Introduction

The *Ordination Scroll of Empress Zhang* (1493) in the San Diego Museum of Art collection is a large-scale horizontal scroll measuring over twenty-seven meters in width and around half a meter in height (Fig. I.1).[1] The scroll consists of text and images painted on paper with fine outlines and brilliant colors. It records the Daoist ordination of an empress that took place in 1493 during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Based upon the date, the imperial ordinand has been identified as Empress Zhang 張皇后 (1470–1541) (Fig. I.2), consort of the Hongzhi 弘治 Emperor (r. 1488–1505) (Fig. I.3). She was ordained by Zhang Xuanqing 張玄慶 (d. 1509), the forty-seventh Heavenly Master (*tianshi* 天師) of the Zhengyi 正一 (Orthodox Unity) School, one of the two main branches of the Daoist religion and the dominant Daoist institution of the Ming dynasty.[2] The empress is portrayed in the scroll as a Daoist priestess, in the presence of the Zhengyi patriarch and other celestial beings in a sea of colored clouds (Fig. I.4). A long inscription in the scroll, written by Zhang Xuanqing, lists the many sacred teachings and celestial titles that were transmitted to the empress through her ordination.

Since the Tang dynasty (618–906), Daoist ordinations have been codified into a hierarchy in which followers could progress through levels

of ordinations as they advanced in training.[3] With each level of ordination, adepts received increasingly prestigious and exclusive teachings from their master, until reaching the highest level, known as *Shangqing* 上清 ("Highest Clarity"). At the heart of Zhengyi ordinations were scriptures (*jing*經) and registers (*lu* 籙): the former represent sacred teachings, while the latter consist of celestial beings that the ordinand could command. The *Ordination Scroll* lists all the sacred documents, titles, and powers that were transmitted to Empress Zhang in her ordination. Based upon this, we know that Empress Zhang received the highest level of Daoist ordinations from the Zhengyi institution.

The *Ordination Scroll* is the only imperial ordination document of its kind to have survived, making it a key source in the study of the history of Daoist ordinations.[4] Its rich textual and pictorial contents reveal the lavish appearance of such documents and the items that were transmitted with them. It offers rare insight into the relationship between the Heavenly Masters and a Ming empress, which would otherwise have remained unknown. Furthermore, its unusual portrayal of Empress Zhang as a Zhengyi priestess reveals an unexpected side to Ming empresses, who are not known for their engagement with self-representations in pictorial form.[5] Given its rarity and importance, the *Ordination Scroll* deserves detailed analysis and a dedicated effort to understand it.

The groundwork for the study of the *Ordination Scroll* was laid in the year 2000 by Stephen Little in the *Taoism in the Arts of China* exhibition, in which catalogue the scroll was reproduced and discussed.[6] Since then, further research has been conducted, but fundamental questions concerning the contents of the scroll remain, such as, who are the celestial beings depicted and why are they depicted in this particular way?[7] What teachings were transmitted to the empress and what was their significance? Apart

from clarifying basic aspects of the scroll, this book also aims to build upon previous discussions by considering the broader historical and cultural context of Empress Zhang's ordination by the Zhengyi institution.

In recent years, there have been enormous advancements in Daoist studies, including the publication of seminal references and research guides that have made it much easier to access and decipher Daoist source material.[8] The Ming dynasty has special significance for the study of the history of Daoism since the core surviving body of Daoist texts known as *Zhengtong Daozang* 正統道藏 (Daoist Canon of the Zhengtong Reign, 1445) and its supplement were compiled during this time. Certain aspects of Ming Daoism have received considerable scholarly attention, such as the worship of the deity Zhenwu 真武 (Perfected Warrior) and the patronage of Mount Wudang 武當山 in Hubei Province related to it, as well as the Daoist fervour of the Jiajing 嘉靖 Emperor (r. 1521–66) expressed in material culture.[9] More recently, Richard Wang's research on Daoism and Ming princes is a welcome addition to the field.[10] Furthermore, an important development in the study of Ming Daoism is the recognition of the significance of Thunder Rituals during this period, which, as we shall see, is relevant for understanding the *Ordination Scroll*.[11] One area that is in need of further study is the Ming history of the Zhengyi School, the key Daoist institution of the period. Surveys of the Heavenly Masters have been presented by Zhang Jiyu 張繼禹, Zhang Jintao 張金濤, and Wang Jianchuan 王見川. Relevant material has also been presented by Vincent Goossaert, with a focus on the late Qing period (1644–1911).[12] However, the only book devoted specifically to the Zhengyi institution in the Ming dynasty remains Zhuang Hongyi's 莊宏誼 publication, dating back to 1986.[13] The present study hopes to contribute to the discussion by considering the *Ordination Scroll* from the perspective of the Zhengyi institution and focusing on its changing relationship with the imperial court during the Ming dynasty.

Another area that has been relatively understudied is women and gender in Daoism. As Beata Grant observes, early writings on this topic have tended to emphasize feminine metaphors that appear in the classic text *Daodejing* 道德經 (Way of the Virtue and its Power) and from them to infer "proto-feminist" sentiments embedded in Daoism.[14] Efforts have been made to move away from such idealized conceptions of Daoism towards greater historical contextualization. Pioneering research on the topic of women and gender in Daoism include publications by Catherine Despeux, Suzanne Cahill, and Zhan Shichuang 詹石窗.[15] In particular, much attention has been paid to women's involvement in Daoism during the Tang dynasty (618–907) (see Chapter One), with exceptions focusing on the Jin–Yuan (1115–1234; 1279–1368) and late Qing periods.[16] The degree of female participation in Daoism during the Ming dynasty remains largely unknown.[17] Information about their organized participation in Daoism is scarce, perhaps due to official policies that discouraged women from joining monasteries and the patrilineal focus of the Ming Zhengyi institution, discussed in later chapters. The *Ordination Scroll* is thus all the more valuable as a record that documents the involvement of a high-ranking imperial woman with the Zhengyi institution. It suggests the existence of activities and networks that were part of women's lives during the Ming dynasty that have been left out of historical accounts. This book explores the significance of Empress Zhang's ordination in relation to her specific position as a young empress in the mid-Ming imperial household. Furthermore, the issue of gender is relevant to how female figures are portrayed in the *Ordination Scroll* and to the inclusion of particular teachings that catered to the well-being of the empress.

In addition to considering the ordination of Empress Zhang as a historical event, this book also studies in detail the *Ordination Scroll* as a

material artifact. In this respect, it is part of the emergence of "Daoist art" as an area of academic enquiry. Compared to the well-established field of Buddhist art, the study of Daoist art developed relatively recently.[18] An important milestone is the *Taoism and the Arts of China* exhibition in the year 2000, mentioned earlier.[19] Given the youth of this field, its foundations need to be secured through the identification and proper understanding of representative objects, in addition to the exploration of wider trends and concepts. The value of close study of individual Daoist objects has been demonstrated by scholars such as Shih-Shan Susan Huang and Maggie C. K. Wan.[20] Furthermore, while objects are not straightforward windows to the past, they can provide entry points for understanding broader historical and cultural developments. It is upon this basis that this book focuses on a single object, the *Ordination Scroll*.

As Stephen Little observes, one of the reasons why scholars have been slow to engage with Daoist art has been the difficulty in defining Daoism.[21] However, with the tremendous growth of scholarship on Daoism in its myriad forms this can no longer serve as a justification. There are indications that Daoist art is gaining wider recognition as more publications, dissertations, and exhibitions on this subject appear.[22] The field is also developing in diversity as different approaches are applied. As Susan Huang notes, the contours of the field have mirrored earlier scholarship on Buddhist art, with emphasis upon the identification of deities and their representations, using "iconography, iconology, and formal analysis" as the main research methods.[23] Such approaches remain useful for understanding the contents of objects and their place in broader art historical narratives. However, iconography does have its limitations as it assumes fixed identifications that neatly correspond with textual descriptions, while formal analysis, if applied in isolation, may lead to insufficient consideration of function and

context.[24] The interdisciplinary framework of material and visual culture has provided new possibilities, as Susan Huang demonstrates in her important publication on Daoist visual culture.[25] It has enabled the discussion of a wider range of objects in relation to each other, and their significance within cultural systems through which meanings are created and understood.[26] The framework of material and visual culture also overcomes the problem of having to apply the value-laden concept of "art" on objects, such as the anonymously painted *Ordination Scroll*, that were not made for art's sake in the modern sense.[27] This book applies both traditional approaches and the ideas of material and visual culture to the study of the *Ordination Scroll*. Iconography has been utilized to examine the celestial beings portrayed in the scroll. The shortcomings of this approach are addressed by considering multiple perspectives based on relevant Ming sources and, where possible, the consideration of sources across cultural categories.

This book is divided into two parts, each further subdivided into three chapters. Part One focuses upon the context of Empress Zhang's ordination as a historical event. The first chapter in Part One considers the history of imperial ordinations in order to understand how Empress Zhang's ritual relates to earlier and contemporaneous examples. Through comparisons with other documented cases, the chapter attempts to clarify the location and purpose of Empress Zhang's ordination. In Chapter Two, the event is situated within the life of Empress Zhang. Its significance in relation to her status and circumstances around 1493 is examined. In particular, it considers how her ordination may be interpreted as an expression of power. Chapter Three focuses on the Zhengyi School and the Heavenly Master Zhang Xuanqing, who was the other key protagonist in the event. It traces the fluctuating fortunes of the Zhengyi institution and how the ordination of Empress Zhang empowers not only the empress but also the Zhengyi School.

Part Two of the book changes focus to examine the *Ordination Scroll* as a material artifact. Firstly it will discuss various aspects of the production, condition, and format of the scroll. Unusual features of the scroll are highlighted and possible explanations for them are presented. This is then followed by detailed discussions of the images in the scroll. The chapter identifies the various celestial beings depicted, and explores the significance of particular inclusions and representations in the context of Ming visual culture. Lastly, the inscriptions in the *Ordination Scroll* will be studied. The various items transmitted to Empress Zhang will be analyzed and explained. A complete translation and transcription of the main inscription is provided in the appendices.