that each of them are individual powers (consecrated by means of individual spells) that together make up the whole of Deng Bowen’s body (termed “assembled

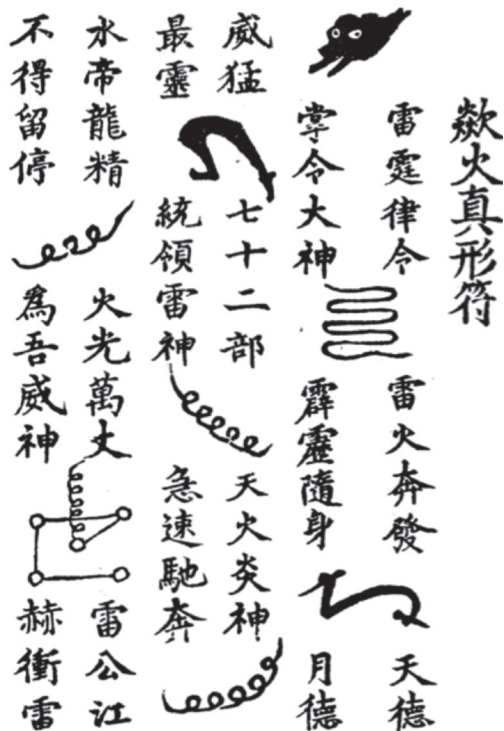
⁷⁶ See my earlier reference to his work.

⁷⁷ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 80.5a.

⁷⁸ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 80.6b–7a.



The assembled shapes of Deng Bowen. DZ 1220
Daofa huiyuan 80.7a.



The scattered shapes of Deng Bowen, each embodying its own powers. DZ 1220
Daofa huiyuan 80.6b.

shapes,” *juxing* 聚形). Thanks to them we see that this Thunder God is no longer understood as an individual “object,” but rather as a construct of which each element is animated by the brush and by an incantation.

In short, the Thunder God here constituted has traversed a long road from graphically relatable entity that can be concretely visualized to a schematic graphic that is more abstract than can be related exclusively on a narrative level. Indeed, the amalgam that is assembled from all these components could hardly find a home in any conventional narrative form—it exists by virtue of its abstraction, it transcends conventional understanding. In a way, then, what this

ritual manual has enshrined is the transition from the first and second mode of perception to the third, Daoist mode.

It would be difficult to understand where such abstractions would come from, if we didn't have detailed explanations in other manuals. Take the procedures for embodying the powers of another Thunder God who also is a heir to Sire Thunder's lore, namely Emissary Zhang (張使者 Zhang Shizhe). Two manuals dedicated to this god take our understanding of these procedures much further. The first of them explains the process of "infusion" as one of realizing equivalence with the cosmic source of all energies; the second goes beyond the process of infusion.

The first is entitled *Great Method of the Nine Heavens for Rain-prayers of the Emerald Pond's Thunder* 九天碧潭雷禱雨大法 (*Jiutian Bitanlei daoyu dafa*; hereafter *Great Method*).⁷⁹ It is similar to the ritual for producing the powers of Deng Bowen in that it also requires complicated visualizations and the transformation of the priest himself into a divine figure. Moreover, it culminates in the production of a talisman that is infused with the priest's energies—at the end of a long process of divine transformations. Like the creation of Deng Bowen, the priest starts by producing an inner fire.

I concentrate my spirit and sit quietly, perform recitation of the "Golden Light Spell." I actualize my body to be withered wood, then bring forth the fire of the heart to burn [the body]. As soon as I have blown away the ashes with the wind of *xun*, I actualize a white *qi*, one drop of spirited radiance within my Primordial Chaos [Hundun], and coagulate it into an infant. I clasp my fists and close my eyes, do seated meditation inside [Hundun]. My inner thoughts cannot escape outward, and outer thoughts cannot enter. All is dim and murky, absent and vague. Seemingly reciting the "Divine Spell of the Central Mountain," yet maybe not reciting it, in reality it is only when my will has arrived, and nothing more, that my body transforms into the Celestial Worthy of the Universal Transformation of Thunder's Sound.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 98.

⁸⁰ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 98.4b.

凝神靜坐，持誦金光咒。存身為枯木，發心火燒之。巽風吹去灰燼，惟存白氣混沌中一點靈光，結嬰兒。握固瞑目，趺坐于中，內想不出，外想不入，恍恍惚惚之餘，似念非念中山神咒，其實只是意到便了，化身為雷聲普化天尊。

This time, the process is explained more comprehensively, linking it to primordial chaos, called Hundun 混沌.

Next, the priest connects his body and spirit to the universe, articulated along the lines of stellar constellations and armies of Thunder Gods. Again similar to Deng Bowen's creation, this process involves the visualization and inner circulation of a written graph, here defined as an "Indian sign" (梵號 *Fanhao*). Then the talisman is written, applying the characters for sun and moon, which are merged inside a dot of black ink. For the final stage of animating the talisman, the priest has to transform into another high Thunder God.

I concentrate my spirit and enter stillness. I actualize an embryo inside my Hundun, recite the Golden Light Spell with my spirit, and transform my body into the Great Thearch, Ancestor of Thunder.⁸¹

凝神入靜，存混沌中嬰兒，神誦金光咒，化身雷祖大帝。

What follows are longer and even more complex procedures of visualization. The priest conjures up an entire universe inside his body. Then, finally, the priest is ready to infuse his energies into the talisman.

The Thunder Gods inside my body all come forth from the Emerald Pond. The Three Rivers within my body also flow in reverse, similarly raising water upstream. When fire bursts forth from the depth of the water, it goes straight up from the Tail Gate [*weilü*] into the Muddy Pellet, and I absorb it into the talisman. At this time my divine *qi*—which is [that of] the Thunder Ancestor—also dashes into the talisman.⁸²

⁸¹ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 98.10b.

⁸² DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 98.11b.

吾身中雷神，亦從碧潭中出。自身三河水，亦如此倒流逆捲而上。水底火發，從尾閭直上泥丸也。吸引入符中，此時我之神氣即雷祖也。亦奔入符中。

In apparently spectacular fashion, requiring a concerted effort of all the spiritual presences inside the priest's body, the talisman is infused with *qi*.

While the process is similar to the creation of Deng Bowen, the instructions have much more depth and explain the process as a whole, rather than merely the main steps. It allows us to see that the infusion of *qi* needs to be understood as a process of tapping into the cosmic energies contained within Hundun—and equating oneself to them.

If this requires a completely different perception of a god's presence than can be narrated in conventional ways, these procedures are taken to a theoretical pinnacle in another manual dedicated to crystallizing the powers of Thunder.⁸³ This manual, entitled *Hidden Writing for Thunder's Crystallization of the Prior Heavens* 先天雷晶隱書 (hereafter *Hidden Writing*), not only explains its procedures in detailed ways, it also makes explicit its pervasive use of theories from classical authors like Zhuang Zi and Lao Zi. It even applies ideas from Tang tales. Together they form the clearest critique of representation in the conventional sense. Explanations similar to that of Emissary Zhang's recur in other manuals for drawing talismans, and have come to form one mainstay of Daoist repertoires since the Ming dynasty.⁸⁴

The *Hidden Writing* also takes the concept of embodiment very literally in that it equates the body of the practitioner (who executes the procedures of embodiment) with the body of the

⁸³ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 84: *Xiantian Leijing yinshu* 先天雷晶隱書.

⁸⁴ In addition to the manual that is to be discussed below (which is linked to some of the greats of Song Daoism, such as Wang Wenqing and Bai Yuchan), others include DZ 1220 *Daofahuiyuan* 77: *Leiting Miaoqi* 雷霆妙契 and 91: *Leiting Liuyi Tianxi Shizhe qidao dafa* 雷霆六乙天喜使者祈禱大法. All of them are associated with the Thunder Masters Zou Tiebi and Mo Yueding, whose lineage informed a substantial part of Thunder Ritual practice as it can be found in the Ming Daoist Canon. See my *Demonic Warfare*, chapters 3 and 4.

Emissary. Yet, different from the above procedures, one of the methods used to reveal this bodily equivalence is by alluding to the discourse of Zhuang Zi's famous butterfly story. As I described earlier, in this story the subject (Zhuang Zi) wonders whether it is him dreaming that he is an object (butterfly), or that it is really the object dreaming that he is a subject. The ritual text reiterates this in the following way, applying it to Emissary Zhang: "I also do not know whether the Emissary is me, or whether I am the Emissary" 吾亦不知使者之為我，我之為使者。⁸⁵

This question is only one of many allusions to Zhuang Zi that are used in the manual. What may strike some as peculiar (the surprising fact of a "philosophical" allusion being included in a ritual text), really reveals the degree to which conventional classificatory boundaries (literature, philosophy, ritual) all too easily disintegrate once they are not studied in isolation, but in the Chinese practices and discourses that are not burdened with these Western categories.

Indeed, the *Hidden Writing's* reference to Zhuang Zi's discourse on the equivalence of things sets the basic parameters for a theory of embodiment. Throughout the ritual text, the human body's separation from other bodies is never a basic condition; to the contrary, the implicit assumption clearly is a complete "openness" of the human body to the presence of other bodies.⁸⁶ As such, Zhuang Zi's discourse relates the ritual text to the important concept of the potential that humans have for appropriating (activating?) a power that we are conventionally taught is not ours

⁸⁵ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 84.4b. Note the usage of two different pronouns for "I," one pertaining to the real self (吾 *wu*) and the other to the conventional self (我 *wo*).

⁸⁶ In addition to the butterfly theory, the ritual text assumes that the human body can be multiple: "one can embody three bodies" (一體三身); "my body is equivalent to the cosmos" (吾身天地同); "I am [the Celestial Worthy of] Primordial Commencement, and [the Celestial Worthy of] Primordial Commencement is I" (元始即我，我即元始); "If you can avoid having any thought emerge within your heart, then the myriad of spirits will naturally fill up your body" (使一念不生於心，萬神自注於體). More broadly speaking, the human body is not only *physically* capable of producing new bodies, but also on a level of visualization: the "mind" can generate entities.

to appropriate. By referring to Zhuang Zi's question, a realm of being is opened up where the subject-object distinction breaks down. In such a world, any-body can become every-body; or, with the right level of cultivation, one can become other bodies—human or divine, but of course also butterfly, fish, or tree.

With the subject-object distinction broken down, the mind-matter boundary is consequently also called into question. The concept that comes into view is the materiality of ideas that I briefly mentioned earlier. Both the butterfly story and the ritual manual point to this sort of materiality, the substance of spirit, or the “thingness” of ideas.⁸⁷ Zhuang Zi is here used to refer to a theory of how the mind can produce “things”—a theory that is implicit in the butterfly dream, but also in many other stories.

On a first level, the mind's perception generates differentiation. In Zhuang Zi's butterfly story this differentiation (分 *fen*) is applied to two different subjects (man/butterfly), but elsewhere he also reveals the differentiating subject to be the producer of his own realities. By juxtaposing the self to a self-produced “other” he shows that “others” actually are called out from non-being by the self: “If there were no ‘other,’ there would be no ‘I.’ If there were no ‘I,’ there would be nothing to grasp [the ‘other’].”⁸⁸ Thus, were it not for the presence of a subject, both object and subject would be indistinguishable and therefore absent as such. In the absence of self and the absence of other, this corresponds to the logic of being and nonbeing. Ontologically speaking, to have a “self” means immediately to have an “other” that is separate. To not have a self implies the potential for being not differentiated.

Absence of self is furthermore connoted in Zhuang Zi's writings with the primordial state of emptiness. For example, when his variegated musings about subject vs. object lead him to point out that the ultimate knowledge is the realization of the cosmic stage “before things had come into being” 未始有物者, Zhuang Zi subsequently

⁸⁷ For this idea I am also indebted to Stephen Bokenkamp, who formulated something to this effect during the NEH Workshop on Daoist Literature (Boulder, Colorado, July 2014).

⁸⁸ See Zhuang Zi, *Qiwulun* (ch. 2): 非彼無我，非我無所取。

adds further levels of differentiation and distinction that lead to the atomic world of things as we know it. To ignore the self thus may lead one to return to the state before differentiation; that is, before the Primordial Chaos of Hundun—from which entities may be created anew—evolved into the distinct forms of an orderly world. Or, ritually speaking, one needs the absence of self in order to recreate oneself anew, in other forms. That is, the ritual procedure of recreating oneself in the form of a Thunder God not only has a philosophical basis but equally depends on an understanding of cosmology.

Thus, to cultivate within one's mindful body a void of self allows for the generation (by means of visualization) of a new body that already exists in a latent state as a cosmic reality. This is exactly what the *Great Method* and the *Hidden Writing* describe. At many stages of the processes they prescribe, they indicate the necessity to empty the mind before anything can be generated—a process that is consistently likened to cosmogonic stages. The priest's body ultimately is the locus for such generative transformations, because, as the *Hidden Writing* says, “The cosmic transformations are one with my body” 造化與吾身一也.⁸⁹ This idea is also articulated earlier in the text: “As for *qi*, it is the ancestor of generating everything—and that is me” 然氣者，生一之祖也，即我也。⁹⁰ At this level of ancestral energies, the “true form” is produced 元始祖氣化生真形。⁹¹ All in a process of synthesizing mind, body, and cosmos—a mindful body that has *realized* its place as a node within the cosmos.⁹²

Such materiality of mental concepts (visualizations; images; ideas) is a common condition at the core of Daoism. The *Hidden Writing* quotes Lao Zi: “reaching the ultimate of emptiness, deeply guarding stillness” 致虛極守靜篤。⁹³ In Lao Zi this phrase relates emptiness to the union of things as they may be perceived by the

⁸⁹ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 84.8b.

⁹⁰ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 84.3b.

⁹¹ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 84.6a.

⁹² The manual also makes this point explicit: “Because Heaven and Earth are of the same flow, spirits and humans are of the same body” (天地同流，神人一體).

⁹³ *Lao Zi* (ch.16).

accomplished perceiver, described in the sentence immediately following: “The things of the world arise together; thereby do I watch their return” 萬物並作，吾以觀復. Zhuang Zi says something similar: “The cosmos is born together with me, and the myriad things are one with me 天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一 (Zhuang Zi, ch. 2). Indeed, the cosmos can be viewed in its original, undifferentiated state from the vantage point of the human body, and from the authentic images and essences therein contained the cultivated practitioner can recreate the things of the universe. From the beginning, so says Lao Zi, things are contained in a latent state of potentiality that includes essences, images, and sounds—and they are “real.” In Lao Zi’s words, “it [the Dao] has within it images; it has within it things. [. . .] It has within it essences, and those essences are utterly real” 其中有象其中有物 [. . .] 其中有精，其精甚真.⁹⁴ Thus is expressed (1) the fundamental intertwinement of image, thing, and essence; (2) the fact of their primordial existence in a latent potentiality; and (3) their authenticity, or “realness.”

It follows that the perceived gap separating the philosophical/mental from the practical/physical is challenged—at least the divide is not absolute, and perhaps not existent at all. Mental images are just as physical as physical objects are mental. Therefore to differentiate mentally in the Daoist context also means to produce “things.” While this may sound somewhat extraordinary (and certainly very “unscientific”), we do well to remind ourselves of the fact that in the Chinese worldview, there is no exclusively mental concept like the Platonic “idea”; if anything, mental images consist of *qi* just as any other entity in our world. This implies that Daoist meditative practices do not merely produce mental images of gods, but produce the gods themselves.

Here I want to finally analyze a passage from the *Hidden Writing* that contains many of the above details. The full translation of the relevant segment on talismanic writing runs as follows:

Whenever one writes a talisman, one must necessarily make the

⁹⁴ Lao Zi (ch. 21).

posture of the Emissary's talisman heroic and grand. Once essence and spirit join in unison, then pneuma will circulate and life will stir [or: Join essence and spirit, circulate pneuma, and initiate life]. The [Emissary's] body resembles a bat; his wings are split like the character *ba* 八 (eight). His feet tread on the Dipper outline, which makes up a Thunder Chariot.⁹⁵

One's brush strokes need to be dynamic, they must never be weak and faint. Indeed, when the brush strokes are weak, then the power of the ritual will be weak; when the brush strokes are dynamic, then the power of the ritual will be dynamic. Swift like a flying falcon, the whole writing is completed in one sweep. Do this at sunrise, do it at sunset; circulate the brush to wet it with ink, copy the form. Open its eyes as if it could see, silently meet it with your spirit.⁹⁶ Then you will naturally enter into the miracle; it will overwhelm you as if it were present.⁹⁷ It cannot be fathomed.

凡書符，須要使者符勢雄偉，精神會合，氣運生動，體類蝙蝠，翅分八字，腳踏斗罡，一作雷車。筆力勁健，切忌軟弱。蓋筆力弱法力弱，筆力健法力健。疾如飛隼，一筆掃成。朝斯夕斯，運筆舐墨，模寫形狀，開目如見，默以神會，自然入妙。洋洋如在，不可射度。

When the people of old drew dragons and dotted their eyes, [the dragons] would fly away amidst wind and rain.⁹⁸ Whenever they painted water and connected to it with their spirit, one could hear the sound of water during the night.⁹⁹ And if they painted a Buddha, his radiance would permeate the monastery.¹⁰⁰ Precisely because of that, "if their knowledge was not divisive then they could concentrate their mind."¹⁰¹ Whatever they contained with their brush and ink, it could always transform. How could spells and incantations be like that?

⁹⁵ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 84.4a–5a.

⁹⁶ This, too, is Zhuangzian parlance, as can be found in the story of the cook cutting up an ox. See my conclusion.

⁹⁷ Reference to *Liji* 禮記 or *Zhongyong* 中庸.

⁹⁸ This is a reference to several famous stories also included in *Taiping Guangji*, such as 211.1614–15: "Zhang Seng You" 張僧繇 and that of Wu Daozi 吳道子 (212.1622–24: "Wu Daoxuan" 吳道玄).

⁹⁹ Another reference to *Taiping Guangji* 211.1619–20: "Li Sixun" 李思訓.

¹⁰⁰ Some *Taiping Guangji* stories may be referred to here, but it is less evident than the preceding two.

¹⁰¹ Again a quote from Zhuang Zi, this time verbatim (ch. 19 *Dasheng*).

Thus when the old people drew talismans, regardless of morning or night, inebriation or sobriety, they did not [need to] recite spells and produce *qi*. Whatever they drew in the flow of their brush, its application would always result in effect. Be it for rebuking Wind and Thunder, or for destroying fiendish monsters, “whatever they faced would be saved by the Dao.”¹⁰² I also do not know whether the Emissary is me, or whether I am the Emissary.¹⁰³ They practiced this for their entire life and stopped only when “reaching the ultimate of emptiness, deeply guarding stillness,” those six words [from *Lao Zi*].¹⁰⁴ Why rely upon anything other? Write your talismans in one stroke, it is not permissible to add [ink] to the brush. Never mind dense and thick, or dry and faint, what matters is that your spirit is aroused, and that your *qi* is heroic and grand. Do not give rise to the slightest distraction in your thoughts, do not interrupt this for the briefest moment. If heart and spirit are united, then *qi* and brush will join.

古人畫龍點睛，風雨飛去。畫水通神，夜聞水聲，畫佛見光明照滿寺。良由「用智不分乃凝於神」。筆墨所寓，皆能變化。豈咒訣之然哉。所以老夫書符之時，不拘早晚，或醉或醒，不誦咒，不作氣。隨筆掃成，用無不應。叱咤風雷，識滅妖魔，「目擊道存」。吾亦不知使者之為我，我之為使者。終身行之，止「致虛極守靜篤」六字而已。何嘗假乎他哉。書符只一筆，不許再填筆。不問濃淡枯燥，須是精神鼓動，氣勢雄偉。毋生一毫雜念，毋令一刻間斷。心與神合，氣與筆會。

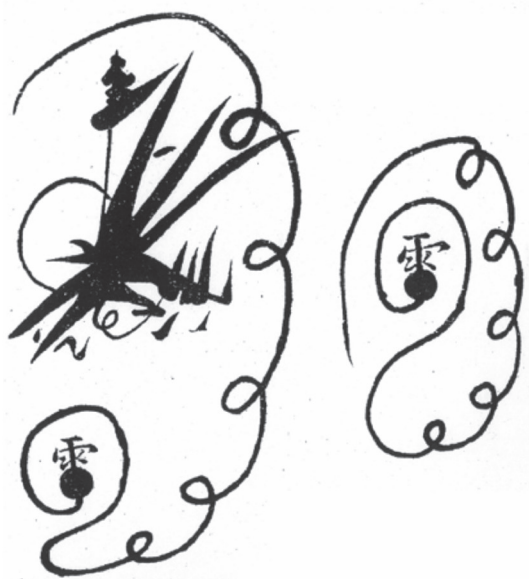
This one manual (and several others)¹⁰⁵ for writing a talisman of Thunder Emissary Zhang makes two things very clear. First, what the *Hidden Writing* had elsewhere stated as “cosmic transformations” being “one with my body,” is here illustrated concretely: the production of the Thunder God is really a re-generation of oneself in a different manifestation. The rephrasing of a sentence from Zhuang Zi’s butterfly story drives home the importance of deconstructing the boundaries between self and

¹⁰² Reference to Zhuang Zi (ch. 21 *Tian Zi Fang*).

¹⁰³ As pointed out earlier, this is a reference to the story of Zhuang Zi and the butterfly.

¹⁰⁴ Indeed, this is a quote from *Lao Zi* (ch. 16).

¹⁰⁵ DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan* 77 and 91.



Talisman of Emissary Zhang. *Daofahuiyuan* 91.8b.

other. The subsequent quote from *Lao Zi* about reaching a state of knowledge that is not driven by categories, classifications, and other distinctions, once more evinces the importance of a non-differential thinking. The quote moreover corroborates Zhuang Zi’s idea about the ultimate knowledge being knowledge of the Void; it similarly sets up Lao Zi’s words as the highest stage that can be attained in this context as “reaching the ultimate of emptiness” 致虛極, indicating attainment of the condition of emptiness (the Void) within which new creation may take place. In other words, as soon as one has unfettered one’s mind from the boundaries of conventional thinking, the emptiness thus attained allows one to (re-)produce any entity. The newly produced representation is no less powerful than the original; the representation is *as* the original—perhaps we might even say that it is also an original?

Second, to manifest the presence of this original, one need not go through verbal procedures, or roundabout methods like producing *qi*: “They did not [need to] recite spells and produce *qi*.” Instead, the success of the act lies in it being a smooth process: the

presence of the Thunder God will manifest itself—spontaneously—if the ritualist is fully absorbed in the flow of his movement. The manual emphasizes this repeatedly, downplaying the attention to calligraphic details while highlighting the importance of a cultivated process of bodily and spiritual unison. Only “if heart and spirit are united, then *qi* and brush will join.” It is, in other words, a process whereby a unified vision allows for the spontaneous generation of *qi* along with the graphic representation, rather than the (still actively imposed) infusion of a drawing with *qi*. While *qi* is still a key component of this process, it here takes Zhuang Zi’s theory to its extreme, positing that animation of drawing cannot be a process that is predicated on differentiation between an infusing subject and a subsequently animated object.

V. Conclusion

This article revolves around ways of seeing things—Daoist modes of perception. Though some of the materials seem to imply a historical progression from Tang encounters to Ming visualizations, the relevance of Zhuang Zi’s theories should have made clear the existence of what I have called the “third mode of perception” long before the Tang. Indeed, while the process of encountering a spirit, registering it, subjecting it to formal procedures, incorporating it, and re-creating it, each time is sequenced more or less historically, my intention has not been to describe the historical transformation from the Tang manifestations of Sire Thunder into the distinct and variegated Thunder Gods of the Song dynasty and after. The precise circumstances of this multifarious history are still too poorly understood to historicize in detail, and Sire Thunder has served merely as a fascinating case study. Instead, what I have attempted is to identify and elucidate the fundamental logic that informs Daoist views of the world and the spirits that animate it.

The first two modes of perception are still of this world. In Sire Thunder’s case, despite the unusual features first encountered as a “strange” entity that stupefies observers, his appearance can still be narrated in the story: his demon-like uncanniness of that blue-skinned body with hairy horns, flesh wings, and a pointy beak or

snout. Features such as these may add up to something weird, they can nonetheless be recognized within the known and visible realm of demons, blue colors, horned creatures, etc. They may seem “otherworldly,” but their otherness is defined entirely within conventions of worldly narrative. As such they can be related to in more or less conventional ways: they can serve as molds for religious iconography in temples, and they can be appropriated during dramatic performances by spirit-mediums or theatrical actors. They can be subjected to familiar discourses of fright, defiance, control, domestication, and so on.

The Daoist view transcends these conventions, as epitomized by talismans. A talismanic representation appears much less concrete and its meaning is not immediately accessible through cognition. Thus while still preserving some of the Thunder God’s recognizable features (wings), the talisman’s shapes tend more towards calligraphic conventions, which are conventions of the writing process rather than of depiction. Written representations, mediated as their significance is by configurations of abstract glyphs, depart from empirical form already. Yet the Daoist manual moreover emphasizes the *process* of writing, such as flowing, dynamic brushstrokes and the uninterrupted completion of the whole graph without adding ink. In this way the power of Emissary Zhang originates not from some external source, it emerges from the flow of calligraphic writing that directly opens up the Daoist priest’s primordial energies. It is not a brief moment of animation, it is a visceral process of “realizing” the spiritual potential inherent in all things.

This process, a live process that joins the philosophical “idea” of breaking down the subject-object distinction with the ritualized “practice” of artful writing, is itself a joining of the “physical” phenomena of body, brush, ink, and paper with the “ethereal” presences of spirit and energy. Indeed, it is precisely this *lived act* that brings the “representation” to life and transforms it into a live entity.

Writing with the brush becomes an act of creation in the most fundamental sense, meditatively performed within a mind-body juncture instead of through conventional perception. Indeed, when

the manual instructs the priest to “silently meet [the god’s body] with your spirit” 默以神會, it refers to Zhuang Zi’s story of the cook who exclaims: “I meet it [the ox] with my spirit, and I do not look at it with my eyes” 以神遇，而不以目視.¹⁰⁶ It is precisely what renders the “object” of a Thunder God’s depiction impervious to the analytical gaze of an outside “subject” who ignores the living process of the writing-act. Just as the cook cuts up an ox by a musically choreographed exercise that is in tune with the natural principle (天理 *Tianli*) of the Dao, the process by which the human body transcends its own physical boundaries and realizes unison with an “other” entity allows for access into the primordial forces animated by the Dao. From that moment onwards, priest and god share in the same reservoir of energies. It is at the meeting of “mind” and “body” where the absence of either (as distinct categories) is realized: back to the hodgepodge of undifferentiated being, the world can be recreated. As with Zhuang Zi’s cook, whoever masters this view can gain access to the “essentials for nurturing life.”

¹⁰⁶ Zhuang Zi, chapter 3, *Yangsheng zhu* 養生主.

道教的知覺模式：記「籙」雷公的 活躍顯化，以及莊子的相關性

梅林寶

摘要

本文分析了雷公的不同面相，並根據「籙」的形式將他們分類。文中的分析涉及唐代小說、傳記，明代的道教科儀和一些現代視覺材料等文本。這些文本可以幫助筆者建立關於相互區別的主體的可以被稱為道教的「知覺模式」的理論。筆者認為審查雷公的不同視角表達了對他的儀式變化有差級的理解（雷公作為一種特異的妖怪，道籙中的神靈，或存在於實體世界中的宇宙的物質），從一位低級神靈轉變為一種可以被儀式召喚的潛伏在人體中的宇宙現實力量。本文的大部分分析是建立在海德格爾、龐蒂和德雷福斯現象學的基礎上，當然，如果沒有莊子的經典著作中相關理論，此對話也無法實現。

關鍵詞：雷公、莊子、知覺、表徵、主客體差異、有知覺的身體