

## The origins of Daoist exorcism

In his chapter in *Early Chinese religion*, Li Jianmin examines changing medical etiologies from the Warring States to the end of the Six Dynasties. In so doing, he quotes a wide range of literature which, taken together, provides most of what we need to understand the origins of Daoist exorcism.<sup>1</sup>

### Illness as possession

“Being haunted by demons served as the dominant etiological notion during the pre-Qin period” 鬼神崇人是先秦時代病因觀的主流 (p. 1103). “The primary cause of disease in the Shuihudi daybooks is the souls of close relatives”; the second is “being haunted by evil ghosts like ‘external ghosts’ or ‘external ghosts that have died prematurely’” 睡虎地秦簡《日書》的〈病〉、〈有疾〉等篇... 直系祖靈為主；再者，以「外鬼」、「外鬼殤死」等惡鬼為崇次之 (pp. 1108-09). Attributing disease to close relatives is found already on the Shang oracle bones; attributing it to ghosts that have died prematurely is still very much present in modern Chinese popular religion.

But what is the mechanism by means of which these two kinds of ghost “haunt”? If early texts pay little or no attention to the mechanism, during the Warring States period, there was a “sudden rise in theories of internal causation” (p. 1106). This will lead, in the medical Classics, to rationalistic explanations of disease in terms of the movements of Yin and Yang, and of the fear, anxiety, and other emotions that make individuals vulnerable. Ghosts go from being the cause of disease to its symptom, and it is not ghosts that invade the body but “evil energies” 邪氣. According to the *Lingshu*, however, “wind, rain, cold, and heat are unable to cause vacuity 虛, and evil 邪 alone cannot harm a person” (p. 1119): “It is invariably only when the two vacuities of vacuity wind and vacuity in the body combine with each other that wind is able to settle in the body” (p. 1120) 此必因虛邪之風，與其身形，兩虛相得，乃客其形. As Li says in discussing the *Huangdi neijing*, “technical terms for causes of disease such as ‘evil’ (*xie* 邪) or ‘evil *qi*’” simply replace terms “from the earlier discourse on demonic haunting (*guisui* 鬼祟)” (p. 1116): *xie* replaces *gui*, but the mechanism of “invasion” and “investing” of the body by alien forces is the same.

A passage quoted by Li from the *Han Feizi* helps clarify what is involved:

What everybody refers to as “being haunted” is in fact a condition wherein the *hun* and *po* souls have departed and the spirit is in disarray. When the spirit is in disarray, virtue is absent. When demons do not haunt a person, the *hun* and *po* souls do not depart, and when the *hun* and *po* souls have not departed, the spirit is not in disarray. The state of the spirit not being in disarray is called “having virtue”.

凡所謂祟者，魂魄去而精神亂，精神亂則無德。鬼不崇人則魂魄不去，魂魄不去而精神不亂，精神不亂之謂有德。

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<sup>1</sup> Li Jianmin, “*They shall expel demons: etiology, the medical canon and the transformation of medical techniques before the Tang*,” in *Early Chinese religion*, Part One: *Shang through Han*, eds. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski (Brill, 2009), pp. 1103-50. Hereafter, citations from Li’s text will be given in the text.

According to Han Feizi, then, the immediate cause of illness is soul-loss, which causes the spirit to be “in disarray” and “loss of virtue” 失德.<sup>2</sup> Deprived of its souls and life power, the empty body is open to investment by other souls and powers: illness is the result of possession.

It is no doubt because the mechanism remained the same in spite of the change in vocabulary that texts from the Eastern Han on combine the *qi*-based and demon-derived explanations and produce an explicit theory of illness as possession. Thus the *Maijing* (third century) says: “The five viscera are at once the abode of the *hun* and *po* souls and the support of the essence spirit 精神. When the *hun* and *po* souls become volatile, the five viscera are empty, and evil spirits 邪神 immediately take up residence there” (p. 1131) 五臟者，魂魄之宅舍，精神之所依託也。魂魄飛揚者，其五臟空虛也，即邪神居之。The *Zhubing yuanhou lun* of the Sui explains one of the so-called “infixation” (*zhu* 注/疰) diseases as follows:

When a person with vacuity in the body comes close to a corpse at a funeral, he will receive the corpse’s *qi*, and it will lodge in his channels, network vessels, viscera and bowels. If he later touches or sees a coffin, this will make it move. As a result, the person will experience stabbing pain in the heart and abdomen, even to the point of vomiting. That is why it is called “funerary infixation” 喪注. (p. 1144)

人有臨尸喪，體虛者則受其氣，停經絡腑臟。若觸見喪柩，便即動，則心腹刺痛，乃至變吐，故謂之喪注。

The physician Xu Sibao 徐嗣伯 of the fifth century writes:

Corpse infixation means that ghost *qi* is latent and has not yet arisen. Hence it makes the person sunken and stagnant. Throw a dead person’s pillow at it and the *qi* of the *hun* soul will fly off and be unable again to attach itself to the body 附體. Thus, the corpse infixation will be cured. (p. 1145)

尸注者，鬼氣伏而未起，故令人沉滯。得死人枕投之，魂氣飛越，不得復附體，故尸注可差。

*Futi* 附體, of course, is one of the standard words still today for “possession”.

### Illness as punishment

The *Zuozhuan* contains quite a number of accounts in which illness and even death are caused by vengeful spirits. Such stories, suggests Li Jianmin, are an expression of the “traditional Chinese notion of ‘retribution’ (*bao* 報)” (p. 1129). He then quotes a *Shiji* biography that reveals the emergence of a notion of trans-generational transmission of guilt: “Three generations of generals spells inevitable defeat. What does ‘inevitable defeat’ refer to? Because inevitably many are killed, the descendants receive the inauspiciousness” 夫將三世者必敗，必敗者何也？必其所殺伐多矣。其後受其不祥。

<sup>2</sup> Once primarily understood as the power of the royal ancestors, source of dynastic sway, *de* here is more like the “life power” of the individual.



Writing at the end of the Western Han, Liu Xiang says that all apparent injustice in this world can be explained in terms of the ancestors: “When a person with outstanding virtue perishes, it is because of misfortune left over from his ancestors. When a reckless person lives on, it is the result of blessings left over from the ancestors” (p. 1134) 貞良而亡，先人餘殃；猖獗而活，先人餘烈. By the late Eastern Han, the *Taiping jing*, with its notion of “inherited guilt” (*chengfu* 承負), raises this idea of trans-generational guilt (and merit) to the level of a general principle governing an entire system of divine/demonic justice.

### The otherworld bureaucracy

While there are plenty of signs, already in the late Warring States, of the development of a Taishan-linked underworld bureaucracy to deal with the dead, it is in the *Taiping jing* that we see the perfection of a truly Legalist system of surveillance and punishment in the other world (p. 1127)<sup>3</sup>:

There are no faults, small or great, that Heaven does not know. Reports on good and evil deeds are noted in registers, which are thoroughly collated on a daily, monthly, and yearly basis, and years are subtracted from [each human’s] count (*suan* 算, i.e. life span allotment). [Those] whose evil deeds never stop then see the Gate of demons 鬼門. Earth gods summon and question them [to check whether] their statements are concordant with [the registers. If] they are not, embittered ghosts inflict punishment on them until they admit [their wrongs]. Their names are transmitted to the bureau of fate (*mingcao* 命曹) for a final comparison [of their records and, if their] count (*suan*) is exhausted, they enter earth (i.e. the realm of the dead), and their transgressions are passed on to their descendants.

過無大小，天皆知之。簿疏善惡之籍，歲日月拘校；前後除算減年；其惡不止，便見鬼門。地神召問，其所為辭語同不同，復苦思治之，治後乃服。上名命曹上對，算盡當入土，愆流後生。

Another passage quoted by Li (p. 1127) shows the work of collation of all these records being done in the Hall of Light 明堂 and the names of the guilty being passed on to Greater Yin 太陰. The officials of Greater Yin

summon [the wrongdoer’s] ancestors, interrogate and beat them by way of punishment, and order them to return to their household to tell [the wrongdoer] that he is cursed and held accountable for the burden [of his transgressions], that his conviction is underway and cannot be stopped, which is why disease is sent to him. A household stricken with disease must gain release from the Yin (*jiyin* 解陰, i.e., ancestor ghosts) and have the indictment repealed (*jiezhe* 解謫).

隨疏之者眾多，事事相關。及更明堂，拘校前後，上其姓名，主者任錄。如過負輒白司官，司官白於太陰。太陰之吏取召家先，去人考掠治之。令歸家

<sup>3</sup> On this subject, see Grégoire Espeset, “Criminalized abnormality, moral etiology, and redemptive suffering in the secondary strata of the *Taiping jing*,” *Asia Major* 3rd series 15.2 (2002), pp. 1–50.

言，咒詛逋負，被過行作，無有休止，故遣病人。病人之家，當為解陰解謫，使得不作，謫解得除之，不解其謫，病者不止，復責作之

In the roughly contemporary commentary of Zheng Xuan on the *Zhouli*, we are told that the director of destiny (Siming 司命) is “a minor spirit who resides among humans and is in charge of watching for minor transgressions and making denunciatory reports” 此小神，居人間，司察小過，作譴告者爾：

From the late Eastern Han on, the director of destiny and the corpse worms formed a single system for managing transgressions. The *Baopuzi* explains that on every *gengshen* day the three corpses inside the human body ascend to heaven to report to the director of destiny any wrongdoings committed by their host” (p. 1139).

東漢中晚期以下，司命與人身的尸蟲共同構成司過的系統；《抱朴子·微旨》說，人身體中的三尸每到庚申這一天，它們即上天報告司命神有關人所犯的過失

The system of surveillance and punishment sketched by Li was completed by earth gods on the level of local communities and, in the Heavenly Masters, by the Three Officials, grand directors of destiny of the three-layered universe composed of “heaven above, the earth below, and the waters under the earth.” The invisible world of the spirits was no doubt far better policed than that of this world.

### Exorcism

In a world of disease-bearing and death-dealing spirits and “evil *qi*”, exorcism was a vital necessity, as is suggested by the names of books in the *Hanshu* bibliographical section on techniques (*shushu*):

We find titles like “auspicious signs transforming into anomalies” 禎祥變怪, “humans, ghosts, specters, and the six domestic animals transforming into anomalies” 人鬼精物六畜變怪, “curses for transforming into anomalies” 變怪誥咎 and “capturing the inauspicious and investigating demonic entities” 執不祥劾鬼物, that is, books that are related in content to the excavated daybook manuscripts. (p. 1109)

The link between the anomalous—the monstrous—and the demonic would be worth exploring in itself, but most interesting for us here is the word *he* 劾, translated “investigating”, for it is of a piece with the image of the earth god in early Daoist texts like the *Huangshu guodu yi* and the transmission ritual in Dunhuang manuscript Stein 203, where

the priest, having just externalized the officers of his body, tells them to report to the local true officer: “together with the four lords who infuse energies, investigate, summon, and cross-examine” 注氣監察考召四君 (l. R2.6), according



to the manuscript<sup>4</sup>; “together with the various officer-lords who infuse energies, summon, and cross-examine” 注氣考召諸官君 in the *Guodu yi* (3a3-4). In the *Guodu yi*, the list of subordinate officials includes as well “the various officers who face the four directions and inspect” 四面監察諸官 (3a4).<sup>5</sup>

Early Heavenly Master Daoism simply carried on a long-standing tradition of exorcism which involved identifying anomalies and then summoning, cross-examining, and judging them, as in a court of law.

Nor is that the only such tradition it carried on:

The Eastern Han classical scholar Zheng Xuan explained that the term “invocation with writing tablets” (*cezhu* 策祝) from the chapter on the “Great invoker” 太祝 in the *Zhouli* refers to offering up a petition to inform the spirits: “Invocation by means of writing tablets aims to send crime-diseases (*zuiji* 罪疾) far away.” (pp. 1135-36)

東漢的經學家鄭玄解釋《周禮·太祝》的「策祝」也就是上章告神：「策祝，遠罪疾。」

Incantations are also part of the exorcistic healing panoply of the *Wushi'er bingfang* 五十二病方 from Mawangdui, as is the Pace of Yu 禹步, likewise inherited by Daoists. Some of the incantations, says Li, “implore the spirits for help, others refer to methods and implements for exorcizing the disease-causing demons, and still others adopt a fierce tone to intimidate the demons” (pp. 1109-10) 而祝辭的內容，有向鬼神表達乞求的，有陳述驅除疾鬼的方法及用具者，也有語氣強硬、威脅鬼神的祝辭。

Particularly intriguing here is the “fierce tone to intimidate”, for it lifts the veil on a whole range of theatrical ritual behavior that is characteristic of Daoist exorcism to this day. Exorcists, moreover, shared such behavior with patients described in the *Lingshu* as having a disease that “manifested itself in states tending toward an exuberance of fire, heat and *yang* that were very theatrical and prone to violent outbursts” (p. 1122).

The ultimate form of exorcistic theater, of course, was the Nuo, which, according to the *Yueling*, involved driving the ghosts of pestilence out of the city and then hanging dismembered corpses of dogs over the city gates so as to “cast out misfortune and disaster, to interdict the ghosts of pestilence, and prevent them from regaining entry in the future” (p. 1113) 欲其攘除凶災，禁止疫鬼，勿使復入也。<sup>6</sup> Virtually identical rituals continued to be done by Daoists in South China right up to 1949.

But perhaps the most interesting idea of all comes from critical remarks of Wang Chong (p. 1115):

People suffering from illness experience severe physical pain and therefore say that demons are assaulting them with whips and staffs. If they see demons, they keep mallets and ropes by their side. In the fear and apprehension due to the pain

<sup>4</sup> See the critical edition of Lü Pengzhi, p. 140.

<sup>5</sup> See my “The Old Lord’s Scripture for the Chanting of the Commandments,” p.

<sup>6</sup> Li, p. 1113, is quoting the commentary of Sun Xidan 孫希旦 on the *Liji*.



of illness, they have absurd apparitions. At the onset of disease, they experience fear and surprise; hence they see demons arriving. Suffering from illness, they fear death; hence they see the demons' anger. Experiencing the pain of disease, they see demons' beating. All of these are empty fictions of their imagination and not necessarily real.

病者困劇身體痛，則謂鬼持箠杖毆擊之；若見鬼把椎鑱繩纏立守其旁，病痛恐懼，妄見之也。初疾畏驚，見鬼之來；疾困恐死，見鬼之怒；身自疾痛，見鬼之擊：皆存想虛致；未必有其實也。

The phrase translated “empty fictions of their imagination” is, in Chinese, 存想虛致: is it pure coincidence that the very term that will be at the heart of Shangqing practice and literature, *cunxiang*, often translated “to meditate”, is used here by Wang Chong? We have already seen how demons and the demonic are associated with the theatrical and the monstrous; we see here their link to the imaginary and the imagination. All who have studied both standard Daoist rituals like the Jiao and exorcistic rituals like the *fachang* in Taiwan or the Hunan rituals discovered by Patrice Fava and presented here by David Mozina are well aware that exorcistic rituals are far more theatrical and imaginative than the Jiao. They are also far more likely to be intimately tied to imaginative literature, as in the hagiographies of Chen Jinggu, Marshal Wen, and Zhenwu, to name but three of the most famous.

A recent thesis by Mark Meulenbeld on thunder ritual gives remarkable testimony to the special link between exorcism and imaginative literature.<sup>7</sup> But I cannot resist citing at length here my compressed account of the first day of a Lüshan-inspired thunder ritual done in the mountainous Hunan-Jiangxi border region of Chongyi county 崇義縣 (where Wang Yangming “suppressed the Yao”):

The “promising the incense” ritual takes place in the third to fifth month and begins at the chief Taoist’s house. Designed to invite the soldiers and masters of his Thunder Altar, it begins with their invitation, the Fabrication of Water, and the Hiding of the Souls of all local people and domestic animals in the holy water (a deep sea) where the demons cannot find them. Then, to Capture the Perverse, a cock is turned into a “perversity-devouring lion”, the evil spirits are first stuffed into its mouth and then into the pot, which is turned into an earth-prison, sealed, and placed under the lineage masters’ table, held in place by a rock which represents the Great Immortal Pangu. After a military invitation which begins with the Three Pure Ones and includes all the Lüshan gods, among whom is one Zhang Wulang who “overturns altars and destroys temples”, the Soldiers are Summoned and fed for the first time. The next day, having converted three of the five generals into the generals of the Three Primes (and having hid their souls), the Taoists and generals set out to music and percussion to the house of the “chief of the incense”. The main Taoist walks in the middle of the procession, and as he walks, he transforms: the road into snakes that lead to the Great Office of Yangping; the stones in the fields into demon-swallowers; and the trees in the

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<sup>7</sup> Mark R.E. Meulenbeld, “Civilized demons: Ming thunder gods from ritual to literature” (PhD thesis, Princeton, 2007).



forest into troops who will help their disciple hail all perverse gods off to the Yangping jail. At the house, he blows his horn to summon the troops, then enters the house and settles them in place before hanging up paintings of the Three Pure Ones. That afternoon, while one group of Taoists stays to recite, another, having first asked Luban to make a boat, forces epidemic gods into the mouth of a cock and then on to the straw boat. After going to each local water exit temple in order to fetch the tablet of its Lord of Fortune and, with the boat, to each incense head's house to gather disease, they proceed to the site of the confluence of two rivers to throw the burning boat into the water and send it to Yangzhou. They then bring the tablets of the lords back to the Jiao arena.<sup>8</sup>

The text of the first of the Daoist's transformations at the beginning of a three-day springtime ritual that is simply a preparation for a massive nine-day ritual to be done in the fall says literally, "By visualization transforms the big and little roads into *nammu* snakes big and little." The eighth day of the fall ritual is just as extraordinary:

Day 8 begins with the setting up of the Lüshan Tribunal, where the master playing Jiulang of Lüshan hears complaints, first from the people and then from the local earth god about the Sheguan under his orders. The Sheguan is summoned and upbraided. Another Taoist in the role of Wangmu uses her beauty to seduce the demons in the village in preparation for sweeping them into her net. Twenty young lads representing demons run about stealing food from the ambulatory merchant stands, while on the inside altar investigation is being made into how many villagers have died untoward deaths and why and straw replacement bodies are being made for each one and then hidden in the grass on the hills surrounding the village. The Three Generals, having received their instructions from Jiulang, pretend to chase the scattering demons while in fact going to fetch the straw persons. They bring them back and put them in a prison drawn by the master on the ground in front of the Jiao shed.<sup>9</sup> At noon, the demons are judged by three fully ordained Taoists representing Jiulang of Lüshan, Qilang of Hengshan, and Shilang of Mengshan<sup>10</sup>: the generals fetch the straw persons, and inquiry is made into the actual facts of each case. If they still have relatives in the village who can act as guarantors, they may stay for an alchemical transformation and rebirth ritual; if not, they are beaten and driven to Yangzhou. At the last, all the straw persons are carried to the river confluence, a cock is killed over a writ, and then all is burned and the ashes are thrown into the river. At day's end, while the Yangzhou soldiers are feasting, the master privately invites the Wushang wulang who then, together with the master, burst in on the banqueting Three Generals and

<sup>8</sup> Lagerwey, "Introduction," p. ?, Liu Jinfeng.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the book mentioned by Ge Hong in his *Baopuzi*: "Classic on the capture of mountain ghosts and old goblins to treat evil specters" 收山鬼老魅治邪精經 (mentioned by Li Jianmin, p. 1125).

<sup>10</sup> The joint appearance of these three divine masters in a ritual context of such dramatic nature is of great import: according to Bo Yuchan, writing in the early 13th century, "The method of the shamans began with King Potan, who transmitted it to King Pangu, who transmitted it to King Axiuluo, the King of Changsha, King Toutuo, Lüshan jiulang, Mengshan qilang, and Hengshan shilang" (*Daozang* no. 1307, *Haiqiong Bo zhenren yulu* 1.8b). In addition to the three masters, Toutuo appears on Chongyi paintings and both the King of Changsha and Pangu are invited to the rituals



chase them and their troops to the river. There the generals drop the command flags, change their clothes, and head back by another route; the master and the Wulang burn the flags, put the oblong stone(s) back together and return them to the river, send the soldiers off, and likewise return by a roundabout path.<sup>11</sup>

This, then, is the condition for the production of local society's most expensive ritual undertaking, a ritual done at best every ten years, whose function is to drive out all the accumulated "evil energies" of the local unfortunate dead and, at the same time, afford an opportunity for apprentice Daoists to climb the sword ladder and become full Daoists: the master's tradition of visualization.

The description above, with its straw persons, reminds us of another feature of early exorcism as revealed by archaeology: the lead and pine persons placed in 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century tombs to serve as substitutes for the dead, to pay their taxes, perform their corvée labor, and suffer in their place (p. 1142)—the idea being that, if the family dead were not made to suffer, they in turn would not inflict illness on their posterity.<sup>12</sup>

If most of the early exorcistic rituals alluded to above dealt with disease and dysfunction as possession of sick bodies or of troubled spaces, this is because, not unsurprisingly, rituals to treat disease as punishment appeared only when a moralistic understanding of illness had gained sufficient importance. According to the *Taiping jing*,

To dispel disease 解病 and bring peace to the emperor, Heaven must make gentlemen of morality explain to the many sages how to transform the people, that they meditate their transgressions 思過 in order to gain release from the burden of blame inherited from the ancestors 解先人承負之謫. Have each person make his own calculation and do not allow them to be lax. (p. 1126)  
今天當以解病而安帝王，令道德君明示眾賢，以化民間，各自思過，以解先人承負之謫，使凡人各自為身計，勿令解忽

The Heavenly Masters solution will be quite similar.

In reality, the self-examination here required of Daoist adepts has its roots in the pre-imperial self-cultivation texts studied by Mark Csikszentmihályi: by following Confucius' advice to perform traditional rituals "as if" the ancestors were present, elite individuals were invited to internalize the rites' values and, thereby, transfer these values—of reverence 敬, awe 畏, and sincerity 誠—into the practice of daily life.<sup>13</sup> Once values had been internalized, the logical next step was scrutiny of success in translating internalized values into external behavior: self-examination of the kind attributed to Confucius himself had been born. The *Taiping jing* and the Heavenly Masters were simply carrying on this long-established tradition, albeit in a negative, exorcistic context rather than a positive, sacrificial one.

<sup>11</sup> Lagerwey, "Introduction," p.

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller account, see Bai Bin, "Religious beliefs as reflected in the funerary record," *Early Chinese religion*, Part Two: *The period of division*, ed. by John Lagerwey and Lü Pengzhi (Brill, 2010), pp. 989-1074, esp. 1031-35.

<sup>13</sup> Csikszentmihályi, "Ethics and self-cultivation practice in early China," *Early Chinese religion*, Part One: *Shang through Han*, eds. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski (Brill, 2009), pp. 519-42, esp. 525-27.



But early Daoists also used the positive approach: by means of *shouyi* 守一, “holding on to unity”, the adept kept the good vital spirits inside his body and, thereby, prevented evil spirits from entering it. Thus Ge Hong mentions a “Classic on calling the body’s spirits to treat the hundred diseases” 呼身神治百病經 (p. 1125). We may assume it was much like the *Laozi zhongjing*, which teaches the adept how to visualize and thereby retain within his body a complex multiplicity of gods. In this text even the Great One 太一 appears in multiple forms, but close reading reveals the underlying, organic unity of the internal pantheon.<sup>14</sup> Regular visualizations are to be done according to a calendar whose logic remains impenetrable, but its culminating point is the autumn equinox when, in response to inspections conducted by the heavenly bureaucracy, the adept enters into his “quiet room” and, for three days and nights, holds in his mind’s eye the multiple vital spirits in his body, in effect preventing them from deserting him and going to report on him. According to a passage in the *Wushang biyao*, once the 18,000 internal spirits had been thoroughly integrated into the adept’s person, another 18,000 external spirits would come “attach themselves to his body”—proof, if any were needed, that Daoist “self-possession”, like the Confucian form studied by Csikszentmihályi, is a form of “controlled possession”.

Wild possession produces illness and death; controlled possession produces immortality.

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<sup>14</sup> See my “Deux écrits taoïstes anciens,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 14 (2004), pp. 139-71.