

Series Editors' Preface

This book, by the eminent historian and scholar of Daoism Vincent Goossaert, is without doubt the most incisive and readable account of the two-thousand-year history of the Daoist church. Goossaert, a member of the department Sciences Religieuses of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, accomplishes this feat by focusing on the bureaucratic and liturgical organization at the center of the religion, the Tianshidao 天師道 (Heavenly Masters, also called the Celestial Masters). Goossaert traces the transformations of this organization in nine tightly argued and carefully documented chapters, from the mythical origin event to the Heavenly Masters' accommodations with modern systems of government in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He also provides the best account we have of how and why members of the Zhang family in the ninth century revived the myth of lineal descent from the founder, Zhang Daoling, to recreate a line of Heavenly Masters that has continued down to the present day.

Most importantly for our understanding of the elusive continuities in Daoist history, Goossaert shows that one of the factors leading to the ongoing success of the Heavenly Master supremacy is closely tied to its origin myth. Recounted in Daoist and secular histories alike, the legend maintains that the first Heavenly Master, Zhang Daoling, received a warrant from Heaven to save people from disorder by establishing correct relations with the celestial powers and by setting up strict systems of social organization. By reviving and breathing new life into the story of how celestial order was

brought to earth, the Heavenly Masters were able to perpetuate in evolving forms both the liturgy and the social organization of the earliest church. They thus, from at least the eleventh century onward, retained control of the Daoist ordination system charged with managing an empire-wide Daoist priesthood that stemmed from various liturgical lineages, worked to sustain Daoist relations with the imperial government, and continued to augment the prestige of their institution.

We also find in this book engaging accounts of the successive Heavenly Masters who were able to help make Daoism a central element of Chinese society for two thousand years. These figures—the Saint Augustines and Martin Luthers of Chinese history—will, through Goossaert's accounts, finally find their proper places in religious history.

Heavenly Masters, as Goossaert states, “is not the history of one specific Daoist school among others but of Daoism as a whole, through its most important, encompassing institution”—the Heavenly Masters. We are proud to offer this volume to the reading public and know that it will be a fixture in classrooms and invoked in discussions on Chinese religion for decades to come.

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