

Empowered Writing: Exorcistic and Apotropaic Rituals in Medieval China, by Stephan Peter Bumbacher. St. Petersburg, Florida: Three Pines Press, 2012. 220 pp. US\$34.95 (paper).

This volume begins with an anecdote. Sometime in the early third century CE, a wild wind suddenly arose while Wu Meng 吳猛, a master of esoteric arts, was in the home of Zhou 周, an official in the small town of Xunyang 潯陽. Wu Meng wrote out a talisman and threw it onto the house. In a moment the wind died down (13).

How are we to understand this intriguing narrative recorded in the fourth-century *Soushen ji* 搜神記? What is a talisman (*fu* 符)? How can such a talisman subdue wild winds, possibly a typhoon? How does one learn to write out talismans and wield such power? What is the power inherent in texts? How did such efficacious texts appear in the world?

These questions form the crux of Stephan Bumbacher's aptly titled book, *Empowered Writing*, in which he takes us on a complicated journey through hundreds of years of Chinese religious life as he explores the practices and theological premises associated with talismans and other forms of efficacious, powerful writing that appeared in Medieval China. Although these issues may seem arcane and perhaps marginal, they are in fact central to the understanding of a wide range of Chinese religious culture from late Warring States popular religion through Han imperial religion, medieval Daoism and Buddhism, and up to contemporary religious practices. Moreover, similar practices are found in many other religious cultures, so a good understanding of Chinese contexts can help in comparative and cross-cultural studies. While providing a detailed examination of the complex Chinese contexts in which empowered writing was employed, Bumbacher also examines the usefulness of Western academic categories, such as magic, to describe and analyze the Chinese material.

The book is divided into three parts: "Tallies," "Petitions," and "Scriptures"—three textual modalities that were central to medieval Daoist practice. Despite their similarities, these modalities in fact had distinct histories.

In the first part of the book, Bumbacher explores the origins of

the *fu*-talisman as one of four related types of tallies. Along with *jie* 節, *qi* 契, and *quan* 券, it was used in the polities of the Warring States. All of these were bipartite documents that indicated various modes of authentication, legitimation, and contractual obligation. One half of the document—be it inscribed on wood, paper, a tiger-shaped bronze, or bronze tubes—was given by an authority figure to a dependent or subject. The other half was kept by the superior. When the two halves of the tally were brought together, the agreement signified by the tally was authenticated and allowed to proceed. Such documents were used as passports guaranteeing safe passage, as loan agreements, and, most important for later Daoist practice, as military tokens by which a lord could send commands and receive reports from his commanders in the field. As illness was widely perceived in early and medieval China as demonic invasion of the body, the military association of the *fu*-talisman was adapted and incorporated into healing and religious practices. Bumbacher then traces the various religious associations of the *fu*-talisman with ritual techniques, prayers, and confessions. The ritual ingestion of talismans and confession became core practices in the emerging Daoist movements in the second century CE. Bumbacher argues that in religious contexts the deployment of the *fu*-talisman by a ritual master was actually a ritual matching of tallies with the appropriate celestial authority, who would then dispatch troops to protect the ill by exorcising the demons.

In the second part of the book, Bumbacher examines a uniquely Daoist ritual practice: the petitioning rite that was at the core of Celestial Master ritual practice. He examines this rite by looking at two more types of documents adapted by medieval Daoists from the imperial civil and military administrations: petitions (*zou* 奏, *zhang* 章) and registers (*lu* 錄 or 籙). The use of these documents assumed a celestial bureaucracy modeled upon an idealized imperial administration. The petitioning rites thus emulated imperial audiences. Bumbacher provides a detailed description of the installation of the ritual space—called the Quiet Chamber (*jingshe* 靜舍)—the ritual preparations, and the performance of the petitioning rite. The most intriguing part of this bureaucratic procedure is the meditative journey of the priest, accompanied by a

procession of his externalized body gods, to deliver the petition at the celestial court.

The third part of the book, “Scriptures,” is truly groundbreaking. Bumbacher presents intriguing parallels between Buddhist and Daoist conceptions of sacred scriptures, including their extra-human origins, transmission, and efficacy. Intriguingly, Bumbacher shows possible Indic Buddhist impact on the Daoist cult of the book as well as on visualization techniques. Particularly important is the *Banzhou sanmei jing* 般舟三昧經, T 418, Lokakṣema’s translation of the *Pratyutpanna-(buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita)-samādhi sūtra*, dating to 179 CE. This text may well be the earliest discussion of visualization preserved in Chinese as it provides instructions for a special Buddhist meditative state of known as *samādhi* of direct encounter with the Buddha of the present (*pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi*) by which the practitioner can visualize the “famous great mountains and the Mount Sumerus in all the Buddha-realms.” Most important, “they see the Buddha Amitābha, hear the sutra which he preaches . . .” (143). Moreover, after disappearing in an apocalyptic age, the text will then reappear in the human realm, but will remain hidden in stupas and caves. The similarities to Daoist notions of textual revelation and transmission that would appear in texts of the third and fourth centuries are obvious.

In the epilogue, Bumbacher resumes the discussion of Wu Meng’s deployment of talismans with which he began the book. Having explained the complex and intricate web of meanings associated with Wu Meng’s act, Bumbacher challenges the received description of talismans as “magic” among China scholars.

This book is philologically excellent, rich in historical detail, and replete with extended and accurate translations from a variety of sources. With its challenging suggestions of Buddhist impact on the earliest stages of Daoist practice, this book is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship on medieval Chinese religion.

Gil Raz
Dartmouth College