

# Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Map of China	x
Dynastic Chart	xi
INTRODUCTION	1
TRANSLATION	25
Du Guangting's Introduction to His Text	27
PART 1: GODDESSES	41
1. The Queen Mother of the West	43
2. The Mysterious Woman of the Nine Heavens	70
PART 2: MATRIARCHS	81
3. Mother Liang	83
4. Bao Gu	87
PART 3: INHABITANTS OF THE GROTTO HEAVENS	91
Introduction	93
5. Sun Hanhua	95
6. Li Xizhi	96
7. Han Xihua	96
8. Dou Qiongying	96
9. Liu Chunlong	97
10. Zhao Sutai	97
11. Fu Lihe	98
12. Huang Jinghua	99

13. Zhang Weizhi	99
14. Ding Shuying	100
PART 4: TANG SAINTS AND TRANSCENDENTS	101
15. Wang Fajin	103
16. Ms. Wang	112
17. Hua Gu	119
18. Xu Xiang	127
19. Gou Xiang	131
20. The Tea Granny of Guangling	135
21. The Lady of the Southern Stygian Realm	138
22. Bian Dongxuan	149
23. Huang Guanfu	161
24. Yangping Zhi	165
25. Shen Gu	170
26. Wang Fengxian	176
27. Xue Xuanton	186
CONCLUSIONS	195
BIBLIOGRAPHY	199
INDEX	213

# Introduction

I address this book both to specialists and non-specialists. I want my students and my non-sinologist sisters as well as my colleagues to be able to read it. The introduction is meant to provide the reader with the background needed to understand the translations and place them in their cultural context. Experts may want to skip some sections.

## Aims and Issues

My main aims are simply stated. I want to put women back into the historical picture and come to understand medieval Daoism a little better. Du Guangting's collection of biographies gives me the opportunity to do both. Women are not ahistorical, as Du clearly recognized. Women may live on the borders or inner frontiers of Chinese society, constrained by law and custom, with limited access to means of self-expression, and with limited recognition in Chinese literature, society, and religion. But they are there, creating their lives with the resources available to them.

The present work is part of a long-term project to find women wherever they are and return them to Tang history. Biographies of women, often depicted as marginal or oppositional figures, can provide the historian with information about contradictions in social systems, and arguments or disputes about those systems including attacks on them and justifications for them. I want to look at what women do to create culture in limited spaces with restricted financial security, political or familial power, materials, and skills. I want to examine both positive and negative consequences of women's working in this limited cultural space. Here I look at women's participation in Tang society through the window of their participation in the full religious life of Daoism, the major native religion of the time. In particular I examine issues of family relationships, education, control and self-control, body and gender, literary and religious expression, and the results of religious practices such as asceticism and meditation. I investigate both the bright and dark sides: social empow-

erment and religious transformation on the one hand, physical danger and commodification on the other.<sup>1</sup>

What can we find out about medieval Chinese women and their experiences, thoughts, and emotions? Where can we find it? The significant limitations of religious biographies, including the partisan viewpoint of the writer, and the mixing of matters of fact and faith, have led many scholars to neglect them as primary sources. The presentation of miraculous occurrences, such as flying to heaven in broad daylight or conversing with animals, next to mundane details of everyday life, such as birthplace, work, or family relations, can be disorienting for the modern reader, to say the least. Hagiography makes a different claim than historical biography about the truthfulness of its narrative. Daoist hagiography claims to be truthful in the sense that individual saints' lives are genuine or authentic (*zhen* 真) embodiments of the doctrines of the Daoist religion. In fact the term for one kind of Daoist transcendent is *zhenren* 真人, literally a "realized" or "perfected" person. In most cases, critical readers of holy biographies have few problems separating reliable historical or social evidence from matters of faith. I would argue that hagiography provides a rich and underutilized resource—especially if read carefully, alongside other texts and material remains of the period.

Texts like Du Guangting's collection help us understand how ascetic physical practices (discipline) lead to Daoist religious goals (transformation) for women. We can examine the links between asceticism, sacrifice, and self-destruction. We can shed light on how medieval Chinese Daoists conceive of the body and self. These texts illuminate the differences in belief and practice between Daoists and their non-Daoist contemporaries and between women and men. We can see how women religious practitioners fit into Chinese society, including the family and the state. We can determine what kind of models these were, and in what sense they represent women of their time, or women in other times and places. Most importantly, we gain insight on what they thought they were doing, and what problems they were solving.

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<sup>1</sup> My approach to the study of women in Chinese history has been deeply influenced by several thinkers. Dorothy Ko (1994) argues against victim feminism and for a more nuanced approach to women's history. Patricia Ebrey (1993) gives the practical advice that we should study women where we find them: in her case within marriage, in my case in the Daoist church. She also makes useful contrasts between women's situations in the Tang and Song dynasties. Francesca Bray (1997) reminds us to include material culture and technology, and to locate women in the context of their dwelling spaces, work, and relationship to motherhood. And Charlotte Furth (1999) shows the importance and complexity of cultural constructions of the gendered body.

This is a work of exemplary literature rather than a statistically meaningful sample. Du Guangting's accounts provide cases to consider regarding their implications for Chinese society. It has both the rewards (good stories) and the limitations (uncertainty as to how broadly to apply the conclusions the material suggests) of case studies everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

My methodology has been a patchwork of systems worked out to deal with this specific text and the issues it raises. I have drawn upon my training in text criticism, medieval Chinese literature, history, art history, religion, and gender studies. I have also borrowed from the works of anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians of medieval European religion. I believe that the best way to study Du Guangting's rich and complex text is to apply an interdisciplinary approach. I try to make observations and draw conclusions that will be useful to readers in several fields. I relegate discussions of specific disciplinary questions and theories to endnotes.

## The Context: Tang Dynasty (618-907)

During the Tang dynasty, when the Daoist master and courtier Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933) wrote most of his book and when many of his subjects lived, Chinese wealth, territory, and civilization had reached fabulous heights. The Tang represents a high point in Asian culture, a period in which Chinese people still take great pride. With a succession of effective emperors on the throne, a huge economy, and vast territory, China experienced a great age of prosperity and international prestige. For the first half of this era, government power rested on a secure tax base in agriculture and trade; a well-organized bureaucracy ran the country; a mighty and well-equipped army kept peace along ever-expanding borders; and ordinary subjects of the emperor enjoyed a relatively high quality of life. The Tang dynasty is considered the golden age of poetry, arts, and sciences. The principal capital city of Chang'an, home to the imperial family and center of government and commercial activity, was the biggest city of the medieval world with over a million people.

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<sup>2</sup>For the courage to consider meaningful a study of medieval culture that relies on models rather than statistics, I rely upon works such as Georges Duby's *Medieval Marriage* (1978). He reconstructs the social history and practice of marriage in one European country during the middle ages, using a small amount of surviving material. He also presents useful information for comparison with China.

Chang'an was also the most cosmopolitan city of its time, the location of a sophisticated international culture.

But in 755, everything changed. A dissatisfied general from the north-western frontier, An Lushan 安祿山, led a rebellion that shook the country to its roots. Although his army was defeated and he was killed, the country never fully recovered, and many changes took place. The transformations in the Chinese government, economy, and society were so profound that many scholars now locate the transition from medieval to pre-modern China in this mid-Tang rebellion and its aftermath.<sup>3</sup>

Du Guangting lived at court during the waning years of the Tang and witnessed events leading to the downfall of the dynasty and to the subsequent establishment of a smaller kingdom called Former Shu (907-925) with its capital in Chengdu, Sichuan. Du's work is influenced by the circumstances of chaos and crisis, and by the prevailing mood of anxiety and depression that characterized his era.

According to the somewhat idealizing constructions of later Chinese thinkers, Tang society was divided into four main social classes. On top were the bureaucrats or literati officials, who monopolized government and education. Most Tang authors were officials originating in this class. Du Guangting, an official as well as a Daoist master, lived at court with the imperial family and associated with literati officials while he was writing his biographies of Daoist women. Beneath the small, literate official class were the farmers, honored for their essential role in producing food and the economic surplus that allowed Chinese civilization to flourish, but rarely rewarded in any way commensurate with their contributions.

In the Tang dynasty, farmers made up the vast majority of the population. Next were the craftsmen, providers of essential services, also respected for their important contributions to material culture and the economy, but not necessarily well compensated. Last were the merchants, who the Chinese traditionally viewed as parasites living off the labor of others. The government was suspicious of merchants, fearing their ability to accumulate wealth and possibly pose a threat to the central power of the Chinese imperium. Outside the traditional class system, and organized in a hierarchical system that paralleled the relations of bureaucrats and farmers, were the military leadership and the soldiers.

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<sup>3</sup> For history of the Tang dynasty, see Twitchett 1979. See also Adshead 2004; Benn 2002. On the capital city, see Xiong 2000. On Tang society and history, see the ongoing series edited *Tang Yanjiu* (Tang Studies), from Beijing University Press.

Struggles between the civil (*wen* 文) and military (*wu* 武) sides of government were a constant and characteristic contradiction of the imperial bureaucratic system.

The actual picture of social classes in medieval China, according to contemporary Tang sources, was more fluid and complex. Merchants along the Silk Road contributed substantially to government coffers, officials participated in commerce, and the early Tang emperors were proud of their own military origins and prowess. Du Guangting's subjects, representing the diversity of Tang society, come from all social classes.

Geographers divide China into two great regions: the northern one centered on the Yellow river and its plains, and the southern one centered on the Yangzi River and its surroundings. But a cultural geography would divide the Tang world most prominently into the areas around the capital cities on the one hand, and, on the other, everywhere else. The two capitals of Chang'an and Luoyang, seats of government and centers of culture and commerce, both located in the north on tributaries of the Yellow River, were considered the most central and desirable locations. Another important city for our story is Chengdu in mountainous Sichuan province to the southwest of the capital cities. Du Guangting accompanied the Tang emperor and court to Chengdu when they were forced to flee the capital in 881. Du also lived there as a courtier in the subsequent Former Shu dynasty. Several of our subjects were also active there. The women in Du's biographies come from all over the Tang empire, with a strong preference for south.

Along with the official world of government administration and tax registers, there was a world of holy mountains and waterways. The most prominent of the holy mountains and the oldest were the marchmounts or sacred mountains of the five directions: Mount Tai 泰山 in the East, Hua 華山 in the West, Song 嵩山 in the Center, Heng 衡山 in the North, and another, different Heng 恆山 in the South. There were also famous Buddhist mountains such as Mounts Emei in Sichuan and Tiantai in Zhejiang, still pilgrimage sites today. And there were Daoist holy mountains. One of the most famous was Mount Qingcheng in Sichuan, where the Celestial Masters school of Daoism began. Du Guangting probably lived there while compiling his text. Another eminent mountain was Mount Mao, residence of the three Mao brothers, deities associated with the beginnings of the Supreme Clarity school of Daoism in the fourth century C.E.

In addition to actual places that we can locate on a map, there were imaginary sites, such as the heaven of the Queen Mother of the West on Mount Kunlun far beyond the borders of the known world in the exotic occident, and Penglai and other Isles of the Blessed far away in the Eastern Sea. Above the earth there were many Daoist heavens, and tribunals or courts for the dead beneath the earth. And for Daoists, there were grotto heavens, cave worlds beneath holy mountains where the faithful could go to survive the chaos and destruction that arrived at the end of each world age. All of these otherworldly places were inhabited by divine beings such as creators, heavenly honored ones, and transcendents. Du Guangting was a student of holy cosmography – the mapping of the religious world – and wrote several works on numinous and lucky places. His subjects often travel to or ultimately reside in such places.<sup>4</sup>

## Daoist Religion in the Tang

By the time the Tang dynasty ruled China, Daoism already had a long history as China's native major religion. Since the second century of the Common Era, Daoists had revered a host of deities, engaged in numerous rituals, and practiced individual self-cultivation, all in order to attain perfection, which included eternal life and residence in the Daoist heavens. The two earliest traditions of Daoism that could be considered religious institutions began in the late Han dynasty, one in Sichuan province and one in the capital city of Luoyang. In Sichuan the school known as the Celestial Masters (Tianshi 天師) began with visions of the deified Laozi by the first Celestial Master Zhang Daoling 張道陵 in 142 C.E. The group grew into a great organized community, producing scriptures, precepts, methods of organization, and ritual practices that continue in some form down to the present. The Great Peace (Taiping 太平) School that began in Luoyang was utopian, messianic, and apocalyptic. They also created scriptures and practices that survive today.

During the fourth and fifth centuries, two great schools arose which continued into the Tang. These are the Supreme Clarity (Shangqing 上清) and the Numinous Treasure (Lingbao 靈寶) schools. The Shangqing tradition emphasized perfection through individual practices such as meditation and asceticism; it found adherents among the imperial family and

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<sup>4</sup> On mountains and caves in Daoist cosmology and practice, see Hahn 1988; 2000. More detailed studies of specific mountains are found in Chavannes 1910 on Mount Tai; Robson 1995a, 1995b, 1995c on the southern Mount Heng.



elite of the Tang. The Lingbao school favored collective ritual and community worship and provided many rites for the state and people of the Tang. The main Daoist schools were religious institutions, with clergy organized in a hierarchical fashion that echoed both the imperial and the divine bureaucracy. Texts and rituals were handed down through lineages. There was always considerable overlap and borrowing between different schools. For most lay people, distinctions between schools made little difference in daily belief and practice. More important for the average believer would be local and official cults along with family and regional traditions. But for clergy like Du Guangting, we can assume that school and lineage did have meaning. Du Guangting was a Shangqing master, the pre-eminent member of the Shangqing lineage in his generation. In his writings, Du tried to unite the two main traditions of his time under the leadership of his own Shangqing school. All his works, including the present one, are intended to glorify both Daoism and his school.<sup>5</sup>

Daoist adepts worked to achieve perfection by means of religious practices that were organized in a hierarchical order leading from the simplest stages to the most difficult. They began with faith and good works, progressed to ascetic practices such as fasting and sexual abstinence, and finally reached meditation and visualization. Mature and successful religious practice led to fruits of the faith, such as youthfulness and superpowers. In the end, the successful adept departed from this world and ascended to heaven to become part of the celestial bureaucracy.<sup>6</sup>

A perfected or realized person in Daoism is comparable to a saint in the Catholic Church. Saints in most religions are made by assignment of titles by imperial or religious authorities or by popular acclaim, and defined as receivers of cult, creators of community, and conduits to the divine. A Catholic saint is verified by investigation under canon law and legitimated by the church, one of the most powerful institutions of medieval Europe. In contrast, Daoist saints prove their transcendence by the manner of their departure: their perfection is verified when they do not die and decompose, but instead ascend to heaven leaving either no corpse at all or a light and fragrant shell. And Daoist saints are legitimated by their ties to two of the most important social systems of medieval China: lineage and bureaucracy. They are placed within a school lineage and granted a posthumous position in the celestial bureaucracy. Thus

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<sup>5</sup> For Daoism, its history and texts, see Kohn 2000, 2001; Bokenkamp 1997; Robinet 1997); and Kirkland 2004. On Tang-dynasty Daoism, see Barrett 1996; Kirkland 1997; Kohn and Kirkland 2000.

<sup>6</sup> For relevant studies, see Kohn 1989; Robinet 1993; Eskildsen 1998.

verification is linked to proof of body's incorruptibility, while legitimization is linked to inclusion in a Daoist fictive family and lineage, and assignment of heavenly office.<sup>7</sup>

## Gender Roles in the Tang

Gender roles during the Tang dynasty were heir to the ideas and customs of earlier eras. Concepts still governing understanding of women's roles in the Tang include *neiwai* 内外 (literally, "inside and outside"). This is the Chinese version of the model of gender relations sometimes called "separate spheres" in which the men work and operate outside the household in the worlds of agriculture and public life, while the women live and work within the household, taking charge of child-raising and the domestic economy. While separate spheres denotes distinctions in location, the Chinese folk expression "men till and women weave" expresses the difference in terms of economic function. Another concept informing female and male roles is that of yin and yang. Yin, originally the shady bank of the river or side of the hill, represents the dark, wet, passive, responsive female force. Yang represents the bright, hot, active, creative male force.

By the Han dynasty, yin and yang come to represent equal and opposite forces in the universe, constantly acting upon one another to create and maintain the world. This implies a certain equality in the value of male and female; yin-yang duality has often been used by Chinese feminists to find something positive and worth keeping in past traditions. Later more negative connotations attach to yin, and the term comes to imply something inferior or even harmful. Another model, suggesting the lower position of women compared to men in the social hierarchy, is that of *sanzong* 三從, literally: "the three follows." This suggests that a woman follows, that is: takes her status from and obeys, men in her family at all stages of her life. As a child, she follows her father, as a young wife, she

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<sup>7</sup> On the process of sanctification in the Catholic church, see Woodward 1990. On sainthood in the western middle ages, see Brown 1981; Vauchez 1997. All three follow a long tradition of scholarship that assumes the importance of saints and hagiographies in medieval western history. This contrasts with the attitudes of several great early twentieth century historians of China, such as Hu Shih (1891-1962), who scorned Daoism and Buddhism as products of a backward era that posed obstacles in the path of China's modernization and strength. Chinese scholars in general, from the second half of the twentieth century on, have started to recognize the importance of religion in Chinese history. On the process of making Daoist female saints in China, see Cahill 1999.

follows her husband, and as an elderly widow, she follows her oldest son. One final expression important in understanding gender roles in early China is *nannü zhi bie* 男女之別, literally: “distinctions between men and women.” This implies that men and women are and should be different. Taken together, these ideas and expressions assume that men and women are distinguishable, that certain activities and places are appropriate for each, and that women follow men in the gender hierarchy.

Women in early Chinese society were expected to conform to norms that later came to be called “Confucian ideals.” According to classical literature, medical texts, and books on appropriate behavior written especially for women, women were to be virtuous, hard working, and filial. Their greatest duty as loyal subjects and filial daughters-in-law was to bear and raise sons for the patriline into which they married. Their own interests were subordinated to or identified with the interests of their family.<sup>8</sup>

The Tang dynasty has the reputation of being a good time for women. Several famous women of the period, such as the empress Wu Zetian 吳則天 (d. 705) and the beauty Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (d. 756), are well known even today. Bound feet were still in the future. Women could inherit property and widows could remarry. Many factors account for women’s relative power and prestige during this time. The Tang ruling family derived partly from nomadic tribes in Central Asia, generally referred to as *hu* 胡 (Turkish or barbarian) in classical literature. They had different and more relaxed notions of the proper roles and work of women. In addition, intermarriage between powerful clans intensified during the Tang dynasty, with women from prominent families becoming highly desirable as wives.

The positions of women from the great clans in their husbands’ families depended to some extent on the political clout their original families maintained in society.<sup>9</sup> Women had more political power, personal freedom, and chances for social prominence than in the following period, when Li-school thinkers (known in the West as Neo-Confucians) were to assert that a virtuous woman could not be talented. Still, we must not lose sight of the many significant restrictions placed on Tang women by patriarchal law, custom, and social ideals. As our biographies show, this was not exactly a golden age for the liberation of Chinese women, although it was a time in which some women found great opportunities for leadership and accomplishment.

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<sup>8</sup> For studies of this aspect of Chinese women, see Raphals 1998; Hinsch 2002.

<sup>9</sup> See Tung 2000; Deng 2003; Yao 2004.

## Women and Daoism in the Tang

Religion was a source of both power and constraint for medieval Chinese women. The belief that yin force was equal and opposite to the yang force in Daoist cosmology was extended, however unevenly, to women's power and prestige in the Daoist church. Women played important roles in the Daoist religion from its earliest beginnings in the Celestial Masters and Great Peace schools of the Later Han dynasty. Even before the Tang, women contributed to Daoist ritual, practice, teachings, and institutional life, both as leaders and followers. Along with nuns, priestesses, and laywomen, there were prominent female Daoist saints, hermits, and wonderworkers. Daoist scriptures, like those of the Buddhists, show a range of attitudes towards women.

The attitudes displayed by Daoist and Buddhist texts alike concerning women's social and family roles reflect the surrounding culture more than any fundamental teachings of the faith. The Daoist church provided both female clergy and laywomen with opportunities to acquire education and play leadership roles in society and politics. And the Daoist church, much like the Buddhist, provided a social and economic safety net for women in need. Daoist female deities and saints provided women with devotional foci and models for their spiritual lives. Famous and infamous Daoist women of the Tang, including princesses such as Jade Verity (Yuzhen 玉真, ordained 711), imperial consorts such as Yang Guifei (d. 756), and nun-poets such as Yu Xuanji 魚玄機 (d. 868) served as examples of female agency.<sup>10</sup>

While many accounts of Daoist female figures are found scattered throughout the Daoist canon, Du Guangting's collection is the first and only text to present exclusively the lives of female Daoists. In Du's day, there were already well-known collections devoted to the lives of Buddhist nuns and exemplary Confucian women. Perhaps the author intended to supply a set of Daoist biographies to rival those. In addition, the textual record suggests that through the end of the Tang dynasty, Daoist women and men engaged in roughly the same practices and rituals. After the Tang, special Daoist practices for women appear, clearly intended to separate them and distinguish their activities from those of

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<sup>10</sup> On women and Daoism, see Despeux and Kohn 2003. On Daoist nuns, see Zhou 2004. On equality between men and women in Daoism, see Anderson 1994. To compare the history of nuns in the West, see McNamara 1996. On fasting and women in medieval Europe, see Bynum 1987.

men. Du Guangting's sequestering of women's biographies in his collection prefigures the segregation between men and women in Daoist life and practice that occurs in the following period.



