Contents

Introduction

Writing has many functions. It prevents information from being lost. Bone inscriptions preserve the questions members of the Shang ruling families asked their oracle with regard to, e.g., the cause of diseases, the suitability of certain sacrifices, or the outcome of planned military campaigns. Chronicles maintain the memories of diplomatic activities between various vassal states of the Zhou kingdom as well as hints at the private lives of their rulers necessary for the understanding of their political behavior.

Writing also transmits the knowledge a person (or a group) has gained during their lifetime to the next generations. The works of the Chinese philosophers hand down the experiences the masters underwent as consultants to local rulers and as teachers of their disciples, materials they—or those who compiled them—considered worthy of transmission. The histories of past dynasties serve as the mirror to be held up to the present emperor. He should learn from their records where his predecessors failed, what they did wrong, and why, as a consequence, they brought their dynasty down.

Writing describes the world, the cosmological concepts, the forces believed active in the universe. Writing lists the pantheons (those of Daoists as well as of Buddhists); they contain the etiological myths surrounding local cults, saints, and immortals; and they transmit the alleged words of founders of religions.

Writing contains prescriptions—medical, political, religious. In both the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* instructions can be found that advise the reader to meditate in a certain way in order to become one with the universe. Later Daoist texts include instructions concerning rituals allowing the practitioner, for instance, to keep his souls joined in the body and not letting them to report the adept's misbehavior to the heavenly authorities that would shorten his or her life as a consequence.

Writing is, moreover, a means of distributing information in an efficient way. The stone engravings of the Confucian classics during the Han and later dynasties not only fixed their authorized version but also made them publicly accessible to virtually everyone. While copying manuscripts by hand already resulted in a modest multiplication of the original text, the invention of woodblock printing in the Tang allowed their mass production.

Writing in the form of poems or novels serves to entertain and educate readers. Officials who often had to produce lyrics on the spot during outings learned the appropriate vocabularies and famous examples from specialized

encyclopedias (*leishu* 類書) like the *Chuxue ji* 初學記 (Records for Early Learning). Yet another type of writing appears in the prompt-books story tellers used in the marketplace to refresh their memories.

Writing Materialized

All this is quite well-known. Less known is the fact that writing can have power as a "physical" or material object. In this form, writing can be treasured as an object in its own right regardless of contents. Thus, for example, texts written in the gifted calligraphy of a certain Yang Xi 楊羲 became so prestigious and sought after in the fourth and fifth centuries CE that almost an entire industry emerged producing forgeries that were sold at high prices (see Strickmann 1977).

In medieval Europe, emperors and kings as well as bishops and prelates used precious copies of gold-plated and wonderfully illuminated bibles as gifts for their most important guests. Clearly, it was not the text that mattered in these cases as the recipients most certainly already had their own copy of the holy book. Rather, it was the material luxury which made writing in this form such a valuable treasure. Along the same lines, some Theravāda communities in Southeast Asia, after the end of the first millenium, made Buddhist texts from gold and enshrined them in stupas, treating them like relics of the Buddha.

Many cultures believed that certain forms of writing had an intrinsic power which allowed their owners to control or influence their contemporaries, supernatural beings, or even nature. In such contexts, empowered writing might be used as apotropaic objects, i.e., objects that had the power to avert evil beings or negative events. Empowered writing could also serve as exorcistic objects, i.e., objects by means of which demons could be cast out of human beings and animals or expelled from certain locations.

According to this way of thinking, special kinds of writing enabled his or her author to spellbind other people or beings. Famous examples are the Greek "binding spells" (*katadesmoi*), small sheets of lead that were inscribed, folded, pierced with a bronze or iron nail, and buried with a human corpse or placed in a sanctuary. The texts contained curses used in a variety of contexts (see Faraone 1991). Here is a fourth-century BCE Attic curse laid upon a disloyal husband or fiancé: "[I bind?] Aristocydes and the woman who will be seen about with him. Let him not marry another matron or maiden" (Faraone 1991, 14).

Another example is a judicial curse against the members of the opposing party in court from the same time and place:

> Let Thersilochos, Oino[philos], Philotios, and whoever else is a legal advocate for Pherenikos be bound before (the gods) Hermes Chthonios and Hecate

> Chthonia. The soul, the mind, the tongue, the plans of Pherenikos, and whatever else he is doing or plotting with regard to me—let all these things be contrary for him and for those who plot and act with him. (Faraone 1991, 15)

Similarly, the Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 55-after 115) believed that the death of the military leader Germanicus (15 BCE-19 CE) was caused by a tablet on which an adversary had written the name of the general in order to curse him (*Annals* 2.69).

An example how writing was used to control supernatural beings is provided by Johannes Chrysostomos (after 344-407), patriarch of Constantinople after 398. He relates in his 43rd *Homily* that among the Christians some used to suspend the gospel (most certainly extracts) at the bedside in order to ward off demons. Further evidence for the belief in influencing nature with writings can be found in the works of Rome's greatest poet, Horace (65-8 BCE). In his *Epodes* he mentions books that were imbued with such a strong power that they could pull down even the stars fixed on the vault of the sky (17.1).

The purpose of this study is to explore the nature of empowered writing in Chinese religious culture and to explain its various functions. The book divides into three parts and an epilogue. Each part is devoted to one of the most important forms of empowered writings, namely talismans, petitions and holy scriptures.

Chinese Tallies

The first part of this book begins with the description of a ritual act in which Wu Meng 吳猛, a Daoist of the third century CE, writes out a short text (of unknown contents) and uses this as a tally (*fu* 符) to stop a storm. In order for the reader to fully understand this act, I present a complex argument that runs through three subsequent chapters.

Chapter One introduces a range of inscribed objects with similar functions. It shows that the *fu*—often translated as "charm" or "talisman"—was in fact one of several kinds of tallies. These are the *jie*-, the *quan*-, the *qi*-, and the *fu*-tallies. These tallies, inscribed items consisting of several parts and made of different materials, can be traced back at least to the first decades of the fourth century BCE.

The earliest examples discovered to date in archaeological excavations are *jie*-tallies. These were imitations of bamboo segments cast in bronze whose lengthy inlaid golden inscriptions reveal that they once belonged to merchants and granted their exemption from being taxed en route when transporting goods along well-defined trading routes. Upon their return to the capital, they had to join their parts with those of the feudal lord of the merchants's place of origin as well as with those of the officer of the Treasury. When all parts

matched and thus formed a complete "tube," all legitimate parties of the transaction were thus identified and the due taxes could be handed over.

Pre-Han texts also preserve descriptions of the use of *quan* 券-tallies. Probably made of wood or bamboo, these two-part objects were given to both parties involved in financial transactions. Creditor and debtor each received one of two complementary parts. Before they were to settle their account, they had to join their respective halves of the *quan*. Only if both parts matched perfectly, were the legitimate partners identified and the transaction could be completed.

The *qi*契-tally, in use at least in the state of Qi and during the third century BCE, was employed in credit operations. It stated the fixed budget for accomodating foreign diplomats during their journey along the network of official post or relay stations in Qi. One half of the tally was kept by the officer in charge of the post house while the accompanying official of Qi retained the other half. Once the mission was accomplished, both officers had to send their halves together with the bill to the accounting office in the capital. Thus the legitimate parties involved were identified and the bill could be settled.

The *fu*, finally, was a tally used in military contexts, serving two different yet closely related functions. On the one hand, both the supreme commander and his field general had one half of it. Whenever commands or requests had to be transmitted, the courier would bear the half of the sender and present it to the recipient who would join it with his own one. If both matched perfectly, the courier had to be accepted as the legitimate messenger. On the other hand, *fu* were used as passports for those who wanted to cross the border passes between the "Chinese" and the "barbarian" territories and for those who had to enter or leave the capital.

The comparison of these various kinds of tallies makes it obvious that their common function was to serve as certificates of legitimation. So widespread was the use of tallies in Chinese—civil as well as in military—daily life that I move on, in Chapter Two, to ask whether similar procedures were also applicable to the legitimation of the ruler. And in fact, by the second century BCE at the latest, the tally concept had found its way into the legitimation of government. The chapter starts with introducing the concept of the Mandate of Heaven which granted or withdrew the right to rule according to the ruling dynasty's moral behaviour. In late Shang and early Zhou times, Heaven showed its disapproval of earthly policy by certain heavenly warning signs such as comets. Likewise, Heaven let extraordinary constellations appear to confirm the legitimacy of a new dynasty.

Unfortunately, astronomical phenomena were not always at hand when a ruler's activities needed to be blamed or praised. Therefore, in course of time the concept of heavenly signs was expanded to include extraordinary earthly phenomena and omens. In another innovative step, these omens were interpreted by Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 195-115 BCE; see Arbuckle 1995, 585)

as one half of a *fu*-tally. Dong obviously applied the tally concept to the notion of the Mandate of Heaven. According to him, the ruler's behavior represented one half of a *fu*-tally which was matched by the complementary heavenly half in the form of omens sent by Heaven.

Thus the tally concept was, for the first time, used in a metaphorical way in order to interpret Heaven's reactions as inevitably complementary to earthly actions. Why did Dong single out the *fu* from the various different kinds of tallies? The *fu* was, as was said above, used in military contexts, and both punishing a dynasty by bringing it to fall and establishing a new dynasty were usually the result of military actions. The relationship between Heaven and the earthly ruler was obviously conceived of as a military one.

However, omens are by no means self-evident, but people have to attach a specific meaning to them. This meaning, on the other hand, was not obvious as different people could in principle interpret the same phenomenon in entirely different ways. It was, therefore, necessary to reduce possible ambiguities. As tallies usually bore inscriptions indicating their proper use, i.e., their proper interpretation, before long the first omens—the heavenly halves of tallies—appeared with some form of writing on them. In fact, not only was the Han emperor Wu presented with a cauldron whose inscription unambiguously stated Heaven's will, but the usurper Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9-23) received the Mandate of Heaven in written form. A white stone found when workers were digging a well bore the inscription: "[Heaven] announces that the Duke of Anhan [Wang] Mang [will] act as emperor."

Once the precedent of announcing the transfer of the Mandate of Heaven by means of *fu*-credentials with written messages was set, it was but a small step for written prophecies to assume the form of full-fledged scriptures. In fact, what seems to have begun as rather short inscriptions on various kinds of objects soon developed into entire scriptures, the so-called apocrypha.

Not only Wang Mang but also his contenders based their aspirations on Heaven-sent scriptures. Accordingly, Liu Xiu 劉秀 could in 24 CE only ascend the throne as Emperor Guangwu after having received a prognostication text entitled *Chifu fu* 赤伏符 (Red Secret *Fu*-Credential).

Daoists established their unique rule in the area now known as Sichuan in the late second century CE. They, too, legitimized this move by means of *fu*-credentials. However, they replaced Heaven as the highest legitimizing authority with an even higher one: Dao. Even after their surrender to Cao Cao in 215, the Daoists still acted as the executors of Dao's will, and time and again made and presented *fu*-credentials as proof of the Mandate of Heaven legitimizing the emperor's rule.

Chapter Three explores the use of *fu*-credentials in what may be called religious contexts. Both popular religion and Daoism adopted the *fu*-concept. Both believed that their priests, in order to pray to the gods for help, had first to legitimize themselves before the gods and only then could they approach the

gods. During their education the priests were instructed how to make a *fu* and they learned that while they were busy preparing a *fu*, at the same time the complementary second half of the credential spontaneously came into existence in Heaven—if and only if the priests' moral qualities were adequate. Thus, whenever a Daoist needed the gods' help, he presented his "half" of a *fu*-credential which the gods then matched with the heavenly counterpart. As soon as both parts complemented each other, the priest was legitimized as authorized petitioner. In this case the gods felt free to answer his prayer. The gods' will was usually carried out by members of an army of armed spirits. This is the reason why the Daoists used the military *fu*-tally as certificate of legitimation.

At this point Wu Meng's ritual act becomes clear in its full implications. Due to his high-minded character and his irreproachable behavior he had received an immortal's instructions. When his host feared that the storm would destroy his house, Wu Meng, using this extraordinary knowledge, made his half of a *fu* and threw it at the building. The unseen gods matched it with their own half which was in Heaven and, as both halves matched perfectly, they knew that Wu Meng was indeed their legitimized earthly partner. Wu then must have asked them for help in the form of a secret prayer which the gods immediately granted.

Fu-tallies obviously also had an apotropaic function. Daoists not always made them when required, they also wore *fu*, which they had been given by their masters, in a clearly visible way at their belt. Demons and evil ghosts were fully aware of their use. Whenever such beings saw somebody wearing a *fu*, they knew this person's special relationship with the gods. Fearing devine punishment carried out by armed higher spirits the evil demons and ghosts did not dare approach such *fu*-wearing people.

Daoist Ritual Petitions

The second part of this book deals with Daoist sacred writing in the form of memorials (*zou* 奏), petitions (*zhang* 章), and registers (*lu* 錄/籙), adopted from the secular administration. Chapter Four discusses early examples of the Daoist use of empowered memorials, which at first glance seem to imply that they were used like *fu*-tallies. The master who wanted to make ghosts appear wrote one and displayed it, and immediately the ghosts arrived at his place and were seen by everyone there. The traveller who wanted to cross a dangerously high river composed one, threw it into a nearby temple, and was able to continue his journey on the very same day.

However, as the term *zou* indicates, the Daoists did not use it as a certificate of legitimation. Rather, it was a means by which to inform the gods in written form about the actual problem and to ask for help.

In the Celestial Masters' tradition, Daoist priests developed the use of *zou* into a highly complex ritual of "submitting a petition" (*zouzhang* 奏章, *shangzhang* 上章) on behalf of ill parish members. This ritual included a special room, the "quiet chamber" or "oratory" (*jingshi* 靜室), a writing table together with stationery, an incense burner, the ill person's oral confession of his or her transgressions, and the priest. The latter entered the room and performed a series of preliminary rituals to prepare the ground. He then wrote out the text of the petition according to strict formal rules, restricting himself to no more than three subjects: the supplicant's disease or difficulty and its probable cause; his or her formal expression of repentance for relevant transgressions; and the request to the relevant celestial officials for help and exorcism.

Subsequently, the text was proof-read and checked with the supplicant before it could be wrapped, addressed, and sealed. This document was then delivered to the relevant celestial divinities. For that purpose, the priest first released some of his own body gods to leave his body and act as his companions. While the priest remained in deep meditation, they all ascended to Heaven on a road built from red *qi* that came out of the priest's body. Once arrived in Heaven, they handed over the document to the celestial divinities who inspected it and decided whether or not to comply with the plea.

Returned to Earth, the priest might further prepare the document so that the supplicant could ingest it—for instance, by soaking it in water and adding honey. This caused the document to come to the attention of supplicant's body gods, allowing them to drive out the illness-causing demons.

This ritual is also mentioned in secular sources. The *Liangshu* 梁書 (History of the Liang Dynasty) notes that the famous poet Shen Yüe 沈約 (441-513), when he felt that his end was nigh, called a Daoist priest, made his confession and asked him to send up a "red petition" (*chi zhang* 赤章; 13.243, Mather 1976, 221).

Chapter Five begins with a description of the politico-religious administration of the Celestial Masters. It shows how the Daoists adopted administrative procedures from the imperial government one of which consisted in registering the parish members at specific dates of the year. They thus emulated and further developed the imperial observance of registering the households which Bodde described as "a sort of annual census-taking conducted locally throughout the empire, with special attention given to aged persons as potential recipients of governmental honors and rewards" (Bodde 1975, 341). The Daoist code, on the other hand, reads: "On the seventh day of the first month, the seventh day of the seventh month, and the fifth day of the tenth month—the Three Assemblies—everybody among the people assembles in his own parish. The master revises the registers and records (*luji* 錄籍), removing the dead,

entering the newborn, minutely authenticating the 'number of mouths' [living in the parish], and correcting the roster of names" (Nickerson 1996, 353).

The interesting difference, however, between imperial and Daoist registers lies in the fact that a mistake made in the latter not only may have resulted in adverse consequences in the Daoist administration but inevitably influenced the spirit world in a negative way as well. As the Daoist code says: "On the days of the Three Assemblies, *the ten thousand spirits* of the Three Offices [Heaven, Earth and Water] *check their records* against each other. *If a new person has been added but the news is not sent up, the celestial bureaus will not have the name*. If a person has gone but is not removed from the record, the roster of names will not be correct" (Nickerson 1996, 354; emphasis added).

As soon as a petition was submitted to the gods, all personal data of both the supplicant and the priest included in it were checked against the heavenly registers. If any discrepancies were noticed, the gods dismissed the petition as irrelevant.

The Celestial Masters not only registered their parish members but also the inhabitants of the spirit world. The *Nüqing guilü* 女青鬼律 (The Pole Star's Statutes against Demons, DZ 790; see Kobayashi 1992, 22; Schipper 1994, 69; Lai 2002),[1] a Daoist text of the third century, says: "They record the names of all demons and spirits on Earth and the method of [distinguishing] evil from good. They were given to the Celestial Master Zhang Daoling 張道陵 [residing in Heaven] and delegated [to him the power to] control demons and spirits" (Schipper 1994, 70).

Registers that listed the names of demons under their control were bestowed upon the adherents during graded rituals of initiation. They served as a ceritificate of legitimation, indicating to the gods against which demons the adept was entitled to ask for their help. As these registers could be worn at the belt, they also functioned as an apotropaic means since they kept those demons at bay that saw their names listed.

Sacred Scriptures

The chapters of the last part of this book deal with the most prestigious form of empowered writing, the sacred scriptures. Chapter Six introduces the exorcistic properties and powers of Chinese scriptures: when put on a sick person's pillow they would heal the patient; when recited appropriately, they could banish evil and hateful ghosts, block calamities, and eliminate misfortune. It also shows that anyone suffering from illness or on the point of death, when given

[1] Works from the Daoist canon (*Daozang*, abbr. DZ) are cited according to Schipper and Verellen 2004.

the (now lost) *Sanhuang wen* 三皇文 (Writ of the Three Sovereigns) to hold, will be sure not to die. Or that a wife having trouble in childbirth will be safe, her child being born immediately.

Where does this power come from? Evidence is presented that it is a direct consequence of the scriptures' very nature. In the beginning of the cosmos, the scriptures spontaneously emerged from primordial *qi* 氣 together with the highest gods. Both gods and scriptures were thus but different manifestations of the same cosmic "energy." Like the highest gods the scriptures reside in Heaven and in their original form as celestial scripts they are neither accessible nor can they be read—not even by lower ranking gods and immortals. Only at very specific occasions these texts can be transmitted, through a series of intermediary stages, finally down to Earth. But it is not the original texts written in the celestial script, it is only the earthly transcripts of heavenly transcripts of the original celestial writings that in the end become accessible to human beings.

On the other hand, lower ranking texts, for example biographies of gods, were written by gods and at a much later time than when the primordial chaos came to an end. Nevertheless, similar rules regarding their transmission apply: they cannot be handed down at any time to everybody. Rather, they are rarely transmitted and only in a limited edition as it were to candidates of immortality.

However, due to their close connection with the gods the Daoist scriptures share certain phenomena with the latter. For one thing, like the gods who are always surrounded by attendants and guards, they have supernatural personnel who guard the scriptures and punish anyone who abuses them. For another, like gods, Daoist scriptures are considered sacred and as they are accompanied and protected by supernatural beings, they have to be venerated like sacred figures and accordingly are cult objects. In addition, scriptures as sacred objects render their storage place sacrosanct.

The power of the scriptures can now be explained: whatever happens to them is reported to Heaven by their spirit guardians. The heavenly gods then decide to take action on behalf of the scriptures. Their will is executed by the guardians who may heal the sick if they hold the scripture with devotion or punish the evildoer who treats them badly. Accordingly, wearing a scripture at the sash or belt guaranteed the constant presence of this supernatural entourage and provided active protection for its bearer.

Chapter Seven goes a step further and, looking beyond the Daoist context, investigates the Buddhists' behavior toward their sutras. Buddhist sutras record the Buddha's own words, first orally transmitted—under conditions of control—by his disciples after his *parinirvāṇa*, later compiled and put into writing by monks. Initially conceived of as a mortal being and entirely extinguished at the end of his life, the Buddha later developed into a supramundane being coeternal with the *dharma* and thus transcending all cosmic cycles (*kalpas*). The same process led to equally supramundane bodhisattvas and *mahāsattvas*. As a consequence, although the original Buddhist canon was closed in the second

century BCE, new sutras continued to appear as the word of the now supramundane Buddha uttered while the Buddha was visualized by adepts in meditation.

The sutras present a form of empowered writing since they contain "the supernatural powers (*shenli* 神力) of all the buddhas of past, future, and present" and are protected by bodhisattvas and *mahāsattvas* against anybody who "despised, hated, envied, or bore a grudge against them." Similarly, any devout reader of, for instance, the *Lotus Sutra* was protected by a vast number of buddhas. In the case of the *Sutra of Golden Light*, the protecting deity was even a local Earth god who, apparently co-opted by the Buddha, guarded and protected anybody expounding it. Exorcistic properties were also recorded as Buddhist lay adherents reciting texts like the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi sūtra* would heal the sick.

Supernatural beings protected Buddhist sacred scriptures as well as their holders. Buddhists soon came to worship the sutras themselves and developed a full-fledged cult to them, including sacrifices to the sacred texts.

Considering the obvious similarities between Daoist and Buddhist concepts of, and practices regarding, their sacred scriptures, in Chapter Eight we ask who influenced whom. Regarding the nature of the scriptures, it seems that the Mahāyāna concept according to which the sutras had been expounded eons ago must have been the earlier one. The Daoists reacted and, in order to surpass the Buddhists, let their own sacred scriptures come into being spontaneously during the self-creation of the cosmos.

Spiritual guardians protecting scriptures and their owners already appeared in the *Taiping jing* 太平經 (Scripture of Great Peace) and may thus have existed before the Buddhist concept. However, this work seems not to have had any influence on the early Highest Clarity and Numinous Treasure texts in the Daoist tradition. On the other hand, these texts were accompanied by spiritual guardians, too, so the adherents of both Daoist traditions may have borrowed the idea from Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The analysis of other aspects of the sacred scriptures seems to suggest that they, too, were modeled on already existing Buddhist patterns. In sum, Chinese empowered writing in all its many forms and manifestations integrated both properties deeply rooted in ancient Chinese traditions as well as properties adopted from Buddhism that were modified to mark Daoist pervasive superiority.