

Basic Conditions of Taoist Thunder Magic

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Florian C. Reiter

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道教雷法

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Contents

Foreword	VII
Introduction	1
The Biography of Yeh Ch'ien-shao	5
Chapter I: Man and Thunder Magic	
A First Approach to Thunder Magic	13
Human Nature and Thunder Magic	15
Summoning and Uniting [Thunder Divinities].....	19
Assembling the Divine Force	32
The Basis for Writing Amulets	41
Praying for Rain.....	47
Killing and Crusading, the Martial Side of Thunder Magic	54
The Creative Impetus.....	62
Chapter II: The Scope of Thunder Magic	
The Divine Texts of the Great Methods of the Five Thunders at the Jade Department in the Heaven of Highest Purity:	
Preface by Wang Wen-ch'ing	69
The Arrangement of the Offices of Thunder and Thunderclaps	74
Method of Consecrating Seals	79
Locations and Departments of the Five Thunders.....	81
Sacrifice to the Great Divinity of Law and Order	85
The Application of Thunder Breaths.....	87
Writing out Amulets to Cure Illnesses, Raise Dragons and Produce Rainfall	88
The Establishment of Hells for Evil Demons.....	96
Altars and Prayers for Rain or Clear Skies	100
The Crusade against Temples and the Eviction of Wicked Spirits.....	109
Ritual Steps and <i>Mudrās</i>	112
Conditions for the Ritual Transmission and [Spirit] Promotion.....	117

Abbreviations	121
Bibliography	123
The Sources in the Taoist Canon.....	126
Glossary	129

Foreword

Today Taoist Thunder Magic or Thunder Rituals (*Lei-fa* 雷法/*Wu-lei fa* 五雷法) constitute an established element in Taoist religious culture. Many ritual practices, convictions and emblems of Thunder Magic stem from antique traditions. The ritual specialisation and the name of Thunder Magic emerged during the Sung period (11th-13th cts.), uniting, developing and rationalizing exorcist and ritual methods that were already current in earlier periods of Taoist history albeit without the label of Thunder Magic.

This study intends to describe the basic notions, practices and intentions of Thunder Magic that often is connected with the names of *Sben-hsiao* (神霄) and *Ch'ing-wei* (清微) Taoism. The Taoist Canon contains abundant materials that show Thunder amulets, altars, seals and other ritual assets. Learned Discussions (*Lei-fa shuo* 雷法說) and similar texts show that Thunder Magic is not a unified religious and ritual element of Taoist culture but comprises ritual methods that many different local traditions, documentations and the patronage of legions of divinities identify.

Many texts cannot be attributed to any individual author but later Taoists, for example Pai Yü-ch'an (白玉蟾 fl. 1209-1224), are widely assumed to have had a hand in the actual formation of those texts. However, some texts very likely emerged in the time of Wang Wen-ch'ing (王文卿 1093-1153) who was a persuasive and famous promoter of Thunder Magic at the imperial court of the Sung (宋) dynasty. I try to focus on materials of that early period of Thunder Magic (12th ct.). Admittedly, the texts are often hard to understand and it is difficult to grasp the practical implications that they only indicate. In a sense, this presentation has a tentative character.

The German Research Foundation (Bonn) and the Ministry of Education of Taiwan (Taipeh) supported me to spend some time in Taiwan where I could consult Taiwanese colleagues and ritual specialists, who were very kind and helpful. In this sense, I especially wish to thank Profs. Lee Fong-mao (Academia Sinica) and Hsieh Ts'ung-hui (Taipei Normal University). The Katholische Akademische Ausländer Dienst (Bonn) gave Prof. Li Yüan-kuo (China/Chengdu, Academy of Social Sciences) the financial support to spend a couple of weeks in Berlin and work with me on some of the Thunder Magic materials that I present in this book. Yet, this book is just an attempt on my part to sort

out the basic conditions of Taoist Thunder Magic. I hope to draw the attention of the scholarly world to this fascinating field of research that matters for the understanding of Taoist religious culture as we have it today. Concerning the publication of this book I wish to express my sincere thanks for the support by Harrassowitz Company (Wiesbaden), especially Mr. J. Fetkenheuer.

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Florian C. Reiter

Introduction

Throughout history, the workings of religious Taoism are present on all levels of the Chinese society. Canonical hagiographies of saints and immortals and the biographies of historic persons show the activities and subtle influences that Taoists exerted. We usually read that they were learned persons who mastered the scriptures of Taoism and Confucianism, and they used to employ a great variety of practical skills and rituals. Skills and rituals saved from epidemics, droughts, floods and illness. Taoists acted for the wellbeing of the people, the administration and the state at large. This seems to be the standard range of Taoist aspirations and activities, and it is for this reason that we easily find the appropriate and persuasive rhetoric in Taoist texts throughout all ages.

Never mind the time and the period, Taoists always were very expert at divination. They healed illness and exorcised baleful influences, using amulets and other ritual devices. The Taoist activists seem to make use of a rather secret personal way of life, of prayer and meditation. There is, of course, the need for a protracted and rather complicated education that may lead to the career as a priest (*tao-shih* 道士), and again there is some secrecy about the actual reality of this career.¹ However, we also notice that in many cases we never learn whether the respective Taoist was a priest or not, whether he knew how to perform rituals or not. Perhaps there was the general understanding that this profession had to be taken for granted.

Some canonical encyclopaedias present superb literary summaries of the Taoist religious culture. Sometimes they were compiled at the behest of emperors and rulers. The series of such encyclopaedias started with the title *Wu-shang pi-yao* (無上必要6ct.). Encyclopaedias turn out to be major stepping-stones when we take up our studies of religious Taoism.²

On the other hand, biographies and hagiographies often speak about alleged historical persons and pose to feature the actual combination of all those

1 F.C.Reiter: The Aspirations and Standards of Taoist Priests in the Early T'ang Period, pp.133-150, in: AAS 1.

2 J.Lagerwey : *Wu-shang pi-yao*, somme taoïste du VIe siècle. Paris 1981.

theoretical and practical elements that characterize the Taoist and his vocation. Such sources show that the Taoist can interfere in the course of nature, for example, when he organises his individual essences of life, which goes with the Taoist self-cultivation to strive after an individual immortality. Taoism is characterized by elusive concepts of immortality that point to the very individual and final goal.

The Taoist, who lives in rural settings or even at the imperial court, is employed to fight against rain, drought and other natural disasters that need the deployment of martial spirit forces. Biographies and hagiographies bring us to realize that there must be a special relationship between the individual quality of the practitioner and the outer or social realities of his Taoist activities. We can find elaborate explanations for this delicate relationship in various canonical sources, and some of them are quite prominent in a book that intends to describe the conditions of Thunder Magic or Thunder Rituals.

Many activities in Thunder Magic remind of ecstatic and exorcist performances that certainly call to mind the opaque sphere of shaman culture. Taoist sources on the other hand explicitly reject the idea that Taoists have anything to do with the shaman branches of religious proficiency. We may suppose that the ecstatic state of mind and exorcist performances can hardly be a concern for an educated and learned person. Taoism, however, proves such a supposition to be wrong.

This study of Basic Conditions of Taoist Thunder Magic elucidates the workings of Thunder Magic (*wu-lei fa* 五雷法). This branch of ritual proficiency is associated with other schools in Taoist history, namely the *Shen-hsiao tao* (神霄道) and *T'ien-hsin cheng-fa* (天心正法).

Since the Sung-period the name Thunder Magic is a general and comprehensive name for a vast variety of exorcist rituals that later continued to flourish and were labelled *Ch'ing-wei* (清微) school (14th ct.). Finally, Thunder Magic became part of the general Taoist religious culture without being explicitly named Thunder Magic and singled out for separate practices. We can study this development, for example, in present day Taiwan, which, however, does not exclude the conscious continuation of Thunder Magic by individual priests or specialists who may claim to have family traditions reaching back to Taoists of the Sung period. The translation “magic” for the Chinese word *fa* (法) is the formulation that I prefer. In fact, we deal with rituals. Thunder Rituals would also be a good name translating *lei-fa* (雷法).

We know that the emergence of Thunder Magic in the Northern Sung-period is based on antique traditions of interpreting and handling natural phenomena, which always was and is a major concern in Taoism. There were specific rituals that focussed on the destructive force of thunder and lightning. They were employed in remote periods of Chinese history. For example, the scholar Wang Ch'ung (王 充) in the Han-period disputes in his *Lun-heng* (論 衡) the existence of a divinity called Thunder Lord (*lei-kung* 雷 公), saying that thunders are simply fire (*huo* 火).³ The statement by Wang Ch'ung (王 充) seems to prove that ages ago a spirit or divine Thunder Lord was an object for scholarly considerations and, most certainly, for religious veneration. The darkness of history conceals those antique rituals. Anyway, we know for sure that the actual tasks, the purposes and means of Thunder Magic were matters of great concern, and they were integral parts of Taoism long before Thunder Magic explicitly appeared.

The T'ang Taoist Chang Wan-fu (張 萬 福 fl.711-713) tells us: “concerning the comprehensive rule over all divinities and demons in heaven and on earth, concerning the killing and subduing of wicked demons (*hsieh-mo* 邪 魔), the beheading and the annihilation of bad spirits (*yao-ching* 妖 精), the recruitment of divine forces (*ling* 靈) and the summoning of vital forces (*ch'i* 氣), the realisation of control and order for mountains and rivers, the cleansing of filthy atmospheres, the dispatch of petitions and the employment of postal [spirit] agents, the direct communication with the immortals (*shen-hsien* 神 仙), there is just nothing that has any priority to [the methods and rituals of] Orthodoxy and Unity (*Cheng-i* 正 一).” Ages later in the Sung period, Thunder Magic did serve well all these tasks.⁴ It is quite telling that the statements of Chang Wan-fu (張 萬 福) read like an early summary of the programmatic range of the much later Thunder rituals. We want to keep in mind that there are also some other, additional aspects of the ritual practice in Thunder Magic that classify such rituals as proper parts of *Cheng-i* (正一) Taoism.

We consider that the Thunder specialists employed mostly secret skills and crafts that go with the name of Thunder Magic to solve individual and communal problems that people believed to have a spiritual or transcendent

³ Wang Ch'ung: *Lun-heng* 6, 23, 96-103, esp. pp. 100-101 (*Lei-hsü p'ien*). Shanghai 1974.

⁴ TT 1241 *Ch'uan-shou san-tung ching-chieh fa-lu lieh-shuo* 1.4a-4b, following the text *Cheng-i fa-wen k'o-chieh p'in* (正一法文科戒品). Concerning this text see, U.A.Cedzich, p. 458, in: K.Schipper and F.Verellen eds.: *The Taoist Canon, A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (henceforth *Companion*). 3 vols. Chicago 2004.

cause. For example, droughts and floods are such problems that can endanger the wellbeing of agrarian communities. The ritual help by means of Thunder Magic, however, is most seldom a communal event in which the local population can participate, in one way or other joining the festivities. Thunder Magic is a rather personal and secret matter. The communal participation is restricted to a few sections of the old and established thanksgiving rituals (*chiaou* 醮). When the Thunder specialist and priest had secretly performed his Thunder rituals and had been successful, the community may then stage such communal rituals.

Before taking up any details, I present the biography of the Taoist Yeh Ch'ien-shao (葉千韶) who lived in the 9th century, well before the heyday of Thunder Magic. His biography substantiates most of the aspects of Taoist culture that I addressed so far. The text also unites many characteristics that generally describe the Taoist priest and exorcist.

The practical and ritual means that were at the avail of Yeh Ch'ien-shao (葉千韶) have a long history in China. They stem from historical periods before the reputed beginning of organized Taoism in the 2nd century A.D. The Sung (宋) period started in 960 A.D., about one hundred years after the life of Yeh Ch'ien-shao (葉千韶) who shows activities and spiritual potentials that forecast specific elements of the later Thunder Magic. His biography indicates the personal qualities that characterize the practitioners of Thunder Magic. The term Thunder Magic stands for the attempt to rationalize a welter of long established religious notions and rituals, which may be due to the intellectual and rationalistic disposition of the Sung (宋) period. We also remember that emperor Sung Hui-tsung (宋徽宗 r. 1100-1126) developed a great personal interest in the Taoist religion and actually thought himself and his staff to represent the heavenly spirit-administration. On the other side, the priest and Thunder specialist professes to embody a spirit-career with ranks and varied promotions, which enables him to live up to the extraordinary standard of being divine. Our sources do not let us have any doubts about this claim.⁵ We notice that we find in *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* many of the spirit-titles that refer to the assumed power structure of Taoist Thunder specialists and their deities.⁶

5 See the grand spirit-ranks and promotions for the Taoist priest in TT 1220 *Tao-fa hui-yüan* 56.39a-39b. For a translation of this chapter in TT 1220 see below, Chapter II: The Scope of Taoist Thunder Magic.

6 See Charles O. Hucker, Stanford 1985 (henceforth *Hucker*).

The biography of Yeh Ch'ien-shao (葉千韶) serves us well as an entertaining example to illustrate the practical and visible role of Taoist Thunder Magic. The biography is contained in the collection “Supplementary Lives of Immortals” (*Hsü-hsien chuan* 續仙傳) by Shen Fen (沈汾) of the Southern T'ang period (937-975). The biography of Yeh Ch'ien-shao (葉千韶) is one of the twelve items in chapter 2: “Hidden Transformations” (*yin-hua* 隱化).

The Biography of Yeh Ch'ien-shao (葉千韶)⁷

(17a) “Yeh Ch'ien-shao (葉千韶) had the name (*tz'u* 字) Lu-ts'ung (魯聰) and hailed from Chien-ch'ang (建昌) district in Hung-chou (洪州).⁸ When he was young he adhered to the Taoist skills (*tao-shu* 道術) of his [spiritual] teacher masters, the [two] Taoists from the Western Mountains (hsi-shan 西山), the Perfect Lords (*chen-chün* 真君) Hsü [Sun] (許 [遜]) and Wu [Meng] (吳 [猛]).⁹ He abstained from cereals and practiced breathing techniques (*fu-ch'i* 服氣).

7 See *Yeh Ch'ien-shao* in: TT 295 *Hsü-hsien chuan* 2,16b-18b. Also see *Hsü-hsien chuan* 2, 13a-13b; in: Hsiao T'ien-shih ed.: *Li-tai chen-hsien shih-chuan* (*Tao-tsang ching-hua* 5/7, Taipei 1980); Concerning TT 295, see F.Verellen, *Xu xian zhuan*, pp.429-430, in: *Companion*, he also indicates other editions of this title that are either complete or fragmentary. See *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* (太平廣記) 394 (*lei* 雷 2), 6a-6b (p.1607, ed.: Kyoto 1972) contains the story of a certain Yeh Ch'ien-shao (葉遷韶) who was initiated by Lei-kung (雷公) as to be able to summon thunders and to save people. The deity explained that he had five brothers. The two Yehs (葉) most likely are the same person, although their places of origin read different. Both names most certainly stand for the one person who hailes from Chiang-hsi province. The background of the person in TT 295 sounds better and more learned, whereas the *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* (太平廣記) of Li Fang (李昉, 978 CE) speaks about a young lad who collected firewood when he experienced that divine encounter. I translate the TT 295 version.

8 This is today's Nan-ch'ang district in Chiang-hsi province, where Wang Wen-ch'ing (王文卿) also hails from.

9 Concerning the two famous Taoists (3rd ct.) who allegedly were experts in Thunder Magic, see TT 1220 *Tao-fa hui-yüan* 56.10a; for a complete translation of this chapter (nr.56) in *A Corpus of Taoist Ritual* see below Chapter II. See F.C.Reiter: „The Name of the Nameless and Thunder Magic“, p.115 in: P.Andersen and F.C.Reiter eds.: *Scriptures, Schools and Forms of Practice in Daoism, A Berlin Symposium*, in: AAS 20. TT 1220: 125.1a sq. *Chiu-chou she-ling man-lei ta-fa* (九州社令蠻雷大法) shows Hsü Sun (許遜) to be the very first spiritual patron saint of the Earth Altar (Thunder) rituals. The phrasing in TT 295 is opaque. It literally says: “...he served the Taoists...as his teacher masters. His Taoist skills [were] the avoidance of cereals and the breathing technics ...” Yeh Ch'ien-shao (葉千韶) reputedly lived in the T'ang-period, a few centuries after the times of Hsü and Wu. Concerning the Altar of Earth Thunder, see below Chapter II, rf. TT 1220: