

Introduction

Scholars of Daoist history agree that the origins of the modern Daoist liturgy and clerical organization can to a large extent be found in the Church of the Heavenly Master, Tianshidao 天師道, reputedly established by the mid-second century in Sichuan by Zhang Daoling 張道陵. In 142 CE, according to Daoist tradition, Zhang was visited by Taishang laojun 太上老君 who named him his vicar on Earth with the title of *tianshi* 天師, Heavenly Master.¹ The dispensation articulated an eschatological vision of saving the initiates—the pure, destined to become immortals, separated from the doomed—through enforcing a strict moral code and rejecting the blood sacrifices to dead humans common in the society around them. Between circa 191 and 215, the church was a large organization run as a semi-independent state centered in Hanzhong 漢中 under the leadership of the Heavenly Master's grandson, holding parish rolls and gathering all members at compulsory collective rituals. Its political autonomy came to an abrupt end in 215; dignitaries and ordinary members had to migrate to various parts of the Chinese territory, but this resulted in the fast expansion of the faith rather than its demise. Gradually during the medieval and Tang periods, the parishes of the Tianshidao transformed, becoming one among several overlapping types of local communities, either territorial or associational, rather than close-knit “sectarian” groups in tension with the outside environment; in the long run, their priests came to serve the temples of local saints and to negotiate their relationship with spirit mediums, Buddhists,

and other specialists. This clergy, however, maintained its theological and spiritual allegiance to the Tianshidao and its now divinized founder, Zhang Daoling. Under evolving forms, the religion created as Tianshidao has never ceased to be a central element of Chinese society. This book tells the story of this *longue durée* evolution from the perspective of religious leadership and authority as invested in the function of the Heavenly Master.

Later hagiography has it that Zhang Daoling's great-grandson, putatively the fourth Heavenly Master, moved to a distant location, Longhushan 龍虎山 (Dragon and Tiger Mountain, in what is now Jiangxi Province), where Zhang Daoling was said to have once practiced self-cultivation before he went to Sichuan and established the Tianshidao. There, the Zhang family settled and transmitted hereditarily the function of Heavenly Master, discreetly at first, for five centuries, and more and more publicly from the late Tang onward. Historical sources document the seemingly reliable genealogy from about the twentieth generation (ninth century) to the present contested 65th Heavenly Master living in Taiwan; some members of the family are now playing leading roles in mainland Daoism. Over at least twelve centuries, the Zhangs have turned Longhushan into a major holy site, a household name in the Chinese world, and a large administrative center for the bureaucratic management of Chinese society.

The foundation stone for that successful development of the Heavenly Masters at Longhushan was a claim of continuity from Zhang Daoling. In actual fact, the historical links of Longhushan with the founders of the Tianshidao are mythical. The institution of a Zhang family, claiming descent from Zhang Daoling, transmitting a hereditary position of authority within the Daoist clergy, and based at Longhushan can be historically ascertained only beginning with the ninth century. The notion that the title of Heavenly Master (Tianshi) conferred by Laozi upon Zhang Daoling was hereditary and instituted in perpetuity also seems to be this family's invention. Yet mythical foundations and radical innovation do not mean that claims of continuity are entirely empty or purely rhetorical. As we will see, the hereditary Heavenly Masters at Longhushan from the ninth century onward were in essential ways renewing the Tianshidao, and their identification with the heritage of Zhang Daoling was their single most important defining element.

This invention of hereditary Zhang Heavenly Masters based at Longhushan was a hugely successful one. It soon gained state recognition, and the stages of this alliance with the imperial state has marked the rise of the Longhushan Zhangs. Their first known official title was granted in the early eleventh century. The prestige and official patronage of the Zhangs and Longhushan reached new heights with the 30th Heavenly Master, Zhang Jixian 張繼先 (1092–1126), arguably the most charismatic ever. By the Southern Song period, the Longhushan Zhangs were at the head of an empire-wide Daoist ordination system regulating—with full state support—the thousands of priests and their various traditions and liturgical ranks and privileges. As a consequence, from the Song to 1911 Longhushan continuously enjoyed imperial favors in both financial and political terms. The Western visitors who described China during the nineteenth and early twentieth century and discovered the importance of the Zhang Heavenly Master dubbed him the “Daoist Pope,” and Longhushan its Vatican. Probably unwittingly, these visitors made a salient point: the “Daoist Pope” was not a mere religious dignitary appointed by the imperial state but a key actor, with full agency shaping social life after his own vision.

The research question

The comparison with the institution of the Catholic papacy, made by modern observers, is historiographically stimulating. That institution has been the topic of many books that dealt variously with the history of its institutional development, its role in European politics, state making and diplomacy, its doctrinal and cultural history, and its role in shaping church life, not to mention studies of individual popes. The present book explores all of the above questions, while attempting to integrate them into a larger question: why and how did so much of Chinese socioreligious life come to be managed by a religious bureaucracy run by hereditary Heavenly Masters? This question involves apparently contingent issues—Why at Longhushan of all places? Why did it emerge at this particular time?—and some more structural ones: what caused society and state to embrace the Longhushan Zhangs’ vision of a centralized bureaucratic management of the initiation of the living,

protection from evil, and promotion of the dead? My telling of this history mingles the contingent and the structural. It tells of one family's long-term endeavors and success, putting their choices and innovations in a larger social, economic, and cultural context, while also outlining the coherence of their liturgy, spirituality, theology, social role, and political vision.

Like the papacy, the Heavenly Master institution is ancient, remarkably resilient through time, and yet has changed dramatically over more than a thousand years. To engage in *longue durée* history and keep track of key factors of change and continuity, we need clear definitions. The topic of this book is the history of the "Heavenly Master institution," in which I include the whole of the Longhushan Zhang lineage,² the Longhushan temples and residences, and their clerical personnel and liturgical services. This fascinating institution was a major, and in many ways unique, actor on the Chinese religious and political scenes from the ninth to the mid-twentieth century. I thus distinguish the "Heavenly Master church" (Tianshidao, that operated from the second century CE to approximately the end of the first millennium) from the "Heavenly Master institution" (that formed around the time that the church dissolved), while arguing for their fundamental continuity.

A third definition is necessary: "Daoist bureaucracy," which here means all the social and ritual consequences, as implemented by Daoists, of the idea that the world and its inhabitants are governed by knowable laws and due process. These laws and processes are implemented by officials both living (the Daoists) and divine, who are nominated and constantly assessed, promoted, or demoted according to merit by the highest gods. This idea informs Daoist ordinations, ranks, and titles; its morality; and its liturgy.³ In the early church, the bureaucracy was largely symbolical (and yet, as such, deeply shaped social life): priests were seen as officials in a divine bureaucracy but were largely autonomous. The Heavenly Master institution continued the symbolical bureaucratic practices but added elements of actual this-worldly bureaucratic integration and control of priests, local communities, and gods. In other words, the Heavenly Master institution brought the Daoist bureaucracy invented in the Heavenly Master church one step further by building it up on earth.

This continuity between early church and later institution is not that claimed by Daoist historiography—the assertion that the Longhushan Zhangs actually descended from and carried on Zhang Daoling’s practices.⁴ Rather, I propose that the Heavenly Master institution not only carried on the liturgy of the medieval church—this is widely recognized—but also, more provocatively, something of its social organization. In the deeply changed context of early modern China that emerges between the tenth and twelfth centuries, the Heavenly Master institution gradually became the organizing center of the new form of the ancient church. The Heavenly Masters continued to manage, or attempt to manage, all aspects of social life, as had the leaders of the early church, but now within and as part of the imperial state—hence the subtitle of this book: “Two Thousand Years of the Daoist State.” By “state” I mean here an institution that proclaims and enforces norms and laws that apply to the whole population, that taxes its registered subjects in order to support itself and its officers, and that wields violence against its enemies. Both the early Heavenly Master church and the modern Heavenly Master institution attempted to meet this definition, although in markedly different ways.

The Heavenly Master institution’s management of society was variously realized, and often compromised, as it was in each place deeply embedded in local and regional socioreligious conditions. Yet the Heavenly Master institution’s vision of society needs to be taken seriously, in its long-term continuity and adaptation to historical change. Such continuity was made possible by radical innovation. Many key elements in the Heavenly Master institution were entirely new—the monopoly of religious authority within a patriarchal line, its centralization in one bureaucratic center, the close alliance with the imperial state, and the recognition of local cults and exorcistic traditions. We need to understand the historical process of these innovations and their consolidation into an empire-wide bureaucracy in their larger historical context. At the same time that it boldly implemented such innovations, the Heavenly Master institution never offered a new dispensation, an explicit plan to return to the origins and reform the church, or a reformulation of its moral teachings: the Longhushan Zhangs just created a new type of religious

institution while quietly convincing everyone (local communities, priests, state agents) that it was carrying on the ancient tradition of the church. These claims to continuity are by no means hollow; this book thus starts its narrative in the second century CE.

Definitions

I work with etic categories: the Heavenly Master church and the Heavenly Master institution, because they allow me to clearly articulate change and continuity. By contrast, emic terms should be used with care lest we see only continuity. The most important such term is “Correct and Unified,” Zhengyi 正一, used by both the church and the institution to refer to a set of texts that defined their practices and to an ordination level at which these texts and practices were acquired. But members of the church and later people affiliated with the Heavenly Master institution just called themselves Daoists—no local community or lay person ever claimed to belong to, even less believe in, something called “Zhengyi Daoism.” This book aims to show that presupposing the existence of a separate Heavenly Master or Zhengyi school or movement within Daoism prevents us from understanding the transformation of the church into the Heavenly Master institution and the development of the latter. Furthermore, using the expression Zhengyipai 正一派 (Zhengyi lineage) to refer indiscriminately to the early church and the modern institution, as many scholars do, is misleading, not only by denying the transformation from Heavenly Master church into Heavenly Master institution but also by introducing a word (lineage, *pai* 派) that is anachronistic and irrelevant to the early church. For these reasons, I will explain the evolving meanings of the term “Zhengyi,” but not use it as one of my defining categories.

Similar care should be exerted with the term “Tianshidao”: while some scholars use it to denote a medieval organization that later disappeared for good,⁵ others (especially in China) use it as a synonym of “Zhengyi” and thus as a label for most present-day Daoists. I note that the term is not often used as an autonym, and treat it as a synonym of the etic term for the Heav-

only Master church. Finally, other categories that are found throughout the historiography (such as Shangqing 上清 and Lingbao 靈寶) also refer first and foremost to corpuses of texts, not to “schools.” My book is not the history of one specific Daoist school among others but of Daoism as a whole, through its most important, encompassing institution.

Sources and historiography

To cover two thousand years of history, the source base, predictably, is huge and not easily manageable. Hardly anything is excluded: I use both Daoist sources, within and without the Daoist canon (*Daozang*), such as liturgical manuals, hagiography, scriptures, and temple gazetteers, but also non-Daoist ones, such as official and local histories, epigraphy, anecdotal literature, and, for the later periods, government archives and the press, in order to explore how Chinese people perceived and understood the Heavenly Master institution. While each of these sources provides only a one-sided view of the Heavenly Masters’ activities, taken as a whole, they converge to form a coherent discourse. More details could be unearthed on the working of the institution seen from the inside, and unpublished archives and manuscripts, notably from Daoist families, have the potential to further expand the source base in the future.

Furthermore, the existing relevant scholarly literature on the history of the Heavenly Masters as a whole is still modest in size, the most important studies so far being those by Wang Chien-ch’uan 王見川, who has devoted a well-documented dissertation, now published, to the history of Heavenly Masters that is particularly strong on setting chronology right, and on the impact on popular culture.⁶ Terry Kleeman has published an important synthesis on the early church but has left the issue of continuity largely aside.⁷ Recently, a team of scholars directed by Gai Jianmin has published a five-volume series of biographies of all Heavenly Masters to the 63rd; unfortunately, its scholarly value is limited by confusion as well as numerous undocumented claims.⁸ The institution itself is now busy anew writing its own history, as it has been doing for centuries, producing texts that are both

well documented and insightful and yet often need to be unpacked.⁹ Paul Amato has written a study that provides a close analysis of the main history produced by the Heavenly Master institution, the *Han tianshi shijia* 漢天師世家, compared to its antecedents and sources.¹⁰

By contrast, there is a vast literature on specific aspects, such as individual Heavenly Masters or specific texts. The question of the chronology and reasons for the rise of the Longhushan Zhangs between the late Tang and late Song in particular have been energetically explored since the 2000s. The field of Daoist studies is growing quickly; I have attempted to keep track of all relevant publications, but new studies and material relevant to some aspect of the history of the Heavenly Master institution are coming out every week. I hope to contribute to this growing field by shedding new light on what sort of religious organization the Heavenly Master institution was. By piecing together all of the data and insights that are scattered in different subfields of Chinese history, I aim to show that the Heavenly Master institution was even more important to Chinese society than it appears to be in the current historiography.

Structure of the book

Such a project is necessarily both a history of an institution, its ideology and social role, and a succession of biographies, at least of those Heavenly Masters who marked the institution with their own personal talent and vision. The succession of sixty-five Heavenly Masters has seen the alternation of figures of hazy historicity (and among early generations, downright a-historicity), others who are mostly documented for their official role and do not afford us the possibility to write a biography, and, finally, a few who have made their mark, left a substantial record (both by themselves and their contemporaries), and who come across as strong individuals. The founder, Zhang Daoling, who is studied not as a historical figure but as a divine persona, has been the most important actor in our story. One key historical Heavenly Master is the thirtieth-generation holder, Zhang Jixian, who by virtue of his own charisma ushered his institution into a new era; another, maybe the best

documented, is the forty-third, Zhang Yuchu 張宇初 (1361–1410), who exerted unprecedented power. Others are the more tragic figures who had to face the political decline of their institution in the context of secular modernity: the 62nd Heavenly Master, Zhang Yuanxu 張元旭 (1862–1925), and 63rd Heavenly Master, Zhang Enpu 張恩溥 (1904–1969). This book is built around successive moments of change incarnated by these exceptional individuals, but does not follow a purely chronological structure.

Chapter 1, “Inventing the Founding Ancestor: The Lives of Zhang Daoling,” narrates the story of Zhang Daoling as a divine persona. While a historical Zhang is highly elusive, and the earliest stages of the process of building his myth are clouded in debates on the dating of the sources, he gradually rises in the medieval period as both a powerful alchemist, revered together with his favorite disciples, and a founder of the Tianshidao institutions, which he bequeathed to his son. Zhang’s aura was claimed by various groups, some of them asserting lineal descent, and others availing themselves of direct revelation. One of the many Zhang families that claimed descent and organized a local cult to him, located at Longhushan, eventually managed to reshape the Zhang Daoling myth to their exclusive advantage.

Chapter 2, “The Rise of Longhushan,” explains why, of the many Zhang families who claimed descent from Zhang Daoling, the one that lived at Longhushan was uniquely successful. This success is to an important extent rooted in the particular location and history of this holy site. The chapter describes the geography of Longhushan and its layers of sanctity: the pre-Daoist traces, the first temple to Zhang Daoling, and the rise of a trading township-cum-military outpost that became during the latter half of the Tang period a place concentrating wealth and power, that the Zhangs were able to harness first on a local, then regional, and eventually empire-wide scale.

Chapter 3, “The Heavenly Masters in the History of Daoist Ordinations,” continues the story of the rise of the Longhushan Zhangs by identifying their one expertise that drew the attention of Daoists, rulers, and laypeople throughout the empire: ordination. It argues that universal ordination, as the gateway to salvation, was at the core of the early Heavenly

Master church and was soon fully localized. By the Tang, the imperial state had favored the concentration of the right to ordain people in official monasteries, but these declined with the troubles of the late Tang period. From the ninth century at the latest, the Longhushan Zhangs eagerly took over this role, attracting from near and far both laypeople and priests for ordinations held collectively thrice a year. They also remodeled ordination ranks so as to give themselves a monopolistic right on ordinations. A specific historical conjuncture and liturgical innovation thus allowed the Longhushan Zhangs to build a unique center where salvation was available to all.

Chapter 4, “New Rituals and the Longhushan Synthesis of Modern Daoism,” analyzes the close connections between the rise of the Heavenly Master institution at Longhushan and the deep transformations of early modern Daoist ritual, characterized by the appearance, success, and eventual integration of new exorcistic traditions, the *daofa* 道法. It shows that one important reason for the huge popularity of the Longhushan ordinations was that they welcomed the “popular,” sometimes socially marginal, practitioners of the *daofa* and thus legitimized and licensed them, as well as their martial gods. By the twelfth century, Longhushan became a training and regulating center for all the *daofa*, and the Heavenly Master institution produced theological and liturgical texts that paved the way for a synthesis of all the *daofa* within a unified Daoist framework, thus creating modern Daoism as we know it.

Chapter 5, “The Mature Institution: Longhushan during the Song-Yuan Period,” chronicles the gradual institutional construction from the tenth to the fourteenth century that resulted in the powerful organization described in the standard texts (which we almost all have in Ming editions) where it presents itself. It distinguishes and explains the interactions between the patriarchal line of the successive Heavenly Masters; the Zhang lineage; the Longhushan Daoists who formed a well-defined corps of elite Daoists running temples, schools, and residences at Longhushan and networks extending from there; and the avenues for state recognition of this complex institution.

Chapter 6, “The Most Powerful Heavenly Master Ever? The Lives of Zhang Yuchu,” is a biography of the 43rd Heavenly Master, who occupies a unique place in the history of the institution. Zhang Yuchu was a prolific and authoritative writer, which allows us to explore both his private life in more detail than is possible for most other Heavenly Masters, and his coherent vision for Daoism that informed the way he shaped his institution.

Chapter 7, “The Institution under the Ming and the Qing,” shows that following the rapid buildup during the Song and Yuan periods, the Heavenly Master institutional framework remained remarkably stable over the next five centuries. It explores the relations of the Heavenly Masters with the imperial state and court, their place and standing in society, the role of their elite priests serving as chaplains in court, and their relation with Daoists and temples throughout the country through the hierarchical network of the central temples allied with Longhushan.

Chapter 8, “The Heavenly Masters and Late Imperial Chinese Society,” explores the role of the institution as described in the previous chapter in the making and control of local society in much of the empire. It argues that the institution maintained order through its armies of exorcistic gods; that it licensed many types of religious specialists, thus determining who could or could not perform rituals down to the village level; that it also licensed (by canonizing) local gods; that it served as a high court of justice for lawsuits instructed in local temples; and that it taxed local communities to support this bureaucratic apparatus. It thus operated as a full-fledged religious bureaucracy, in continuity with the early Heavenly Master church.

Finally, chapter 9, “The Predicaments of Modernity: The Heavenly Masters since the 1850s,” tells the story of the radical transformations wrought on the Heavenly Master institutions starting with the destruction of Longhushan by the Taiping armies in 1858, followed by reconstruction and the presence of Christian missionaries, the end of the official status of the Heavenly Master with the founding of the Republic in 1912, and the travails of the Heavenly Master as he had to reinvent his role as a religious leader in the context of the 1910s and 1920s. My own narrative ends in 1949, even though the story of the Heavenly Masters is continuing to unfold before our eyes.