

FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE: TIAN IN DAOIST RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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Abstract. This essay is an overview of the role of Heaven in Daoist religious thought prior to the Tang Dynasty. Lao-Zhuang teachings portray Heaven as helper of the perfected person, who has parted with the human and thereby evinces a heavenly light. The *Huainanzi* compares possessing Heaven's Heart to leaning on an unbudgeable pillar and drawing on an inexhaustible storehouse, enabling one to shed mere humanity as a snake discards its skin. The *Heguanzi* homologizes Heaven and Taiyi and by the Six Dynasties period some Daoist canonical sources give the face of Laojun to Heaven/Taiyi, increasing the anthropomorphization of Heaven.

I. ON METHOD AND PROCEDURE

If we are to consider the nature and role of Heaven (*tian* 天) in Daoist religious thought as expressed in tradition and ritual, we must begin by clearing away some brush related to methodology and sources. Ours will be the description of a double process. On the one hand, arriving at a serviceable understanding of Daoist identity from the late Warring States to the end of the Han dynasty requires that we appreciate the extreme fluidity and multiplicity of overlapping lineages of masters and their disciples. There is no single identifiable time at which we can declare the arrival of "Daoism" and before which there was only proto-Daoism. Instead, we have the confluence of various lineages, as though they are strands of a rope, overlapping and gaining ever more identity and strength in the doing so. Moreover, the texts which contain themes, emphases and concepts we associate with the family resemblances we call Daoism of this period are themselves almost unanimously agreed

to be composite anthologies of materials having their matrix in various lineages. Accordingly, any reasonable attempt to provide an overview of Heaven in Daoist religious thought must take into account the currently available sources and the nature of their intertextuality and interrelationships.

On the other hand, the notion of Heaven is itself not merely diverse in content within this tangle of lineages, but also in process of change throughout the period within the broader terrain of Chinese culture as a whole. We cannot overlook the contexts and shifts occurring in the notion of Heaven in wider Chinese religious culture, especially those taking place in Han religion, because these find their way into emphases and sentiments expressed in Daoist teaching and captured in the anthologies of its representative early texts.

Finally, although this is not the place to rehearse the arguments for the guiding assumption of this study's approach to Heaven in Daoism, I will state directly that I take it as now so widely and robustly substantiated as to be beyond reasonable doubt that however understood as an identifiable tradition, Daoism developed from its very beginnings as a dynamic worldview of transformation, which was never purely a rational philosophy or pragmatism, but always included features and practices that may be broadly characterized as religious.¹

II. HEAVEN IN THE LAO-ZHUANG MATERIALS

If we look to the Lao-Zhuang materials found in the *Daodejing* (道德經 a.k.a. *Laozi* 老子, hereafter *DDJ*) and the *Zhuangzi* (莊子, hereafter *ZZ*), ascribed to Zhuang Zhou (c. 369-289 BCE) for an understanding of Heaven in the early lineages that would grow into Daoism, we must avoid a common mistake: the failure to distinguish the cosmological uses of “heaven and earth” (*tiandi* 天地) from “Heaven” (*tian* 天) when it is being used as an ontological operator of religious import.² “Heaven

¹ For those interested in reviewing the evidence for not making a hard and fast distinction between Philosophical Daoism (*Daojia* 道家) and Religious Daoism (*Daojiao* 道教), consult Donald Harper (2001), Sarah Allan (2003), Livia Kohn and Roth (2002), and Ronnie Littlejohn (2009).

² We are quite confident that both the *DDJ* and *ZZ* are composite works not written by single authors. Throughout the classical period, there were many strands and lineages of teachers and disciples, as well as multiple oral and written versions of transmitted materials that came together to form these two texts. The finds at Mawangdui and

and earth” is most often an expression for “reality,” “nature,” or “the cosmos”. “Heaven” standing alone is often used as an ontological, not a cosmological concept, and it is this use in which we are most interested in the present study. To illustrate this difference, consider the often cited “Heaven and earth are not *ren* (仁, humane, compassionate); they treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs” (Ch. 5, *DDJ*).³ As it stands in our present *DDJ*, this is a comment, however one might finally decide its interpretation, about the flow of reality and not about Heaven in its ontological use.⁴ In fact, it seems that in every instance of the association of “heaven and earth” together in *DDJ*, including those which are poetic parallelism such as, “Heaven is long lasting; earth endures” (*DDJ* 7), heaven is being used as a cosmological concept.⁵

But contrast this with the use of Heaven in the ritual interrogations⁶ in *DDJ* Ch. 10:

Embracing the soul and holding on to the One,
 Can you keep it from wandering?
 Concentrating *qi* (氣) and attaining the utmost suppleness,
 Can you become like a child?
 Cleaning and purifying your mind’s profound vision (*xuanlan* 玄覽),
 Can you leave no flaw?
 ...
 Opening and closing Heaven’s gate,
 Can you play the part of the feminine?
 Comprehending all within the four directions,
 Can you reside in non-action (*wu-wei*)? (Ivanhoe 2002)

Guodian and the textual criticism of LaFargue (1992, 1994) have left little doubt about this with respect to the *DDJ* and form and literary critical studies by A.C. Graham (1986), Liu (1994), Roth (1991) and Littlejohn (2009) have supported the same claim for *ZZ*. While there was certainly no unified, coherent school we can call Lao-Zhuang in the classical period, the term is used in this paper to capture the family resemblances between lineages and their transmitted teachings as these are reflected in *DDJ* and in *ZZ*, Chs. 1-7, 8-10, and large segments of Chs.17-28.

³ This is the most frequently misunderstood passage about heaven and earth in the *DDJ*.

⁴ In my own view, this passage is not meant to teach that heaven and earth are indifferent to human concerns, but that it should be taken as part of the overall critique of the Confucian value concepts *ren* and *yi* (義) which we see throughout *DDJ*. Alternative positions are taken by Moeller 2006: 135-37 and Perkins 2014.

⁵ See also *DDJ* Chs. 23, 25, 32, and 45 for other examples of this use.

⁶ Keightley (1985) uses the term “nonexploratory interrogation” for this form of loqion.

Although other interpretations are certainly possible, “Heaven” in “opening and closing Heaven’s gate (*tianmen kai he* 天門開闔),” may well be functioning as a nominative for a numinal or ontological reality from which the adept, if receptive (feminine) either through ritual activity or meditation (i.e., opening the gate), can walk away in utmost suppleness, like a child and possessed of a pure profound vision, residing in *wu-wei*. Moreover, in the only passage in *ZZ* that mentions Heaven’s gate, the text seems to make the numinality of a direct experience of Heaven clear.

[It] comes out from no source, it goes back in through no aperture. It has reality, yet no place where it resides; it has duration yet no beginning or end. Something emerges, though through no aperture – this refers to the fact that it has reality. It has reality yet there is no place where it resides – this refers to the dimension of space. It has duration but no beginning or end – this refers to the dimension of time. There is life, there is death, there is a coming out, there is a going back in – yet in the coming out and going back its form is never seen. This is called Heaven’s Gate (*tian men* 天門). Heaven’s Gate is emptiness (天門者，無有也)⁷ ... it is here that the sage hides himself.⁸ (Watson 1968: 256-57, my modifications)

In this passage, the adept may well be transmitting a memory of the experience of opening Heaven’s gate and he wants to affirm its reality, although he is unable to ascribe any form to it (i.e., give it any name or empirical description implying temporality or spatiality). If this interpretation is right, then the insistence on the inability to describe the form or image encountered when Heaven’s gate is opened reminds us of the discourse of the piping of Heaven in *ZZ* Ch. 2 in which its source master says that all things “have some True Master, and yet I find no trace of him. He can act – that is certain. Yet I cannot see his form. He has identity but no form” (Watson 1968: 38).

Other passages in which I suggest Heaven is used in this ontological sense in the *DDJ* include the following:

In bringing order to the people or in serving Heaven, nothing is as valuable as frugality. (*DDJ* 59)

⁷ 無有 is often rendered “nonbeing.” I have chosen “emptiness.” It could also simply be “blank.”

⁸ The complete passage is 出無本，入無竅。有實而無乎處，有長而無乎本剽，有所出而無竅者有實。有實而無乎處者，宇也；有長而無本剽者，宙也。有乎生，有乎死，有乎出，有乎入，入出而無見其形，是謂天門。天門者，無有也，萬物出乎無有。有不能以有為有，必出乎無有，而無有一無有。聖人藏乎是。

One who shows compassion even in attack will be victorious, his defenses will be secure. For Heaven will save such a person and protect him with its compassion. (*DDJ* 67)

Those good at battle are never warlike [in disposition]

Those good at fighting never become enraged.

Those good at overcoming their enemies never challenge them.

Those good at employing others puts themselves in a lower position.

This is called the virtue (*de* 德) of noncontention;

This is called the power of employing others;

This is called matching up with Heaven, the highest achievement of the ancients. (*DDJ* 68)

Who knows why Heaven dislikes what it does?

Even sages regard this as a difficult question. (*DDJ* 73)

Heaven's net is vast;

Although its mesh is not fine, still, it misses nothing. (*DDJ* 73)

The Way of Heaven (*Tiandao* 天道) shows no favoritism;

It is always on the side of the good. (*DDJ* 79)

In all these instances, Heaven is presented as a numinal power which enables one to reside in *wu-wei* and protects those who are one with it. Heaven misses nothing; just as in Chapter 48, the one who is unified with *Dao* does nothing (*wu-wei* 無為) but leaves nothing undone. Heaven is always on the side of the good; giving the adept confidence that although he may not know why Heaven likes and dislikes what it does, the course of reality is toward the good. For the person able to open its gate perhaps in ritual or meditation and encounter Heaven, he will reside in its Way in *wu-wei*. In these passages, Heaven is portrayed as worthy of service and able to act as an agent⁹ which will save and protect an individual who seeks to “match up to it,” and one can be assured that any appearances to the contrary, Heaven's net misses nothing in its preference for the good.

We may wonder whether we can identify a family resemblance between this understanding of Heaven in *DDJ* and its use in the *ZZ*. While this task requires rather more detail than I can provide in this study, some apparent similarities horizon from the *ZZ* strata known as the “Inner Chapters” (Chs. 1-7), the “Daode” essay in Chapters 8-10, and the later material added by Zhuangzi's disciples (Chs. 17-27).¹⁰

⁹ Both Philip J. Ivanhoe (2007) and Robert Louden (2002) have argued for the agency of the use of *tian* (i.e., Heaven) in a Confucian context.

¹⁰ For an explanation of this textual critical division of *Zhuangzi* see the similar, but not altogether identical, approaches in Littlejohn (2009: 26-42) and Roth (2008).

In ZZ's "Great and Worthy Master" chapter (*Da zongshi* 大宗師), which opens with a discourse on the *zhenren* (真人 i.e., True Man, Perfected Person), it is this kind of person who "knows what Heaven does" and has thereby reached the peak (Watson 1968:77). But is there really a Heaven that guides the *zhenren* and empowers his *wu-wei* action? The master transmitting this text puts the question in this way: "How, then can I know that what I call Heaven is not really man, and what I call man is not really Heaven?" The answer to this question is not as clear as we would like, but one way of interpreting it is to affirm that we must look at the *zhenren* who lives with Heaven as his companion in order to know the answer (Watson 1968: 80). Only when we encounter the *zhenren* and his distinctiveness can we recognize that something more than man is being displayed in this person.

In the Zhuangzi disciples strata of the ZZ, Heaven again plays a significant role in both the empowerment and identification of the *zhenren* as revealed in the following passage from the chapter "Geng-sang Chu" (庚桑楚).

He whose inner being rests in the Great Serenity will send forth a Heavenly Light (*tian guang* 天光). He who sends forth a Heavenly Light, people will see as a *zhenren*. When a person has trained himself to this degree, he achieves constancy. Because he possesses constancy, he has parted with the human, Heaven is his helper. Those who have parted with the human may be called the people of Heaven; those whom Heaven aids may be called the sons of Heaven. Those who would try by learning to attain this goal seek for what cannot be gotten by learning. Those who by effort seek to gain it are trying to get what effort cannot deliver. Those who aim by rational argument to reach it employ reason for what it is unable to achieve. Knowing what knowledge is unable to attain is the highest attainment. Those who fail to obtain this goal face Heaven's destruction.¹¹

In this passage, the *zhenren* have parted with the human. Given what we know about Lao-Zhuang teachings more generally, we may take this to mean at a minimum that the *zhenren* have set aside human distinctions and preoccupations.¹² Heaven has become the *zhenren's* helper, like

¹¹ My translation of 宇泰定者，發乎天光。發乎天光者，人見其人。人有修者，乃今有恆；有恆者，人舍之，天助之。人之所舍，謂之天民；天之所助，謂之天子。學者，學其所不能學也；行者，行其所不能行也；辯者，辯其所不能辯也。知止乎其所不能知，至矣。若有不即是者，天鈞敗之。

a guide for the blind or someone who carries a paralytic. The *zhenren* are part of the people of Heaven (天民).¹³ Additionally, in the Daoist folklore meant to express a more literal meaning of this text, the *zhenren* as transcendents (*xian* 仙) were said to emit a luminescence, sometimes a purple *qi*.¹⁴

A parallel version and extension of these teachings on Heaven can be found in Confucius's dialogue with Zi-gong in the "Great and Worthy Master" chapter of *ZZ*. In this passage, Confucius explains to Zi-gong what was so unique about the men who did not practice the funeral rituals for Zi-sang Hu.

"Such men as they," said Confucius, "wander beyond the realm; men like me wander within it. Beyond and within can never meet ... Even now they have joined with the Creator (*zaowu* 造物) as men to wander in the single breath (*qi*) of heaven and earth... They borrow the forms of different creatures and house them in the same body ... they roam beyond the dust and dirt, they wander free and easy in the service of inaction (*wu-wei*)."

Zi-gong said, "Well then, Master, what is this realm you stick to?"

Confucius said, "I am one of those men punished by Heaven." (Watson 1968: 86-87)

We should not take the exchange between Zi-gong and Confucius as traceable to the historical Confucius. It is a creation of some Daoist master designed to set in sharp relief the difference between their Way (*dao*) and that of Confucius, just as do so many other passages in which Confucius is a key figure in *ZZ*.¹⁵ However, it reinforces the Daoist use of Heaven we have been describing and nests well within the Lao-Zhuang sentiments which emerged from the late 4th century BCE down to the mid-2nd century BCE.

¹² For a sampling of the examples of the human distinctions in morality, law, and sociality set aside by the *zhenren* see the *DDJ* (Chs. 18, 37, 38) and *ZZ* (Watson 1968: 37-38, 45-46, 68-69, 72, 74).

¹³ The theme of being the people of Heaven suggests affinities with the later movement of the Way of Heavenly Masters (*Tianshi* 天师) manner of calling themselves and their followers the "seed people" (*zhongmin* 種民).

¹⁴ For example, the tradition that Yi Xi saw a purple numinal ether rising from Laozi as he approached the path to leave for the West (Schipper 1985: 821).

¹⁵ For a more complete discussion of the various ways in which Confucius is portrayed in *ZZ* see Ronnie Littlejohn (2010).

The connection between these two passages from the chapters “Gengsang Chu” and “Great and Worthy Master”, although they are probably found in different strata of ZZ, is important to an understanding of Heaven in Lao-Zhuang thinking. The *zhenren* that Zi-gong observes have “parted with the human” and roam in *wu-wei*, united with the Creator. And, as for Confucius, he has pursued life as one going off to his execution at the hands of Heaven (天之戮民也 translated above as “punished by Heaven”) because he has sought by learning what cannot be attained in that manner and pursued through the effort of morality what cannot be achieved through such means. Accordingly, he is like a condemned man walking to his own execution.

When Zi-gong presses Confucius for more information about these persons who stand out from others, Confucius is made to reply using a standard conceptual vocabulary taken from the *Analects*, but with a distinctively Daoist focus, in this way: “He stands aloof from other men, but he is in accord with Heaven! Hence it is said, ‘The small person (*xiaoren* 小人) of Heaven is the superior man (*junzi* 君子) among the people; the superior man among the people is the small man of Heaven!’”¹⁶ This is the kind of person who has become spirit like (*shen yi* 神矣). He cannot be harmed by the circumstances of life and he lives in a state of power unavailable to the ordinary person (Watson 1968: 33, 46).

In what I have labeled as the Zhuangzi Disciples strata of ZZ material the text says, “The True Man (*zhenren*) of ancient times used Heaven to deal with man; he did not use man to work his way to Heaven” (Watson 1968: 277). Such a person makes all things equal and acts in spontaneity (Watson 1968: 182). “Hence it is said: The Heavenly is on the inside, the human is on the outside. Virtue (*de* 德) resides in the Heavenly. Understand the actions of Heaven and man, base yourself upon Heaven and take your stand in virtue, and then, although you hasten or hold back, bend or stretch, you may return to the essential and speak of the ultimate” (Watson 1968: 182-83).

While we have been concentrating on the logia in *Zhuangzi* that may be most confidently associated with the Lao-Zhuang lineages, there is another layer in the text that should not be neglected: the Yellow

¹⁶ My translation of 天之小人，人之君子；人之君子，天之小人也. “Superior person (*junzi*)” is the term used for the ideal person in Confucianism according to the *Analects*.

Emperor-Laozi (*Huang-Lao* 黃老) logia found in Chapters 11-19, 22.¹⁷ In both Chapter 12 of this material entitled “Heaven and earth” (*Tiandi* 天地) and Chapter 13, “The Way of Heaven” (*Tiandao* 天道) “heaven” shows up most often as “heaven and earth” used in a cosmological sense. The same is true of Chapter 14 “The Turning of Heaven” (*Tianyun* 天運), with the important exception of the exchange between Cheng of North Gate and the Yellow Emperor which I interpret below.

In this account, it appears that Cheng has apprenticed himself to the Yellow Emperor and on the banks of Lake Dongting he experiences an alternative state of consciousness described as follows.

Cheng of North Gate said to the Yellow Emperor, “When Your Majesty performed the *xianchi* 咸池 music¹⁸ in the wilds around Lake Dongting, I listened, and at first I was afraid. I listened some more and felt weak, and then I listened to the end and felt disoriented. Overwhelmed, speechless, I couldn’t get hold of myself.”

“It’s not surprising you felt that way,” said the Emperor. “I performed it through man, tuned it to Heaven, went forward with ritual principle, and established it in Great Purity ... now with clear notes, now with dull ones, the *yin* and the *yang* blend all in harmony, the sounds flowing forth like light, like hibernating insects that start to wriggle again, like the crash of thunder with which I awe the world. At the end, no tail; at the beginning, no head; now dead, now alive, now flat on the ground, now up on its feet, its constancy is unending, yet there is nothing that can be counted on. That’s why you felt afraid.

... You stood dazed before the four directioned emptiness of *dao*, ... It flowed and scattered, and bowed before no constant tone ... Wordless, it delights the heart-mind. Therefore, Shennong sang its praises thus:

¹⁷ My own delineation of the Huang-Lao logia in ZZ is as follows, with pagination referring to Watson’s translation: Chs. 11; 12a, 126-28; b, 128-29; 13a, 142-148; 14a, 154-55; c, 156-58; e, 161-62; f, 163-64; g, 163-65; h, 165-66; Ch. 15; Ch. 16; 18a; 19a, 22a. The principal indicators that we are dealing with the Huang-Lao lineage in these sections of ZZ are the prominent role given to the Yellow Emperor, the style and preferred concepts (i.e., recurrent use of *wu-wei*), and the embrace of rulership expressed in *wu-wei* in this logia. In the ZZ, all the logia in which the Yellow Emperor is a main character are in the materials I have identified as having their source in Huang-Lao master-disciple lineages. For a fuller discussion see Littlejohn (2009: 33-37).

¹⁸ It is not certain what this music was. One interpretation takes *xianchi* 咸池 as a place (i.e., salty pond), but it seems possible that this is the name of a kind of ritual music, although not one necessarily associated with court rituals.

‘Listen you do not hear its sound; look – you do not see its form. It fills all heaven and earth, enwraps all the six directions’ (Watson 1968: 156-58).

This is a puzzling passage capable of multiple interpretations. I suggest that because the Yellow Emperor had tuned his music to Heaven, Cheng’s consciousness was opened and became receptive, able to melt into the empty void that brought him freedom and the command of spontaneity following the wordless teaching. In short, the ritual music opened Heaven’s Gate for Cheng. And as Barrier Keeper Yin says, “A man like this guards what belongs to Heaven and keeps it whole. His spirit has no flaw, so how can things enter in and get at him?” (Watson 1968: 199)

III. HEAVEN IN YELLOW EMPEROR-LAOZI TEXTS

As the Yellow Emperor-Laozi lineages gained strength, a number of texts were produced.¹⁹ The *Huainanzi* (淮南子, *Masters of Huainan*, hereafter *HZ*) is a text representing a collection of some of these Daoist sensibilities. While it is a composite work gathering teachings from many sources, substantial sections use the vocabulary, allusions, and intellectual frame of the Huang-Lao Daoist lineages.²⁰

Considerable attention is given to cosmological theory in the *HZ*, where there is a consistent and sustained effort to develop a comprehensive account of the Five Phase (*wuxing* 五行) explanatory system.²¹ Chapter Three, “Heaven’s Patterns” (*Tian wen* 天文) is one of the clearest examples of this development with descriptions of the Five Phase correlations beginning each of the sections of 3.7-3.11 and making use of quotes from the *Prognostications of the Five Planets* (*Wuxingzhan* 五星占). Everything from compass directions, to music, to the body’s organs is correlated with the Five Phases in *HZ*.

¹⁹ For a discussion of some of these see Littlejohn (2009: 65-67).

²⁰ Some traditions say the *HZ* was written collectively by the “Eight Gentlemen” (*bagong* 八公) of Huainan and that Liu An was its General Editor, rather than its sole author. According to Ban Gu, the work was originally in three sections: an “inner book” (probably the current 21 essays we now possess); an “outer book” (larger than the “inner” but with an unspecified number of chapters); and a “middle book” of more than 200,000 characters discussing the techniques for becoming a spiritual transcendent (*shenxian* 神仙) by the use of “the yellow and white” (i.e. alchemy, *huangbai* 黄白). In the first complete English translation of the text made in 2010 by John Major and others, Harold Roth is identified as offering the most cogent defense of the Huang-Lao provenance of the text (Major, et al., 2010: 29-32).

²¹ i.e., wood, metal, fire, water, and earth.

Even so, there are clear ontological uses of Heaven in the text as well. For example, the sure signs that Heaven's tendencies (*ming* 命) are not being followed is the futile practice of harsh punishment, as well as animal and natural catastrophes in the remembered years of the Qin (Major et al., 2010: 2.13, 6.8-9). In contrast, the *HZ* insists that sages, "act in accord with Heaven; in their death, [they] transform with other things. In tranquility, [they] share the potency of *yin*; in activity, [they] share the surge of *yang*. The sages roam freely, discern the flawless, do not get mixed up with things, know without studying, see without looking, complete without acting, differentiate without judging" (Major et al., 2010: 7.6, 7.7).

HZ returns to the theme that the abandonment of the human is necessary to grasp Heaven which we have seen to characterize the descriptions of the *zhenren* in the Geng-sang Chu chapter of *ZZ*.

The Perfected [i.e., *zhenren*] lean on the unbudgeable pillar, walk on the unblocked road, draw from the inexhaustible storehouse, and study with the undying teacher People like them embrace simplicity, guard Essence (*jing* 精); like locusts molting and snakes shedding their skin [they leave this world and], wander in Vast Clarity. They lightly rise up and wander alone and suddenly enter the Obscure. Even the phoenix cannot be their match, how much less the barn swallow! Power and station, rank and reward, how could these be sufficient to perturb their heart-minds." (Major, et al. 2010: 7.10)

In the *HZ*'s portrayal of the *zhenren*'s abandonment of the human, the analogies are illuminating and novel. Parting with the human and aligning with Heaven is a process compared to a snake shedding its skin or a locust molting. In another image, the *Zhenren* are set apart from other persons just as the phoenix is beautifully and nobly different from other birds. Here we can remember the *ZZ*'s teaching in the Geng-sang Chu chapter that such a person emits a "Heavenly Light" and even the common people can recognize them as *zhenren*.

However, if the "Heavenly Light" emitted by the *zhenren* is among the most distinctive of themes using the concept of Heaven in the *ZZ*, certainly the exhortation to possess a "Heavenly Heart" (*tianxin* 天心) developed in the "Exalted Lineage" (*Tai zu* 太族) chapter of *HZ* is that text's most unique contribution to the understanding of Heaven (*tian*) in Daoism.

The “Heavenly Heart” concept appears only in the “Exalted Lineage” chapter of *HZ* and only a scant five times.²² In this chapter, to possess Heaven’s Heart is to act as Heaven does and move as Heaven moves. When the sage embraces Heaven’s Heart, his voice transforms the world and he possesses the moral efficacy (*de* 德) that coheres all things in heaven and earth (Major, et. al., 2010: 20.3). Since under the principle of action-response (*ganying* 感應) constructed in the *HZ* in which everything in the cosmos is linked in constant resonance, possessing the Heavenly Heart means that one person can affect the entire world.²³ The *HZ* teaches that when Shennong made the first *qin* [stringed instrument] it was in order to help people return to their Heavenly Hearts. Conversely, when history devolved from the age of primordial Great Peace (*taiping* 太平), it was because people drifted from their Heavenly Hearts. As a model for the ruler in *HZ*, the Yellow Emperor is made to express his Heavenly Heart in this way, “Broad and infinite, I follow Heaven’s Way, and my *qi* is identical with the Origin” (Major, et al., 2010: 20.17).

Having said this, the most important shift in regard to the Daoist concept of Heaven to be found in the *HZ* is its use of the concept *Taiyi* (i.e., the Great One *Taiyi* 太一) assigning it the functions we have seen before as ascribed to Heaven.²⁴ Concentrating one’s *qi* in the *HZ* is a method

²² The term is used in the “Yao Lue” (要略, “An Overview of the Essentials”) chapter of the work, but only as this final chapter in the book offers its summary of the teaching in the “Exalted Lineage” chapter.

²³ On the concept of *ganying*, see John Henderson (1985: 22-28); and Charles LeBlanc (1985). The Song dynasty Daoist lineage “School of the Heavenly Heart” (*Tianxin pai* 天心派) should not be confused with this emphasis in *HZ*. The School of the Heavenly Heart emphasized the arts of exorcism and has little connection with the line of inquiry we are pursuing in this paper. Nevertheless, when Rao Dongtian, the founder of this school had his initial encounter with the spiritual being (*shen ren* 神人) who guided him to the place where he unearthed the lineage’s founding text, *Correct Rites of the Heavenly Heart* (*Tianxin zhengfa* 天心正法), still bearing the amulet-seals of Zhang Daoling, he was told by this being that if he possessed the Heavenly Heart his voice could shake the world; a locution that certainly calls to mind this passage from *HZ*. See *Case History of Fouqiu, Wang and Guo, the Three Perfected from Mt. Huagai* (*Huagai shan Fouqiu Wang Guo san zhenjun shishi* 華蓋山浮丘王郭三真君事實, DZ 778), 5.313. On this text see Judith Boltz (1987: 78-81). Dongtian’s name (lit. “grotto heaven” 洞天) is homonymous with “To make heaven shake” (*dongtian* 动天). For more on this movement and its allusions to the Heavenly Heart see Robert Hymes (2002: 26-46) and Johannes Kurz (2006-7: 105-08).

²⁴ There are several authoritative studies of *Taiyi*. A recent essay accessible to English speaking readers is Li (1995-6).

for communicating with Taiyi. Robert Eno associates oneness with Taiyi with an experience of alternative consciousness that re-presents one's primordial spirit (*yuanshen* 元神, Eno 1990). In the *HZ*, the Purple Palace is Taiyi's abode, Xuanyuan (a constellation related to the Dipper) is the Heavenly Prince's lodge, and the *zhenren* is never apart from Taiyi (Major et al., 2010: Ch. 3).

The concept of Taiyi predates *HZ* considerably. Based on our current sources, Taiyi first appears as the ultimate celestial being in divinations of the late fourth century BCE that were found at Baoshan (包山). There Taiyi is portrayed as a celestial ruler over a court which includes numinal beings such as the Arbiter of Fate [Siming 司命, mentioned also in the "Perfect Happiness," *Zhe le* 至樂 chapter of *ZZ*] and spirits of rivers and mountains, doorways, dwelling and directions (Csikszentmihalyi 2004: 67; see also Li 1993). However, a firmly established anthropomorphic view of Taiyi seems not to have been fixed in the 4th century BCE. Taiyi is still used as a cosmogonic principle in *The Great One Generated Water* (*Taiyi sheng shui* 太一生水), a text recovered at Guodian and dating to the second half of the fourth century BCE.

Taiyi is a concept also given a prominent place in the *Heguanzi* (鶡冠子) in ways that are very much like that found in the *HZ*.²⁵ In the text, Taiyi is closely associated with both the celestial pole and the Dipper.²⁶ In *Heguanzi*'s chapter "Grand Galaxy" (*Taihong* 泰鴻) there is this ode to Taiyi.

Love your essence (*jing* 精) to nourish energy (*qi*):

Inner governance is the means of ascending to Heaven.

Heaven is where divine illumination is rooted.

Taiyi creates from the formless, gives taste to the tasteless, and details

²⁵ *Heguanzi* has long been considered an apocryphal work ascribed to a religious prophet active in Zhao (south Shanxi to Hebei) in the mid-3rd century BCE. However, the discovery of the early Han textual cache at Mawangdui has revealed strong affinities between the terminology of this text, the *DDJ*, and the Yellow Emperor-Laozi (Huang-Lao) materials in *ZZ*. *Heguanzi* also makes use of the literary trope of dialogue between numinal spirits (i.e., *shen* 神) found in many Yellow Emperor texts, suggesting that *Heguanzi* may derive from the same ideational context. Materials of a political nature in the document recommend a date for its composition on the eve of the reunification of China under Qinshihuangdi (c. 221 BCE). On questions regarding authenticity, date, and ideological affinities of *Heguanzi* see Graham (1989). The first full English translation of the text is Marnix Wells (2013).

²⁶ In a late Han engraving, Taiyi is enthroned on the Dipper.

the principles (*li*) of heaven and earth. He is the governor of *Dao*, and upholds justice. He rides on *Dao's* virtue (*de* 德)
(Ch.11, Wells 2013: 165, 166).

The teaching in this passage is that one who possesses inner governance can ascend to Heaven where illumination results through an encounter with Taiyi.

Gil Raz argues that the Taiyi cult developed in the area of Chu (current Shandong region), from where the *Songs of Chu* (*Chu ci* 楚辭) which form a main source of *HZ's* Chapter Three also came (2012: 57).²⁷ Taiyi was a high deity in Chu and during the rule of Qinshihuang the *fangshi* (方士) assisting him in the quest for immortality integrated Taiyi into a religious system conflating Taiyi and Heaven. According to *fangshi* teaching, the Yellow Emperor had climbed Taishan and venerated Taiyi there. (Bujard 2008: 779).

Arguably, the greatest innovation in Han religion most generally was the elevation of the cult of Taiyi by the Han court in 133 BCE. Emperor Wu, acting on the advice of the *fangshi* Miu Ji (繆忌), was the first ruler on record to construct a state altar to Taiyi and to elevate Taiyi above the Five Emperors, giving him the title Heavenly Ruler and Great Emperor Taiyi (*Tianhuang dadi Taiyi* 天皇大帝太一)²⁸ (Lagerwey and Kainowski 2009: 23-25, 28). Twenty years later, in 113 BCE, the emperor himself sacrificed to Taiyi at a new altar in the imperial residence at Ganquan (Bujard 2008: 777).

What all this meant to emerging Daoism specifically was that Heaven and Taiyi were homologized with the overarching *dao* and in effect placed at the top of the fledging beginnings of the Daoist pantheon. Heaven was not bleached of its ontological use, but by association with Taiyi it became all the more like an anthropomorphic spirit being; and at the same time, Heaven gave Taiyi benefit of its moral attributes which, as the patron of immortality, Taiyi in its early forms had lacked before (Csikszentmihalyi 2004: 67). This practice of conflating numinal powers shows up in the extended appellations used in Chinese. For example, during Wang Mang's (9-23) reign, the suburban sacrifices were addressed to Luminous

²⁷ The great poet of Chu tradition Qu Yuan (屈原) wrote of the celestial spirit "Great One Sovereign of the East" (Donghuang Taiyi 東皇太一).

²⁸ There is a silk painting discovered in the Mawangdui tomb finds (prior to 168 BCE) now in the Changsha Museum portraying Taiyi exalted above a court of spirit beings and dragons.

Heaven Shangdi Taiyi (*Huangtian shangdi taiyi* 皇天上帝太一) (Bujard 2008: 794). This title includes “Heaven,” “Shangdi,” and “Taiyi,” all of which are names for supreme numinal powers in various times in Chinese intellectual history. Taiyi is the supreme deity named in two stele inscriptions to the transcendent *zhenren* Wangzi Qiao and the deified Laozi erected at the command of Han Emperor Huan (r. 147-167).

IV. HEAVEN IN THE DAOIST TRADITIONS OF THE TWILIGHT OF THE HAN

Worship of Taiyi represented an attempt to conjure the powers of Heaven and bring in the era of Great Peace. Masters steeped in these changes eventually expressed themselves in the apocalyptic movements associated with the founding of Daoist communities and governing districts known as the Yellow Turbans and the Way of the Heavenly Masters (*Tianshi dao* 天師道). In its description of the Great Peace (*Taiping*) rebellions the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* says that these movements combined worship of a Yellow Center Taiyi (*Zhonghuang Taiyi* 中黃太一) and Heavenly Taiyi (*Sanguo zhi* 三國誌, 1.10; Zhang Lu’s biography).

Regrettably, however, all the candidate Daoist texts from this period pose multiple problems to the scholar: authorship, date, textual modification, text disappearance and “reappearance”, and intertextuality. Most of the Way of the Heavenly Masters’ texts are lost and those in the Ming dynasty Daoist canon, while very likely preserving teachings and sentiments from the last decades of the Han dynasty, also contain a good bit that appears to be of a later context. Accordingly, it is presently impossible to name with absolute certainty the texts which we should include in a study of Heaven in Daoist religious thought in the last years of the Han.²⁹

Even so, we can have confidence that some texts reflect substantially the ideational context of the Yellow Turbans/Way of Heavenly Masters period. The *Great Peace Classic* (*Taiping jing* 太平經, DZ 1101), which we cannot trace with certainty further back than the sixth century, is almost

²⁹ For some of the best recent work on Heavenly Master’s texts see the papers of the International Conference on the Texts of Early Heavenly Master Taoism, Nov. 3-4, 2001, Chinese University of Hong Kong <<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~earlychina/research-resources/conferences/early-heavenly-master-taoism-conference.html>> [accessed 2/3/2016].

certainly from a much earlier time and Barbara Hendrische holds that there is no good reason to doubt the *History of the Later Han* statement that Zhang Jue 張角 (d. 184), leader of the Yellow Turbans movement, had seen and made use of the text in the second century (Hendrischke 2004: 144). Zhang Jue proclaimed the project of achieving Great Peace by promoting Heaven's original intentions. Accordingly, he called upon his followers to establish the new Yellow Heaven of Great Peace through the power and instruction of "The Great One (i.e., Taiyi) of the Central Yellow" (*Zhonghuang taiyi* 中黃太一) (*Sanguo zhi* 1.10; Seidel 1969: 58). In this way, the merger of Heaven and Taiyi alluded to in the *HZ*, and found in *Heguanzi* and Han religion generally, continued in the *Great Peace Classic*. Hendrischke comments on this work's teachings on Heaven in this way.

By submitting to Heaven's will, men are good; that is, they are self-disciplined, considerate, cooperative, filial, loyal and obedient. To this catalogue are added the virtue of being "with heart" and prohibitions against self-reliance and resentment. The authors stress that seeking life provides social as well as personal benefits since, out of fear of death and Heaven's anger, the believer will become aware of moral rules and thus contribute to social order and peace. (Hendrischke 2012: 53)

Reflecting the thought of southern Celestial Masters in the 200s, the text *Essential Precepts of Master Redpine* (*Chisongzi zhongjie jing* 赤松子中戒經, DZ 185) lays out a celestial administration responsible for moral retribution and governing the underworld earth prisons of *fengdu* (酆都). Taiyi, through lesser officials such as the Arbiter of Fate (*Siming*) governs human life by recording deeds and issuing cosmic responses to them. Numinal officials who examine persons apply the perfected talisman of Taiyi to the forehead of a person in order to reveal all their deeds, motivations, and intentions.³⁰ The *Classic of the Limitless Transformations of Lord Lao* (*Laojun bianhua wuji jing* 老君變化無極經, DZ 1195), which dates probably to the early Eastern Jin (317-420) states that Laojun created the world and has continued to appear in various manifestations to direct rulers (e.g., the Yellow Emperor) and deliver the people from disease and distress.³¹ So, by the fourth century,

³⁰ For a somewhat more extended discussion of this text, see Littlejohn (2009: 108-10).

³¹ This work is a long poem of 369 verses in its present form. The first 112 verses narrate the many transformations of Laozi (i.e., Laojun (老君)).

Daoist lineages, here represented by one of the few surviving texts of Heavenly Masters, have reached the point of associating Laozi with Taiyi and Heaven.

Why do we see such a convergence of identities? Naturally, there are many approaches to answering this question. Historically and culturally, we may say that the late Han Daoist movements of the Yellow Turbans and Heavenly Masters attempted to provide their own distinctive worldview, revising the Taiyi cult by substituting the worship of Laozi (i.e., Laojun) within the community designed to establish communication with him. Likewise, we should not neglect the budding Daoist defense strategies against the growing influence of Buddhism in many regions, including especially Louguan Tai. Indeed, the *Classic of the Limitless Transformations of Lord Lao* already contains the structure for the “revelation” that Laozi converted the barbarians in the West in his transformational state as the Buddha, which became a part of the Daoist arguments related to the primacy of their teachings over Buddhism.³² However, while these interpretations are important, they do not reach to the religious phenomenology of the development that puts the face of Laozi onto Heaven/Taiyi.³³

If we are to approach an understanding of this move we cannot begin by making a false step. That is to say, we cannot pose the question the way it is often done: why did Daoism move from its early belief expressed in *DDJ* in *dao* as the process of reality, and the skepticism about who is the player of the piping of the music of reality in the *ZZ*, all the way to this apotheosis of the figure of Laozi into the deity Laojun/Heaven/Taiji? Asking this wrongheaded question will lead us astray from the beginning. As shown above, there has been within lineage texts displaying a family resemblance to Daoism a continuous history of use of “Heaven” as an experienced presence, albeit one that cannot be given form and is quite beyond categorization through the intersection of the categories of space and time. But nonetheless, oneness with Heaven is the source of the power to *wu-wei*. Heaven is a reality to be served and likewise offers protection. Heaven is always on the side of the good and misses nothing. Oneness with Heaven does not come by use of reason or knowledge; it requires parting with the distinctions made by our human categories of

³² Most famously, this is the position of *Laozi's Conversion of the Barbarians* (*Laozi huahu jing* 老子化胡經) in the Buddhist canon, no. 2139 of the Tasho edition.

³³ For a discussion of the history of the deification of Laozi, see Jao (2001).

valuation, sensibility and reason. The *zhenren* has the heart of Heaven and emits Heaven's light in a manner to be noticed by all people.

The movement toward the Taiyi cult in the Han was a turn away from identifying the ultimate with the human, no matter how worthy of valorization the ancestral five monarchs of pre-Han religion were. But the turn toward personalizing Taiyi as Laojun was a result of the lived spiritual phenomenology of the Heavenly Masters adherents. Their rituals and practices opened Heaven's Gate for them and what they experienced was interpreted through the concepts and sensibilities of their distinctive histories as analogous to a person, specifically Laozi. If we try to interpret the introduction of Laojun as the face of Heaven/Taiji strictly as a political or cultural phenomenon, we have only a thin veneer which at best implies that the Heavenly Masters libationers and community members were not very self-aware, and at worst that some leaders of the movement were intentionally manipulative and deceptive. To my way of thinking we are on more solid ground if we look to the religious experiences of engaged adepts for an explanation of the evolution of the concept of Heaven in Daoist thought.

V. HEAVEN IN DAOISM OF THE SIX DYNASTIES

By the time of the Lingbao (i.e., Numinous Treasure 靈寶) lineage of Daoism in the Six Dynasties (220-589), Taiyi is worshipped as a celestial power who monitored human morality with the aid of eight numinal scouts and envoys (*ba shizhe* 八史者), taking control of human destinies as Heavenly Emperor (*Tiandi* 天帝). On special days of the year, he receives reports on the moral conduct of individuals and shortens or lengthens their lives accordingly, additionally bringing them auspicious fortune or deserved disaster.³⁴ Lingbao talismans were explicitly conceived of as contracts with Heaven/Taiyi (Toshiaki 2004: 228). Additionally, Taiyi, in his form as Heaven, is frequently mentioned in the grave writes that document the mortuary liturgy of the Celestial Masters. However, Daoist practice never quite abandons totally the use of Heaven in favor of either the appellation Taiyi or Laojun.

As an illustration of what I mean, consider the frequent use of the phrase "ascension into Heaven's Great Net" for entry into a spiritual state.

³⁴ See *Esoteric Essentials of the Most High*, 9.4a-11b (*Wushang biyao* 無上祕要, DZ 1138). This was the first Daoist "encyclopedia" and was probably created by Louguan Tai masters to aid in debates with Buddhists in the last quarter of the 6th century.

Perhaps the association with a net here is because phenomenologically the spiritual awareness being named is experienced as being captured, gathered, or caught up and is not the result of an act of the will or even a state completely within the control of the seeker.³⁵ Among Six Dynasty texts, this phrase figures prominently in several. Although showing signs of Buddhist influence, the principal powers mentioned in the “Most Exalted Numinous Treasure’s Marvelous Classic of Primordial Yang” (*Taishang lingbao yuanyang miaojing*, 太上靈寶元陽妙經, DZ 334) are most probably Daoist and the distinctive form of spiritual transformation in the text is Daoist, not Buddhist. The spiritual entities mentioned include the awe-inspiring Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning (hereafter HWPB, *Yuanshi tianzun* 元始天尊) who performs the functions in the Lingbao belief system elsewhere associated with Heaven and Taiyi and serves as the model for transformation by ascending to Heaven’s Great Net on the ritual seventh day of the seventh month. When he does so, he confides the supreme, orthodox method (*zhengyi* 正一) of the Way to Lord Lao (*Laojun* 老君) who is commissioned to provide a “great manual” (*da zhigui* 大指歸) for the seekers of the Way (10.19a). The summary of this method in the text shows the influence of Yellow Emperor-Laozi medical and cosmological texts and extends beyond action/response (*ganying*) to include among the practices enabling ascent into the Great Net of Heaven and its transforming effect (*ruding* 入定) the following: swallowing essences (*tunjing* 吞精) and energy (*yanqi* 咽氣), inhaling and exhaling (*tuna* 吐納), absorbing and mounting (*fuyu* 服御). Taking the HWPB as the model for such ascent, the text suggests that this experience cannot occur on just any day, but is ritualized to be sought on the seventh day of the seventh month (10.5) (Schipper and Verellen 2004: 245).

Another Six Dynasty text giving prominence to ascending to Heaven’s Great Net is *The Register of [the Heavenly Worthy] of Primordial Beginning, the Superior Zhenren and Hosts of Immortals* (*Yuanshi shangzhen zhongxian ji* 元始上真眾仙記, DZ 166), a late 4th century text representing itself to be a revelation to Ge Hong (葛洪, 283-343). This work provides a Daoist creation account as well as the genealogy of the HWPB and other spirit beings, and an account of various immortals and the functions they have. Then, in the 8th century anti-Buddhist

³⁵ Of course, there is also the allusion to *DDJ* 37 in which we are told that the mesh of Heaven’s net is wide, but does not let anything escape.

text, *Scripture of Jade Purity of the Great Dao of the Most High* (*Taishang dadao yuqing jing* 太上大道玉清經 DZ 1312), “Jade Purity” refers to the heaven of the Palace of the Clouds, where dwell the Heavenly Worthies of Great Compassion (2.17, 10.1-2), the Supremely Great Dao (8.14) and numerous *zhenren* in the service of higher numinal spirits. All these beings are presented as saviors of humanity, who use the “expedient means” (*fangbian li* 方便力) of great compassion and rules of conduct (*jieke* 戒科). What is important to notice is that although such methods are meant to relieve the suffering of persons, they are all inferior to the individual’s own ascent into Heaven’s Great Net, where the seeker may visit (*ye* 謁) the HWPB (Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning). The expression “*ye*” for this visitation is a term employed when one speaks of paying respects to a superior, ancestor, or revered place or person. Entering the presence of the HWPB is just such a visitation.

In this experience of visitation, there is both an immediate cognitive realization of the wordless teaching (*bu yan zhi jiao* 不言之教, Cf. *DDJ* 43) and communication by the spirit alone (*yi shen jiao* 以神交, 6.7). Additionally, there is an awareness of void (i.e., the Heavenly Worthy of the Void, *Xuwu tianzun* 虛無天尊), entry into a domain of silence (i.e., The Way of Silence of the Most High, *Taishang mingji daojing* 太上冥寂道鏡), the perception of a great space “where there is nothing to see” (*Taixu daojing* 太虛道鏡), and an overwhelming sense of great peace (i.e., the Heavenly Worthy of Great Peace, *Taiping tianzun* 太平天尊). Instead of taking these titles as names for deities, they may well represent expressions of the phenomenology of the experience of the numinosity known as the entry into Heaven’s Great Net. In this sense, they may be best understood as facets of an inner spiritual awareness and transformation.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

We have traced in a brief way the role of Heaven in early Daoist religious thought prior to the Tang Dynasty. In so doing, we took note of the significant contribution made in the classical period by the Lao-Zhuang logia in the *DDJ* and *ZZ*. In this tradition, Heaven is sometimes used as a nominative for a numinal reality that, while it is inexpressible through our categories of space and time, nevertheless possesses agency and is capable of acting in a manner that is describable as being always on the

side of the good. Heaven is worthy of being served and individuals are encouraged to match themselves up to its operations. The outcome of such an alliance is that an individual will emit a “Heavenly Light” in his deeds and people will realize he is a *zhenren*. The texts make clear that such an alliance cannot be achieved by moral effort, rational argument or proof, or great learning. It is the result of abandoning the human for the Heavenly. Such individuals will not only be recognized as *zhenren*, but they live as though they are wandering beyond this realm, joined in novelty with the Creator.

By the time of the mature expressions of Yellow-Emperor Laozi Daoism in the *HZ* the persons who part with humanity and its distinctions and align with Heaven are compared to the molting locust or snake shedding its skin. They are as highly distinguished among humans as is a phoenix among mere barn swallows. They not only emit a “Heavenly Light” but they possess “Heaven’s Heart”. So, when they act and speak, they transform the world around them.

In the later years of the Han, Heaven and Taiyi were closely identified and portrayed as a celestial ruler governing the longevity of humans’ lives and their success and well-being through a court of numinal powers. In at least one version of Heavenly Master’s tradition, Heaven/Taiyi was given the face of Laojun, increasing the anthropomorphic nature of Heaven’s description. In the Lingbao version of Daoism, a similar extension of appellations occurred and Heaven became the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning.

Surely there are manifold historical, cross-cultural, and even regional explanations for the permutations in understanding of Heaven in Daoist religion. Yet, we have seen various family resemblances in each of the new or modified appellations used of Heaven. These point to lived experience of a numinal reality and presence that could not be reduced to human conceptions and language, but the alignment with which (whom?) could enable the transformation of persons and enable their efficacious *wu-wei* conduct.

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