

## Article

# What Is Hell? How Daoism Challenges the Strong View

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**Abstract:** This article argues that Daoism embodies a performative approach to hell. To make this argument, the first section summarizes the “strong view of hell”. The second section explores how the Daoist text *Scripture of the Three Offices* (*Sanguan jing* 三官經) describes hell. The third section examines how the Daoist priest Nie Shihao 聶士豪 (fl. 1691) interprets this description of hell. His commentary shows that Chinese rituals constitute a venue whereby social actors pursue ritual criticism and self-reflexivity.

**Keywords:** Daoism; hell; ritual; strong view of hell

## 1. Introduction

Hells pervade most world religions. Descriptions of a dreadful postmortem destination appear in Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Chinese, and Hindu traditions. Although hell might be described as a cross-cultural category, one should not assume that different traditions construe hell in the same manner. Yet, the “strong view of hell” pervades scholarly debates on the subject. Simply put, the “strong view” depicts hell as an eternal postmortem place of punishment for those whose lives do not align with God’s plan for humanity. The dominance of this view has two undesirable consequences. First, Judeo-Christian notions tend to eclipse native narratives about hell. Second, scholars might unwarrantedly establish “hells” where there are none.<sup>1</sup>

Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) was among the earliest intellectuals to apply the “strong view” to Chinese culture. “That means there must be a hell too?” (Lu 1980, p. 171) A woman identified simply as “Xianglin’s Wife” asks this question in Lu Xun’s classic tale *The New Year’s Sacrifice*. In this short psychological story, an anonymous protagonist—“I”—returns to his village to take part in new year celebrations. The returnee stands for the modern intellectual. Fourth Uncle, Aunt, Xianglin’s Wife, and Amah Liu embody a “feudal” China where rituals, sacrifices, and local gods structure social relations.

That the father of Chinese literature would pay heed to hell is remarkable. Amah Liu explains to Xianglin’s Wife that hells *do* exist: “As it is, you’re guilty of a great sin though you lived less than two years with your second husband. Just think: when you go down to the lower world, the ghosts of both men will start fighting over you. Which ought to have you? The King of Hell will have to saw you into two and divide you between them” (Lu 1980, p. 185). Horrified, Xianglin’s Wife purchases ritual atonement for her sins from a Daoist priest. She pays “twelve thousand cash” for salvation.

Lu Xun is a modernist who abhorred ritual. For him, ritual has a numbing effect: “Enveloped in this medley of sound I relaxed; the doubt which had preyed on my mind from dawn till night was swept clean away by the festive atmosphere” (Lu 1980, p. 187–88). The protagonist of *The New-Year Sacrifice* thus describes his relief from doubt and anguish upon participating in rituals. The tale portrays ritual as a hindrance against the forces of progressivist modernity. In a word, ritual is allegedly incompatible with modern self-reflexivity.



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*Contra* Lu Xun, I argue that Daoism embodies a performative approach to hell. The “strong view” postulates hell as a phenomenon whose reality is independent from observers. The Daoist tradition, on the other hand, construes the reality of hell with reference to a ritual framework. As demonstrated by Patrice Fava, Daoists conceive of hell as part of Laozi’s cosmic body (Fava 2013, pp. 88–93). Not surprisingly, Daoist ordination exempts one from damnation in hell.<sup>2</sup> The Daoist priest achieves control over hell through complex ritual processes of self-divinization.<sup>3</sup> Crucially, Daoist views of hell entail what Ronald Grimes terms “ritual criticism” (Grimes 2014). Real-life Daoists do not eschew critical attitudes toward ritual, nor do these social actors frown upon self-reflexivity.<sup>4</sup>

To make this argument, the first section summarizes the “strong view”. The second section explores how the Daoist text *Scripture of the Three Offices* (*Sanguan jing* 三官經) describes hell. The third section examines how the Daoist priest Nie Shihao 聶士豪 (fl. 1691) interprets this description of hell. His commentary shows that Chinese rituals constitute a venue whereby social actors pursue ritual criticism and self-reflexivity.

## 2. The Strong View of Hell

There is something odd about the way *The New Year’s Sacrifice* approaches hell. Xianglin’s Wife asks a philosophical question: does hell exist? Indeed, it is reasonable to contend that Xianglin’s Wife asks a question about what Jonathan L. Kvanvig usefully defines as “the strong view of hell”. In his formulation, the “strong view” entails four theses:

- (H1) The Anti-Universalism Thesis: some persons are consigned to Hell;
- (H2) The Existence Thesis: Hell is a place where people exist, if they are consigned there;
- (H3) The No Escape Thesis: there is no possibility of leaving Hell, and nothing one can do, change, or become in order to get out of Hell, once one is consigned there; and
- (H4) The Retribution Thesis: The justification for and purpose of Hell is retributive in nature, Hell being constituted so as to mete out punishment to those whose earthly lives and behavior warrant it.

(Kvanvig 1993, p. 19)

To this list, Andrew Rogers and Nathan Conroy add a fifth element. In their own words: “(H5) that Hell will exist for an infinite length of time” (Rogers and Conroy 2015, p. 50). The idea of a retributive hell is as old as the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece (McCraw and Arp 2015, pp. 1–2). Yet, Rogers and Conroy justify their defense of the “strong view” as follows: “We have reason to believe that God can experience infinite pain because we have reason to believe that Jesus experienced infinite pain when crucified” (Rogers and Conroy 2015, p. 64). This defense defines the “strong view” as an expression of Christian exclusionist theology.

*The New Year’s Sacrifice* suggests that Chinese views of hell are not fully compatible with the “strong view”. Lu Xun’s tale seems to support theses H1, H2, and H4. Indeed, the dialog between Xianglin’s Wife and Amah Liu implies that (1) some people are consigned to hell (H1); (2) hell is indeed a place where people exist (H2); hell exists for a retributive purpose (H4). The story does not afford conclusions about whether hell is eternal or not (H5). Yet, the fact that Amah Liu urges Xianglin’s Wife to seek atonement suggests that Chinese views of hell do not support H3. There might be an escape from hell.

I do not know *who* is correct about the nature of hell. I know, however, that there are no grounds to dismiss theological rationales—be they Christian or Daoist—as baseless mumbo-jumbo. The ground of reality could be anything from Jesus to Daoist scriptures, or the groundless Emptiness of Buddhists. As Donald D. Hoffman puts it:

By trying to boot up biology from physics, we have made an elementary error: we have mistaken a limit of our interface as an insight into reality. The presumed pyramid of science, with physics at the base and the special sciences emerging from physics, embodies this mistake. This pyramid is upside down. Consciousness is fundamental, and all the other sciences are interface descriptions of the network of conscious agents; physics is simply the least informative description of consciousness within our interface.

(Hoffman 2019, p. 68)

The paragraph entails a radical claim. If, as the author suggests, consciousness is fundamental, then there is much room for theorizing religious studies as a supplement to physics. Ritual, for example, is probably the most informative description of consciousness within our evolutionary interface. This hypothesis opens up new lines of inquiry for theologians, ritualists, and religious studies scholars.

The “strong view”, however, is the product of a society for which physics defines what is real and what is not. As a matter of fact, the “strong view” would be unthinkable in a society where there is no separation between science and religion. This theological construct perpetuates dichotomies such as science and religion, knowledge and faith, thought and action. Such dichotomies are not relevant for understanding Daoist visions of hell.

No clear boundary between “knowledge” and “faith” existed in traditional China. For this very reason, Chinese views of hell entail a different set of questions than those informing the “strong view”. The latter wants to answer whether hell exists and what is the nature of hell. These questions were not relevant in traditional China’s case. The problem was how to *overcome* hell through rituals. This attitude toward hell entails a critical approach to ritual.

### 3. The Scripture’s Description of Hell

Lu Xun was fundamentally wrong about the nature of ritual. While *The New Year’s Sacrifice* caricaturizes ritual as an expression of anti-modern backwardness, the reality is that those who perform rituals also engage in criticism (Grimes 2014). Nie Shihao’s *Explanation to the Scripture of the Three Offices* (*Sanguan jing zhujie* 三官經註解; hereafter *Explanation*) corroborates this claim. As the title suggests, this work is a commentary on the *Scripture of the Three Offices* (hereafter, *Scripture*).<sup>5</sup>

The *Scripture* is a Daoist text devoted to the Three Offices (*Sanguan* 三官). This exalted Daoist trinity presides over the divine bureaucracy to confer blessings, pardon sins, and avert disasters. Although the Three Offices have played a central role in Daoist rituals since Eastern Han times (25–220), the *Scripture* appeared much later, between the Southern Song (1127–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties. Its extant editions date back to the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.<sup>6</sup>

Tobias Zürn urges scholars to adopt a reader-centered approach to Chinese texts. As he puts it: “in some of our projects, we could de-emphasize authorial intent as the prime target of any hermeneutic enterprise and, instead, focus on a text’s readership” (Zürn 2022, p. 9). There are several reasons the *Explanation* invites such a methodology. First, we know nothing about the human authors of the *Scripture*. This text presents itself as a series of oral revelations by the Three Offices of Heaven, Earth, and Water. Second, we know virtually nothing about the text’s first edition. Did spirit-writing groups produce the *Scripture*? Was the first edition a manuscript or a printed edition? In the absence of conclusive evidence, any answer to these questions is mere speculation. Third, we know more about the readers of the *Scripture* than about its authors.

The *Explanation* is a multilayered document. Stored in the Tianjin Library, the extant physical exemplar was produced in Yongfeng 永豐 (Jiangxi 江西 area) in 1876. The edition

records the plain text of the *Scripture*, which is preceded by a Ming preface attributed to the Jiajing emperor (1507–1567). The exegetical layer, on the other hand, traces back to the Daoist priest Nie Shihao, whose extensive commentary focuses on the moral foundations of ritual practice. The Nies were an influential clan in the Yongfeng area. Nie Shihao's ancestors included the Minister of War 兵部尚書 Nie Bao 聶豹 (1487–1563). Nie was trained as a Daoist priest on Mount Yusi 玉笥山, which was part of Linjiang prefecture 臨江府 (Schachter 2022).

The *Explanation's* paratextual apparatus shows that the edition was created for ritual purposes. In this respect, this Qing edition is almost identical to the Ming editions. Nie Shihao's commentary, however, is unique to the *Explanation*. This exegetical layer comprises 4847 Chinese characters. The plain text of the *Scripture* runs through 13 characters per line, 5 lines per page. Nie's commentaries appear in small characters and occupy 25 characters per line, 10 lines per page. Nie divides the plain text of the *Scripture* into ten "branches" (zhi 支). Both the plain text and the commentary are punctuated.

The plain text of the *Scripture* offers a vivid description of Daoist hells. Admittedly, however, the very notion of "Daoist hells" merits further explanation. By "Daoist hells", I mean the hells mentioned or described in Daoist scriptures. I do not mean that these hells are Daoist in nature or that they exclusively punish transgressive Daoists.

Scholarly accounts of Daoist views of hells usually focus on describing the origins and characteristics of Chinese hells. It is undeniable that Buddhist sources contributed much to the imagery associated with Chinese hells. However, scholars unanimously agree that Chinese sources recorded a great many underworlds long before Buddhism entered China (Bokenkamp 2007; Miller 2008; Graham 2020).

A brief account of Chinese underworlds is, thus, in order. The Shang dynasty (1600 to 1046 BCE) oracle bones describe a pantheon of capricious ancestors who live in the underworld and receive sacrifices. Warring States (c. 475–221 BCE) sources mention the Yellow Springs (*huangquan* 黃泉) as the postmortem destination of the deceased. Sources dated to the first century BCE describe Mount Tai 泰山, a mountain range also known as the East Marchmount (Dongyue 東嶽), as a dark, cold underworld. Since ancient times, Mount Tai was also imagined as a region ruled by a divine sovereign, the Lord of Mount Tai 泰山府君. Daoist scriptures of the Six Dynasties period (220–589) describe Fengdu 豐都 as an underworld where relatively accomplished Daoists act as bureaucrats in charge of the dead. None of these underworlds, however, was imbued with a retributive nature. The concept of hell as a place for judgment and punishment appears only in Lingbao scriptures of the fifth century CE.<sup>7</sup>

In Song (960–1279) and Ming China (1368–1644), the cult of Mount Tai developed into a robust temple network (Fava 2023, p. 37). The god Dongyue became the head of an immense divine bureaucracy. He was, thus, responsible for punishing and rewarding the deceased. He was also responsible for "sublimating and saving" (*lian du* 煉度) local gods, which then became spirits worshiped at the national level. As Mark Meulenbeld remarkably puts it, "Without him, local spirits would remain local" (Meulenbeld 2015, p. 4). Daoist hells display distinctively bureaucratic features.

The *Scripture* reflects this bureaucratic ontology. The *Explanation's* seventh branch records the *Scripture's* most intriguing passage about hell. Consider the translation below:

- (1) The Water Officer said: when the destinies of mundane men and women enter in conflict with the widower star and the widow mansion, they are punished and afflicted with the extinction of offspring; all this is because in previous lives they did not practice charity, so that in this life they must suffer this [retribution]. If there are kind men and trustworthy women, they must observe silence during day and night, take ritual baths, burn incense, light lamps, and recite Scripture; they must practice Fast-

ing, give alms, repent from their faults, and refrain from transgressions; then they will give birth to an upright and handsome man, an intelligent and noble son whose reputation will pacify the five ponds and four seas.

水官曰：世間夫婦，命犯孤辰寡宿，刑害絕嗣，皆是前生不施，今生受之。若有善男信女。晨夕好靜，沐浴燒香，燃燈誦經，修齋布施，悔過消刑，便生端正有相之男，聰明富貴之子，聲鎮五湖四海。

- (2) Those who are born [to you] in this life practiced misdeeds and were negligent [towards you] in the past; to obtain riches, they disobeyed [your] orders; they are born as [your] son in this life to have their lives taken and riches wasted. When women become pregnant, they will not be able to give birth without great difficulties [literally, they will take three to five days to do so]; their sons will die inside their bodies; or they will die as soon as they come out; or they will die when they are around three, six, or nine years old; or they will die when they are thirteen or fifteen years old. Day after day, night after night, ten thousand die and ten thousand live; this is all because wronging and faults follow one another; wasting resources and riches, those who join forces to deceive [people] for the sake of accumulating riches and things will be reborn as animals.

宿世今生，故作誤為，謀財負命，今世為兒，取命化財，女人妊娠，三朝五日不行分娩，或在身兒亡，生下兒亡，三六九歲兒亡，十三五歲兒亡，一日一夜，萬死萬生，俱是冤愆相臨，化目化財，騙協財物，化為畜生。

- (3) If there are kind men and trustworthy women who decide to donate riches, practice Fasting, take ritual baths, recite this Scripture, thus repenting from their faults and transgressions, they will be liberated from their transgressions forever. People and ghosts will be kept apart, there will be no difficulties during partition, both the mother and her son will be safe; not being harmed by the baleful portals, [the son] will grow up as an adult, benefiting his parents.

若有善男信女，發心施財，齋戒沐浴，轉誦此經，悔過愆尤，即使愆尤永釋，人鬼分離，產生無難，母子雙全，關煞無刑，生長成人，利益雙親。

- (4) The powers of Scripture are vast and profound! Supplicate for blessings and blessings must arrive! Avert disasters and disasters must be eliminated! Enemies disintegrate like melting ice; wrongdoers and creditors disappear and vanish spontaneously; the orphan souls, the seven generations of ancestors in the ninefold dark regions, as well as the four forms of life in the six paths which transmigrate between life and death will be released from the terrestrial prisons; they will be immediately reborn in the Celestial Realm of the Eastern Pinnacle, in the courtyard of the [Celestial Worthy Who] Saves from Suffering. The land of the [Celestial Worthy Who] Saves from Suffering is of great advantage for self-cultivation; it has only Celestial Halls, but no terrestrial prisons.

經力弘深，祈福福至，禳禍禍消，讎人冰泮，冤家債主，自消自滅，孤魂等眾，九玄七祖四生六道，輪迴生死，出離地獄，即往東極天界，救苦門庭救苦地上好修行，只有天堂無地獄。

- (5) When Yama glances [at you], he will not dare to raise his voice. The spiritual infants and the yakshas will join their hands across their breasts [in a sign of respect]. The Ox-Headed and Horse-Faced [Guardians] will take refuge [in you]. In the eighteen terrestrial prisons there will be enjoyment and ease.

閻王一見，不敢高聲，童子夜叉，擎拳拱手，牛頭馬面，總盡皈依，一十八重地獄，獄獄逍遙。



- (6) In the thirty-three celestial palaces, there will be unrestrained spontaneity. In the realm of the Celestial Halls for salvation of life, the sounds of the terrestrial prison are not heard. Being delivered from the terrestrial prisons, there is eternal deliverance from sufferings and difficulties. Ascending from the human to the celestial realm, [your] life will be saved in that pure land; [experiencing] unlimited joy, [you will] go and come without impediments and obstacles.

三十三天天宮，宮宮自在，超生天堂之境，即無地獄之聲，出離地獄，永離苦難，徑往人天，超生淨土，快樂無量，一去一來，無掛無碍。<sup>8</sup>

The passage translated above concerns at least six different themes. Paragraph (1) claims that astrological phenomena—the text mentions the widower star (*guchen* 孤辰) and the widow mansion (*guaxiu* 寡宿)—might influence one's life. The same paragraph, however, argues that the act of reciting the *Scripture* might liberate one from the influence of astrological configurations. Paragraph (2) explains how karma works. Paragraph (3) is about ritual efficacy. Paragraph (4) concerns the “powers” (*li* 力) of the *Scripture*. Paragraph (5) promises that those who recite the *Scripture* might gain control of hell. Paragraph (6) promises eternal salvation.

These six themes represent a considerable challenge to the “strong view of hell”. (H2), the Existence Thesis, is the sole point of agreement: Hell is a place where people exist. Yet, the Daoist hell is also a place where a host of deities exist. Paragraph (5) mentions Yama, the King of Hell. It should be noted, however, that Yama is not a Daoist counterpart to Satan or the Devil. Indeed, Yama is not the Prince of this World.

King Yama has a complex history. In Indo-Iranian myth, Yama is the first king. According to Martin West, Indic, Iranian, and German accounts suggest that “the origin of man was bound up with the creation of the world from the body of a giant or proto-human killed and carved by the gods” (West 2007, p. 359). In the Chinese context, Yama is a divine bureaucrat of Buddhist origins. Yama became an indelible aspect of the Chinese religious imagination during the Tang dynasty (618–907) (Teiser 1988, p. 359). The ten courts of hell, of which Yama is the fifth king, have been central to Chinese popular religion since the Song dynasty (960–1279) (Teiser 1988, p. 183; 1994, p. 2). Yama is the “chief supervisor of the underground prisons”, who “resides in a palace underneath the outskirts of the Iron Wire Mountains, to the south of the Southern Continent” (Huang 2012, p. 122). The Chinese term for hell, “terrestrial prison” (*diyu* 地獄), suggests that the Chinese imagine hell as an extension of this world. According to this royal ontology, there is a symbiosis between human and divine bureaucracies.

The *Scripture* is partially compatible with (H4), the Retribution Thesis. Hell metes out punishment to those whose behavior warrants it. Paragraphs (2), (3), and (4), however, explain punishment vis à vis two theoretical devices unknown to the “strong view”. The first device is the idea of karma. The second construct is the idea that an individual's destiny is tied to that of his ancestors.

The *Scripture* is fully incompatible with (H1), (H3), and (H5). Against (H1), the Anti-Universalism Thesis, paragraphs (4), (5), and (6) suggest that no one is, fundamentally, consigned to Hell. *Contra* (H3) and (H5), the No Escape Thesis, paragraphs (5) and (6) claim that not only it is possible to escape hell, the *Scripture* might confer upon ritual practitioners authority over Yama, the King of Hell. As important, ritual practice aims at transforming hells into paradises. Denying (H5), the Daoist view is that hell exists for a finite length of time. We now have enough textual elements for examining how the Daoist priest Nie Shihao explains the *Scripture's* description of hell.

#### 4. Nie Shihao Explains Hell

Another crucial reason Daoist views of hell are incompatible with the “strong view” has to do with Daoist notions of Divinity. Note that the central theme of the *Scripture* is the notion of “power of Scripture” (*jingli* 經力).<sup>9</sup> This notion is neither exclusively nor originally Daoist. Apparently, its *locus classicus* is the *Lotus Sutra* (*Lianhua jing* 蓮華經), which was translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa 法護 (fl. 265). Buddhist miracle tales portray the *Lotus Sutra* as “an entity that could stand in for the Buddha himself (as the *Lotus* repeatedly says of itself)” (Campany 2018, p. 51). Indeed, there is a sense in which both Buddhist and Daoist texts conceive of Scripture as a divine Subject.

The *Scripture*’s bold claims about ritual efficacy and personal empowerment reflect this view of Scripture as Divinity. The text promises that one will enjoy filial offspring, overcome unfavorable astrological configurations, avoid disasters, subjugate enemies, and even participate in Yama’s divine kingship. Intriguingly, the Daoist priest Nie Shihao argues *against* such promises of ritual empowerment. Indeed, Nie’s commentary to the *Scripture* is evidence that the populace developed its own understanding about how certain rituals should be conducted, and what to expect from these practices. In the *Explanation*, Nie denounces wrong expectations toward ritual practice. Consider his preface:

Among those who observe the vegetarian restrictions of the Three Offices in the present age, there is an uncountable number of folks who adopt [the practice] as a fashionable trend. Unfortunately, the people of the world are deluded and stupid. They admire [the Scripture for the sake of] its prestige and vainly hope for blessings and protection. They do not understand its meaning, nor do they understand its purpose. They commit evil deeds against the visible, i.e., fellow humans] and beg the invisible, i.e., gods and ancestors] for blessings. Is it not absurd? The mundane people have lost their original nature; they indulge in their illicit desires, without taking caution against anything whatsoever. As soon as they raise their minds and give motion to their thoughts, they produce nothing but sins. [They do not understand that] people must not go as far as having illicit sexual relations, stealing, and killing in order to commit what is known as evil. Those who are deluded do not know that they spontaneously invite retribution. This is truly regrettable! Therefore, even if reprimanded by the royal stanzas and national statutes, they remain stubbornly ignorant. It is only when exposed to the ineffability of karma, and frightened by the inescapability of the invisible net, that they apprehensively generate awe. This is how the Sages make use of the divine Way to establish the teaching. As for this Scripture, its purpose is evident, its phraseology is simple, while its essence is comprehensive. It wishes that people repent from their sins and move toward what is good, so that disasters may be transformed into auspiciousness. Those who are wise may grasp its meaning, but those who are naïve and ignorant will not necessarily be able to suddenly understand it. I have been observing the vegetarian restrictions of the Three Offices for more than thirty years; and I have never dared to minimally neglect it. I always lament the fact that the masses misunderstand the meaning of the Scripture. They wrongly think that a person who observes the vegetarian restrictions, although practicing evil deeds, will avoid harming himself while illicitly escaping misfortune. They hope to avoid disasters and to procure blessings. Moreover, this greatly encourages those who are not good. Is it not absurd? I, therefore, wandered in search of the Commentaries to the Resplendent Scripture and of the books in the Daoist Canon, which I then consulted and investigated. I spent two months immersed in such efforts, from evening until the day would dawn; I painstakingly tried to explore and clarify the meaning of the Scripture.

I have thus, albeit inappropriately, composed the Explanation to have it printed and disseminated among those who share the same resolve. Its readers must easily grasp the [Scripture]. [My] explanations must produce understanding. Understanding must cause readers to suddenly repent from their sins, so that they will faithfully accept and observe [the Scripture]. I would not vainly waste my efforts compiling a writ for mundane supplications. In utmost awe, I respectfully examine the purposes of the Grand Thearchs, which is caring for the world and awakening the people, so as not to betray their magnificent intention of compassionately saving the world!

01/10 of the *xinwei* year of the Kangxi reign of the Resplendent Qing [20 November 1691].

Shihao, the disciple from the southern regions of Gudan, in Yuzhang, respectfully records [the above].

今之奉三官素者，靡然從風指不勝屈矣。可惜世人夢夢，浮慕其名，而妄希福庇。不解其義，不明其旨。作惡於昭昭，求福於冥冥。有是理哉！蓋凡夫之人，迷失本性，縱其私欲，無所顧忌。即舉心動念，罔非過惡。不必淫殺盜而後謂之惡也。彼昏不知自招孽報。良可悼嘆。故雖糾以王章，加以國憲而頑然罔覺。惟示以果報之不爽，惕以陰綱之難逃，庶慄然而知畏。此聖人所以神道設教也。但此經其旨顯，其辭樸而其要總。欲人悔過遷善，以轉禍成祥。智者可以意會，而顛蒙未必能驟悟。豪奉三官素三十餘年，始終不敢少懈。每嘆衆人迷失經義，妄以爲即奉其素，則雖作惡，亦自無妨，而苟且僥倖。冀圖禍可免，福可致。此又與於不善之甚者也。豈不謬哉！因訪求《皇經註釋》及《道藏》各書，參訂考究，費兩月之功，苦心晷晷必求發明經義。謬為《註解》一書，用以刊佈同志。俾覽者，開卷了然。由解而悟，由悟而翻然懺悔，信受奉行。不徒作世俗祈禱之文觀也。庶仰體

大帝憂世覺民之旨，以無負其慈悲度世之盛心云爾。皇清康熙辛未孟冬朔旦。豫章古淦陽弟子聶士豪敬識。

Nie wrote this preface in 1691. By then, he was a senior Daoist with “more than 30 years” of practice. Nie follows a tradition of Daoist commentaries.<sup>10</sup> As important, Nie constructs two types of audience. On the one hand, Nie addresses a cohort of kindred spirits who have the “same resolve” (*tongzhi* 同志). By this, Nie most probably means fellow Daoists, initiates, students, and lay patrons. On the other hand, Nie also explicitly deploys the term *zhongren* 衆人, literally, the “myriads of people”, or the “masses”.

What does Nie mean by the word “masses”? One possibility is that the term indicates the small parcel of the population who could consume religious scriptures as a cultural commodity without, however, showing adequate ritual fluency. This interpretation is supported by Nie’s characterization of the masses as those who are not able to understand “scriptural meaning” (*jing yi* 經義). The masses hold wrong expectations toward ritual practice: “They wrongly think that a person who observes the vegetarian restrictions, although practicing evil deeds, will avoid harming himself while illicitly scaping misfortune”. Those who do not grasp scriptural meaning “commit evil deeds against the visible [i.e., fellow humans] and beg the invisible [i.e., gods and ancestors] for blessings”.

The “masses” lack ritual fluency. One reason is that the “masses” do not understand that ritual involves meaning. The preface thus reflects certain assumptions about scriptures. First, the scriptural text is prone to misinterpretation. Second, there is something as the correct interpretation of scriptural texts. Third, those who misinterpret the *Scripture* believe that rituals and vegetarianism may take precedence over proper morality. In other words, lack of ritual fluency arises from misunderstanding the relationship between ritual and morality. For Nie, proper morality produces ritual efficacy.



Note that Nie also criticizes deviations in ritual practice. More conspicuously, the author mentions a specific set of ritual practices known as the Vegetarian Restrictions of the Three Offices (*Sanguan su* 三官素). Remarkably, the *Explanation* is the sole edition of the *Scripture* to explicitly mention this practice. However, many sources support Nie's claim to the effect that "there is an uncountable number of folks who adopt [the practice] as a fashionable trend".

Let me illustrate this claim with some examples. The *Hangzhou Gazetteer* 杭州府志 claims that the famous "dish of the eight treasures" (*babao cai* 八寶菜) was a favorite among practitioners of the Vegetarian Restrictions of the Three Offices.<sup>11</sup> The Qing lexicographer Zhai Hao 翟灝 (fl. 1754) mentions similar ritual programs associated with deities other than the Three Offices, including Guanyin 觀音, Cundi (Zhunti 準提), and the Jade Sovereign (Yuhuang 玉皇).<sup>12</sup> Zhai argues that these practices originated during the Tang dynasty. While this may be pure speculation, the practice was widespread in late imperial China. Gu Lu 顧祿 (1793–1843) describes the Vegetarian Restrictions as a communal festivity that used to take place on Mount Qizi 七子山, Suzhou 蘇州.

In traditional China, no religious groups had monopoly over communal festivities and vegetarian programs of spiritual perfection (Goossaert 2007). Certain groups could thus coopt and reinterpret the social and religious meaning of the latter. In this regard, Qi Xueqiu 齊學裘 (b. 1803) records an interesting anecdote:

This person came from Liangxi village, but I forgot his surname. He went far away to pay a visit to his relatives. His family considered killing a chicken to pay him due courtesies. When he learned this, he anxiously said to the host: "I eat according to the Vegetarian Restrictions of the Three Offices, you must not kill a living being [for the sake of offering me food]". The host paid due courtesies by means of a vegetarian meal, after which he returned home. He reached the shore to cross the river. When he was on the boat, there appeared an old man of white hair, who exclaimed: "If there is a person on this boat who observes the Vegetarian Restrictions of the Three Offices, he may not cross the river!" All the people shouted. The person said: "I do not observe the Vegetarian Restrictions of the Three Offices, it was my family who intended to kill a chicken to pay me due courtesies. Therefore, as an excuse, I said that I observe the Vegetarian Restrictions of the Three Offices!" The masses pushed him onto the shore, not letting him occupy the same boat. The person looked for the old man of white hair at the shore but could not see him. The person then turned back and saw that a strong wind caused the boat to capsize. Saving the life of one chicken, this person was able to escape death from water. This person then understood that returning life is a good deed. How could people neglect this?

梁溪鄉人，忘其姓氏。遠道訪親戚。戚家議殺鷄以待。某知之急謂主人曰：我食三官素，無須殺生。主人待以素食而返。河干過渡，已在渡船岸上有白髮老翁呼曰：船上有假喫三官素者勿渡群譁。某自言：我不喫三官素，為親家要殺鷄待我。故託言喫三官素耳！衆推之上岸，毋許同船。某上岸覓白髮翁不見。回視渡船中流遇風覆矣。救一鷄命得脫水死，乃知放生一節真善舉也。其可忽諸？<sup>13</sup>

This tale also corroborates Nie's claim on the popularity of vegetarian restrictions. At the same time, it adds some layers of complexity to Nie's account. Obviously, the record is sympathetic to vegetarianism. The "old man of white hair" is a deity who disappears as soon as the unnamed man from Liangxi escapes death. Those who rejected the man for his alleged involvement with vegetarian practices met with disaster. Apart from promoting the vegetarian restrictions of the Three Offices, the tale also favorably portrays the practice of returning life to wilderness (*fang sheng* 放生). Yet, the tale reflects the viewpoint of someone who is at least partly suspicious of permanent vegetarianism. On the one hand, the

vegetarian practitioner is outrightly rejected by the people on the boat. On the other hand, the vegetarian practitioner himself denies his participation in permanent vegetarianism.

As explained by Vincent Goossaert, late imperial elites regarded permanent vegetarianism with suspicion (Goossaert 2007, p. 13). Although the tale above seems to connect the Vegetarian Restrictions of the Three Offices with permanent vegetarianism, it is important to notice that neither the *Explanation* nor Daoist ritual codes necessarily endorsed a strictly vegetarian diet, which imperial elites saw with great suspicion (Goossaert 2005b, pp. 237–48). Since the Song onwards, the most important dietarian restriction among Daoists has been the prohibition against the consumption of bovine meat (Goossaert 2005a).

The *Explanation* seems to reproduce elite suspicions against permanent vegetarianism. Indeed, it is possible that Nie Shihao and the local elites responsible for reprinting the *Explanation* in 1876 would like to establish a clear distinction between themselves and sectarian movements that advocated permanent vegetarianism.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the inner cover of our Qing edition portrays vegetarianism as a commendable and yet *secondary* aspect of spiritual cultivation:

*Commented Explanation of the Scripture of the Three Offices*

During the Retreat of the Three Primes, kind men and pious women should repent from their faults and move towards what is good. The gods will immediately confer blessings, pardon the sins, and avert disasters on behalf of those who recite this Scripture.

If you concentrate your heart on what is good and do not practice all sorts of evil actions; even if you do *not* [my emphasis] keep a vegetarian [diet], you may at any time perform ablution, change your clothes, and burn incense to recite Scripture; in this manner, too, [you] can move and approach the divine luminaries, thus achieving blessings.

三官經註解

凡善男信女，每逢三元齋期，悔過遷善。持誦此經者，神即賜福赦罪解厄。若一心向善，諸惡不作，雖不持齋，隨時沐浴，更衣焚香，誦經亦可感格神明而獲福矣。

This is old wine in new bottles. The old wine is a redemptive program that addresses the hardships caused by what Franciscus Verellen names imperiled destinies, i.e., the burden represented by spiritual liabilities, debts, and retribution: “Annual Daoist festivals were occasions for rituals of confession and expiation. The Three Primes marked days of inspection by the Three Offices. Lu Xiuqing instituted Three Primes Retreats on those days, which served increasingly as mortuary rites” (Verellen 2019, p. 304). Recorded as early as the Six Dynasties, the Lingbao version of the Retreat became a central element of local religion in post-Tang China (Lagerwey 2010, p. 33; Lü 2011, pp. 35–61).

The *Explanation*’s inner cover suggests that the Retreat of the Three Primes, a festival in homage of the Three Offices, was an important festival in Qing dynasty Yongfeng. However, the same paratext also states clearly that domestic rituals are *as effective* as communal ones. In so doing, the inner cover reproduces views expressed in the scriptural text and in a long tradition of miracle tales according to which domestic rituals produce blessings (*fu* 福).<sup>15</sup> This term points both to this—worldly benefits and postmortem salvation. Indeed, as demonstrated in the previous section, the *Scripture* contains bold promises of personal empowerment.

In the *Explanation*, Nie takes upon himself the difficult task of conciliating the *Scripture*’s claims about ritual efficacy with proper morality. Nie’s commentary is an attempt at deconstructing the view that ritual *necessarily* produces efficacy. Against a hypothetical audience of deviant worshippers, Nie argues that ritual observation *does not necessarily* produce efficacy. He denies that a *direct* cause–effect relationship between ritual and efficacy exists. His goal is to establish the moral and intersubjective foundations for correct

ritual practice. To demonstrate this point, it will be useful to examine how Nie explains the *Scripture's* description of hell found in the passage translated in the previous section. Consider the following propositions:

- (1) In this [section,] the Water Officer provides those who have no descendants a ritual gateway for begging for sons. His words [mean that when] mundane people find it difficult to [produce] sons and daughters to the point that they become childless, this situation does not come about for no reason. This happens because in a previous life, they were stingy and mean, [so that] even though they might have benefited the whole empire by plucking out a single hair, they would not have done it. For this reason, they suffer this terrible retribution in this life. Why? The same indeed applies to those who regard wealth as the blood and veins of those who are alive. Every time I see someone who lacks descendants, [I know that the reason is that] they have committed this offense. It is a pity that people do not realize this! If they could only awaken to their mistakes with all sincerity, practicing repentance according to the *Scripture*, the so-called grave sins would melt like frost and dew.

此是水官為乏嗣者，開一求子之法門。蓋言凡人艱於兒女。以致絕嗣非屬無因。皆由前生慳吝刻薄拔一毛而利天下不為。故今生受此慘報。何則財利者。生人之血脈也。亦其如此。每見世人乏嗣者。多坐此弊。惜乎人不悟也。但能一念悔悟。依經懺悔。所謂重罪如霜露。

- (2) Repentance is like the scorching sun. When frost and dew are exposed to the sun, is it possible that they will not melt and disappear? A Buddhist scripture says: "Sin originates from dependent origination; it also vanishes due to dependent origination". Repentance is the [limb of] dependent origination that vanishes sin. That one who, thus, begs for a son would obtain a son is but the expected [outcome]. It is also said that there are wicked people who committed offenses with a view to obtain riches through murder, causing the wronged soul to seek revenge. Life after life, generation after generation, [the wronged soul] refuses to leave. It might be reborn at the family [of the wrongdoer] to seek his life and waste his riches. As for women who experience both pregnancy and childbirth difficulties, the sons produced by them might variously perish very fast, or they might be short-lived. They are born and die like ants revolving around the millstone. This is all due to the coming of the wronged soul. Or it might happen that the son thus produced is deceptively smart and pleasant [to the parents' taste] just to confound their eyes; [this son will face] a great many crises and diseases [just to] waste their wealth. Such is the retribution for those who obtain riches through murder.

懺悔如日。霜露見日。有不消融者乎。佛經言罪從姻緣而起。亦從姻緣而滅。懺悔者。滅罪之姻緣也。求男子得男子。理固然耳。又言其有惡人。故作誤為以至謀財害命。而冤魂取償。生生世世。決不暫離。或投胎於其家。而索其命。以花費其財物。至于女人妊娠產難畢至。而所生之兒。或速亡。或夭折不等。生生死死。如蟻旋磨。總是冤家來到。或有所生之兒。伶俐乖巧。以愚哄其眼目。多驚多疾。以花費其錢財。此皆謀財害命之報。

- (3) In the visible realm, there are the royal statutes. In the invisible realm there are ghosts and spirits. In the end, one must, evidently, be assassinated. After dying, one will enter the terrestrial prisons, not being reborn for ten thousand eras. As for those who conspire to deceive people to steal their riches, their treacherous stratagems are many, and they indecently exude cunningness. Although they do not have the form of animals, they do display the minds of animals. Their forms will be transformed according to their minds. One's appearance follows one's mind. After they die, they

must transform into animals as retribution for the riches they stole. This is an indisputable principle.

明有王法。幽有鬼神。終當顯受誅戮。死入地獄。萬劫不生者也。至于協謀而騙人之財物者。奸計百出。狡詐橫生。雖無畜生之形。而已是畜生之心。形隨心化。相從心生。必然死後化為畜生。以償其前生所竊之財物。乃一定之理也。

- (4) In sum, the reason is that the power of Scripture is vast and deep. Repenting according to this, there is no sin one could not be absolved from, as there are no blessings one would not be able to achieve. This is what is known as “everything according to one’s wishes”. Through this, injustices are repaired, one’s ancestors are benefited, to the point that the four forms of life in the Six Paths of rebirth will achieve rebirth in heaven through the power of Scripture.

總而言之。由經力弘深之故。依此懺悔。無不可懺之罪。無不可求之福。所謂如一切願是也。由是冤消。而且利及祖先。以至輪回之六道四生。皆得藉經力而生天矣。

- (5) Through this, all hells [become] paradises; [immersed] in untroubled ease and freedom, there will be sudden salvation with no leakage whatsoever. [All] will be reborn in the lotus world with its nine pure lands. Therefore, coming and going, there will be no hindrances. Since one’s mind displays no hindrances, there is no fear. Distancing oneself from deluded dreams, [one understands everything as] feeling, perception, impulse, and consciousness. If someone regenerates himself with full concentration, then the furnace will transform into a lotus pond, the Avīci hell will transform into a Celestial Palace.

由此而于一切地獄天堂。逍遙自在。以至頓超無漏。得生九品淨土蓮花世界。故去來皆無罣礙。心無罣礙。則無恐怖。遠離顛倒夢想。受想行識矣。然則人能一念自新。則火炕化為蓮池。阿鼻轉為天宮。

The five propositions above merit further examination. Proposition (1) frames the scriptural text as a discourse about a ritual gateway (*famen* 法門) for obtaining virtuous sons. Proposition (2) reaffirms the importance of repentance; it also explains the inability to produce offspring as resulting from wrongdoings. Proposition (3) supports the claim that the Chinese held kingship as the foundation of reality. The depiction of hell as a royal court does not mean that religion is a mirror of society. Rather, it means that the Chinese perceived kingship as ontologically fundamental. Proposition (4) concerns, again, the powers of Scripture. Indeed, the *Scripture* describes itself as a stream of miraculous words: “Each word is the true principle. Each sentence cancels faults. Each line destroys sins. Each volume confers blessings”. Proposition (5) argues that there is a subjective dimension to hell, which might well be its most fundamental nature. Accordingly, fearlessness should transform the most torturous of the eighteen hells of the Buddho-Daoist cosmology—the Avīci hell—into a paradise.<sup>16</sup>

These five propositions further corroborate the fact that the Daoist view of hell challenges the “strong view”. Propositions (1), (2), (4), and (5) do not support (H1), the Anti-Universalism Thesis. Indeed, Nie conveys the idea that ultimate justice is about emptying hells. Ultimately, no person should be consigned to hell.

Propositions (2), (4), and (5) deny the validity of (H3), (H4), and (H5). In other words, the Buddho-Daoist view conveyed by Nie is that there is an escape from hell, whose fundamental nature is neither retributive nor eternal. Hell is not, fundamentally, retributive because suffering is not only a moral but also a cognitive phenomenon. The root of suffering is illusion.

In this connection, note that proposition (5) introduces significant obstacles to (H2), the Existence Thesis. In this passage, Nie quotes from the Buddhist classic *Heart Sutra* (San-

skrit: *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*; Chinese: *Bore boluomiduo xin jing* 般若波羅蜜多心經).<sup>17</sup> The argument that there is no such thing as pure or unadulterated Buddhism also applies to Daoism (see Sharf 2005, p. 16). The Daoist priest subscribes to the Buddhist thesis that the sense of a permanent “I” is an illusion arising from four aggregates—(1) feeling (*shou* 受), (2) perception (*xiang* 想), (3) impulse (*xing* 行), and (4) consciousness (*shi* 識). The illusion of an independent “I” is at the root of all suffering. Since the “I” is an illusion, (H2) is wrong. There is no one in hell. Ultimately, feeding the illusion of an independent “I” is what *causes* hell to exist.

For this very reason, salvation is found in self-effacement. The illusion of an independent “I” is a form of ignorance. Ritual practice, on the other hand, is a form of *embodied* knowledge. Consider how Nie defends this thesis in the following passage:

The secret treasures and true words of the Most High are the secret names of the divine sages. They are Writs with no meaning. I do not dare to explain them. I cannot explain them. Indeed, I must not explain them either. One should but recite the *Scripture*. It is fundamental that you wholeheartedly generate utmost deference [*li* 禮]. You must wipe out and remove impure thoughts. You must purify your body and mouth. Adjust your voice and concentrate your mind. Loudly recite several times. Clearly articulate words and sentences. With time, there must occur numinous responses. This is what is called the understanding that emanates from no explanations. And truthfully, this is deeper than any explanations. Those who understand this can conjoin in meaning. Those who [intend] to explain this to others ought to know it themselves [first].

太上秘寶真言。神聖之隱名。蓋有文無義。不敢解。不能解。亦不必解。但誦經者。只宜一心頂禮。掃除雜念。淨身淨口。調聲定心。朗誦數遍。字句分明。久久必有靈驗。此所謂不解之解。而實深於解也。明者可以意會。解人當自知之。

Nie does not mean that the True Words are meaningless. Rather, he means that the human mind is not able to articulate this meaning in a verbal discourse. Accordingly, worshippers must aim at achieving what Nie terms “the understanding that does not emanates from explanations” (*bu jie zhi jie* 不解之解). This understanding involves establishing a *ritual* relationship with the *Scripture*. Nie claims that true understanding arrives through *ritualizing*, which he refers to as utmost deference (*ding li* 頂禮).

Deference has to do with what some scholars theorize as the mode of sincerity. Andersen argues that: “As in Daoist theories of ritual, the source of the efficacy of ritual is found in the person and daily life of the one in charge of ritual, particularly in the degree of sincerity with which he conducts himself, in a way that is not fundamentally different from Christian notions of worshipping God first and foremost in one’s personal, everyday existence” (Andersen 2019, p. 255). Andersen’s claim that “the source of the efficacy of ritual is found in the person” deserves further elaboration. Nie Shihao would most certainly agree with this claim.

Deference (*li* 禮) relates to the mode of sincerity. Andersen notes that scholars have raised charges of narcissist indulgence against sincerity. Such charges have to do with the subjunctive mood of ritual. This aspect of ritual gives concrete expression to society’s desires, goals, and plans (Turner 1991). Since the subjunctive mood of ritual is about the potential for transformation, it might easily degenerate into narcissistic wishful thinking. In referring to the “masses” in his commentary, Nie refers to an audience that exercises the subjunctive mood of ritual without displaying proper deference. For Nie, ritual should not engender narcissistic behavior. Accordingly, ritualizing is about establishing a *personal* relationship with *Scripture*. Ritual is a *relational* mode of being.

For one thing, *Scripture is Divinity*. According to Nie, meaning emerges in an intersubjective space. Ritual is the means through which one *experiences* *Scripture* as a Divine



Other, not a mere reading matter. Indeed, Nie describes a ritualizing process through which the act of reading is detached from prepositional meaning. Reading becomes a ritual act of recitation, which produces “numinous responses” (*lingyan* 靈驗), or miracles. Let me illustrate this claim vis à vis an intriguing miracle tale:

In Chizhou prefecture, there was a person who always used to recite the *Scripture of the Three Offices*. When a horde of thieves approached the city, the person had a dream in which the Three Officers said: “In your past life you killed a person. Now, [this person] will come to get revenge. This cannot be avoided”. Alarmed and frightened, [the person] woke up. [The person] then supplicated in an even more pious manner. [The person] had a new dream, [in which the deities] said: “It is very difficult to escape from past karmas. How could [we] illegitimately rescue [you]? However, [know that] the one whom you wronged in the past is named Zhu Qi, and he rides a red horse. He must come tomorrow. You should fall on your knees in front of the door and beg: ‘Oh! General Zhu Qi! Please spare my life!’ If he asks you: ‘How do you know my name?’ All you need to do is to tell him your two dreams”. In the next day, a man riding a red horse appeared in front of the door. The person knelt and said: “Oh! General Zhu Qi! Please spare my life!” When the bandit listened to this, he was astonished. Upon asking [how the person knew his name in the first place], [Zhu Qi] learned the reason. [Zhu Qi] then felt surprised, as if lost. Not killing [the worshipper, Zhu Qi] left the place.

池州府有一人，恒誦三官經。流賊臨城，其人夢三官告云：汝前世曾殺一人。今來報讐。不可免矣。驚懼而醒。復加懇禱。又得夢云：往業難逃。豈能曲救？但汝夙冤名朱七。騎紅馬。明日必來。汝可跪於門前，口稱：朱七將軍饒命！彼或問汝何故知我名字。即以兩夢告之可也。次日果於門前見有騎紅馬者。跪稱：朱七將軍饒命！賊聞驚異。問知其故。遂慙然若失。置之不殺而去。<sup>18</sup>

The genre of miracle tales constitutes a rhetorical device.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, it presents abstract theology with a focus on ritual practices. Verellen thus summarizes the rationale informing Daoist miracle tales: “although karmic causation links moral action to retribution by incontrovertible law, the true cause of an effect is frequently hidden from human perception, in particular because retribution operates across the barriers of successive human existences” (Verellen 1992, p. 227). The tale translated above illustrates Verellen’s argument in a most vivid manner. It also corroborates the idea that the Daoist view of justice does not agree with the “strong view of hell”.

First, the tale entails certain assumptions about morality.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the *Book of Job*, the tale does not presuppose the existence of *innocent* suffering.<sup>21</sup> According to the tale, there are neither innocent victims nor unredeemable culprits. The anonymous worshipper murdered Zhu Qi in a previous life. Karmic forces dragged Zhu Qi, whom the tale describes as a “bandit”, into murdering the worshipper. The moral paradox centers around the invisible workings of “past karmas” (*wang ye* 往業). While killing a fellow human being is *essentially* wrong, death by murder is a *necessary* result of karmic liabilities. Albeit equally sinful, both the worshipper and Zhu Qi achieved what the *Scripture* terms “benefit” (*liyi* 利益).<sup>22</sup> The worshipper avoided being mercilessly executed in this life. By not killing the scriptural user, Zhu Qi avoided being murdered in his next life. The *Scripture* miraculously ended a cycle of eternal revenge.

Second, the tale concerns, fundamentally, rituals. Note that the tale explicitly mentions two verbs associated with ritual. The worshipper “recites” (*song* 誦) the *Scripture* and “supplicates” (*dao* 禱) for blessings. In this respect, what the worshipper *does* is much more important than who she *is*. Indeed, the redactors do not inform the reader, for example, *when* the event took place. The redactors also do not reveal *who* is the individual mentioned

in the tale. The reason is not that the text was composed in a social vacuum but rather that the redactors did not want to reduce the ideal worshipper to a specific social class. This strategy defines the *Scripture* as a sacred text that welcomes worshippers from different social classes and genders. What really matters for the redactors is advertising the *Scripture* as a source of potential blessings.

Third, the tale is about ritual efficacy. The tale advertises its miraculous aspect vis à vis bold claims about how ritual practice might alter supposedly irrevocable destinies. The first line, for example, claims that the worshipper “always” (*heng* 恆) recited the *Scripture*. This passage emphasizes the frequency with which the individual in question performed the ritual. As such, the text implies that assiduous ritual practice is the reason the worshipper was blessed with revelatory dreams in the first place.

Like the *Explanation*, the tale invites scholars to grapple with a series of issues. *What*, exactly, produced salvation? *How* does the *Scripture* explain the relationship between ritual and efficacy? Is ritual the source of efficacy? Both the miracle tale and the *Explanation* situate salvation in the intersubjective space between ritualist and *Scripture*.

There exists a distance between the practitioner and Divinity. Ritual makes this distance disappear. Ritual space fills in the intersubjective distance between humans and Divinity. The ritualizing relationship established between practitioner and *Scripture* is a journey of self-reflexivity and Self-unfolding. The ritualist experiences a new understanding of justice. *Scripture* manifests itself as the ground of reality through miracles, which are events that defy explanation.

Intriguingly, Nie argues that salvation is like the scorching sun. This metaphor is a most fortunate one. It suggests that the shrinking of distance between ritualist and *Scripture* is an act of de-psychologization. Note that the miracle tale does not describe the worshipper’s psychological state. As Byung-Chul Han argues: “When the subject is de-psychologized—indeed, de-voided (*ent-leert*)—it opens onto a mode of existence that still has no name: an unwritten future” (Han 2017, p. 79). Ritual is the means through which one achieves de-psychologization.

The act of de-psychologization creates an openness to the Other. The experience of salvation thus unfolds with the same poignant, indisputable reality of the perceived world. Salvation operates like the warm feeling occasioned by the scorching sun, or the redness of red. There is something fundamental about the redness of red, or the warmth of sunlight. This fundamental quality is extremely difficult to articulate in words. Nie refers to this quality of the experienced world when he explains the embodied knowledge derived from ritual practice as something that one might experience directly without, however, being able to translate into verbal discourse. For him, salvation is like the direct experience of a blossoming flower. The Daoist alchemy of hell into paradise is as simple as that.

## 5. Conclusions

In this contribution, I argued that Daoist views of hell entail a significant challenge to the “strong view”. The first section summarized the “strong view”. The second section demonstrated that the *Scripture* does not agree with the “strong view” and its main theses. The third section capitalized on Nie’s exegetical work to further explore the relationship between hell and ritual in Daoism. Like the second section, the third section demonstrated that Daoism is antithetical to the “strong view”. Daoist notions of hell imply five radically different theses: (1) no one is consigned to hell; (2) the foundation of hell is the deluded sense of an independent “I”; (3) there are ritual methods through which one might not only escape hell but also to achieve authority over it; (4) justice involves punishment, but (5) hell is not eternal. In this connection, the section also explored the fact that the *Scripture*’s edition, content, and interpretation are grounded in critical attitudes towards ritual.

Unlike as supposed by Lu Xun and other modernists, Chinese rituals are not conducive to obtuseness. Daoist ritual constitutes a venue whereby social actors exercise self-reflexivity.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For example: there might be no such thing as hell in the Yoruba tradition. See (Ofuasia 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> Fava (2013, p. 155): “Je verse donc une nouvelle pièce au dossier de la statuaire hunanaise et il devrait y en avoir d’autres pour expliquer comment on passe des portes de l’enfer aux portes du ciel, car le rituel funéraire est le premier rite de passage qui précède une éventuelle investiture dans la bureaucratie céleste”. In a personal communication, Patrice Fava generously shared with me his insight to the effect that the ordination allows the Daoist priest to have direct access to the celestial realms.
- <sup>3</sup> For a standard description of this ritual framework, see (Huang 2012, pp. 243–80). For an ethnographic account, see (Fava 2013, pp. 154–75). For a description of Daoist self-divinization, see (Mozina 2021, pp. 167–216).
- <sup>4</sup> Therefore, I am not implying that “Daoism” is an actor. On the dangers of treating ideas as social actors, see (Campany 2003).
- <sup>5</sup> The complete title of the *Scripture* is *Wondrous Scripture of the Most High Three Primes Who Confer Blessings, Pardon Sins, Avoid Disasters, Prolong Life and Protect Fate* (Taishang sanyuan cifu shezui jie’e xiaozai yansheng baoming miaojing 太上三元賜福赦罪解厄消災延生保命妙經; DZ 1442). Throughout this paper, I use “the *Scripture*” to refer to the *Sanguan jing*. I also use “*Scripture*”, without the definite article “the” to refer to the concept of religious scripture as a theological construct.
- <sup>6</sup> On the Three Offices, see (Schachter 2022).
- <sup>7</sup> This paragraph follows (Bokenkamp 2007, pp. 37–50; Miller 2008, pp. 69–71; Kleeman 2016, p. 390; Graham 2020, pp. 32–37; Zhao 2009, pp. 79–85).
- <sup>8</sup> *Explanation*, “Seventh Branch” (Plain text: 30a–33a; Nie’s Commentary: 33a–34b/DZ 1442, 8a–9a)
- <sup>9</sup> On the early Daoist evidence, see (Verellen 2019, p. 257).
- <sup>10</sup> In his preface, he explicitly mentions a certain Commentary to the Sovereign Scripture (Huangjing zhushi 皇經註釋). The title *Sovereign Scripture* (Huangjing 皇經) must refer to the Southern Song text *Scripture of the Jade Sovereign* (Yuhuang jing 玉皇經). On the *Yuhuang jing*, see (Schachter 2014). As important, Nie’s exegetical procedures are very similar to those verified in the *Collected Commentaries to the Sovereign Scripture* (Huangjing jizhu 皇經集註), which was compiled by the Daoist priest Zhou Xuanzhen 周玄貞 (1555–1627). In many passages, for example, he offers a word-by-word explanation of the scriptural text. Several Ming–Qing commentaries to this most revered Daoist text are extant. On Zhou, see (Schachter 2018). The *Collected Commentaries* comprises commentaries attributed to various gods and to the Ming literati Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504–1564). Schipper (Schipper and Verellen 2004, p. 1114) speculates that Luo’s commentaries might have been produced through spirit-writing rituals.
- <sup>11</sup> *Hangzhou fu zhi*, 178.1944.
- <sup>12</sup> *Tongsubian*, 20.287 (Zhai 1937).
- <sup>13</sup> *Jianwen suibi*, 26.2.2b–3a (Qi 2009).
- <sup>14</sup> The famous Non-Action Teachings (*Wuwei jiao* 無為教), for example, promoted permanent vegetarianism. On this religious group, see (Ter Haar 2014, pp. 157–58).
- <sup>15</sup> In translating *fu* as “blessings”, I follow (Teiser 1994, p. 103, footnote no. 5). As explained by Teiser, the concept entails an agricultural metaphor.
- <sup>16</sup> *Avici* means “no-interval”. The name refers to the ceaseless suffering experienced by those who are in this hell. Nie’s audience would have heard about the *Avici* hell from widely circulated stories about how the Buddhist monk Mulian saved his mother. See (Teiser 1988, pp. 6–15). Different systems of five, eight, eighteen, thirty, and sixty-four hells appear in Chinese sources of the sixth-century. See (Teiser 1988, p. 180). On the earliest mention of eighteen hells in Chinese sources, see (Teiser 1994, p. 205, footnote no. 87). In traditional China, Daoist priests also played the role of Mulian in the context of funerary rituals. See (Fava 2023, p. 27).
- <sup>17</sup> This sutra is the single most revered text among Tibetan, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese Buddhists. See (Lopez 1996, p. 5).
- <sup>18</sup> *Jianwenlu*, 1.27b. The tale translated above survives in Qing dynasty edition. However, it must date to the Yuan period, when the region it mentions was named Chizhou prefecture.
- <sup>19</sup> Miracle tales have a long history. The genre originated in early medieval China (ca. 220–618) among lay Buddhist communities. Robert Campany argues that miracle tales evolved from an earlier genre—“accounts of anomalies” (*zhiguai* 志怪)—among

Buddhist lay circles to persuade non-believers about basic aspects of Buddhist practice. As he remarkably puts it, “miracle tales are rich historical sources precisely because they both reflect and were attempts to persuasively shape what these groups of early Chinese Buddhists thought and did.” (Campany 2012, p. xiv). Similarly, Franciscus Verellen defines miracle tales as an “apologetic” genre. The scholar shows that Daoist miracle tales became an established genre during the Tang dynasty (618–907). In this context, he explains, Daoist miracle tales emerged as a counter-apologetic response to Buddhist expansion. On Buddhist tales, see (Campany 2012, 2015, 2018). On Daoist tales, see (Verellen 1992).

On morality, see (Goossaert 2020).

Innocent suffering is the problem informing the *Book of Job*. See (Fokkelman 2012, p. 3).

The term “benefit” (*liyi* 利益) originates in Buddhist scriptures. The attested Sanskrit equivalent is the polysemous term *artha*. See (Keown 2003, p. 219; Buswell and Lopez 2014, p. 63).

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