

## Cultivating Conduct and Establishing Merit: Pursuing the Good Life in Early Daoism

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### Abstract

Most Daoist texts dealing with morality consist of negative statements, lists of prohibitions and taboos, rather than positive exhortations to good conduct. In the form of precepts, these rules defined Daoist society, since each rank in the Daoist hierarchy observed a different set of precepts, increasing in number and complexity with rank in the church and social status. Such lists give us a good idea of what Daoists of the day considered evil or perverse. We are considerably less well informed about Daoist conceptions of virtuous behavior, as might be represented in codes that exhort Daoists to achieve positive moral conduct, acts of goodness. The Protocol of the Outer Registers (*Zhengyi fawen taishang wailu yi* 正一法文太上外錄儀) preserves one list of Five Virtues and two lists of the Nine Merits, which are recorded to provide guidance for one seeking

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to accumulate merit for the purposes of promotion. The recommended conduct includes both ascetic elements like dietary restrictions as well as thaumaturgical endeavors involving the harnessing of local spirits. These lists will serve as a point of departure to consider just what was considered worthy and commendable conduct in the early Daoist church, and then assess the import of these values in a comparative perspective.

**Keywords:** precept, merit, ordination, *Protocol of the Outer Registers* (*Zhengyi fawen taishang wailu yi*), evangelization

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