

“From Another World: A Conversation between Daoism and Ritual Theory”

- Organizer: Tobias Zürn, Washington University in St. Louis
- Presider: David Mozina, Boston College
- Panelists: Tobias Zürn, Washington University in St. Louis: “Ritual Embodiment of the Way and Resonating Correspondences in the *Huainanzi*”
- Joshua Capitanio, Stanford University: “Sincerity and the Subjunctive in a Daoist Ritual Manual”
- Michael Naparstek, University of Wisconsin-Madison: “Consummate Bodies: A Prolegomenon to a Daoist Ritual Theory of the Senses”
- Mark Meulenbeld, University of Wisconsin-Madison: “Categories of Culture: Daoist Ritual and Modernity in Villages of Central Hunan”

Panel Abstract (150 words):

The Chinese traditions known under the umbrella term of Daoism remain a rich resource for the study of ritual. Over the last two millennia, various Daoist communities developed not only a great variety of ritual practices, but also a vast corpus of scriptures that contain elaborate illustrations and reflections upon ritualistic performances. In this panel, we share some of these materials by introducing Daoist vocabulary related to discourses of ritual and the body. In particular, we engage with terms such as bodily transformation (*bianshen*), affective power (*ling*), embodiments of the Way (*tidao*), true form (*zhenxing*), and sincerity (*cheng*) to introduce this valuable, but overlooked liturgical world to a ritual studies audience unacquainted with Daoist terminology. By pairing specific Daoist discourses on the function(s) of ritual with widely known theoretical models, we provide an avenue to this exciting world that furthers intellectual exchange between the fields of Daoism and ritual studies.

Panel Description (1000 words):

The Chinese traditions known under the umbrella term of Daoism remain a rich resource for the study of ritual. Over the last two millennia, various Daoist communities developed not only a great variety of ritual practices, but also a vast corpus of scriptures that contain elaborate illustrations and reflections upon ritualistic performances. For example, the *Daoist Canon (Daozang)*, a collection of materials begun under the supervision of the Ming emperor Yongle (1360-1424) and finished during

the Zhengtong (1427-1464) emperor's reign, comprises almost 1500 titles. Large portions of this imperially commissioned project consist of technical literature on exorcisms, ordinations, contemplative practices, purifications, consecrations, spells, and amulets, to name only a few. The single largest compilation of texts within the canon, titled *Unified Origins of the Dao and Its Rituals* (*Daofa huiyuan*), contains 268 "chapters" (*juan*) of manuals and other complementary writings related to exorcistic Thunder Methods (*leifa*) and rituals for refining souls for salvation (*liandu*). Due to Daoism's temporal and spatial distance from the majority of materials that dominate the current discourse of ritual, it provides a wealth of information that offers valuable, but overlooked perspectives on our understanding of the function and efficacy of ritual.

In addition to the tradition's richness of materials, which in itself justifies a theoretical engagement, it is in fact Daoism's elaborate system of liturgical terminology and its explicit statements on the function and form of rituals that make these texts even more valuable for theoretical inquiry. Various Daoist communities developed a rich vocabulary explicating the efficacy of ritual performances. Generally speaking, these indigenous discourses emphasize functions that we nowadays may categorize as effects of presence. Such understandings of ritual presences is largely based on early Chinese notions of an intricate relationship between the human body and the cosmos. In this lifeworld, the entire universe is woven together via powerful, yet hidden forces (*yinde*) on which Daoist masters capitalize with the help of rituals and their bodies. Hence, Daoist rituals seem to be less concerned with social, communicative, hermeneutic or semiotic aspects. Rather, they were important catalyzers within world-making procedures triggering effects and helping facilitate the maintenance of the cosmos.

In this panel, we want to share some of these materials, practices, concepts, and worldviews by introducing Daoist vocabulary related to discourses of ritual and the body. In particular, we will engage with terms such as bodily transformation (*bianshen*), affective power (*ling*), embodiments of the Way (*tidao*), true form (*zhenxing*), resonating correspondence (*ganying*) or sincerity (*cheng*) as a basis for introducing Daoist worldviews and concepts to scholars outside of the field of Chinese studies. In order to open this liturgical world to a ritual studies audience unacquainted with Daoism or Chinese languages, our papers will put a variety of materials—from its earliest manifestations to contemporary practice—in conversation with ritual theories. By pairing specific Daoist discourses on the function(s) of ritual with widely known theoretical models, we provide an avenue to this exciting world while challenging overly referential and symbolical readings of ritual. In other words, by highlighting how these indigenous discourses relate to contemporary understandings, we aim to further intellectual exchange and generate a fruitful discussion between the fields of Daoism and ritual studies.

The first paper, titled "Ritual Embodiment of the Way and Resonating Correspondences in the *Huainanzi*," offers a glimpse in the ritual world that preceded the rise of organized Daoism in the second century CE. By retracing how the *Huainanzi* formulates the idea that only a ritualistic transformation of one's body (*bianshen*) into a non-being (*wu*) would allow a practitioner to wield the ordering powers of the force that underlies the organization and creation of the cosmos, the paper showcases that such proto-Daoist articulations of ritual power reverberate in later Daoist ritual theories as exemplified in the second paper.

The second paper, titled "Sincerity and the Subjunctive in a Daoist Ritual Manual," addresses the common understanding of rituals as an "as-if"-performance, an idea popularized by J. Z. Smith's work. It explores a similar dichotomy between "subjunctive" and "sincere" behaviors in a ritual manual written by the late Song literatus Zheng Sixiao (1241-1318). In his piece, titled the *Inner Method of Oblatory Refinement of the Great Bourne* (*Taiji jilian neifa*, DZ. 548), Zheng reverses J. Z. Smith's

interpretation of ritual as a performance of what the world ought to be by claiming that only ritual enables us to experience the world as it really is. In fact, ritualistic contemplation and inner alchemical methods (*neidan*) allow the practitioner to become sincere (*cheng*) and thereby transform their bodies (*bianshen*) into a receptacle of the cosmic force Dao that underlies the functioning of the universe.

The third paper, titled “Consummate Bodies: A Prolegomenon to a Daoist Ritual Theory of the Senses,” seeks to bring emic articulations of Daoist ritual as exemplified in the case of the demon-queller Wang Lingguan in concert with etic discourses on the senses. By observing various rituals from the *Daofa huiyuan* and its embodied vocabulary, the paper showcases that these performances explicitly activate the visual, aural, tactile, and even olfactory senses in order to bring the deity into the phenomenal world manifesting his “true form” (*zhenxing*). Hence, the ritual and its senses do not only communicate Wang Lingguan’s form to an audience but are rather depicted to be the very means through which the deity becomes actualized.

The last paper, titled “Categories of Culture: Daoist Ritual and Modernity in Villages of Central Hunan,” continues such a reading of ritual as a multisensorial performance and similarly calls for a need to further engage in indigenous terminology. It addresses Tylorian readings of rituals as a residual category. Based on elaborate fieldwork in Hunan province (PRC), it grounds the academic category of ritual within the living contexts of several villages and their local Daoist masters. By reconstructing the indigenous vocabulary and discourses surrounding what we would nowadays label ritual, it shows that its performativity and multisensoriality are integral aspects of the communities’ world-making.

Paper 1: “Ritual Embodiment of the Way and Resonating Correspondences in the *Huainanzi*”

150 words:

This paper retraces the earliest manifestations of the ritual practice called “Embodying the Way” (*tidao*). It showcases that the *Huainanzi*, a text written prior to the rise of organized Daoism during the second century CE, contains the most elaborate version of this proto-Daoist ritual discourse. The *Huainanzi* formulates the idea that only a ritualistic transformation of one’s body (*bianshen*) into a non-being (*wu*) would allow a practitioner to wield the ordering powers of the force that underlies the organization and creation of the cosmos. Although the *Huainanzi* and its illustration of an embodiment of the Way does not provide a direct avenue to Daoist ritual theory, it may serve in my opinion as a historical catalyzer that foreshadows the importance of the body and presences in Daoist liturgy.

1000 Words:

In this paper, I present a proto-Daoist discourse on the ritual practice of embodying the Way (*tidao*) as articulated in the early Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE). Situating the discussion of Daoist ritual in the

period that precedes the rise of the second century social movement in modern-day Sichuan known as the Way of the Celestial Masters (*tianshi dao*) provides a wider cultural context for the panel's further discussion of Daoist ritual practices and its oftentimes sensorial and physiological terminology. The paper largely focuses on one specific scripture that is famous for its self-reflective and encyclopedic character: the *Huainanzi*. As king of the state of Huainan, Liu An (r. 164-122 BCE) is generally understood to have produced this highly intertextual and comprehensive "scripture of the Liu clan" (*Liu shi zhi shu*) in order to submit it to his nephew Emperor Wu (r. 141-87 BCE) as an offering at his inaugural visit to the throne. Scholars often read this text as a compendium that unites and presents early Han visions of rulership, cosmology, and ritual practices for the edification of the young emperor. Hence, it offers a glimpse into how ritual practices were conceived and consciously articulated during China's earliest imperial history.

Although some scholars do not consider Liu An's text a Daoist scripture, its incorporation in the *Daoist Canon* proves that later Daoists deemed it worthy of inclusion among other Daoist movements. In fact, Daoist lore as recorded in Ge Hong's (283-343 CE) *Biographies of Divine Ascendants* (*Shenxian zhuan*) commonly depicted Liu An as a practitioner and supporter of Masters of Methods (*fangshi*) who had reached the Daoist heavens as an Immortal/Ascended Being (*xianren*) after his apparent death in 122 BCE. In other words, several groups situated the *Huainanzi* within a cultural framework infused with what later would be categorized as Daoist ideas and practices.

Accordingly, it is not surprising that several terms discussed in the *Huainanzi* continue to reverberate in later Daoist discourses about ritual. This paper focuses on how Liu An's text conceptualizes the sagely ruler as an embodiment of the Way capable of ordering the universe by resonating with all the Myriad Beings. This same theme re-appears a millennium later in Zheng Sixiao's (1241-1318) manual discussed in the panel's second paper. As Anna Seidel convincingly shows in her seminal article, entitled "Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments: Taoist Roots in the Apocrypha," such appropriations of earlier practices and material cultural objects were a common feature of the Celestial Masters who based their insignia and talismans (*fu*) on Han imperial practices. Accordingly it is likely that we find a similar situation in the case of the embodiment of the Way, a ritual practice first enshrined in the extant *Huainanzi* and later included in a different form in Daoist liturgical discourses.

Because of this sustained relationship between the *Huainanzi* and later iterations of Daoism, I deem it valuable to retrace important elements of its ritual terminology and its utilizations prior to the rise of the Celestial Master's movement. By reconstructing the conceptual and practical context of one specific practice—the ritual embodiment of the Way—this paper fleshes out some of the reasoning behind the practice's purported efficacy. As we will see, the *Huainanzi* construes the embodiment of the Way as a practice that transforms the body (*bianshen*) of the ruler into a physical manifestation of the Way. By decultivating the ruler into a form-, action-, and mindless non-being, the ruler would be able to mimic the actions of the Way in his body and exert the same cosmic force that keeps the entire phenomenal world in orderly motion.

By retracing this early discourse on the practice of embodying the Way in the *Huainanzi*, my paper achieves two feats. On the one hand, it introduces an indigenous terminology that emphasizes the physiological underpinnings of early Chinese ritual theory—one that continued to inform how ritual power was construed in later Daoist practices. On the other hand, it provides a wider (intellectual) historical foundation for Daoist understandings of ritual and helps pave way for the panel's specific discussions of later ritual practices and terminology.

Paper 2:

“Sincerity and the Subjunctive in a Daoist Ritual Manual”

150 words:

In recent years, the notion that ritual constitutes a “subjunctive” or “as if” mode of behavior has become popular among some scholars of religion, inspired by the work of J.Z. Smith. In this paper, I examine several critiques of such a position drawn from the writings of the late Song author Zheng Sixiao (1241-1318), who presents his own theory of ritual within a manual on a Daoist practice for the salvation of lost souls. While Smith has claimed that ritual represents an attempt at performing an ideal that is implicitly understood to be in tension with the way things really are, Zheng argues that ritual involves an encounter with the world as it really is. Only by understanding ritual in this fashion – and acting accordingly – can one perform rituals that are truly efficacious; furthermore, such performances constitute a form of self-cultivation through which practitioners can attain transcendence.

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In the well-known article, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” J.Z. Smith argues for an understanding of ritual as “a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are.” This notion has led a group of scholars, in a recent work entitled *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, to argue that ritual involves the creation of a “subjunctive” or “as if” universe. Moreover, they place this “subjunctive” mode of ritual in contrast with a mode of behavior that they call “sincerity,” which they argue gives primacy to internal states over external performance, and is thus “antiritualistic.”

Within this paper, I explore a similar dichotomy between “subjunctive” and “sincere” behaviors in a ritual manual written by the late Song literatus Zheng Sixiao (1241-1318), entitled the *Inner Method of Oblatory Refinement of the Great Bourne (Taiji jilian neifa)*, DZ. 548). In this manual, Zheng begins by presenting a brief description of a practice of “oblatory refinement” (*jilian*), a method for the posthumous salvation of orphan souls that involves both liturgical recitation and meditative visualization. Zheng’s stated goal in compiling this manual was to design a form of ritual practice to be undertaken by a single person, in a solitary location, which has been stripped of what he regards as “external” elements involving excess performativity, in favor of “inner” qualities such as meditative concentration (*ding*) and sincerity (*cheng*).

This emphasis on the practitioner’s internal state derives from Zheng's larger theory of Daoist ritual, which he articulates in the second part of his manual. He argues that “ritual methods” (*fa*) were created by the Dao and transmitted to the human realm as an expedient means for allowing humans to access the Dao’s creative and transformative potency (*zaohua*). However, because ritual methods are formal and contrived, they can actually serve to estrange the practitioner from direct engagement with the formless and spontaneous Dao, and thereby hinder the attainment of transcendence. In particular, Zheng is critical of ritual practices that involve ostentatious public performance and unnecessary focus on outward elements such as chanting incantations, writing talismans, and choreographed ritual motions. Instead, he has designed a form of oblatory refinement involving

minimal recitation and choreography that is intended for private, solitary performance. By eliminating external distractions and focusing instead on developing concentration through meditation and the practices of inner alchemical visualizations that characterize Song Daoist rituals of refinement (*lian*), practitioners can develop the quality of sincerity, which allows them to directly connect with and channel the creative and transformative potency of the Dao. Such a connection, Zheng argues, will render any ritual performance efficacious, even if one dispenses with most of the external, formal elements of the ritual. Moreover, the attainment of this connection with the Dao can also lead the practitioner to the attainment of transcendence.

In this paper, I will focus on Zheng's critiques of contemporary ritual practices and theories that, I argue, align with the subjunctive understanding of ritual described above – that is, ritual practices that involve the performance of an alternate reality that is implicitly understood as such. I will examine Zheng's criticisms of certain forms of imaginative deity visualization, including the practice of "deity transformation" (*bianshen*), which conflict with Zheng's understanding of deities as truly existent. Similarly, I will discuss his critique of contemporary ritual theories that treat elements of Daoist ritual as mere symbolism. Finally, I will present Zheng's own recommendations for developing the ethos of sincerity within Daoist ritual practice. Ultimately, I argue that "sincerity," as Zheng and other contemporary ritual theorists understood it, is not antiritualistic; rather, it represents a response to subjunctive and symbolic understandings of ritual that attempts to assert an objective basis for ritual actions and outcomes.

Paper 3:

"Consummate Bodies: A Prolegomenon to a Daoist Ritual Theory of the Senses"

150 Words:

This paper seeks to offer a more nuanced vocabulary of the senses by exploring the role of the visceral in liturgical articulations for manifesting the presence of the Daoist exorcistic deity Wang Lingguan. Using Michel Serres' philosophy of "mingled bodies" to orient its discussion of sensory meaning, it plumbs the embodied repertoire of transforming the body (*bianshen*) as detailed in the ritual texts within the *Unified Origins of the Dao and Its Rituals (Daofa huiyuan)*. By showing how meaning is articulated in talismans, body postures, breathing techniques, incantatory utterances, and the use of ritual objects that when performed together manifest the "true form" (*zhenxing*) of the deity, it reveals how the language of actualizing Wang Lingguan speaks to something truly visceral. Thus, this paper demonstrates how the study of Daoist ritual offers an overlooked but poignant contribution to the burgeoning conversation on the role of the senses within religious studies.

1000 Words:

As concern within the broader Humanities for finding alternatives to the dominance of metaphorical modes of interpretation continues to grow, there remains an ever increasing need for developing a more nuanced vocabulary to articulate engagement with the phenomenal world. Recent work in Religious Studies has looked to the senses, and Sally M. Promey's edited volume, *Sensational Religion* (2015), is among the first attempts to engage multiple scholarly perspectives on how sensory

perception informs visceral aspects to the study of religion. Yet, given the rich vocabulary within the discourse on art criticism, the overall emphasis remains squarely fixated on the visual aspects of religious practice. The primacy of the visual extends into the study of Daoism as well, where the discussion of the “true form” (*zhenxing*) centers almost exclusively on visual cultures. While it is clear that “true form” within Daoist contexts extends well beyond only the visual, the fact is that discussing sensory qualities other than visibility remains a great challenge given the paucity of vocabulary with which scholars of religion can approach the visceral. The study of ritual, and in particular Daoist ritual, can step into this void to help.

Rituals for manifesting the presence of divine figures offer a nuanced sensory vocabulary for articulating presence in the phenomenal world that can enrich a developing conversation on the senses and contribute to the broader discourse of the phenomenological turn. This kind of empowered vocabulary of the body is typified in rites associated with the Daoist exorcistic deity Wang Lingguan. Methods such as the letting of the priest’s own blood to consummate the writing performance of talismans to bring about the presence of this martial deity thus manifest a sanguine form of the god that extends beyond just the visual. Such an outward corporeal expression of the transformations of the body (*bianshen*) is part of a much broader embodied repertoire that articulates meaning through the senses. Through a discussion of the performative and embodied vocabulary of ritually manifesting Wang Lingguan, this paper seeks to bring the emic articulations of Daoist ritual in concert with etic discourse on the senses for the mutual benefit of both.

Using Michel Serres’ philosophy of ‘mingled bodies’ to orient its perspective on articulating sensory experience, this paper focuses on Ming dynasty (1368–1644) ritual texts dedicated to summoning the martial god Wang Lingguan in order to reveal how the embodied vocabulary of manifesting the divine articulates presence using a vocabulary of the senses. The ritual manuals detail how to actualize the presence of the deity through transforming the priest’s body via visceral articulations—visualizations, written talismans, hand seals, invocatory chants, breathing techniques, along with the deployment of such ritual objects as altar scrolls and “thunder blocks”—that when performed in concert together, account for the presence of the deity and make his power perceivable. This paper brings the language of these liturgical texts in concert with contemporaneous ritual objects to help flesh out how divine power becomes embodied.

Focusing on the terminology for manifesting the affective quality of divine presence reveals how the procedural vocabulary of ritual manuals does more than simply describe the martial deity to make him accessible through sensory perception. Enacting the ritual has the effect of bringing the deity into the phenomenal world—manifesting his “true form” through outward expressions of the visceral. The expression of divine power through these combinations of methods that explicitly utilize the visual, aural, tactile, and even olfactory senses offers a rich vocabulary for articulating meaning through visceral modes of expression framed in ritual context.

While Ming sources form the basis for this investigation, the texts themselves likely have antecedents in local liturgical traditions associated with Wang Lingguan that may reach as far back as the Song dynasty (960-1279). More generally known as a protector of Daoist space, Wang Lingguan plays an important role as a violent demon turned demon-queller deployed in the service of the early Ming emperors. He, along with his master Sa Shoujian (fl. 12th century), form a dynamic duo of divine response articulated within the Divine Empyrean School’s (Shenxiao) liturgical tradition ready to be called forth when the personal welfare of the ruler or the security of the state felt threatened. Some of the earliest extant ritual texts detailing the process for summoning the presence of Wang Lingguan are found in the *Daoist Canon*, preserved within the massive liturgical compilation of the *Daofa huiyuan*. Three chapters in total are dedicated specifically to Wang Lingguan each offering a variety of

different embodied methods on how to summon forth the presence of the deity and how to control its terrible power and thus set it to task. While situated within the Shenxiao liturgical traditions of the early Ming, the vocabulary of the *Daofa huiyuan* texts draws from a shared conceptual reservoir of Thunder Methods (*leifa*) that extends from the Song dynasty to contemporary times. Thus, the sources chosen here offer a window into a much broader ritual imaginary that informs how to interact with, understand, and manipulate the phenomenal world in terms of the sensorial body. Informed by contemporary practice, this paper shows how the ritual vocabulary of summoning Wang Lingguan is more than just a description of how the phenomenal world is perceived, but how the phenomenal world is made manifest through avenues of perception. As such, it offers an active mode of interacting with the world through the careful consideration and practiced interplay of the senses. In so doing, it demonstrates how the embodied vocabulary of Daoist ritual offers an otherwise overlooked opportunity to enrich the broader conversation on sensory religion. At the same time, the study of ritual, and in particular how it relates to the discourse on sensory religion, can help frame Daoism's contribution to the Humanities at large. As the broader scholarly concern continues to turn toward seeking out alternatives to metaphorical modes of interpretation, the sanguine presence of the demon-queller Wang Lingguan stands ready as an able-bodied guide to help lead the way.

Paper 4:

“Categories of Culture: Daoist Ritual and Modernity in Villages of Central Hunan”

150 words:

Rituals in general – and of the rural Chinese hinterland in specific – are often understood as a vestige of the past, a Tylorian “survival” that has been allowed to persist either because religious institutions with vested interests transmitted them (against the common sense of modernity) or because the poor patrons of ritual did not have any other, more rational options. Ritual thus conceived is no more than a residual category, a stubborn habit of the social body that gestures meaninglessly against the tide of the times. Focusing on Daoist rituals performed in the villages of Central Hunan (PRC), I argue that ritual is much more, and that within communities where ritual is still a prominent part of everyday life, it forms a constitutive aspect of what it means to be human.

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Focusing on Daoist rituals performed in the villages of Central Hunan (PRC), I argue that ritual is much more, and that within communities where ritual is still a prominent part of everyday life, it forms a constitutive aspect of what it means to be human. Ritual in those communities does not make up an

exclusive or autonomous aspect of culture that can be defined as a category in itself. Though performed by experts who have detailed knowledge of the specific procedures they execute as ritual, neither the experts nor the rituals or the occasions at which experts and rituals jointly gather forces could be fully defined within the distinct analytical pigeonholes that the discourse of modernity has normalized for academic research. That is, when scholars differentiate between “sacrificial ritual,” “exorcist ritual,” “ritual theatre,” “ritual festival,” “rituals of worship,” and so on, they engage in a play of words that creates the semblance of orderly differentiation between distinct categories of analysis, each supposedly representing a different phenomenon. Ironically, however, presented as distinct categories, none of these make sense to the priests who perform it or to the laymen who participate.

We need to take seriously the fact that ritual is neither an end in itself nor a phenomenon that can exist outside a context. Unlike literary texts, historical records, or legal documents, ritual (and its texts) is meant for performance, including music and singing, for visceral perception, for individual as well as communal experience. Ritual, freed from the artificial vacuum of academic analysis, belongs to the community that performs it in a context of politics, economic transactions, aesthetic experience; these all form a continuum with each other. Indeed it is precisely because of ritual’s intertwinement within a complex socio-religious landscape, not torn apart by the divisive forces of ‘new meaning’ that modernity has imposed on the world, that ritual connects to aspects of the world that have existed in relatively stable format before modernity came along with its innovative urges. Rather than a meaningless gesture of the social body, ritual expresses concerns at the core of the human world, even provides visions of what it means to have a full human experience: aesthetically rich, socially connected, linguistically refined, and ambitiously transcendental.

How to make sense of it all? Instead of falling into the paralysis of muddle-headedness, however, the most likely way out of the trap of academic categories is to return to the living context of ritual and reconsider the terms of engagement between various interrelated categories. We need to submit first to the indigenous categories, units, labels, and other linguistic constructs that define the discourse surrounding Daoist ritual. So, the first question to ask is, What are the terms used within this discourse? How are they related to each other? If they are indeed constructing a different repertoire of categories, what are the phenomena that underlie them, and what are the phenomena that are produced by them? Finally, and perhaps most crucially, how is all of this related to the very real and present entity of the human being?